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Del Coraje A La Esperanza (From Rage to Hope): A Case Study of the Development of Latina/o Immigrant Parents as Agents of Change

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Del Coraje A La Esperanza (From Rage to Hope):
A Case Study of the Development of Latina/o Immigrant Parents as Agents of Change

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Veronica Nelly Velez

2012
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Del Coraje A La Esperanza (From Rage to Hope):
A Case Study of the Development of Latina/o Immigrant Parents as Agents of Change

by

Veronica Nelly Velez

Doctor of Philosophy in Education
University of California, Los Angeles, 2012
Professor Daniel G. Solorzano, Chair

This dissertation is a qualitative case study designed to explore the political agency of a Los Angeles-based Latina/o immigrant parent group - ALIANZA. Utilizing a Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) framework, this study contends that deficit characterizations of Latina/o parents operate from normalized standards of what it means to be a “good” parent and fail to acknowledge the educational participation of Latina/o parents as well as the institutional barriers they face in schools. It also reveals how educational policy, despite its democratic intent, can often render silent the voices of Latina/o parents in educational and civic reform efforts. To examine notions of consciousness and collective action, this study uses a Freirean pedagogical perspective that broadly guides its main inquiry.

Data for this study were collected in collaboration with 15 ALIANZA parents in the form of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and organizational archives.
using a participatory action research approach grounded in Chicana feminist epistemology. Data was analyzed using critical race grounded theory that allowed this study’s broader conceptual frameworks to assist in isolating emergent themes that best explain the intersecting experiences of ALIANZA parents.

Findings from this study suggest that political agency was developed throughout the life histories of ALIANZA parents. Namely, three important junctures were collectively identified as important toward this end: early schooling, migrating to *el norte*, and encountering U.S. public schools as mothers for the first time. These formative moments became “triggers of political agency” for ALIANZA parents by disrupting their sense of belonging, extending their threshold of hope, and developing their consciousness as agents of change. Building and capitalizing on these lived experiences, ALIANZA further developed its members as political actors through the use of key strategies and pedagogical approaches aimed at helping them heal from past abuse and racist encounters, identifying and speaking out against injustice, and building a collective and shared political capital to leverage their voice and participate in local reform efforts.

Findings from this study can serve future research and practice on building school-community partnerships in Latina/o immigrant communities and support a greater inclusion of Latina/o parents in school decision-making. Cases like ALIANZA, whose members are immigrants, many of whom are undocumented, complicate traditional notions of who can and cannot participate in creating social change. Documenting their efforts can help us further theorize about the role Latina/o undocumented immigrants can and should play in transforming schools and society.
This dissertation of Veronica Nelly Velez is approved.

Leobardo Estrada
Don Nakanishi
John Rogers

Daniel G. Solorzano, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012
DEDICATION

In loving memory of

“Justo”
March 1955 – November 2011

“Compartiendo se sigue aprendiendo”
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Growing up and going to school, my father would always caution me, “mija, no olvides quién eres.” In part, his message was intended to develop my pride in our family’s cultural identity, embracing everything from his insistence that we only speak Spanish at home to our reverence and devotion of La Virgen de Guadalupe. But his other purpose for relaying this daily message before dropping me off at school was to remind me that I, as his daughter, was and always will be a reflection of him. I hope this dissertation and my journey to the Ph.D., a dream he held for me since I started school, has made him and my mother proud. I never forgot the consejos, las platicas, sus valores, sus sacrificios, sus esperanzas y sus sueños. I also never forgot my father’s decision to work graveyard as a police officer so that he would never miss my basketball games or the countless nights he would sit with me as I did my homework before going to work. I never forgot my mother packing my lunch even as a Master’s student or coming in to check on me throughout the night as I pulled all nighters for my classes. This journey would not have been possible without them. The success of completing this journey is as much theirs as it is mine and this dissertation, in particular, is rooted in their experiences as immigrant parents and my own experience knowing what they had to do to make my dreams and those of my sister’s a reality. I look forward to seeing my dad hang up this last degree of mine, with our family’s last name next to the initials of Ph.D. Gracias mami y papi, sin ustedes nada de esto hubiera sido posible.

To my younger sister, Vanessa, who has been an incredible support, especially during the most trying times of this journey. Despite being so different in our career pursuits, we couldn’t be closer as sisters and friends and I’ve been so thankful to have her by my side “keeping it real.” She has been my sounding board throughout the dissertation process and her honesty in
reflecting on my work only served to make it better. Thank you Vane for keeping me sane and for reminding me to think about the “other argument” in my scholarship.

To my husband, Patricio, who has put up with me in ways that let me know, in no uncertain terms, just how much he truly loves me. Since we met in our undergraduate years, he’s always encouraged me to follow my heart and pursue work that I was passionate about. I’m glad I followed his advice and since then he has always been my biggest supporter, often sacrificing his own dreams to allow me to pursue mine. During the moments I wanted to give up, he wouldn’t let me, often staying up with me late into the night to make sure I would finish a project. For the late night coffee runs, the prayers, all the editing and writing advise throughout this dissertation project even after he came home from work in the middle of the night, I will never be able to thank you enough. I think my advisor was right when he gave you the title of “St. Pat.” You really deserve it.

To my advisor and dissertation committee chair, Daniel Solorzano, I don’t have words to express my gratitude. I still remember that first day I walked into your office as a Master’s student and you asked me questions about my family, where I grew up, what high school I went to, among other things about my life. We discovered that we both went to Catholic high schools not far from each other and shared funny stories about growing up in our respective neighborhoods. I realize then just how much you cared about your students, that you wanted to support us holistically not just what we do inside the walls of higher education. You became my role model for how I hope to serve my own students in the future. Thank you for your words of wisdom, your friendship, and the difficult conversations that only made me grow as a person and as a professional. I could not have gotten through this journey, and especially through this dissertation, without you. Thank you for believing in me when I didn’t believe in myself.
To my committee, John Rogers, Leo Estrada, and Don Nakanishi, thank you for agreeing to support his project, for your encouragement along the way, and for all the feedback that went into developing this manuscript. It’s definitely been a long journey. Thank you for your patience and for believing in the necessity of ALIANZA’s story as much as I do. I will forever be indebted to your support and guidance.

I am especially grateful to UC ACCORD, the Spencer Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. Their financial support made it possible for me to initiate and finish this journey. Thank you for also connecting me to an amazing group of scholars and for continuing your support through mentorship and networking.

Finally, to the amazing mothers of ALIANZA, who I feel honored to have worked with and learned from over the past nine years. Thank you for allowing me into your homes and into your lives. You continue to inspire me each and every day and I feel so incredibly blessed to continue this next journey with you. In particular, I want to thank Selina and Justo, quienes son mis ángeles and have taught me what praxis “really” looks like on the ground. Justo, from wherever you are looking down on us and guiding our work, I hope I have made you proud. Not a day goes by since you left us that I don’t think about the many things I learned by your side. Thank you for showing me strength in humility and for reminding me that compartiendo se sigue aprendiendo.
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SELECTED PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS


CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Dime con quien andas y te diré quien eres”¹

I was nervous as I looked over my notes, preparing to share some preliminary research I had done alongside ALIANZA parents about the realities facing Latina/o students and their families in our schools. As I tried to release some of the tension I felt, I realized that the information I was about to present, and the well-attended forum organized to share it that evening with teachers, school district officials, civic leaders and school board candidates, was one result of the several years of organizing by ALIANZA to address educational inequities. Being part of the planning process for this event, I witnessed first-hand just how deeply personal this forum was to the group’s members. Although the primary goal was to expose and press institutional leaders to address schooling practices that were denying local Latina/o students a quality education, it was also the intent that this forum convey a message of hope, highlight a uniquely Latina/o immigrant perspective on educational issues, and underscore that ALIANZA would no longer accept a marginal position in decision-making when it came to local reform efforts. Their decision to conduct the event in Spanish and provide translation for the monolingual English speakers in the audience was one strategy used to achieve these ends. In the past, when ALIANZA did this, it always promoted a greater sense of confidence and comfort among Latina/o immigrant families that translated into an increased participation on their behalf in presentations and dialogues. In essence, ALIANZA was careful about not only defining the content but the terms of engagement for this event, always mindful of how to best facilitate the inclusion of voices so often

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¹ Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “tell me who you hang around with and I’ll tell you who you are.”

² I use dichos, or quotidian sayings commonly used in Latina/o communities, to begin each chapter. My purpose for doing this is deeply personal and aims to honor the diverse forms of pedagogy practiced in the homes of Latina/o families, including those of ALIANZA parents and my own home growing up as a child of immigrant parents. Although my focus in this dissertation is on the political dimensions of parent engagement in ALIANZA and less so on the ways Latina/o parents are involved in their children’s education at home, prefacing each chapter with a dicho, nonetheless, foregrounds the voices of marginalized parents, especially Latina/o immigrants, in a way that powerfully challenges traditional norms and ideologies of parent involvement, which has been an overarching goal of mine since the early conceptualization of this project. My goal is that the structure of each chapter serves the social justice ends of this study just as much as the content and arguments contained within each.

³ Actual name of parent group has been replaced by a pseudonym to protect its anonymity. ALIANZA is the Spanish word for “alliance.”

⁴ In this study, Latina/o immigrant refers to both men and women who were born in Mexico, Central America, South America, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. I use this term in the same way that ALIANZA utilizes it, to highlight and capture a shared experience of being both Latina/o and an immigrant in the U.S. It includes individuals with distinct immigration status (i.e. permanent residents, noncitizen, undocumented). It should be noted that the term “Latina/o” has a political dimension that this study does not address.
ignored. After going over my notes for the fifth time, Olga,\(^5\) one of ALIANZA’s parent leaders, motioned me to the front, embraced me and handed me the microphone. I’ll never forget her words as I cued my visuals for the presentation: “Acuerda que nunca estás sola. Tu eres parte del grupo ahora y nadie te puede decir que no perteneces a nuestra comunidad. Como dice el dicho, 'dime con quien andas y te diré quien eres.'”\(^6\) And as she smiled, my own parents entered the room. Their strength filled me and I began the presentation . . . \(^7\)

The excerpt above, taken from a personal journal entry in February of 2007, details one of the most formative experiences for me as both a scholar and long-time ally to organizing efforts by Latina/o immigrant parents. It documents an event organized by a group of Latina/o immigrant parent leaders known as ALIANZA to address educational inequities in their school district and introduce school board candidates to residents of the low-income, predominantly Latina/o immigrant neighborhoods, that it serves. This event marked the high point of several months of organizing by ALIANZA to bring issues of concern affecting Latina/o families to the attention of school and civic appointed leaders before the March 2007 local election. Although I had supported ALIANZA on several occasions prior to this event and had witnessed the trajectory of their efforts for many years, I had made significant attempts to avoid inserting myself as a researcher into my work with the organization. I had long felt that my roles as a doctoral student and activist were best left separate in order to fully honor my commitments to each. But I realized that night in February of 2007 that separating these roles was hindering my

\(^5\) Actual names of informants have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

\(^6\) Translated to English: Remember that you are not alone. You are part of the group now and no one can tell you that you do not belong to our community. As the saying goes, “Tell me who you hang around with and I’ll tell you who you are.”

\(^7\) In an effort to honor the voice of my informants throughout this manuscript, I have kept their words unaltered and in the language in which they were originally shared. English translations for each quote, when needed, are provided in the footnotes.

\(^8\) This excerpt was taken from a personal journal I have been using to document my experiences working with ALIANZA. This excerpt, dated February 2007, reflects only my recollections and reflections of the event it describes.
ability to fully actualize my own potential for supporting and creating change, both personally and professionally.

That evening I had come to a powerful awareness of the transformation members of ALIANZA had to make in order to organize this event in the way it was organized, as well as a personal awareness of how I could contribute to their efforts as both an organizer and researcher. Being one of the few times I had shared my research outside of an academic conference or a university classroom, that evening made powerfully evident how I could use research to highlight an often missing story, or challenge distorted narratives, about the efforts of Latina/o immigrant parent leaders. Through the telling of this story, I could also initiate policy-oriented dialogue for how to create genuine democratic spaces within school and civic decision-making arenas for parents, particularly Latina/o parents. Finally, I felt my research could contribute to furthering ALIANZA’s mission and goals, and hopefully the work of other, similar parent groups seeking to effect social change. My work as a researcher really did have a place – a critical and necessary place – in my work as an activist. And both of these interrelated roles, as I came to see them that night, intersected in the very place I call home – a community in the San Gabriel Valley near Los Angeles, California.

When I initially began my graduate studies, I never imagined conducting research in my hometown. I returned home after working in northern California for several years as a parent organizer. In this role, I had supported the efforts of Latina/o parents, most of whom were undocumented immigrants, in creating spaces, both inside and outside of schools, that facilitated

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9 In this study, *undocumented* is used to refer to immigrants who come to the U.S. without “proper” documentation that would otherwise permit them legal authority to reside within the borders of the U.S. It is important to note that this label is highly contested. I use this term cautiously, recognizing its problematic nature in defining or framing U.S. immigrants from a nation-state position without adequately recognizing global conditions that have led many individuals to risk their lives to cross the border without this documentation. I have chosen to use this term in lieu of other terms in public discourse, such as *illegal* or *alien*, because these later terms serve to inhumanely criminalize
their participation in local politics and school decision-making. It was during my time in this position, that I first came to realize how institutions, namely schools, could function to marginalize the very communities they blame for not being more involved in education. In an effort to reconcile this contradiction, and make sense of my experiences, I turned to graduate school for answers. Though unsure if I would later focus on Latina/o parent communities in my research, I knew my scholarly work would somehow focus on exposing and dismantling multiple and intersecting forms of institutional subordination, especially within schools. Upon initiating my graduate studies, though, a professor, who knew my background working with Latina/o immigrant parents, informed me of a particular parent group, known as ALIANZA, doing important educational and civic engagement work in my hometown, particularly for Latina/o immigrants. I immediately contacted ALIANZA for a meeting. The moment I met several members of the group for the first time, I realized that my work with Latina/o parents was really just beginning, but now my work was informed by a personal history of growing up in the very social and political context that informed the efforts of the parents I would ally with.

But there was another important component that I powerfully realized that evening in February that made apparent the multifaceted connections affirming my ability and drive to contribute, as both a researcher and activist, to the work of ALIANZA beyond my professional experience and “hometown” knowledge. This personal realization came the moment my parents walked into the room. It was one of the rare occasions in which my parents were able to attend a community function I had helped organize. As I stood at the front of the room, microphone in hand, my father made sure to make eye contact, communicating through his expression just how proud he was of me. As he turned to sign his name on the attendance sheet near the entrance, I and demonize the immigrant population of concern here, particularly Latina/o immigrants in contemporary U.S. society.
could overhear him telling another attendee that he was my father pointing to me and waving in
the process. As I scanned back and forth between my parents and other members of ALIANZA,
the connection for me was instant. I could see my parents in the stories, experiences, and
struggles of ALIANZA parents. My mind flooded with childhood experiences of how my
mother, an immigrant from Mexico, and my father, an immigrant from Panama, were always
vigilant about my education and, despite their struggles communicating with my teachers
because English was not their dominant language, always asserted their right to have a say in
how my schooling was conducted. My parents’ involvement in decision-making at my
elementary school became so strong that my mother was eventually elected its parent association
president and, later, hired as the school office manager. And their experiences of navigating U.S.
society, through the intersecting structural barriers of racism, nativism, and poverty, in order to
provide their children opportunities that had been denied them, became tools, in the form of
consejos,\textsuperscript{10} that they utilized to raise and strengthen my sister and me. I realized just before
presenting that their experiences, struggles, hopes, and dreams were no different than those of
ALIANZA. As I nervously raised the microphone to begin my presentation, I looked right at my
parents knowing, at that moment, that what I was about to say was as much for them as it was for
ALIANZA. Connecting with them that evening made clear that any research endeavor on my
behalf to shed light on the experiences of Latina/o immigrant parents would not only be
informed by my professional experiences but also deeply by my own relationship with my
parents. This relationship is the heart of an interwoven set of personal experiences and dreams
driving this research.

At the conclusion of that evening in February, I thus began a process of merging my
personal and scholarly trajectories for the purpose of designing such a research project. As it
\textsuperscript{10}Translated to English, consejos is most closely defined as advice-giving narratives (Moreno & Valencia, 2002).
slowly materialized into a concrete and researchable plan of action, my research focus became the following: to document and understand the formation and efforts of ALIANZA, as a vehicle by which to begin theorizing about Latina/o immigrant parents as powerful agents of change in schools and society at large, which often fail to recognize them as such. With a particular focus on ALIANZA as my site of study, I began to ask myself: Do ALIANZA’s members see themselves as political actors, and if so, what informs this sense of self? What role does ALIANZA play in influencing its members to see themselves as agents of change and act on behalf of the “greater good,” as they define it? What is ALIANZA’s vision for itself as an organization but also for the schools, communities, and broader society it serves? How does ALIANZA participate in educational and civic spaces and how does this participation, in turn, influence the political identity of the group? How have ALIANZA’s members come to understand why and how to engage in public life in order to create change?

In attempting to answer these questions, I argue that while ALIANZA can only be fully understood from a particular socio-historical context, the collective experience of its members is not unique. My personal and professional experiences attest to elements of a shared reality and common struggle among Latina/o immigrant parents to insert themselves into reform efforts to attain educational and social change first for their children, and then for themselves. Thus, while this research project begins and ends with ALIANZA, it speaks to a much broader context and wider audience that, at its largest level, seeks to uncover how marginalized communities, in their efforts to create social change, arrive at a place where they “speak truth” to those in power11.

Before providing a detailed description and outline of the present study, it is important to first provide a brief research and demographic context that will help frame why a project of this kind merits such grave importance. Although I have described my personal journey and interest

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11 Here I define power as “the ability to carry out your will despite resistance,” see Henslin (2007).
in this topic above, I argue that this research will powerfully fill a void in educational research and practice concerning marginalized parents generally, and the growing population of Latina/o immigrant parents specifically. After establishing this set of critical concerns, I return my attention to ALIANZA, providing a brief history of the organization and rationale for why conducting a case study of their efforts can help address this set of concerns. Immediately following this description of ALIANZA, I lay out the specific research questions guiding inquiry in this study as well as the methodological approach for carrying it out.

In ending this section, I return to Olga’s comments on the night described in the opening vignette of this introductory chapter. Reflecting in hindsight after the completion of the study, I have come to discover that the privilege of telling the rich story of ALIANZA contained in this manuscript had as much to do with ALIANZA accepting me into their organization and struggle as a full-fledged member, as it did with my inescapable desire as a community organizer-turned-scholar to co-produce social justice research equally, if not more useful, to the community than to the academy, and ethically produced without exploiting the former to benefit the latter. I hope that I have accomplished my goal and that ALIANZA can embrace this work as authentically their own, as much as the academy can embrace the value of ALIANZA’s story. As for me, I hope my work affirms the dicho that introduces this chapter and body of work: “Dime con quien andas y te diré quien eres.” Embracing my identity as an ALIANZA member has been both a privilege and a responsibility, honored, in part, by considering this study as a work-in-progress; in other words, a commitment to further revise, improve, and extend the work captured throughout this manuscript. I also expect that my role with ALIANZA is a permanent one and that our collaborative efforts will yield many more projects that seek change in and through diverse spaces both in the academy and the community.
Statement of Research & Significance of Study

In their tabulations and comparisons of the 2000 Census and the Census Bureau’s 2005 American Community Survey, the Pew Hispanic Center reports that in 2005 more than 12% of the total population in the U.S. was foreign-born (http://pewhispanic.org/reports/foreignborn). Of those foreign-born, approximately 45%, or nearly half, were from Mexico, Central or South America in 2005 (http://pewhispanic.org/reports/foreignborn). This number reflects an impressive growth between 2000 and 2005 of individuals emigrating from these countries to the U.S. of 74% (http://pewhispanic.org/reports/foreignborn). In 2005, California, compared to all other states in the nation, had the highest concentration of foreign-born individuals, approximately 27% of its total population. Among this population of foreign-born in California, nearly 55% were from Mexico, Central or South America (http://pewhispanic.org/reports/foreignborn). This represents a higher concentration or proportion of foreign-born individuals from these places of origin residing in California compared to other states in the U.S. Within California’s broader Latina/o population, 42% were foreign-born in 2005. Although these numbers make evident the importance of a growing Latina/o foreign-born community in the U.S. generally, and in California specifically, they do not reflect a complete picture.

12 According to the Pew Hispanic Center website, this statistical profile of the foreign born population is based on Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of the Census Bureau’s 2005 American Community Survey public, which was released August 29, 2006. The 2005 ACS is designed to provide estimates of the size and characteristics of the population residing in households. As a measure of population change, this report includes tabulations for 2000 from the 2000 Census 5% public use micro-data file. The 2000 Census enumerated the entire resident population, including persons residing in group quarters. However, for the purposes of comparing the 2000 tallies to the 2005 estimates from the ACS, all the tabulations herein only include persons residing in households. In this statistical portrait, foreign-born persons include those born outside the United States and its outlying territories. The foreign-born population does not include persons born abroad of American parents (http://pewhispanic.org/reports/foreignborn).
Most demographic profiles of the foreign-born population in the U.S. tend only to account for those persons who have legal documents to reside in the country. This limitation is often due to the difficulty of accurately portraying those U.S. immigrants who are undocumented, since there is usually minimal or no trace of them in legal or social security-related documents. What this means is that there is a substantial number of immigrants that are not being accounted for in U.S. demographic profiles. Although an approximation at best, recent reports published by the Pew Hispanic Center estimate that there are currently 11.5 to 12 million undocumented individuals living within U.S. borders (Passel, 2006). Within this population, 78% are considered Latina/o and 56% are from Mexico alone (Passel, 2006). If the recent immigration growth rates from Mexico, Central and South America are any indication of the future, the U.S. will continue to experience a rise of Latina/o immigrants to the country, both documented and undocumented (Passel, 2006).

Although any examination into the multi-faceted reasons why Latinas/os emigrate to the U.S. merits a much lengthier analysis than can be provided here, it is important to provide some acknowledgement of the contextual factors that force individuals to migrate. Too often when demographic reports surface about the rise in Latina/o immigrants to the U.S., without any mention of the historical, political, and/or socio-economic conditions that led individuals to leave their home countries, concerns quickly surface in the form of a national “immigration problem” or “crisis.” Such discourse has become more prevalent in a post-9/11 era and fails to fully understand and address the global conditions that lead to migration in the first place. Consequently, this ends up reducing the complex and multi-dimensional reasons Latina/o immigrants come to the U.S. as simply “by choice.”
In an effort to provide a more complex understanding of reasons why Latinas/os migrate to the U.S., Portes and Rumbaut (2006) add theoretical depth to the often-cited economic theories, such as the “push-pull” migration theory, to highlight particular processes families undergo before migrating. These go beyond just recognizing a demand for work in the receiving country to understanding how individuals come to an awareness of that work as accessible and viable. While Portes and Rumbaut’s (2006) research highlights the complexity of migration factors at the familial level, Gonzales and Fernandez (2002) provide a compelling argument examining how U.S. intervention efforts in the form of foreign policy have contributed, ironically, to the immigration “concerns” the U.S. is now trying to remedy. Their analysis of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), for example, reveals how U.S. foreign policy has worked against building economic independence and has, instead, functioned to devastate the Mexican economy at the expense of U.S. monetary benefit. By demonstrating how NAFTA destroyed small-scale farming and businesses throughout Mexico, Gonzales and Fernandez (2002) reveal how impoverished conditions ensued affecting the ability of many Mexicans to sustain a livelihood for themselves and their families. Thus, rather than “choice,” it became a necessity for many Mexicans to migrate across national borders in search of sustainable work.

Much attention has also been given to highlighting the intersecting and diverse reasons why individuals migrate to the U.S. from different regions of Latin America. Hamilton & Chincilla (1991), for example, provide an in-depth portrait of the historical patterns beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century to the late 1980s that led many Central Americans, from diverse countries, to migrate to the U.S. From devastating economic conditions, to governmental

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13 Here I’m defining “push-pull” migration theory as an economic theory that explain migration patterns in terms of an imbalance between labor demands and working wages in the sending and receiving countries. Several researchers have developed this theory in their research (Portes & Back, 1985; Zolberg, Suhrke, & Aguayo, 1986; Cohen, 1987).
and extragovernmental repression, to war and political upheaval, Central Americans have suffered numerous economic and political circumstances that begin to explain their patterns of migration. Hamilton & Chincilla’s (1991) analyses of these circumstances have furthered a theoretical understanding of Central American migration that powerfully deepens and appropriately situates an overall portrait of Latina/o immigration to the U.S.

Whether social, economic, and/or political factors make up the root cause for Latina/o immigrants arriving to the U.S., their presence has been widely felt as they establish their lives, build homes, and raise children in their new setting. This has been particularly true in California. In 2003, the Study of Latina/o Health and Culture conducted at UCLA predicted that by 2006, the majority of children entering kindergarten in California will be Latina/o; by 2014, the majority of children in high school in California will be Latina/o; and by 2019, the majority of youth adult voters in California will be Latina/o (Hayes-Bautista, 2004). Since this study was published, Latinas/os have indeed become the majority group entering kindergarten in California public schools. In the 2006-2007 school year, Latinas/os comprised 53% of the kindergarten population (http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest). Although this study originally predicted a 2014 date for when Latinas/os would become the majority in California high schools, recent statistics posted by the California Department of Education reveal that in 2006 Latina/os already comprised 44% of the overall high school population and nearly half, 48%, of all students in public schools (http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest).

Considering the continued rise in Latina/o immigrant presence in the U.S., and California specifically, it comes as no surprise that educational researchers and practitioners have focused their attention on how to address the needs of this growing population within schools. Most of this interest has been focused on trying to understand and remedy what Valencia (2002) refers to
as the persistent, pervasive, and disproportionate academic underachievement of Chicana/o\textsuperscript{14} students specifically, and Latina/o students generally. One focus of this body of work is parent involvement, as a large body of educational research continues to conclude that parent involvement is an absolute necessity for student achievement (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Epstein, 1983; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Cotton & Wikelund, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 1996). To highlight this point, Cotton & Wikelund (2001) find that “the research overwhelmingly demonstrates that parent involvement in children’s learning is positively related to achievement.” This has been found to be even more significant for “non mainstream” families (Cotton & Wikelund, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 1996; McCaleb, 1997; Moll & Gonzalez, 1997).

Although such work in this area of parent involvement has been numerous, it has also highlighted important contradictions in how “parent involvement” is operationalized, the causes for the “lack” of parent participation in schools, and ideas for how to build better partnerships between schools and parents. This is not surprising considering that “. . . the concept of parent involvement is a social construct whose boundaries and expectations are impacted by culture, race, class and gender issues” (Jasis & Ordañez-Jasis, 2004, p. 32). What has become a dominant thread in this work, though, has been the unrelenting search in the “home” for the problem of low parent participation in schools. Consequently, much of this research has served to brand parents as the primary culprits for a failed relationship between them and the public schools that serve their children. This has been a popular finding particularly as it pertains to schools serving poor Students of Color,\textsuperscript{15} particularly Latina/o students (Donato, 1997; Moreno

\textsuperscript{14} I use the term Chicana/o to refer to both men and women of Mexican-origin in the U.S. There are political dimension to this term that are not addressed here.

\textsuperscript{15} “Students of Color” is intentionally capitalized to reject the standard grammatical norm. Capitalization is used as a means to empower this group and represents a grammatical move toward social and racial justice. This rule will also
The proliferation of cultural deficit arguments in parent involvement research, I argue, has problematically contributed to a distorted and inaccurate portrayal of the relationship Latina/o parents have with public schools and the education of their children. Although critical work continues to uncover the institutional processes that have served to marginalize Latina/o parents from meaningful participation in schools (Delgado Gaitan, 1990, 2001; Olivos, 2003, 2004, 2006; Jasis & Ordañez-Jasis, 2004), the widely and deeply held perception of the “apathetic” Latina/o parent persists, making such work the exception and not the norm within the field of education. Thus, I argue, contributing to this critical line of work is sorely needed in order to strengthen a larger counter-discourse aimed at fully dismantling deficit rationales and erroneous portrayals of the Latina/o family. I also contend that more is yet to be known about the multiple ways Latina/o parents participate in the education of their children, particularly how

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16 All of the work cited here challenges the argument that Latina/o parents are to blame for the failed relationship between them and schools.

17 For more on cultural deficit theory, see Valencia (1997).

18 It is important to note that while educational research has only minimally captured a more critical perspective on parent involvement, other disciplines and writings have been exposing and challenging deficit thinking as it affects and erroneously characterizes Latina/o families. I highlight it as a footnote here, acknowledging that a LatCrit approach to educational research demands the employment of an interdisciplinary lens to inform and guide research and practice. Thus, future work in this area needs to recognize and situate the historical trajectory of Latina/o parent engagement from an ethnic studies disciplinary perspective, particularly Chicana/o Studies. This does not change the argument here that educational research is lacking in more critical reviews and approaches to understanding the phenomenon of parent involvement, especially as it pertains to Parents of Color. Rather the purpose here is to acknowledge a longer history of important work that supports the current study, but requires an interdisciplinary lens to make it visible. One example of such work is a compilation of articles written for El Grito, a Chicana/o Studies journal that sought to challenge the stereotypical representation of the Chicano, which its founders agreed had informed social-scientific discourse. See Romano (1971), Voices; reading from El Grito: A journal of contemporary Mexican American thought, 1967-1971. In addition to work produced in the academy, it is also important to acknowledge the trajectory of writings and essays produced within grassroots organizations and community groups, as part of a body of critical work supporting the current study.
they come to insert themselves in efforts around school reform. This is mostly true as it relates to Latina/o immigrant parents.

Thus, groups like ALIANZA could potentially help inform us about how to build sustainable school-community partnerships in Latina/o immigrant communities and support a greater inclusion of the Latina/o parental voice in school decision-making. Moreover, as I have been able to witness during the time I have worked with them, ALIANZA’s efforts powerfully suggest a reframing of parental involvement, particularly in school decision-making, as a form of civic engagement. From this standpoint, parent involvement is not only important in improving one of the most important civic institutions in society – schools – but it can often carry over into other civic and public spaces because of how schools are connected with other civic establishments. Acknowledging and supporting this form of involvement is crucial particularly in a time where decreases in civic participation have been noted (Franklin & de Mino, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Gibson & Levine, 2003). As concerns of increasing “under-performing” schools (Tyack & Cuban, 2001; Pearl, 2002; Solorzano & Solorzano, 1995) and a rise in an “opportunity gap” continue (Oakes, Rogers, Silver, Horng, & Goode, 2004), the importance of including Latina/o parents within educational and civic spaces for improving schooling conditions is now more important than ever.

It is within this interconnected set of concerns that I have laid out above, that I argue a case study of ALIANZA, which is provided in the chapters that follow, is crucially needed. As Latinas/os, and arguably Latina/o immigrants, rapidly become the majority in California’s public schools, finding ways to increase the Latina/o parental voice in school and civic reform is not

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19 Here, I am borrowing from the report issued by Oakes, Rogers, Silver, Horng, & Goode (2004), to define “opportunity gap” as the disproportionate distribution of “opportunities to learn,” such as qualified teachers, facilities that are not overcrowded, appropriate learning material, etc., between schools in affluent, White neighborhoods and schools in poor, Communities of Color.
only important but essential if 1) schools are to better serve the needs of Latina/o students and their families and 2) educational policy is to honor its expressed intent for democratic collaborations among schools and their communities for the purpose of improving the educational outcomes of Latina/o children. This is particularly important among Latina/o immigrants, particularly those undocumented, who are often seen as outsiders to the process of school and civic reform. Cases like ALIANZA, whose members are mostly undocumented, complicate traditional notions of who can and cannot participate in creating social change. Documenting their efforts can help us further theorize about the role Latina/o undocumented immigrants, in particular, can and should play in transforming schools and society.

But there is another crucial element that establishes the importance of a study of this kind. As I now turn to briefly describe ALIANZA and define the specific questions guiding inquiry in this study, I am once again reminded of my own parents and mothers like Olga. Documenting and telling their story not only serves potential interests among educational researchers and practitioners, but among other parents as well. Sharing this study with other parents can be deeply reaffirming as they may also be dealing with similar situations in their efforts to participate in school reform. In this way, a study of this kind can sustain and support efforts of parents beyond ALIANZA. By attempting to understand and document how ALIANZA came to be what it is today, this research can unveil what is possible and what is still needed to reconcile the contradictions between the ideal and the practice of a participatory and representative democracy. Thus, at its core, this study is a story of hope, or esperanza, about parents enacting their agency to create change despite the numerous barriers in their path. This is what I believe fundamentally makes a case study of ALIANZA so compelling and important.

I now turn my attention briefly to ALIANZA and my guiding questions for this study.
Research Questions

Although ALIANZA has existed in its current form since the late 1990’s, its history traces back to the early 1980s, when its umbrella organization, Centro para Inmigrantes (CI)\(^{20}\) was formed. Founded in a public park in 1983, CI was initially an organization working with a group of parents and their youth on addressing concerns about racism and the lack of educational opportunities and affordable housing for the working poor in an area of Los Angeles County that has been and continues to be highly segregated both racially and economically. In 1987, a group of local popular educators joined the group, introducing the concepts of popular literacy and popular education\(^{21}\) to the organization. From this union, emerged what became CI’s mission:

- to create a more humane and democratic society by responding to the needs and problems of disenfranchised people through leadership development and educational programs based on Popular Education methodology.
- Specifically our goal is to organize and educate low-income Latina/o immigrants concerned with solving problems in their own communities.

It is within this organizational context that ALIANZA formally emerged in the late 1990’s.

Since its inception, ALIANZA defines its purpose as training, organizing, and facilitating the participation of public school parents in an effort to achieve equitable and quality schooling for all children in the local school district that it serves. In the process, they have called particular attention to the conditions affecting Latina/o students and their families, who form the majority of students in their district-- approximately 60% during the 2010-2011 school year\(^{22}\). In their campaign to achieve its organization’s purpose, ALIANZA has participated and organized

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\(^{20}\) In order to protect the anonymity of ALIANZA, the real name of its umbrella organization has been replaced by a pseudonym.

\(^{21}\) During their first methodological workshop in 1997, CI defined popular education as “...a process of analysis, critical and participative reflection through economic, political, and socio-cultural realities that arise from impoverished organized groups” (organizational website, concealed to protect anonymity).

\(^{22}\) Data derived from the California Department of Education data portal, available through its website: http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/.
numerous activities including holding leadership development trainings for parents, organizing forums with elected school and city officials, and working with other organizations such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) to bring educational and training resources to families. Comprised of Latina/o immigrant parents, several of which are undocumented, ALIANZA has been instrumental in helping to bring the Latina/o immigrant voice into local school and city politics over the course of several years.

Considering the set of concerns I have laid out above and the trajectory and current work of ALIANZA, I argue that a case study of ALIANZA does indeed serve as a vehicle to theorize about Latina/o immigrant parents as powerful agents of change in schools and society at large. Using Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) as an overarching theoretical frame and Freirean understandings of consciousness and collective action, I approach this study guided by the following questions:

1. **How have members of ALIANZA come to see themselves as agents of educational and civic change?**

2. **How have ALIANZA’s members’ perceptions of themselves as agents of change translated into collective action?**

To answer these questions, I begin by exploring the field of parent involvement, in both research and policy from a LatCrit lens, providing a critique of how parent involvement has been framed in ways that have marginalized Latina/o parents in schools. In this process I introduce work that examines Latina/o parent leadership from a critical perspective and informs the current study on ALIANZA. Following this, I provide a LatCrit analysis of ideologies embedded in the notion of civic engagement by highlighting first how litigation and policy has contested the notion of U.S. political membership and second by providing examples in both research and practice that can help contextualize the efforts of groups, like ALIANZA, to insert themselves
within civic spaces. In order to address the questions guiding this study, I then turn to Freire and his theory of how the oppressed come to consciousness about their social conditions and enact agency to bring about change. Next, I discuss how I employed a qualitative case study methodology using a participatory action research approach guided by a Chicana feminist epistemological frame. Grounded in this methodology, I highlight the specific methods used for data collection that include oral history interviews, participant observation, and examination of selected organizational artifacts for a grounded theory-based data analysis. To better contextualize the findings of this study, I provide introductory portraits of each of my parent collaborators, appropriately honoring the individuals whose stories are contained within this manuscript by prefacing the findings sections in this way. Next, I provide my first set of findings, which identify a series of critical junctures in the life histories of each of my ALIANZA collaborators important in triggering their development of political agency. I follow this with an analysis of how ALIANZA builds from these lived experiences to create change within the community it serves. Finally, I conclude with important policy recommendations this study informs for constructing school-community partnerships, particularly in Latina/o immigrant communities, as well as the importance of critically grounded participatory action models of research for achieving social justice ends not just at the conclusion of the research process but throughout its production.
CHAPTER 2

Constructing an “External” Framework

“No hay mal que por bien no venga”

Since my inception as a community organizer, I have been in search of literature to help explain the institutional and contextual factors that I argue powerfully shape the experiences of the parents I worked with in Northern California and, later, my experiences working with ALIANZA. Without having yet conducted a research study to understand how the socio-political, cultural, and historical dimensions of these broader factors translated into the work of these Latina/o immigrant parents, I did recognize that their efforts, like other social movements, arise from a particular “place,” one informed by their own lived experiences throughout their life trajectories and within the day-to-day moments shaped by the environment in which they were operating to create change. As I embarked on my journey through graduate school, I began searching in the areas of parent involvement and civic engagement, as these areas directly addressed the participation and efforts of the parents I collaborated with. But rather than come across a vast literature in educational research that critically situated and contextually informed the civic and educational efforts of these parents, I instead encountered a wide array of culturally deficit arguments that blame Parents of Color generally, and Latina/o parents specifically, for the failed success of their students in public schools. Within a framework of civic engagement that assumes citizenship, Latina/o immigrants, particularly the undocumented, are rarely acknowledged as agents of civic change. With some exceptions, my search not only ended up uncovering a void in the educational literature which failed to explain the efforts of groups like

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23 Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “there is no misfortune that doesn’t bring some good with it.”

24 It is important to acknowledge that place and space have related but distinct meanings. According to Friedland (1992), “place is the fusion of space and experience, a space filled with meaning, a source of identity” (p. 14).
ALIANZA but, I argue, also defined parent involvement and civic engagement in such a way that renders such efforts by non-citizens invisible from the start. Referring to the realm of education, Olivos (2006) highlights this problematic when he writes: “The inability of current parent involvement policy and practice to take into account contradictions and tensions in knowledge, culture, and power, particularly in regard to bicultural parents, has contributed greatly to the alienation of these communities from the schooling process” (p.77).

In the midst of these early encounters with the above-mentioned literature that portrayed Latina/o parents in a light that I felt was inaccurate, short-sighted, and on the verge of racist, I attended an ALIANZA group meeting where several of its members quickly noticed my concerned demeanor. After briefly explaining what informed my frustration, I was surprised at the laughter I received in response by several of the parents. Perplexed, I tried to nervously join in the laughter, assuming that their response was aimed at helping me attach a light-hearted character to a profoundly disappointing moment in my initial years as a graduate student. But as the laughter died down, one of ALIANZA’s long-standing members, Caridad, responded with a dicho I had often heard from my own parents growing up: no hay mal que por bien no venga. Immediately, I understood. Their laughter wasn’t meant to minimize my experience or the frustration I felt as a result, but to help me persevere in my efforts. After many years of challenging faulty assumptions and misguided beliefs about Latina/o parents, Caridad, and the other ALIANZA members, understood first-hand what it meant to work in the trenches of grassroots organizing where challenging racist ideologies was a daily battle in their quest for social change. If they had given in to the trials and tribulations in their work as Latina/o immigrant parent leaders, ALIANZA would have ceased to exist long ago or possibly would never have come to be in the first place. Having already witnessed and experienced the many
benefits of their work, ALIANZA members were, in their own way, encouraging me to see beyond the frustrations I was then experiencing and to embrace a hope that I would find the tools to render their lives as Latina/o immigrant parent leaders as truthfully and accurately as possible.

Thus, in an effort to follow Caridad’s advice and create a framework to explore the questions of the present study, I set out to find the most effective theoretical tools to unmask the normative premises of parent involvement and civic engagement work. I came across Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), a framework that has emerged from Critical Race Theory (CRT), which has helped me understand and challenge the central and intersecting ways race and racism operate to marginalize Latinas/os and, in this case, Latina/o immigrant parents specifically. I employ LatCrit not only in deconstructing this work but with the aid of recent critical research in the areas of parent involvement and civic engagement, utilize it as a theoretical tool to reconstruct and build a new framework. This intersecting framework of parent and civic engagement centers the voice and experiences of Latina/o immigrant parents in an effort to more fully capture an understanding of their relationship with schools and society. As a way of demonstrating how I am building a model for this study, I provide a step-by-step diagram that will be revisited throughout the remainder of this chapter and chapter three. It begins with Figure 1 that demonstrates how LatCrit is being used in this chapter as an overarching frame to examine the areas of parent involvement and civic engagement.
The goal here is to use LatCrit to build an intersecting framework that will center the experiences of ALIANZA within a broader or “external” socio-political and historical context. I begin this discussion and analysis by first defining CRT and LatCrit.

**Critical Race Theory & Latina/o Critical Race Theory as a Theoretical Lens**

Critical race theory (CRT) originated in the late 1970s from the work of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars as a new strategy for dealing with the emergence of a post-Civil Rights racial structure in the United States. This structure, they argued, was maintained by a color-blind ideology that hides and protects white privilege while masking racism in a rhetoric of “meritocracy” and “fairness” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Premised on the belief that the Civil Rights struggle and numerous legal
decisions, such as Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)\textsuperscript{25}, granted equal opportunities to all citizens, color-blind ideology argues that race is no longer a decisive factor in the distribution of resources. The danger of color-blind “racism,” though, is that it disregards the “. . . enormous and multifarious implications of the massive existing racial inequality” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p.80). Not only does it deny that institutions continue to perpetuate racism, its “reasonable” and politically correct style has made it both a popular and “moral” position, creating an “. . . almost impenetrable defense of postmodern white supremacy\textsuperscript{26}” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p.162). CRT powerfully emerged within this context as a framework aimed at undermining color-blind ideology through a deconstruction of its racist premise.

Although its origins are found in the law and critical legal studies, CRT is emerging as a useful tool in educational research to understand the experiences of Students of Color and their families in schools. Before defining CRT and the development of LatCrit in education, a definition of race and racism is first needed.

\textit{Defining Race and Racism}

Race may be America’s single most confounding problem, but the confounding problem of race is that few people seem to know what race is. (Haney López, 2000, p. 165)

An understanding of race\textsuperscript{27} is needed to examine the ways racism marginalizes People of Color. While several critical theorists have provided their own definitions and frameworks for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25}For a more complete analysis of the elusiveness of desegregation and the promise of Brown vs. Board of Education refer to Oakes & Lipton (1999).
  \item \textsuperscript{26}Here I define white supremacy as “a system of racial domination and exploitation where power and resources are unequally distributed to privilege whites and oppress People of Color” (Pérez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagón, Velez, Solórzano, 2008).
  \item \textsuperscript{27}It is important to mention here that ethnicity is also a socially constructed category, used to demark differences of culture between different groups of people. While not the focus here, it is important to note that the categorization of race and ethnicity, and its overlapping dimensions, are important for understanding the complex mechanisms employed in categorizing groups, such as Latinas/os.
\end{itemize}
understanding “race,” most agree that race is a socially constructed category, debunking commonly held biological notions of race (Haney López, 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994). As a social construction, legal institutions have contributed much to the definition of race. According to Ian Haney López (1996), courts throughout history have struggled to define the boundaries of racial categories. In this process, legal institutions have been involved not just in adopting specific definitions of race but also in creating them, especially when the legal task is to define how resources will be distributed along racial lines, such as in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (Haney-López, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1994). Although a social construction, race manifests itself in very real ways in the everyday lives of people, particularly People of Color.

Haney López (2000) argues that notions of race are deeply embedded in the social fabric of American life. Race materializes in powerful forms and is experienced in a “common sense” way by individuals through a set of interpretive codes and racial meanings that operate in daily life (Haney López, 2000). As these racial meanings become socially contested in the competition for various forms of power, race not only becomes a way to differentiate between socially constructed racial groups but also defines a hierarchy that justifies the superiority of one race over another (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). As Banks (1995) points out, race is “. . . a human invention constructed by groups to differentiate themselves from other groups, to create ideas about the ‘other,’ to formulate their identities and to defend the disproportionate distribution of rewards and opportunities within society” (p. 22). Banks’ analysis, similar to other critical race scholars, acknowledges that the construction of racial meanings within a U.S. context benefits whites by validating their values, beliefs and knowledge over that of other racial groups through
a process of normalization, establishing whites “naturally” at the top of the racial hierarchy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn, 2006; Banks, 1995).

This hierarchy of “races” is legitimized through racist ideologies. While racism can be manifested in both overt and covert ways, at its core, racism is an ideology that positions certain races as dominant and others as subordinate, reinforcing systems of domination that maintain this hierarchy intact (Solórzano, 1998). It defines who in society is allocated privilege and status and rewarded with the best jobs, schools, etc., and who is deemed substandard (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Lorde (1992) defines racism as “the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance.” Marable (1992) adds that racism is a system of “... ignorance, exploitation, and power” used to oppress People of Color (cited in Solórzano, 1998, p. 124). Drawing from Lorde (1992) and Marable (1992), Solórzano (1998) identifies three important characteristics of racism: 1) the belief that one group is superior, 2) that this “superior” group has the power to carry out racist acts, and 3) that various racial/ethnic groups are affected (Solórzano, 1998, p.124).

It is important to note that racism, which functions from a social construction of race, operates to simultaneously privilege and subordinate groups based on perceptions of racial difference, whether such perceptions are accurate or not. Memmi (1968) highlights this in defining racism as “the generalized and final assigning of values to real or imagined differences, to the accuser’s benefit and at his/her victim’s expense, in order to justify the former’s own privileges and aggression.” Thus, despite an individual’s self-identified racial and/or ethnic background, misperceptions of his/her racial and/or ethnic identity often suffice to position that person within a racial hierarchy. In this way, perceptions or misperceptions of racial difference are what count in enacting racist acts against People of Color.
Central to a critical understanding of racism in the U.S. is an undermining of the ideology of “white supremacy,” where power and resources are argued to be unequally distributed to privilege whites and oppress People of Color (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Dubois, 1999; Roediger, 1999). As mentioned earlier, notions of meritocracy and color-blindness reinforce an investment in whiteness, thereby protecting white privilege. White supremacy not only positions whites as entitled beneficiaries of unearned societal privilege and status, it also normalizes white values, beliefs, and experiences as those dominant and therefore legitimate in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn, 2006). Gillborn (2006) highlights the normalization of white supremacy when he states “. . . the racialized nature of politics, policing, education, and every other sphere of public life is so deeply ingrained that it has become normalized – unremarked, and taken for granted” (p. 319).

A historical analysis of U.S. racism reveals how People of Color have been victims of racial prejudice and discrimination, resulting in disparities in economic, political, and social arenas (Hilfiker, 2002). While racism today has taken on more covert forms, such as racial microaggressions\(^\text{28}\), it still plays a central, and no less debilitating role, in structuring power relations (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Its endemic nature continues to take a psychological toll on the self-regard of People of Color through the process of racial stigmatization (Delgado, 2000).

\textit{Critical Race Theory & Latina/o Critical Race Theory}

\(^{28}\) Solorzano & Yosso (2002b) define racial microaggressions as “1) subtle insults (verbal, non-verbal, visual) directed at people of color, often done automatically or unconsciously; 2) layered insults, based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and 3) cumulative insults that cause unnecessary stress to people of color while privileging whites” (p. 160).
Critical Race Theory (CRT) draws from several disciplines, including civil rights, ethnic, and critical legal studies, to examine and transform the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Mari Matsuda (1991) defines CRT as:

... the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination (cited in Solórzano, 1998, p. 122).

Thus, CRT is motivated by social justice and characterized by a passionate activism to eliminate racism as part of a broader effort to end subordination on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin lines (Solórzano, 1998). Some of the basic tenets or themes of CRT include the re-examination of history through the eyes and voices of People of Color and interest convergence, the belief that racial reform only served to promote whites' self-interest (Bell, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT today is characterized by various new sub-disciplines that “... challenge civil rights activists to rethink the ways they conceptualize race and civil rights” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 101). Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) is one of those sub-disciplines that emerged to explore and deconstruct race-neutral or color-blind ideologies within historical and cultural contexts in an effort to challenge racial and/or ethnic subordination as it particularly affects Latinas/os. Although originating in the field of law, both CRT and LatCrit have crossed disciplinary borders. Within the field of education, for example, these frameworks are providing educational researchers with a lens to explore the role of race and racism in the educational experiences of Students of Color, and, in the case of LatCrit, Latina/o students specifically.

It is important to note that LatCrit is not incompatible with CRT. According to Valdes (1996), “LatCrit is supplementary, complementary to [CRT]. LatCrit ... at its best, should operate as a close cousin – related to [CRT] in real and lasting ways ...” (p. 26-27). As a related
framework, LatCrit holds the same traditions and purpose of CRT, but developed to explore issues relevant to Latinas/os when CRT fell short as an analytical lens. Iglesias (1997) describes the main limitation of CRT as one of scope; namely, that CRT’s preoccupation with a black/white paradigm often narrows its ability to adequately answer questions about the role of race and racism, and other forms of oppression, in the lives of Latinas/os, Asian Americans, and other Communities of Color. Thus, LatCrit, as one of the branches of CRT, has now become an important theoretical lens for legal and other scholars to more fully examine how multiple forms of oppression based on immigration status, language, culture, ethnicity, and phenotype intersect to shape the experiences of Latinas/os (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

One important development in LatCrit to explore how these multiple forms of oppression affect Latina/o immigrants specifically has been theoretical work examining the intersection of racism with nativism. In an effort to explain the recent experiences and attacks against Latina/o undocumented immigrants, particularly of Mexican descent, that led to the mass pro-immigrant mobilizations in the Spring of 2006, Perez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagon, Velez, and Solorzano (2008) argued that exploring the intersection of racism and nativism is key to understanding the contemporary experiences of Mexican immigrants in particular, and Latinas/os generally. Utilizing the definitions of racism noted above and existing work on nativism, Perez Huber et. al (2008) use a LatCrit lens to define racist nativism as

The assigning of values to real or imagined differences, in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is perceived to be white, over that of the non-native, who is perceived to be People and Immigrants of Color, and thereby defend the right of whites, or the native, to dominance (p. 10).

By deconstructing the racist and nativist premise of notions such as “illegality” and “alien” that frames the current dominant discourse on immigration, work such as that being produced by

29 Higham (1955) defines nativism as the “. . . intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e. “un-American”) connections” (p. 4).
Perez Huber et. al (2008) provides a more critical contextual lens to understand the power dynamics inherent in the subordination experienced by Latinas/os. Moreover, it provides an important framework for understanding the experiences of foreignness, fear, invisibility, and criminality faced by these same persons (Abrego, 2002; Chavez, 1996).

Exploring these intersections and others within education, LatCrit has further evolved from its roots in legal scholarship. Solorzano and Yosso (2001) define LatCrit theory in education as:

... a framework that can be used to theorize and examine the ways in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact on the educational structures, processes, and discourses that effect People of Color generally and Latinas/os specifically. ... LatCrit scholars in education acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower. LatCrit theory in education is conceived as a social justice project that attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching and the academy with the community. LatCrit theory in education is transdisciplinary and draws on many other schools of progressive scholarship” (p. 479)

Similar to a CRT approach in education that has exposed and sought to challenge ways racism mediates to produce educational inequality both in and out of the classroom (Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a), a LatCrit approach in education employs the following five elements that frame its methodological use within research (Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001):

1. The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination
2. The challenge to dominant ideology
3. The commitment to social justice
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge
5. The transdisciplinary perspective

Through these elements, LatCrit allows educational researchers to “see,” deconstruct, and transform the racist and intersecting oppressive educational realities that affect Latina/o students.
and their families. In this way, it has aided my own analysis of parent involvement and civic engagement work that I argue has operated to render invisible the work of individuals and groups like ALIANZA. I now turn to this analysis beginning with a LatCrit deconstruction of parent involvement research and policies.

**A LatCrit Analysis of Parent Involvement Research**

A broad consensus exists among educational researchers, teachers and school administrators, policy makers, and the public that parent participation is a crucial element in the academic achievement of children and in the overall promotion of school quality. As mentioned in the introductory section of this study, an extensive body of research is now available that has established this strong link (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Epstein, 1983; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Banks 1993; Cotton & Wikelund, 2001; Cummins, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 2001). However, much of the dominant and well-cited parent involvement work, particularly on Latina/o parents, reaches the following conclusion: *Latina/o parents do not care about education*. A group of critical researchers have properly identified this as a deficit understanding. (Donato, 1997; Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Olivos, 2003, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdes, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002).

According to Valencia and Black (2002), this widespread stereotype or “myth” that Latina/o parents do not value education is based in deficit thinking, in particular cultural deficit arguments that attempt to explain the school failure of Latina/o children. Pearl (1997) explains that cultural deficit or deprivation models “. . . singled out the family unit as the transmitter of deficiencies . . . The family unit – mother, father, home environment – [is] pegged as the carrier of the pathology” (p.133). Logically then, if a child fails academically the “deficient” home is to
blame. Hence the assumption follows that Latina/o children fail in school because they are not appropriately socialized for academic competence, a direct result from the indifference their parents demonstrate toward education (Moreno & Valencia, 2002).

Some of those most powerful articulations of this deficit rationale emerged in the 1960s, when literature surfaced that spoke directly about the “culturally deprived” child and his/her impoverished home environment (Frost & Hawkes, 1966; Hemmuth, 1967). As it became apparent with copious publications on this topic during this time, Chicana/o families became one of the targeted racial groups for remedies and interventions (see Marans & Lourie, 1967). Soon after the culturally deprived literature made headlines throughout the country, another body of educational work emerged in the 1980s, whose focus and arguments around the “at risk” child have lingering effects even to this day. Similar to the cultural deficit rationales of the literature that preceded it, this body of work focused primarily on family and personal characteristics as the root cause of school failure (Moreno & Valencia, 2002). Here mothers were identified as the source of their children’s problems in schools (Lubeck, 1995) and, once again, Latinas/os, along with other Families of Color, were implicated most severely for putting their children “at risk” (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). Today, the persistent and pervasive academic achievement gap between Latina/o students and their white peers contributes to the continued use of culturally deficit explanations for Latina/o school failure (Valencia, 2002). The questioning of this assumption in critical research and through historical analyses, however, is beginning to challenge these deficit explanations.

A small body of qualitative and ethnographic research investigating the socialization practices of Latina/o parents reveals a different reality from that posed by the erroneous deficit claims of their educational apathy. In a few studies, researchers have found that Latina/o parents
continuously expressed a strong value for the education and academic achievement of their children (Solorzano, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdes, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002). Critical examinations of the Latina/o home have showed that it provides a rich socio-cultural environment of learning, even though these cognitive “spaces” differ from mainstream dominant culture (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 2001; Valdes, 1996). Olivos (2004) additionally cites several important studies of Latina/o families that demonstrate the multiple ways learning and literacy occur in Latina/o homes, regardless of socio-economic status.

In addition to demonstrating the educational involvement in Latina/o homes, Olivos (2003, 2004, 2006) also provides an important analysis for understanding the relationship between Latina/o parents and public schools. He finds that Latina/o parents actively resisted, challenged, and even transformed contradictory and “oppressive” school policies and practices. Jasis & Ordañez-Jasis (2004) similarly discovered in their study of a Latina/o parent-organizing project at a public middle school that Latina/o parents actively worked to establish a more inclusive partnership with their school. Both Olivos (2003, 2004, 2006) and Jasis & Ordañez-Jasis (2004) indirectly uncovered institutional processes that served to marginalize Latina/o parents from meaningful participation in schools by demonstrating how Latina/o parents struggled to be validated by school agents as important collaborators in both student achievement and school improvement.

Another important body of work that has made similar arguments to those provided by Olivos (2003, 2004, 2006) and Jasis & Ordanez-Jasis (2004) and is central to the current study on ALIANZA is the work by Delgado-Gaitan (1990, 2001) that highlights the efforts of Latina/o immigrant parents in Carpinteria, California. Using socio-cultural theories and Freirean concepts of empowerment, Delgado-Gaitan (2001) provides a complex and rich understanding of the
personal and collective empowerment of her Latina/o immigrant parent informants as they organized and developed leadership to address educational concerns in their community. She poignantly and powerfully documents how Latina/o immigrant families in Carpinteria confronted poverty and racism as they organized into a formal group, known as COPLA (Comité de Padres Latinos\textsuperscript{30}), that provided them agency to navigate the school system and advocate for improvements in their children’s schooling. Her work, I argue, is fundamental and necessary to any investigation of Latina/o immigrant parental involvement both inside and outside of schools. Because her work has provided one of the very few important critical portrayals of the efforts of a Latina/o immigrant parents to insert themselves in educational reform, it is essential in guiding the current study on ALIANZA, which I hope will extend and further contribute to this work.

In addition to scholarly research, Moreno and Valencia (2002) provide a brief historical analysis of the multiple ways Chicana/o parents and families have struggled to provide better education for their youth. By providing numerous examples of litigation, advocacy organizations, the efforts of multiple individual activists, political demonstrations, and legislation, Moreno and Valencia (2002) defiantly debunk the deficit myth that Chicana/o families do not care about education. One example of these efforts is the 1968 East Los Angeles “blowouts.”\textsuperscript{31} Commonly cited as a defining moment in the Chicana/o movement, the 1968 East Los Angeles school “blow-outs” demonstrate how Latina/o parents were critically involved in the struggle to provide equitable, quality education for their children (NLCC, 1996; Moreno & Valencia, 2002). Numerous examples also exist in the area of litigation, where Latina/o parents

\textsuperscript{30} Translated to English: Committee of Latina/o Parents

\textsuperscript{31} In 1968, Chicano students used the term “blow-out” as a signal for other students to walk out of their classrooms to protest the lack of attention school officials were giving to the worsening educational conditions of Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles (NLCC, 1996).
have brought suit to demand educational equity for their children through the desegregation of schools. Two historical and emblematic examples of this are the 1931 case of Roberto Alvarez v. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District and the 1946 case of Mendez v. Westminster (544 S.D. Cal 1946). These historical efforts on behalf of Latina/o parents not only communicate their high value in education but also clearly demonstrate their invested and engaged pursuit for educational equity (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

So how can deficit views of Latina/o parents that wrongly characterize them as apathetic and ambivalent about education continue to persist in light of evidence that demonstrates the contrary? I argue that the fundamental reason is racism. In his own reflections as a parent activist in a Latina/o community, Olivos (2004) maintains that the “. . . relationship between Latina/o parents and the school system is a micro-reflection of the societal tensions and conflicts in the area of . . . institutional racism” (p.30). He further contends that this tense relationship . . . is negatively affected by the cultural biases . . . inherent within the institution of public education as demonstrated by its historic role of using its power to impose the values and wishes of the dominant culture onto bicultural student and parent populations (Olivos, 2004, p. 29).

So how does cultural bias and institutionalized racism become manifested in the perpetuation of these negative stereotypes of Latina/o parents? I maintain that while Latina/o parents demonstrate a high regard for education and exhibit multiple forms of involvement, their contributions to the education of their children do not “fit” within the narrowly defined, White, middle-class, standards of what it means to be a “good” and “involved” parent (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdes, 1996).

These standards, which have become the “norm” for parent involvement in public schools, serve to dismiss Latina/o parents’ values and practices as authentic investment in the

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32 For more on both of these cases see Ruiz (2001) and Wollenberg (1976)
education of their children (Valdes, 1996). According to Moreno and Valencia (2002), “. . . the use of priori categories regarding the nature of parental involvement have constrained our understanding of [how] involvement can vary in families of different cultures within the United States” (p.242). I argue that the “failure” of Latina/o parents to display behaviors consistent with these dominant parent involvement standards has contributed to deficit stereotypes that they do not care about education.

The following analysis explores this further by examining the politics of parental involvement in public schools. By applying a LatCrit framework to this analysis I address how racism is central to understanding why “certain” definitions of what it means to be a “good” parent validate and recognize particular types of cultural capital and dismiss others while framing this racist practice as neutral and “color-blind” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). A LatCrit analysis is important because it not only confronts race and racism in understanding the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of Latina/o parents but also challenges the very construct of parent involvement all together (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). In order to fully unveil and debunk the myth that Latina/o parents do not care about education, ideologies of parent involvement must be deconstructed using a LatCrit lens to expose the institutional forces that circumscribe the relationship between Latina/o parents and public schools.

The Politics of Parental Involvement & The Marginalization of Latina/o Parents

While several research studies acknowledge that Latina/o parents do, indeed, value education they also report that Latina/o parents tend to be less “visible” in their children’s schools compared to other non-Latina/o parents (Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Olivos, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Following cultural deficit thinking, many practitioners believe efforts
need to be made to engage “non-standard” Latina/o families in “standard” or “traditional” methods of parent involvement, from which they are currently absent (Valdes, 1996). These efforts have resulted in family intervention/parent education programs that believe “traditional” parent involvement results in improved student achievement among low-income, Students of Color (Valdes, 1996). These efforts are founded on the premise that Latina/o parents lack the necessary “cultural capital” to be “good” parents (Yosso, 2005; Solorzano & Villalpando, 2003). I argue that these programs and most public schools value only one type of “cultural capital” and dismiss other types of “capital” or “cultural wealth”\textsuperscript{33} that socially and ethnically diverse parents, in particular Latina/o parents, bring to the educational arena. Before engaging in a critical analysis of Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “cultural capital” and the marginalization of Latina/o parents in schools, it is first important to understand what is meant by “traditional” parent involvement.


According to Valdes (1996), in the late 1980s and the decade of the 1990s saw a heightened interest to understand how parents could better support the education of their children. The strategy, known as \textit{parent involvement}, took center-stage with the publication in 1987 of \textit{What Works} from the United States Department of Education (Valdes, 1996). In the section entitled “Curriculum of the Home,” \textit{What Works} details what parents can do at home to help their children succeed in school. Specifically, it contends that parents need to discuss news,

\textsuperscript{33} Yosso (2005) defines cultural wealth as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and networks possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression” (p. 77). Yosso’s (2005) model of cultural wealth, situated within critical race theory (CRT), challenges traditional interpretations of cultural and social capital. It shifts the lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead highlights the often unrecognized array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts held by socially marginalized groups.
television programs, and special events and observe “routine” for meals, bedtime, and homework, among several other things. In addition to the “Curriculum of the Home,” parent involvement also includes participation at the school site in activities such as Parent-Teacher Association meetings and school decision-making processes (Moreno & Valencia, 2002). The message communicated in What Works is that if “. . . parents of disadvantaged children take the steps listed . . . their children can do as well at school as the children of more affluent families” (Valdes, 1996, p.32). Consequently, if parents do not engage in such behaviors they are placing their child at risk for failure in school.

The prescription of parent involvement that arose from What Works is based on an ideology of education that minimizes institutional responsibility for privileging certain students and disadvantaging others and attributes success or failure to the individual efforts of parents. These parent involvement “standards” have served to locate within Latina/o families the causes of children’s low academic performance rather than in the unequal resources and practices of the school. The following analysis exposes how this traditional definition of parent involvement has significantly contributed to the stereotyping and marginalization of Latina/o parents in schools by refusing to acknowledge and validate the cultural skills and abilities Latina/o parents employ to support their children’s academic success.

Rejecting the “Cultural Wealth” of Latina/o parents and families

While most educational research on this topic seeks to identify how Latina/o parents’ lack of power, cultural background, and socio-economic environments contribute to their marginalization in schools, a more critical analysis reveals that things are not so simple or straightforward. In fact, simply identifying these characteristics could easily serve to further
reinforce culturally deficient notions about Latina/o parents. A more critical analysis finds that embedded in the erroneous argument that Latina/o parents do not participate and do not care about education are racist ideologies that privilege White, middle class forms of involvement and “cultural capital” while devaluing and rejecting others. Before analyzing how this occurs, a brief understanding of the notion of “cultural capital” is required.

According to Arum and Beattie (2000), cultural capital, first introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, can be defined as possessing those “dispositions, attitudes, and styles” that are characteristic of “upper-class cultural forms” (p.4). The more you possess these attitudes or style the greater your cultural capital (Arum & Beattie, 2000). According to Lareau and Horvat (1999), both membership in higher social classes and being white are forms of cultural capital that are immediately validated in school contexts. Schools value this cultural capital because its possession implies large vocabularies (in English, I argue), time, transportation, and the ability to arrange for child-care to attend school events during the day (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

While Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital assumes that the cultural capital of low-income Parents of Color does not have high exchange value in schools, a critical race application of his theory reveals how racism mediates to discount other forms of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006; Solorzano & Villalpando, 2003). In their research on cultural capital in family-school relationships, Lareau and Horvat (1999) argue that while all parents have cultural capital to invest in different settings, not all forms of cultural capital have the same value in a given field. Specifically, they discovered that “the rules of the game” that mediate the interactions between parents and school are race-specific, where White, middle class parents have what Lareau (1989) calls “home advantage” (Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Shannon, 1996). The association of valued “cultural capital” to being white creates a racist power differential where
Latina/o parents’ cultural wealth, as manifested in their own investments in education, is deemed inferior by traditional parent involvement measures.

The practice of validating only certain forms of cultural capital is reinforced by the adoption of narrow definitions of parent involvement in schools and in educational research. These narrow guidelines for how to be a “good” parent are problematic when applied universally (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Valdes, 1996). For Latina/o parents, for example, who often utilize consejos\textsuperscript{34} and cuentos\textsuperscript{35} to motivate and support their children, these rigid definitions dismiss their forms of investment and contribute to labeling them as uninterested and disinvested in education (Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Valdes, 1996). The failure to recognize multiple forms of Latina/o parent involvement in education creates an environment where Latinas/os parents are frequently rebuffed by administrators and teachers, not included in school discussions about their children, and even less so in school decision-making processes (Olivos, 2004; Auerbach 2002; Valdes, 1996). They are perceived to lack the necessary “cultural capital,” as measured by parent involvement standards, to effectively advocate for their children in school. Latina/o parents are therefore dismissed and marginalized and invited only to participate in parent education activities that help them build the “appropriate” capital to be “good” parents (Valdes, 1996). For many Latina/o parents, the dismissal of their contributions often leads to a sense of inferiority, shame, embarrassment, and helplessness (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990), while others are angered into resisting the lack of respeto\textsuperscript{36} schools demonstrate toward them.

Olivos (2004) maintains that the “absence” of Latina/o parents in schools is more a demonstration of resistance than a sign of disinterest. Olivos (2004) finds that Latina/o parents

\textsuperscript{34} Translated to English, consejos is most closely defined as advice-giving narratives (Moreno & Valencia, 2002).

\textsuperscript{35} Cuentos is the Spanish word for stories.

\textsuperscript{36} Respeto is the Spanish word for respect.
have valid reasons for refusing to attend parent involvement “opportunities”, usually education workshops that attempt to “improve” Latina/o parenting. Not only do Latina/o parents find these activities useless, some perceive them as patronizing and disrespectful (Olivos, 2004, 2006; Valdes, 1996). Further research is needed to explore how the lack of Latina/o parent presence within schools can also be a form of resistance.

In sum, standards of parent involvement found in schools and perpetuated by educational research are narrowly defined, which leads to the exclusion of Latina/o parents and others whose forms of involvement and “cultural capital” are not recognized by educational institutions. According to Olivos (2004, 2006), the racism Latina/o parents experience in local schools reflects broader institutionalized structures that negate the value of non-White cultures. These racist ideologies reject the cultural wealth and educational contributions of Latina/o parents, allowing culturally deficit arguments of Latina/o parents to persist in light of evidence that demonstrates the contrary. I now turn my attention to providing a LatCrit analysis of California’s policies on parent involvement, particularly within the realm of educational accountability.

_A LatCrit Analysis of California’s policies on Parent Involvement_

As pointed out by Olivos (2003, 2004, 2006) and Jasis & Ordanez-Jasis (2004), it is not uncommon to come across findings in the area of parent involvement that are filled with culturally deficit explanations for poor parent turnout in Latina/o school communities. As well-intentioned approaches emerge to “fix” parents, there is an important set of questions that few are asking with regard to parent involvement policies: *Does California offer a clear vision, through its policies, of how parents can make certain that schools serving their children are*
providing the necessary conditions and learning opportunities to succeed? Does California adequately provide the conditions for parents to play a meaningful role in this process, especially in Latina/o communities?

It answering these questions, I seek to understand both the symbolic and political value of parent participation in educational accountability, particularly the ways the articulation of this value from the State’s point of view holds important implications and consequences for the meaningful participation of all parents, but more so for Latina/o parents. It is here that the employment of a theoretical lens - in this case LatCrit – becomes important to this policy analysis. According to Cibulka (1994), “. . . the study of educational politics and policy may contribute to understanding within its limited domain, but unless its research is framed theoretically . . . research findings will not lead to cumulative knowledge about the broader political system” (p. 109). I argue that in order to examine the politics of parental involvement in California schools, a critical race lens is absolutely necessary. Specifically, I contend that the failure of these policies to provide an adequate support structure for carrying out the tasks it requires, combined with embedded notions of cultural deficit in both the research and practice of parent involvement, serves to keep Latina/o parents out of important decision-making spaces in schools.

In order to begin addressing the question of whether or not California’s policies on parent involvement in educational accountability live up to their true intent, especially when it comes to Latina/o parents, it is important to first examine the assumptions this combined legislation makes in its “theory of change.” By examining these assumptions, we can better understand what is needed strategically for implementation of these policies and better evaluate whether such conditions are supported in their provisions. Before examining the assumptions of California’s
policies on parental involvement in educational accountability, it is important to briefly detail what these policies are asking parents to do.

According to Rogers (2002), the State’s accountability system can be best summarized as “test, report, and support” (p.13). It is within this system, that parents are primarily asked to be recipients of State testing information, reported mainly in the form of an Academic Performance Index (API) via the School Accountability Report Card (SARC) (Rogers, 2002). The intent of the SARC is to make known to the public which schools are not performing the way they should so that they, in turn, can help develop strategies that will bring that school up to par and make school officials accountable for their actions. This system, couched most extensively in the Public School Accountability Act (PSAA) of 1999, specifically requires that important information about schools, such as that made available via the SARC, be distributed to parents in an easily accessible format so that they can more meaningfully participate when problems do arise.

PSAA and other policies aimed at involving parents in school reform, though, assume three things: 1) that all parents have easy access to high quality and comprehensible information; 2) that all parents have meaningful opportunities to contribute their feedback and experiential knowledge to school officials responsible for improving schools; and, 3) that these same officials will be accountable to parents and respond to their concerns and interest (Rogers, 2002). In order for parent participation in California’s educational accountability system to be successful, as intended in the numerous policies already listed, all these assumptions have to be met. The concern now is whether these same policies provide for the conditions necessary to satisfy these assumptions. In his recent work on California’s educational accountability system,
Rogers (2002) has clearly demonstrated that these conditions have not been met, and that, therefore, these policies have failed to live up to their true purpose.

Analyzing the research of Rogers (2002) from a critical race lens reveals how the failure to meet these conditions adversely affects working class, Parents of Color the most. He finds that the SARC, for example, is often written in inaccessible language, can be posted on the internet versus providing a hard copy at the discretion of the school, and is generated without much oversight from this State (Rogers, 2002). Thus, the SARC often provides incomplete portraits about the conditions of student learning and may be difficult for parents to access if they do not possess certain technology or have the linguistic skills to decipher its language. Consequently, some parents often have no way of knowing how their child’s school compares to other schools in the State based on the SARC (Rogers, 2002). Using a critical race lens makes clear that those parents that are at the greatest disadvantage in accessing critical information about public schools are Parents of Color generally, and Latina/o parents specifically.

Taking it one step further, Rogers (2002) also argues that “. . . the State provides limited opportunities for parents to share their interests and concerns within school improvement or school-based governance structures” (p.18). He goes on to discuss Malen’s (1999) work on school site councils to contend that parents are often not allowed to discuss “provocative issues” in these spaces (Rogers, 2002, p.18). But Rogers (2002) is not alone in observing the lack of meaningful opportunities for parents to contribute to a system of educational accountability. Olivos’ (2003, 2004, 2006) work similarly exposes how the purported absence of Latina/o parents in school decision-making is in large part due to teachers and administrators not wanting their participation for a host of culturally deficit reasons (Olivos 2003, 2004; Jasis & Ordañez-Jasis, 2004). Using a critical race lens highlights how race and racism and other forms of class
subordination are often mediating mechanisms for keeping Latina/o parents out of decision-making spaces, and when such spaces are available, fails to encourage parental input on school conditions and improvement.

The final point Rogers (2002) illuminates is the lack of an infrastructure to support school personnel in effectively dealing with concerns raised by parents. When parents approach teachers with concerns about school conditions or ideas for school improvement they are not sure what to do with the information. Research in the area of effective implementation of educational policies in schools, suggests the need for creating conditions that develop the local capacity of teachers and administrators to more effectively engage and adapt the educational reform (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Danielson & Hochschild, 1998; Calhoun & Joyce, 1998; Cooper, Slavin, and Madden, 1998; McLaughlin, 1998). Developing capacity is only one part of the solution in both the implementation and scale-up of policies designed to engage parent participation in educational accountability. Generating interest is also necessary.

According to Elmore (1996), in order for a policy or practice to become widely implemented you need to establish incentive systems. Once again, Rogers (2002) highlights that California’s educational accountability system fails to create direct incentives for school officials to engage their parent constituency. This, combined with the already burdensome task of just keeping schools running, has served to erode much of the interest in meaningfully engaging parents in accountability for the long haul. When you examine this from a critical race lens, it only becomes more problematic. As noted above, Lareau & Horvat (1999) argue that middle-to-upper class, White parents possess a certain type of social and cultural capital that is valued in public schools. Thus, the interest that teachers and administrators may have toward engaging parents in educational accountability may be racially-biased and class-based. *The result?*
Schools fail to recognize the numerous assets among Latina/o parents while activating the faulty stereotype of their disinterest in education to explain their absence on school campuses (Olivos, 2003, 2004; Jasis & Ordañez-Jasis, 2004).

As examined above, California’s policies on parental involvement in educational accountability have come up short on their alleged intent. In reading the language of several of these policies, it is hard to disagree with them. I would go so far as to argue that these policies, at least in the way they are written, come across quite progressive. The idea that parents have the right to sit at the decision-making table serves a symbolic function for believing that democracies really do work and that our system of government is truly accountable to the public. Boleman & Deal (2003) argue that for many organizations, and I would add policies, “what is most important is not what happens, but what it means” (p. 242). Unfortunately, California’s policies leave parent involvement in educational accountability only within the symbolic realm.

Taken together with dominant notions of parent involvement, California’s policies only contribute to a further marginalization of Latina/o immigrant parents in schools. The ineffective system of implementing such policies, despite their democratic intent, has added to parents’ task of participating in school reform by necessitating that they also engage and/or create decision-making spaces in order to generate meaningful change. This task, I argue, is more burdensome for Latina/o immigrant parents, as the analysis above suggests. They are confronted with deficit notions of their “parenting” as well as decision-making contexts that were not designed with them in mind, failing to consider the particular cultural and linguistic needs that would make their participation, when allowed, meaningful. Given this argument, I offer the following approach of parent engagement as a possible frame for thinking about and redefining parent involvement.
From Parent Involvement to Parent Engagement

In the argument I provided above, a LatCrit framework was essential to a deconstruction of the premise of parent involvement, as made evident in dominant research and policy on the topic, in order to unveil its racist and classist assumptions. But more importantly, LatCrit became an important tool to acknowledge and place center-stage the efforts of those parents highlighted by the work of Olivos (2003, 2004, 2006), Delgado-Gaitan (1990, 2001), and Jasis & Ordañez-Jasis (2004), and those still that have yet to be documented, such as ALIANZA, within an appropriate critical context. By allowing us to unmask and see beyond the normative assumptions in parent involvement work, LatCrit, in conjunction with the research produced by these individuals, helps us understand how Parents of Color generally, and Latina/o parents specifically, engage both the figurative and literal spaces afforded them in schools to bring about change. In essence, it is a call to move from a parent involvement paradigm to one of parent engagement.

In defining parent engagement in contrast to parent involvement, I argue that a LatCrit framework is essential in my attempts to craft a more nuanced and critical model for how we study and come to understand the efforts of parents in groups like ALIANZA. Toward this end, I contend that a parent engagement approach in educational research recognizes the importance of the relationship between the activities and strategies employed by parents to exert their voice and the context that affects, informs, and may even be contested by such efforts. In other words, it acknowledges how ideology works to shape the very spaces that parents then either come to occupy or are marginalized from in schools.

This is in contrast to a notion of parent involvement that connotes an idea that parents work to involve themselves within generally accepted spaces, such as parent-teacher
associations, or in generally accepted forms, such as those outlined by the 1987 publication of “What Works,” noted above. The focus within a parent involvement paradigm, I argue, is toward solely examining the participation, or lack thereof, of parents without adequately examining how broader mechanisms are at play that have a direct influence on this participation. By shifting to a parent engagement framework, research becomes more attuned to capturing the important connection between what parents do in terms of educational reform and the context in which they do it. It recognizes that parents, particularly working class Parents of Color, engage and may even seek to transform the spaces often allocated for them in schools in order to create the change they hope to see for their children and communities. This also includes efforts to create new spaces to more effectively carry out their intentions and efforts. This type of framework is consistent with a LatCrit approach that calls on educational researchers to examine the important contextual elements, such as race, class, and gender that are crucial for understanding the experiences and efforts of Communities of Color, particularly Latinas/os.

It is important to note that the shift I am suggesting to a parent engagement framework simply allows for a broader analysis of the institutional and political context in which groups like ALIANZA find themselves. The specific elements that will define the parental engagement of ALIANZA will emerge from the data and counterstories of parents themselves, through a grounded theory approach that I detail in Chapter Four. I now turn my attention to providing a similar LatCrit analysis of civic engagement, the second major area comprising an “external” framework for this study.

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37 Solorzano and Yosso (2001) define counter-storytelling as “. . . a method of telling the story of those experiences that not often told (i.e. those on the margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse – the majoritarian story” (p. 475).
A LatCrit Analysis of Civic Engagement

Recently, both educators and educational researchers have been called to prioritize the notion of civic engagement in their work. The American Educational Research Association (AERA), one of the most important nation-wide networks within the field of education, decided to organize their 2008 national conference under the theme of “Research on Schools, Neighborhoods, and Communities: Toward Civic Responsibility” (http://www.aera.net/meetings). In establishing the importance of this topic, Dr. William Tate, current AERA President, comments that civic responsibility in education is important in bringing a community together to “. . . accept the charge of creating high-quality educational opportunities irrespective of neighborhood or other geospatial considerations” (Tate, 2006, para. 2). In other words, educational efforts should be invested in civic engagement, or rather defined as a form of civic engagement, as a way of creating a viable path toward educational opportunity.

For many parents trying to exert change in their communities this intersection between the civic and educational realm is a critical one. Since its inception, ALIANZA’s campaign for educational justice has led them into city-wide campaigns that address issues such as affordable housing, economic development, residential segregation, sustainable employment and living wages, among other issues. They are rarely absent from city council meetings and, in the recent past, became one of the lead groups convening a large forum to address how city and school leaders can work more effectively for their students. The forum, aptly titled “civic investment in our public schools,” was well attended by more than 200 community residents, school officials, and city leaders. It was one of many efforts, where ALIANZA explicitly reminded city officials that schools are intimately connected to other civic institutions and, therefore, necessarily impacted by civic decision-making.
In this forum, as in other events organized by ALIANZA to call attention to and seek a remedy for concerns affecting their local district’s schools, the goal was two-fold: 1) to achieve a comprehensive solution towards an equitable education for all children and; 2) to establish all parents as necessary political actors within intersecting civic and educational arenas. This is not unlike the efforts of parents in Chicago and other U.S. cities, which I briefly highlight below, who have fought and continue to fight for the right of all parents to vote in school-wide elections as part of larger, continuing campaigns, to extend suffrage to noncitizens. What makes these efforts and those of ALIANZA particularly significant is that they are spearheaded by and on behalf of immigrant parents, all of whom are non-citizens, and a large proportion of whom are undocumented. In a powerful way, then, the civic efforts of these parents are redefining the very meaning of civic engagement beyond the traditionally recognized relationship of the citizen to the state, in which dominant notions of civic engagement derive their value.

It is here that a LatCrit analysis of civic engagement becomes important for this study. Not only does a LatCrit lens provide us an analytic tool to deconstruct the underlying ideologies informing a traditional understanding of civic engagement, particularly from a racist nativist standpoint, but also aids us in reconstructing this concept from the very experiences of parents. This latter objective is one of the central goals of the present study – to define and understand civic engagement from the perspective of ALIANZA. Such a study not only heeds the call of Dr. Tate and others to find ways to develop and support the civic efforts of school communities toward educational reform but also works to powerfully reshape our view of Latina/o immigrant parents, particularly those undocumented, as agents of civic change. In doing so, this study can also help us further theorize about the intersection between parent and civic engagement and the particular role of Latina/o immigrant parents at that junction.
Toward this end, I begin by briefly locating the present study within a larger debate about the meaning of citizenship, which I argue broadly frames a dominant understanding of civic engagement as primarily the work of citizens via traditional methods such as voting. The intent here is to briefly provide a LatCrit analysis to the notion of citizenship in order to elucidate its contested meaning and provide a space to illuminate and explore the work of ALIANZA as that of civic engagement; however defined by ALIANZA. Thus, I begin by discussing some key examples of recent policy and litigation that have attempted to define the position of immigrants in a contemporary U.S. political community and in relation to U.S. citizens. After this I provide the example of immigrant parents in Chicago and other U.S. cities, to which I alluded above, who are operating from the intersection of civic and parent engagement to claim their right to vote in school-wide elections. These examples highlight how Latina/o immigrant parents, specifically those considered undocumented or non-citizens, are redefining and (re)claiming a civic role in electoral politics through their role as parents, regardless of how law or policy defines their position within a U.S. political community. Finally, I conclude with the only study to date that directly examines the efforts of undocumented Latina/o immigrant parents from the place of civic engagement (Rogers, Saunders, Terriquez, and Velez, 2008) and thus becomes a key piece of educational research that this study on ALIANZA hopes to extend.

**Contextualizing the Civic Engagement of Latina/o Immigrant Parents**

As a way of articulating an understanding of civic engagement in contemporary U.S. society, Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, and Silbereisen (2002) begin by defining civic competence as “. . . an understanding of how government functions, and the acquisition of behaviors that allow citizens to participate in government and permit individuals to
meet, discuss, and collaborate to promote their interest within a framework of democratic principles” (p. 121). I highlight this definition as representative of a dominant or typical understanding not only of what civic engagement means but also for whom it is intended. As Youniss et al. (2002) point out, the acquisition of political behaviors geared toward a civic participation in a democratic community is the responsibility of citizens. Although they don’t define who exactly is captured by this term, I argue that there is an implicit understanding of what a citizen means in relation to citizenship that reflects a commonly understood and often unspoken assumption.

In her work that seeks to understand the dilemmas and contested meanings of membership in contemporary society, Bosniak (2006) nicely summarizes the normative assumptions about citizenship. She argues that

Most such discussions presume that citizenship is enacted within bounded national societies. Ordinarily, these presumptions are unspoken and unacknowledged: theorists tend to treat both a national setting and a state of boundedness as already satisfied conditions for the practices and institutions and experiences of citizenship (p.5).

Thus, a citizen is normatively understood as an exclusive member within a bounded national community. This is not to say that this notion or concept has not been contested. As Bosniak (2006) points out, numerous directions in political and legal thought on the subject have led to a rethinking and redefinition of the concept. Developing notions of multicultural, corporate, post-national, and cultural citizenship are a few examples of this trend calling for a more universalistic frame of the term (Motomura, 2006; Bosniak, 2006). What is important here is not detailing what each of these new terms means but rather understand that they have all attempted to deconstruct and redefine the very borders or boundaries that have confined traditional notions of citizenship.
These challenges offer powerful insights about how the legally delineated borders that define inclusion or exclusion within a U.S. political community are racially constructed. Although he does not explicitly define his work as critical race scholarship, Motomura (2006) for example, argues that race has always been an important part of defining restrictions in U.S. immigration law and policy. Extending this idea, Flores (2003) underscores how Communities of Color, particularly Latinas/os, have been deprived of certain rights despite their prominent and long-standing presence within the U.S. By arguing that citizenship rights are not bestowed but must be fought for and achieved, Flores (2003) essentially exposes how the boundaries of citizenship are ridden with racist assumptions that are then challenged in an effort to gain civil rights. This argument leads Flores (2003) to define cultural citizenship as the “. . . process by which subjugated groups define themselves, claim space, and claim rights” (p. 96). His work not only rejects what he defines as the “artificial” boundaries defining who is and who is not a citizen, but calls for a redefinition of citizenship that emerges from the experiences of marginalized groups, a method that functions, I argue, in appropriate LatCrit fashion.

But rather than entertain a lengthier and abstract discussion about politically contested and redefined notions of citizenship in an attempt to situate the civic engagement work of ALIANZA, I argue that we can turn to cases of litigation and policy to provide a more concrete approach. Motomura (2006) points out that “whether in the form of court decisions, statutes, or agency regulations, law typically reveals our society’s values and attitudes in concrete, crystallized, and accessible terms. . . court decisions and statutes reflect influential thought about immigration and immigrants.” (p. 12). So as a matter of locating the civic engagement work of ALIANZA within a larger discourse on citizenship, I explore examples of key policy and litigation that has and continues to influence the position of immigrants, particularly those
undocumented, within a U.S. national community. Specifically, I highlight three examples: the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, California Proposition 187, and the 1982 Supreme Court decision of *Plyler v Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). In exploring these cases, I by no means ignore the historical legacies that inform contemporary battles to include or exclude Immigrants of Color in the U.S. Although not explicitly detailed below, I acknowledge these cases as deeply rooted in historical traditions that directly impact their contemporary meanings.\(^38\) I use these examples strategically to highlight how they contest notions of membership within a U.S. national frame to either deny or grant access for immigrants to particular privileges, rights, and public benefits. I argue that the manifestation of these legal efforts, in conjunction with others, have resulted in creating the marginalized conditions\(^39\), but also the opportunities for immigrant parents, such as those in Chicago, to organize battles to gain voting rights. I now turn my attention to the first of these efforts showcased below – the *Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986*.

**Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986**

Enacted in 1986, the federal Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was an effort to curb undocumented immigration to the U.S. IRCA was designed to strengthen border controls and punish employers who knowingly hired undocumented immigrants (Motomura, 2006). IRCA also established a temporary agricultural worker program intended to reduce the demand

\(^{38}\) For a more detailed historical analysis of immigration litigation and policy, see Motomura (2006).

\(^{39}\) At the time this manuscript was being written, Arizona and Alabama faced new proposals to further deny immigrants, particularly the undocumented, entry into and full participation in U.S. civic life. Because these battles are currently being contested and the aftermaths of their passage or denial are still unknown, they were not included as separate cases here. But the importance of these emerging anti-immigrant attempts is worth noting here.
for undocumented farm labor while granting amnesty for the undocumented who had been in the U.S. since 1982 (Motomura, 2006).

Daniels (2004) argues that IRCA emerged during a “climate of fear” in the 1980’s towards what was perceived as a growing immigrant population. At the same time, and in contradictory form, the U.S. also recognized its need for low-wage labor despite this growing fear of being “overrun by undesirable illegal aliens” (Ngai, 2004). Thus IRCA, reflective of the socio-historical and political context at the time it was drafted, sought to both restrict undocumented immigration and ensure an ever present pool of cheap immigrant labor. This satisfied and protected wealthy U.S. businesses that profited from the exploitation of this type of labor (Daniels, 2004). Thus, IRCA would continue lawful efforts made by the Simpson-Mazzoli law to protect U.S. businesses hiring undocumented workers, while criminalizing undocumented workers themselves.40

Critically analyzing IRCA from this position reveals its racist nativist premise and potential, particularly as it intersects with the power dynamics inherent in a capitalist, U.S. economic structure. According to Motomura (2006), “the act’s new penalties for employers raised concerns that notwithstanding existing antidiscrimination laws, employers would discriminate against Latinos, Asian Americans, or others who ‘look foreign’” (p. 137). Additionally, IRCA imposed a significant increase in “border” enforcement, or rather the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border specifically, which cost $2 billion per year to build and maintain during the 1990’s (Ngai, 2005).

40 The Simpson-Mazzoli Bill was passed in March 1982 as a reform to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 (McCarran-Walter Act). This bill enabled business owners to evade employer sanctions for the hiring of undocumented workers. It also increased penalties for undocumented workers who falsified legal documents such as social security cards and work permits. Furthermore, the bill excluded undocumented workers from access to legal aid centers and other publically funded assistance program. Ironically, these services would be partially paid by undocumented workers’ tax dollars. See Bustamante (1983).
An important characteristic of IRCA was its effort to rigidify distinctions between arbitrary classes of noncitizens as a way of determining who has protection against workplace discrimination. According to Motomura (2006), the original language in the 1986 version of IRCA “. . . penalized employers only if they discriminated against citizens or . . . permanent residents who . . . have applied for naturalization within six months of satisfying the resident requirement and became citizens within two years of applying” (p. 137). Thus IRCA’s antidiscrimination provisions would not extend to non-citizens who didn’t meet those requirements, only “lawful” immigrants on a particular path to “legal” citizenship. I argue what is important to highlight here is how IRCA, through its language and provisions, attempted to define membership within a larger political community as a way of restricting who could and could not enjoy particular rights, such as protection from workplace discrimination. By creating and attempting to legally enforce arbitrary classes of non-citizens, IRCA is an example of how notions of citizenship and political membership become strategically constructed in ways to privilege those in power.

*California Proposition 187*

In November 1994, California voters approved Proposition 187, which would have barred access by undocumented immigrants to a large portion of state public services, including public education and nonemergency health care (Motomura, 2006). It would have also required verification of immigration status of individuals encountered by certain state and local government employees, who would then need to report any suspected undocumented individuals to federal immigration officials (Motomura, 2006). A failure to do so would result in criminal
prosecution. Proposition 187 also would have established criminal penalties for manufacturing, selling, and using false documents (Motomura, 2006).

Emerging within a similar social and political climate as IRCA, Proposition 187 could be argued as a continued, albeit more severe response to the 1980’s “climate of fear” discussed above. The difference here is that Proposition 187 emerged during a period of recession in California that caused the closure of many industrial businesses in the state. Similar to the rhetoric that occurred during the Repatriation era, immigrants, particularly those of Mexican descent, were accused in California of taking scarce jobs and diminishing wages for U.S. workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995). “Xenophobic narratives” about Mexican immigrants emerged, creating erroneous images and beliefs about them. Mexican immigrants were perceived as “unfairly” and “unjustly” taking advantage of welfare, healthcare, education and other social services at the expense of taxpayers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995). Hondagneu-Sotelo (1995) names this anti-immigrant narrative the “government resource drain” story, which targeted Mexican women and children particularly as draining the economic prosperity of the state through the “undeserved” utilization of social services. Thus, in this latter example, a racist nativist discourse intersected with a sexist one to create an oppressive environment for Mexican women especially.

Luckily, lawsuits ensued immediately after Proposition 187 was passed citing that it conflicted with the exclusive federal domain of immigration legislation and policy (Motomura, 2006). A federal court agreed and found Proposition 187 unconstitutional. Within these debates to challenge Proposition 187, it is important to highlight how notions of political membership were being contested in an attempt to articulate which rights and public benefits could be enjoyed by which individuals. Motomura (2006) defines these debates as articulating two main
arguments. The first argument was “. . . that all persons, citizens or not, are entitled to a minimum standard of living that includes adequate health care, food and financial security” (Motomura, 2006, p. 152). Motomura (2006) cites the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, produced by the United Nations, as a possible reference for articulating this first argument. The second argument, which is more limited in scope, contends that “. . . any country has only limited authority to discriminate between citizens and non-citizens” (Motomura, 2006, p. 153). Both lines of reasoning sought to disrupt the rigid classifications that Proposition 187 was attempting to make between citizens and noncitizens, specifically those undocumented, in order to access even the most basic public benefits. What they demonstrate, once again, is that notions of citizenship and political membership are highly contested. Although Proposition 187 was never implemented, it is still often cited as one of the more severe attempts to establish the exclusivity of certain rights, even the most basic ones, as the sole domain and practice of citizens.

_Plyler v. Doe_

In 1975, Texas enacted a statute that barred undocumented children from access to public schools. A lawsuit initiated in the city of Tyler, Texas by Chicana/o plaintiffs on behalf of undocumented Mexican students moved through the Texas courts to the U.S. Supreme Court. There the Supreme Court required the state of Texas to demonstrate that this statute furthered “some substantial goal of the State,” and when none could be provided it was ruled unconstitutional (Motomura, 2006). _Plyler_ significantly established the importance of providing _all_ children, including those who are undocumented, an education. It also implied the education of all children is an important state interest (Rogers et al., 2008). In essence _Plyler_ extended the
boundaries of constitutional protection to all individuals within the U.S. in ways that I argue, begins to make more porous the barriers defining what constitutes citizenship and political membership.

Motomura (2006) acknowledges the critical importance of *Plyler* as a modern constitutional decision that argued on the basis of “territorial personhood” in interpreting the U.S. constitution, even when those “persons” had been legally deemed “unlawful” in the U.S. He highlights a key statement by Justice Brennan who wrote for the majority, “...aliens, even aliens whose presence in this country is unlawful, have long been recognized as ‘persons’ guaranteed due process of law by the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments” (Motomura, 2006, p.77). Thus, *Plyler* clarified that the boundaries of the Constitution encompass undocumented immigrants at least to a certain extent and afford them its protections. But the court could have decided to argue in other ways that would have reinforced these boundaries as they were. The rationale that was used and court decision that ensued in *Plyler* reminds us, once again, of the contested terrain in which notions of citizenship and political membership are located.

*Plyler v. Doe* is unique in that it sought to open rather than constrict boundaries of political membership, particularly as it applies to accessing educational opportunities. In this way, it serves an important function, I argue, in powerfully framing and supporting the civic engagement efforts of noncitizen Latina/o immigrant parents, specifically for those that are

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41 I want to make note that critical race legal scholars sometimes view the rationale in legal decisions enacted to support and secure rights for working class, Communities of Color, with skepticism. Bell (2004), for example argues that historical legal decisions in support of Blacks can be viewed through the lens of interest convergence theory. He argues that interest convergence functions so that one party enjoys some rights or privileges because of the significant benefit another party would enjoy due to granting such rights. In his work, Bell (2004) uses an example of white elites incorporating poor whites into policy decisions around slavery during the Reconstruction era in order to break potential class alliances of poor whites and Black slaves. In effect, white elites persuaded poor whites to support slavery, even when this decision was to their own detriment. In his example, Bell (2004) illustrates how poor whites were given increased voting power to change, or maintain policies in which white elites would benefit.
undocumented. Because *Plyler* held that denying educational access to undocumented youth hindered their ability to function within and contribute to civic institutions in the state, it stressed the important function of schools as sites for building civic competence and encouraging civic engagement (Rogers et al., 2008). According to Rogers et al. (2008),

Public schools both teach about, and provide practice in, civic engagement. Undocumented students and parents develop knowledge, skills, and commitments for civic engagement by participating in school activities, school-based social networks, and school governance. Foreclosing these opportunities, we argue, would undermine civic engagement and the health of democratic institutions (p. 3).

Thus, *Plyler* not only made it possible for undocumented immigrant youth and parents to access basic educational opportunities, but it also, both directly and indirectly, provided opportunities for them to participate as civic actors for social change via public schools.

Thus, I argue that *Plyler* has played a role in assisting undocumented parents in claiming their place within civic decision-making. By granting access for undocumented youth to attend public schooling, *Plyler* also opened the door for their parents to participate in school politics. This same group of parents is now working to widen that door, such as those in Chicago and other U.S. cities, who have and continue to campaign to secure voting rights in school-wide elections. I now briefly highlight these examples, what they offer in helping to contextualize the civic engagement efforts of ALIANZA, and finally, highlight the only study to date that examines the civic engagement efforts of undocumented parents critically and explicitly.

*Toward a Model of Civic Engagement for Latina/o Immigrant Parents*

In 1988, Chicago’s school code was changed to allow all community residents and parents of children in schools, regardless of citizenship, to vote in school-wide elections. Although the campaign to reform Chicago’s school code was fought on numerous fronts, much
of the leadership was noncitizen parents. Their voices, among others, were listened and validated as Chicago determined that the betterment of the future of its schools rested in part in having *all* parents participate in electoral politics at the school level. This was unlike the reasoning provided in New York, when that city similarly decided to allow noncitizen parents the right to vote in school board elections and to hold office on school boards until 2003 (Hayduk, 2004). During the period that noncitizen parents had the right to vote, Guillermo Linares, who served as president on one of the New York City school boards, acknowledged that this type of action “celebrates and assists the newest wave of immigrants, who are vital to New York City’s future as their predecessors” (Hayduk, 2004, p. 515). Although not specific to just parents, other campaigns to secure noncitizen voting in local elections have been successful in Maryland and Massachusetts (Hayduk, 2004). The success of these campaigns has helped pave the way for other parent groups seeking to obtain voting rights in their own districts and cities.

One such case is San Francisco. There, as in Chicago, parents organized in 2004 to secure the right to vote in school board elections for all parents, regardless of citizenship or “legal” status in the U.S. A local newspaper reporter who covered the issue when it first emerged, interviewed several noncitizen parents in the city for their perspective (Mangaliman, 2004). Berta Hernandez, one of those parents, a Mexican immigrant and mother of two children, comments, “[Voting] is not the key to solve all of our problems, but it’s an important political tool to help us continue with the fight to have better schools for our children” (Mangaliman, 2004). Miguel Perez, another parent interviewed, referred to the democratic idea of “no taxation without representation” as the reason why *all* parents should have the right to vote in school-side elections, since *all*, regardless of citizenship status, pay taxes (Mangaliman, 2004). Although the proposed amendment to the San Francisco school code that would have extended this right to
vote did not pass, it has not deterred continued efforts to secure noncitizen voting there and elsewhere in the country. In 2005, New Yorkers once again took up the campaign to secure the right of noncitizens to vote, but this time in local elections. And this is part of much broader, emerging immigrant rights movement that is witnessing a proliferation of immigrants’ rights organizations working to *civically* engage within an array of issues such as labor, housing, education, health, welfare and foreign policy (Hayduk, 2004).

Regardless of whether or not noncitizen immigrant parents were able to secure the right to vote in school-wide elections within their communities, their actions are nonetheless crucial. Not only do they pave the way for furthering future efforts in the same arena but can also help educational researchers theorize about the important intersection between parent and civic engagement, particularly when it comes to undocumented Latina/o immigrant parents. I argue that their efforts can help us better articulate how parent engagement *is essentially* a form of civic engagement. Additionally, they can help reveal how opportunities to become engaged as parents, both inside and outside of schools, open doors to opportunities for developing civic capacity and leadership.

Only one study to date has begun to theorize about this intersection, particularly as it applies to undocumented parents. Rogers et al. (2008) looked at multiple ways that undocumented parents were civically engaged, specifically in the Los Angeles area. In the qualitative portion of their study, they examined several community organizations that were working toward involving more immigrant parents in educational politics. They found that among all the organizations they surveyed, undocumented parents “. . . participate robustly in educational reform and related civic activity” (Rogers et al, 2008, p. 23). This includes activities such as attending school-wide meetings to serving on school and district governing councils.
They found that an important entry into undocumented parent civic engagement was through different forms of parent education structures where they learned important skills about how to communicate their concerns and interests to the broader community, including key stakeholders (Rogers et al., 2008). Finally, they discovered that undocumented parents were participating in the electoral process in multiple ways by informing voters door-to-door about school board candidates, making calls to registered voters during election days, and helping to register new voters in their communities (Rogers et al., 2008). Taken as a whole, the authors of the study argue that when “. . . undocumented parents become engaged in their children’s school they both contribute to the school and to their own civic development . . . such engagement creates new relationships of trust in the broader community [and] . . . energize[s] civic action” (p. 27).

Because Rogers et al. (2008) powerfully exposes the intersection of parent and civic engagement for undocumented parents, it serves as the most important piece of educational research informing and situating my inquiry on ALIANZA’s civic engagement. It provides a context from which I can begin to articulate how members of ALIANZA see themselves within the arena of civic reform, and how these understandings of themselves are connected to their role as parents. Moreover, it positions the civic efforts of parents like those in ALIANZA as crucial and important to the overall health of a U.S. democracy and thus, from a LatCrit lens, directly challenges the racist nativist discourse that undocumented immigrants, particularly Latinas/os, are a “drain” or detriment to U.S. society.

From the work of Rogers et al. (2008) and the examples I provided above, I contend that a model is beginning to emerge to illuminate the educational and civic efforts of Latina/o immigrant parents. Yet, I argue that such a model needs to be embedded within a critical
framework, like LatCrit, in order to acknowledge the contextual factors that necessarily influence these efforts. Thus, in Figure 2, I show how this model builds from a LatCrit analysis of both parent and civic engagement.

![LatCrit Model of Parent and Civic Engagement for Latina/o Immigrant Parents](image)

**Figure 2. External Model, Part 2: A LatCrit Model of Parent and Civic Engagement for Latina/o Immigrant Parents**

Although a “skeletal” design of this model began to emerge from the analysis I provided in this chapter, the goal of this study was to build a more comprehensive framework that is informed by the voices and experiences of parents themselves, in this case ALIANZA. Based on data analysis, a more in-depth explanation of this intersection is provided in Chapter 7. The objective here was to broadly situate this study within LatCrit but allow the data to define what that intersection between *parent* and *civic engagement* actually looks like for Latina/o immigrant parents. Figure 3 demonstrates how this emerging framework both explains and is informed by the actual study.
Figure 3. External Model, Part 3: Current study both informs and is informed by theoretical framework

Providing this “external” framework, though, only partially addresses the questions guiding the present study. I now turn to describe an “internal” framework in the next chapter that will address the issues of consciousness and collective agency that are the central focus here.
CHAPTER 3

Constructing an “Internal” Framework

“No hay maestro como carne propia”

Situating this study within an “external” framework, as I laid out in Chapter 2, was necessary for providing an overarching lens from which to understand the relationship between ALIANZA and the broader social and political environment in which it operates. By employing a LatCrit lens to examine those “external” factors, I am better able to articulate the racist nativist context in which this study both finds itself and by which it is necessarily influenced. But the central questions guiding this study also demands a look “inward” at how members of ALIANZA have come to see themselves as change agents within this broader context. Thus, for the purpose of this study, it was essential to provide an “internal” framework that starts at the organizational level as the unit of analysis. It offers an approach for addressing the elements of political consciousness-raising and collective action that are at the heart of this study.

When I was originally thinking about the need for an internal framework, I consulted several ALIANZA parents to help me develop a rationale. I had, for some time, internally debated several theories and ideas for approaching this framework, but I felt as if I was coming up short and that a conversation with the parents might help me tease out why a “bottoms-up” model was just as important as a “tops-down” one that explored the structural and institutional factors framing the study, and ultimately how the two are related. Thus, in an effort to think through a skeletal model, I began a conversation with the parents at the end of one of their monthly meetings. One parent, Dolores, responded in a way that caught my attention the most. As I shared my struggles in considering multiple theories form several disciplines in an effort to

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42 Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “there is no teacher like your own flesh”
develop this framework, Dolores responded with a commonly used dicho in Latina/o communities, “Vero, como dice el dicho, no hay maestro como carne propia.”

Propelled by Dolores’s words, I began developing a framework that initiates with community organizing traditions of parent-initiated models of parental engagement (Hasan, 2004), a category of parent engagement that I argue ALIANZA falls within. Starting here recognizes and contextualizes the efforts of ALIANZA as part of a larger social movement of parents that begins with parents. It honors the dicho expressed by Dolores in that it seeks to develop an understanding of parent engagement directly from the perspective and lived experiences of parents – a type of theorizing from the flesh. This is in contrast to movements that initiate with schooling institutions, where administrators and other school officials create spaces and opportunities for parents to become “involved” (i.e. parent-teacher associations) in ways that they deem appropriate and beneficial. Exploring community organizing traditions additionally provides important insights about particular strategies used to politically socialize individuals toward a point of collective action that is relevant to this study. I also argue that because this study centers on how members of ALIANZA make meaning of their political identity development, rather than on how others evaluate their efforts or understand their role as political actors in educational and civic reform, such a starting point is necessary. I specifically turn my attention to the main theoretical framework that will be utilized to examine the core issues embedded in this study’s inquiry – Freirean Pedagogy. I use this frame primarily because ALIANZA emerged from the tradition of popular education, a well-known Freirean pedagogical practice.

It is important to note that in shifting from an external to an internal framework, by no means am I trying to create an artificial dichotomy. Rather, my intent is to show that this

43 Translated to English: Vero, like the saying goes, there is no teacher like your own flesh.
internal approach is not only embedded within but requires an external framework to position this study as a counter-hegemonic project. And, as will become evident below, almost all elements of this internal framework consistently make reference to a much broader context that appropriately blurs distinctions between what can be considered part of an “internal” or “external” framework. My purpose for separating the framework in this study into external and internal components is both for clarity and to bring to the fore different units of analysis.

**Community-Organizing Traditions within Parent Social Movements**

As Hasan (2004) points out, a less popular model of parent engagement is one that she refers to as “parent-initiated parent involvement” (p. 7). Rather than the traditional models that emphasize a client-like, dependency relationship between parents and schools, a parent-initiated model often develops outside the school system through a process of community organizing (Hasan, 2004). I argue that ALIANZA, which emerged from CI, is an example of a parent-initiated model of parent engagement. Thus, it is part of a long tradition that Hasan (2004) argues began with the social movements of the 1950s and 1960s. This community organizing tradition can be defined as “. . . sustained processes whereby people come to deeply understand a movement’s goals and empower themselves to continued action on behalf of those goals” (Hasan, 2004, p. 40). Whether through the process of cultivating safe and nurturing spaces (Gutierrez, 1990; Payne, 2000; Poletta, 2002), creating small groups to affirm each participant’s contribution (Baker, 1973), or emphasizing participatory democracy in decision-making (Poletta, 2002), these traditions offer important insights about the processes individuals go through to see themselves as agents of change and organize collectively as a result. Thus the first step in
building a model for the “internal” framework I propose here is providing a context that begins with these community-organizing traditions. Figure 4 displays a visual of this first step.

![Community Organizing Traditions](image)

**Figure 4. Internal Model, Part 1: Community Organizing Traditions**

As a way of contextualizing the work of ALIANZA within this tradition, I highlight a few organizational examples that form part of the community organizing tradition of parent-initiated models of parent engagement. I begin with the Industrial Area Foundation (IAF).

*Industrial Area Foundation (IAF)*

*The Industrial Area Foundation* (IAF) was one of the first organizations to adopt a community organizing approach to parent involvement (Hasan, 2004). Formed in the 1960s throughout the U.S., IAF was an organization that began with community leaders, educators and students working together around issues of school improvement as well as living conditions in communities. The first IAF movement started in Texas by Saul Alinsky, whose approach to community organizing dates back to the 1930s and has since influenced broader movements on a variety of social issues (Hasan, 2004). In the 1970s and 1980s, Ernesto Cortez, a former student of Alinsky, expanded his vision and model to help organize low-income parents toward political engagement nation-wide to improve public schools (Hasan, 2004).
From this expanded approach, the IAF/School Alliance emerged in 1972, mostly through churches, particularly the Catholic church “. . . to focus on the deplorable conditions in the schools and argue that the local schools were functioning as a factory of reproducing illiteracy and poverty of community members” (Hasan, 2004, p. 47). Within the context of Texas, IAF’s focus was a predominant working class Mexican community that suffered poor conditions in housing, education, and employment (Hasan, 2004). In 1992, recognizing the benefit of IAF to the community, the Texas government facilitated a relationship between IAF and the Texas Teacher’s Association to form 22 schools as “Alliance” schools in low-income communities. Despite becoming institutionalized in the process of creating these schools, IAF still maintained a participatory democratic process where “horizontally ordered civic networks” (Hasan, 2004, p. 48) allowed for a strong representative voice from the community in IAF decisions. Through the use of one-on-one’s, house meetings, and parent assemblies, common strategies within an IAF organizing philosophy, Alliance schools continue to this day to experience success on multiple levels (Hasan, 2004).

Hasan (2004) points out that one of the important distinguishing features of IAF is how it centralizes the community in the overall process of creating educational change. For IAF, the community, rather than principals, teachers, and administrators should lead endeavors toward educational reform (Shirley, 2002). As part of its process to achieve this and ensure that efforts are truly grassroots, IAF uses a strategy of “scaffolding and fading” (Cortez, 1992). Under the approach, IAF organizers help members of the community construct a “scaffold” for building their own movement and then later “fade” when they feel a community can carry out its own interests without their aid. According to Cortez (1992), this process is fundamental to the overall philosophy of IAF that seeks to move communities from dependency to autonomy.
Overall, IAF is important to highlight here because of its community-centered origins and focus, similar to ALIANZA, and because of its work with parents. IAF continues to work nation-wide with communities on several issues and its continued success makes IAF one of the most recognized organizations and social movements in the U.S. I now turn my attention to another equally important organization – ACORN.

**Action of Community Organizing for Reform Now (ACORN)**

*Action of Community Organizing for Reform Now (ACORN)* began in the 1960s to organize working class individuals around particular issues and concerns. Although it started in Arkansas as a local organization, within six years it expanded to twenty states. According to Hasan (2004), one of the major focuses and concerns of ACORN was the condition of education afforded to students and their families in urban communities. She highlights, as example, ACORN’s mobilizing efforts up to this day within the Oakland school district (Hasan, 2004). In one Oakland school, ACORN helped organize mothers to pull their children out of school as a result of the school’s “overuse” of substitutes. They also helped parents and students in one of the district’s high schools lead a strike to address the poor quality of instruction and facilities at the school site (Hasan, 2004).

Similar to IAF, ACORN believed that a community-centered approach to school and educational reform is the most effective for bringing about change. To accomplish this, ACORN strategically formed alliances with different community-based organizations, particularly in the arena of organized labor (i.e. AFL-CIO), to hold civic leaders accountable for the quality of schools and community conditions (Hasan, 2004). Through the use of public

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44 I speak of ACORN in the past tense because it filed for Chapter 7 liquidation in November 2010, effectively closing the organization. Despite ceasing to exist, however, there is much to be learned from the work of ACORN.
forums, in much the same way that IAF utilizes public assemblies, ACORN practiced “... traditional community organizing strategies as a format to evolve to a powerful position of influencing government and corporate policies” (Hasan, 2004, p. 57). Forming an important part of the community organizing tradition highlighted here, ACORN, much like IAF, demonstrated how a participatory democratic approach to seeking reform can powerfully shift power and achieve sustainable victories.

*Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA)*

Although not on the same nation-wide scale as IAF and ACORN, the *Mothers of East Los Angeles* (MELA), I argue, forms an important part of the community organizing tradition that informs parent-initiated parent engagement, particularly for Latina/o parents. Thus, and because of its Los Angeles focus, MELA is critical to a larger movement of Latina/o parents, such as ALIANZA, seeking to create change within their communities, locally, in Southern California. Furthermore, I argue that ALIANZA is a continuation of the legacy that MELA furthered in the 1980s, particularly because MELA, like ALIANZA, operated from the intersection of parent and civic engagement.

Pardo’s (1990) work with MELA introduced the group to the educational research scene. Her research poignantly and powerfully demonstrates how Chicana women transformed their “traditional” networks and resources into political assets to form MELA and collectively defend the quality of life in their community. According to Pardo (1990), MELA was loosely comprised of 400 Chicana women who were longtime residents of East Los Angeles in the late 1980s. They initially came together utilizing the same participatory democratic strategies employed by IAF and ACORN, to address and challenge a proposition to construct a state prison
in their community, and later, continued to organize around “quality of life” issues, including campaigns for environmental justice (Pardo, 1990). In the process of their work, Pardo (1990) argues that these women “. . . transformed social identity – ethnic identity, class identity, and gender identity – into an impetus as well as a basis for activism. . . . in transforming their existing social networks into grassroots political networks, they have also transformed themselves” (p. 2). This transformation, Pardo (1990) goes on to contend is what led the women in MELA to transcend their definition of “mother” to include a militant political opposition to state-proposed projects that would have adversely affected their East Los Angeles community.

One important characteristic of MELA, noted above, was the operation of their initial campaigns in the 1980s from the intersection of parent and civic engagement. From her informants in the organization, Pardo (1990) learned that in the process of interacting with school staff and attending school functions, MELA members met other mothers and began developing a network based on a mutual concern for the welfare of their children. From these networks they began participating in different efforts aimed at remedying pressing issues facing their local neighborhoods. Slowly their civic capacity developed, which eventually led to the formation of MELA. Thus, Pardo’s (1990) work is not only important in that it documents the efforts of Chicana mothers from a critical gendered and raced lens, thereby challenging dominant notions of Latina/o parents that I highlighted above, but it offers important insight about how civic engagement emerges from parent engagement, particularly as this applies to Latinas generally, and Chicanas specifically.

Viewed together – IAF, ACORN, and MELA – all reveal important approaches within a community organizing frame that led to parent-initiated platforms of parent engagement, whether to demand educational or civic reform, or both. Central to all three was the practice of
participatory democracy that led them to structure their respective organizations in ways that facilitated the growth and participation of each of its members. I argue that this is one of the fundamental principles characterizing the community-organizing traditions that these examples highlight and which ALIANZA is now continuing. Each of these organizations operated in their own way to secure a standard of participatory democracy in their practice. Similarly ALIANZA, which is immersed within a tradition of popular education, uses Freirean principles to guide their work. Thus, a Freirean approach to consciousness-raising and collective action is important to help frame the central questions guiding this study. Figure 5 demonstrates how the overall internal model articulated in this chapter builds on the work of Freire, which I detail in the following section.

![Figure 5. Internal Model, Part 2: Freirean Pedagogy](image)

*A Freirean Approach to Consciousness Raising & Collective Action*

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby
coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge (Freire, 1970, p. 69).

Perhaps one of the most influential theses in the philosophy of education, Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* calls for a radical approach to the deconstruction of oppression and the creation of liberatory and democratic societies. Freire’s approach turns the concept of established education on its head, replacing what he calls the "banking" notion of education with a more critical dialogical approach to teaching and learning. Under the common "banking" model of education, the teacher deposits knowledge into the student's mind, and whether the student learned from the process is tested by how accurately he/she can regurgitate the knowledge back to the teacher at test time. Freire critiques the absence of critical thinking in these traditional schooling practices as well as the underlying structure that assumes teaching and learning is a one-way street: the educator is superior to and must teach the student, who is in turn inferior to and dependent upon the instruction of the teacher. According to Freire, this model of education secures the social status quo from challenge. Unless the oppressed in society are taught to think critically about their reality, they will not gain what Freire refers to as *conscientização*. He defines this as a form of critical consciousness to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions that enables individuals to take action to challenge oppression. In order to achieve this, Freire offers a radically different approach than that offered by the traditional “banking” method. His approach is one of “problem-posing” where individuals use the practice of dialogue to come up with generative themes that speak to their reality, particularly around oppression. These themes or “codes” are then reflected and acted upon by participants, a method Freire refers to as *praxis*, as a pedagogical path toward liberation and social justice.

Freire’s work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provides educators with a process for dismantling oppression and creating socially just societies. First, the concept that learning takes
place through dialogue, as mentioned above, between different people with different experiences is essential. Depositing information into the minds of students does not lead to true learning; it relegates the student to the position of object, excluding him as subject. Dialogue, in turn, fosters true learning and challenges long-standing structures of power and oppression in modern society. According to Freire, this dialogue, in order to be liberatory, must include the core values of love, humility, faith in humankind, and hope. For Freire, “... the act of love is commitment to ... the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical” (p.70).

Second, and complimentary to this theory, is Freire's attempt to disrupt the traditional notion of the teacher-student relationship in which learning is a one-way street. Part and parcel of this challenge is the necessity of treating all people with respect and embracing the reality that all are capable of teaching, not simply of being taught. Under this paradigm, all are subjects of learning and education. Embedded in this idea is the third concept that the oppressed and marginalized in society are capable and essential to their liberation. Only they should lead the charge; only they are capable of attaining their freedom. By being engaged in critical thought, the oppressed become conscienticized about their place in the world, decide that this “place” or reality is not agreeable to them, and begin to resist against their oppression. It is this process of self-empowerment through the practice of participatory democracy that leads to the creation of a more socially just society.

While this summarizes Freire’s overall philosophy and pedagogical approach, for our purposes here in providing an “internal” framework for the questions guiding this study, it is important to detail more fully what Freire means by conscientização and how this translates to collective action. For a more concrete approach that is also immersed in the tradition of CRT and LatCrit, I turn to the work of Solorzano and Yosso (2001) who theorize about the merger of
a critical race approach with Freirean pedagogy. Their work is central to providing the “internal” framework for this study and thus provides the final component to this internal model that is demonstrated in Figure 6.

![Internal Model, Part 3: Consciousness and Resistance](image)

**Figure 6. Internal Model, Part 3: Consciousness and Resistance**

The first step for Solorzano & Yosso (2001) in their process was defining the different levels of consciousness that Freire describes along the path to conscientização, or critical consciousness. The first is *magical consciousness*, which Freire (1974) characterizes as individuals “... simply apprehend[ing] facts [that they] attribute ... a superior power by which it is controlled and to which it must therefore submit. Magic[al] consciousness is characterized by fatalism, which leads men to fold their arms, resigned to the impossibility of resisting the power of facts” (p.39). Described another way, magical consciousness can translate into individuals blaming inequality on luck or chance, or the will of God (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

The second form of consciousness is *naïve consciousness*, where instead of blaming fate for
reality, an individual may believe that they, their culture, or community is ultimately responsible (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Finally, the last form of consciousness is *critical consciousness*, where individuals “. . . look beyond fatalistic or cultural reasons for inequality to focus on structural, systemic explanations” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 608).

In their next step toward intersecting these levels of consciousness with action or resistance, Solorzano & Yosso (2001), provide a continuum of levels of motivation that an individual may have toward social justice. They first define social justice as “. . . working toward the abolishment of racism, sexism, and poverty, and the empowerment of underrepresented minority groups” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 608). Next they argue that an individual may be motivated, moderately motivated, or not motivated toward social justice (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Each of these levels closely corresponds to a level of consciousness. In other words, an individual who is not motivated toward social justice supports the status quo, one who is moderately motivated looks to reform society by altering him/herself or his/her community, and, finally, one who is motivated by social justice works to transform or change social structures and institutions (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Their final step was placing these levels of consciousness and motivation toward social justice, that I highlighted above, within a framework of resistance. For this they borrowed from the work of Giroux (1983) and Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), to develop the model depicted in Figure 7.
In this model, Solorzano & Yosso (2001) define three different types of resistance that they argue are intimately in relationship with Freire’s levels of consciousness and a motivation, or lack thereof, toward social justice. The first form of resistance, *self-defeating resistance*, is thus defined as a critique of societal inequality but because it is not motivated by social justice responds in a way that may perpetuate inequality for the person enacting it or his or her community (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The second form, *conformist resistance*, is characterized by an absent critique of inequality but because it may be somewhat motivated toward social justice, will look to reform the system by changing individuals or communities (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The final form of resistance, *transformative resistance*, is distinct from the other two in that it involves both a critical analysis and critique of what cause societal inequality and is motivated by social justice. As a result, a person enacting transformative
resistance will seek emancipatory changes in the system by working to abolish racism, classism, sexism, and other intersecting forms of oppression in society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Taken as a whole, the model offered by Solorzano & Yosso (2001) provide the most comprehensive and accessible approach to date, I argue, that examines the intersection between a Freirean approach to consciousness and models of resistance. The important piece to remember as well is that Freire provides a pedagogical approach, a dialectic “problem-posing” praxis, to assist individuals in arriving at conscientização and ideally enact the type of transformational resistance that Solorzano & Yosso (2001) define. Since Freire first introduced his philosophy, most profoundly explicated in his seminal work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, individuals and communities around the world have been working to enact his approach and recommendations to bring about social justice. This also includes organizations within the U.S., particularly pro-immigrant organizations, that have been influenced by his traditions and the use of popular education that Freire’s legacy left behind in Latin American primarily, but also in other parts of the world (La Belle, 1987). CI, the umbrella organization for ALIANZA that I briefly highlighted in the introduction to this study, is one such organization that prides itself on employing a Freirean philosophy and pedagogy to their organizational efforts.

Thus, I argue, using a Freirean approach, particularly in the way that Solorzano & Yosso (2001) utilize it in connection with resistance, is an appropriate “internal” frame to situate the questions guiding this study that seek to understand how members of ALIANZA have come to see themselves as agents of educational and civic change (i.e. consciousness) and how they have, as a result, collectively organized and employed their agency to create change (i.e. resistance). I situate this internal framework within the broader external framework that I detailed in Chapter 2. Figure 8 demonstrates how these internal and external frames are connected.
I argue that this “internal” framework is important for shedding light into a critical process of consciousness-raising and collective action that reflects the philosophical positioning of ALIANZA. I now turn my attention to the particular methodological approaches I used in carrying out this study, the focus of the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4

Methodology

“Del dicho al hecho hay un gran trecho”45

It was that time of the year again, when ALIANZA comes together to somehow miraculously pull off one of the most successful end-of-the-year events both for the school district and the families ALIANZA serves – a ceremony to recognize all Latina/o students who had completed high school, regardless of whether they had passed the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). It was 9AM and although the ceremony didn’t start until later in the afternoon, I was helping Caridad load her car with the more than three hundred stoles ALIANZA mothers had sewn to give the graduates. As I finished placing them carefully in her car so as not to undo Nelly’s efforts at ironing each of them the night before, Caridad yelled from inside her house, “Vero, me ayudas con las cajas de los certificados?”46 I turned around and saw Caridad struggling to hold on to a heavy box of certificates, each in their colorful folder, compliments of our local state legislator. I hurried to meet her and help hoist the box into the car. My eyes scanned the colorful certificates and as I caught my breath from lifting the box, I asked Caridad if it was ok to look at one at which she nodded in response. I couldn’t help but awe at the great lengths the parents went through in their effort to make sure each student participating in the ceremony would receive a certificate of completion, regardless of whether or not their high school would confer a diploma. I carefully placed the diploma back in the box. As I went to close Caridad’s car, Justo and Selina pulled up right behind us. I couldn’t help but notice Justo’s large grin as Selina scolded him for stealing one of the 500 cupcakes she, Dolores, and Elena had prepared throughout the night and were now making their way via their car to the graduates and their families. His expression immediately made us laugh. Though Justo’s demeanor is usually positive, during this time of the year, it runs especially high. He stepped out of the car and gave me a high five, signaling his overall feeling of success although the event had yet to start. While I wasn’t ready to celebrate just yet, I understood Justo’s sense of pride. This year was the fifth year that ALIANZA organized the ceremony, which began with roughly 50 students and had now grown to over 300. As I contemplated the success, having witnessed and participated in each of the ceremonies until now, Justo noted, “Del dicho al hecho hay un gran trecho, pero aquí estamos o no? Llevando acabo una vez más esta gran celebración en la forma que siempre quisimos. Nunca soltamos nuestros valores. Dijimos que íbamos a celebrar nuestra cultura y tradiciones y reconocer a cada estudiante aunque otros nos critiquen. Así que Vero tu también échale ganas a tu proyecto. No sueltes tus sueños aunque tengas que luchar contra quien sea para lograrlos.”47,48

45 Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “easier said than done”

46 Translated to English: Vero, can you help me with the box of certificates?

47 Translated to English: Easier said than done, but here we are, aren’t we? Carrying out once again this grand celebration in the way we always wanted. We never let go of our values. We said we were going to celebrate our
As I began thinking about how I would answer the questions to the present study, I knew that the process had to honor my role as an organizer with ALIANZA as much as it required of my role as a researcher. I knew from the onset, though, that this would be a struggle, not just in balancing and merging the two roles, but justifying it to an academy that might question the legitimacy of my research because it refused to operate from a traditional “objective” standpoint. Although critical scholars in multiple disciples, and CRT scholars in education specifically, challenge the use of research approaches that utilize positivist methodologies in educational research, I worried about what it would mean to do a case study at a site at which I had been operating as an organizer for several years. Moreover and more importantly, I wrestled with concerns about how it would affect my overall relationships with ALIANZA members, many of whom I consider close friends.

It wasn’t until I came across literature that described the possibility of participatory action research (PAR), that I realized the feasibility of what I imagined for this case study but, up until then, hadn’t really thought was doable. When I introduced it to ALIANZA in 2007 as we collectively designed this study, they all agreed that PAR most closely aligned with their values as a group and met their expectations for the study we were about to undertake. Although their vote of approval gave me a sense of peace as I entered the field as a researcher knowing I was employing a research approach ALIANZA supported, the nagging concerns I had prior to initiating the study remained. As I did throughout my graduate school studies, I often confided in ALIANZA members and sought their advice. So as these nagging concerns turned into an

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48 This excerpt was taken from a personal journal I have been using to document my experiences working with ALIANZA. This excerpt, dated June 2008, reflects only my recollections and reflections of the event it describes.
unbearable anxiety, I turned to Justo for guidance and support and an opportunity to think out loud about the value in this project and whether my approach was appropriate.

In his usual manner, Justo, one of ALIANZA’s co-founders, always has sound advice, although not always direct at first. He would often leave me questions to ponder or hand me additional Freire readings from his personal archive that he felt might be useful when he didn’t have time for longer conversations. But one of the most impactful pieces of advice came in the form of a dicho captured in the opening vignette to this chapter: *del dicho al hecho hay un gran trecho*. He reminded me that there is no easy path to accomplishing something others may not expect us to do or even deter us from doing but whose value is worth the struggle. By comparing this study to the efforts of ALIANZA to realize the graduation ceremonies they organize each year for Latina/o students and their families, he was arguing that a positive outcome for this study depends on the means used to achieve it, refusing to compromise those values we collectively agreed should characterize it simply to make the journey of completing it easier. Needless to say, his words propelled this project forward and became the support for defining the methodological approach outlined in this chapter.

Thus, encouraged by Justo and developed in conjunction with ALIANZA members, this study employs a qualitative case study methodology carried out in the tradition of PAR to address the following questions: 1) *How have members of ALIANZA come to see themselves as agents of educational and civic change?* and, 2) *How have ALIANZA’s members’ perceptions of themselves as agents of change translated into collective action?* I begin by providing a more in-depth rationale for using PAR in this study, highlighting in particular my rationale for continuing as organizer with ALIANZA as we carried out the study. In providing this justification, I discuss how my role as a participatory action researcher was informed by a Chicana feminist

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49 Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “easier said than done”
epistemology. Highlighting the relationship between my epistemological orientation and the methodology for this project is crucial as these elements are closely connected and influenced by one another (Delgado Bernal, 1997). Following this I articulate why a qualitative case study method was most appropriate for helping to define how PAR would be applied to answer the questions guiding this study. I then provide the sampling methods I employed in selecting my collaborators within ALIANZA, the types of safeguards in place to protect the anonymity of ALIANZA members, and the specific data collection strategies I used to research my “case.” Finally, I conclude with a description of the grounded theory approach I applied in data analysis during and after data collection.

A Participatory Action Research Approach Grounded in a Chicana Feminist Epistemology

As I mentioned earlier, since the beginning of my relationship with ALIANZA I have been working as a collaborator on several of their projects, a few of which I detail in the introduction to this manuscript that describes my personal journey to this study. Yet, for several years, I had steered away from doing any research with the group for fear that it would affect our relationships. From the inception of our work together, I have approached ALIANZA as a committed ally to their efforts, collaborating with them to carry out important projects in the community, from helping organize educational forums to coordinating literacy campaigns for day laborers to developing youth leadership building projects for Latina/o immigrant students. My relationship with them, up to the start of this study, had never been as a researcher in the “traditional” sense of this role. Rather I have attempted to work with them as a collaborator and most often as their student, learning from them about the process of popular education and the very history of the area I grew up in, one which was never taught to me while going to school in
this same community. The connection between us, I argue, created a deep sense of con
fianza\textsuperscript{50} and respeto\textsuperscript{51} that led to ALIANZA encouraging me to conduct this study, even when I had my doubts about the research process jeopardizing the relationship I had built with them. In fact, when I originally approached them having made up mind that I would conduct my dissertation work elsewhere, they were disappointed. They had made it clear that in the same way I had made in investment in our collective work, they too had invested in me with the hope of one day having the opportunity to craft a research project that would highlight their efforts and rethink the role of Latina/o immigrant parents in educational reform.

Based on their response and encouragement, I went ahead and organized three separate meetings with all the parents in the group to design and craft research questions, objectives, goals, and a collaborative approach to the study. It was important to all of us that it would be a collective narrative and that multiple writing pieces would eventually emerge from the project. ALIANZA members understood that they were supporting a dissertation project to fulfill my requirements for the degree but our commitment to see this work as a platform for something larger, as a document that would support the overall aims of the group, is what motivated them to support this research endeavor. Our goal was that somehow we could continue to open up spaces and support practices that would further ALIANZA’s work even in the process of conducting research. This allowed a different kind of research relationship to form between myself and each of the parents that was based in caring and authentic reciprocity, where we shared the same goals and worked side-by-side to exert change in our local schools and through this study. Although I later realized that transitioning from the role of organizer to the role of researcher, and often going back and forth between the two, was one of the most challenging

\textsuperscript{50} Spanish word for “trust”  
\textsuperscript{51} Spanish word for “respect”
aspects of my study, it was also one of the most rewarding. ALIANZA parents allowed me into their lives in ways that I could have never imagined and once the study got underway I realized how powerful it was to have the opportunity to co-narrate a research process built on such loving, honest, and intimate relationships with each of the parents.

Thus, while challenging at times to simultaneously operate as a researcher and community organizer, I felt that my role as a collaborator to ALIANZA’s efforts was not made vulnerable or put at risk simply to obtain “data.” Part of this was facilitated by how ALIANZA parents felt connected to the research process and outcomes, arguing that it would help them reflect on their trajectory to better plan for the future, both immediate and long-term, but would also help them better support other parents in their pursuit to insert their voice in educational and civic decision-making. This latter goal, they believed, could be materialized in very concrete ways, such as utilizing the data collected for the curriculum they use for parent workshops.

Thus, based on our research planning dialogues and keeping in mind my own concerns, I wanted to acknowledge two things from the onset of the study: 1) that whatever knowledge is produced from this study is the result of a co-construction between members of ALIANZA and myself and, 2) that I would continue to function in my collaborative role with ALIANZA. I argue that a participatory action research approach allowed me to accomplish both these objectives.

As a research paradigm, participatory action research (PAR), I argue, facilitates a research space for research collaborators to construct knowledge, transform their experiences, and work to change those conditions that affect their lives. One of the important aspects of PAR is its recognition of power dynamics (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). By understanding how power is traditionally embedded in the researcher, PAR strategically attempts to shift the locus of power toward the informants or community. It demands a move from a unilateral researcher-based
approach to a multilateral community-based participatory paradigm. Finn (1994) identifies three elements unique to PAR compared to other traditional approaches to social science: people, power, and praxis. It is “people centered” in that the process of critical inquiry is informed by and responds to the experiences and needs of marginalized people (Brown, 1985; Finn, 1994). It involves “power” which is crucial to the construction of reality (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). And, finally, PAR promotes empowerment through “praxis,” particularly the critical awareness of the personal-political dialectic (Lather, 1986; Maguire, 1987; Freire, 1974). Maguire (1987) highlights that PAR has the “. . . explicit intention of collectively investigating reality in order to transform it . . . By linking the creation of knowledge about social reality with concrete action, participatory research removes the traditional separation between knowing and doing” (p. 3).

In this way PAR aligns with the Freirean philosophy promoted by ALIANZA, in that it is rooted in a democratic practice of decision-making and consensus building for the purpose of creating meaningful and sustainable change. The democratic character of PAR is supported and furthered by feminist critiques of traditional, positivist research paradigms. By arguing that reality and knowledge are co-constructed in relationships between the researcher and the informant (Charmaz, 2000; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001), these critiques powerfully align with and support the orientation of PAR. Acknowledging these feminist critiques, I contend that a Chicana feminist epistemological framework not only further supported the use of a PAR paradigm for this study, but also mediated how the co-construction of knowledge occurred between me, as a Chicana feminist researcher, and my research collaborators in ALIANZA.

Similar to feminist critiques, a Chicana feminist epistemological framework challenges the use of dominant paradigms and methodological approaches in research. Specifically, it objects to how these approaches have been used to examine and inappropriately characterize the
experiences of Chicanas/os specifically, and Latinas/os generally. It calls on critical researchers, particularly Feminists of Color, to center the lived experiences of communities within research in a deliberate attempt to create social change (Hurtado, 2003). Thus, I argue, PAR fits as an appropriate paradigm under a Chicana feminist epistemological framework because of its democratic and socially-oriented character. Additionally, it recognizes the fundamental value of the lived experiences of communities not just within the content of knowledge produced but in the very process of creating that knowledge. Utilizing PAR within this framework is particularly important for this study because it provides the tools to help capture the experiences of my collaborators, mostly Latina/o immigrant mothers, and because of my own positionality as a Chicana feminist researcher that powerfully informs my subjectivity as I entered into this study.

Delgado Bernal (1998) argues that Chicana feminist researchers have unique and important perspectives that are important to their research endeavors. She defines this as cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998). According to her, the Chicana feminist scholar draws on the following four sources of cultural intuition in her research: 1) her personal experience that shapes how she understands, interprets, and makes sense of the data she collects; 2) a sensitivity to identify and analyze relevant data and literature to her work; 3) her professional experiences working with the community that provide her particular insights about the realities of her informants, and; 4) her analytical intent in “bringing meaning” to the data and larger study by working to include her informants in data analysis (Delgado Bernal, 1998). I argue cultural intuition mediated my broader methodological approach to this study helping me tap into the lives of ALIANZA members, mostly Latina/o immigrant women.

Specifically, my experience as a witness to my own parents’ struggles in the schools I attended informed my perspective, albeit as a daughter not as a parent, or even as an immigrant,
directly experiencing these forms of abuse and marginalization. But even from this stance, my personal experiences continued to serve as a source of cultural intuition that allowed me to identify those cultural practices and norms instilled by my parents that fundamentally regulated how I developed relationships with ALIANZA mothers. It focused on a collective memory I shared with the mothers, not so much in terms of the content of our experiences but the shared cultural ways we learned about relating to one another and to the world around us. For example, knowing “my place” when it came to talking with the mothers older than me or embodying a sense of solidarity and commitment to a community’s goals, whose roots extend to a long-standing practice of mutual aid common in many rural communities throughout Latin America. And there was also the shared experience of living and working in the same neighborhood that I later realized served as a type of spatial knowledge that bridged our experiences and provided a grounded perspective from which to explore data in the data analysis process.

As a result of a Chicana feminist standpoint and an intentional strategy to draw from my cultural intuition, I was better able to discern when and how to foreground research efforts versus organizing work, when and how to approach parents, and how to move fluidly within and between contexts and roles without sacrificing my relationship with them. But most importantly, it helped me maintain a constant vigilance that the research was fulfilling the goals set forth by the collective and that I served the transformative objectives I set out to accomplish. Taken as a whole, foregrounding my cultural intuition and how it was used in this study, articulates and makes evident my own position as a Chicana feminist researcher that combined with PAR centered my commitment to build knowledge from the lived experiences of communities while simultaneously engaged in an action-oriented approach for creating collaborative social change.
Qualitative Case Methodology: A Justification

Using a participatory action approach that is grounded in a Chicana feminist epistemological framework, I employed a qualitative case study design to carry out this study on ALIANZA. Qualitative case study methodology combines two distinct research strategies – case study design and qualitative methodology. Used together, these research strategies can provide a powerful tool for examining how people make sense of their lives within particular settings (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). The justification for limiting a study to a single case rests in the ability of that case to reveal something about a broader phenomenon (Yin, 1994, p. 21). For my purposes here, this “case” seeks to discover ways in which Latina/o immigrant parents make meaning of their roles as participants in educational and civic reform, which is necessarily shaped by their local contexts. Events that are seen as critical, influential, or decisive are extracted as “critical incidents” as a means to understand larger phenomena from the perspective of ALIANZA (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

What is also important to point out is that a qualitative case methodology, because it is rooted in qualitative traditions, operates from an interpretive framework. From this place, an informant’s reality is socially constructed resulting in multiple perceptions of that reality. “Truth” for that individual is dependent upon historical, cultural, and political conditions and relations. Thus, this type of approach most effectively allowed me to capture the relationship between ALIANZA and the broader context that informs their work, as they see it. Since this is an important goal of this study, I argue a qualitative case study approach that utilizes individual interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and archival data collection methods was the most appropriate.
Site, Sample Selection & Protection of Research Collaborators

Research Site & Sample Selection

This study took place in a community within the larger Los Angeles County area, where ALIANZA is located. I selected ALIANZA for three main reasons: 1) its composition of mostly Latina/o immigrant parents, several of which are undocumented; 2) their participation in both educational and civic arenas to create change, and 3) a personal motivation to contribute to social justice oriented projects in my hometown community. Although this community has other characteristics that make it an important site of educational inquiry, my main reason for focusing on it here is a personal one. In addition, a Latina/o parent group like ALIANZA, where several members are undocumented and yet so actively engaged in civic life beyond issues of school reform was particularly intriguing, considering that their status could have prevented them from directly benefiting from their own activism and also increased their risk of being reported to the immigration authorities. As I collaborated with them, I came to discover that it is in large part because of the legal residency status of many of its members that ALIANZA sees it vital to engage in civic issues such as fair housing, law enforcement, immigrant rights, among others in addition to their central work in education. Such a “case” can help us understand and better support efforts on behalf of Latina/o immigrant parents to engage in social reform.

I employed a purposeful sampling technique to identify those members of ALIANZA that served as primary collaborators in this study. Purposeful sampling is “... based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). This type of sampling allows the researcher to identify possible “expert” informants, or collaborators that experienced key events or situations that may be particularly helpful in illuminating some aspect
that the study is attempting to understand or address (Weiss, 1994). Using a purposeful sampling technique, I argue, allowed me to identify particular members of ALIANZA whose expertise is crucial for this study.

Thus, using this technique, I invited the following “groups” of ALIANZA members to participate in this study: 1) ALIANZA’s current governing body at the time of data collection – 3 members; and, 2) a selection of ALIANZA’s membership – 12 members. I believe these two groups provided a comprehensive portrait of the organization while allowing me to understand how different members of ALIANZA, based on their experience with the organization, developed their agency and self-perception as actors of educational and civic change. The purposeful sampling technique was particularly relevant for the latter group mentioned here, namely individuals that are were a part of ALIANZA’s current membership at the time data was collected as well as previous ALIANZA members. I interviewed all of ALIANZA’s current governing body, which includes only three members; therefore, a sampling technique was not necessary to indentify research collaborators for this group.

For the two groups where purposeful sampling was relevant, I identified potential collaborators in a way that allowed me to capture a diverse array of experiences. Thus, I identified collaborators with varied backgrounds based on the following criteria: 1) whether they are monolingual Spanish speakers or bilingual in both Spanish and English; 2) age; 3) immigration status; 4) gender; 5) educational attainment; 6) their country of origin; and 7) the length of time they have been, or were, a part of ALIANZA. My intent was to diversify my pool of collaborators as much as possible.

At any given time during this study, ALIANZA’s membership varied from approximately 15 to 25 active members.
As I have already mentioned in the introduction to this study, a substantial proportion of parents within ALIANZA are undocumented. Immigrants in general, but undocumented immigrants in particular, are a particularly vulnerable population. At any moment, they are susceptible to action by the INS in the form of detention and/or deportation because they lack the “proper legal” documents to reside in the U.S. In their workplaces, they may also fear exposure of their “undocumented” status to employers, who may either terminate their employment or use it as a means to exploit their labor.

Within this context, we had a difficult conversation nearing the end of data analysis because many of the ALIANZA parents wanted their actual names to be used in the final manuscript. Their argument was similar to the family in Donovan’s (2006) research that refused to be portrayed *sin nombre*.

But as a Chicana feminist scholar that finds it necessary to be vigilant in how we carry out our research as well as how it might be read by others, it was important I discuss with the group what it would mean for undocumented members of ALIANZA to be identified by their real names. The legal status of several of the mothers in this study required an open and honest conversation about the consequences of disclosure for each of them.

Although the decision about whether to use actual names, pseudonyms, or no personal identifies was ultimately a group one, I had the ethical and moral obligation to discuss possible threats to their safety as a result of this study. We ended up deciding to take a silent evidentiary position throughout discussions in the research findings where the issue of undocumented status of ALIANZA parents arose. Any evidence that had personal identifiers where undocumented status was mentioned was simply labeled as “ALIANZA parent” to identify its source, opting out.

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53 Translated to English: without name
of even using their pseudonyms. As a Chicana feminist researcher, I argue that while difficult and messy, engaging in these types of conversations with our research collaborators about how they will eventually be portrayed and characterized in the final manuscript, is one way we are called to transform the academy.

**Data Collection Strategies**

*Participant Observation*

As mentioned earlier, this study was particularly interested in examining how ALIANZA is shaped and informed by the many contexts in which it finds itself and works within to collectively organize. Thus, I conducted in-depth participant observation of their activities for a period of two years, from 2008 to 2010. This allowed me to examine the relationship of these settings to the overall work of ALIANZA from the perspective of its members. This type of approach is appropriate because of the project’s goal to understand how the everyday activities, particularly pedagogical practices, of ALIANZA shape its members’ sense of agency and understanding about the meaning of their work. According to Erickson (1986), this type of interpretive fieldwork is useful when the researcher is “. . . attempting to identify the significance of actions in the events from the various points of view of the actors themselves” (p. 121).

In particular, I conducted observations of ALIANZA’s planning of key group events that occurred from 2008 to 2010, including their internal monthly meetings, several local parent and youth summits, community forums, graduation events, parents trainings, and invitations to present at local and national parent-related and/or educationally focused conferences. In these observations, I paid particular attention to the type of practices that ALIANZA utilized to carry
out their planning. During my observations, I took extensive field notes that were later coded and analyzed. Themes that emerged from this analysis were shared with collaborators during both the individual interviews and focus group.

_Semi-Structured Interviews & Focus Group_

Each of the collaborators identified for this study were asked to participate in two to three semi-structured individual interviews, which took place in 2009 and 2010, and one focus group in 2010. The individual interviews were constructed in an oral history format (Yow, 2005). Yow (2005) defines oral history as “... the recording of personal testimony delivered in oral form” (p. 3). Delgado Bernal (1997) adds to this definition by contending that a case study that “... employs life histories as a primary method of data collection allows resistance and its impact to be explored from an historical perspective” (p.44). Thus, I argue that using a “life history” or oral history approach for conducting individual interviews for this study was appropriate given that the research questions reflect an interest in capturing the trajectory of political agency development in the lives of ALIANZA members. Specifically, it allowed me to capture those critical “moments” in the experiences of my collaborators, both past and present, that were formative in defining themselves as political actors.

In the first interview, I asked each collaborator to provide information about their background, their experiences as parents in schools since their eldest child began attending, and their trajectory of parent and civic engagement prior to ALIANZA. I also asked them to reflect on what broader contextual factors impact their lives the most, particularly their ability to meaningfully engage in decision-making spaces. In the second interview, I explored their experiences within ALIANZA, from the moment they discovered or were discovered by the
group and decided to become more involved. Specifically, I invited each collaborator to reflect on the significance of ALIANZA in their lives and where they envision ALIANZA should go in the future. Additionally, I asked them to define terms such as “social justice” and “equity” to gain a sense of how they see the world around them and what they feel is necessary to enact a broader project of social change.

After both interviews were conducted, I invited ALIANZA collaborators to return for a separate focus group. At the focus group, I brought transcriptions of the individual interviews that I conducted with each collaborator and asked the group to review and discuss the statements that were made. My goal here was to work collaboratively to deconstruct the data collected from the interviews, negotiating its meaning and what it reveals about ALIANZA as a whole. This process was crucial to the grounded theory approach in data analysis, which I detail below.

Archival Data Collection

The final method for this study was a data collection of artifacts, either produced or gathered by ALIANZA since its inception. Since I began working with ALIANZA, I was impressed by their effort to ensure that the historical memory of the organization was recorded. At each event they organize, they always designate a parent to take pictures and/or video to record and capture what happens. They also have their own newsletter where members of ALIANZA have been contributing reflections about their experiences and or perspectives on particular political issues of interest or concern for several years now. In addition, they have also developed their own curriculum that they use to conduct parent workshops and trainings at schools throughout the school district. For the purpose of this study, I focused mainly on their curriculum, which I used in both interviews and the focus group to facilitate ALIANZA
members’ reflections and analysis about the overall purpose and mission of the group as well as the specific strategies it employs to bring about change.

**Data Analysis**

Data collected from this study was analyzed through an inductive grounded theory approach to develop themes and categories from which to make sense and interpret the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As Holme (2002) contends, the process of data collection, analysis, and writing, is not a linear process – rather it is an iterative one, involving analysis, verification, and re-evaluation at each step (Holme, 2002). Grounded theory provides researchers with an analytical tool to develop theory from the actual data collected not just at the end of data collection but throughout the entire process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Though grounded theory requires that researchers avoid entering the research process with predetermined categories (Bodgen & Bilken, 2003), recent developments in the use of grounded theory for data analysis call for a more flexible application of its guidelines (Charmaz, 2006). These recent developments are a challenge to the positivistic character that grounded theory became associated with during the 1960s (Charmaz, 2006). Here, I employed a *critical race* grounded theory approach (Malagon, Perez Huber, and Velez, 2009), to allow the broader conceptual frameworks that I examined in Chapters 2 and 3 (i.e. LatCrit and Freirean Pedagogy) assist me in isolating the emergent themes to best explain the intersecting experiences of race, class, gender, and nativism of my collaborators. These frameworks, far from functioning as “predetermined” categories, are necessary for allowing the experiences of my collaborators to emerge and inform the entire research process. Data analysis using critical race grounded theory is also assisted by a PAR methodological approach in this study that requires knowledge, as
mentioned above, to be co-constructed by both the researcher and his /her collaborators. Figure 9 provides a visual model of data analysis for this study.

![Figure 9. Visual Model of Data Analysis](image)

Based on this model, the process of data analysis for this study began when data collection was initiated. The first data collected in this study was through participant observation. Data gathered there, in conjunction with ongoing archival data collection, was coded and preliminarily analyzed for use in the individual interviews and focus group. Each set of interviews was then recorded, transcribed, and indexed to identify emergent themes to compare to those that emerged from participant observation and archival data collection. I then provided each collaborator the transcription of both their interviews and asked them to review each of them, identifying particular themes that best explain their experiences.\(^{54}\) At the focus group, I asked my collaborators to dialogue about the themes they developed and I shared my own preliminary analysis to determine which themes and codes were the most appropriate for categorizing the data as a whole. Based on the agreed upon themes that emerged from the focus group, I then coded and indexed all the data in the final stage of analysis. The following chapters present the findings that resulted from this process.

\(^{54}\) Some members of ALIANZA have a low literacy level. When one of my collaborators had a difficult time reviewing the transcripts, I organized additional meetings to go through it with him/her.
Before addressing the first set of findings, I provide the following introductory portraits for each of the 15 ALIANZA parent collaborators that were a part of this dissertation study. Not only does this further humanize the co-narrative that continues in the remaining chapters, it also allows the reader to get to know each of the parents in a personalized and unique way, albeit brief, and, thus, provides a nice entry into and context for the courageous stories that follow. Much of the impetus for including these portraits in this study came from a conversation I had with ALIANZA members as we wrapped up collaborative data analysis and began thinking about how they wanted to be portrayed in the final manuscript. Several things were discussed in that conversation, including what particular findings were most illuminating for answering the study’s research questions and the desire of many of the parents to not be rendered “sin nombre” (Donovan, 2007), a methodological concern I briefly addressed in Chapter 4.

Reflecting back on that conversation, one of the most memorable moments was when Selina, ALIANZA’s coordinator, summed up the group’s request for a writing product that both honored their personal lives as well as their collective struggle in the following dicho: lo que bien se aprende, nunca se olvida. I looked around the room and saw expressions that immediately understood and appreciated Selina’s words. Growing up in a home where dichos were commonly used, I rarely asked for clarification as to a dicho’s meaning. Over time, the

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55 Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “what is well-learned is never forgotten”

56 Translated to English: without name

57 Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “what is well-learned is never forgotten”
frequent association of *dichos* with stories by my parents provided sufficient material for reflection and learning that an explanation was often rendered unnecessary. And even if I had no idea what the *dicho* meant, it felt almost disrespectful to have my parents clarify its meaning, as if they intended to leave me the work of contemplating its significance. But when Selina so powerfully and appropriately captured the group’s message during that conversation, I found myself torn between my instinct to quietly self-analyze its importance within what was being discussed and my urge as a researcher to make sure I left no rock unturned when it came to understanding my research collaborators’ sense-making. Before I had a chance to decide, Selina could read my body language and responded, to my relief, by elaborating and explaining why the *dicho* so aptly applied to the conversation.

According to Selina, she and the other ALLIANZA parents were no strangers to research products, often finding themselves at meetings deciphering statistics and translating reports that examined the educational outcomes of low-income, Latina/o students from the local to the national level. While insightful, Selina argued that the reports, more often than not, failed in the art of storytelling and making data relevant to the everyday experiences of students and families. In fact, she felt as if researchers almost intentionally tried to make you forget about the individuals whose lives were being analyzed in an effort to provide some type of generalized finding that could be applied in *any* context and for *any* Latina/o. Thus, they were so much less memorable than they could and should have been, in her opinion. She highlighted,

> Cuando el autor sabe como comunicar sus ideas y datos en la forma como nuestras madres nos contaban historias, llenas de detalles y metáforas, nos ayudan a visualizar el punto clave de sus investigaciones. Si yo no puedo asociar una cara o una familia con toda esa información y datos, entonces el reporte no se me va a grabar, importante que sea. Pero si sabes narrar un cuento y me describes bien los protagonistas del cuento, como son, sus inquietudes y como llegaron a tener una falta de acceso de oportunidades equitativas, entonces el argumento y los puntos claves que me quieres decir
Thus, for Selina and the rest of the parents participating in that conversation and nodding in agreement as she spoke, it was critical that the final write-up of the findings prioritized the *format* of the narrative as much as its *substance*, and that every effort was made to ground the reader in the lives of the parents that provided the content for this study.

Thus, in an effort to honor ALIANZA’s request, I begin the findings’ portion of this study with the following portraits that offer a qualitative description of the personal attributes and characteristics, initial entry into ALIANZA, and multiple roles held at home and in the community by each ALIANZA member that agreed to participate in the study. They also include a short background story of how each of our individual relationships began which, I argue, is at the core of the methodology used to carry out this study and, thus, functions as the spine for the chapters to follow. Each of these portraits was co-narrated by myself and each of the parents for his or her introduction below, a process I argue aligns with a Critical Race, Chicana Feminist, Participatory Action model of research. They are by no means exhaustive as it would be impossible to capture the fullness of character that defines each of my collaborators or our relationships within the limits of this dissertation. They simply facilitate an initial “meeting” between reader and co-narrators and set the stage for what is to come.

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58 Translated to English: When an author knows how to communicate his/her ideas and data in a way similar to how our mothers would tell us stories, full of details and metaphors, he/she helps us visualize the key point of his/her research. If I can’t associate a face or a family with all that information and facts, then the report won’t become ingrained in my memory, no matter how important it is. But, if you know how to narrate a story and you can describe for me the protagonists of the story, who they are, their concerns, and they arrived at a place where they don’t have access to equitable opportunities, then I won’t forget the argument and key points you want to stress. Because it’s difficult to remember some data or statistic just like that, but I won’t forget the story of Juan or Felicia. Therefore, the saying goes, what is well-learned is never forgotten and we want our story, as ALIANZA mothers, to not be forgotten by the individuals who come to read it.
Caridad

I first met Caridad at a school board meeting back in 2004 when I was invited by ALIANZA’s president at the time, Olga, to sit in and listen to the concerns ALIANZA had planned to voice about unequal representation of Latina/o and African American students across the school district’s gifted and talented education programs. As I sat toward the back, waiting for the meeting to start, I heard a loud and boisterous laugh in the hallway. It was one of those laughs that automatically made you laugh even though you had no idea what caused the laughter in the first place. It was contagious and I couldn’t help but chuckle as Olga turned to me and said, “Esa es Caridad. Su voz y su risa es inconfundible.”

Even though she had yet to walk through the boardroom’s doors, I couldn’t wait to meet her. Her loud laugh and strong voice already spoke volumes of her personality. As she walked in, it was easy to point her out. She came through the doors with open arms, hugging and greeting almost every person in attendance for the meeting. As she slowly made her rounds, she looked over at Olga and must have seen my anxious expression, waiting for the opportunity to be introduced. She headed toward the back and immediately embraced me, “Hola mija, soy Caridad.” She didn’t even wait for Olga to introduce us. But that’s Caridad; always ready to embrace a stranger.

Since that first meeting, Caridad and I have become close friends but it is rare to find someone in our local community that is not her friend. Prior to working with ALIANZA, Caridad was already heavily involved in local school and city politics, gaining her the unofficial title of the “411” for Latina immigrant mothers needing information or guidance about where to go for answers regarding their children’s schooling. In many ways, Caridad helped form and

59 Translated to English: That is Caridad. Her voice and laughter can’t be mistaken.
60 Translated to English: Hello, I’m Caridad.
establish ALIANZA through her contacts. Most of ALIANZA’s members arrived to the group through Caridad. She has served on multiple school’s site councils, the district’s English Language Advisory Council, special district task forces, and a local non-profit’s board of directors. This was in addition to her work with ALIANZA, her part-time paid position as a parent liaison for a local elementary school and her full-time job cleaning homes. Needless to say, Caridad was always visible in the community and always willing to participate and engage in new projects.

In addition to her service, Caridad has four children, 3 of which were in high school when I met her. Although just a few short years later she had no children attending the district’s public schools, Caridad continued to be heavily involved in local school and district decision-making. Caridad has held each of the 3 positions in ALIANZA’s governing body – President, Treasurer and Secretary. Although several members of ALIANZA initiated a campaign to change the bylaws of the group in order to permanently keep Caridad as ALIANZA’s President, it was Caridad who felt a stronger commitment to develop new leaders, and has since made it her mission to recruit new parents to the group.

Finally, it is important to mention that Caridad is always quick to let people know that she was born and raised in Guadalajara, México, the land of las Chivas, a popular soccer team that calls Guadalajara its home. Her pride in her hometown is clear and you cannot help but wish you were from the same place. She is an amazing storyteller and her generosity has no limits, particularly when you need a large van to transport a group of ALIANZA’s members and their families to different events. Caridad’s large 15-passenger van is always put to good use and she never hesitates to loan it when it comes to community projects.
Selina

Selina was my first contact and introduction to ALIANZA. She is the group’s coordinator and is the only salaried member paid to be working with ALIANZA. She was hired by ALIANZA’s umbrella organization to help found and coordinate the group, along with a separate adult literacy program designed for day laborers and a youth program that would be closely tied to ALIANZA’s projects. I was referred to Selina when I inquired in 2003 about volunteering opportunities in my local community that would serve to extend the work with Latina/o immigrant parents I had done in Northern California prior to returning to graduate school. When I called Selina and asked if she had opportunities for new volunteers, she immediately and enthusiastically asked how quickly I could meet with her.

Our first meeting took place at a community center, where Selina had a small office from which she coordinated the three projects – ALIANZA, the adult literacy program, and the youth group. The first thing that struck me about Selina was how formal she was, although there was a gentleness and familiarity to her voice that reminded me of my own mother. She was firm and direct but nurturing and I later came to find out she had a special way with words. It was immediately evident that she possessed the qualities necessary to coordinate and manage three distinct projects simultaneously. She quickly sat me down and explained the projects she managed after which she asked a rather strange question, “eres una beisbolista?61” I was struck by the question. Why would it matter whether or not I played baseball? After realizing the confused look on my face, she grinned and lightly laughed. Before I could answer, she said to me, “te pregunto porque muchos jóvenes de UCLA han llegado con la intención de ayudarnos, pero la verdad solo están cumpliendo con los requisitos de una clase. Necesitamos la ayuda

61 Translated to English: Are you a baseball player?
p ero estoy cansada de personas que vienen con nosotros y en muy poco tiempo se van. Vienen, 
 pisan y corren – como los beisbolistas.\textsuperscript{62}

Selina’s message was clear. She needed my help but she wanted me to stay committed 
for the long haul. I agreed to her conditions and, thus, began my service with ALIANZA and 
soon after with the adult literacy program. From this point forward, Selina became a mentor and 
I returned the favor by helping to mentor her two daughters, one in high school and the other in 
middle school when I first met them. At the time of our introduction, Selina was a single mother 
living in a garage, doing her best to save money in preparation for when her daughters would go 
on to college. She is an incredibly devoted and committed mother, as she is a community 
organizer. Often, though, her relentless commitment to community projects was so intense and 
time-consuming that she frequently found herself trying to recover from exhaustion and stress-
related health problems. It was common that I would visit Selina in the hospital and that other 
ALIANZA members would lecture her on taking a break from her commitments to recover.

Professionally, Selina was one of the few members of ALIANZA who had the 
opportunity to pursue a career in her hometown of Morelos, México. She was raised primarily 
by her father who encouraged her to pursue vocational training after high school. She served as 
an office manager for a local business in her hometown for several years before leaving with her 
daughters to start a new life in the U.S.

\textsuperscript{62} Translated to English: I ask you because we have had several UCLA students come with the intent to help us, but 
the truth is they are just trying to fulfill some requirements for a class. We need the help but I’m tired of people who 
come and in a short time leave us. They come, step on the “plate” and then run – like baseball players.
Yesenia

Yesenia became involved with ALIANZA through her only daughter, who joined the youth group about a year prior to her mother’s introduction to the parent group. I had been volunteering with ALIANZA for about two years before I met Yesenia in late 2005. I still remember our first encounter at one of the group’s monthly meetings. She sat near the back of the room waiting for the meeting to start. Yesenia was shy but it did not take long for her to warm up to the others once approached. I introduced myself to her and welcomed her to the group. In reply she said, “Gracias, vine por mi Viviana, mi hija. Espero que me pueda quedar y contribuir.”

From that point forward, Yesenia was a regular at ALIANZA meetings. She was careful about the commitments she made to the group, never agreeing or entering into something she was not going to be able to see through. But you knew that once she made the commitment, you could count on her to be fully present and engaged. This was especially true when she offered to support the adult literacy program as a volunteer teacher for students starting their English language instruction. Yesenia had received her GED in 2005 and had enrolled in a couple of classes at the nearby community college soon after. Although she felt nervous about teaching English, a task she had never done before, she was up for the challenge when the program lost most of its volunteer teachers the semester before. The constant encouragement and the shouts of “si se puede!” from the other parents definitely helped her take the plunge. As the only other volunteer teacher still working for the adult literacy program at the time, it was a big relief to have Yesenia on board to help me. The opportunity to collaborate with Yesenia on both ALIANZA and the adult literacy program led to the development of a special and close

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63 Translated to English: Thank you, I came because of my Viviana, my daughter. I hope I can stay and contribute.”

64 Translated to English: Yes you can!
relationship between the two of us. We relied on each other often and Yesenia was someone I knew I could always count on.

There were moments when other ALIANZA parents kindly joked with Yesenia about where she lived. Yesenia would comment on how lucky she was that she had two homes. For most of the workweek, Yesenia was a live-in nanny and housekeeper for a family in one of the most affluent parts of the city. During one of our conversations about race and space, she shared how other parents often found themselves confused when they came to her workplace for the first time. Although she argues she provides clear directions, it never fails that they would call her convinced that they had lost their way in the wrong part of town. Yesenia laughs when she receives these calls, as if expecting them each time. “La gente no puede creer que yo viva en esta área. En su pensar, una persona como yo, pobre e inmigrante, no pertenece aquí.”

But Yesenia is not one to be easily offended. She takes things in stride and laughs when others make fun of her “posh” living. On the weekends, she and her daughter live in a small house she rents with her brother and sister-in-law in East Los Angeles. The first time I visited Yesenia at what she calls her real home I realized that in addition to her family, she also provided food and shelter to several pets, including, 6 birds, 1 turtle, 2 dogs, and about 3 cats. My own love for animals bonded us more when I met her “extended” family.

But Yesenia knew that the opportunity to live in an affluent part of town not only helped sustain her financially but also opened educational opportunities for her daughter. Viviana was able to attend some of the best schools because she could use the address of her mother’s workplace as her primary residence. The schools in that area were known for their excellence. When I spoke to Yesenia about what she wanted to do with her GED and the plans she had for

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65 Translated to English: People can’t believe that I live in this area. In their thinking, a person like me, poor and immigrant, doesn’t belong here.
her own future, she replied heavy-hearted, “No Vero, ahorita me tengo que quedar aquí por mi Viviana. Yo no tuve oportunidades de estudiar en Morelos, el pueblo en México donde nací. Trabajando para esta familia rica le da a mi hija las oportunidades que yo nunca tuve. Por ahora, aquí es mi lugar.” As I later discovered, ALIANZA became a critical place for Yesenia to apply her GED and support the educational development of other parents in the group.

Clara

Clara joined ALIANZA soon after Yesenia, her sister-in-law, joined the group. Unlike Yesenia, though, Clara was anything but shy. Her introduction to the group happened at one of their monthly meetings. Yesenia had previously asked permission to invite Clara to the group, which was typical procedure for ALIANZA although no one was ever turned away. Nonetheless, it was an unspoken norm for members of the group to gain permission for new guests that rests in the shared belief that all decisions, insignificant as they may seem, should involve a democratic decision-making process. Before she even mentioned her name or was greeted with the familiar embrace ALIANZA members give to new attendees, Clara started making jokes and laughing about the everyday realities of living as an immigrant in the U.S. That first impression was undoubtedly a lasting one as she was known thereafter as ALIANZA’s unofficial comedian. It was not difficult to understand why Clara so easily developed relationships with others in the group.

Often when ALIANZA meetings organically transformed into a support group for its members, Clara would temporarily shelf her comedian nature and open up about her struggles living in the U.S. as an immigrant woman. It was during these times that I appreciated how fluid

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66 Translated to English: No Vero, for now I need to stay here for Viviana. I didn’t have opportunities to study in Morelos, the town in México where I was born. Working for this rich family gives my daughter the opportunities I never had. For now, this is my place.
ALIANZA was, serving multiple functions depending on the needs of the group and its individual members. It also became a window into the multifaceted and courageous lives of ALIANZA parents. This was especially true for Clara. She would open up about her experience immigrating to the U.S. from Puebla, México without her family’s support and what it meant having to adapt to the harsh realities of living in the U.S. on her own. She laughs when she recalls friends returning home from the U.S. to let her and other neighbors know that money and work was abundant “en el Norte.” Clara remembers, “Nos decían que el dinero se recogía del piso pero hasta la fecha sigo buscando y no puedo encontrar ese dinero del cual nos hablaron.” As she shares this with ALIANZA parents, caught between a laugh and a sigh, she receives several nods from others in the room, a gesture of a commonly understood immigrant experience of deception and coming to grips with the elusiveness of the American Dream they were fed as children and young adults. But for Clara, these harsh realities became her platform to become involved and work to support immigrant parents and women in her community, to provide them with a sense of familiarity and connection to their lives in their native communities, especially if they were recently arrived. She not only became involved with ALIANZA, thanks to Yesenia, but also was heavily involved in multiple immigrant outreach programs with her church.

One last, but important, thing to mention about Clara by way of introduction is that Clara has no children. Although she felt a strong mission to support the work of ALIANZA, she and her husband were never able to have children of their own. Yet, she considers herself no different from the other parents in the group and often refers to herself as a second mother to

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67 Expression commonly used in Latin American countries to refer to the U.S. Translated to English means, “the North.”

68 Translated to English: They would tell us that you could pick money right off the ground but I continue to search and I still can’t find that money that they talked about.
Viviana, Yesenia’s daughter. When Viviana speaks of her aunt, in fact, she almost always refers to her as “mi otra madre.” Thus, in the chapters to follow, Clara is referred to as a mother, in reference to her relationship with Viviana and the political identity she embraces to organize alongside other parents, regardless of whether broader society, and more specifically the school system, refuses to recognize her as such.

**Guadalupe**

When I first met Guadalupe at a school board meeting in 2007, I was struck by how quiet she was. I had been invited by ALIANZA members that evening to hear parent and community concerns about a principal at a local elementary school who had refused to meet with her families to address building safety issues. Guadalupe had her son enrolled in this school and had come to the school board meeting that night to speak directly to the board about her specific concerns. Other ALIANZA members knew Guadalupe, although Guadalupe had yet to be formally introduced to the group. As I waited for the meeting to start, Caridad, in her usual style of facilitating new introductions between people she knew, brought me over to meet Guadalupe and shared her efforts at encouraging Guadalupe to come and speak that night.

As I reached out my hand I noticed that Guadalupe kept her gaze mostly at the ground and smiled graciously as her hand met mine. I could not help but wonder how she was going to muster the courage to speak in front of the school board and a packed room of angry parents. She seemed so incredibly shy. As we sat down and they began calling speakers by name, I nervously awaited for Guadalupe’s name, quickly glancing at Caridad, signaling that maybe she should go up with Guadalupe to support her as she spoke. Caridad shook her head, making it clear that Guadalupe knew exactly what she was doing. A few minutes later, Guadalupe’s name

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69 Translated to English: My other mother
was called and what came next I hardly expected. The Guadalupe I met just minutes before was a very different Guadalupe from the one that stood behind the podium poised and ready to be heard. Her voice was strong and firm and her brief three-minute speech was eloquently and powerfully articulated. Of the fifteen parents that spoke that night, Guadalupe’s voice, in my opinion, delivered the most powerful expression of parental concern while simultaneously making a case for the inclusion of parental voices that are so often dismissed in important school decisions. The loud and standing round of applause she received after she spoke only confirms my judgment of her words and delivery that evening.

Immediately following the meeting, Selina invited Guadalupe to join ALIANZA. Although unsure at first because her time was already stretched thin with work, school, and caring for her son as a single mother, Guadalupe accepted and joined the group. Although she rarely speaks at ALIANZA meetings, the other members and I have come to appreciate her quiet, yet powerful, presence. When Guadalupe does speak, her words are always profound and full of conviction. This is also true of her commitment to group projects. In 2008, she volunteered to lead the Spanish literacy component of the adult literacy project attached to ALIANZA. Prior to her joining this effort, the Spanish literacy classes had mediocre success and the project struggled to keep students invested. Once Guadalupe joined, the project took on new life and student enrollment increased three-fold. She somehow managed to volunteer in this project four nights a week, after which she would attend night classes at the local community college to improve her English skills in the hopes of being able to pass the GED requirements in the near future. She also worked full time and was active in church events and other community projects. All this, of course, was in addition to her primary role as a single mother to her only son, who at the time I met Guadalupe was in Kindergarten.
Guadalupe integrated into ALIANZA quickly and her presence was transformative, particularly in how the group began to define and represent itself. Prior to her arrival, all ALIANZA parents, except for one, were immigrants from México. Guadalupe, whose hometown is a small rural community outside the capital of El Salvador, introduced the group to the customs and cultural practices of her Central American upbringing. With Guadalupe’s help, ALIANZA planned cultural events and *convivios*[^70] that celebrated the diversity among its membership. Eventually this impacted the political presence ALIANZA had at school and city-wide meetings, where ALIANZA made an intentional effort to promote and embrace a much more heterogeneous perspective and understanding of the immigrant community. Guadalupe and her family, thus, became a constant and powerful reminder for the group to be vigilant of reducing their experiences of common struggle as exclusively Mexican.

**Mireya**

Mireya is one of twelve of Guadalupe’s siblings, but the only one that became involved with ALIANZA. Guadalupe and Mireya look nothing alike, although they share the same initial shyness and personality traits. On occasion, when both sisters exhibited a healthy dose of sibling rivalry, either in talking about out their childhood experiences or in tackling a group project within ALIANZA, Mireya’s shyness quickly diminished and her competitive nature would surface. This was true from the moment I met Mireya via introduction by her sister in late 2008, almost a year and half after Guadalupe joined the group. Guadalupe had invited Mireya to attend an ALIANZA meeting to hear about important information that would soon have bearing on her role as a mother in the public school system. Mireya had three young children, none of which were of school age at the time we met. She had also recently arrived to the U.S. and was

[^70]: Spanish word that is closely translated to English as “informal gathering”
navigating its institutional and cultural system for the first time with the help of her siblings already living in California. For Guadalupe, ALIANZA was key in helping her address the issues she faced with her son’s school and was hopeful it would be as helpful and supportive to her sister Mireya.

I was talking to Selina when I met Mireya. Selina enjoyed using icebreakers or what she referred to as dinámicas\(^\text{71}\) to facilitate introductions between group members and new guests. She was sharing with me some ideas for a dinámica that evening at the group’s monthly meeting in anticipation of Mireya’s arrival when I felt a small hand grab my elbow. I turned to receive a warm embrace from Guadalupe immediately followed by an interesting introduction to her sister, “Esta es mi hermana Mireya pero somos muy diferentes. Claro yo soy la más inteligente y la más chica de la familia, pero ella tiene algunas cualidades buenas.”\(^\text{72}\) Both Selina and I laughed along with Guadalupe, familiar with harmless family rivalries that have surfaced in the group. But as I turned to Mireya to greet her, it was easy to discern how bothered she was at her sister’s comments. But in the typical sense of humor that I have come to love about Guadalupe and realized at that moment was a family trait, Mireya responded, “Si soy Mireya, la más bonita de la familia.”\(^\text{73}\) At this point several members of the group who overheard had joined Selina and me, and the two sisters, in laughter.

Beyond the harmless quality to the competitiveness Mireya and Guadalupe displayed with one another, Mireya possessed an unwavering commitment to remedy social injustice, particularly when it affected the immigrant community. It was here that I witnessed how her competitive nature transformed into a powerful sense of political agency, where she would spend

\(^{71}\) Spanish word that is closely translated to English as “icebreakers”

\(^{72}\) Translated to English: This is my sister Mireya but we are very different. Of course, I am the most intelligent and the youngest in my family but she does have some good qualities.

\(^{73}\) Translated to English: Yes, I’m Mireya, the most beautiful in the family.
long nights with Selina perfecting her speech to the city council about affordable housing or preparing to speak on a panel calling for the right of non-citizen parents to vote in school-wide elections. Mireya is a perfectionist in her work with ALIANZA and although she refers to herself as a “behind-the-scenes” activist, other ALIANZA parents consider her a natural leader in their efforts.

Olga

Olga is a long-time veteran of ALIANZA, having been actively involved since 2002. I met Olga a few days after Selina introduced me to the group at a community forum that ALIANZA was co-sponsoring with other community groups to assess educational equity concerns across the school district. On our way there, Selina warned me not to judge Olga by my first impressions of her. I couldn’t help but ask her why. Selina responded, “La gente tiene la impresión de que Olga es una persona dura y poco amable cuando la conocen por primera vez. Olga tiene un corazón grande pero la gente tiende de confundir un carácter fuerte en un mujer como signo de ser cerrada, grosera, y con quien se trata solo de lejos.” I understood what Selina meant. The sense of feeling erroneously judged by contradicting mainstream gendered-raced norms of “appropriate” behavior through an intentional and unapologetic practice of speaking up and out about social injustice was one I too was familiar with in both my personal and professional life. Rather than make me nervous about my first-time meeting with Olga, Selina’s warning only served to excite me.

When we entered the room for the community forum, Olga was easy to spot. She was tall and her voice carried over the others in the room. Although the meeting had yet to start, it

74 Translated to English: When people meet Olga for the first time, they are left with the impression that she is stern and unfriendly. Olga has a huge heart but people often equate a strong personality in a woman as a sign that she is closed-off to others, rude, and someone you deal with only from a distance.
was clear that Olga was already commanding an audience. Selina brought me over to meet Olga although the introduction might have been a bit premature. We caught Olga in mid conversation sharing her story with other parents about how she helped remove a school office assistant that had been consistently rude to Latina mothers. She wasn’t too keen when Selina interrupted her to introduce me. She quickly said hello and continued her conversation. Although Selina left us to deal with logistical matters for the forum that evening, I stayed behind to finish listening to Olga’s story and hopefully have the opportunity for a more “thorough” introduction with her after.

At the end of her conversation, I approached her once more but before I had the chance to share a little about who I was, Olga immediately started asking me questions, everything from where I was born to what my aspirations were in life. She was exhaustive to say the least. What I came to appreciate about Olga that night, and later, as we developed a close friendship, grew into an admiration of her amazing ability as a storyteller, a reflection of how deeply and profoundly she absorbed and understood the people and context around her. Whether she was presenting at a school board meeting, or simply sharing with other parents during a convivio, Olga always embedded her messages within a story. And her narrating was always rich, complex, full of detail and description, and, unless she was sitting down, had body language that perfectly accompanied her words. Often when things became a little slow at ALIANZA’s group meetings, other parents would turn to Olga and ask, “ándele Señora Olga, cuéntenos una historia.” at which invitation Olga would never hesitate.

In addition to her art at storytelling, Olga was also a masterful chef. She was the unofficial point person within ALIANZA for organizing all the food and beverage needs for a group-sponsored event or for its monthly meetings. The parents’ appreciation of her cuisine led

75 Translated to English: Come on, Mrs. Olga, tell us a story.
to ALIANZA organizing a weekend to help plant different fruit trees and vegetable plants in a small plot Olga owned in front of her house. I later discovered that this was also a covert strategy by the group to ensure that Olga would continue to stay committed as the group’s culinary expert. Although her three children, who at the time I met Olga were all in high school, frequently reminded the group that they had unwillingly been put to work by their mother as a result of this unofficial position, it was clear that they and the rest of her family were extremely proud of her. Raised in Michoacán, México, Olga had limited access to formal schooling. She completed the equivalent of sixth grade but as an adult in the U.S. returned to school and taught herself how to read and write in English. In addition, she managed her own housecleaning business and held leadership positions on decision-making committees at both her children’s schools and the school district.

Amanda

Amanda is one of two of Olga’s sisters. Although Olga and Amanda arrived in the U.S. at roughly the same time, Amanda joined ALIANZA late in 2008, several years after her sister became a part of the group. Unlike Olga who immigrated together with her husband and members of his family, Amanda came alone. She struggled for several years in an abusive relationship and only until she separated from her spouse did she feel able to join and fully participate as a member of ALIANZA.

I met Amanda shortly after I was introduced to Olga. Olga frequently opened up her home for informal social gatherings of the group, and in the spirit of celebrating the accomplishment of the community forum at which we were introduced, she held a celebration at her home the weekend after. I met Amanda that night but we spoke only briefly before she
retired into her sister’s home, where she and her family also lived. My first impression of Amanda was that she was shy and reserved but I did not want to pass judgment on her based on the few minutes we spoke. As the time passed, she slowly opened up to me as I began mentoring Olga’s children toward college, and by extension, Amanda’s two daughters who spent quite a bit of time with their cousins. She would call me to ask questions about the college admissions process, particularly about financial aid, and I encouraged her to come to an ALIANZA meeting where we held special workshops for parents preparing their children, and themselves, for college. Although interested, she held back and it was not until after the separation from her spouse and the daughters’ pleading that she finally came to an ALIANZA meeting.

During the first several months of Amanda’s participation with the group, she kept mostly to herself and tended to speak when prompted by Olga’s gentle, but not so subtle, elbow nudge every now and then to chime in on conversations. At first, she seemed most engaged when ALIANZA opened the space at the end of meetings for members to talk about any issue concerning them, personal or related to the group’s projects. Amanda used this opportunity to talk about her everyday struggles as a single mother and though apprehensive at first, the outpouring of support and the realization that so many other ALIANZA parents were going through similar circumstances, encouraged her to become increasingly involved and invested in the group. Amanda used the strength she gained from the supportive nature of ALIANZA to develop as a leader in her daughters’ school serving as President of the English Language Advisory Council for two years. She also began taking courses at the local community college at night in hopes of being able to obtain a GED and go on to college with her daughters. She obtained her GED, after which she and Yesenia have begun working to encourage members of
ALIANZA and other parents to return to school and have helped to facilitate entry into the local community college for more than a dozen Latina/o immigrant parents in the school district.

**Nelly**

Like Olga, Nelly was a long-time veteran of ALIANZA, joining the group in early 2002. I was introduced to Nelly, strangely, through her famous *horchata*\(^76\) the same night I met Olga at the community forum. As Olga and I started to get to know one another we walked over the refreshments table and she handed me a glass of horchata. Although my mother, a native of México herself, would make the drink for my sister and me when we were younger, I was never a fan. So I was a little skeptical when Olga handed me the glass but I also did not want to be impolite by not accepting it, especially as were just getting to know one another. So I took the glass and proceeded to drink, hoping my body language would not reveal my dislike of the traditional beverage. But after one drink, I was pleasantly surprised, almost shocked, at how good the horchata was. I could not help but ask Olga who made it but before she could answer, a deep, scratchy voice replied from behind, “*Yo hice la horchata. Es mi especialidad. ¿Le gusta?*”\(^77\)

I turned around, expecting to see a figure that matched the depth and strength of the voice that replied to my question. Instead, I came face-to-face with a woman who by my estimates was significantly shorter than 5 feet in stature. “*Soy Nelly, una de las mamas de [ALIANZA], y la horchata es la receta de mi familia en Guatemala,*”\(^78\) she continued. I congratulated her on the

\(^{76}\) Traditional Mexican rice drink

\(^{77}\) Translated to English: I made the horchata. It’s my speciality. Do you like it?

\(^{78}\) Translated to English: I’m Nelly, one of the mothers of ALIANZA and the horchata is a recipe from my family in Guatemala.
best horchata I had ever tasted and could not help but wonder what she had done to it and where my own mother had failed at the recipe.

After the community forum that night, Nelly made sure to introduce me to her five children that were quietly playing in the back during the presentation. She, like many others in ALIANZA, was a single mother supporting her family by cleaning homes and, on occasion, catering to family parties where she was paid for large quantities of her famous horchata. For Nelly, ALIANZA is her extended family, as the rest of her siblings and parents still live in Guatemala. She is especially close to Caridad and over the years the two have developed a tight-knit relationship to the level that they each refer to one another as an “hermana.” Caridad’s comedic style has also worn off on Nelly to a certain degree and when the two are in the room, especially at group meetings, you can expect many jokes, laughter, and a lot of inappropriate, but well-intentioned, fun. The other parents in the group have noticed the closeness of their relationship and have gone as far as calling them “las gemelas.”

Although Nelly has been a member of ALIANZA for several years, she has yet to take on any leadership role. Despite this, she never misses an ALIANZA meeting or organized event. She contributes in her own way and is more heavily involved when the group plans cultural events. Like Guadalupe and Mireya, who hail from El Salvador, Nelly’s roots in Guatemala contribute to the diversity in the group in both identity and practice. At a recent fundraiser, for example, she introduced the group to unique Guatemalan practices that she organized with her mother as a young child to raise funds for her school. With Nelly’s help, ALIANZA organized a “blended” Latin American fundraiser to support the adult literacy program in 2006.

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79 Spanish word for “sister”

80 Spanish word for “twins”
Vanessa

I first met Vanessa in 2007 at a fundraising event for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF). MALDEF is a Los Angeles based non-profit organization that, in addition to legal advocacy, has an education department that focuses on developing parent leaders in low-income Latina/o neighborhoods across the country. Vanessa had undergone the 14-week parent training that MALDEF offers and was looking for an organizational home to put into practice the skills she gained. Seeing that she lived in the community that ALIANZA serves, Selina, who was in attendance with me that night at the MALDEF event, immediately asked Vanessa if she would consider joining the group. The selling point for Vanessa was ALIANZA’s formation of a youth group and their need for a volunteer youth coordinator at the time. Vanessa was looking for opportunities for her teenage son, Omar, and felt it would be ideal to work with her son on similar, or connected, community-based projects. Thus when Vanessa joined the group at the following ALIANZA monthly meeting, her son joined as well as a volunteer with the youth group.

Little did Selina or I know when we asked Vanessa to join how talented she was as a photographer. Although Vanessa cleaned homes to support herself and her son, her passion was photography. She would secure small jobs taking pictures at birthday parties and quinceañeras\textsuperscript{81} on the occasional weekend, but her dream was to pursue a journalism style of photography, hoping maybe to earn a job at a local newspaper one day. In the meantime, though, Selina encouraged Vanessa to become the official historian for ALIANZA, taking pictures at each of our events and meetings and cataloguing pictures from years past. Vanessa enthusiastically agreed and it was rare to find Vanessa without her camera from that point forward at ALIANZA

\textsuperscript{81} A traditional birthday celebration common in Latin American communities that marks a coming of age for a young woman at the age of fifteen.
functions. She was also highly computer literate, having taken college-level classes in her hometown of México City before immigrating to the U.S., and began a website for the group where she frequently posted her pictures. Eventually others in the community began to take notice, and she landed a part-time job taking pictures for a local paper.

With help from her son Omar, Vanessa quickly rose to a leadership position in the group. About a year after joining, she and Omar held a series of computer classes for interested members of ALIANZA and, later, basic skills in photography. When she was voted as secretary for ALIANZA in 2008, the parents were amazed at her commitment for the role. She helped members establish email accounts, led efforts to organize the historical archives of the organization, and worked informally with me to learn about research skills to better capture the everyday realities of the parents in her notes and photography. She was also constantly looking for capacity-building opportunities for the group, securing speakers on everything from how to set up a bank account to how to create nutritious meals for picky members of the family.

**Yolanda**

Yolanda joined ALIANZA in 2005, encouraged by other members who worked cleaning homes in the same neighborhood with her. I actually met Yolanda through the adult literacy program connected to ALIANZA in 2003. At the time, I was teaching introductory English for the program and Yolanda ended up in my class halfway through the semester. She was very quiet and shy, only speaking when called on and rarely interacting with her fellow classmates. In my effort to help her become more comfortable participating in class, I asked her to translate a sentence on the blackboard, even insisting after she repeatedly made it clear she did not want to.
She disappeared from the program for a few weeks. I had to call her at home and apologize for being so aggressive. It took another two weeks but she eventually returned to my class.

After she joined ALIANZA in 2005, Yolanda began gaining confidence and slowly increased her engagement with the group and its projects as well as with other activities outside the group. One of those activities included organizing a cooperative with other women as a way of starting a business in house cleaning services. Her shared company, known as Magic Cleaners, started in 2006 and quickly had success. Within a year the company was able to purchase two cars, helping them extend the reach of their service area. They also organized workshops for themselves and for other interested community members on effective house cleaning using natural, non-toxic products. The success of these workshops and the marketing of their services as “eco-friendly” helped propel the growth of the business, and along with it, Yolanda’s leadership role within the cooperative. In 2010, she had served as Magic Cleaners’ president for more than 3 years.

When I asked Yolanda about her success at the time I was collecting data for this dissertation, she replied humbly and heavy-hearted, “mi éxito será realizado cuando tenga a mis dos hijos conmigo. Los deje cuando eran niños para venirme acá y lo que más anhelo es poder verlos pronto.” Yolanda left her two young sons with her mother in her hometown of Oaxaca, México, 14 years prior to our interview. She hadn’t seen them since but was hopeful to be reunited with them in the near future. Her dedication to her work and the development of the cooperative was aimed at making sure she could send enough money to sustain her children and her parents back in México. Although she had no children in U.S. schools, Yolanda felt committed to the group. She shared that by “seeing” her children in those attending the local

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82 Translated to English: My success will be realized when I have my two sons with me. I left them when they were children to come here and my deepest hope is that I will be able to see them soon.
schools she was able to heal from the guilt and pain of having to leave her own at such a young age.

**Dolores**

Dolores joined ALIANZA in 2003, initially to help her daughter, Lizet, who was dealing with bullying at her high school. Selina remembers how distraught Dolores was when she heard her plea to the school board to establish some sort of district-wide policy to end bullying and support training on the issue for teachers and administrators. Selina recalls, “*Me acuerdo que venía muy mal a la junta, desesperada. Parecía que nadie la había ayudado y le suplicó a la mesa como último esfuerzo. Era obvio que la iba invitar al grupo. Estaba segura que la podíamos ayudar.*” And, in effect, ALIANZA did. At the next group meeting, Selina asked the group to prioritize Dolores’s concerns and think about an action plan to support her. Even though the group had not met Dolores prior to the meeting, they were ready to assist. They organized a short campaign to bring attention to bullying in the Spanish-speaking community by providing materials to parent groups at the local high schools about what to do if their child was being bullied. They also went as a group to the next board meeting to support Dolores and follow up on the board’s promises. The immediate action of the group to support her solidified Dolores’s commitment to ALIANZA and she became one of the group’s most active and engaged leaders thereafter.

Although Dolores was already an active member of the group when I become involved, I did not have the opportunity to meet her until several months later because her work schedule as a nanny kept her busy Friday nights, when ALIANZA would meet. She considered herself at the

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83 Translated to English: I remember that she was in bad shape, desperate. It seemed as if no one had bothered to help her and she was pleading with the board as a last ditch effort. It was clear that I had to invite her to the group. I was sure we could help her.
time a “behind-the-scenes” leader because of this absence from group meetings. In 2004, ALIANZA was able to secure a small grant to offer a part-time stipend to a parent for a year to help Selina expand the group’s programs and training opportunities. By unanimous vote, ALIANZA selected Dolores to receive the stipend, hoping it would help relieve her of some of her work responsibilities and further her development in the group and as a parent leader. Dolores gladly accepted the opportunity and in 2004 worked alongside Selina to coordinate much of the group activities.

When her tenure ended in early 2005, Dolores decided to continue in the same role without pay. Her husband was promoted at his workplace allowing Dolores to devote herself to the group full time. She also returned to school at the local community college in hopes that she might be able to finish her training as a school counselor, a profession she was pursing in her hometown of México City prior to leaving for the U.S. She also found it exciting to be going to school at the same time that both her daughter and son were in college and shared with me that it served to bring the three of them closer. It was during her return to school that Dolores and I became close friends. I had majored in Psychology as an undergraduate and was happy to assist her in her social work coursework. We would often meet up at night to study together and over the years motivated one another to persist toward our educational goals.

Felicia

I met Felicia through Caridad, who invited her to join the group in 2005. Felicia’s three children were close in age to those of Caridad’s and their children’s friendship seemed to naturally extend to their parents. You would often find Felicia driving Caridad’s van or Caridad picking up Felicia’s children from school. But Felicia held back from integrating into the group.
when Caridad joined. Although one of fifteen siblings, Felicia was the eldest and when her parents became ill in 2001 she was expected to take on the primary responsibility of caring for them. It wasn’t until after her father passed away in 2003 and her mother the following year in 2004, that Felicia felt able to join the group. But because of her relationship with Caridad, most of ALIANZA’s members already knew Felicia well and her entry into the group was only a formality.

Felicia enjoyed being involved in the graduation events that ALIANZA organized each year for Latina/o students and their families. These graduation festivities were started by ALIANZA in 2003 to honor a diverse Latina/o cultural perspective that was missing in the traditional school sanctioned graduation events organized each year. It was also an effort to celebrate those students who were denied participation in other graduations because they had not completed all of their high school graduation requirements and/or passed the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) starting in 2006. As other organizations joined to support ALIANZA in this project, Felicia became the point person to facilitate collaborations and guide the cultural and performance aspects of the event. Felicia excelled in this role and her talent as a facilitator secured her an ongoing part-time position in the school district to work with other parent groups to share her skills at managing community-based collaborations.

Over the years, Felicia’s involvement and success with ALIANZA became a source of encouragement for her own children. Her eldest daughter assisted the adult literacy program connected to the group as a volunteer teacher for almost two years and her son became a mentor for Latina/o immigrant students at the local community college he attended. I also developed a special relationship with Felicia through her youngest son who I helped mentor and guide during his high school years and into college. The fact that she was born just outside of Guadalajara,
México in the same rural community as my mother, also provided material for long conversations and further developed our relationship over the years.

**Elena**

Elena is one of the most recent additions to ALIANZA, having joined the group in 2009. Though a recently joined member, Elena rose to leadership quickly both in the group and the school district. She initially joined at Olga’s invitation. She and Olga became neighbors when Elena moved to Pasadena with her husband and three children in late 2008. Concerned about the previous school district her children attended, Elena began asking her neighbors for advice about the local schools that her children would be required to attend. Immediately Olga suggested that Elena join ALIANZA, and without hesitation Elena showed up to the following group meeting where I met her for the first time.

From the moment Elena was introduced to the group, she instantaneously developed friendships with the other parents. Her contagious sense of humor, the strength and conviction with which she spoke, and the depth of compassion she showed for the everyday struggles of ALIANZA members, were not only well received but admired by the other parents. She is also a straight talker, never holding back her critiques or concerns about how the group conducts itself internally or politically in the community. Although she would often attribute her strong and direct communication style to being born and raised in México City, her comical stories about how she had to defend herself as the youngest and only sister to five brothers led many of the parents to believe that her skill at communicating was, in part, developed early on in life. Nonetheless, the parents took notice of Elena’s seemingly natural ability to lead and decided to
capitalize on Elena’s talents by initially encouraging her to lead group projects and events and soon after unanimously voting her as ALIANZA’s President.

Like the other relationships she formed in the group, Elena and I became close almost immediately. She was starting college in México in hopes of becoming a teacher when she left for the U.S. When the other parents introduced me as “una maestra” to Elena, she was intrigued about the possibility of continuing her studies in the U.S. and we would often have long conversations about what it meant to teach and what she would do if she had the opportunity to work as a teacher in U.S. public schools. During the day, Elena worked full time as a nanny, sharing with me that she enjoyed her work because her employers expected her to teach Spanish to the children she looked after. In one of our conversations she mentioned, “no importa que todavía no sea una maestra de escuela, me siento con la responsabilidad de enseñarles a estos niños que cuido. Lo bonito es que los padres me tratan con mucho respeto y me hacen sentir verdaderamente que soy capaz como maestra.” Her positive work experiences, together with the encouragement of the other parents, motivated Elena to return to school at the local community college. She has since achieved her GED and plans to return to school in hopes of transferring to a four-year institution and eventually obtaining her teaching credential.

**Justo**

Justo, like Selina, worked for the ALIANZA’s umbrella organization when I met him. Although he was not paid to work directly with ALIANZA, he worked on collaborating projects in other sectors of the same community. Selina introduced me to Justo the same day I decided to

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84 Spanish word for “teacher”

85 Translated to English: it doesn’t matter that I’m not yet a schoolteacher, I feel as if I have the responsibility to teach these children that I look after. The great thing is that their parents treat me with great respect and they make me feel genuinely capable as a teacher.
join as a volunteer. I clearly remember Selina prefacing that I should not be alarmed by what seemed to be an 18-year old’s spirit and optimism trapped in a mid-50 year old’s body, referring to Justo. The moment I met him, I knew exactly what she meant. Just as Selina was showing me newspaper clippings of recent stories of ALIANZA that made it into the local paper, the corner of my eye caught a middle-aged man with a large backpack practically skipping to where we were seated, whistling a familiar song I had heard when I was a child. Selina laughed and quickly noted that Justo loved listening to popular children’s music common in small communities throughout México.

As I stood up to greet Justo, I could not help but notice that he was wearing two pairs of glasses. I later realized he could not afford bifocals, so he often switched back and forth between two different pairs and on the special occasion where he did not want to bother going back and forth, he wore them both at the same time. We embraced each other and with a warm and humble gesture immediately invited both Selina and me for tacos at a local restaurant, a space that continues to serve a vital and important purpose for ALIANZA’s informal gatherings.

During our initial meeting I discovered that Justo, together with Selina, had founded ALIANZA and his design for the project mimicked organizing work he did as a student teacher in México City, where he is from. Although he never finished his university degree in political science, he was formally and informally trained to teach popular education in rural, indigenous communities throughout México. In fact, he spent a large portion of his adult life living with a small indigenous group in the mountains of northern México, helping to initiate a popular education school for the children of this community. His organizing work is extensive but what’s most impressive about Justo is the wealth of information he possesses. He knows a broad range
of political and economic theory and shares this information through his teaching and organizing in the most accessible ways.

To the parents of ALIANZA, he is known as “el maestro,” and it’s easy to see why. He has a way with words and is able to connect concepts and theories easily and seamlessly with their everyday lives. He leads many of the capacity-building workshops within ALIANZA and is constantly imagining new avenues and projects for the parents. He is a key leader in the group and the other members hold him in high esteem. He has three children in México from a previous relationship and one child in Northern California. Although I did not know it at the time that I met him, he was dating Selina. They were married in 2010.

A Note on ALIANZA’s Neighborhood Context

Due to the nature of this dissertation study, which seeks to understand how each of the parents introduced above developed a sense of political agency and organized collectively as Latina/o immigrant parents to bring about change, the importance of context cannot be underestimated. It seems organic to include a rich and detailed description about the neighborhood ALIANZA serves here to place the individual descriptions above within the social, cultural, and political setting in which its members came together to organize as a collective. While some very general description of this context is more aptly provided in Chapter 7, which focuses on ALIANZA as an organization, there is a central reason why I silence details of the setting in this dissertation.

As I discussed in Chapter 4, the undocumented immigration status of some of the parent collaborators in this dissertation necessitates that I take a silent evidentiary position at strategic and vulnerable points throughout the findings. This includes, but is not limited to, the setting in

86 Spanish word for “teacher”
which ALIANZA operates. As a educational researcher committed to social justice, keeping the reader in the dark about individual or context descriptors that could remotely identify undocumented ALIANZA members was an enactment of an ethical and moral obligation on my part to go above and beyond the standard protections required for research participants in the social sciences. It was imperative that I in no way place the integrity of the research project before the safety of my research collaborators.

These types of unconventional but necessary research decisions go against the grain of what is considered valid research, at least in the traditional sense. But as Ladson-Billings and Donner (2008) emphasize, “the standards that require research to be ‘objective,’ precise, accurate, generalize-able, replicable do not simultaneously produce moral and ethical research and scholarship.” Coming from a critical race, Chicana feminist position, I argue that the decision to take a silent evidentiary stance is at the core of how we are called to transform the academy. For the parents who participated in this study, taking such a stance contributed to a profound sense of safety and confianza87 that I would never put the group and/or its members at risk.

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87 Spanish word for “confidence”
CHAPTER 6

Roots, Triggers, and Milestones of Agency: Early Schooling, El Norte, and Motherhood as Political Identity

“Arrieros Somos y en el Camino Andamos”

We were all nervous on our drive back from New Orleans. I still couldn’t believe that so many parents from ALIANZA decided courageously to organize the forty-hour drive to the educational conference. When our panel was accepted, I wasn’t sure I would be able to convince any parents to join me on the trip from Los Angeles to Louisiana. Not only was the cost of such a trip exorbitant by any standards, but the risk of making the trip for ALIANZA’s undocumented parents was no less than playing with fire. So when ten parents and a few of their youth signed up to go, I couldn’t help but feel a mix of excitement and awe as well as fear and apprehension. They understood the risk, but felt it necessary to go. With the blessings and prayers of family members and friends, ALIANZA made it to New Orleans, successfully and powerfully delivered their panel presentation, and were now making the drive back home. We were getting close but had one last obstacle to cross: the agricultural checkpoint coming into California. Although we had taken Highway 40 to avoid the additional risks of driving on Interstate 10, extending our trip there and back by more than 12 hours, we couldn’t avoid the checkpoint. It was 3AM but no one was asleep as we approached it. I looked back from the driver’s seat of our 15-passenger van and saw nervous glances back and forth as we waited for our turn to cross. We approached the officer who looked at me and asked where we were coming from. I showed him my conference badge and told him the truth. He motioned us through. Before we started picking up speed again, a wave of applause and laughter immediately broke the tense silence. A couple of the parents began singing corridos that told of the painful journey of immigrants to el norte as it simultaneously praised their spirit of hope and perseverance. One by one the parents began sharing their stories of migrating to the U.S., celebrating each other’s courage and laughing at the mishaps that occurred along the way. The mood had changed and I looked over to Justo in the passenger’s seat who looked back with a smile of relief. We were only a few hours from home. “La hicimos Justo,” I shouted so he could hear me over the singing and animated migration stories. He smiled and shouted back, “Si Vero, arrieros somos y en el camino andamos.”

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88 Expression commonly used in Latin American countries to refer to the U.S. Translated to English means, “the North.”

89 Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “Muleteers we are and on the road we travel”

90 Translated to English: We made it, Justo

91 Translated to English: Yes, Vero, muleteers we are and on the road we travel

92 This excerpt was taken from a personal journal I have been using to document my experiences working with ALIANZA. This excerpt, dated April 2011, reflects only my recollections and reflections of the event it describes.
Although I didn’t realize it then, ALIANZA’s trip to New Orleans to attend and present at a major educational research conference was symbolic of the risk-taking, discovery of the unexpected, and sense of collective accomplishment involved in the journey to address the initial inquiry that motivated this study. Justo, one of the founders and parent leaders in ALIANZA, probably captured it best in the *dicho*\(^3\) he exhaustedly, but happily, shared with me on the drive back: *arrieros somos y en el camino andamos*. Although I had grown up hearing my parents use *dichos* as a pedagogical strategy at home, this one was new to me. When I asked Justo to describe its significance, he explained that the *arrieros* were a marginalized group in society, often scorned and treated poorly. He imagined their everyday lives being similar to those of Latina/o immigrants today, and that in their own travels, they must have felt the same sense of apprehension ALIANZA experienced traveling to New Orleans, especially as the U.S. has become increasingly anti-immigrant, and arguably, anti-Latina/o. But Justo’s explanation of the second part of the *dicho* was what caught my attention the most. He described it as a deep-rooted sense of *esperanza*\(^4\), a belief that it shouldn’t matter whether you were an *arriero*, or an immigrant for that matter, our journeys in life are inevitably intertwined and, at some point, will depend on reciprocal and equitable acts of aid. Although Justo deeply understood the seemingly insurmountable challenges to his vision, he believed the *dicho* embodied his unwavering hope that one day he, and the other members of ALIANZA, would be able to drive fear-free to future educational conferences with the figurative and literal license to continue supporting efforts for educational and social change.

For the remaining drive home, I couldn’t stop thinking about Justo’s words and the *dicho*. Up until then I kept asking myself: Why do ALIANZA parents risk so much in their

\(^3\) Spanish word for “saying”

\(^4\) Spanish word for “hope”
efforts to bring about change? The trip to New Orleans was a culminating and critical moment in my quest to find an answer. The parents had put so much on the line but their willingness to risk so much, including their safety, kept me wondering – is it worth it? What informs their determination? Where is their sense of agency rooted that it gave an unhesitant “yes” to this 80-hour round trip to speak to a community of educational researchers about the importance of Latina/o immigrant parent organizing, despite the many potential dangers along the way for undocumented travelers? Even with my best efforts to answer these questions in the months of data collection and analysis leading up to the trip, it wasn’t until Justo shared and explained the dicho that opens this chapter that the answers began to dawn on me.

For Justo and the other parent leaders in ALIANZA, the political agency that became the platform for the risk-filled trip to New Orleans didn’t commence with their entry into the group, as I had originally hypothesized. Having been introduced to many of the parents through group meetings or events, I had initially attributed their development as political actors to the efforts of ALIANZA. But as this chapter highlights below, the dynamic process by which they came to see themselves as agents of change began as early as their entry into school as young children. Justo made me realize on that drive home that his motivation to go to New Orleans regardless of the risk was the product of his own journey, across time and borders, that rested on an ever-evolving and mutually-informing relationship between his sense of belonging to a political community and his ability to enact change. Though throughout his lifespan he had been defined as an outsider either because of his status as an immigrant, a Mexican, or non-English speaking person, or some combination of the three, Justo had fought to remake his sense of belonging and in the process claim a political place from where to exert his agency in meaningful and critical ways.
But this relationship between agency and belonging had another fundamental component that Justo made evident. As part of its dynamic nature, a deep-rooted sense of esperanza was both its driving force and its product. For Justo, hope was not a static concept, a “thing” that one has or doesn’t have. Hope, as the foundation of agency, was continually being renewed, restored, and often remade when he, and the other ALIANZA members, worked to challenge the boundaries of their belonging in U.S. society as Latina/o immigrants. The trip to New Orleans was just one of many successful milestones in this regard but to fundamentally understand how members of ALIANZA came to see themselves as agents of change, it is necessary to start at its roots and explore the formative moments, or triggers, each member of ALIANZA identified throughout his or her life journey as critical to a developing sense of agency.

Toward this end, this chapter explores the life histories of ALIANZA parents in an attempt to answer, or at the very least complicate, how each of them came to see him- or herself as political actors organizing to create change within a U.S. political community that continues to render them as outsiders. Using data primarily from oral history interviews and focus groups, our collective analysis reveals an interwoven set of defining experiences that, while unique to each parent, occurred at similar moments or junctures in their lives: early schooling, migrating to el norte, and encountering U.S. public schools as mothers for the first time. These formative moments became “triggers of political agency” for ALIANZA parents by disrupting their sense of belonging, extending their threshold of hope, and developing their consciousness as agents of change. Below, I discuss each of these three junctures separately, highlighting moments that best exemplify the dynamic and changing nature of their political identity. I also discuss

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95 It is important to note that I’m using the term “mother” and “motherhood” intentionally, while recognizing than not all ALIANZA parents are women, have children in U.S. public schools, or at all. I’m challenging the boundaries of the term to refer to all ALIANZA parents included in this dissertation study and to theorize around the concept of motherhood in ways that extend its scope and understanding. I describe these arguments and my rationale for a re-thinking of the term in more detail later in this chapter.
important “milestones of agency,” where the parents experienced a shift toward a critical consciousness of the world around them, in the Freirean sense, and began defining their agency as motivated by social justice. I conclude with a transition to the following chapter, that introduces ALIANZA as a fourth juncture. It is here that this developing sense of agency evident in the life histories of each of the parents becomes once again transformed as ALIANZA employs popular education to capitalize and build from the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005; 2006) of its members. This organizing strategy produced a new set of skills, knowledges, and networks, further explored in the next chapter but introduced here as an important link between each parent’s coming to consciousness as an agent of change and their collective enactment of that agency as a Latina/o immigrant parent group through ALIANZA.

FIRST JUNCTURE: Early Schooling

I begin this first set of findings at the chronological starting point of the life histories of ALIANZA parents, not because it seems “natural” to talk about a coming to consciousness as a formative journey across time, but because it holds particular significance as a foundation of agency, or what I’m aptly referring to as its roots. Figure 9 provides a visual model that emphasizes early schooling as the first critical juncture in the parents’ development of agency.
As I discuss in more detail below, this early period of life, when ALIANZA parents engaged with schooling for the first time, as students, had a direct bearing on their later experience of motherhood as political identity, the final critical juncture explored in this chapter. Thus, while I have laid out the findings in a chronological sequence, the theoretical and conceptual insights gained point to a much more cyclical pattern that starts and ends with the roots of political agency examined in this section.

Coincidentally, starting here with experiences of early schooling for ALIANZA parents also mirrors how typical conversations would begin at group meetings or informal events. In fact, it was rare that I attended an ALIANZA function and did not listen to a parent share some memory, either comical or heartbreaking, about their childhood, particularly as it related to their early encounters with school. Selina, the group’s coordinator, would often organize a dinámica, or an icebreaker, that would encourage parents to share these early memories in an effort to
reflect on the similarities of their life histories. But even without these intentional strategies, conversations about early schooling would inevitably come up as parents tried to make sense of why schooling practices were so different for their children in the U.S. compared to when and where they went to school. Despite different schooling experiences, the recollections of their early years as students were almost always shared with a special sense of fondness and nostalgia. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the majority of the parent participants in this study spent a large portion of our time together in interviews and focus groups talking about their early schooling as a formative period in their lives.

I initially framed my inquiry in our interviews as a general question about what schooling meant for each them. Although ALIANZA parents had completed different levels of education, ranging from the second grade in elementary school to graduating from college, their response to this general question always focused on their early years in school. As Olga shared with me during our interview together,

*Cuando me acuerdo de los años que era estudiante siempre se me viene a la mente los primeros años que pase por la escuela. Fue unos de los momentos más felices para mi. Era un momento de muchos cambios, de mucha energía. Era una transición de una niña que vio su vida definida por las cuatro paredes de su casa a una persona capaz que se empezaba a desarrollar sin limites.*

Olga recalls these earliest years in school as the most memorable, emphasizing their significance as a major life transition. When I probed further about why she felt they were so significant, she added, “era un escape donde se valía soñar. En mi casa sentía mi mundo limitado pero cuando

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96 Translated to English: When I remember the years I was a student, what always comes to mind are the first years I went to school. It was one of the happiest moments for me. It was a moment of many changes and a lot of energy. It was a transition for me, from a young girl who saw her life defined by the four walls of her home to a capable person who began to develop without limits.
iba en la escuela, aunque todavía estaba chica, se me abrían los ojos a todo lo que el mundo me ofrecía, y yo verdaderamente creía que la escuela era mi llave para alcanzar mis sueños.  

For Olga, school facilitated an important shift in how she saw herself in relation to the world around her. She imagined possibilities, aspiring to something larger than what she felt was permitted and even dreamt of the type of work and activities she would engage in one day. School encouraged Olga to see herself as a learner and she embraced this identity as the license through which she not only could hope for, but also act upon, to create a better future. Several of the other parents also shared this sentiment, describing what it meant to have teachers, or other institutional actors, early on, that made them feel intelligent and capable, while simultaneously charging them with the responsibility to utilize and share their knowledge. Dolores recalls,

Yo fui muy afortunada. Mis maestros de priFelicia fueron buenos conmigo. Me enseñaron que todo ser es capaz de aprender pero más importante era lo que hacíamos con esos aprendizajes. Me acuerdo de mi maestra de tercer año de priFelicia que nos decía que la educación sin práctica era una pérdida de tiempo. Creo que era una Freireana, la verdad. Sus palabras me daban energía, mi sentía capaz y responsable, y fue la primera vez que alguien me hizo sentir que era una intelectual y capaz de cambiar el mundo. Sentirse así cuando todos, hasta tu misma familia, te decían que solo sirves para servir a otros o trabajar como un obrero, era transformativo.

These early moments in school were similarly influential for Dolores as they were Olga. Her third grade teacher encouraged Dolores to see herself as an intellectual despite others telling her

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97 Translated to English: School was an escape, where we were allowed to dream. At home, I felt my world was limited but when I went to school, even though I was still young, I felt as if my eyes opened to all the world had to offer, and I truly believed that school was the key to reach my dreams.

98 I was very fortunate. My elementary school teachers were good to me. They taught me that everyone is capable of learning but more important was what we did with that knowledge. I remember my third grade teacher would tell us that education without practice was a waste of time. The truth is, I think she was a follower of Freire. Her words gave me energy, they made me feel capable and responsible, and it was the first time that someone made me feel that I was an intellectual and was capable of changing the world. To feel like that when everyone else, including your family, would tell you that you were only capable of serving others or working as a laborer, was transformative.
quite the opposite, in what Dolores believed was an erroneous perception of her abilities because she came from a poor, working class, campesino\textsuperscript{99} family.

Guadalupe also remembered what it felt to walk into school as a young child with the burden of belief that she wasn’t suited for schooling. During one of our focus groups, she shared, “Cuando caminaba de la escuela a mi casa con mis libros en mis manos, los niños grandes que vivían a un lado de mi casa me hacían burla. Me decían que para que perdía el tiempo que yo no era para la escuela. Que mejor me pusiera a trabajar con mis padres y a ayudarlos con mis hermanos.”\textsuperscript{100} However, instead of encouraging her to give up, her neighbors fueled Guadalupe to continue her schooling. As she carried on in the focus group, she pointed to how challenged she felt to prove to them, and herself, that she was capable of simultaneously being a student, a worker, and care-taker for her younger siblings, all of which she perceived as important and necessary \textit{para sobrevivir}.\textsuperscript{101} But to tackle this challenge and transform it into a deeper commitment and engagement with school, Guadalupe took refuge in the words of her teachers that nurtured and praised her tenacity and resilience as a learner. She recalls fondly the interaction she had with her fifth grade teacher,

\begin{quote}
Mi maestra me hacía sentir que yo era su alumna preferida, pero estoy casi segura que nos trataba a todos por igual. Nos hacía ver que ser pobre no era una condena y no por ser pobre valíamos menos. Ella nos decía muchas cosas tan bonitas para darnos ánimo y fortalecernos, siempre reconociendo la lucha que era para muchos de nosotros ir a la escuela todos los días cuando nuestras familias nos necesitaban en casa. A la mejor solo eran sus cuentos para mantenernos motivados en la escuela, especialmente los mas
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{99} Spanish word for “farming”

\textsuperscript{100} When I would walk home from school with books in hand, the older children that lived next door would make fun of me. They would ask me why I was wasting my time, tell me I wasn’t meant for school. That it would be better if I worked with my parents or helped them by looking after my younger siblings.

\textsuperscript{101} While the literal translation of this word in English means “to survive,” its English counterpart fails to capture its true meaning and significance. I borrow from the work of Trinidad Galvin (2006), to define the concept of “sobrevivir” as an action that reflects “. . . what lies ahead and beneath plain victimry, [the] ability to . . . satiate hopes and dreams in creative and joyful ways.” (p. 163).
Through her words, Guadalupe’s teacher made her realize that being a learner wasn’t something she was striving for, it was something she already was. Even though Guadalupe may have had doubts about her teacher’s intentions, believing in her words had profound effects on Guadalupe’s self perception that she mattered in the classroom not because of what she lacked but because of what she had to offer. This is best captured by Guadalupe’s observation that her teacher’s goal wasn’t to change but to nourish her and her peers, as students. Such a goal recognizes the importance of pedagogically building from what children already bring to the classroom rather than marginalizing their everyday lives and existence in an effort to “remove” perceived “obstacles” to their learning. Charged by her teacher and embracing an unlikely identity based on her neighbor’s standards, Guadalupe performed well in school and eventually graduated with high honors from the equivalent of high school in her home country. Guadalupe attributes her success and her return to college in the U.S. later in life, as a testament to the efforts of a teacher who radically shifted her sense of self by believing in her when few others did.

Both Guadalupe and Dolores had teachers who countered these faulty, deficit beliefs by working to ensure that they saw themselves as holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002), as individuals who believed in their “gifts, talents, . . . worthiness and beauty, while having to survive within the constructs of a world antithetical to [their] intuition and knowledge.” (Castillo, 1995, p. 149). Embracing this identity was, in Dolores’s words,

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102 Translated to English: My teacher would make me feel as if I was her favorite student, but I’m almost sure that she treated us all the same. She would make us see that being poor wasn’t a sentence and that we were not worth less because we were poor. She would tell us many kind things to encourage and strengthen us, always recognizing the struggle it was for many of us to go to school each day when our families needed us at home. Maybe she was just telling us this to motivate us, especially the lazier ones, but I believed in her words. . . She made us understand that her goal was not to change us but to nourish us.
“transformative,” referring to the process of adopting aspirations via her “new” identity that went against the grain of societal expectations that limited her to working within and reproducing the oppressive conditions of everyday poverty she experienced growing up in Mexico. It triggered an important shift in their understanding of the boundaries that defined the requirements for entry into a community of learners. Thanks to the efforts of their teachers, both Dolores and Guadalupe considered those boundaries extended to include them, unlikely members by societal standards. 

But the outcome of this process, as Dolores points out above, wasn’t simply to retain knowledge but to engage, extend, and challenge it. She was charged early in her schooling to see her intellectual capacity in relation to a developing sense of agency that would fundamentally give purpose and meaning to her scholarly pursuits. As one of the few members of ALIANZA that later went on to college in her home country, Dolores considered this relationship between knowledge and agency, first introduced by her third grade teacher, as a central and fundamental reason for continuing her studies. According to Dolores, “mis estudios universitarios fueron motivados por un deseo de usarlos para hacer cambios positivos. ¿Si no, para qué perder mi tiempo?“ For Dolores, using her newly found knowledge for change was key that without such a purpose might have deterred her from going on to college in the first place.

This same sentiment was expressed by Mireya, who like her sister Guadalupe talked about the importance of her teachers’ influence in her self-perception as a learner, but focused more on their encouragement to use their new found knowledge for the greater good. She recalls, “nos decían cada rato que uYeseniamos nuestros estudios para el bien y no el mal. Que

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103 Translated to English: my university studies were motivated by a desire to use them to make positive changes. Otherwise, why waste my time?
Guadalupe attributes the strong and urgent message of putting knowledge to work by her teachers to the socio-political climate in El Salvador at the time she was going through elementary school. During these years, El Salvador was experiencing civil unrest and both Guadalupe and Mireya felt its effects at home and at school. While it energized their parents to become more involved with their church, it was the impact it had on the beliefs and practices of their teachers that Guadalupe credits with a developing sense of consciousness to embrace her identity as a learner for its capacity to change the reality around her. She shared, “poco a poco me empezaba a sentir que yo tenía un propósito muy importante en esta vida, no sólo para mí pero para mi comunidad. La situación en El Salvador tuvo mucho impacto en esto y aunque fueron unos momentos difíciles para todo Salvadoreño, estoy agradecida con mis maestros que me enseñaron a ser consciente.”

Triggered by the social upheaval in her home country, Mireya’s sense of political self and agency began to take shape, in large part as her teachers engaged the social context around her and transformed it into important learning opportunities. These efforts on behalf of her teachers helped Mireya cross an important milestone in her development as a political actor. She began to see schooling, and her relationship with it as a learner, beyond its benefit in fulfilling personal success and adopted it as a tool for social justice. While she later admits that she wasn’t able to fully put to practice her teacher’s plea until she became a mother, in part because she left El Salvador before she felt she was able to, she characterizes these early moments in school as the roots of her political agency.

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104 Translated to English: They would tell us time and time again to use our studies for good and not for ill. To not forget that there was a community in need of good leaders.

105 Translated to English: Little by little I began to feel that I had an important purpose to fulfill in this life, not only for me but for my community. The situation in El Salvador had a great impact in this regard and even though there were difficult times for every Salvadorian, I am grateful that my teachers taught me how to be conscientious.
The same was true for Justo, who shared with me during our interview that he understood the importance of putting knowledge to work for social change early in life. Like Mireya, he attended elementary school during a time of great political unrest in his home country of Mexico. It was particularly influential that he was going to school in Mexico City during the late 1960s and early 1970s, during which several students and teachers were arrested for being involved in organized student movements. He remembers,

Yo tuve la oportunidad de asistir a los colegios de ciencias y humanidades. En esos entonces fueron las escuelas que más me impactaron en términos de mi formación y de un pensamiento crítico. Todos mis maestros, sin excluir a ninguno, habían sido presos políticos del movimiento estudiantil del 1968 en México. En 1971 el presidente hizo una amnistía a todos los presos políticos y a todos los soltaron. Casi todos ellos se convirtieron en maestros. Y la universidad creó un espacio para los ex-presos y toda la gente que había sido reprimida por el gobierno anterior. Todos ellos cupieron en las escuelas de ciencias y humanidades y crearon un modelo de educación alternativa. Esas escuelas fueron escuelas con una politización y un radicalismo muy fuerte. Entonces los años que pasé por la escuela fue de un activismo y un radicalismo impresionante. Era terriblemente política y marxista la educación.¹⁰⁶

When Justo shared his experience of going to school, I had to keep reminding myself that these schools he so vividly described were, in fact, elementary and secondary schools. My perception of his classes and pedagogical environments was something I could have expected of his college experience, but never at such an early age. These learning opportunities had a dramatic impact on Justo’s identity as a political actor and clearly impacted his vocational and scholarly pursuits. After completing high school, Justo went on to study political science at the university and

¹⁰⁶ Translated to English: I had the opportunity to attend the schools of humanities and sciences. In those days, they were the schools that had the most impact on me, in terms of my formation and critical thinking. All of my professors, without exception, had been political prisoners of the student movement of 1968 in Mexico. In 1971, the President gave an amnesty to these political prisoners and they were all released. Nearly all of them became teachers. And the university created a space for these ex-prisoners and those who had been repressed by the previous government. All of these individuals were able to “fit” into schools of humanities and sciences and created an alternative model of education. These schools were schools with a strong politicization and radicalism. So the years that I spent in school were characterized by an impressive activism and radicalism. Education was terribly political and Marxist.
although he didn’t persist to a degree he eventually obtained his teaching credential, which he put to immediate use working with indigenous populations in northern Mexico. Like Mireya, he attributes the roots of his political agency to his early schooling experiences, particularly the instruction of those teachers who had been involved in the Mexican student movement of 1968. It was here that he gained the tools to engage a model of transformative praxis, a relationship between knowledge and action that would prove critically useful throughout his life and later with his work in ALIANZA.

But for the women in the group, putting into practice this relationship between knowledge and agency and embracing themselves as learners didn’t come without challenges. The majority of them witnessed how gendered norms and ideologies powerfully mediated their attempts to actualize their hopes and aspirations early on in life. Capturing this struggle poignantly, Amanda described the moment she saw herself as a young, developing scholar confronted with her father’s gendered expectations that she was better suited full-time at home.

On the verge of entering middle school, she recalls this experience broken-hearted,

Me acuerdo que estaba a punto de empezar la secundaria. Yo era muy buena estudiante y me encantaban mucho las clases de historia. Tuvimos una visita con mi clase de sexto año a un museo cerca de mi escuela. Quedé fascinada. Saliendo de la escuela ese día, le fui a decir a mis padres que mi sueño era trabajar en un museo como guía. Nunca se me va a olvidar la respuesta de mi padre que me dijo, “para que quieres seguir en la escuela si acabo vas a terminar siendo ama de casa y madre. No, mejor sería que te quedes con tu madre y aprendas como mantener un hogar.” Con esas palabras de mi padre sentí que me cortaron las alas.  

107 Translated to English: I remember that I was just about to start middle school. I was a very good student and I loved my history classes. My sixth grade class took a field trip to a museum near my school. I was fascinated. When I got out of school that day, I went to tell my parents that my dream was to work as a guide in a museum. I will never forget my father’s response. He told me, “why do you want to continue in school if you are going to end up being a housewife and mother anyway. No, it would be better if you stay with your mother and learn how to maintain a home.” With those words, I felt as if my father clipped my wings.
Amanda found herself as a sixth-grade student wrestling with the harsh reality of a gendered norm that defined schooling, and the opportunities it afforded, as unnecessary for women. Her father, who embraced this principle, pulled Amanda and her sisters out of the classroom to begin what he believed was more appropriate training at home. For Amanda, this decisive moment taken by her father had two, seemingly contradictory, outcomes: 1) it figuratively “clipped her wings,” as she so powerfully articulated in the quote above, referring to the moment where she was no longer permitted to continue her studies, which led to 2) a growing rage, that went beyond a passive rejection of society-sanctioned roles for women to carve out new opportunities that would allow what she had been so unjustly denied. Seen from this latter perspective, the denial of schooling for Amanda became a direct catalyst for a developing agency. Although she later identifies the greatest challenge to her father took form in her leadership as a political actor in ALIANZA, she remembers the feeling of satisfaction from defying her father during these missed middle school years where she would sneak out with friends to visit the museum she so much enjoyed during her sixth grade field trip. Through her act of defiance, she was working to maintain her membership in that community of learners that she already so strongly identified with and create opportunities to pursue her passion and dreams, even if they were short-lived. Amanda’s disobedience to her father, but more importantly, to a patriarchal society rightly qualifies her actions as an early performance of her developing political agency.

Other ALIANZA women had a comparable reaction when similar experiences occurred to them. In fact, with the exception of Selina, Vanessa and Dolores, all the other women found themselves challenged to continue their education, at one point or another, because of gendered norms and ideologies that attempted to cut their schooling short. For those where these ideologies succeeded, such as in the case of Amanda, they identified and/or created alternative
spaces, often with the help of a family member, friend or neighbor, to maintain a sense of belonging and connectedness to those classroom practices they had become so fond of. For Amanda, it was her childhood friend that helped her sneak out and visit the museum she loved. For Felicia, it was the owner of a local hair salon in her hometown where she worked since the age of seven sweeping freshly cut hair off the floor for tips. Although she started there part-time, her father’s decision to pull her out of school in the eighth grade to help the family economically transitioned her to full-time work by the time she was twelve. But for Felicia, the peluquería was a vital place of learning where she continued to practice her reading skills and maintain her identity as a learner. During our focus group she shared,

Cuando mi papá me dijo que ya no podía estudiar, me puse triste. Me encantaban las clases de historia y pues, ni modo, tenía que trabajar aunque a mis hermanos sí les permitía que siguiieran en la escuela. En ese tiempo, yo trabajaba para una peluquería barriendo el pelo cortado por unas cuantas propinas. La dueña al ver que me sacaron de la escuela, se puso a comprar más revistas y material para los clientes. Antes que lo pusiera para el uso de ellos, me daba a mí las revistas y los periódicos para que yo los leyera. A veces, hasta se sentaba conmigo y me ayudaba a leer. Y a través de su ayuda, yo me conscientizé de lo que estaba pasando en el mundo. Si me papá se hubiera enterado de lo que estaba haciendo la dueña conmigo se hubiera enojado. Pero fue en esa peluquería que me convertí en buen lector y se me abrieron los ojos al mundo.

With the help of the salon’s owner, which Felicia later identified as her first political ally, Felicia was able to continue growing as a learner, despite no longer being enrolled in formal schooling. Although her father had allowed her to work, he was unaware of the many ways the salon was

\[108\] Spanish word for “hair salon”

\[109\] Translated to English: When my father told me that I could no longer go to school, I was sad. I loved my history classes but, oh well, I had to work even though my brothers were allowed to continue going to school. In those days, I worked for a salon sweeping hair for a few tips. When the owner saw that I had been taken out of school, she bought more magazines and reading material for her clients. Before putting them out in the salon for her clients, she would give me the magazines and newspapers so that I could read them. Sometimes, she would even sit with me and help me read. As a result of her help, I learned about what was happening in the world around me. If my father had found out what the owner was doing with me he would have gotten angry. But it was in that salon that I became a good reader and my eyes opened up to the world.
being utilized by his daughter. Felicia deeply understood that her father’s denial of her schooling was more than economic necessity, it was also an attempt to keep her “in her place,” a direct enactment of gendered norms that destined Felicia for domestic life. Thus, the salon became a form of counter-space that disrupted the patriarchal privilege and entitlement of men to spaces of learning and provided Felicia a physical, epistemological, social, and academic space (Yosso & Benavides Lopez, 2010) from which to continue her education and resist these unjust ideologies. The peluquería facilitated Felicia’s development as a reader as it facilitated her development as a political actor because her decision to continue growing as a learner was a direct act of resistance to societal norms for women.

As Felicia shared her story with the group during the focus group, other women found it hard to resist chiming in to share their own examples of counter-spaces for maintaining and nurturing their identities as learners. Caridad talked about similar experiences at the panadería110 around the block from her home, Yesenia shared how she learned about math and science in her neighbor’s garden, and Olga discussed learning opportunities on trips helping her older sisters clean homes in the wealthier neighborhoods outside her town. Much of the learning that occurred in these spaces went unbeknownst to their parents and although they laughed recalling the travesuras111 they engaged in to make sure this learning happened at any cost, most of the women remembered feeling proud that they did what they could to resist being denied an education. Whether they were successful or not in their attempts, the subversive quality of their actions was a clear example of a developing sense of political agency.

Connected to these spaces was the identification of critical individuals who helped ALIANZA women continue to develop as intellectuals and, thus, as political actors. Like the

110 Spanish word for “bakery”

111 Spanish word for “mischief”
salon owner in Felicia’s story, several of the other women had their own early political allies that helped them access learning opportunities and experiment with educational possibilities once schooling had been denied. Although a few identified a neighbor or friend in this role, most identified a family member, particularly an older sibling, but especially their own mother. Olga recalls,

Mi madre buscó la forma de meterme en clases que ofrecía la iglesia mientras ella trabajaba. Le echaba mentiras a mi papá diciéndole que yo le estaba ayudando a trabajar cuando en verdad yo seguía mis estudios. Aunque no llegue muy lejos en la escuela si no fuera por mi madre no hubiera alcanzado lo que alcancé\(^\text{112}\).

As Olga remembered the efforts of her mother, she made it a point to connect her current efforts and struggles for her own children to obtain a quality education to those that her mother made for her when she was young. As such, Olga’s mother became a role model for when she became a politically active mother herself through ALIANZA. Thus, Olga’s mother not only supported a developing agency in Olga but also had a direct influence on the type of political agency she would engage in later in life, by being a model of an engaged parent who fought for her daughter’s education. Similarly, Elena shared the role her mother played in helping her pursue her dream of teaching one day. In our interview together, she remembered, “en una ocasión mi mama me dijo, ‘Vero, me encontré con un maestro de la universidad y lo invité a la casa para comer. Así puedes hablar con él y ver si te puede ayudar a conseguir lo que necesitas para ser maestra.’\(^\text{113}\)” In her own way, Elena’s mother was using what she had at her disposal to help her daughter continue her studies and fulfill her goals in life. By enacting her own agency to

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\(^{112}\) My mother found a way to enroll me in classes that the church offered while she worked. She lied to my father telling him that I was helping her work when in reality I was continuing my studies. Even though I didn’t go very far in school, if it wasn’t for my mother I wouldn’t have gone as far as I did.

\(^{113}\) Translated to English: On one occasion, my mother told me, ‘Vero, I ran into a university teacher and I invited him to the house to eat. That way you can talk to him and see if he can help you obtain what you need to become a teacher.’
facilitate her daughter’s dream, she was showing Elena that what a mother does to make possible what society attempts to deny is always a political act, no matter how small that effort is. Thus, her mother became an important catalyst, then and today, for developing her sense of political agency.

In conclusion, the examples above make powerfully evident how important early schooling, whether it occurred in formal or informal spaces, was to the development of political agency among ALIANZA parents. Especially formative in these spaces were teachers and other political allies, who nurtured their identity as learners, facilitated opportunities for growth as political actors, and supported their efforts to disrupt gendered norms that were operating to define a threshold to their hope. Taken as a whole, the stories of these courageous parents demonstrate the important relationship between hope, belonging, and agency, an understanding that they universally shared began or had its roots early in life. It was here that all of them understood how education rendered certain things possible in life, and thus became the platform through which they would later fight for the same right for their own children. In fact, these memories of early schooling were the most often recalled when they talked about the importance of motherhood as political identity, a concept I explore further in a later section in this chapter.

In closing, it’s important to note that the examples I shared in this section aren’t meant for the reader to conclude that the early schooling experiences of ALIANZA parents were always ideal or transformative. Often in the same breathe that the parents would share how meaningful a teacher’s advice was for encouraging their identity as a learner, they would also talk about how debilitating certain disciplinary practices were to their self-esteem. Schooling is, arguably, a contradictory space for both its ability to liberate and oppress students simultaneously. Granted, these examples easily lend themselves to future inquiry about the early pedagogical practices
experienced by ALIANZA parents to uncover their potential for transforming other classroom spaces. But my purpose here was to expose those particular practices and moments that were particularly formative for the parents’ developing sense of political agency during this time in their lives.

SECOND JUNCTURE: Migrating to *El Norte*

Of all the life history junctures explored in this chapter, the most painful to recall for ALIANZA parents, and the most difficult for me to listen and write about, was the moment they left their home countries and migrated to the United States, which most of them commonly referred to as *el norte*. Figure 10 builds on the model introduced in the previous section, adding this experience of migration as a second critical juncture in the parents’ development of political agency.
But like the other formative moment detailed in the previous section, the profoundly transformative nature of crossing the border into the U.S. merits the characterization of this experience as one of the most empowering in their lives, particularly as it relates to their identity as political actors. Thus, this section explores the migration experiences of ALIANZA parents as a critical trigger of political agency. Although the motives ALIANZA parents had for leaving their home countries are important to this discussion, our collective analysis revealed that the actual process of migrating and arriving to the U.S. were most influential during this time in their development of political agency. Thus, my attention in this section is given mainly to this process while acknowledging that these motives were a critical starting point, where agency was enacted to render possible the act of migration in the first place.

Though most of our conversations regarding migration happened in interviews or focus groups, it seems fitting to return to the vignette that opens this chapter. While I wasn’t fully aware of it then, the event it captures symbolizes the importance of the parents’ migration experience as a critical juncture in a developing sense of self as a political actor. What made the moment so telling was how it transitioned from an anxiety-filled van of passengers to a seemingly celebratory recalling of memories crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. The change in mood was so abrupt right at the moment we crossed the agricultural checkpoint coming back home to California, that I couldn’t help but wonder what that crossing meant to the courageous parents who made the trip. Granted, I, and the other travelers, understood the risk for all of us in the van but particularly for the undocumented parents traveling with us, whose apprehension was warranted for fear that we might get stopped and questioned by authorities operating under current anti-immigrant policies and sentiment. One of the youth traveling with us rightly noted as we commenced our trip, “considering society is doing everything it can to get rid of Mexicans,
don’t you think that a van full of brown people with a ton of luggage looks just a little bit suspicious.” As myself and the other parents tried to nervously laugh off the comment by this highly perceptive teen, her words precisely embodied the reason for the shared sense of heightened tension we all felt. So it’s no surprise that we all breathed a sigh of relief and had every reason to celebrate once we crossed that checkpoint and were just hours from ending our amazing journey.

But beyond the laughter and relief we all enjoyed to differing degrees once we successfully crossed, there was a deeper sentiment, a more profound sense of rootedness, that was universally felt in that van and explains why that checkpoint was so significant for the parents and, for our purposes here, their developing sense of agency. I return to that moment when I looked at the mothers through the rear view mirror from the driver’s seat right before crossing. Their expressions of fear and awareness were unlike any I had seen from them in the many years since our first meeting. The anxious glances back-and-forth, the uncontrollable foot tappings, the nervous handling of rosaries for those that had them, and the stiff upright postures that made everyone appear at least half a foot taller than their actual height, were clearly evident that something had been triggered in each of them. Once the officer motioned us through and we were safely out of earshot, the joyous singing and storytelling about migration experiences erupted, embracing us with a sense of accomplishment and happiness that can only fully be understood by those of us who experienced it in that van. As I reflected on that moment for the remainder of our drive home and, later, with ALIANZA parents during a group meeting, it became apparent that what was triggered at that checkpoint were precisely the deeply rooted memories, both physiological and psychological, of migrating to the U.S.
Once triggered, the immediacy of those memories crossing the U.S.-Mexico border manifested in two ways: 1) the corporal changes in the parents as we approached the officer, reflecting an almost instinctive response of their bodies to what that agricultural checkpoint signified within the repertoire of their migration experiences and, 2) the instant and spontaneous sharing of migration stories right after we crossed, a clear indication that these memories were, indeed, painfully near. In reference to the former point, the bodily changes I witnessed when I looked through that rear view mirror brought to life the experiences each of the parents shared with me several months prior when I asked them to recount their stories migrating to the U.S. during our interviews. While each journey was unique, those that crossed without authorized paperwork all shared a theme of an *embodied* experience, one that foregrounds the physicality of that moment and remembers all too well just how life defying crossing the U.S-Mexico border was. One of the first narratives that stood out was from an ALIANZA mother\textsuperscript{114} who spent our entire first interview meticulously detailing every moment of her journey to the U.S., particularly the treacherous and dangerous moments of crossing the border as an undocumented migrant woman. It felt as if the events had occurred the day before and not fifteen years prior to our interview. At one point in our conversation when I asked about how those experiences of migrating to the U.S. affect her today, she responded:

\textit{Como te platiqué, estaba perdida dos días sin agua y sin comida. Llegó un momento que dije, ‘o luchas o te mueres.’ Me acuerdo bien después que crucé el río, el dolor en mis piernas. Estaban llenas de cortadas de las ramas de árbol y las espinas del cacto. Mira, todavía tengo las cicatrices. Pero las ganas de vivir fueron más fuertes. De repente escucho que alguien muy lejano gritaba, ‘cuidado, viene la migra!’ Me puse a correr y a correr. Creo que corri más de treinta minutos sin parar. No sé de donde saqué tanta fuerzas Vero pero el deseo tan grande por vivir y para ayudar a mi familia...}

\textsuperscript{114} I remind the reader that I have taken a silent evidentiary position when discussing data that highlights or makes reference to the undocumented status of any of the parents in this study. This means, but is not limited to, refusing to use any type of identifier, including pseudonyms, when providing quotes that make reference to crossing the U.S.-Mexico border without proper documents as deemed by U.S. immigration laws.
fue más grande que mi propio ser. Y es lo que me sigue impulsando. La lucha que hoy hago con [ALIANZA] es la misma lucha que cargaba sobre mi cuerpo cuando crucé la frontera – para un mejor futuro no solo para mí pero también para mis seres queridos, que ahora incluye todos los niños del distrito escolar. La experiencia cuando crucé sigue siendo como una fuente de fuerza, de haberme visto con la muerte y haberla retado. Esa lucha para sobrevivir, en un sentir, todavía sigue.  

As this ALIANZA member narrated this experience, I couldn’t help but notice how she kept touching and rubbing the scars she gained from it in an almost instinctual fashion. Whether it was her intent to soothe the remnants of any bodily pain she still felt or her own way of exposing and making evident the visible markers of that journey, it was clear that recalling these memories was physical just as much as it was verbal. Maybe, in part, she rubbed her scars to remind herself that she truly is human, even though getting through that experience required extraordinary strength, a type of “sixth sense of survival” (Espinoza-Herold, 2007) that, I argue, can only be acquired by having crossed the border in this way. But her struggle to leave the borderlands continues, as she made plainly evident. By connecting the experience of crossing the border to her efforts with ALIANZA today, she identifies her current efforts and struggles as a Latina immigrant parent leader as historically rooted in this event. For her, the goal remains the same: to address unjust obstacles that have relegated her to a marginal place in society, from where she continues to fight, in her words, for a better future. And while those dreams have become extended to include other people’s children as part of her circle of “loved ones, “ and the tactics may have changed, the linking of these experiences demonstrates just how powerful a

115 Translated to English: Like I told you, I was lost for two days without food and water. There came a moment when I said, ‘either you fight or you die.’ I remember well the pain in my legs after I crossed the river. They were full of cuts from tree branches and cactus thorns. Look, I still have the scars. But my desire to live was stronger. All of a sudden I hear a distance voice scream, ‘watch out, the border patrol is coming!’ I started running and running. I think I ran for more than thirty minutes without stopping. I have no idea where I got the strength Vero but the desire to live and to help my family were greater than my being. And it is what keeps me going today. My struggle I embrace alongside [ALIANZA] is the same struggle I carried on my shoulders when I crossed the border – for a better future not only for me but for all my loved ones, that today includes all the children in the school district. The experience when I crossed continues to be a fountain of strength, of having seen death in the face and overcome it. That struggle for survival, in a sense, still continues today.
trigger migrating to the U.S. was to this mother’s development of political agency, so much so, it produced a mechanical response to brush over her scars as a reminder of its lasting effects, both good and bad.

For another ALIANZA mother, the experience crossing the border was the most defining moment for her current understanding and enactment of hope. Like the previous example, sharing this moment took a considerable amount of time, consuming more than two hours of our first interview together and a good portion of the second, where she added important details of her journey to el norte that she inadvertently left out the first time. But before making those additions, she noted that reliving her border-crossing was like riding a bike: “a tu cuerpo jamás se le olvida lo que viviste al cruzar. Aunque tu mente ya no acuerda cada detallito, a tu cuerpo nunca se le olvida. Es igual cuando aprendemos a manejar una bicicleta. Pueden pasar años, pero cuando te vuelves a montar es casi inconsciente como uno se recuerda cómo conducirla.”

Her comparison stresses the extent to which a migration experience like hers is fundamentally embodied, similar to the other mother highlighted previously, where the memories of that event were physically stored and the flesh, thus, becomes the source of narrative when recalling what happened. She also mentioned that since she made the treacherous crossing twenty years prior to our interview, she has never retold the moment-to-moment encounters of that experience until my request. But like riding a bike, she argued, your body immediately remembers what occurred and what you learned from it, even if at first the story may lack a bit of cohesiveness, structure, and specificity.

After she prefaced her reasons for adding to her migration story, what struck me most was the connection she made between her embodied memories and how they challenged her

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116 Translated to English: your body never forgets what you lived when you crossed. Even though your mind may not remember every little detail, your body never forgets. It’s like when you learned to ride a bike. Year can go by, but when you get back on it, it’s almost unconscious how one’s body remembers how to ride it.
previously understood notion of a threshold of hope. In a similar fashion to the examples
provided in the previous section of this chapter, this mother knew first hand what it meant to
have gendered norms weigh heavily against her aspirations to become a doctor one day. She had
grown up with a socialized understanding that hope, at least for her, had an upper limit. But
when she made the decision to leave for the United States against the will of her family, she
began to extend the scope of that term with its most radical expansion occurring during the actual
migration and triumph of reaching *el otro lado*117. During our interview, she recalled,

> Cuando me sacaron de la escuela, me sentí apachurrada. Deje de soñar. Pero salir al norte fue un momento de rebeldía, y pues, bueno, también de liberación. Quise irme y estuve dispuesta a arriesgar mi vida. Pero el momento que retas la muerte y llegas al otro lado, te sientes fortalecida aunque tu cuerpo está totalmente rendido. En mi misma carne encontré otro sentido de lo que es la esperanza. Es difícil ponerlo en palabras. Para mí, aprendí en ese desierto que la esperanza es algo que experimentas al ver tu triunfo al lograr cruzar la frontera. Sientes que no hay nada que no puedas hacer. Por eso ahora cuando me siento que me quieren volver a apachurrar en mi lucha como madre, me acuerdo del sacrificio que hice y lo que logre al cruzar. Es lo que me hace sentirme fuerte118.

Here, this ALIANZA mother suggests that her sense of hope was powerfully transformed during
migration, specifically when she crossed and successfully made it to the other side. It was in
realizing what she had accomplished though the life-defying act of crossing through the desert
that she gained a new perspective on her agency, both the hope that informed it and its ability to
carry her through when she thought survival wasn’t necessarily secured. Experiencing first-hand
the sacrifice, will, and triumph of border crossing removed any upper limit she previously held

117 Translated to English: the other side (this refers to the United States)

118 Translated to English: When they took me out of school, I felt squashed. I stopped dreaming. But leaving to the U.S. was a moment of rebellion, and, well, liberation too. I wanted to leave and I was willing to risk my life. But the moment you challenge death and get to the other side, you feel strengthened even through your body is totally vanquished. In my own flesh I found another sense of hope. It’s difficult to put it in words. For me, I learned in that desert that hope is something you experiment when you see yourself triumph at crossing the border. You feel that there isn’t anything you can’t do. That’s why now when I feel that others are trying to squash me again in my fight as a mother, I remember the sacrifice I made and what I accomplished when I crossed. It is what makes me feel strong.
about her definition of hope and would continue to be the experience she returned to in an effort to hold on to that understanding especially as new obstacles and challenges in the U.S. attempted to reinstate a threshold for the second time. She made this point clear when she, like other mother above, linked her experience of migration, particularly what it afforded by way of extending her boundaries of hope, to her efforts today as a mother. Alluding to her work with ALIANZA, she directly connected her political agency of challenging unjust practices that attempt to marginalize or disregard her efforts as an immigrant mother to the agency she enacted to cross the border, emphasizing that it was the same hope that informed both. And it is from this source of hope that she now finds the strength to continue *luchando*\(^{119}\) for her child and other people’s children. Thus, her political agency today is profoundly *rooted* in her experience of migration, which triggered an extended and *embodied* awareness of hope from which her actions as a political actor are rendered possible.

To better appreciate this idea of an embodied understanding of agency and hope that emerged from the migration experience of the two mothers I highlight above, I turn to the work of Cindy Cruz (2006) who powerfully articulates an *epistemology of the brown body*. While much of her work emerges from personal experience as a queer, Chicana scholar, the extension of her work to the experiences of migrant women goes without saying. Drawing from the notion of *mestizaje*\(^{120}\), primarily from the work of Dolores Anzaldua (1987, 1990) and other Chicana feminist scholars who have extended Anzaldua’s insights (Moraga, 1983; Sandoval, 1995), Cruz (2006) suggests that the, “...production of knowledge begins in the bodies of our mothers and grandmothers, in the acknowledgement of the critical practice of women of color before us. The

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\(^{119}\) Spanish word for “fighting”

\(^{120}\) Borrowing from the work of Anzaldúa (1987), Cruz (2006) argue that mestizaje, “recognizes the multiple perspective of truth and ways of knowing that acknowledge the racialized and gendered histories of conquest and colonization of indigenous people” (p. 62).
most profound and liberating politics come from the interrogations of our own social locations, a narrative that works outward from our specific corporealities” (p. 61). Here Cruz (2006) argues for the necessity of seeing the brown body as an important site of knowledge production. Such an argument powerfully underscores the experiences of the mothers above, who, in their own words, articulated the way in which migration became inscribed into their bodies and how their flesh became the source of their narrative about that experience and the source from where they draw strength as political actors because of that experience.

Although Cruz (2006) primarily refers to efforts of Chicana scholars who theorize from the flesh, I apply Cruz’ arguments directly to the narratives of the ALIANZA mothers examined above. Cruz (2006) contends, “each component of the brown body has its own story to tell . . . and its deconstruction is a necessary process of reclaiming and reimagining the histories and forms of agencies of women who are unrepresented and unheard” (p. 66). These mothers made it clear that their bodies were relaying the stories of their border crossing, demonstrating through its scars and sacrifice one of the most powerful enactments of agency. Collectively, we theorized the impact of these embodied experiences on political agency later in life, in an effort to reclaim and reimage, in the words of Cruz (2006), their rightful place as migrant political actors in U.S. society. As a witness to their stories, I realized just how, “. . . the brown body becomes agent, witness, and provocateur. . . . a place scarred by history and struggle, yet engaged in building new cultures and new ways of being” (Cruz, 2006, p.62-63). Thus, the migration stories of these ALIANZA parents aren’t simply ones of pain and sacrifice but also testimonies of triumph, hope, and possibility, and thus, represent the roots of political agency. Although Cruz would probably agree that an epistemology of the brown body inherently includes the knowledge production and modes of agency that stem from the bodies of Latina
migrant social agents, I believe it important to make one small addition to her original concept. What the mothers demonstrate above, and our collective analysis of those narratives alludes to, is an epistemology of the *migrant* brown body that helps explain how ALIANZA’s undocumented members come to see their role as political agents of change, what informs it, namely their migration experiences, and what it means in relationship to U.S. society.

But to fully grasp and complicate this idea of an epistemology of the migrant brown body, and how it influences political agency, an exploration of the role gender in the border crossing of ALIANZA mothers is needed. Cruz (2006) theorized from a uniquely Chicana feminist standpoint and the fact that the stories of undocumented migration shared in this study were those of women, over two-thirds of which were already mothers when the decision was made to journey to *el norte*, undoubtedly requires a gendered analysis. One mother’s story stands out in particular as emblematic of what undocumented ALIANZA members experienced crossing the border *as mothers*. Holding back tears during our interview, she remembered,

> Mandamos a mis hijas primero. La grande tenía casi seis años y mi chiquita solo diez meses. Pudieron cruzar con las actas de nacimientos de las hijas de mi hermano. El día que cruzaron yo hice el intento de pasar por la noche. Era la única mujer entre un grupo de hombres y pues claro que me dio miedo. Pero mi único enfoque era mis hijas. Me lastimé mucho al cruzar pero el dolor que más acuerdo eran el de mis senos porque todavía le estaba dando pecho a mi hija. Ya habían pasado varias horas de la última vez que le di de comer y pues a una madre le duelo mucho cuando pasa tanto tiempo. Pero el dolor aun era más fuerte porque necesitaba ver a mis hijas. No sabía al cruzar si ellas llegaron bien. Eran mi motivación y mi urgencia por llegar. Cuando finalmente cruzamos y vía a mi hermano abrazando a mi chiquita sentí un alivio que solo una madre puede sentir.¹²¹

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¹²¹ Translated to English: We sent my daughters first. The oldest was almost six years old and my little one was only ten months. They were able to cross using the birth certificates of my brother’s daughters. The day they crossed I attempted to cross at night. I was the only woman in the group of men and, well, of course I was scared. But my only focus was my daughters. I was very hurt when I crossed but the pain that I remember the most was the one I felt in my breasts because I was still breastfeeding my daughter. Several hours had passed since the last time I had fed her and for a mother it hurts when so much time passes. But the pain I feel was even greater because I needed to see my daughters. I didn’t know when I crossed whether they had gotten there ok. They were my motivation and my urgency to get to the other side. When I finally crossed and I saw my brother holding my youngest, I felt a relief that only a mother could feel.
Once again, this mother, like the others highlighted in this section, foregrounds the corporeal element of her experience crossing the border. Though she remembered being injured, she centered on the physical and emotional pain of being separated from her daughters, in particular what it meant to be a nursing mother when she migrated. Unable to breastfeed for almost twenty-four hours, the grueling pain she experienced as a result was profoundly gendered and unique to being a mother. It directly shaped her agency in that moment and became her central drive to cross the border and reunite with her child. Later in our conversation, she mentioned that every now and then she would sense the same pain, although not to the same degree, when she felt challenged to become more politically active in local educational reform. Arguing it was most likely the psychological aftermath of the trauma she experienced crossing the border, she sees her pain today as a reminder of the urgency of her actions and the necessity to overcome challenges as a parent leader. To make this point she added, “igual como cuando crucé la frontera, no hay vuelta atrás. Tengo que vencer los obstáculos porque al final están los niños de este distrito igual como estaban mis niñas en los brazos de mi hermano.122” In other words, the same embodied urgency that she felt as a migrant mother when she crossed the border is the same one that gives haste to her efforts as a political actor today. Thus, to understand how her political agency is rooted in her migration experience, the role of gender can’t be ignored.

Although several of the other undocumented ALIANZA members didn’t cross while nursing a child, the same sense of embodied urgency as migrant mothers was present in their border-crossing stories. One mother, for example, recalled the pain she felt from the blisters that had developed on her feet from walking so many hours without rest. But the moment she felt the

122 Translated to English: in the same manner of when I crossed the border, there is no turning back. I have to overcome obstacles because at the end are the children of this district in the same way by daughters were in my brother’s arms.
pain was unbearable, she would pull out a small picture she had of her son and immediately felt as if she was being gingerly carried across the rocks and treacherous terrain. Another mother described what it felt to be three months pregnant when she crossed, sharing, “cargaba en mi vientre la mas grande razón por llegar a mi destino. Mi hijo nunca era una carga en esos momentos. Al contrario era la fuerza que necesitaba para poder cruzar. Y por cuidarlo a él y asegurar que nada me pasaba, hice la cruzada con más prisa.” For this mother, the very child she carried within her fueled her drive to cross in ways that underscores how intimately tied her identity as a migrant mother is to her sense of agency, and the embodied urgency, in a literal sense, that informed it. And still another mother described how her sister, who had left to the U.S. about two years before she crossed, needed her help as she was about to become a mother for the first time. The necessity to help her sister, as a mother, was just as urgent and driving in her efforts to cross the U.S.-Mexico border as the other examples of mothers provided here.

For these and other ALIANZA members that crossed as mothers, their maternal identity was foregrounded as a source of support and strength as they migrated across the border. As another undocumented ALIANZA mother painfully described, her identity as a mother what she relied on as she confronted the possibility during her border-crossing of never being able to return home to Mexico and the unknown reality of whether or not she would be accepted as part U.S. society. She recalled:

Cuando estas cruzando te pones a pensar que a la mejor ya no volverás a regresar a tu tierra natal y que solo te quedan los recuerdos de los rostros de tus familiares, de tus papás, tus hermanos. Y luego te pones a reflexionar si verdaderamente vas a encontrar un hogar, pero un hogar auténtico en los Estados Unidos. Ahora con diez años de estar aquí, puedo decir con seguridad que los obstáculos son grandes para que te acepten simplemente como ser humano, y mucho menos como ciudadano. Pero en los momentos

123 Translated to English: I carried in my womb the greatest reason for reaching my destination. Mi hijo was never a burden in those moments. On the contrary, he was the strength I needed to cross. And in an effort to care for him and ensure that nothing would happen to me, I made haste in my crossing.
cruzando la frontera lo único en que te pones a pensar son tus hijos. Ellos son tu motivación y son lo único con que te identificas. Ser madre es donde te ubicas, donde te agarras cuando enfrentas la realidad que ya no eres de allá pero tampoco eres de acá.\footnote{Translated to English: When you’re crossing, you begin to think about the possibility of never being about to see your home country and that all you have left are the memories of the faces of your loved ones, your parents, your brothers. And then you begin to reflect if truly you will find an authentic home in the United States. After being here ten years, I can tell you with confidence that the obstacles are great in having others simple see you as a human being, and much less as a citizen. But in the moments you are crossing the border the only thing you can think about are your children. They are your motivation and they only thing you can identify with. Being a mother is how you orient yourself, what you grab onto when you confront the reality that you neither from here nor from there.}

For this mother, her sense of belonging was disrupted the moment she embarked on her journey to the U.S. During, and in the months following her experience of migration, it was her identity as a mother, renewed and strengthened during her treacherous two-week passage to \emph{el norte}, that defined her hope and through which she would later come to enact a political agency in ALIANZA. Forced by migration to reclaim a place a belonging, she found her figurative home in her role as mother, which in a separate interview she identified as permanently being tied to the desert she crossed to reach the U.S. She argues that for her she can’t separate the two, noting that giving birth entered her into motherhood but migrating, and all the sacrifices it entails, made her worthy of such a title. She highlights, “Cuando decidí enfrentarme a la muerte por mis hijos, es cuando yo verdaderamente me hice madre.”\footnote{Translated to English: When I decided I willing to die for my children is when I truly became a mother.}

Taken as a whole, the stories of ALIANZA’s undocumented migrant mothers demonstrate the mediating role of gender in shaping their migration experiences and what it took to successful navigate this formative moment in their development of political agency. Without a gendered lens in exploring this critical juncture, I argue, it’s impossible to fully capture how it furthered ALIANZA members’ identities as agents of change. Though there was variance in the range and degree to which gender played a role in each of mother’s stories, it was, nonetheless,
central to understanding how migration was simultaneously one of the most traumatic and transformative moments of their lives. Moreover, it’s embodied quality, as I articulate using Cruz’ (2006) notion of an epistemology of the brown body, is one that is made possible through and becomes inscribed on the bodies of the migrant women and mothers in the examples I shared above. Thus, the development of political agency for ALIANZA parents takes a decisively gendered, and arguably, feminist character during this formative period.

In closing, I return once again to the vignette that opens this chapter. As I mentioned at the start of this section, I was struck by the joyous outpouring of migration stories once we crossed the agricultural checkpoint coming back from New Orleans. The checkpoint had clearly triggered the passengers’ memories of migrating to the U.S. But why the laughter attached to their stories? How was it possible to provide such cheerful renditions of an event that nearly took the lives of many of those who attempted such a border crossing? I was baffled at first but as the stories took shape and fed off one another in what remained of our drive home, it started to make sense. Without disregarding the painful and life-defying quality of that journey or what was lost as a result, the narratives honored the determination of the human spirit, a restored and extended sense of hope, and the pride in realizing that its narrators are capable of so much more than they expected of themselves and that others expected of them. By framing their stories in this way at precisely the moment we returned from what was perhaps one of the most important milestones in ALIANZA’s collective enactment of political agency, it was easy to see just how powerful a trigger migration was in their individual development as agents of change. Celebrating its transformative nature, thus, seemed a perfectly fitting thing to do.
THIRD JUNCTURE: Motherhood as Political Identity

The final life history juncture, and perhaps the most significant for developing the type of political agency most connected to the mission of ALIANZA, is when each of its members engaged with public schools as a parent for the first time. Here, I’m specifically referring to interactions with school agents, such as teachers, counselors, administrators, or office staff. Figure 11 adds this final juncture to the visual model that has been building in the last two sections to represent the development of political agency along the parents’ life trajectories.

Figure 11

Figure 12. Triggers of Political Agency Model for ALIANZA Parents, Part 3. Motherhood as Political Identity as Third Juncture

While this section discusses the last set of major findings for this chapter, it is necessary to note that I’m in no way arguing that it serves as the final influential moment in the development of each parent as a political actor. Although the three junctures explored here were identified as especially formative for their value in containing experiences that functioned as
historical *triggers* of agency, it’s important to emphasize that the political identities of ALIANZA members are continuously being formed, challenged, and extended. Also noteworthy is the fact that the life journeys of each of the parents were filled with numerous formative moments, varying in degree and extent to which they influenced their ability to see themselves as agents of social change. The three that made it into this chapter were collectively identified as those critical roots *prior* to ALIANZA that were overwhelmingly shared among the parents as uniquely and powerfully transformative when it came to informing their individual development as political actors. The continued development of their political identities and the collective enactment of their agency through ALIANZA is the focus of the next chapter. As a segue to this next set of findings, this section explores the early encounters of ALIANZA members with their child(ren)’s schools that was overwhelmingly identified as a critical juncture directly informing what would become their collective political identity as *madres en lucha*\(^1\).\(^2\)

Before introducing and discussing these encounters as triggers of agency, it’s necessary to first understand why ALIANZA collectively defines itself as an organization of *madres*,\(^3\) underscoring the importance of motherhood as political identity, even though one of its members, Justo, is a father. From an outsider perspective, adopting an identity that centers mothers can seem inaccurate and even contradictory, especially when one considers the group’s recruitment efforts to bring in fathers and Justo’s role as one of the founders and key organizers in ALIANZA. One could even argue that it sends the wrong message and may even serve to exclude fathers at a time when the voice and participation of *all parents* is urgently needed in school politics and decision-making.

\(^1\)(Translated to English: Mothers in struggle)

\(^2\)(Spanish word for “mothers”)

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But judging ALIANZA’s definition of itself as a movement of immigrant mothers from a mainstream or majoritarian perspective that narrowly characterizes who is and who isn’t a mother, can easily misinterpret the group’s purpose and mission and misses the political reasons for why ALIANZA classifies its work the way it does. At first, I admit, I did think it was strange when I joined the group as a collaborator to their grassroots projects and Justo would introduce himself and the group at meetings or events as an organization of mothers fighting for educational equity and social change. In my mind, I had come to the conclusion that Justo was simply trying to acknowledge that ALIANZA, and possibly other groups similar to it, were primarily made up of mothers and not fathers. Maybe his status as the only father in the group didn’t justify giving ALIANZA an all-inclusive descriptor as a group of women and men. Every now and then, he and the other mothers would use the term “parent,” but these moments were, at best, infrequent. Over time I had come to simply accept the gendered framing ALIANZA’s members utilized to describe the group, rarely questioning and exploring further the reasons why. I was at peace believing that ALIANZA had adopted a political identity around motherhood because the majority of its members were, indeed, mothers.

It wasn’t until ALIANZA received a national award for its efforts that I began to think more deeply about why the group had made the strategic decision to frame itself in this way. It was the first time the group had received an award of national prestige and several of its members felt the need to meet and plan how they would accept the award and what they would convey about ALIANZA in their acceptance speech. Like every major decision or political move ALIANZA has made since its inception, all members were consulted and a convening was organized to determine a strategy for framing their work to a national audience of educational researchers, scholars, and activists. During the meeting, Justo stressed the importance of
speaking back to the negative framing of immigrant mothers in mainstream media, particularly to the right-winged, racist narratives of Latina/o immigrant women being the propagators of the “immigration problem” by deliberately scheming to have their children born on U.S. soil. As he’s done in the past during several of ALIANZA’s capacity building workshops, Justo was intentional in his message about mothers as the most important educators of society. Yet, as he spoke, he also challenged us to not limit our understanding of motherhood as only that defined by the biological or adoptive act of having children, and especially by the more restrictive requirements of the local school district to have a child enrolled in public school to be eligible to participate in educational decision-making.

Of course it made sense that we should complicate the term because, afterall, Justo was a father and discussing ways to make the group’s politics around motherhood much more inclusive was undoubtedly necessary, especially considering how important Justo was to the group. But as Justo underscored the importance of this challenge, I looked around and saw several of ALIANZA’s members nodding in agreement not just for Justo’s sake but for their own. My eyes were first drawn to Clara, who has no children of her own but considers herself an adoptive mother to her niece, Viviana. She seemed to nod the most aggressively at Justo’s comments. In several ways, Clara falls under the category of “other mothers,” a term Patricia Hills Collins (1990) uses to capture the shared mothering practices common in African American communities, where women support one another in the care of other people’s children. I would argue a similar practice occurs in Latina/o communities, and particularly among Latina/o immigrants, in both a local and transnational context as the separation of families becomes more and more common under U.S. anti-immigrant policies.
I then turned to Yolanda and was quickly reminded that she was in the U.S. alone, working for the past fifteen years to send money to her parents in Mexico, who were helping raise two sons in her absence. Under school district guidelines, she would not be eligible to sit on local school or district decision-making bodies because she does not have a child in one of the local public schools. As I continued to scan the room, I then realized that a substantial majority of those present at that meeting no longer had children in the K-12 public school system. They had been long time members of ALIANZA and their commitment to the group had extended long after their children had graduated from high school. And then there was me. For many years, I had refused the title of group “member” and opted instead to use the term “ally,” feeling more comfortable with the latter label because I have no children. But about a year after working with ALIANZA, I was sternly scolded at a group meeting when I used this term to describe my role in the group. Unanimously, it was made clear to me in no uncertain terms that it was one’s commitment to the group and not one’s definition as a parent by normative or traditional standards that determined whether or not one was a member of ALIANZA.

As we discussed and took up Justo’s challenge in preparation for the award ceremony, I began to realize the radical nature of what we were doing. We were, in essence, redefining the concept of motherhood as a political identity, as a movement of women and men, parents and non-parents, committed to challenging educational and civic institutions that marginalize the voices and actions of parents like those in ALIANZA, while, at the same time, recognizing the gendered nature of parent engagement in social reform and the important role of mothers toward this end. This (re)conceptualization of the term we arrived at honored mothers, and the relentless lucha that many of them embraced for their children and families in a patriarchal society, and simultaneously extended its reach to include others that fell outside its traditional definition but
stood in solidarity with and worked alongside these courageous women for the same goals, *para los mismos sueños*\(^{128}\).

As I witnessed the conversation that ensued that evening, I was particularly intrigued by how firm ALIANZA members were in refusing to adopt a narrow definition of motherhood, specifically as a political strategy practiced by the group. It reminded me of the work of Kathleen Coll (2010), who in her research on a grassroots organization comprised of Mexican and Central American immigrant women, discusses just how important it was for those in her study, to avoid, “. . . the maternalization of group politics and struggled against any effort to reduce their political status to that of mother-citizens” (p.74). The women in Coll’s study were particularly challenged in defining themselves to ensure that one of their members, a trans-gender mother, was included in their work. The reflective process they underwent to challenge traditional norms around motherhood as well as universalizing claims about Latina immigrants was not unlike what ALIANZA was doing in preparation for framing their work to a national audience. Like these mothers, ALIANZA member’s personal histories, collective lived experiences, and relationships with one another informed the “. . . complexity of their position as local mothers, long-distance mothers, sisters, daughters, and/or as paid care providers for the children of other working women . . . [that impacted] how they understood their position and rights in the United States” (Coll, 2010, p.74). At the end of the conversation that evening, it was clear that ALIANZA members were embracing the complexity of these roles, deciding to center them in their development of a political definition of motherhood, and by extension, the overall purpose and mission of their group. Having to deal with the daily struggles or *lucha* against institutional efforts that seek to render them silent or non-existent in school and civic decision-making spaces, ALIANZA members were well adapted and equipped, I argue, to

\(^{128}\) Translated to English: for the same dreams
(re)define concepts like motherhood in order to include the critically needed participation of members that would otherwise be left at the sidelines. The urgency and wholehearted nature with which ALIANZA took on this task was so powerfully indicative of how important it was to a collective enactment of political agency both then and for their future as a group.

But arriving at a place where ALIANZA could concretely articulate their political position around motherhood and challenge normative understandings of the term didn’t initiate with Justo’s challenge to think strategically about how the group would frame itself to a national audience. As witnessed by the outpouring of stories that night of moments when teachers, school staff, administrators, district officials, and even community members and other parents attempted to keep ALIANZA members out of decision-making spaces, it was clear that the journey leading to the group’s collective definition of motherhood as a political identity began way before many of them even joined ALIANZA. In fact, for many of the mothers, it started during their initial encounters with public schools as a parent. While the experience of these encounters was unique for each of them, their collective voice expressed a universal rage or coraje129 at being treated as an outsider, considered an incapable parent, or seen as simply clueless about the educational system or any institution for that matter. All ALIANZA members, without exception, attributed the negative perceptions of others toward them within school contexts, and the actions derived from such perceptions, to misguided and faulty beliefs about Latina/o immigrants generally, and Latina immigrant mothers specifically. Many of the stories shared that evening were stories I had already heard during our interviews in which the overwhelming majority of ALIANZA members repeatedly discussed these early experiences

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129 Spanish word for “rage”
with public schools as central to their development as madres en lucha\textsuperscript{130}. Thus, I argue that these first encounters functioned as triggers of political agency by motivating a search for support that led each of the mothers to ALIANZA and providing the first-hand accounts that would be referenced time and time again as the driving force behind why they consider their participation in ALIANZA so necessary.

One of the most powerful narratives came from Dolores who shared her story numerous times both with me and with the other mothers about her first interactions with the schools her children attended. In our interview together, she recalled,

\textit{Me sentí temerosa al principio. De por si tenía algo de miedo en no conocer este país. Así te hacen sentir y uno se va acostumbrando a vivir con ese miedo. Lo mismo pasaba en las escuelas. Entras y no te ayudan. Al contrario, te hacen a un lado y a veces te recuerdan que no eres de aquí, que no tienes derecho de molestar a la gente para preguntar o pedir ayuda. Muchos son racistas y especialmente con el padre inmigrante. No lo hacen directamente pero te lo hacen entender y uno lo siente. A veces es su mirada, la forma en como te ignoran, la forma en que te hablan para hacerte sentir tonta. Pero no te creas que me quedé callada. Fui e interrogué a la maestra. Aunque tenía miedo, primero están mis hijos y por nada me iba a quedar callada. Fui con la maestra de mi hijo y le pregunte como le iba a enseñar. No creo que esperaba que me preguntara sobre su estilo de enseñanza porque me preguntó porque yo era así, porque tenía tantas preguntas. Yo no sentí esa puerta abierta a los padres. Siento que no quieren que hagamos ciertas preguntas. Pero yo insistí y fue poco después que me encontré a Selina. Y gracias a Dios que la encontré. Fue [ALIANZA] que me ayudó con el miedo. Todas en el grupo habíamos pasado por algo similar y mutuamente nos ayudamos\textsuperscript{131}.}

\textsuperscript{130} Translated to English: mothers in struggle

\textsuperscript{131} I felt fearful at first. As it was, I was somewhat scared because I didn’t know this country. That is the way they make you feel and one becomes accustomed to living with fear. The same thing happens in the schools. You enter and no one helps you. On the contrary, they push you to the side and sometimes they remind you that you are not from here and that you have no right to bother people to ask a question or ask for help. Many are racist and especially against the immigrant. They don’t do it directly but it’s understood and we feel it. Sometimes it’s the way they look at you, they way they ignore you, they way they talk to you to make you feel dumb. But don’t think that I stayed quiet. I went and questioned the teacher. Even though I was afraid, my children come first and I wasn’t going to stay quiet for any reason. The first thing I did was go to my son’s teacher and ask what her plans were for teaching him. I don’t think that the teacher was expecting that I ask her about her teaching style because she asked me why I was this way, why I had so many questions. I did not feel that the door was open to parents. I feel they don’t want us to ask certain questions. But I insisted and soon after I found Selina. And thank God I found...
Dolores’s narrative was a common one in ALIANZA. Although the reasons for first engaging with administrators, school staff, or teachers varied, it was nearly unanimous that the central reason focused on addressing a problem. In Dolores’s case, when the performance on her daughter’s report card dropped significantly soon after she was transitioned from one teacher to another, Dolores mustered the courage to face her fears and get to the bottom of the reasons why.

Later in our conversation, I referred back to her fear of going to talk to the teacher face-to-face, especially having been a school counselor in her home country. She stressed,

. . . siendo inmigrante en este país ya esperas el mal trato, aunque una vocecita me decía que no fuera tan desconfiada, especialmente con las escuelas. Pero a veces allí es peor porque te llegan a lo que más quieres – tus hijos. Te hacen sentir allí que tú y tus hijos son una carga y que tu, como madre, eres la responsable por traerles otro problema. Nadie se quiere sentir así y basado a mis experiencias en este país, tenía medio que me volvieran a humillar. Pero porque son mis hijos, yo no me puedo quedar callada como en otras ocasiones. Que me traten mal a mí, OK, que me quiten mis esperanzas, bueno, que me hagan sentir que no pertenezco, lo tolero, pero jamás a mis hijos 132.

It was clear from Dolores’s introspective analysis that her prior experiences of being an immigrant in the U.S. had prepared her for that first encounter with Lizet’s teacher. Although she later went on to say that she knew of others that had positive first experiences with teachers and administrators at the public schools, she, unfortunately, wasn’t so lucky. Her encounters with U.S. society up to that moment had so dramatically impacted her social vision that she

her. It was [ALIANZA] that helped me with my fear. Everyone in the group had had a similar experience and we mutually helped each other.

132 Translated to English: being an immigrant in this country, you already expect to be treated poorly, even though I had a little voice telling me not to lack trust, especially with schools. But sometimes, it’s worse there because they attack what you love most – your children. There, they make you feel that you and your children are a burden, and that you, as a mother, are responsible for bringing them another problem. Nobody wants to feel that way and based on my experiences in this country, I was afraid they were going to humiliate me once again. But because these are my children, I couldn’t keep quiet like I did in other occasions. That they treat me bad, OK, that they take away my hopes, I get it, that they make me feel that I don’t belong, I tolerate it, but never with my children.
primarily saw the world through a highly skeptical lens that, understandably, engendered her fear and apprehension and mediated her expectations of encounters with school agents.

But unlike other critical junctures in her life that impacted her development of political agency, this one, triggered by the interaction with her daughter’s teacher, felt different. For Dolores, previous moments that shifted her sense of belonging and motivated her to act in ways to realize her hopes that others seemed set on denying, were driven by what she felt were more individualistic reasons. Although Dolores seemed cautious in our interview to avoid coming across as only concerned by selfish needs, she distinguished her early encounters with U.S. public schools as fomenting a deeper type of rage than prior experiences in her life. The threat of society’s denial of opportunity, according to her, was now being extended to her child, potentially limiting Lizet’s chances for the future. Dolores argued, as did all of the other ALIANZA members at one point or another in our interviews, that there is no deeper pain for a parent than one caused when you feel your child has been harmed or wronged. This emotion was clearly expressed in my interview with Olga, who shared the following early encounter with a member of the office staff at her son’s school,

Fui a la casa de una amiga porque necesitaba un consejo. Junior había sacado una mala calificación pero no sabía si le iba a afectar o no en su clase al final del semestre. Yo no conocía mucho de las escuelas en ese entonces. Pero mi amiga me dijo que yo tenía el derecho, como madre, de pedir el archivo de mi hijo. Ella me dijo que se llamaba el ‘CUM folder.’ El siguiente día fui a la oficina de la escuela y le pedí a la muchacha por tal folder de mi hijo. Me dio una mirada como queriéndome decir como sabía yo de tales archivos. Se levantó y le fue a pregunta a la señora encargada de la oficina. Aunque yo no la conocía, la señora me vio y asumió que no entendía ingles porque le dijo a la muchacha, en ingles, que me diera cualquier papel que al cabo yo no iba a saber la diferencia. En otras palabras diciéndome que yo era una estúpida y que me trataran como cual. Se me subió la sangre Vero pero no dije nada. Tenía a la chiquita conmigo pero pensé en un momento que iba a perder el control. Y para el colmo, ni bajó la voz la señora. Lo dijo para que todas la escucharan, como haciéndome burla. Pero las cosas no iban a quedarse así. El siguiente día
fui al distrito para quejarme y fue allí que me encontré a Selina y empecé a ir a las juntas de [ALIANZA].

By the time I had interviewed Olga and was able to capture her story on record, I had heard her tell some version of it at least three or four times. Her reaction, though, is always the same. Despite her often stern demeanor, as she approaches the part of her narrative where the office manager makes clear her beliefs about Olga’s capability to distinguish between a student’s cumulative report card and any other piece of paper, tears well up in Olga’s eyes. I asked Olga what made her so emotional, even though it felt, at first, an unnecessary question to ask considering what she had shared. She continued,

Por varias razones Vero. Porque en ese momento me sentí que no valgo nada, que no cuento. Esa mujer no sabía que yo había regresado a la escuela para aprender inglés, para sacar mi GED, para motivar a mis hijos. Pero nada de eso importaba. Me vio y en un segundo determinó que yo no valía la pena. En ese momento recordé cuando era niña y mi papa me sacó junto con Amanda de la escuela. Esa mujer me volvió a cortar mis alas como lo había hecho mi padre pero ahora eran las alas de mi hijo, mis esperanzas que tengo como madre. Al sentir ese mismo dolor pero ahora como madre es lo que me hace llorar porque el que me traten como que si no fuera nada no es algo nuevo, pero sentirlo como madre es un dolor tan profundo que las lagrimas te salen sin pensar.

133 Translated to English: I went to my friend’s house because I needed some advice. Junior had received a bad grade but I wasn’t certain how it would affect him in his class at the end of the semester. I didn’t know much about schools during that time. But my friend mentioned that as his mother I had the right to ask for my son’s file. She told me it was called the “CUM folder.” The next day I went to the school office and asked the girl in the front for my son’s folder. She looked at me as if questioning how was it possible that I knew about such files. She got up and went to ask the woman in charge of the office. Even though I didn’t know her, that woman looked at me and assumed I didn’t know English because she told the girl, in English, to give me any paper because I wouldn’t know the difference anyway. In other words, telling me that I was stupid and to treat me as such. My blood began to boil Vero but I didn’t say anything. I had the little one with me but for a moment there I thought I was going to loose control. And to make things worse, she didn’t even lower her voice. She said it in such a way so that everyone could hear, like she was making fun of me. But I wasn’t going to let things stay like that. The next day I went to the district to complain and it was there that I found Selina and I started going to the [ALIANZA] meetings.

134 Translated to English: For various reasons Vero. Because at that moment I felt that I wasn’t worth anything, that I didn’t count. That woman did not know that I had returned to school to learn English, to get my GED, to motivate my children. But none of that mattered. She saw me and in a second determined that I wasn’t worth her time. At that moment I remembered when I was a girl and my father took me out of school along with Amanda. That woman clipped my wings once again the way my father had but this time it was my son’s wings, my hopes and dreams as a mother. To feel that same pain but now as a mother is what made me cry because to treat me as if I’m nothing isn’t something new, but to feel it as a mother is a pain so deep that tears will surface without you having to try.

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For Olga, the interaction at her son’s school triggered memories, and the emotions associated with them, of being pulled out of school early in life by her father. Although both experiences disrupted her sense of belonging, the first by denying her membership in a community of elementary school learners and the other by attempting to render her incapable as a parent, the potential threat of the latter on her son’s future gave that moment a distinct gravity. As Olga painfully describes each times she tells it, the arguably racist encounter with the office staff triggered a rage that was familiar, based on her life history, and yet unique in her role as a mother, where the stakes around the realization of her hope, now as a parent, were raised to new levels.

As Olga described the singular nature of her experience dealing with the office staff at her son’s school, what struck me was how she defined it as an extension, albeit on some levels more profound, of her early experiences of being denied an education. Her connection was similar to how Felicia and Caridad described a sense of coming full circle when they started interacting, as parents, with U.S. public schools. Like Olga, Felicia and Caridad both referred to denials of schooling early in life when describing what it felt like to be told they had language “impediments” as Spanish-speaking parents for participating in school site councils, or having teachers advise they turn off the Spanish soap operas if they expect their children to succeed, or being told that only citizens can complain and raise issues at school board meetings. In each of these cases, the unjust nature of the rationale others used to keep them as parents at the margins, classify them as unfit, or deny them entry all together reminded them of what it felt like to have their hopes deferred or denied as children. Arguably, the similarity of both junctures reflects their connection to schooling. Nonetheless, in my attempt to chronologically uncover ALIANZA’s formative moments in the development of political agency, I realized that how
certain experiences impacted each of them as political actors and their understanding of motherhood as a political identity, was much less linear and much more layered than I had anticipated. I argue that as immigrant mothers, ALIANZA members continuously draw on a repertoire of experiences to shape and inform their political identity as madres en lucha that is rooted in a deep understanding of injustice from a young age, not just when they began interacting with U.S. public schools.

In concluding this section it is important to note that between these early encounters with public schools and becoming full-fledged members of ALIANZA, I am not claiming that each of the parents operated in isolation. Oftentimes, these early experiences led them to join an informal network of parents who they turned to for advice and support when school administrators, teachers, or staff failed to provide any. In other cases, some of the parents had already developed relationships with other mothers who understood and affirmed what they were going through and strengthened their commitment to act in ways to remedy the circumstances that led them to the school site in the first place. While some mothers were introduced to and signed up with ALIANZA soon after these early negative experiences, others took a while to become a member even after becoming informed of its existence, highlighting in our interviews that the mistrust that resulted from these early encounters made it difficult for them to immediately join, even if it appeared that as a group it would have their best interests in mind.

Regardless of the process, though, it was unanimous among the mothers that these early encounters triggered actions that led them, one way or another, to ALIANZA and, thus, rightfully merit their categorization as a critical juncture in their development of political agency. Coupled with how often at group meetings or events each of them referenced these early moments, it became clear just how powerful they were in driving their need to remedy wrongs.

Translated to English: mothers in struggle
and transforming their sense of self as political actors. It reflects what other scholars of Latina activism (Hondagnue-Sotelo, 1994; Pardo, 1990, 1991, 1995; Ruiz, 2000) have noted that, “motherhood led to the politicization of some women not only because it forced them to engage state institutions . . . but also because of its common ground and politics of solidarity forged among the women as mothers” (Coll, 2010, p. 74). Similarly with ALIANZA, the coming together of its members to share these early encounters, name injustices, create solidarity, and define itself as an organization of immigrant mothers, highlights the process through which these triggers transformed into milestones of political agency, characterized by a critique of the structural barriers that have operated to keep them out of schools. How this occurred is the focus of the next chapter but making note of it here underscores the role of ALIANZA in merging and building from the individual life histories of its members to create a grassroots movement of mothers motivated by social justice. The following section briefly summaries the central findings of this chapter and introduces the role of ALIANZA as an important fourth juncture in the development of its members’ political agency.

**From the Individual to the Collective: ALIANZA as Fourth Juncture**

From the onset, the goal for this chapter was to address the first of two questions guiding this study: *How have members of ALIANZA come to see themselves as agents of change?* Based on my experience working with ALIANZA for several years prior to initiating this project, I was convinced that the group and its strategies had much, if not all, to do with developing its members in this regard. As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, this informed my hypothesis and shaped my own perceptions of what I would find once I entered the field. But to determine to what extent ALIANZA was responsible for developing and shaping its members’ perceptions of themselves as agents of social change, I had to employ a methodology that would allow us -
myself and my collaborators - to collectively explore and analyze their life histories and uncover those moments prior to ALIANZA, if any, that were particularly influential toward this end. Using in-depth oral history interviews, described in length in Chapter 4 of this manuscript, we found, to my surprise, that ALIANZA was only one of several influential moments throughout their lives affecting their development of political agency. As I have laid out above, our joint analysis revealed the importance of three junctures in particular: early schooling, migrating to el norte, and encountering U.S. public schools as a mother for the first time.

While unique in the type of formative experiences contained within each of these critical junctures, ALIANZA members collectively identified shared elements across that three that speaks to their importance as triggers of political agency, defined in this manuscript as those moments that powerfully shift an understanding of hope, belonging, and agency. Regardless of whether it occurred in early schooling, migrating to the U.S., or interacting with schools as a mother for the first time, ALIANZA members found themselves challenging barriers that attempted to keep them out of spaces and away from opportunities important to fulfilling their hopes and dreams and, later in life, those of their children. Confronted with gendered, raced, classed and anti-immigrant-driven obstacles, they resisted and worked to remake opportunities to realize hopes that others seemed set on denying. In this process, arguably undergoing some of the most arduous moments of their lives, they gained a critical, embodied understanding of injustice that would serve as a platform for framing their efforts as madres en lucha and seeking social change through ALIANZA. Thus, I argue, that defining these junctures as triggers of political agency is warranted, even though I do not assume or claim that these triggers automatically translate into activism or political participation. What I argue here is that these

136 Translated to English: mothers in struggle
triggers, and the events that caused them, hold a potential for developing and motivating agency that aspires to help others and is ultimately driven by social justice.

Unfortunately, Latina/o immigrant parents in public schools are often viewed as deficient, incapable, or simply unworthy, evidenced best by the voices of ALIANZA mothers above, that fail to see this potential, and much less its merit, for developing parent engagement practices at schools or strategizing how it can support educational reform. This is why I argue, and further explore in the next chapter, that many of the parents that collaborated with me on this study joined ALIANZA, because its leaders, members, and allies knew how to capitalize on the lived experiences and strengths of Latina/o immigrant parents and further develop their collective community cultural wealth, particularly their deep-rooted understanding of injustice, into strategic action. Within ALIANZA, members felt that their hope was extended not limited, they were welcomed not shunned, and their agency mattered, in powerful ways, to creating the type of change necessary to improve the conditions of their own family and families like theirs. In this sense, ALIANZA members appropriately and unanimously identified joining the group as a fourth juncture during our focus group, which I highlight by adding to the model developing in this chapter in Figure 12.
Although framed as a fourth juncture by ALIANZA members, the group differs in two important ways compared to other critical junctures discussed in this chapter. First, it engages the relationship around hope, belonging, and agency in a way that affirms each one of its members, not rationalizing their exclusion or denying opportunity in the way that often occurred during moments in the previous three junctures. Second, it brings in and builds from the individual life histories of each of its members to continue developing each of them as political actors, but more importantly, creates a collective movement of immigrant parents working for social change. In this sense, it serves as a bridge, shifting its’ members sense of self as individual agents of change into a collective political identity as madres en lucha\textsuperscript{137}. Exploring ALIANZA in this regard, along with its specific strategies, is the focus of the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{137} Translated to English: mothers in struggle
In closing, I return once again to the *dicho* that framed the findings above. I realized that in Justo’s humble, yet profound, reflection on our trip back from New Orleans he also captured what ALIANZA meant to its members in connection to the critical junctures and triggers of political agency explored here. As the figurative “*arrieros*”\(^{138}\),” the parents found their identities as learners, immigrants, and mothers centered and celebrated in ALIANZA in ways they hadn’t experienced before. Although each of their journeys to ALIANZA was unique, “*en sus caminos andando*”\(^ {139}\), they discovered that their lived experience was a source of strength, learned to name their pain as institutional and structural oppression, and renewed their hope in their abilities as agents of change. It was here, in ALIANZA, that previous triggers of political agency transformed, in large part, into milestones, further developing a critique and a toolbox they later identified as necessary to do the work of meaningful change in their local school district and neighborhoods. Justo helped me realize on that trip home that to fully understand ALIANZA you had to first understand the individual journeys of each of its members. Only then can ALIANZA, explored next, be fully appreciated for its impact on the lives and futures of its members and the community in which they operate to create change.

\(^{138}\) Part of a Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “Muleteers”

\(^{139}\) Part of a Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “on the road we travel”
CHAPTER 7

Affirming, Naming, Practicing, and Extending: Enacting Political Agency through ALIANZA

“No Más Atole con el Dedo”

It was a typical, Friday night ALIANZA meeting. As I entered la casita, where we held our meetings, Caridad’s laughter, Olga’s food, and Selina’s embraces greeted me. Over the course of the many years working with the group, I had come to appreciate the multiple purposes our meetings served, one of which was the opportunity to come together and convivir to share in one another’s company and build solidarity as a group. Tonight was especially important for nuestro libro as Olga had coined my dissertation to show both her support and ownership of the project. We were wrapping up data analysis and I was excited to hear what the mothers had to say. I looked over my notes excitedly as Olga brought out her famous buñuelos to share with the group. I opened up the conversation by asking each of them for a phrase or a word that captured how ALIANZA has impacted their sense of self and their collective identity as madres en lucha. At first, several of the mothers looked perplexed and I worried that by asking for a succinct analysis from a group of parents who are gifted storytellers and usually lean toward rich description in their accounts, I had made the question nearly impossible to answer. Elena was the first to chime in. She responded, “Creo que la mejor manera de capturar lo que [ALIANZA] ha hecho por mí, y creo que por muchas

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140 At the time that this manuscript was submitted for review, Justo, one of the co-founders of ALIANZA had recently passed away. In light of this, I asked his widow, Selina, also a co-founder of ALIANZA, to re-read this chapter to determine if she felt comfortable submitting it with the rich and detailed narrative included about his life through ALIANZA. Although previous chapters highlighted particular moments of Justo’s life, this chapter contained the most extensive portrayals and analysis of his contributions to the group. After a long conversation, we both felt that she needed time to make a decision to determine which facts she wanted shared with others and which ones she wanted kept internally as part of her and the mothers’ collective memory about how Justo impacted ALIANZA. As a result, this chapter was revised and sections summarized to keep certain details about Justo’s pedagogy and practice in the group private. Future revisions of this chapter may re-include these details as Selina and ALIANZA negotiate how they want their story told and to whom.

141 Of all the dichos, or Mexican sayings, used in this manuscript, the one that introduces this chapter is the most difficult to translate into English. Rather than attempt to provide what would likely be an inaccurate translation, I give context to the dicho’s meaning in the opening vignette. Here I provide sufficient context for non-Spanish speaking readers to capture its significance for framing this chapter on ALIANZA.

142 Spanish word for “sharing time and experiences”

143 Translated to English: our book

144 Buñuelos are a traditional Mexican desert made of flour and eggs, fried in oil, and typically covered in honey or cinnamon and sugar

145 Translated to English: mothers in struggle

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de las que estamos aquí, es a través del dicho, “no más atole con el dedo.”146 UNCLEAR about its meaning, I asked Elena to elaborate on the dicho and she continued, “Cuando una mamá está amamantando es natural que se canse especialmente si le toca a un niño comelón. Hay momentos que no puedes más y para apaciguarlo entre su horas de comer se le da un poquito de atole con el dedo. Pues lo mismo pasa con nosotros – se nos ha dado atole con el dedo para apaciguarnos, para engañarnos, para no quejarnos de las injusticias que se cometen día tras día contra nosotros, contra nuestros hijos. Se justifican dándonos una miseria mientras disfrutan de los beneficios de la explotación de nuestro labor. [ALIANZA] nos dio las herramientas para reconocer y desafiar a los que se proponen seguir dándonos atole. Antes aceptamos esta realidad pero ¡no más!147

Elena’s response to my request for a word or phrase that captured how ALIANZA had, up until then, influenced her ability to see herself as an agent of change left me speechless. Not only did she powerfully frame the role of ALIANZA toward this end - so much so, that there was no better way to introduce this chapter - Elena also made me realize just how much I had yet to learn from her and others in the group. Although for years the mothers would half-joke with me saying they were my students, in part, I believe, to motivate me to finish what has been arguably a long journey to the Ph.D., the truth is that their profound contribution to my personal and professional growth rightfully places them as my teachers and mentors. Of the many things I’ve learned working side-by-side with them, one of the things that always impressed me was how they communicated their critique of social structure, understanding of oppression, and their role as resistors through the use of stories, dichos, consejos, and metaphors, that conjured up images

146 Translated to English: I think that the best way to capture what [ALIANZA] has done for me, and I believe for many of us here, is through the saying, “no más atole con el dedo.”

147 Translated to English: When a mother is breastfeeding it’s natural that she becomes tired especially if she has a child who is a big eater. There are moments that you can’t anymore and to calm the baby between feedings you trick her by giving her a bit of atole (a Mexican drink made from cornmeal) with your finger. Well the same thing happens with us – we have been given atole with the finger to calm us, deceive us, so that we don’t complain and speak up about the injustices that are committed day-after-day against us, against our children. They justify themselves by giving us a pittance while they benefit from exploiting our labor. ALIANZA has given us the tools to recognize and challenge those who like to keep giving us atole. Before, we accepted this reality but not any more!

148 This excerpt was taken from a personal journal I have been using to document my experiences working with ALIANZA. This excerpt, dated September 2010, reflects only my recollections and reflections of the event it describes.
that were so incredibly profound and yet accessible at the same time. I would often compare their analysis of our social world to the many critical theorists and great thinkers I was reading throughout graduate school, often coming to the conclusion that the mothers often did a much better, more parsimonious, job in their framing.

This was especially true of Elena’s comments, highlighted in the vignette above. Although in a later conversation she referred to her use of the *dicho*, “*no más atole con el dedo,*” as nothing special and pretty commonplace, I was struck by how well she underscored the transformative aspect of ALIANZA in helping her disrupt and challenge what she felt had become a normalized practice in institutions serving Latina/o immigrant parents. At its core, her use of the *dicho* spoke to the silencing of a community by deceiving them into believing they had been equitably “served” through false promises and stand-ins for real reform, symbolized in the *dicho* by the *atole* as a substitute for a mother’s breast milk. Referencing and using the *dicho* to summarize ALIANZA’s impact also makes it powerfully clear just how important the group was in making her aware of this reality. It gave her the tools to call it out for what she felt it is - an act of trickery and deceit on behalf of those in power - which she no longer tolerates. What was equally powerful was the connection between the *dicho* and Elena’s role as a mother. By using a saying that reflects an act only a mother could fully comprehend, the *dicho* emphasized the extent to which a mother, based on her lived experience, could identify, comprehend, and expose the acts that render injustice possible. In essence, it defined oppression and subordination from a mother’s standpoint, and in this case, a Latina immigrant mother.

As we continued our conversation that day in the focus group, it was unanimous that ALIANZA was, indeed, a powerful “place” from which Elena and the other mothers could employ their agency to disrupt what they felt kept them silent and work toward creating change.
The group’s bearing on their development as political actors was not only something I heard in our conversations, but witnessed first-hand as a member of ALIANZA myself, participating in countless activities, meetings, events, and workshops organized by its members. The first-hand accounts, along with the voices of ALIANZA parents, make up the content of this chapter that focuses on addressing the second question guiding this study’s inquiry: *How have ALIANZA’s members’ perceptions of themselves as agents of change translated into collective action?*

To address this question requires an examination of how ALIANZA has further developed its members’ sense of political agency, extending from what was explored in the previous chapter. As argued in Chapter 6, ALIANZA members identified the group as an important life history juncture in this regard. But how this was done was only briefly alluded to. This chapter provides a more in-depth analysis and description of the ways in which ALIANZA further developed its members’ political identities and, often through these same strategies, worked to create change within the community it serves. But it also exposes the ways in which members influenced the group as well, highlighting that transformation is mutual in how they worked to continuously adapt and remake ALIANZA’s political identity as one of *madres en lucha.*\(^{149}\) While difficult to capture the range and depth of approaches the group has employed since its inception, my goal here is to provide an analysis of those key strategies that best frame how ALIANZA supports and develops its members so that collective action to create social change is possible. It’s not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, my hope is to share *defining* group practices that ultimately make the case for using ALIANZA as a platform for unpacking the politics of participation for Latina/o immigrant parents in schools and society at large. Moreover, it can serve to support other groups, similar to ALIANZA, as they work to exert change in their own communities.

\(^{149}\) Translated to English: mothers in struggle
Toward this end, this chapter provides examples and analysis of three central approaches that ALIANZA utilizes to develop its membership, insert itself into educational and civic decision-making arenas, and seek equitable outcomes for low-income families, particularly Latina/o immigrants. The first approach is the creation of counter-spaces where members come together to celebrate culturally based traditions, share concerns about a range of topics and issues without judgment, heal from past abuse, and build solidarity. Collectively, the mothers referred to this function as conviviendo y desahogando.\textsuperscript{150} A second strategy comes in the form of workshops and trainings, where ALIANZA’s leaders employ critical forms of pedagogy to help its members identify, name, and speak out against injustice. They define this as aprendiendo a hablar y luchar.\textsuperscript{151} Finally, the third approach examined here builds on the first two, examining how ALIANZA challenges institutions as a group and comes together to create new opportunities for themselves, their families, and their communities. I argue that this third approach is a strategic effort to build a type of political capital that the group then uses to leverage their voice and participate in reform efforts and rests on members’ confidence and critical know-how of schools and civic institutions, the expected products of the first two approaches. The group defines this last approach as realizando y rehaciendo.\textsuperscript{152}

It’s important to reiterate that my goal throughout this manuscript, but especially in this chapter, was to capture how my parent collaborators understood the utility and significance of ALIANZA for creating change, as they define it. I ground my analysis in their meaningmaking about the value of the group and its efforts. Too often I find myself reading research that identifies the merit of an educational intervention based on its comparative value with other

\textsuperscript{150} Translated to English: spending time together, sharing, and getting things off your chest

\textsuperscript{151} Translated to English: learning to speak up and fight

\textsuperscript{152} Translated to English: realizing and remaking
similar interventions premised on results of “standard” measures for determining their worth. Without restating why using White, middle-class norms of parent involvement fail to gauge the effectiveness of a group like ALIANZA, an argument I covered in Chapter 2, I contend that the voices and lived experiences of ALIANZA parents are sufficient for making a case of its positive impact. This does not mean that future research on ALIANZA shouldn’t attempt to affirm what its members have claimed. The voices of allies and other supporters of the group can serve to better understand how ALIANZA has altered the educational outcomes of Latina/o students, improved conditions for Latina/o families, and/or effectively changed the course of civic and educational reform decisions to be more inclusive of Latina/o participation, particularly that of immigrant parents. But our collective goal was to begin and ground any initial analysis of the group in this study from the position and perspective of its members.

*Conviviendo y Desahogando: Sharing, Healing, and Honoring Lived Experience*

Of all the strategies employed by ALIANZA, the most commonly practiced was making sure its members could safely and comfortably come together to share their experiences, celebrate traditions and accomplishments, find support to heal from past abuse or current life challenges, and build solidarity rooted in friendship. *Conviviendo y desahogando,*\(^{153}\) as its members called it, was intentional and yet at the same time felt so normal that over time I came to see this activity as synonymous with ALIANZA rather than as one of several things they did. It was similar to Andrea Dyrness’ (2011) experience of parallel activities within a Latina/o immigrant parent group with which she collaborated in Oakland, California. In her work with these mothers, she described entering their spaces as “. . . soothing, comforting, like background music” (p.139), referring to the “rhythm” of their meetings, which was characterized, among

\(^{153}\) Translated to English: spending time together, sharing, and getting things off your chest.
other things, by a sharing of experiences, laughter, food, and the use of “non-traditional” spaces for parent engagement, such as the kitchen table. This is the act of conviviendo and it is part and parcel of ALIANZA’s everyday work. To understand and appreciate its benefits and why it’s so critical to the mothers’ political activities, it’s necessary to first unpack its relationship to the spaces in which it occurs, and conversely, where it doesn’t occur. I argue that when it comes to fully comprehending how ALIANZA operates and the ways its members attempt to insert themselves in local civic and educational decision-making, it is vital to explore where they define ground zero for strategizing and organizing and why these spaces are important toward this end.

Similar to Dyrness (2011) who identified the significance of the kitchen table in one mother’s home for the organizing efforts of the parent group in her study, I, too, found myself often being invited by ALIANZA members into their homes, as well other places outside of schools, to conduct group business. One of the most frequently visited spaces to hold informal meetings and plan events, was the home of Justo and Selina, who despite its small size could easily fit fifteen parents and often their children as well. Their home was centrally located in the community so it proved to be fairly accessible to all the parents. When we had important events or community forums to plan, you would easily find at least two or three of the group’s members coming in and out of Justo and Selina’s home at all times of the day or night. Although ALIANZA had a small office at the local community center used primarily for their adult literacy project and youth leadership building, access to the office is limited because of the community center’s hours of operation. Since most of the parents work during the day, ALIANZA had to find a way to open up working spaces around their schedules.
Entering Justo and Selina’s home, you couldn’t help but notice the piles, or rather pillars, of papers, boxes, and other materials like posters and markers, gathered against nearly every wall. Selina would laugh each time I told her that I would eventually come by one day and find her completely consumed by all the paper she and Justo stored. In earshot of the other parents, she would half-joke that she would soon make it an ALIANZA project to come by and organize her home. After all, the papers she collected were part of ALIANZA’s collective memory, an intentional strategy to record their trajectory in the community in an effort to, one day, re-write local history and demonstrate evidence against dominant narratives that seek to render them invisible as political actors. Nestled alongside these documents are large posters and images that are used as part of ALIANZA’s curriculum for parent workshops at different schools throughout the district. One that especially caught my eye when I first entered into their home was a life-size poster of what ALIANZA defines as a popular educator, a cartoon of a teacher and her toolbox displayed with all the items she would need to create a problem-posing style of teaching, in the Freirean tradition. Scanning to the walls that gently support these pillars of papers one can easily make out images of Antonio Gramsci, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, and, of course, Paulo Freire, right alongside several framed pictures of ALIANZA members in Sacramento and Washington D.C. fighting for educational reform. Respectfully placed throughout their home are also different cultural artifacts from Mexico, in particular, indigenous artifacts from the time Justo spent teaching and working with the Tarahumara community, as well as religious imagery, mainly of la Virgen de Guadalupe. As a group, we usually settled to work in Justo and Selina’s living room that connects nicely to their porch, an open space well suited for making banners and posters for marches, events, or other political rallies, and well lit when we needed to work late into the night.
Besides the comfort that Justo and Selina’s home affords the group to meet, work, or simply come together to celebrate accomplishments, its locale is especially close to another of ALIANZA’s important gathering spaces – la casita. Located about two blocks from their home, la casita, as ALIANZA endearingly calls it, is literally a small house that was purchased by a local arts-based non-profit organization to bring together grassroots groups in the area and provide them a space to work and serve the community when they couldn’t afford their own. Several of ALIANZA’s members have a key to la casita, and although they share the space with other groups, they have access to the facility anytime they need it. In fact, many in the community equate la casita with ALIANZA since they use it the most compared to other organizations also taking advantage of the space. Equipped with new computers and other technology, la casita also provides access to the internet and free printing that ALIANZA finds crucial to their efforts, without which it would be difficult to maintain their website, communicate with other civic leaders, and prepare letters, agendas, and memoranda when needed. The benefit of being so close to Justo and Selina’s home means that parents can go back and forth easily to transport materials or work simultaneously in both spaces when one has become crowded. ALIANZA monthly meetings and workshops always take place at la casita.

Finally, the last space commonly used by ALIANZA is a local Mexican food restaurant, Don Beto’s,\(^{154}\) whose owner is a long-time friend and ally of several members in the group. Beyond the obvious utility of the space for keeping us fed during long conversations and gatherings, its location three blocks south of la casita and round-the-clock service is undoubtedly convenient. The owner is also incredibly generous to the group, providing discounted meals and drinks during gatherings at Don Beto’s and often sponsoring food at several of ALIANZA’s

\(^{154}\) Actual name of restaurant has been replaced by a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of ALIANZA and its members.
events at no cost to them. In addition, she has sectioned off several tables in the patio area of her restaurant, dubbing the area, “el área de los revolucionarios,\textsuperscript{155}” as a term of respect toward the group’s members and what they do. These tables always have a reserved sign on them, indicating their exclusivity for informal ALIANZA meetings. \textit{Don Beto’s} is primarily used by the group for planning and strategizing the night before important school board or city council meetings or to support members when they have been elected to district- or city-wide committees, in an effort to help them serve on these committees more effectively.

Taken together, Justo and Selina’s home, \textit{la casita}, and \textit{Don Beto’s}, comprise ALIANZA’s internal working spaces where they conduct group meetings, trainings and workshops, event planning, and other activities primarily designed for and attended by its members. During our interviews and focus work, we collectively explored their value as we simultaneously discussed why ALIANZA, as a group, doesn’t operate from within schools, a place one would typically expect to find parent engagement efforts. Despite all of its members holding one or more positions on local school or district-level advisory councils, English language advisory (ELAC) councils, or special task forces and other committees, none of them defined their work as rooted or grounded from within school or district-supported spaces, such as a parent welcome center or a PTA (parent-teacher association) office. From an outsider perspective, some might argue that it makes sense for ALIANZA to work from these “non-traditional” spaces because the parents that comprise the group come from all over the district. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to ground ALIANZA from one particular school site without risking alienating parents who don’t represent that school or its surrounding community. But analyzed from the perspective and position of its members, it becomes clear that their use of these spaces is strategic to sustaining their work, supporting one another, and exposing how other

\textsuperscript{155} Translated to English: the area of the revolutionaries

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more “traditional” spaces function to keep them at the margins, particularly when it comes to important civic and school decision-making.

Seen from this angle, their use of alternative spaces can be more appropriately framed as *counter-space,* where ALIANZA comes together to heal from and challenge other spaces that seek to exclude, silence, distort, or delegitimize their lived experiences as Latina/o immigrant parents. Borrowing from the work of critical race scholars (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000), Dyrness (2011) defines a central function of counter-spaces as, “. . . the ability to collectively dissect controlling images of one’s group and fashion alternative selves,” a key step in the process of *conscientización.* Similarly in ALIANZA, the parents’ use of space suggests the importance of operating from places not mediated by deficit ideologies of Latina/o parents, from which they claim institutional spaces suffer. As counter-spaces, Justo and Selina’s home, *la casita,* and Don Beto’s, offer ALIANZA members the opportunity to safely and openly interrogate their experiences as *madres en lucha,* their challenges as political actors in traditional decision-making arenas, and their efforts to construct new spaces that respect their dignity and value as Latina/o immigrant mothers. Collectively, these spaces provide a place to recover from their encounters with injustice, both past and present, and allow them to build an agenda around social justice grounded in their lived experiences.

During our focus group, ALIANZA parents discussed and analyzed their reliance on counter-spaces and what seemed, at first, a contradiction in their use as a means of gaining entry into more traditional decision-making arenas. Yesenia explained this tactic,

> Somos los de afuera queriendo cambiar a los de adentro. Nuestra meta es entrar al sistema pero para hacerlo tenemos que analizarlo de afuera y verlo por lo que realmente es. Haciéndolo de esta forma como lo hacemos nosotros en [ALIANZA] asegura, yo pienso, que el trabajo nuestro sea
For Yesenia, the purpose of working from the “outside” was essential because only from that vantage point, she argued, was it possible to understand and work to transform civic and educational institutions authentically, without having those in power attempting to define the terms of participation for how one should or shouldn’t challenge the social order. But working from the outside doesn’t mean staying there, as Yesenia points out. She and the other parents highlighted how crucial it is to insert themselves politically into these “inside” spaces, or those spaces within institutions where important decision-making takes place. To make this happen, Yesenia relies on ALIANZA as a supportive platform. She stressed, “sabemos que allí se toman decisiones importantes. Tenemos que entrarle pero armados y listos para luchar. Ellos no nos van a proveer las herramientas de un conocimiento crítico. Ese el trabajo de [ALIANZA]. Pero no por eso abandonamos esos espacios.”

Extending Yesenia’s comments, Elena went on to argue that this type of tactic or strategy of using counter-spaces is especially crucial for groups like ALIANZA, comprised primarily of Latina/o immigrant parents. She pointed to the structure of school site councils and other institutionally sanctioned committees for important decision-making as especially alienating for individuals who don’t fit the mainstream model of a civic leader, which she defined as white, middle-to-upper class, male, English-speaking, and of course, a U.S. citizen. According to Elena, even when you have knowledge about how the system works and you come prepared to

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156 Translated to English: We are outsiders trying to change those on the inside. Our goal is to enter into the system but in order to do that we need to analyze it from the outside and see it for what it really is. Doing it this way, like we do here in [ALIANA] ensures, I believe, that our work is honest and will have a greater impact because we are not tied to the ideas of those in power.

157 Translated to English: We know that important decisions are made there. We need to insert ourselves but armed and ready to fight. They won’t provide us the tools of a critical consciousness. That is the work of [ALIANZA]. But not because of that do we abandon those spaces.
engage in conversation and ask important questions, it’s still an uphill battle just to be heard, let alone taken seriously. For Elena, her experience through ALIANZA has shown her first-hand how easily one is dismissed in decision-making arenas if you are a Latina immigrant mother. She highlighted her point through the following example,

Hace poco el distrito organizó lo que le llaman un ‘task force’ para desarrollar estrategias para involucrar a más padres. Fuí y cuando entré me enteró que contrataron a una firma con supuesto conocimiento en el área de involucramiento de padres para construir un currículo. Cuando empezó a presentar el señor americano, gringo, yo levanté la mano pero me dijeron que no podía comentar o preguntar hasta el final. Yo esperé y esperé. Lo bueno es que no tenía a mi hija porque no creo que me hubiera podido quedar. Pero tenía que hablar porque el currículo que usamos en [ALIANZA] es igual o hasta mejor de lo que estaban presentando. ¿Por qué no usar el de nosotros? Ya teníamos éxito con los papás y el distrito lo sabía. Hasta nos habían aprobado. Cuando finalmente pude hablar era obvio que aunque teníamos un currículo parecido no importaba. Prefirieron pagar miles de dólares a este otro señor porque a él si lo vieron como experto en el área de padres más que un propio padre. Para mí era obvio. Somos padres inmigrantes. Uno lo siente. Que ironía. Si no fuera por [ALIANZA] yo me hubiera desesperado hace mucho y jamás volver a regresar a esas juntas. Los espacios dentro de las escuelas y el distrito nos toman poco en cuenta. [ALIANZA] me ayuda a perseverar cuando te hacen a un lado.158

In sharing her experience, Elena points to several noteworthy reasons for why ALIANZA’s decision to headquarter in spaces outside of schools is crucial. The first rests in how these “traditional” decision-making spaces structure and often limit how individuals can participate, often in ways that make it difficult for a working-class mother, like herself, to attend and

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158 Translated to English: Recently, the district organized what they called a task force to help develop strategies to involve more parents. I attended and when I entered I came to find out that they had hired a firm with supposed knowledge in the area of parent involvement to develop a curriculum. When the presenter, a white American, began I raised my hand but they told me that I had to wait until the end to ask a question or make a comment. I waited and waited. The good thing is that I didn’t have my daughter or else I couldn’t have stayed until the end. But I needed to speak because we have a curriculum in [ALIANZA] that is as good or better than what he was presenting. Why not use ours? We had proven success with the parents and the district knew it. They even approved it. Finally when I was able to talk it was obvious that even though we had a similar curriculum it didn’t matter. They preferred to spend thousands of dollars on this other person because they saw him as more of an expert in the area of parent involvement than a parent herself. For me it was obvious. We are immigrant parents. You feel it. What irony. If it wasn’t for [ALIANZA] I would have become frustrated long ago and never again returned to these meetings. We are hardly taken into account within schools and the district are taken into account. [ALIANZA] helps me to persevere when others push me aside.
participate. As Elena mentions, if she had her youngest daughter with her she wouldn’t have been able to stay until the end, where the meeting’s facilitators relegated her comments after being silenced when she attempted to speak up during the presentation. Furthermore, she notes her frustration at witnessing how an agency was hired to develop curricula for parent workshops when ALIANZA already had district approval for carrying out these same activities. ALIANZA had received numerous awards for their success and had, in Elena’s eyes, well-established and successful relationships with parents at different school sites. So why not involve ALIANZA in this process? For Elena, the answer was clear: she and the others in the group, as Latina/o immigrant parents, were not seen to possess the same type of expertise and, therefore, not capable of performing the task even in light of evidence showing the contrary. It is this same deficit belief about Latina/o immigrant parents that Elena later describes as permeating most “traditional” spaces of parent engagement within schools. Because she grounds herself in ALIANZA, she is able to persist and persevere in these arenas, in large part, because the group operates outside of school and is, thus, less susceptible to the raced, classed, gendered, and anti-immigrant ideologies informing deficit rationales for why voices like hers matter less when making important decisions about school reform.

But in referring to the benefits of having ALIANZA centered outside of schools, Elena specifically highlights how it’s beneficial, making reference to its effect on her persistence and perseverance as a political actor. In my conversations with each of the group’s members, it was clear that Elena wasn’t the only one that felt this way. Several of them described feeling a sense of strength and empowerment because the group operated in ways and within spaces that validated and honored their language, traditions, cultural norms and practices, and lived experiences. All of them stressed at one point or another that these types of validation rarely, if
ever, occurred within the institutional spaces they engaged with. In fact, many talked about the need to recover after school board or city council meetings where they either presented or were somehow involved. They described feeling drained, exhausted, and often discouraged from returning to these spaces in the future. Having ALIANZA as their home base was necessary to their recovery and regaining a sense of purpose and “wholeness” as political actors. Although they described example after example of how ALIANZA does this, a common theme characterizing these moments was the opportunity to come together as a group *para convivir y desahogar*.\textsuperscript{159}

In describing the importance of this activity during our focus group, ALIANZA members highlighted in particular its connection to their *autoestima*\textsuperscript{160} that had endured injury and assaults across their life trajectory, and more recently, as mothers working to challenge a system set on keeping them at the margins. Since joining ALIANZA, they felt their *autoestima* was nurtured, healed, and strengthened, an indispensable process and outcome critical for doing the work required of them as *madres en lucha*. It was similar to the importance given by the immigrant women in Coll’s (2010) study, where they jointly identified, “. . . the importance of engaging in collective political action, but the urgency of many members’ concerns meant that their needs for social and instrumental support demanded attention in order for them to engage at all with politics and politicization” (p.100).

At each of the monthly ALIANZA meetings I attended, I was able to witness how this occurred and the priority given to addressing members’ personal and emotional issues. Besides

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{159} Translated to English: to spend time together sharing and getting things off your chest
\item \textsuperscript{160} The term *autoestima* translated literally to English means self-esteem. But, in this study, how ALIANZA uses the term means much more than its counterpart in English. I use the term similar to how Coll (2010) uses it in her work on Latina immigrant women. She define *autoestima* as a process more aligned with developing a positive self-concept that “. . . encompassed personal transformational processes. . . . tied to peer support and dialogue about social issues and how to address them collectively.” (p. 103).
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making sure we had food to share, enough to carry us through the three or four hour meeting, the mothers always set up their meeting space at la casita in a circle. It not only allowed everyone to see one another but it recognized the democratic and Freirean nature of their work, where everyone understood their ability to influence and be influenced by the dialogue that would ensue. Selina or Justo would write out the agenda on the small white board toward the front of the room that started and ended with each member sharing an issue, concern, or an experience worth celebrating, that the group could either assist with or join in support. Usually at the beginning of the meeting, this activity took place through the use of dinámicas, or icebreakers that acknowledged each person present and encouraged their participation from the start, particularly from those members that tended to be a bit more reserved in joining conversations. One of my favorites occurred right before Justo planned to give a talk on hegemony and gender. He asked each of the mothers to share a word or a short phrase that characterized what it meant to be a mujer. After he wrote each of their responses on the white board, he went around again and asked them to share a similar response but one that characterized the men in their lives. With the two lists side by side, he asked the group to compare the characterizations and share why they had portrayed men and women so differently. What followed was a profound sharing of painful experiences of domestic abuse, abandonment by fathers, fears of raising sons who were not socially conscious, and the contradictions they embody as wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers. Masterfully facilitated by Justo, he was able to interweave his lesson that day about patriarchy with the stories shared by the mothers. Dolores referred to the conversation that day, “. . . como un alivio. Necesitaba desahogarme de cosas que muy poco hablo. Y Justo ayudándonos a ver como nuestro dolor es causa de un sistema patriarca pude dejar de torturarme

161 Spanish word for “woman”
Similar to work done by Coll (2010), in facilitating a politicized space where the mothers could share their life histories, and the struggles contained within, Justo was able to help each of them situate and analyze their lives within a broader social context. By simultaneously developing their political skills through their need to *desahogar*, Justo recognized that the work of ALIANZA is only made possible by enacting a vision of politics that intimately intertwines efforts that support “. . . personal transformational processes, [their] shared identity as immigrant Latinas forged in dialogue and *convivencia*, and their work together on community social and political concerns ranging from immigration reform to domestic violence” (Coll, 2010, p. 103).

Another powerful moment that showcased just how valuable and necessary *conviviendo y desahogando* was to the *autoestima* of ALIANZA members, and thus, to their overall work as *madres en lucha*, came when Caridad shared with the group her son’s decision to join the military. Typically, ALIANZA would open the floor before concluding a meeting for members to bring up any topic of choice or personal concerns. At the end of one of our meetings, Caridad opened up about her sadness and disappointment in her son’s decision to leave college and enlist in the armed forces,

> Ayer llegó mi hijo y me dijo que ya no podía más en la universidad y mejor irse al army antes de que empezara en malos caminos con sus amigos. Estoy tan triste porque no era lo que quería para él. Tantas veces que hemos hablado aquí en [ALIANZA] de como las fuerzas armadas buscan discriminadamente a nuestros hijos porque son latinos y los ven con pocas esperanzas de realizarse en su educación. Tantas veces que le compartí estas conversaciones pero no tuvieron efecto. Siento que fracasé como madre. No sé como apoyarlo. No sé que hacer.  

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162 Translated to English: like a relief. I needed to get things off my chest that I rarely talk about. And Justo helped us see how our pain is caused by patriarchy and I was able to stop torturing myself that I was the one responsible for my own pain.

163 Translated to English: to get things off your chest

164 Translated to English: Yesterday my son came home and told me that he couldn’t stay at the university any longer and that it was better for him to join the army before he started going down the wrong path with his friends. I
As Caridad broke down in tears, several of the mothers stood up to embrace her, immediately responding with the phrase, “ánimo, Caridad, ánimo.” In reply, Selina initiated a dialogue that underscored the complexity of the society in which we live, reminding them that it is never easy raising children within an inherently unjust and oppressive world. Several of the mothers chimed in and discussed how they faced their own contradictions at home as critically conscious parents trying to help their children “read” the world around them. As a collective, the group embraced and uplifted Caridad, showcasing examples of her unconditional support toward her children and strategizing how to help her son through this difficult transition in his life. At the end of the meeting she thanked the group, highlighting how the conversation helped her “volver a encontrar la confianza en mi papel como madre. Sólo aquí con ustedes me siento renovada y lista para seguir luchando dentro y afuera de mi casa.”

Caridad’s closing remarks make clear how necessary desahogando was to her autoestima, emphasizing the importance of this collective process not just for helping her as a mother but also for sustaining and continuing her work as a political actor. As Coll (2010) points out, “autoestima [is] both a resource to help women stand up for themselves in the home . . . and a collective process through which women [come] to fully articulate their claims for respect and a voice in the community and their full rights in national politics and public institutions, regardless of their gender, language, income, or immigration status” (p. 101). By connecting Caridad’s struggle to the larger social and political struggles ALIANZA finds itself working to

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165 Translated to English: keep your head up, Caridad, keep your head up

166 Translated to English: regain my confidence in my role as a mother. Only here with all of you do I feel renewed and ready to keep fighting both in and outside my home.
change, the group further developed her sense of self as a political actor. It forged a sense of solidarity by validating her experience but framing it as a shared struggle, one that she did not have to fight alone. Through the acts of *conviviendo y desahogando*, practiced within counter-spaces, ALIANZA thus provided Caridad, and by extension its other members, a place from which to claim and affirm their role as agents of change.

In closing, I reflect on ALIANZA’s strategies covered in this section for theorizing about Latina/o immigrant parents as change agents and what’s required to make this happen. Although *conviviendo y desahogando* represent only part of what ALIANZA does toward this end, it’s impossible, I argue, to understand its other activities without first exploring how this occurs. It represents the foundation on which ALIANZA relies in order to, “. . . [support] each other in naming and recording the experiences that [have] been suppressed, [reject] the controlling images that framed them as unworthy or ‘problem parents,’ and [recast] themselves as concerned advocates for their families and community” (Dyrness, 2011, 140). Using counter-spaces, ALIANZA provides a critical platform for its members through *conviviendo y desahogando* to challenge injustice and find the strength *para hablar y luchar*, the second function of the group explored next.

**Hablando y Luchando: Learning to Name and Speak Out Against Injustice**

Although I had experience working with Latina/o immigrant parents prior to joining ALIANZA, I was, nonetheless, taken back when I first heard ALIANZA members use words like “opresión,” “hegemonía,” and “patriarcado.” I was in the process of learning many

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167 Spanish word for “oppression”

168 Spanish word for “hegemony”
of these terms myself as a graduate student, struggling through abstract and difficult readings, and couldn’t help but awe at the ease with which these parents that I had recently met talked about such complex ideas. In many ways, it challenged my own thinking about where certain types of critiques and language use take place and that such terms aren’t necessarily the sole property of spaces within higher education. Yet, it also made me wonder how such language made it’s way into a group like ALIANZA and what purpose it served the parents that used it.

In a conversation I had with Justo and Selina soon after I joined the group, I commented on being surprised at the terms ALIANZA members used to talk about the world around them and their relationship with it. They both smiled and proudly replied that I should have seen the look on the faces of school board members when Elena and Dolores used such language to talk about the educational outcomes of English language learning students at a school board meeting just two weeks prior. Justo laughed remembering how the district translator asked the parents clarification each time they used the term “hegemonía” just to make sure he was translating the right word to the monolingual English speakers in the room. As he continued to share story after comical story of the shock they receive when ALIANZA speaks in public, he reflected on how other’s reactions simply affirmed what he’s known all along: that Latina/o immigrant parents are viewed by mainstream society as apathetic, incapable and often unintelligent and couldn’t possibly understand how important decisions are made in schools or at the city level, much less pose a threat to their outcomes. So he and Selina expect the stunned looks of surprise when they engage school and civic leaders for the first time, articulating their critiques of policies or practices through a Freirean lens. During our interview together I asked Justo to reflect further about outsiders’ perceptions of the group and how he responds. He shared,

169 Spanish word for “patriarchy”
Me siento orgulloso en esos momentos cuando reto sus ideas racistas del padre inmigrante. Claro, nunca te van a decir que son racistas pero sus caras de sorpresa al momento de escucharnos hablar con términos que hasta muchos de ellos ni conocen, revela lo que realmente piensan de nosotros. La expresión de ‘¿cómo es posible que este padre sepa tanto?’ Por eso es importante que estemos bien armados con un conocimiento amplio y profundo para que no nos hagan tontos. Otros grupos nos critican el lenguaje que usamos. Nos dicen que son términos abstractos que María y Juanito no van a entender. Pero yo les digo, ¿por qué piensan así? ¿No creen en su capacidad? Para mí es importante nombrar las cosas como son, con sus nombres y términos apropiados. Por eso usamos la educación popular. Nos enseña a hablar y es a través de nuestra voz que podemos luchar.170

For Justo, part of the process of becoming politicized requires naming injustice, using terms to appropriately describe what informs it, how it functions, and the consequences it has for people’s lives. Though he would later go on in our interview to argue that this includes a range of linguistic tools, not just the utilization of complex terms like “hegemony,” he did find the use of these concepts necessary. He believed that when grounded in the life experiences of the mothers in ALIANZA, they have the power to call out the core issues informing social inequities and strengthen the group’s ability to strategize and organize more effectively because they are more aware of what they’re up against.

Others in the group shared Justo’s sentiments. Several mothers commented that it wasn’t until they joined ALIANZA and began sharing, desahogando and learning from each other through dialogue and workshops that they finally could “name their pain” and muster the courage to change what causes it. Prior to ALIANZA, many felt vulnerable to mainstream attacks that blamed them for their social conditions and described often questioning whether they

170 Translated to English: I feel proud in those moments when I challenge their racist ideas about immigrant parents. Of course, they will never tell you that they are racist but their looks of surprise when they first hear us speak with terms that they don’t even know reveals what they really think of us. Their expression of ‘how is it possible that this parent knows so much?’ This is why it’s important that we are armed with ample knowledge so that they don’t make fools out of us. Other groups have criticized the language we use. They tell us that Felicia and Juanito won’t understand our abstract terms. But I tell them, why do you think like that? Do you not believe in their capacity? For me it’s important to call things what they are, with their appropriate names and terms. This is why we use popular education. It teaches us to speak and it is through our voice that we are able to fight.
had the right to speak out and demand dignity and respect for themselves or their families, even for the most basic things. As Felicia so aptly put it, “yo me culpaba. No tenía una visión del mundo que me ayudara a sentirme de otra forma. Ahora me siento capaz. Puedo cambiar mi realidad y no quedarme con los brazos cruzados. Es mi derecho y mi deber. Gracias a [ALIANZA] estoy consciente y nadie me volverá a tapar los ojos o hacerme sentir mal por ser madre inmigrante.”

Felicia’s comments capture why having the opportunity to desahogar in ALIANZA, described in the previous section, was so important in the process of coming to consciousness and a necessary step for speaking out against injustice. Coll (2010) found a similar process at work among the group of immigrant women in her study. According to Coll (2010), for her informants,

being able to speak with other women and articulate one’s story was part of being able to claim rights and demand recognition as political subjects. . . . Desahogandose was a key first step for women in aprendiendo hablar, learning to speak out or speak up. The ability to desahogarse was critical for those trying to change their lives individually, as well as for those hoping to speak up for their children, their families, and their communities (p. 116-117).

ALIANZA members were no different than the women in Coll’s (2010) study. Having the space to get things off their chest provided parents in the group the opportunity to articulate injustice and build solidarity. Combined with popular education, in particular the workshops facilitated by Justo and Selina, they developed a new set of skills, along with a new vocabulary, for addressing social problems. This is why Selina, during our interview, argued that the mothers were able to grasp complex terms and theories with ease. Neither she nor Justo introduced these

171 Translated to English: I blamed myself. I didn’t have a vision of the world that helped me feel any other way. Now I feel capable. I know I can change my reality and I refuse to sit back, with my arms crossed, and do nothing about it. It’s my right and responsibility. Thanks to [ALIANZA] I’m aware and no one will ever cover my eyes again or make me feel bad because I am an immigrant mother.
ideas in the abstract, but rather made sense of them through what the mothers shared 'cuando se desahogaban',\textsuperscript{172} and the historical context of the community in which they all work and live. She stressed, “para mi es imposible entender un concepto si no lo veo reflejado en mi vida. Los temas de ‘poder’ y ‘patriarcado’ suelen ser difíciles porque son temas complejos. Pero si alguien me enseña estos conceptos a través de mi experiencia como mujer abusada es más probable que lo llegue a entender y aceptar.”\textsuperscript{173}

Yet, as I spoke with Selina and other parents about their ability to name and speak out against injustice, it still wasn’t clear \textit{how exactly} they developed this skill. All of them spoke about coming to a powerful awareness of human rights, their relationship to the world around them, and believing in their capacity to demand what was just, but I was growing more and more interested in learning about \textit{how} they got there. Without exception, \textit{all} of them spoke about the importance of popular education, a method of teaching and learning rooted in Freire’s (1973) proposals for liberatory education, most notably, his problem-posing method. And, \textit{all} of them, without exception stressed that to fully understand why popular education mattered so much to their individual and collective development as political actors, I had to experience it myself. I completely agreed. Although I had previously attended several talks on popular education during group meetings, I hadn’t been able to attend a day- or weekend-long workshop organized by ALIANZA’s founders – Justo and Selina. Both of them have been key in bringing this pedagogical practice to the group, believing in its ability to politicize and transform individuals into social change agents.

\textsuperscript{172} Translated to English: when they got things off their chest

\textsuperscript{173} Translated to English: for me it’s impossible to understand a concept when I don’t see it reflected in my own life. Themes like ‘power’ and ‘patriarchy’ can be difficult because they are complex ideas. But if someone teaches me these concepts through my own experience of abuse as a woman it more likely that I will come to understand and accept them.
Over the course of two years, I took seriously the parents’ advice and attended every popular education talk, workshop, and event that ALIANZA offered. Although primarily designed for its own members, Justo and Selina would often invite students from the local high schools and colleges who wanted to learn about popular education or sought to support the group’s efforts as volunteers. Although the topics covered ranged in scope from capitalism on the broad end to issues confronting undocumented students at the local level, the process for carrying out the workshops was generally the same. I provide the model, represented in Figure 13, to highlight the basic steps Selina and Justo employed each time they carried out these popular education workshops as well as emphasize the cyclical, rather than linear, nature underlying their pedagogical approach.

![Diagram of the general process of popular education practiced in ALIANZA](image)

Figure 14. General Process of Popular Education Practiced in ALIANZA
In an effort to understand how popular education has been key in helping ALIANZA members name and speak out against injustice, I analyze each of these steps, in turn, summarizing activities that generally occur within each and what goals they serve toward politicization. To help me do this I use, as example, one of the most powerful popular education workshops I experienced in ALIANZA that analyzed the history of U.S. public schools and their relationship with Students and Communities of Color.

Generally speaking, the first step in ALIANZA’s employment of popular education begins with all participants, including facilitators or teachers, assessing reality. This involves a process of identifying issues connected to the theme being analyzed but, more importantly, reflected in their own lives. In the case of the aforementioned workshop I attended, this meant sharing out and dialoging in response to a central question Justo posed: *What are the core issues facing Students of Color and their families in U.S. public schools today?* In most workshops Justo and Selina facilitate, they leave this initial question broad enough to allow participants to share a range of experiences that will be vital for the next step in the pedagogical process. As each person addresses the question, one of the facilitators is writing their responses on large sheets of butcher paper and placing them around the room, so as to be visible to the entire group. The goal is to explore the core topic, in this case the relationship between Students of Color and their families and U.S. public schools, from the perspective of ALIANZA members and the other guests in attendance.

The second step in the process is *identifying generative themes,* or the core concepts that define or best capture participants’ responses. For example, ALIANZA’s stories of their children

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174 I note for the reader that this chapter originally provided rich and detailed narrative of workshops led by Justo that have been summarized only in this final version in light of Justo’s untimely passing. Future revisions of this chapter for publication may re-include these details as Selina and ALIANZA negotiate how they want their story told and to whom.
being placed in English language learning (ELL) classrooms even though they speak little
Spanish could be categorized under the theme “racism” along with experiences of Chicana/o
high school students being advised out of advanced placement courses because of perceived
ability. These stories were part of the many shared the day of the workshop I attended on U.S.
public schools. But defining these categories isn’t the sole responsibility of the facilitator(s).
It’s primarily a group activity with Justo and Selina assisting in identifying and writing down the
central themes being discussed about the range of and causes for educational outcomes among
Students of Color. Among the generative themes identified that day were “lack of resources,”
“racism,” “resistance,” and “bullying.” The goal was to begin analyzing and deconstructing the
underlying social factors at work informing the stories and experiences shared by participants.

The third step involves identifying codes, or visual artifacts, that best capture the themes
previously discussed. In order to do this, Justo and Selina always come prepared with boxes of
magazines, newspapers, posters, and any other print media they could find and will ask
participants to use this material to search for and cut out images, words, and/or phrases that
reflect the themes. Usually participants are divided into groups for this part of the process, with
each group responsible for one theme. As they collectively look for codes, Justo and Selina
encourage continued dialogue as each group created collages with the images and phrases they
found to represent the multi-faceted nature of each theme. For example, under the theme of
“resistance,” ALIANZA mothers pulled out images of undocumented students graduating from
college, rallies in California against the banning of same-sex marriage, and a photograph of a
Latina mother with her child. For them, all of these images captured different elements of
resistance and were equally important in defining the theme. In their conversation that day, they
discussed how the media often portrays resistance as one-sided, using images of riots and non-
peaceful demonstration to describe the tactics of the “typical resistor.” For ALIANZA parents, resistance can often occur in the everyday actions a mother does to provide her child opportunities that society attempts to deny. As they and the other participants analyzed their choice of codes, Justo pushed them to identify those practices that either hinder or make possible the realities depicted through the images. The goal at this stage during the workshop was to unpack participants’ beliefs about whose to blame for the struggles Students of Color and their families face in public schools and their own role in either perpetuating or challenging these realities.

The fourth step in ALIANZA’s popular education process is to engage in a problem-posing dialogue. Defining this as a fourth step, though, feels a bit artificial since dialogue occurs throughout the entire process. But at this stage, Justo and/or Selina pose a series of questions to engage participants further, often presenting compelling evidence for discussion or using activities to help participants reflect on institutional and societal practices that have historical harmed particular communities in the U.S. They do this, though, always mindful of grounding conversation in the lived experiences shared by participants in the workshop. Although straightforward dialogue is more commonly used by ALIANZA during this step, every now and then creative techniques and activities are used that beautifully showcase Justo and Selina’s talents and pedagogical abilities. Such was the case during the popular education workshop I attended on U.S. public schooling.

During this activity, Justo and Selina first divided the larger group into two. They told each group that they would be responsible for putting together a puzzle and that they would be competing with one another for who could complete the puzzle the fastest. They weren’t allowed to talk to one another or ask for help. A few participants were selected to observe the
entire process, as they would be asked later to comment on what they had witnessed. After everyone agreed to the terms and rules, Justo provided each group with a bag filled with large puzzle pieces. Assembling began instantaneously and feverishly. Having been selected as an observer, it became clear right away that each group had been given pieces to the same puzzle, but between the pressure to complete the task quickly and a desire to adhere to the rules provided, it took a while before anyone realized they were missing pieces. Eventually, a member from one group tapped the shoulder of a participant from the other and through hand gestures signaled that they had been duped into believing they were completing two separate puzzles. They eventually came together and worked jointly to complete the task at hand. The image represented in Figure 14 displays what the puzzle looked like when completed.

![Image of puzzle]

**Figure 15. Puzzle Created by ALIANZA to Represent History of Oppression in the U.S.**

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175 This image was created by an ALIANZA ally, commissioned by the group for the purpose of its popular education activities. It has been inserted here with both her and the group’s permission.
Once the last piece was added to the puzzle, Justo asked everyone to step back and reflect on both the image and the process of putting it together. The first to comment were the assigned observers who laughed about the frustrated looks of participants trying to force puzzle pieces together when, in reality, they were missing pieces all along. Justo then engaged participants around their acceptance of rules without question, noting how society has socialized us into accepting certain norms and practices as commonplace, despite our better judgment. He emphasized that while nothing was keeping any of the participants back from challenging him or Selina on the terms that were set forth at the beginning of this activity, they nonetheless chose to abide, highlighting how powerful the setting of rules can be. Finally, in terms of problem-posing the process of this activity, Justo drew attention to how participants chose to compete rather than cooperate with one another, a product, he argued, of capitalism’s heavy hand in dictating how we relate to one another.

But the most powerful part of the problem-posing process during this workshop came when Justo and Selina facilitated a dialogue about the meaning of the image in the puzzle. As participants identified the historical moments that each of the smaller images represented, Justo and Selina led a discussion about the historical relationship between schooling and Communities of Color in the U.S., using terms like “power,” “oppression,” and “racism” to characterize it. They brought in the themes and codes that participants had identified earlier to argue that many of the practices the image depicts continue today. Finally, they pointed to the blank area in the middle of the image. Here, they said, is where each of the participants must decide if and how they were going to change history. It was left intentionally blank in an effort to collectively identify how they were going to stop oppression from continuing. At this point, Justo and Selina carried on their task of facilitating dialogue but now focused on finding solutions, the fifth step in
the popular education process. They engaged participants in a conversation about what can be, what should be, and what they want to be, as opposed to what is, what must be, and what always will be.

At the end of the workshop, Justo and Selina stressed how important it was to continuously revisit and reevaluate their own realities and the types of solutions employed to create change. Popular education, by nature, is cyclical not linear, with identifiable stages of inquiry. I came to realize as a participant in this workshop that the central goal of its approach is to gain a deeper understanding of the world as dynamic as opposed to static; a historical reality that is susceptible to transformation, as opposed to a fixed fatalistic absolute. As such, it requires that those who use it exercise patience and flexibility as they learn to continuously examine, name, and challenge injustice. This message was clear as Selina and Justo ended the workshop, leaving participants with what was, arguably, an unforgettable experience.

As I reflected back on this and other workshops I attended, I realized that ALIANZA mothers were right in encouraging me to experience these transformative moments first-hand. Only then could I fully grasp just how important popular education has been in developing their sense of political agency and their identities as agents of change. As mainstream society continues to objectify and relegate them to the margins, popular education allows them to reclaim their subjectivity and demand dignity and respect as they fight for what’s just. Through popular education they have developed a shared language of belonging along with new terms to name and speak out against injustice. It reshaped their, “... normative ideas and aspirations about the relationship between motherhood, rights, entitlements, and politics” (Coll, 2010, p. 73). Popular education has radically shifted their understanding of the social world and their role in it, and only from this re-imagined “place,” I argue, are they able to realize their goals as a group of
madres en lucha, and *remake* opportunities for themselves, for their children, and for their communities. The following section briefly explores the task of *realizando y rehaciendo*\(^\text{176}\) as the third, and final approach, used by ALIANZA that captures their efforts to build a type of *political capital* that its members then use to leverage their voice and participation in educational and decision-making spaces.

**Realizando y Rehaciendo: Building Political Capital for Social Change**

When Selina and Justo introduced me to ALIANZA for the first time, they were in the process of undergoing planning for the next five years, which included rewriting their mission and vision statement to reflect the changing nature of their work, one which is constantly adapting to meet the needs of the parents and students they serve. They invited me to the group’s meeting that evening because they both felt it captured the democratic nature of how they operate. In ALIANZA, *all* members are expected to participate in defining the group’s future and *all* have an equal say in decision-making, no matter how small in scale or importance the decision may be. Excited to see them at work for the first time, I entered *la casita* nervously but full of curiosity to see how ALIANZA compared to the group of women I worked with in Northern California. Warmly greeted by many of its members, I took a seat around the table and watched in awe as Selina and Justo engaged the group in a revision process of their mission and vision statements. Although they framed these guiding statements as a perpetual work-in-progress, at the end of the meeting ALIANZA had collectively agreed on what would be the final revisions of their mission and vision for the time being. Both these statements are provided below:

\(^{176}\) Translated to English: realizing and remaking
Misión: Promover el cambio social, cultural y educativo de la comunidad Latina e inmigrante con sentido de justicia social a través de programas que favorezcan su coexistencia y desarrollen su conocimiento y defensa activa de los derechos humanos y civiles. Esto se llevará acabo bajo la propuesta pedagógica de la educación popular (EP), que apoya la construcción de una sociedad justa y democrática.  

Visión: Promover la coexistencia democrática de nuestras comunidades en la vida social con dignidad, respeto e igualdad de oportunidades, favoreciendo la construcción y permanencia de nuestras culturas e identidades como parte de la riqueza socio-cultural con la que contribuimos a esta sociedad.

Although I was still admiring the process ALIANZA used to arrive at these mission and vision statements, I was more impressed with the final products. Both clearly reflected an embracing of their collective identity as madres en lucha, one that employs political agency for social justice and reclaims a place of belonging within the bounds of a U.S. political community, asserting rights as citizens, regardless of legal status, on the basis of their humanity and contributions to society. These statements were profoundly radical, especially when considered against the backdrop of continued anti-immigrant sentiment, legislation, and attacks throughout the country.

Since that meeting, I would often find myself contemplating about the ways in which ALIANZA works to fulfill what it has set out to do. As I watched its members conduct community forums, speak in front of school board and city council members, and organize marches around immigrant rights, among other things, I realized that its mission and vision, at its core, is fundamentally about realizando y rehaciendo. This doesn’t represent a specific activity as much as an underlying strategy and goal of continuously learning about, deconstructing, and

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177 Translated to English: To create social, cultural, and educational change in the Latino community, particularly among immigrants, utilizing programs rooted in social justice that believe in an equitable multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. Our goal is to develop a critical consciousness that can translate into action to defend human and civil rights. To accomplish this we base our work in the pedagogical premises of popular education (PE) that support the construction of a socially just and democratic society.

178 Translated to English: To promote democratic co-existence whereby members of our communities can live with dignity, respect, and have access to equitable opportunities. Our vision is to foment the development and permanency of our cultural and identities as part of the cultural wealth with which we contribute to society.
remaking the relationship between their role as Latina immigrant mothers and the spaces where important decisions are made that affect them, their children and their families. To do this requires the capacity to name and speak out against injustice, but goes one step further to actualize efforts to change what is unjust. For ALIANZA, who have been rendered as outsiders for reasons already discussed, this means redefining and remaking the boundaries of belonging in order to realize the hopes articulated powerfully in their mission and vision statements. I argue that central to this third approach is a strategic effort to build a type of political capital that the group then uses to leverage their voice and participate in reform efforts and rests on members’ confidence and critical know-how of schools and civic institutions.

Before exploring this argument, though, its first important to briefly revisit the multifaceted ways the group honors and builds from its’ membres lived experience, examples of which I provided earlier in this chapter. In re-examining this strategy, I draw from the work of critical race scholars (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso, 2005, 2006) who define a community’s cultural assets and resources accumulated over time as cultural wealth. Within this model, Yosso (2005, 2006) specifically identifies six types of capital that Communities of Color posses but are often ignored, largely the result of mainstream cultural deficit arguments more concerned with identifying pathology in these communities than about celebrating their skills and knowledge. The six types of capital include: aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, linguistic capital, resistant capital, and navigational capital.

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179 Aspirational capital refers to “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of barriers” (Yosso, 2006, p. 41).

180 Familial capital refers to “those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2006, p. 48).

181 Social capital refers to “networks of people and community resources” (Yosso, 2006, p. 45).
Using a community cultural wealth model is useful in framing how ALIANZA views its members’ lived experiences and values what they collectively bring to the table. Through the use of popular education described in the previous section, ALIANZA intentionally builds from the different forms of cultural wealth possessed by the mothers in an effort to jointly develop as political actors, as madres en lucha. But its founders, Justo and Selina, combine this strategy with a critical know-how of how institutions function, showing parents the ropes of how decision-making spaces work and how to operate within their limitations. For example, learning to speak up in spaces that use Robert’s rules of order for conducting business. Some of this is embedded in the workshops they provide but some of this knowledge comes from strategic alliances with other community groups, school and civic leaders, and selected institutional agents. The strategy is meant to develop ALIANZA’s political network along with their political knowledge as a necessary tactic for gaining entry into important decision-making spaces. I have witnessed how this has helped establish their legitimacy in the community over time, particularly since they operate outside of schools, and aided them in developing a broad base of support that has proven vital on several occasions when they campaigned for city-or school-wide policy changes or fought for immigrant rights. The combination of efforts – identifying and building from the mothers’ community cultural wealth, developing a network of political allies, and providing institutional knowledge – has led to the development of ALIANZA’s political capital, which I define as set of critical political skills and wisdom grounded in community cultural wealth, in this case that of ALIANZA parents, but developed through strategic engagement with

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182 Linguistic capital refers to “those intellectual and social skills learned through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (Yosso, 2006, p. 43).

183 Resistant capital refers to “those knowledges and skills cultivated through behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2006, p. 49).

184 Navigational capital refers to “skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (Yosso 2006, p. 44).
institutions and their agents. Figure 16 provides a visual model of how ALIANZA builds political capital. It also connects the critical junctures explored in Chapter 6 for informing community cultural wealth with the group practices examined here.

Figure 16. Building Political Capital in ALIANZA

It’s important to note that in building political capital, ALIANZA adds to its shared community cultural wealth and shapes the spaces and interactions they have within schools and other civic institutions. Some of this has been evidenced by the school district’s provision of ALIANZA’s own space at its headquarters and approving their curriculum for use in parent workshops at all of its elementary and secondary schools. In addition to the material benefit of gaining access to important institutional spaces, building political capital has also profoundly
shaped ALIANZA’s members sense of self, as capable and confident *madres en lucha*. During our focus group, they referred to these skills and knowledge as *herramientas* or tools necessary for the work they do. As Clara so fittingly described, “es imposible ser buen cocinero si no tienes una licuadora, sartén – pues, herramientas básicas de la cocina, tu sabes. De la misma forma creo que es imposible ser buen líder si no tienes las herramientas que resultan de un conocimiento amplio y profundo de nuestro mundo. ALIANZA nos da esa herramientas para poder seguir luchando y peleando por nuestros hijos.”

In closing, I’m reminded of a long conversation I had with Justo one afternoon at Don Beto’s, as we worked to plan a series of popular education workshops that he and the mothers had decided to call, *la universidad dentro del pueblo.* He shared with me that ALIANZA’s efforts to *realizar y rehacer* don’t simply refer to the project of remaking the world around them. *Realizando y rehaciendo* is first and foremost a project of consciousness-raising, of redefining themselves that makes it possible to create change. As I concluded this chapter, Justo had recently passed away, succumbing to a long battle with cancer. In the time that I was privileged to share with him, learning, laughing, and dreaming as both friends and allies, I came to know first-hand the power of his efforts to transform all of us in ALIANZA into political actors. He allowed me the opportunity to *realizar mis sueños*, and for that I will be eternally grateful. I end here honoring his memory, a testament of what’s possible if we embrace our right and responsibility as agents of change.

185 Translated to English: it is impossible to be a good cook if you don’t have a blender, pan – well, you know the basic kitchen utensil. In the same way, I believe that it is impossible to be a good leader without the tools that come from a profound knowledge of how the world works. ALIANZA has given us those tools so that we can continue fighting for our children.

186 Translated to English: the university inside the community
CHAPTER 8

Conclusion
Del Coraje a la Esperanza: 187 Lessons from ALIANZA

“Mientras Hay Vida Hay Esperanza188”

Walking down the long driveway, grocery bags in hand I can hear Junior scream out to his mother, “quieres que mueva el carro?189” I couldn’t help but turn to Olga in shock that her son, that I helped mentor in middle school, was already driving. She laughed, as did her sister Amanda, a recent addition to the ALIANZA family, who was walking closely behind us. As I mentally noted how much time had passed since I first met Olga, she quickly reminded me of our history together by pointing out the extensive garden in front of her home. “Te acuerdas Vero? Me ayudaste a plantar el durazno y la mata de cilantro. Y ahora, ve como han crecido190.” I did remember. Several of us in ALIANZA had come to help Olga settle into her home and ‘break ground,’ so to speak, in the planting of her family’s garden. It was from this very place that we enjoyed most of our snacks at our group’s meetings. Olga, afterall, had been given the informal title of ALIANZA’s cook. As we continued our walk, Olga’s 91-year old aunt walked slowly to greet us, arms stretched out and calling me by a name that felt so intimately familiar, “mija, como estas?191” I placed the groceries on the floor and embraced her and responded, “muy bien y usted como esta?192” Before she could respond, Junior, Fatima, Belen, and the rest of Olga’s and Amanda’s crew came out to greet us and help with the groceries. Earlier in the week, I had asked Olga and Amanda if I could come by and interview them for ‘the book,’ as they understood my dissertation project, and, at the same time, strategize about the next school board meeting. We had planned a strategy meeting with ALIANZA later that night but Olga asked for some additional support as she was planning to present in front of the board the following week. But when I arrived, Olga had forgotten that it was her husband’s birthday and so we made a quick trip to the grocery store to prepare his favorite meal – enchiladas. I could already hear the older girls inside cutting up produce. As I turned to walk into Olga’s home, I heard another ALIANZA mother, Elena, yell from a

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187 Translated to English: from rage to hope

188 Mexican saying that is closely translated to English as “while there’s life, there’s hope”

189 Translated to English: do you want me to move the car?

190 Translated to English: do you remember Vero? You helped me plant the peach tree and the cilantro plant. And now look how much they’ve grown.

191 Translated to English: ‘daughter’ (as a term of endearment) how are you?

192 Translated to English: very well and how are you?
window next door, “tocalla, necesitas ayuda? I laughed and waved her toward the house. At this point, we needed all the help we could get. It was 4PM and the meeting was at 6PM, making plainly evident the challenge of getting the meal done in time. I had even told Olga that maybe she should skip out on the ALIANZA meeting to which she quickly responded, “no, Vero, no puedo. Tenemos un compromiso y no podemos faltar.” As I walked inside, the busy sounds of six women at work, sounded like home. I quickly washed my hands, and took my place alongside Olga. My role? To roll the enchiladas after Olga had filled them with her specialty picadillo. She smiled and said to me, “No pensabas estar haciendo enchiladas hoy, verdad? Pero me siento cómoda contigo. Nos has ganado con tu forma de ser, principalmente por tu compromiso al grupo. Sabemos que podemos contar contigo y que al final del día, no nos vas a defraudar. Nuestra lucha y nuestras metas son las mismas y por eso quiero ayudarte con tu libro, porque también siento que es mío.”

They say the first choice is usually the right choice. Nevertheless, for months, I have been racking my brain in the quest for a perfect title to this dissertation. I all but drove my husband and ALIANZA parents crazy asking them to help me come up with a “better” title. Each time, they would sit in silence for a moment, contemplating . . . or perhaps just wondering when my obsession over the title to this manuscript would end. Despite my husband’s usual knack for providing me with wonderful suggestions, nothing came this time. He liked the title.

It was only me who kept second-guessing it in my desire that every aspect of this manuscript worthily honor ALIANZA and accurately reflect its essence. I wanted Olga and the other mothers to be proud of me, to be proud of this work. This was their book but I was still

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193 Translated to English: tocalla (a Spanish term used to refer to someone that has the same name) do you need help?

194 Translated to English: I can’t Vero. We made a commitment and we can’t disappoint.

195 Dish made from ground beef and vegetables

196 Translated to English: You didn’t think that you were going to be making enchiladas today, right? But I feel comfortable with you. You have won us over with the way you are, but mainly because of your commitment to the group. We know we can count on you and that, at the end of day, you won’t disappoint us. Our struggle and our goals are the same and that is why I want to help you with your book, because I also feel that it is mine.

197 This excerpt was taken from a personal journal I have been using to document my experiences working with ALIANZA. This excerpt, dated July 2010, reflects only my recollections and reflections of the event it describes.
primarily responsible for making it all come together and the stress of producing it had all but overwhelmed me.

It was not until I began to think back on the history and process of this study and reflect about the lessons learned from ALIANZA that it finally became clear to me that the phrase “del coraje a la esperanza” in fact more aptly captured the essence of the pivotal aspects of this study, its genesis and its conclusions than I had previously thought. I, thus, conclude this manuscript by sharing my final thoughts about the journey of working with ALIANZA’s mujeres en lucha, del coraje a la esperanza.

Revisiting the Genesis of My Journey

As I discussed in the introduction to this manuscript, I worked as a parent organizer in Northern California prior to starting graduate school. In this role, I supported the efforts of Latina/o parents, most of whom were undocumented immigrants, in creating spaces, both inside and outside of schools, that facilitated their participation in local politics and school decision-making. It was during my time in this position, that I first came to realize how institutions, namely schools, could function to marginalize the very communities they blame for not being more involved in education. I would later come to realize that the misjudgment and misconception by the teachers and administration of the parent community as uninvolved and disinterested, though far from accurate, was a prevalent reality. And though I organically began to discover the parents’ counter-stories, fought to showcase their cultural wealth and began to witness the parents speak truth back at the teachers and administration in the beginnings of resistance, I stumbled along without the benefit of the literature and theoretical lenses I set forth in Chapters 2 and 3. As a result, I knew something was wrong, but I lacked the tools to name it
and frame it. Operating purely by intuition, I tried to make the case to the teachers and administration that the parents were neither disinterested nor uninvolved simply because they did not participate in PTAs (parent teacher associations), would not make meetings held during the day, and would not actively participate in the meetings they did attend. I shared my observations of the parent community which spoke volumes about just how much they cared about their children’s educational development and schooling, how they regularly attended meetings I held during the evenings or on weekends at times they could actually attend, and how they actively participated at those meetings, which were held in Spanish, and were quite capable of forming and sharing their ideas with regard to school governance. I tried to explain to the school that they needed to adjust their rigid ideas about what parent involvement looked like and how it happened, hold meetings at more appropriate times, make them bilingual and give Latina/o immigrant parents a place at the decision-making table. They would not listen. In fact, they affirmed their misjudgments of the parents and it was angering.

In frustration, I turned to my peers and superiors and requested training and other resources that could help me get through to the teachers and administration, but they simply did not have the resources to devote to such an issue. They told me that there was no room to discuss what they considered the “philosophical” matters of parent involvement, because, from their perspective, there was only time for doing the work that my position as a community organizer required. Thus, I was on my own.

This experience was trying, to say the least. The parent community had a lot to offer and deserved so much more. They had the potential to really improve the school and the educational experience of their children if only the teachers and administration were willing to form a partnership with them. It was from this place of coraje that I turned to graduate school for
answers. I discovered the literature on Latina/o parent involvement, particularly as it relates to
Latina/o immigrants, and learned that the deficit thinking I had experienced first-hand in
Northern California was the dominant attitude. I also discovered Critical Race Theory in
general, and Latino Critical Race Theory in particular, which provided me with a critical lens
from which to turn deficit thinking on its head and counter it. The veil was lifted and I began to
understand what I had organically begun to experience working as a community organizer. Thus
began my journey toward esperanza.

Towards a Radical and Ethical Methodology

I was then introduced to ALIANZA. This was particularly exciting because, despite
enjoying the learning that was taking place as a scholar, I missed the parent group in Northern
California and my work as an activist/organizer. I also could not help but want to put the
learning to practical use. At the outset of our relationship, however, I had no thought nor
intention of turning ALIANZA into a case study for this manuscript. I was dead bent on keeping
my identities as a scholar and organizer/activist separate.

The reason for this attitude was one of respect for the parent community. I had learned
that working with Latina/o immigrant parents requires trust building, confianza. As I worked
side-by-side with the members of ALIANZA over the years, I began to build their trust, so much
so, that they came to accept me not just as an ally but as a full-fledged member, despite the fact
that I was neither an immigrant nor a mother. Ironically, the closer I got to ALIANZA, the more
I began to see just how unique an organization it was and the value in documenting its story, not
only to educate the academy but also for the benefit of other Latina/o immigrant parent groups
seeking to effect social and educational change. But I did not want to mix business with
pleasure, so to speak, and potentially jeopardize my relationship with many of the group’s members who I consider close friends.

Interestingly, the conversation came up and the members of ALIANZA felt that a case study could be useful to them for self-assessment purposes, would give them an avenue into the academy and could provide helpful lessons for other immigrant parent groups. Thus, we organized three separate meetings with the mothers to design and craft research questions, objectives, goals, and a collaborative approach to the study. It was important to all of us that it would be a joint narrative. Yet, even as we began planning for the study, I was hesitant. I had seen too many instances in which self-interest and academic requirement caused research to draw knowledge from Communities of Color without giving anything back, something I considered to be exploitative and unethical. I worried that our research protocols and methodology could ultimately require me to compromise my relationship with the group and that ALIANZA’s voice may ultimately be drowned out by my own.

But as the mothers began articulating this study as a platform for something larger, as a document that would support the aims of the group, I realized that despite my fears and hesitation, it was a worthy task to undertake. My sense for its feasibility began to take shape as I learned about participatory action research and Chicana feminist epistemology and saw the possibility for designing this study in such a way that ALIANZA would help guide the interpretation of data and presentation of the findings so that the research was, indeed, collaborative and useful to them. ALIANZA agreed with my proposal and the study began.

Through the process of carrying it out, we developed a different kind of relationship, one based in caring and authentic reciprocity, where the parents and I shared the same goals and worked side-by-side to exert change in our local schools and through the study. Although I later
realized that transitioning from the role of organizer to the role of researcher was one of the most challenging aspects of my study, the mothers allowed me into their lives in ways that I could have never imagined. Once the study got underway I realized how powerful it was to have the opportunity to co-narrate a research process built on such loving, honest, and intimate relationships.

Reflecting in hindsight, I realized just how important *symbiosis*, or interdependence, between researcher and those being researched was to carry out this project. A symbiotic relationship in research, as I argued in Chapter 4, requires an intricate entanglement between the production of a research project, which necessarily includes our theoretical and epistemological position, and standing in solidarity with and working alongside the students and families whose lives are the focus of our work. Honoring and embracing these symbiotic relationships was also the product of a conscientious reliance on my professional experience of having worked as a community organizer with Latina/o immigrant families for over a decade. Drawing from this source of cultural intuition, I deeply understood the vulnerability of ALIANZA mothers in my research. Because of the immigration status of several of the mothers, similar to those I had worked with as a community organizer, I had an ethical and moral obligation to go above and beyond the standard protections required for research participants in the social sciences. It was imperative that it no way I put the integrity of the research project before the safety of my research collaborators. Thus, I enacted a social justice stance guided by a Chicana feminist orientation and took a silent evidentiary position throughout discussions in the findings where the issue of undocumented status of one or several of the ALANZTA parents arose. As a Chicana feminist researcher, I argue that the decision to take a silent evidentiary position is at the core of how I am called to transform the academy.
At the end of the process, I realized that this project allowed me to transform my own coraje into esperanza, and I hope documenting the story of ALIANZA did the same for the parents I was privileged to collaborate with. The intent to enter this work from the start determined to produce a product that was as much, or more useful, to the work on the ground than to the academy, taught me what it means to produce authentically liberatory research. It was a process, although difficult at times, that refused to accept that the “ends justify the means,” in other words, that what matters is what is produced through research rather than how it was produced. I believe that employing a radical and ethical methodology, as I have attempted to do here, can offer possibilities for future scholars to consider not just how they go about conducting research with transformative potential but their very commitment through and beyond the research process to the communities and individuals that their work purports to serve.

**Revisiting the Research Questions**

*How have members of ALIANZA come to see themselves as agents of change?*

When I started this study, I expected to find that ALIANZA was primarily responsible for developing its members as agents of educational and civic change. I instead found that each of the members of ALIANZA had undergone life experiences that brought them to ALIANZA with an already developed sense of political agency. As we collectively analyzed the data, it became apparent that there were three common junctures important in triggering their development of political agency: (1) their early schooling experiences, (2) their migration across the border to the U.S. and (3) their experiences dealing with U.S. schools as mothers. These stories, like my own experience leading to this study, were also instances of “del coraje a la esperanza.”
This was evident in Guadalupe’s rage at her neighbors’ ridicule and statements that she should stay home and tend to her siblings, a rage that only fueled her desire to learn and go to school. Felicia’s coraje at her father’s pulling her out of school to work full-time sweeping hair for tips at a salon yielded to esperanza as the salon owner provided her with magazines and newspapers that helped her become a good reader and be conscious of what was happening in the world. Or Amanda’s attempt to resist her father’s will by sneaking away to visit museums to maintain her status as a learner despite no longer being in school. Each of these stories provides powerful testimony about how important early schooling, whether it occurred in formal or informal spaces, was to the development of political agency among ALIANZA parents. It was here that many of them first understood how education rendered certain things possible in life, and thus became the platform through which they would later fight for the same right for their own children.

One of the most, if not the most, powerful example of transforming rage into hope occurred in migrating to the U.S. for many of ALIANZA’s mothers, in particular those considered undocumented. Painful and powerful stories were shared about the life-defying nature of crossing the border through the desert on foot, often having to traverse dangerous and difficult terrain to get to el norte. The pain of one mother who was still breastfeeding her youngest daughter when she crossed exemplifies what it meant for many of ALIANZA’s members to cross as women and mothers. The legacy of that experience is one that is embodied, continuously experienced through the flesh, and serves as a reminder for why their efforts today as madres en lucha are so urgent and necessary. Taken together, these stories reveal what is arguably the most powerful example of esperanza, and give meaning to the dicho that opens this concluding chapter. They demonstrate that even in moments when the mothers felt their own
lives were at risk, they held on to a hope that gave them the will to continue even beyond what they felt was humanly possible and, thus, had direct implications for their development of political agency and their identities as political actors.

Finally, the stories of ALIANZA parents interacting with their children’s public schools for the first time voice a collective coraje at being treated as an outsider, considered an incapable parent, or seen as simply clueless about the educational system or any institution for that matter. Olga’s rage was evident in her retelling of the moment the office manager at her son’s school questioned her ability to distinguish between her son’s cumulative school report and “any other paper.” Frustration and anger was also part of Dolores’s narrative describing her interaction with Lizet’s teacher who didn’t take too kindly when Dolores questioned her teaching philosophy. Similar descriptions of coraje were evident in the experiences of other mothers in the group who described what it felt like to be told they had language “impediments” as Spanish-speaking parents to participation in school site councils, or to have teachers advise they turn off the Spanish soap operas if they expected their children to succeed, or to be told that only citizens can complain and raise issues at school board meetings. Many of these moments served as direct triggers that led them to ALIANZA, where the transformation of rage to hope as they developed a collective political identity as madres en lucha, manifested most powerfully. How this transformation occurred is summarized next.

*How have ALIANZA’s members’ perceptions of themselves as agents of change translated into collective action?*

Without question, all of the mothers identified ALIANZA as crucial and central to their development as political actors. They initially came to the group with concerns, coraje, and first-hand experiences of being rebuffed by institutions in hope that ALIANZA could help them. While difficult to capture all ALIANZA has done toward this end, there were several defining
practices that ultimately make the case for using ALIANZA as a model for unpacking the politics of participation for Latina/o immigrant parents in schools and society at large and showcasing what’s necessary to engage parents, like those in ALIANZA, in social reform. Three central practices stood out that ALIANZA utilizes to develop its membership, insert itself into educational and civic decision-making arenas, and seek equitable outcomes for low-income families, particularly Latina/o immigrants: (1) conviviendo y desahogando, which involves the creation of counter-spaces where members come together to celebrate culturally based traditions, share concerns about a range of topics and issues without judgment, heal from past abuse, and build solidarity; (2) aprendiendo a hablar y luchar, where ALIANZA’s leaders employ popular education through workshops and trainings to help its members identify, name, and speak out against injustice; and (3) realizando y rehaciendo, a strategic effort to build a type of political capital that the group then uses to leverage their voice and participation in reform efforts and rests on members’ confidence and critical know-how of schools and civic institutions. Each of these strategies was part of ALIANZA’s collective work to transform coraje a la esperanza.

This was evident in Elena’s story about the importance of counter-space that honored her experiences, made her feel she mattered and allowed her to voice her concerns, unlike the school district meeting she attended on parent engagement where her attempts to make a comment about the ineffectiveness of the process were immediately silenced. Or Caridad’s testimony about how ALIANZA allowed her to desahogar in ways that were necessary for regaining her strength and confidence as a mother and working to help her son as he transitioned from college and into the army. Several of the other mothers also described feeling a sense of strength and empowerment because the group operated in ways and within spaces that validated and honored their language, traditions, cultural norms and practices, and lived experiences, in ways that rarely occurred
within other institutional spaces. Having ALIANZA as their home base was necessary to their recovery and to regaining a sense of purpose and “wholeness” as political actors. They felt their autoestima was nurtured, healed, and strengthened, an indispensible process and outcome critical for doing the work required of them as madres en lucha. Thus, these examples highlight the importance of conviviendo y desahogando as a strategy practiced by ALIANZA to help its members transform rage into hope by ensuring that they persevere and persist as madres en lucha through the use of counter-spaces.

Second, were efforts to aprender a hablar y luchar that utilized popular education to help the mothers understand, name, and challenge injustice. By participating in the process of assessing reality, identifying generative themes and codes, engaging in problem-posing dialogue, and working together to find solutions, I had the opportunity to witness first-hand, as a participant and later organizer of popular education workshops through ALIANZA, just how powerful popular education has been in developing the parents’ sense of political agency and their identities as agents of change. It radically shifted their understanding of the social world and their role in it, and only from this re-imagined “place,” I argue, are they able to realize their goals as a group of madres en lucha, which leads to the final strategy of realizando y rehaciendo.

Here, ALIANZA works to build political capital that its members then use to leverage their voice and participation in reform efforts. By identifying and building from the mothers’ community cultural wealth, developing a network of political allies, and providing institutional knowledge, ALIANZA has helped to provide its members a set of critical political skills and knowledge. These skills, I argue, have redefined and remade the boundaries of belonging to render ALIANZA members as viable actors in efforts to create change, and in doing so, to realize their hopes and dreams as madres en lucha.
Future Research

The day we concluded our collective analysis, it was clear to all of us that this dissertation is only the beginning of future research projects for ALIANZA. One of the areas that went underexplored was how their allies perceive their influence in the community as a whole and how other parents, outside of the group, make sense of ALIANZA’s efforts to insert the Latina/o immigrant parent voice into school politics. This is important, in part, to better assess ALIANZA’s impact on local decision-making and better situate its efforts in regard to other groups and organizations within the same community. In addition to future studies on ALIANZA, it would also be interesting to do a comparative analysis to other similar parent groups, both locally as well as across the state and country, to better understand the spectrum of issues that Latina/o parents are facing today as political actors. This is particularly critical, especially as certain states have become increasingly hostile toward Latina/o immigrants, such as Arizona and Georgia, making it undoubtedly difficult for groups like ALIANZA to sustain their efforts in these states.

Contributions

As explained in Chapter 2, a widespread stereotype or “myth” that Latina/o parents do not value education continues to exist in educational research and practice. This notion is based in deficit thinking, in particular cultural deficit arguments that attempt to explain the school failure of Latina/o children. While there is a small body of qualitative and ethnographic research investigating the socialization practices of Latina/o parents that reveals a different reality from that posed by the erroneous deficit claims of their educational apathy (Solorzano, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdes, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002; Coll, 2010; Dyrness, 2011), few studies
have provided critical portrayals of the efforts of Latina/o immigrant parents to insert themselves in educational reform (Delgado-Gaitan 1990, 2001; Dryness, 2011). This study, guided by a LatCrit framework, extends and further contributes to that work, additionally providing evidence of noteworthy efforts by undocumented immigrant parents to engage with their local educational system and broader, related civic issues.

The findings of this study, as informed by a LatCrit analysis, not only furthers the work of the individuals above but also help us understand how Parents of Color generally, and Latina/o parents specifically, engage both the figurative and literal spaces afforded them in schools to bring about change. This manuscript, therefore, calls for a move from a parent involvement paradigm to one of parent engagement.

In defining parent engagement in contrast to parent involvement, I argue that a LatCrit framework is essential in crafting a more nuanced and critical model for how we study and come to understand the efforts of parents in groups like ALIANZA. A parent engagement approach in educational research recognizes the importance of the relationship between the activities and strategies employed by parents to exert their voice and the context that affects, informs, and may even be contested by such efforts. In other words, it acknowledges how ideology works to shape the very spaces that parents then either come to occupy, or are marginalized from, in schools.

This is in contrast to a notion of parent involvement that connotes an idea that parents work to involve themselves within generally accepted spaces, such as parent-teacher associations, or in generally accepted forms, such as those outlined by the 1987 publication of “What Works,” noted above. The focus within a parent involvement paradigm, I argue, is solely toward examining the participation, or lack thereof, of parents without adequately examining how broader mechanisms are at play that have a direct influence on this participation. By
shifting to a parent engagement framework, research becomes more attuned to capturing the important connection between what parents do in terms of educational reform and the context in which they do it. It recognizes that parents, particularly working class Parents of Color, engage and may even seek to transform the spaces often allocated for them in schools in order to create the change they hope to see for their children and communities. This also includes efforts to create new spaces to more effectively carry out their intentions and efforts. This type of framework is consistent with a LatCrit approach that calls on educational researchers to examine the important contextual elements, such as race, class, and gender that are crucial for understanding the experiences and efforts of Communities of Color, particularly Latinas/os.

It is important to note that the shift I am suggesting to a parent engagement framework simply allows for a broader analysis of the institutional and political context in which groups like ALIANZA find themselves. The specific elements that define parental engagement emerge from the data and counter-stories of ALIANZA parents themselves, through a grounded theory approach that I detailed in Chapter 4. In particular, ALIANZA’s work illustrates how necessary it is to disrupt ideologies that have rendered them as outsiders in order to do their work as madres en lucha.

This case study additionally provides a framework for what parent-school partnerships should look like, particularly in California’s growing number of schools serving predominantly Latina/o immigrant families. There are lessons to be learned regarding policies affecting or governing parent involvement and school governance. Namely, ALIANZA’s efforts establish that providing spaces that recognize the community cultural wealth of Latina/o families encourages and increases participation on behalf of Latina/o immigrant parents, permits their meaningful input into the educational experience and actively combats a silencing of their voices.
and their valuable contributions. Furthermore, examining how ALIANZA challenges institutions as a group and comes together to create new opportunities for themselves, their families, and their communities debunks the deficit notion that Latina/o immigrant parents lack the interest or capacity to exert political agency. Moreover, the model and practices designed and implemented by ALIANZA can serve to support other groups, similar to ALIANZA, as they work to exert change in their own communities.

Finally, as one of my committee members pointed out after reviewing this manuscript, the story of ALIANZA is also a powerful story of a community of organic intellectuals. I was not looking at that aspect for this study but I most certainly agree and believe it a contribution worth mentioning. As he aptly stated, not only are ALIANZA parents engaged in political work, but they are engaged in a vibrant intellectual community, producing stories and insights that become lessons for their children, other parents, and community members with which they come into contact.

As I look back on the journey that the members of ALIANZA so graciously allowed me to make with them through this collaborative study, I cannot help but acknowledge the invaluable education with which they have provided me. It is from them that I have learned that, “mientras hay vida, hay esperanza.” And it is from this place of hope that I bring this manuscript to a close and pass on the story of ALIANZA, that it may serve to further educate and bring hope to those in search of it.
APPENDIX A

Participant Observation Protocol

Date of Observation:
Duration of Observation:
Location of Observation:

Physical Setting:
1. What is the physical environment like?
2. What is the context?
3. What kinds of behavior is the setting designed for?
4. How is space allocated?
5. What resources are made available in this setting?

Participants:
1. Who is in the setting?
2. How many people are there?
3. What is each person’s role?

Activities and interactions:
1. What is going on?
2. Is there a definable sequence of activities?
3. How do people interact with each activity and with one another?
4. How are people and activities connected or related?
5. What norms or rules structure the activities and interactions?
6. Indicate major resources (i.e. materials, technology, etc.)
7. Indicate the major ways in which participant activities are structure (i.e. as a whole group, small group, pairs, individuals)
8. Include the major activities of participants in this session

Conversations:
1. What is the content of conversations in this setting?
2. Who speaks to whom?
3. Who listens?

Subtle factors:
4. What are the informal activities occurring in the setting?
5. What is the symbolic meaning of words?
6. Indication examples of nonverbal communication

Researcher’s Behavior:
1. What is my role in this setting?
2. How is my role affecting what is occurring in this setting?
3. How do participants responds to what I say and do?
APPENDIX B

Interview I Protocol

1. Completely review the Consent to Participate in Research form with the participant. Use the Spanish form if they are more comfortable in Spanish. Ask if they have any questions or concerns about the form or the interview procedures. Have them sign the form if they are willing to participate in the study.

2. Set time and place for the interview. The interviews will last about 1.5 hours.

3. Conduct the interview in the language that is most comfortable for the participant (Spanish or English). An English tape log will be created of the tape including the type of contact, who was involved, place, site and date of contact, date the tape was transcribed and the person(s) who transcribed it. Any parts of the interview to be used for the dissertation will be transcribed and then translated into English.

4. The tape logs will be numbered, indexed, and filed by the name of the parent leader together with the tape and any accompanying documents. These documents will be maintained in a file cabinet in a locked facility (my home office).

** The following protocols only provide broad guides. They will help direct me to explore topics with each parent and will be tailored accordingly depending if the parent interviewed is part of ALIANZA current governing body, a member of its current constituency, or a previous member. They are not meant to be exhaustive.

1. Demographics
   a. Name
   b. Age
   c. Birthplace
   d. Educational Attainment
   e. School(s) children attend

2. Experiences as a parent in public schools in U.S.
   a. Did you feel that the school was open to you at first? Please describe.
   b. What expectations did you feel the school had of you as a parent?
   c. Did you become involved at first? If not, what deterred you?
   d. Are you now involved at your child(ren)’s school(s)? If so, how?
   e. Since you have become involved in ALIANZA, are you more involved at your child(ren)’s school(s)? In which ways?
   f. How do you think teachers and/or the principal at your child(ren)’s school see you?

3. Experience as a parent in civic institutions
   a. What has been your experience with different civic institutions?
   b. Do you feel comfortable in these spaces? Please describe.
c. What was your experience with civic institutions in your country of origin? How are the different from the experience you have here?
d. Tell me about how you became more civically involved?
e. How do you think civic leaders see you?
f. How do you think other community residents see you?

4. General Activism
   a. Were you political involved in your country of origin? If so, how?
   b. When did you begin to become more involved politically?

5. Other General Questions
   a. Do you feel that you been treated differently because of your
      i. Race/ethnic background
      ii. Income level?
      iii. Gender?
      iv. Immigration Status?
   b. Please describe these experiences
APPENDIX C

Interview II Protocol

1. Introduction to ALIANZA
   a. How did you find out about ALIANZA?
   b. What was your first reaction?
   c. What was the first activity/workshop/event that you did with ALIANZA?

2. Experiences with ALIANZA
   a. How long have you been in ALIANZA?
   b. Overall, how would you describe your experience?
   c. What have you learned since being in ALIANZA?
   d. How would you define ALIANZA’s overall mission and purpose?
   e. Why is ALIANZA significant to you?
   f. What have been some of the most memorable experiences as a member of ALIANZA?

3. Activities with ALIANZA
   a. How does ALIANZA generally organize its activities?
   b. How does ALIANZA make decisions?
   c. How do you see your role within ALIANZA?
   d. What types of pedagogies are employed in organizing activities?
   e. What are the major activities?

4. Future of ALIANZA
   a. What do you think is the future of ALIANZA?
   b. What do you think is needed to sustain ALIANZA?
   c. Where would you like ALIANZA to go in the future?
   d. How do you see your role in the future of ALIANZA?
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