Toward a Neo-Critical Validation Theory: Participatory Action Research and Mexican Migrant Student Success

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Abstract

The success of nondominant students in higher education can be strengthened when students' contributions and participation in the institution are valued and seen as important to the college environment. Rendón's (1994) theory of validation stands as a centerpiece in the scholarship that seeks to understand, explain, and support the academic achievement of nondominant students. Drawing on experiences with a participatory action project cofounded by 12 Mexican migrant students and one university researcher, this article describes how Freire's concept of critical consciousness can help incorporate struggles of power, agency, and identity into the validation work described by Rendón. A neo-critical theory of validation is put forward as a means to extend Rendón's theory by incorporating the sociopolitical context of nondominant students' participation in higher education.

Mexican (im)migrant families and their students are among the most marginalized groups in the United States. Deeply implicated in America's agricultural, economic, and immigration policies, the livelihoods and opportunities of Mexican (im)migrant students often factor into hotly politicized public discourse. Contemporary debates over federal immigration law and states' rights, such as California's Assembly Bill 540, which extended in-state tuition benefits to undocumented students, and Arizona's State Bill 1070, which deputized state and municipal police forces with immigration enforcement responsibility, are but two examples of recent legislation that foster a turbulent political environment for Mexican (im)migrant students. Yet the political arena is only one source of uncertainty in the lives of these families and their students. They also are subject to economic, educational, and social discrimination across their lived social spheres (Gibson, 2003; Gildersleeve, 2010; Lopez, 2001; Rothenberg, 1998; Wright, 1995; Zalaquett, McHatton, & Cranston-Gringas, 2007). Such discrimination fosters contexts in which Mexican (im)migrant students face marginalization that threatens their success in college.

In response to long-standing concerns over migrant education, *Los Estudiantes Migrantes y Educación* (LEME) was formed as a participatory action research (PAR) collective of 12 first-generation, Mexican (im)migrant college students and one university researcher (article author). As a collective, we work together to understand and give voice to the experiences of Mexican (im)migrant college students. Broadly, LEME-PAR seeks to support Mexican (im)migrant student success. Particularly, LEME-PAR investigates local manifestations of inequality in migrant families' lives and explores how they relate to broader social concerns of educational equity for (im)migrant students (Gildersleeve, Gomez, & Rodriguez, 2009).

Among the myriad findings and theories that have emerged in the research literature about college student success, Rendón's (1994) validation theory stands out as a model of learning and student development that accounts for diverse contextual backgrounds and pays attention to students' holistic college experiences. Incorporating both academic and interpersonal experiences while paying close attention to the role of students' self-efficacy, Rendón's theory has helped researchers make sense of marginalized students' experiences in ways useful for supporting their success in college. However, Rendón's theory of validation does not explicitly engage with issues of power and agency in the lived experiences of underrepresented and/or marginalized college students. Social and political influences on students' collegiate experiences are not explicitly addressed. As such, students' ability to cultivate validation on their own terms could be limited by the dominant practices of the academy—practices that validation work might very well be seeking to subvert.

The purpose of this paper is to report on how the research and action activities of the LEME-PAR might constitute validation in these (im)migrant students' lives. Moreover, this paper highlights how the validation experienced vis a vis the LEME-PAR is markedly political and sociocultural, drawing from key concepts of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 1989). As such, issues of power and agency are made explicit in the validation work of the LEME-PAR. I will argue that the particular validation experienced by the LEME-PAR collective suggests a theory of neo-critical validation—one that explicitly takes up the inequalities faced by migrant students, and seeks to generate critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) toward the goal of college student success.

After a brief review of the contemporary landscape for Mexican (im)migrant students in higher education and a brief discussion of Rendón's validation theory (1994), the background and context of LEME-PAR and its participants will be described in detail. Discussion of the LEME-PAR will then present examples of our research and action activities, drawing on Rendón's theory of validation to explain how the critical consciousness fostered through the LEME-PAR supports students' success. As the focus of this paper and this special issue is the contribution and development of validation theory, implications will be drawn that emphasize how issues of power and agency can be engaged by a neo-critical validation theory, relying heavily on Freire's concept of critical consciousness.

Mexican (Im)migrant Students and Higher Education

The educational experiences of students from migrant farm-working families are generally underresearched. However, some scholars have identified a number of barriers that migrant students face in their precollege contexts. For example, scholars (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Gibson, Bejinez, Hidalgo, & Rolón, 2004; Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009) have found that migrant labor contexts conflate with race and class to further disadvantage migrant students in education. Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha (2001) found that migrant parents were more likely to be disenfranchised from meaningful participation in their students' schooling, but when schools took responsibility for fostering positive relationships and meeting families' basic needs, then student achievement increased. Valadez (2008) ethnographically studied the educational decision-making of 12 high-achieving Mexican immigrant students and found that traditional school structures were often in tension with students' cultural understandings of education.

A number of studies have noted that migrant student K–12 academic success relies heavily on school involvement in family life, progressive language policies, and the accessibility of positive mentors (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009; 2001; Gutierrez, Arzubiaga, & Hunter, 2009; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). In my own work, I have ethnographically documented that beyond these social and cultural mediators of academic success, migrant students face institutionalized inequality in college-going (Gildersleeve, 2010). That is, migrant students' college-going, unlike some dominant groups', is not an institutionalized practice, but rather emerges from exceptional practices by key interlocutors.

Despite these barriers and inequalities, some migrant students matriculate into higher education every year. As evidence of this, the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) operates as part of Title I, Part C of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. CAMP serves approximately 2,000 first-year migrant students annually (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). As of July 2009, there were 108 CAMP initiatives across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Nuñez (2009) looked at the college choice outcomes for migrant students in California. Comparing students who participated in an overtly politicized outreach program that relied on sociocultural pedagogies with nonparticipating students, Nuñez noted that students who participated in the outreach program were more likely to apply to more schools and more competitive campuses across the California public higher education sector.

Despite growing attention to migrant students' social contexts and K–12 schooling, little research has focused on the college experiences of migrant students. Zalaquett, McHatton, and Cranston-Gringas (2007) conducted a survey of 52 CAMP participants from across three different cohorts at a metropolitan university. They found that migrant students shared a strong bicultural identity, saw college as a primarily economic/career-enhancing enterprise, and relied on parents for paramount influence in college decisions.

Markedly absent from the landscape of research on migrant students in higher education is any particular attention to their academic achievement, including their persistence and retention. This paper addresses that gap by describing how Mexican migrant students participating in the LEME-PAR experienced validation while cultivating critical consciousness of their sociopolitical conditions in higher education.

Validation in Student Success

For a long time, research on students' achievement in higher education was limited to graduation patterns, dropout prevention, and studies of student retention. Each of these framed student success from an institutional perspective. When retention studies did begin to use individual units of analysis (e.g., students), they became plagued by deficit perspectives of nondominant students' cultural background (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2004). For example, departing Latino students were interpreted as

resultant from inferior academic ability, perhaps brought on by unsupportive home lives and poor academic preparation (Adelman, 1999). In addition, scholarship on student success has long used comparative logic, pitting one arbitrarily chosen group's achievement in comparison with another's to make claims about student ability, cultural background, and academic preparation (Adelman, 1999). These logics of comparison undermine the integrity of any given group's experiences—suggesting that one group's reality only matters in reference and relation to the dominant group's experience.

As critical scholars began to identify this deficit-laden interpretation in the research literature, some scholars were shifting the narrative about nondominant students' retention, arguing that cultural assimilation was the answer to supporting student success (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Others were quick to disagree and proffered more affirmative interpretations of nondominant student struggles in higher education (Nora, & Cabrera, 1993, 1996; Tierney, 1992). These critiques led to new models and again began shifting the available frames for understanding student success. These were the seeds planted to study student persistence.

Meanwhile, scholarship around college student experiences began to theorize about the role that out-of-class experiences and the broader college environment might have on student success (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996). Astin (1984) generated a theory of student involvement that made the logical connection that students who were involved in the institution were more likely to respond positively to its enterprise and therefore achieve greater academic success. However, Astin's theory was based on research that relied heavily on aggregated national data, which had a tendency to overlook the nuances of nondominant students' realities. Not all students could be involved in colleges and universities in the same way, nor to the same extent. Yet colleges and universities, and the people that run them, still needed to address the academic and social needs of nondominant students in order to support their academic success.

In her study of 132 students from across institutional types, Laura I. Rendón (1994) pieced together another logical conclusion that amended Astin's theory of involvement. Noting how student demographics were changing from predominantly White, middle- and upper-class, well-educated backgrounds to

a more diverse student body with more students of color and first-generation college students, Rendón's data suggested,

> What many students related in this study differs from involvement. What had transformed these students were incidents where some individual, either in- or out-of-class, took an active interest in them—when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment. It appears that nontraditional students do not perceive involvement as them taking the initiative. (pp. 43–44)

Rendón's conclusions led her to develop a theory of validation for student development, arguing that nondominant students benefit from a collegiate environment that validates their experiences as learners and knowers. Validation theory afforded another shift in the framing of student success: research could focus on students and seek practical ways to affirm their diverse experiences with the institution.

Rendón (1994) points out that students from underrepresented backgrounds often experience isolation, a lack of self-efficacy, and a lack of a sense of belonging in college contexts. Numerous other researchers have come to similar findings and conclusions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993; Torres & Solberg, 2001). Furthermore, these experiences have been linked to early departure from college and institutional retention issues (Hurtado & Kamimura, 2003; Nora, 1987). In theorizing her concept of validation, Rendón asserted that recognizing students' diverse backgrounds and affirming their experiences can take form as academic and/ or interpersonal validation. Academic validation usually comes from in-class activities and stems from academic personnel (i.e., faculty) expressly supporting the academic work, effort, and achievement of nondominant students (Rendón, 1994). Interpersonal validation usually comes from out-of-class activities that recognize and celebrate the social and cultural traditions related to students' backgrounds (Rendón, 1994). The goals of fostering validation in nondominant students are to provide affirmation of their experiences as college students, mitigate isolation, strengthen self-efficacy, and foster a stronger sense of belonging in the college context. It is assumed that these characteristics will afford students greater opportunities to become involved in meaningful ways

in their education, thus supporting their persistence to degree. According to Rendón's theorization of validation, this should be understood as an enabling process that creates self-efficacy. However, validation suggests a developmental process rather than developmental outcomes. It is an ethic of caring that must be practiced in order to be experienced.

Validation theory has been cited repeatedly in studies of student success, suggesting that it affords scholars and practitioners a valuable way to think about serving nondominant students in higher education (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Torres, 2006). Despite the advances made in the study of student success by Rendón's (1994) theory of validation and subsequent studies, nondominant students, in aggregate, continue to struggle in higher education, and faculty and staff continue to struggle to serve nondominant students effectively. Criticalists have argued that contemporary educational activity and inequality cannot be understood as divorced from struggles of power and agency (Baez, 2006; Jaramillo & McLaren, 2008; McLaren & Kincheloe, 1995). Paulo Freire (1970) taught that power and agency are best understood from the lived experiences of those disenfranchised by current power relations. Furthermore, the oppressed must engage in the struggle for equity on their terms, generating their own liberation (Boal, 1979; Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008). Thus, I argue that incorporating a more critical perspective of the power relations that shape higher education contexts for nondominant students could strengthen validation theory. And in response, I present a case of validation work, founded on Freirean principles of critical consciousness.

Los Estudiantes Migrantes y Educación—**Participatory Action Research Collective**

At its most basic element, the LEME-PAR is a learning community focused on conducting critical research and effecting social change toward equity in educational opportunity for migrant communities. Through participation in this dialogic community, I contend that students gained self-efficacy, which includes the students' ability to affirm themselves. Hence, students experienced validation via the LEME-PAR. However, as the LEME-PAR concerns itself with the *critical* study and engagement of educational equity, issues of power and agency become

paramount. Students' interrogation of power and agency generated a critical consciousness, marking their validation as a neo-critical validation: affirmation of their reading of the world and how they write themselves into it.

As noted earlier, the LEME-PAR is a collective of 12 Mexican (im)migrant college students and one university researcher (the author of this article). These 12 students come from across the state of California, as far north as the San Francisco Bay Area, and as far south as the Imperial Valley along the *Baja California* and Arizona borders. During the time of our engagement together, three students attended a University of California campus, five students attended a California State University campus, three students attended a California community college, and one student attended an Ivy League university. As the project's principal investigator, I was working full-time as an assistant professor at Iowa State University. All thirteen participants met in the summer of 2005 during the UCLA Migrant Student Leadership Institute (see Gildersleeve, 2009b), which was a precollege outreach program funded by migrant education funds. Since that time, the students and I engaged in a critical ethnographic study of migrant student college-going (Gildersleeve, 2010) that then evolved into the participatory action research project described here.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a research tradition that draws from interdisciplinary methodologies that share a common commitment to social justice and equity. As such, definitions of PAR vary across research contexts and purposes. Yet most PAR projects can be understood as working from a common core of principles that include collaboration, critical reflection, action benefitting participants, and the goal of addressing a social problem (McIntyre, 2008). Among the manifold outcomes that PAR can produce, Cammarota and Fine (2008) suggest that *youth* participatory action research in particular is explicitly pedagogical and "a prime methodology … for preparing and engaging youth in democratic processes as well as providing young people with a systematic way to analyze the oppressive circumstances within various institutional settings" (p. 8). Ascribing to these core principles and desiring such critical outcomes as described by Cammarota and Fine (2008), the LEME-PAR engages in rigorous social research that requires critical reflection and leads to social action addressing educational injustices experienced by (im)migrant communities.

Toward these goals, the LEME-PAR draws liberally from Paulo Freire's (1970) teachings, taking his concept of conscientization as a guiding principle in our work (Gildersleeve & LEME, 2009). Conscientization can be understood as the development of a critical consciousness that recognizes inequality in people's daily lives (Friere, 1973). As we reflect on our circumstances, we can effect change both individually and socially. Freire also instructs our understanding of knowledge as a dialectical coconstruction across all participants and unifying theory and practice (1973). We seek to produce counterhegemonic understandings of educational opportunities for Mexican (im)migrant communities. As such, the LEME-PAR is inherently a pedagogical project, working in the tradition of Freire to read the word in the world and the world in the word, to speak back to injustice, and to imagine a new world toward which to direct social action. As Ginwright argues, "equal in importance to the analytical skills developed through participatory action research, youth develop a collective radical imagination that is vital for community and social change" (2008, p. 15).

Working toward these counterhegemonic and radically imaginative ends, the LEME-PAR enacts a critical pedagogy framework for teaching and learning. Critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2005; McLaren, 1986) seeks to expose social structures that prohibit human agency in inequitable ways. As a pedagogy, it draws from the knowledges distributed across any group of people, valuing the everyday ways of knowing the world as much as the academic (Moll, 1991). Further, the LEME-PAR's critical pedagogy requires all teachers and learners to recursively engage one another, alternating and assuming hybrid identities across the expert-novice spectrum (Rogoff, 2003). Within the LEME-PAR, we enact a critical pedagogy informed by Gramsci's notions that self and collective actualization can help address inequitable exercises of power—that is to say, everyday people can effect dramatic social change (Gramsci, 1988; Hall, 1981; Steinberg, 2001).

Organized around these theoretical and methodological principles, the LEME-PAR anchored itself by holding biannual retreats called "Migrant Student Summits." These were extended weekends when all 13 members of the LEME-PAR would gather and collectively engage in decisionmaking, research analysis, and critical reflection.[1] Dialogue is at the center of these migrant student summits. The primary purpose of our gathering is to share, respond, challenge, support,

repair, reframe, revise, and plan future action together. Agendas for these summits are built within a dialogic knowledge community framework. Dialogic knowledge communities use dialogue as a means of knowledge production and value the wealth of resources that multiple positions can exercise across and through dialogue (Kuntz, Pasque, Gildersleeve, & Carducci, 2010).

Core activities of the LEME-PAR included critical ethnographic methods, recursive reflexive practices, and community engagement toward generating critical consciousness. Specifically, students engaged in ethnographic fieldwork in their home communities by interviewing migrant parents about their experiences with schools, their perceptions of opportunities for their children, and their insights about the workings of immigration as a social process that shaped their families' lives. Students also conducted asset-mapping of their home communities, seeking to mark the resources that often go unnoticed or underrecognized by dominant discourse. These asset-mapping activities included noting where and when language development took place (both formal and informal), finding places in their home communities where cultural heritage was shared (e.g., quinceañeras), and identifying what educational opportunities were nearby (e.g., community colleges, universities).

I made quarterly visits with students in order to check in, share what other students were doing, and afford students an opportunity to process individually what they were learning through their research activities. These encounters were documented with ethnographic field notes, journals, and some recorded interviewing that was later transcribed. When making these visits, I also engaged in the local action that students were taking.

As part of our mutual commitment to each other and students' local communities, each student engaged in local activist efforts around issues pertinent to the LEME-PAR's concerns for equity and opportunity. Some students became leaders in local immigrant rights organizations. Others organized fundraisers for scholarships. Many participated in educational preparation programs that provided services to local schoolchildren. In these ways, our collective was more of a network, but everyone brought their action activity back to the group, sharing and reflecting on our collective actions during our Migrant Student Summits. We assumed that there was greater resource in our distributed expertise than any one of us could draw from alone

(Rogoff, 2003). The goal of sharing across our network was to assist each other in providing more informed and critically reflective leadership back home.

As a dialogic knowledge community situated within a participatory action research project, the LEME-PAR was a popular pedagogical encounter that engaged participants and society. These are typical process and outcome of PAR projects, as McIntyre (2008) notes:

> It is by actively engaging in critical dialogue and collective reflection that the participants of PAR recognize that they have a stake in the overall project. Thus, PAR becomes a living dialectical process, changing the researcher, the participants, and the situations in which they act.

It is my argument that the "living dialectical process" of the LEME-PAR's dialogic knowledge community as expressed through the collective's research, reflection, and action practices generated a critical consciousness. Cumulatively these experiences validated LEME-PAR students' higher education, assisting their success.

Critical Consciousness as Validation in the LEME-PAR

This article makes two arguments. Students in the LEME-PAR experienced validation through the cultivation of critical consciousness in a participatory action research project. And, these experiences of validation suggest a neo-critical validation theory rooted in Freirean concepts of critical pedagogy—reading the word in the world and the world in the word. First, I turn to a description of the critical consciousness cultivated through LEME-PAR activities.

Fieldwork with Parents

As mentioned, one of the major fieldwork projects that LEME-PAR has undertaken focused on the roles and relationships that parents served within migrant communities and the assets present in those communities in relation to social opportunity. Three themes emerged from the LEME-PAR's analysis of these ethnographic endeavors: college-going, school involvement, and immigration (Gildersleeve, 2009a). Each of these themes was constituted by a critical rendering of parents' participation in the social opportunity of their students' lives, with particular attention paid to higher education. For example, LEME analyses uncovered that, as is typical of most parents, migrant parents wanted their children to succeed educationally and were willing to do

whatever they could to support their children. However, these migrant parents also recognized that their family's migration history challenged the normative college-going experience. As one set of parents' brief dialogue below illustrates:

> Father: Even though it's better for us here, it's in some ways, harder for you.…

> Mother: Like it was hard for us in Mexico … But here, their lives are hard in a different way. Hard for the dreaming.

As members of the LEME-PAR listened to these words during our Summer 2008 Migrant Student Summit, the sound of *las madres* echoed through the room as students engaged in dialogue to make sense of what one mother meant by life being "hard in a different way. Hard for the dreaming." Miguelito, a migrant student from the East San Francisco Bay, thought out-loud:

> I think I kinda get it. Like, we always talk about wanting to honor their struggles, but like, I think *mi mama y mi papa* see how hard school can be for me here. And I think they want to be able to help even more. And I think like, maybe they worry that I don't think as big as other kids do. Or that they don't know how to help me reach my dreams like other kids parents maybe.

Yaneth, a migrant student from the Central Valley immediately chimed in:

> I agree, yeah, but like, it is hard. And like, I don't want my parents thinking they can't be part of my dream, you know! When I hear this "hard for the dreaming," like, I want to cry. But I also want to recognize with my parents that we are all still struggling.

Nene, a migrant student from the Salinas Valley connected a few dots:

> So, but like, even though things are better here, perhaps, but our parents and we know that things are still hard, we also learned about these resources, right? Like, I am so proud that my mom got her GED. And she couldn't do that without the local community college program.

Yaneth asked, "And so where are you going?"

Nene responded, "Like, our parents are our hope. And we're theirs. It's kinda cool." A collective quiet took over the room as the LEME-PAR sat and pondered Nene's insight.

The above exchange was made possible by the fact that students crafted the space to discuss their parents' perceptions of their social opportunities. Through the LEME-PAR project, these migrant students were able to share and dialogue about the discursive role their parents played in their navigation of schooling and the collegiate environment. They were also afforded the opportunity to muse about their role in their parents' experiences. Perhaps these conversations could have taken place in a residence hall or a classroom, but because they took place in a self-made space, generated by original research practices, and engaged friends and colleagues from different schools, regions, and universities, the LEME-PAR marked these particular conversations with a critical element, suggesting that students might foster validation on their own terms.

Sharing in Each Other's Activism

Another key activity of the LEME-PAR was our dispersed commitment to social action. As a collective of 13 individuals spread across different regions of the state, each committed to the struggle for educational equity, we did not often have the chance to engage in direct action with one another. However, sharing the process, practices, and products of our individual direct-action activities with one another became a salient component of our critical praxis. This is where our dialogic framework became a privileged force in our development of critical consciousness.

Our activism was diverse, yet interconnected. For example, Angel is a leader of an immigration reform movement in the East San Francisco Bay Area that focuses on undocumented student tuition policies in higher education. He coordinated and organized marches, teach-ins, and letter-writing campaigns. Yaneth became a leader for a service-learning organization at her university in southern California. She organized tutoring and after-school programs for Latino immigrant youth, and also coordinated a parents' workshop to assist Latino immigrant families with accessing social services available to them.

Sharing these experiences and the self-reflections we make from them became an important part of our collective praxis. Through sharing and informing one another, we were able to raise our collective consciousness about the complexity of immigrant equity issues. I chose to ask LEME students about these practices while visiting their home communities in between our migrant student summits.

Gael, from California's Central Valley, explained:

> Something as simple as sharing what we're all doing—that's inspiring. Hearing about Yaneth's after-school program helped me think about my own involvement in our CAMP program. And I think hearing about me reminded other people about where we all came from.

I pressed Gael to explain further what he meant by "where we all came from." Gael responded:

> It's like this—when I share about working with migrant students, with other migrant students, we all get to remember what it was like before we got to college. And when Yaneth shares about working with little kids, we all get to remember what it was like as a little kid—before we knew any of the hardship, really. And we get to talk about, not just how we're activists today, but how we became activists today, and why our education is so important to us.

On a visit to the Imperial Valley, another LEME student, Julio, put things another way:

> I don't know … it's like, I don't get to have these kinda conversations with a lot of people, you know? With anyone! And I think what each of us are doing is really cool. Really important. And getting to share that makes me … I feel important.

Our friend and fellow LEME student, Lorena, also from the Imperial Valley, added to Julio's remarks that she "learns so much about how pervasive oppression is" when everyone shares about their activist work. Lorena explained:

> I see the educational part, especially like with bilingual ed, because of my involvement in the center [a university research center focused on urban education], but I don't see the health or the environment part like Celia does cause she's all green about it and stuff. When I talk with Celia, you know, like, at the summits, then we get to connect the dots. And we get to feel really smart together.

As a collective, we found value in connecting our concerns about equity across our different activist endeavors. Rarely did two or more LEME participants engage in the exact same actions, but often, the lessons of those actions

permeated across the collective. The act of sharing—voicing and listening to activist identities and experiences—afforded students in the LEME-PAR the ability to cultivate understandings of their individual and collective cultural histories in relation to the inequities they were working to dismantle. As Julio shared, voicing and listening to each other's activist work provided a sense of importance. Simultaneously, these acts of agency—in the face of inequality—built a particular kind of self-efficacy that was tied to the interrogation of power in students' everyday lives. LEME-PAR students developed new identities as scholar-activists interconnected with broader social issues.

Mapping Migrant Lives

Freire (1973/2008) and other critical pedagogues have pointed to the significance of critical reflection in the development of critical consciousness (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kincheloe, 2005; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998). Rendón (2008) in her later work documented the importance of contemplative practices in higher education learning and success. For example, she described the practice of creating *cajitas*, or personal journey boxes, that explore individual subjectivity and relation to the broader social world, particularly education. Also, Futch (2007) has shown the pedagogical value of cognitive mapping for marginalized students, wherein students map their struggles between home and college, affording them opportunities to analyze and evaluate the inequities they face while developing strategies to address them. Within these traditions, the LEME-PAR engaged in shared activities of mapping migrant lives.

Building on the fieldwork with parents, asset mapping of students' home communities, and dialogues about migrant activism, the LEME-PAR collectively designed its own mapping activity, setting out to map migrant lives in the struggle for educational equity. These were visual representations of individual and collective journeys between and across home communities, higher education, and their myriad subjectivities. Students took time during one of our semiannual migrant student summits to draw, paint, and use other materials to visually represent their journeys as college students from migrant farm-working families. Some students organized their maps chronologically, often beginning with their own or their parents' departure from Mexico. Other students organized their maps politically—drawing relationships between

the different people, groups, offices, and institutions that informed their development into the college students they had become.

Regardless of the maps' organization, these reflectively generated artifacts afforded students the opportunity to recognize the moments in their lives where and when they managed to break with the dominant expectations of their educational trajectories. These were moments in students' lives that I have elsewhere called transformative learning moments in students' college-going—moments when and where students could take strategic action toward the futures they wished to pursue as active agents of their own historical making (Gildersleeve, 2010). By marking the chronology of critical incidents in students' lives and/or the relationships of individuals and institutions that either constrained or enabled their academic successes, LEME-PAR students could recognize how their daily lives were making changes in higher education. Their corporeal presence in academe and their journeys to get there could be understood as evidence of themselves as historical cultural workers; they could recognize themselves as agents in society, rather than passive objects of dominant power structures.

As a case example, Yaneth's map depicted her life via the different community settings she vacillated in and around. She carved space in her map for her family's house in the Central Valley, where she noted that she and her family knew almost everyone else in their small town. In another space, labeled simply "college," she drew figures of herself and her two older siblings. She put "college" in a bubble-cloud, which she connected to her family's home. When presenting her map, Yaneth stated, "because our family's dreams are for all of us to go to college, and so far, with me, we're three for three." As a subarea to "college," Yaneth drew a large lecture hall with only one person in it, but outside there were rows and rows of people. This caused a bit of confusion with the rest of the LEME-PAR. In explanation, Yaneth said:

> It's me at school. I never feel more Chicana than when I'm in class sometimes, because I'll be the only *mujer* in the whole room. But I remember *mi compas*, like my sorors [sorority sisters] and like all of us [LEME]. Altogether, we're always right there outside the lecture hall for each other.

Lorena spoke up near that moment and said, "Seeing this on your map, it made me think about all the migrant students who don't get to go to college. That's what I thought the people outside were."

"Well, I think it's both, no?" Yaneth replied.

Nene chimed in, "That's what I was thinking. It's really cool that your map works both ways, and with your family too."

Miguel asked, "How with the family?"

Nene responded, "With the way that college is their dream, but it's also the reality so far for Yaneth and her sister and her brother. Like the world as it could be turned into the world as it is, but it's not over yet."

"Yeah."

"I like that."

"Ooh, Nene, that's kinda sexy."

The LEME-PAR agreed and felt stronger together for a moment.

Yaneth's mapping of her life as a migrant student afforded the LEME-PAR an opportunity to analyze their social conditions, identify some of the inequality they struggle through, and begin to discursively render a plausible alternate reality. These activities continued and seemed to affirm students' possible selves as successful college students. Further, the social analysis of the mapping activity reinforced the dialogic nature of their self-generating collective self-efficacy. The LEME-PAR was strengthening its collective critical consciousness.

Toward a Neo-Critical Validation Theory

Through activities associated with the LEME-PAR project, migrant students constructed their own processes of developing critical consciousness, with each activity building on and drawing from another. As such, these processes enabled students to foster self-efficacy as a collective of Mexican migrant college students, irrespective of which college or university they were attending. In these ways, the critical consciousness generated from participating in the LEME-PAR was an enabling process that created self-efficacy and was oriented

primarily as developmental process, rather than focused on material outcomes. These are cornerstones of Rendón's validation theory (1994).

However, students in the LEME-PAR experienced validation in ways that differed from Rendón's initial development of the theory. As explained earlier, validation was conceived as an externally generated experience; Rendón demonstrated the benefits when institutional actors (e.g., faculty) validated students either academically or interpersonally. LEME-PAR students' validation was unique in four ways:

1. It was self-validating within the group;
2. Students exercised their own agency to create self-efficacy, in a recursive process;
3. This recursive process relied on critical social analysis of everyday experiences through dialogic interaction; and,
4. Validation was created exogenously from institutionalized practices.

Rendón's theory of validation was founded on pedagogical values of wholeness and honoring experiences of the self (Rendón, 2009). A neo-critical validation theory recognizes a political dimension in students' wholeness. Power, agency, and identities circulated throughout the development of critical consciousness in the LEME-PAR. Students sought to investigate, share, and map the exercises of power in their daily lives that produced inequalities and the tools to address them. Their work was

> *Rendón's theory of validation was founded on pedagogical values of wholeness and honoring experiences of the self. A neo-critical validation theory recognizes a political dimension in students' wholeness.*

political, because it sought to reimagine the body politic of opportunity. This political dimension can support students recursively through their own process of development in relation to broader social concerns that connect students with their home and cultural communities.

Conclusions

Validation theory changed the landscape of how scholars and practitioners understood students' participation in higher education, particularly in relation to student departure and persistence. Incorporating the political within

the educational has increasingly been shown to support student success (Gildersleeve, 2010; Gutiérrez, Arzubiaga, & Hunter, 2009) Further, critical engagement with higher education as an institution has proven an effective way for nondominant students to navigate and negotiate postsecondary contexts (Morrell, 2008; Rogers, 2008). As such, a new, critical infusion into validation theory can help transform it for the twenty-first century. By incorporating a critical element wherein students' experiences can be placed in a sociopolitical context, their participation in higher education can be validated via the development of a critical consciousness about their own educations in relationship to broader society and their home communities.

This neo-critical validation affords students the opportunity to generate their own versions of validation, divorcing, at least in part, students' success from the power-laden assumption that institutional actors must bestow validation upon students. In this sense, students regain autonomy and agency over their experience and mitigate dependency on the institutions that have marginalized them historically. It is important to note that validation was never conceived as wielding power over students, but rather as a behavioral modification in educators' practice—authentically caring and fashioning compassion to help students succeed (Rendón, 2009). I contend that a neo-critical theory of validation could be grounded in students' material realities and spring forth from their own participation in the interrogation of those material constraints.

Neo-critical validation, then, could lead to new revolutions within academia. Students producing self-efficacy through their own agency could construct an academic context where their histories and futures are coconstructed on more equitable grounds. However, this should not be heard as a siren call to dismiss all institutional actors from caring about and fostering validation in nondominant students. Rather, it provides yet another opportunity for educators to engage in validating work with students. Administrators and faculty members can foster a campus climate that supports neo-critical validation by engaging in public pedagogies that create opportunities for critical consciousness to be strengthened collectively.

Specifically, administrators can provide models of dialogic knowledge communities for student organizations. Enrollment professionals specifically can provide resources such as time, money, and advising for community-based relationships to be fostered between nondominant students and the broader

communities served by the institution. Faculty can pursue critical pedagogies in their classrooms that foster and support dialogic community building. Rather than assuming authoritative stances on students' engagement, faculty can assist students in claiming their own stances in relation to each other. Policies, practices, and funding that support grassroots organizing, like the kind that initiated the inter-institutional LEME-PAR, can be adopted by administrators and supported by faculty. Rather than taking over the work of validation, faculty and administrators can privilege their roles as facilitators of neo-critical validation by engaging students in the raising of critical consciousness around issues of equity and agency.

The LEME-PAR represents one such offering of opportunity. It serves as an exogenous extension of academic activity, but one that is driven by students for students yet interconnected with community and social concerns. Through the sociocultural analyses and sociopolitical foundations of the LEME-PAR, Mexican migrant students engaged in critical self-reflection, critical investigation, and critical pedagogy, which lead to critical consciousness. The work of the LEME-PAR can be understood as the validation described by Rendón, but generated through a praxis-driven interrogation of power in higher education opportunity. Hence, a neo-critical validation was born.

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