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“The majority of students likely to fulfill the baseline criteria for admission to top colleges come from upper-middle class families that can afford to provide their children with educational opportunities from early on in life. Consequently, instead of trying to expand college access to low-income students by implementing modest reforms in the college admissions process, reform should focus on improving educational opportunity for young children in low-income areas (Stevens, 2008, p. A53).”

Introduction

As a Latina student I myself experience profoundly the absence of other Latinos in higher education. I live the statistics that I research. At times it is disheartening to see that over twenty years have passed since I first entered college and that statistically Latinos are still significantly underrepresented in attaining four year college degrees. This is despite the various programs that exist to help Latinos access higher education. As a parent of two young children who are in the beginning stages of their schooling, and an active member of the Latino community, the issue of access to high quality education is all the more pressing to me. I see firsthand the desperate need to help low Socio Economic Status (SES) Latino parents through the education process. Using my own lived experiences, I will address the concept of empowerment that is absolutely necessary if we are to truly address why Latinos are underrepresented in higher education.

I work in a very exciting position as a study abroad administrator in higher education. This position allows me to exercise many functions: I can serve as the academic counselor, the dean of students, the therapist, the registrar, and the contracts negotiator, to name a few, in a well regarded NW Liberal Arts College. Although I hold a competitively sought after position and fit into my environment very neatly, I feel that I must share my story if I am

going to challenge the status quo that is inherent in higher education. However, telling my story needs to be framed in theory so that my esteemed colleagues can better understand my path as representative of a broader picture. It is not enough to say that I fit in and that no one would suspect that I am the first in my family to go beyond third grade on my mother's side and sixth grade on my father's side. Obtaining a master's degree through Portland State University offered me the opportunity to obtain my degree while allowing me to work and parent. The program also provided me with the theoretical tools that allow me to write this biography through an academic lens.

In addition to giving me theoretical skills graduate school also awakened my true passion in higher education, which is to work toward addressing the absence of Latinos in higher education. Through the content in this program I experienced firsthand what transformational change is. I went from being a higher education manager to accepting my role as a leader in my community. According to Astin (2000):

...leadership is a process that is ultimately concerned with fostering **change**. In contrast to the notion of "management," which suggests preservation or maintenance, "leadership" implies a process where there is movement – from wherever we are now to some future place or condition that is different. Leadership also implies **intentionality**, in the sense that the implied change is not random – "change for change's sake"- but is rather directed toward some future end or condition which is desired or valued. Accordingly, leadership is a purposive process which is inherently **value-based** (p. 8).

The program's primary goal of ensuring critical thinking is what awakened my political consciousness. I was no longer satisfied with my professional role but since I did not find an outlet professionally I sought to cultivate my transformation through giving back to the Latino community.

The PACE program at Portland State University modeled theory into practice very simply; the professors incorporated our collective knowledge base as adult learners and directed us to the theory that validated and/or challenged our life experiences. We were empowered through theory to make sense of our own environment. In the words of Merriam and Caffarella (1999, p.223), as a learner I was able to connect what I had learned from current and past experiences and see possible future implications. I stopped seeing myself as just an administrator and began to see myself as an agent of change. Now, with my the understanding of theory and critical thinking I am able to seek out research, critically analyze it and present it to my higher education peers and community at large, in the hopes of creating change.

One of the core classes for this program is Social Foundations of Education. In this class we studied the history of education in the United States and the inequalities that have existed and continue to exist today. I had gone through my undergraduate education not understanding why, although I had graduated from high school with high marks and had taken all of the college preparatory courses that I still had a difficult time adjusting to the academic rigors of my undergraduate education at the Claremont Colleges. I had no words to process my experience until I sat in the Social Foundations class and read authors like Kozol,(1991). It was Kozol who used side by side comparison to get me to understand why my experience was one of being relegated to attending schools that were the least funded and least academically challenging in Los Angeles County through the Pomona Unified School district. Although I knew that schools were primarily funded through property taxes I didn't fully understand the implications of how this funding creates inequality. According to Kozol (1991):

The answer is found, at least in part, in the arcane machinery by which we finance public education. Most public schools in the United States depend for their initial funding to a tax on local property...the property tax is the

decisive force in shaping inequality. The property tax depends, of course, upon the taxable value of one's home and that of local industries...Typically in the United States, very poor communities place high priority on education, and they often tax themselves at higher rates than do the very affluent communities. But, even if they tax themselves at several times the rate of an extremely wealthy district, they are likely to end up with far less money for each child in their schools (p.55).

Although I would never change the experiences I had growing up in South Pomona, because those experiences are at the core of who I am, like; going to the local pool with friends; growing up in a culdesac where I knew everyone, having caring teachers during each step of my academic development, living in a diverse community that validated who I was as a Latina, I do resent the fact that we had underfunded schools with limited access to textbooks, limited access to more advanced classes and just basic funding to help our dedicated teachers be better equipped to help us.

As an undergraduate I could see that I was not as prepared academically as my peers. I had no idea that it was because my first through twelfth grade experience was not the same as that of my peers. It was not until later that I understood that my peers came into higher education from some of the best preparatory schools in the United States and were better prepared academically. It was not that I was inherently lacking intelligence, but rather that I did not have the same set of academic tools with which to work. When we were all asked to build onto our academic foundation, my peers already had a solid foundation and were using their academic bulldozer to build their academic dreams. Meanwhile, there I was with a crumbling academic foundation competing with the equivalent of a spoon. I reconstructed my education foundation while putting together my own bulldozer, which came in the form of professors who had faith in me and gave me the academic tools and parts that I was missing.

According to deMarrais and LeCompte (1999, p.32), critical theorists would look at my educational experience and validate it by, "point[ing] a way out,

emphasizing the power of individuals to structure their own destiny and to ameliorate the oppressive nature of the institutions in which they live,” which is exactly what I did with the help of my professors. They understood better than I did, at the time, that with their support I would persist. Pitzer College was the best place for me to have attended undergraduate college as this institution prides itself in radical socialist reform with professors who want to reconstruct the education paradigm. I was not asked to conform to high SES status, the environment was designed to validate where I was at that time in my development, I was valued as an individual.

As part of my graduate program, I decided to also take courses in History and Sociology with Latino themes to better understand my own community, our history in the United States, and how these pertain to current higher education issues. I also chose to apply this hybrid information into the volunteer work that I do in the Latino community. I share this and other important information with the parents I mentor on how to advocate for their children in the PK-12 system, with the goal that more Latinos will qualify for higher education, persist and graduate. Using my education as a tool for social justice, I work to make a difference for low SES Latino parents in my community by empowering them to advocate for the academic aspirations that they have for their children.

Becoming informed about Latino history and our social experiences in the United States empowered me to develop my public discourse abilities and writing abilities. These abilities are essential to making my voice and experience heard in my professional and community life. As a result I am not afraid to ask people to challenge their beliefs about Latinos. I do this through the topics that I research and write about and the discourse I choose to partake in, as a professional and as an informal leader in my community.

I have come to understand that because of the demographics in my environment, I tend to be the only Latina in my academic courses, my place of work and the general community. Rather than being angry about this

fact, I have embraced it and have decided to be a voice that needs to be heard in an effort to create positive change. As Rocco and West (1998) state:

If we do not reflect upon the assumptions that create privilege, the current power structures will be reproduced, but with different targets as demographics change. It is in the interests of both dominant and marginalized members of society to examine privilege and learn how to create equitable systems and structures. Otherwise, we run the risk of victimizers becoming victims while former victims revel in our victimization (p.172).

Realizing that the Latino population is exploding, it is imperative that we understand the need to empower Latinos through education now rather than waiting for Latinos to usurp power through other measures in the future.

My experience as a Latina should not be interpreted as one of being a victim by an unjust system, as I have persevered. I am living proof that when status quo is challenged to include people like me, that we can be successful. Many key people empowered me through sharing their social and cultural capital and insisted that I take charge of my life through education. With this education I have obtained additional social and cultural capital, which empowered me to move from low Socio Economic Status (SES) to high SES. According to Hirsch et al. (2002) SES is, "an individual's or group's position within a hierarchical social structure. Socioeconomic status depends on a combination of variables, including occupation, education, *income*, wealth, and place of residence (p.445)." I was able to end the situational poverty in which I grew up. Having a college degree from the Claremont Colleges has opened up many doors for me, including my current position in higher education. Having a master's degree from Portland State University further validates my worth in society.

Rather than choosing to simply fit into my new environment under a

different SES, I have chosen to ask tough questions of those around me and challenge the status quo. This is especially true when people make disparaging remarks about low SES immigrants. I hold true to my roots as an immigrant and honor the fact that I was raised in a low SES environment by my mother and grandmother. It would be easy for me to "pass" and forget where I have come from, I choose differently because I believe in social change.

I feel that because I have made it to where I am that I must challenge high SES community members to own their status and challenge them to empower others. The goal is to create an environment where stereotypes and misconceptions can be addressed while allowing people to transform their way of thinking about those whom they perceive as different from themselves. In essence I am a conduit between two worlds that are used to seeing each other from a distance. It is my goal to continue being an interpreter between differing SES cultures in the hope of creating a more inclusive environment.

On the other side of my cultural interpreter role, I am consciously sharing my knowledge about the college process with the Latino community, as they are the least represented in higher education. After reading, Tornatzky, Cutler and Lee (2002), I have come to understand why low and mid SES Latino parents don't know the process for college attainment. Therefore, rather than waiting for someone to ask me how I made it through and being seen as an exception, I am reaching out and sharing this information. According to Tornatzky et al.:

In order to make a successful transition between high school and college, Latino youth need to move through a number of milestones and prerequisites... However, in order to play a positive role, parents must know about these milestones and prerequisites and what actions need to be taken when (p.1).

I recommend that this process start as soon as Latino parents encounter the

education system, as each of these building blocks, that lead to milestones, begin in the early education years. Assuming that everyone enters the college admissions with the same level of information is erroneous. This assumption only helps perpetuate the fallacy that Latinos are entering higher education on equal footing with their higher SES peers. This fallacy leads many to drop out of higher education instead of questioning why they are struggling to transition into higher education. Beyond feeling the academic challenge students must learn to question the very environment that they are in. Is this environment truly there to help them succeed? Or are students being asked to give up their true selves and fit into the status quo? Or can it be a combination of both depending on the structures put in place? It is essential that first generation college students learn to ask these questions early in their careers. These questions will help them identify the allies in their environment and those who may serve as obstacles to their success.

Because of my critical thinking skills and seeing myself as a social change agent I do not inform myself for just my sake. I see myself as being held accountable to the greater Latino community. I know that I am not here having completed my master's degree because I am exceptional. I am here because I have worked hard and because I persisted in higher education. I was able to access and persist in higher education because of key people who shared their wealth of information and I want to be that person for others. I want to give back because I believe in justice to achieve equity and I want others in my community to benefit from my gain. I also want to honor my parents' struggles and those who came before me. According to Elliot, Dweck and Covington (2005):

Similar observations have been made about the role of the family in Latin American and Latino contexts. For example, Mexican children feel responsible for the honor of the entire family, and Central American refugee students whose families have experienced misfortune in coming to the United States feel both guilt and responsibility (p.475).

This type of commitment to my community and my family is not something I choose, it is just something that I am. I cannot see myself as an individual, I don't know how. I am a member of a very large family under the label Latino. However, this is not to say that I will only reach out to Latinos, I am willing to share my knowledge with anyone who can benefit from it, but Latinos are my main focus. I have helped countless first generation students to successfully graduate from my place of employment.

I also want to emphasize the importance of learning how to identify issues and working through them by using a critical lens. As stated before:

On the micro-level, critical theorists like interpretive theorists, view schools and classrooms as sites of cultural *production*, where people interact to construct meaning. Issues of power and control are worked out in classrooms by individuals. If those involved in the schooling process are able to resist the oppressive practices of schooling, and if critical consciousness can be developed by teachers, administrators, and students, schools can become sites of social change rather than of social reproduction (deMarrais & LeCompte, p. 32).

I have found the tools that I need to continue down the path of creating environments with active discourse about issues that are important to me and that impact my community. In this instance the issue I have identified is the lack of information that Latinos have about the education process, which they need to be able to better advocate for themselves or their children. I have begun and will continue to think critically about the factors that contribute to this reality. As a lifelong learner I will strive to keep up to date on data and will continue to create dialogue about this issue. I will continue to address this issue as a professional and as a member of the Latino community.

I have come to believe in the importance of helping adult learners be co-creators of their academic goals because that is the essence of what I have walked away with from graduate school. It is not merely understanding

adult learning theory but being able to apply it in my role as a professional in higher education and as a change agent in my community. According to Tennant and Pogson (1995) the challenge for me and others in the teaching and learning of adults is that:

Adult educators who seek to make their work of individual change and transformation fit into a wider agenda of social change and transformation need to acknowledge the social and historical dimension of adult development. This perception will help them distinguish learning experiences and personal changes that genuinely transform and liberate their students from those that simply key into the social expectations associated with different phases of life (p. 112).

I take this challenge seriously and that is why I have chosen to become more informed with historical data and theories that address the issue of how the education process can either empower parents to create change or limit them because of systemically low expectations for Latino parent involvement. In order to reach Latinos we must first understand their personal histories and incorporate these histories in the work that we do. As we become more inclusive, we will be in a better position to empower Latinos about the schooling process.

I have taken the challenge of ensuring that the learning environments in which I participate as either an adult educator or as an adult learner are environments that not only take into account the different social and cultural issues represented in the immediate environment but will also point out the voices who are missing or silent. I also have set as a goal for myself to create environments where those who historically are discounted or excluded are welcomed and empowered to speak out with their own voices.

It is no longer acceptable to me to perpetuate the superficial understanding of social and cultural issues with the attitude of, "Can't we all just get along." The status quo's definition of whose social and cultural capital we need to either recognize or aspire to is not conducive to fully understanding

social and cultural issues. We as adult educators and adult learners must demand that all voices be heard in the development of learning communities. As Rocco and West (1998) state:

Related to access is the status one has in society. Members of marginalized groups have less status than members of dominant groups. As a result of having power, status, and access, people who possess attributes bestowing privilege also have credibility and are assumed capable. Those born with attributes considered to be the norm set the standards by which others are judged to be substandard or deviant. This type of circular reasoning allocates power and privilege to the reference point (white males) regardless of their desire to have this privilege or their attempts to create an equitable society (p.2).

If we are to truly challenge ourselves out of the role of educators as mere conduits of information (managers of the status quo) we must go one step further and recognize our own privilege and demand transformation. Furthermore, we must deconstruct our learning environments to create inclusive ones. We can begin down this path by including the voices who are present but often times silent as well as those who are not even in attendance. We must recognize that higher education is an environment of privilege where many voices are underrepresented. As a higher education administrator I will continue to question the absence of Latinos on college campuses and insist that the system that hinders our participation be challenged from all angles. I know that when given the information they need, that Latino families will work to ensure that the academic aspirations that they have for their children are realized.

As both a higher education administrator and active member of my community I have come to appreciate the importance of knowing how to access, assess and use information for the betterment of my practice. As previously mentioned I have moved from being a physical presence to an engaged participant. In my role as a community change agent I have been able to actively research information about successful parent outreach

programs, find theory to support why these programs are necessary in our community and assess this information to begin the process of implementation. It is my deep desire to take the success of what I do informally within my community and implement it more broadly and systemically.

I would not have been able to make the transformation of passive participant to being an element of change in my community without first understanding the different methods of how research is conducted and how data is analyzed in the information I have gathered. Having this knowledge has allowed me to find richness in the research studies and has empowered me to decipher the findings. Whereas before I felt that the information contained in these studies was in an unknown language, I can now understand the various classifications of research methods. I am also able to interpret the classifications and understand why one method may have been used over another. It is my hope that the use of this research knowledge is apparent in the work that I am presenting here. It is up to me and you to translate this information in ways that our entire community can understand.

As an adult learner and educator it is imperative that I understand the importance of not only transforming my practice but also myself. My graduate program achieves this by expecting the program participants to practice critical reflection. Critical reflection challenges me to recognize and own the biases that I bring into the learning environment. Once I own and process these biases I need to reflect on where they come from and how to change them through personal and professional development. We as adult educators and adult learners cannot expect professional and personal development to be a one-way street where we impart our opinions at the expense of others.

As a Latina I cannot assume that because I am a minority that I am somehow immune from needing to learn how to create inclusive environments for others. All of us regardless of race or other diverse

backgrounds need to recognize our limitations and reach out to whatever that otherness is, if we are truly to create inclusive environments. According to Alfred (2002):

Through critical analysis, we honestly name the constraints, barriers, and issues that keep us from establishing a more democratic adult education, to include our own personal histories, assumptions, and biases...Through reflective analysis and acquisition of knowledge, we can have a deeper cognitive grasp of how (and why it is important) to create space for diversity of ideas, worldviews, and perspectives (p.92).

This ability to self reflect also allows us to move beyond theory and its analysis. Self -reflection challenges us into the next step, which is to take action and create change. In order to take action one eventually needs to have the support of others. Self reflection gives us the ability to create environments that allow diverse viewpoints to be a part of creating change thus inviting others to create change with us. We move from tolerance to inclusiveness.

In an effort to maintain my skills and theory knowledge I have come to value the use of reflective journal writing. The process of writing allows me the opportunity to practice my writing skill and be ready when asked to produce samples of my writing ability. I share this writing with peers whose opinions I value and I know will take the time to provide feedback. The feedback that is built into these exercises allows me to learn how to write better and communicate my thoughts clearly.

Using reflective journal writing has allowed me to also improve my interpersonal skills. I am the type of person who likes to participate in class or committee meetings and can inadvertently take up more than my share of air-time . Therefore, by having the writing venue I am able to hold off some of my comments to allow for others to have their turn to participate. Having the added writing venue to express issues and comments that are important to me also allow me to be more patient with

people who have opposing views. Because I had a writing venue, I don't need to be reactive to every racist, sexist or classist comment that is said in a particular discussion. Reflective writing allows me to process difficult content, to help me synthesize.

Although I believe that we are trying to implement the justice that is needed to create common good, my daily existence is still difficult at times. As a higher education administrator in a private liberal arts college I am hit with the reality that there are few underrepresented minorities in higher education. Given this reality I feel that I was presented with a fork in the road: to passively participate in life or to work toward equity through justice. As bell hooks (2003) states:

We need mass-based political movements calling citizens of this nation to uphold democracy and the rights of everyone to be educated, and to work on behalf of ending domination in all its forms – to work for justice, changing our educational system so that schooling is not the site where students are indoctrinated to support imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy or any ideology, but rather where they learn to open their minds, to engage in rigorous study and to think critically (p. xxi).

In an effort to create educational justice at the level that can be expected from one individual I have used the knowledge from my graduate program to seek out information that I can use to address the issue of how to empower myself and other Latinos to advocate for themselves or their children through the education pipeline.

Since learning about the historical disparities that exist in education attainment, I have been on a personal quest to find the best schooling that I can for my children. In the process I was reminded of my own K-12 experience and saw injustice in the schooling disparities that exist in Portland Public Schools. I came to realize that as a Latina with high SES, my experience mirrored that of my European American counterparts with similar SES. However, my experience was very different from lower SES Latino

parents whom I met along the way.

Along the process of researching schools, I gathered information that I felt was important for creating change. As bell hooks (2003) states above, schooling needs to be about rigorous study and critical thinking, unfortunately what I found was a system full of socio-economic disparities and racial segregation in Portland Public Schools. The skills and the information process that I found necessary to advocate for my children were the very skills and information that I can see low SES Latino parents need but may not have. It is not because they "do not care," it is that they do not know where to begin.

I could choose to focus on my own professional development and pursue a higher role of influence, by having a more authoritative title, however, I also value my role as a mother. Therefore, at this point in my life I am choosing to focus my attention to advocating for my children as they confront the education system. Along the way I make time to volunteer in causes that I believe are making a difference in the Latino community. These causes aim to bridge the academic access gap.

The first program that I dedicate my efforts to is the Portland Suzuki Project. The Portland Suzuki Project is a 501(c) (3) tax exempt non-profit educational organization. Founded in 2008 by a team of community involved violin instructors and parents, the organization seeks to provide a music education to children and families regardless of their financial income by introducing the Suzuki method of violin instruction. This method focuses on developing and enhancing a child's natural ability through a nurturing environment, includes private and group lessons, as well as strong family participation. I truly believe in the power that having access to quality co-curricular activities can have in the lives of students. By accessing this music program students are given the opportunity to develop in ways that students not exposed to music learning cannot. This particular music program creates an environment where all students, regardless of background, have access to something special. I have personally witnessed the transformation

of our students and the pride that radiates from them and their families during community concerts.

I have more recently joined the Board of Directors at Latino Network. Latino Network provides transformative opportunities, services, and advocacy for the education, leadership and civic engagement of our youth, families and communities. This 501(c) (3) tax-exempt-non-profit, has programs that address the needs of Latinos in the P-20 system. This program is an important voice in the Portland community. The program not only provides advocacy for Latinos in the Portland Metro area, it also provides direct theory based service programs to empower our Latino parents.

As I stated in the beginning of his educational biography, although as a Latina I experience profoundly the absence of other Latinos in higher education and live the statistics that I research; and that at times it is disheartening to see that over twenty years have passed since I first entered college; and that statistically Latinos are still significantly underrepresented in attaining four year college degrees, I know in my core that I must keep going and help others around me reach their academic goals. Even if I can only do this one person at a time, I will not walk away from this challenge.

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