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Abstract

This critical qualitative research study (Denzin, 2017) explores how Latinx community members within the Near Westside neighborhood in Syracuse, NY serve as activists and advocates in interrogating educational systems, policies, and practices. By focusing on a specific neighborhood that houses a significant and diverse Latinx community within a smaller U.S. city, this study adds to the scholarship that oftentimes focus on Latinx communities within larger metropolises. This study also allows for a deep sociohistorical understanding of the ways in which Latinx community members engage educational inequities and injustices. This study utilizes a Lat Crit Constructivist Grounded methodology, influenced by Malagon, Huber, and Valdez (2009) and their work on Critical Race Grounded Methodology, as well as archival research, to capture the testimonios of 30 Near Westside Latinx community members and share the ways in which they construct and define community; the most pressing community and educational issues that are negatively impacting the Latinx community; and the roles they play in mobilizing community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005, 2006) and community power to effect change and preserve critical hope. Key findings include: the clear impact of cultural capital in forming and shaping their activist spirit; deep ties to the Near Westside community and unwavering commitment to interrogate educational systems, policies, and practices; the rich history of community activism and the formation of foundational community-based organizations and grassroots efforts that had lasting effects on community growth, wellbeing and educational success; and the ways in which community members can be rendered inactive or ineffective. This study can impact current community efforts in mobilizing against current racist, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric and educational policies.

Urban Latinx Community Engagement in Activism and Advocacy: Community Members Interrogating Educational Systems, Policies, & Practices

by

Jermaine Soto

B.A., Cornell University, 2001
M.S., Syracuse University, 2011

Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Foundations of Education.

Syracuse University
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Chapter One

Introduction

In 2014, the Syracuse City School District (located in Syracuse, NY) announced that three schools would close for failure to meet state standards of excellence and become restructured to include schools within schools (Siu, 2014; Riede, 2014; McMahon, 2017). This is not an uncommon practice that occurs in isolation but rather a practice all too prevalent within urban spaces throughout the United States, deeply impacting racial/ethnic marginalized communities (Lipman, 1998; Davila, 2004; Valencia, 2012; Stovall, 2013; Bierbaum, 2021; Michaels, 2021; Ramos, 2023). With the influx of school closures, charter takeovers, and school vouchers within recent years, researchers have tackled the injustice and racism towards Black and Brown communities, from naming school closure as spatial injustice (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019) to seeing it as disaster capitalism and accumulation by dispossession (Aggarwal, 2019) and school districts utilizing a 'plantation complex' in an all-charter movement within post-Katrina New Orleans (Jeffers & Dixson, 2023). A recent report by the Othering & Belonging Institute and Centro pare la Reconstruccion del Habitat (2020) highlighted the catastrophic impact on poor, Puerto Rican communities as nearly half of the public schools in Puerto Rico were closed since 2007, a greater proportion than Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Within Syracuse, NY, two of the schools that were closed and reinvented were located within the Near Westside community, home to a high number of Latinx community members. This was just one of the many social issues that were negatively impacting the Latinx community of Syracuse, reflective of the experiences of urban Latinx communities throughout the United States. In 2015, when research for this dissertation project was conducted, the Syracuse Latinx community was one of the poorest Latinx communities, per capita, in the entire

country. Fifty-nine percent of Latinx community members in Syracuse were living in poverty, compared to the 14% of total U.S. population (all races) living in poverty (NYSCAA, 2013). The births in Latinx communities within Syracuse include 23% of the births to teen mothers – the highest rate within Syracuse at the time – and 7% of the births resulting in low birth weight – second highest percentage within Syracuse at the time (diversitydata.org, 2012). Regarding education, the schools that Latinx students attended within Syracuse had a student body where 68% of the students received free and reduced lunch, a marker of poverty (diversitydata.org, 2012). Graduation rates were extremely low, with the Latinx population of Syracuse only having 49% of its students graduate in 2012 (NYSED.gov, 2013). The graduation rate for Latinx males was worse at 27.3%. I was able to witness firsthand the negative impact of these social and educational issues on Latinx community during my time as a community-school liaison in Syracuse's Near Westside for five years. These experiences - combined with my own lived experiences as a Puerto Rican youth navigating poverty and segregation within public housing in Queens, NY – motivated this dissertation project, stirring up a passion within me to better understand community and educational issues from a community perspective. Specifically, considering the long history of injustices that have affected Latinx communities, what are Latinx community members doing in the face of these social and educational inequalities and how are they naming and navigating these prevalent issues as it continues to negatively impact the educational experiences and academic success of Latinx youth? This research project aims to better understand how members of the Latinx communities within urban spaces, specifically Syracuse, NY, engage and interrogate educational systems, policies and practices and serve as activists and advocates in mobilizing community cultural wealth and building community power. This dissertation project qualitatively captures the experiences, stories, struggles, victories, and

practices of those community stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in institutions, programs, grassroots, and organized efforts that directly interrogate the unequal and unjust schooling (formal and informal) practices and policies that historically have negatively impacted Latina/o communities within urban spaces. This introductory chapter will share an overview of the topic area, providing a foundational understanding. It will clearly articulate the research problem and the research aims and objectives. It will show the significance of this research, especially in light of recent policies that seek to quell community social justice efforts while also highlighting some limitations to this work.

Gary Orfield (2014), writing on the importance of a new civil rights agenda for American education, focused on the re-segregation of schools and the disproportionate wealth disparities, the higher concentration of poverty for schools that serve students of color, as major educational issues that negatively impact students of color and their communities. Educational systems are not meeting the needs of these students, these communities, and the consequences are severe issues that negatively impact the socio-emotional, economic well-being of the students and communities. Valencia (2011), in researching the educational experiences of Chicano/a students, specified school failures as causing a 'plight' for students and communities. The issues that cause this plight are "persistent, pervasive, and disproportionate" (Valencia, 2011, p. 5). The impact from these issues is negative and oppressive, and affects academic achievement, grade retention, matriculation rates to college, and school stress (Valencia, 2011).This has all become a civil rights issue that needs to be addressed, with communities needing to step up and "…create a vision appropriate to our society in this century…new understandings of the forces that create and sustain unequal opportunity and expanding the definition of the basic rights so that it works in transformed context" (Orfield, 2014, p. 278). When analyzing the state of Latinx in education,

much of the discourse, scholarship, and recommendations have focused on what occurs within the school building. It centers on the injustices and inequalities that occur within the building structures – how policies are shaped that continue to negatively impact Latinx students; how subtractive schooling practices within the school perpetuate stereotypes and maintain deficit discourses; how achievement and opportunity gaps were still high (Valenzuela, 1999; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Brown & Tam, 2019; Galindo, 2021; Leo & Wilcox, 2023). Researchers have also highlighted how family and neighborhood attributes have impacted Latinx students' education outcomes (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Recommendations to eradicate these policies and practices and interrogate the injustices focus on embracing the lives of Latinx students outside of the school community and its potential to positively impact their educational experiences within the school building, of fostering and embracing a strength-based perspective on Latinx students (Galindo, 2021). Thus, there is a call to embrace their family and home experiences through embracing the many 'funds of knowledge' students possess (Gonzalez et al., 1995) as well as what the community-at-large brings to the schooling experience, as seen in Yosso's (2005) work on community cultural wealth. While the literature is robust in identifying educational and community issues for Latinx youth and identifying ways in which to embrace Latinx culture and a strengths-based perspective to combat educational inequities and injustice, it is lacking in two key areas: centering the voices and perspectives of Latinx community members as they engage in activism and advocacy and spotlighting smaller urban cities with a larger or increasing Latinx population. Much of the research on community activism and advocacy in interrogating Latinx educational issues has focused on student activism and the roles of teachers in enacting change. Very few have looked at how community members are actively engaged in interrogating education, with a couple recent studies looking at the role of Latinx mothers in

actively engaging educational policy (Oliva & Aleman, Jr., 2019) and the potential for cross-racial coalitions within minoritized communities in educational advocacy (Sampson, Demps, & Rodriguez-Martinez, 2023). On the latter under researched area, much of the focus of this work is geographically regional, centrally focused in areas in the United States with large Latinx populations, primarily the Southwest, including Los Angeles and Phoenix and the cities within Texas, and Northern Latinx hubs like Chicago and New York City. A recent book edited by Donna Marie Harris and Judy Marquez Kiyama (2015) did look at the smaller city of Rochester, NY and efforts within their Latinx community to build a community-based approach to understanding and interrogating the educational experiences of Latinx youth. Recent research has popped up studying the 'new Latinx South' (Gamez & Monreal, 2021) but there is room for a study like mine centering a smaller urban city like Syracuse.

Mercado & Reyes (2010) called for more Latinx researchers to focus on the efforts of urban Latinx community members and this dissertation projects seeks to heed that call. The purpose of this study is to capture the educational issues that negatively affect Latinx students from perspectives outside the school building, from the experiences and stories of those that make up the community-at-large. This brings up an important question: are communities within urban spaces with growing Latinx representation viewing educational issues as a civil rights issue and thus taking the steps necessary to challenge and interrogate educational systems and enact change? There is a history of many members of Chicana/o and Mexican-American communities serving as activists and advocates to improve the educational opportunities of their children (San Miguel, Jr., 2013) and my study's aim is to further capture the recent context of these efforts – broadening the perspective to embrace a more diasporic viewpoint and focusing on a particular, understudied socio-geographic location. This study spotlights the Latinx

population in Syracuse, NY – a smaller urban locale with a decades-long history of Latinx community presence and continued Latinx population growth with the potential to impact how public schools teach their students and interact with community. Naming Syracuse as the site is important. Naming the city allows me to situate this research within a historical and socio-cultural context and allows for more accuracy and detail (Reyes, 2018). In addition to naming the city, I name the prominent Latinx neighborhood of the Near Westside and identify various community-based organizations and community markers. I feel this is a necessity to document the significant ties participants have to this neighborhood and captures the spatial justice taking place (Carrillo & Mendez, 2019). Carrillo and Mendez (2019) stress the necessity of considering spatial inequities when examining educational disparities; they stress the importance of documenting the memories and experiences shaped by the intersectional identities of study participants, exposing the inequities within the space, and disrupting hegemony. As they state: "Space is a site of struggle linked to resources, ideas, and specific actions that can lead to possibility and agency" (Carrillo & Mendez, 2019, p. 447). Ultimately, naming the site of this dissertation research (Syracuse and the Near Westside neighborhood specifically) allows for transparency and contextualization in my research (Reyes, 2018) while providing respect and spotlighting those that call the space home, engage in activism and mobilize its community power. This research embraces the efforts of community members and organizations, amplifying their voices as it relates to how they feel and view the education of the community's children, capturing whether smaller cities do have a vibrant and active community combating and interrogating the same injustices occurring for Latinx populations throughout the United States. This research centers testimonios, counterstories of Latinx community members while holding myself accountable for handling these intimate stories and highlighting their impact. Finally, this

study partakes in research built on critical hope. It is "…not intended to contribute to a sense of hopelessness but…provide a critical analysis for the purpose of highlighting the absolute necessity of resistance" (Duncan-Andrade in Stovall, 2013, p. 34). According to Stovall (2013), this hope "…requires that we must be painfully honest about the realities of current educational conditions in urban areas, while at the same time building networks that challenge these conditions" (p. 34). Yes, the injustice is a reality. But the Latinx community within this study, the participants within this study, the researcher of this study do not have to be bound to those realities and turn away defeated. Hence, this dissertation project also seeks to identify and articulate "…the necessary tools for resistance" (p. 34).

To achieve these research aims, I engaged in a qualitative study that captured the testimonios of multiple community stakeholders to document whether they are participating in efforts that mobilize culture, mobilize language, and mobilize community power to create stronger communities that will in-turn impact the quality of students' education (Moll, 2010). Thirty participants shared their stories and these counterstories allowed for an in-depth understanding of how Latinx identity and community was constructed and defined, a clear articulation of the community and educational issues and injustices that negatively impacted Latinx students, and how these community members were involved in promoting reforms that met the Latinx community's cultural, academic, and political needs and interests – partaking in educational reform movements that improve their children's academic achievement (San Miguel, Jr., 2013). I sought to understand a holistic perspective of efforts – what works, the challenges and struggles, the dissent, the collaborations, the successes. This study aimed to tackle overarching research questions, including:

1. Why is a smaller urban space like Syracuse, NY a relevant site for capturing the lived experiences of Latinx community members and the ways in which they name and interrogate educational injustices?
2. How is Latinx culture and community constructed and defined by its community members? How do these perspectives capture a socio-historical understanding of Latinx community, identity, and engagement with education systems?
3. What are the most pressing community and educational issues negatively impacting Latinx communities?
4. How are Latinx community members taking on roles as activists and advocates in interrogating educational systems, policies and practices? How do they mobilize community cultural wealth and community power to effect change and preserve critical hope? What motivates them to take on these roles?

As I hope to clearly articulate within the presentation of my findings and within my analysis of this robust qualitative data, this research has value. Not only does it center the testimonios of a broader Latinx diaspora, spotlighting Caribbean, Central, North and South American voices, but, as mentioned earlier, it brings the perspectives of an established Latinx community within a smaller rustbelt urban space to the forefront. As much as it is a city study (Syracuse, NY), it is ultimately also a study of a Latinx community within the specific community of the Near Westside, all potentially serving as a microcosm of Latinx life in the United States. It is a relevant and rich research site. This research can also serve as a roadmap for countering the current social and political discourse and policies that are anti-immigration, anti-EDI – blatantly racist and ethnocentric and seemingly popping up stronger and more prevalent each and every day. This research highlights the potential to invest in Latinx communities, to take the strategies

and best practices that are utilized in their activism and scale it in a way that counters efforts by school boards, local and state governments to remove cultural relevancy and cultural awareness within schools. Investing in communities as curators of culture can empower Latinx students and provide hope in the face of schools rejecting their identities, dehumanizing them. Finally, this research celebrates the rich history of community-based organizations and grassroots efforts that have been active and a significant part of Latinx communities, embracing their roles in serving the community's needs, and uplifting all of its assets to clearly announce its presence and potential for larger social impact. This research pushes to not take these efforts for granted.

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term Latinx to encompass the diaspora of Mexicans, Chicanas/os, Central Americans, South Americans, Caribbean people (Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican), and other Latin lineage and embrace an inclusive, gender-neutral term for individuals with the shared identification of Hispanic or Latino (Mora, Perez, &Vargas, 2022). This term has found prominence in activist and academic spaces (Salinas Jr., 2020). The term "…has created (dis)comfort, ambiguity, and disingenuous arguments related to language, grammar, phonetics, religion, and identity politics" (Salinas Jr., 2020, p. 150). As Lozano, Salinas, Jr., and Orozco (2023) argue: "…the 'x' in Latinx has disrupted language and cultural norms and created an opportunity to validate and recognize individuals who do not identify with the gender binary" (p. 1339). It is grounded in the politics of race, gender, and ethnicity (Mora, Perez, & Vargas, 2022). It is also important to acknowledge the tension with this term, how it still only applies within a U.S. context and may not necessarily capture a global diaspora (Lozano, Salinas Jr., & Orozco, 2023); how it may still be embraced by Latinx students in academic spaces but abandoned when they engage their families and communities (Salinas Jr., 2020); and very real generational politics involved, as Gen Z has a much higher usage rate and

embraces the term more than Baby Boomers and Gen X (Mora, Perez, & Vargas, 2022). While this is the terms of choice for this dissertation, if participants in this study utilized other terms such as *Latino*, *Latina*, *Hispanic,* or *Spanish*, then their use of these terms are reflected within the findings and any other direct participant quotes. Within this dissertation, *Latinx* is understood as complimentary to, not mutually exclusive, of *Hispanic*, *Latino*, or *Latina* (Mora, Perez, & Vargas, 2022).

This qualitative study uses the testimonios and counterstories of 30 Latinx community members within the Westside community of Syracuse, NY to understand how Latinx community interrogates educational systems, policies and practices. This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction, including initial background information, motivations for and significance of this study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature of the pertinent themes and prior relevant research and details relevant empirical studies. Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive explanation of the methodological and theoretical choices made, detailing the data collection process and offering an in-depth critical self-reflection of my role as researcher and the impact of my own Latinx identity. Chapters 4-6 presents my findings, highlighting significant themes through the testimonios of participants. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the interpretation of these findings, including recommendations, and conclusions from the research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

In her study of Latina immigrants navigating various barriers in Georgia, Michelle Yrigollen-Robbins (2023) states: "It is imperative that local school boards, lawmakers, and stakeholders be reminded that Latinx are the largest minority population in the United States…" (p.1568). As the Latinx population continues to grow within the U.S., it is also imperative that we better understand the history of the community, understand the educational barriers and obstacles in place, understand how Latinx communities have navigated and overcome these educational barriers, and better understand the vital roles community members play in moving the Latinx community towards resilience and successful academic outcomes. This chapter explores the literature that speaks on the educational experiences of Latinx communities, offering a historical overview of educational injustices faced, an overview of contemporary barriers and obstacles impeding academic and educational success, and the spirit of activism that has flowed throughout Latinx communities as their population has grown and they have become more established here in the United States.

Sociohistorical Understandings of Educational Injustices for Latinx Populations

It is important to understand holistic perspectives on the issues that plague the education of Latinx youth, analyze the historical along with current contexts. Donato (1997) captures the inequalities, injustices, and inequities Latinx youth have historically faced by conveniently categorizing them as issues of segregation, Americanization, migrant education, intelligence testing or psychometrics, and vocational education. Numerous studies on contemporary educational inequity and injustice and the impact on Latinx youth have not only identified

systemic and structural barriers in schooling but also outside of school (Jang, 2023). The negative impact of U.S hegemony and White oppression on Latinx youth and communities as categorized by Donato (1997) can be traced to early in the history of the Latinx population in the U.S., specifically to Mexican/American social relationships and educational experiences. It can be traced to the 1830s, when the Anglo (White) population grew in Texas, which at the time was still Mexican property. The Anglo population became the majority and the Mexican population became a minority ethnic group. These Tejanos (Texas Mexicans) continued to lose political, economic, and social control, culminating in a shift of power and control to the Anglo population after the Texas Revolution of 1836. Once Texas was 'independent' and controlled by the Anglo population, the Tejano population occupied an inferior, subordinate position; lost much of their land and property; were relegated to the bottom of the economic ladder through a dual wage-labor system which insisted that Tejanos make less than their Anglo neighbors; and were culturally dominated as English became the mandated language (San Miguel, Jr., 1987). Tension was high and created an environment where Mexican Americans felt the weight of an ultimatum in the form of early Americanization threats – learn American customs and adopt the English language to the fabric of their everyday life or go back to Mexico (San Miguel, Jr., 1987). In 1848, the conquest of Mexican peoples was complete, as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the end to the Mexican American War, effectively annexed over 525,000 square miles of Mexican territory, the present Southwest United States, to the hands of the U.S. (San Miguel, Jr. & Valencia, 1998). Newly created schools began to be the sites where social injustices were mirrored and carried out on a micro level. Any early access to schooling by Mexican Americans - outside to the Catholic schools created specifically for the education of Mexican American students and which did a strong job of maintaining Mexican cultural values (San Miguel Jr. &

Valencia, 1998) – were to segregated public schools seeking to maintain "the Mexican problem" (San Miguel, Jr., 1987). Policies and prejudice, and increased nativist sentiments towards Mexican children, helped sustain segregated schools that were overcrowded, offered inferior curriculum, poor quality of teaching, and effectively created spaces of stigmatization (San Miguel, Jr., 1987; San Miguel, Jr. & Valencia, 1998). In relation to Anglo schools:

> "…Mexican schools were older, their school equipment was generally less adequate, per pupil expenditures were generally lower, and the staff was less appropriately trained, qualified and experienced. In many cases, the teachers were sent to the Mexican schools as a form of punishment or to introduce them to the teaching profession" (San Miguel, Jr. & Valencia, p. 365).

Also, there were groups of Mexican-American students that were denied full access to an education, including agricultural migrants, secondary school-age students, and post-secondary school-age students (San Miguel, Jr. & Valencia, 1998). The curriculum that students who were able to access school experienced was "academically imbalanced and culturally subtractive", emphasizing socialization and non-academic concerns. (San Miguel, Jr. & Valencia, 1998).

Things did not change much for Mexican Americans, years later. Donato (1997) highlighted Mexican American educational experiences in a small California city during the 1960s and 1970s and showed how oppression and the subordination of Mexican American students were still prevalent. Mexican American parents were stereotyped by school systems as indifferent in their views on education for their children, as lazy. Mainstream educators saw Mexican Americans as "…culturally deficient because their parents did not possess the cultural currency to socialize their children to succeed in schools" (Donato, 1997, p. 64). Schools felt they needed to correct this problem by transforming Mexican American students "as much as possible into average white middle-class children" (Donato, 1997, p. 65). The academic

structures of schools also encouraged students to fail. This was done through "…cultural exclusion, fostering too rapid Americanization, rigid tracking, curricular rigidity, rote teaching, overly rigid behavioral standards, ethnic cleavage, de facto segregation, and biased and pessimistic (school) staffs" (Donato, 1997, p. 65). Schools supported the disfranchisement of Mexican Americans, keeping them relegated for careers in the agricultural economy and limiting any other options.

Puerto Ricans have a history of negative educational experiences as well. While the history of Puerto Ricans within the U.S. context is not as long as the Mexican experience, it shares an experience with Mexico in that the 'homeland' and future emigration/migration to the United States was impacted by American imperialism and the U.S. participation in Manifest Destiny (del Moral, 2013; Whalen, 2005). The island of Puerto Rico was at the center of a U.S. colonial state project during the first half of the twentieth century - the site of a military occupation between 1898-1900 as the U.S. invaded Puerto Rico during the Cuban Wars of Independence and acquired the island from Spain through the Treaty of Paris; the creation of a colonial civil government between 1900 and the late 1940s through the Foraker Act of 1900 which allowed the U.S. to retain the island as a permanent colony and established governance through a U.S. appointed person, and the Jones act of 1917 which granted U.S. citizenship to all Puerto Ricans born on the island and which in turn increased the U.S. efforts to "…more aggressively promote the Americanization of students, the creation of 'tropical Yankees', and the instruction of English language" and U.S. ideals (del Moral, 2013, p. 87); and a modern colonial state under Puerto Rican leadership in the 1950s and beyond (Whalen, 2005; del Moral, 2013). Education, and schools in particular, was at the heart of the colonial state project within the island for "…it was in the classroom that colonial state ideologies were intended to be

transmitted to and reproduced by the next generation – children" (del Moral, 2013, p. 19). Puerto Rican students in Puerto Rico experienced the weight and oppression of Americanization that impacted identity politics. Upon arriving to the U.S., Puerto Ricans faced many injustices in the schools they attended, mostly in major cities like New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia and surprisingly in places such as Hawaii and Louisiana (Whalen, 2005). The first migrants, mostly men, arrived after Puerto Rico was newly colonized and served as cheap labor. The greatest migration which saw an influx of children attending public school occurred after WWII (MacDonald & Monkman, 2005; Whalen, 2005). The growth of the Puerto Rican presence in New York City public schools was impressive – in 1949, 29,000 Puerto Rican children were in schools; in 1953, 54,000 students were enrolled in NYC public schools; in 1968, that number skyrocketed to 300,000 students (MacDonald & Monkman, 2005). Puerto Ricans quickly experienced injustices in regards to their linguistic and scholastic needs, and their intelligence and academic abilities were questioned. The unique relationship and experiences Puerto Rico had with the United States, and the fact that those experiences played out both within the island of Puerto Rico and within many locales in the United States, places an emphasis and importance on understanding how "…students, education, and schools were sites through which many attempted to define citizenship, nation, race, and empire" (del Moral, 2013, p. 23).

There are many specific educational injustices that have historically caused negative consequences for Latinx students and their communities. These issues effectively stigmatized Latinx students and their communities. A closer look at some of these specific historical issues follows.

Immigration Policies and the Stigmatization of Immigrant Latinx

With a steady increase in Latinx immigration throughout the history of the U.S., the education of Latinx populations was impacted. Overall, Latinx communities were stigmatized and forced to endure unjust educational practices. Puerto Rican children were constructed as 'foreigners' "…who were potentially polluting and threatening the eugenically healthy community of U.S. citizens" (del Moral, 2013, p. 130). In Texas, Lewis Terman, a researcher in the field of intelligence measurement, argued that Mexicans "should not breed" and were a "genetically unintelligent race" and must be kept in separate schools (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2012, p. 72). Children in Colorado were seen only as labor and therefore access to education was denied (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2012). Policies, such as Proposition 187 passed in California in 1994, denied public education to 'illegal' immigrants (Gonzalez & Portillos, 2007). These policies and ideologies towards immigrant Latinx populations in essence branded the population as inferior and segregated them through this stigmatization.

Politics of Language

Language was the means by which to exert political dominance and reify colonist hegemony through the mandates of English only policies and the making of the Spanish language as a marker of inferiority as part of Americanization processes (del Moral, 2013; Ovando, 2003; San Miguel, Jr., 1987). Garcia and Alonso (2021) discussed the bounding and othering of the Spanish language by looking at the history of New Mexico. Spanish language was bounded solely to written texts from Spain, recognized as the "…language of trade with elite merchants from Spain and Spanish colonies" (p. 116) and included the first Spanish language textbook in the U.S. in 1751 (Garcia & Alonso, 2021). As the ideology of Manifest Destiny ran

rampant and after the U.S war with Mexico in 1846, the Spanish language was quickly othered and began to be effectively erased. As more English-speaking Anglo settlers arrived in what is now the Southwest U.S., “Spanish spoken by so-called treaty citizens was again demeaned, describing it as a language of uneducated people…” (Garcia & Alonso, 2021, p. 116). As Spanish-speakers became dehumanized, and the language was belittled, it was easy to justify replacing Spanish with what was assumed to be the more appropriate and civilized language of English and by 1878 English had taken the place of Spanish as the working language of the legislature in New Mexico (Garcia & Alonso, 2021). State bills, such as Texas’ English only bill in 1918, made it a criminal offense to teach in a language other than English (San Miguel, Jr., 1987). Also in the early 20th century, as the population of Mexican Americans in the Southwest increased, U.S. politicians “…doubled down on the imposition of English, attempting to annihilate what was perceived as ‘the Mexican’ problem…” (Garcia & Alonso, 2021, p. 117). Language was the means by which to create deficit discourses, to maintain segregated schooling practices, through school board actions and administrative regulations that designated Mexican American students into separate buildings from their White classmates lest they impede on the White children’s ability to learn and stunt their English language abilities by infusing the Spanish language (San Miguel, Jr., 1987; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2012). It continued in the English-only movement of the early 1980s, a sort of legalized linguistic apartheid (Chavez-Moreno, 2020) that dehumanized Latinx populations, criminalized the Spanish spoken by U.S. Latinx as the language of ‘violent racialized communities and undocumented people’ where “This is America, speak English” and “You are in America, speak English” “…were common expressions of racist harassment of Latinxs” (Garcia & Alonso, 2021, p. 122) and led to increased crimes and intolerance towards Latinx communities (Chavez-Moreno, 2020).

Deficit Discourse and Student Achievement

A historical lens applied to Latinx student achievement can paint a picture of structural injustice and inequalities. It is one of policies, psychometrics, and perceptions. As access to schooling increased for students in Texas during the early 20th century, compulsory school laws were created to ensure students were attending on a daily basis (San Miguel, Jr., 1987). However, as San Miguel Jr. (1987) states, there was a lack of enforcement when it came to Mexican American students as Texas schools did not want Mexican Americans to attend school. Their presence would be a financial burden on the school districts. There was a fear that more education for Mexican Americans would lead to 'smarter' laborers who would in turn potentially unionize, ask for more money. As one Texas official stated in regards to uneducated students: "Illiterates make the best farm labor" (p. 51). Not being able to attend school corresponded with a public image that soon gained traction of the intellectually inferior Mexican American, apathetic to education. Psychometrics were also used to claim the intellectual inferiority of Latinxs and led to educational practices that negatively impacted Latinx student achievement. The 1935 Armstrong study was commissioned by the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York to study the 'Puerto Rican problem' (del Moral, 2013). Eugenic scientific testing was implemented to create a conclusion that Puerto Rican children were intellectually inferior in comparison to other student group in NYC. This study was used in attempts to justify the tracking of Puerto Rican students into vocational programs lest the "…students' potential disaffection with academic instruction might push them toward their 'natural proclivities' – delinquency and criminality" (del Moral, 2013, p. 120). Again, the overall goal of educational structures was to mark Latinx students as academically inferior and remove them from equitable schooling opportunities, thus constructing them as academic underachievers or 'disaffected' with

education. On the macro-level, these 'results' served in attempts to 'close the border' on Puerto Rican immigration out of fear of 'grave consequences' for the American people (del Moral, 2013). These systemic practices normalized deficit discourse perceptions held by society and acted upon by teachers in schools. It was these negative perceptions from teachers that many Mexican American families in 1960s and 1970s California felt negatively affected their children's performance in schools, as these families explicitly claimed that the academic structure of schools enabled their children to fail (Donato, 1997). The only hope at academic success, according to these teacher perceptions, was the degree in which Mexican American students would become more like their White, middle-class peers (Donato, 1997). Here, potential success was equated with embodying Whiteness, with embracing middle-class norms. Del Moral (2013) also discussed this from a colonized perspective, how teachers in Puerto Rico tried to instill, in their students, principles that equated whiteness with American culture and thus success in life.

The importance of highlighting the historical context of educational injustices faced by Latinx students is that it allows for a current analysis of the plight of Latinx students that goes beyond a contextual vacuum. What Latinx students and their communities are facing today is steeped in history. What is occurring today did not just appear suddenly. Today's issues have been a long time in the making, and the current experiences are those similarly experienced by previous generations.

Contemporary Understandings of Educational Injustices for Latinx Populations

"The experiences of Latinx students in the U.S. are layered with struggles associated to cementing their full identities amidst the microaggressions that they experience throughout their

schooling trajectories" (Carrillo & Mendez, 2019, p. 453). Many of the educational experiences of Latinxs throughout history are mirrored in contemporary U.S. society. The issues embody several themes as described by MacDonald & Monkman (2005): the positionality of Latinxs within society; schooling and its role in the social and cultural changes of Latinxs; and identity politics, or what it means to be Latinx in the U.S. The overall general condition of educational experiences of Latinxs within contemporary society is still one that negatively impacts students. In short, urban U.S. Latinx communities continue to face an education crisis, one that has not dramatically changed since various sectors of the Latinx population began migrating to the United States or had large portions of their land taken in the name of Manifest Destiny (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Darder, Torres, & Gutierrez, 1997). Latinxs have been and continue to be among the nation's most educationally disadvantaged and economically disenfranchised groups (Darder, Torres, et al., 1997) despite their population growth within the U.S. According to the U.S. Census Bureau Supplemental Poverty Measure (Shrider & Creamer, 2023), 21.7% of Latinx children under the age of eighteen were living in poverty in 2022. Latinx students made up 28% of the student enrollment in all public schools in fall 2021, an increase from 23% in fall 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). Thirty-eight percent of Latinx students attended high-poverty schools (NCES, 2023b) while 61% of Latinx students attended schools where students of color comprised at least 75% of the total enrollment (NCES, 2023a). Latinx students comprised 71.1% of the English learners (ELs) student population (NCES, 2023c). In 2021, the National Center for Education Statistics (2023d) notes that the status dropout rate for Latinx students, the percentage 16- to 24-year-olds without a high school diploma, was 7.8% - a decrease from the 16.7% in 2010 however still higher when compared to the Black population (5.6%) and White population (4.1%). For foreign-born Latinx community,

the status dropout rate was even higher at 18% (NCES, 2023d). The schools that serve Latinx students in communities of concentrated poverty "are much like the students themselves – lacking in resources and the social know-how needed to garner more" and rather than address these disadvantages the schools perpetuate it even more (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, pp. 86-87). Students are still educated to accept the ideologies of the dominant society including how they are perceived within this society. They are exposed to many inequities such as: lack of early childhood educational opportunities; overcrowding of Latinx majority schools; inadequate school facilities; a "digital divide" or lack of access to technology in schools and at home; inadequate instructional offerings; less access to Advanced Placement or honors classes; lack of Latinx representation in the teaching and administrative force and/or ill equipped teachers; high drop-out/push out rates; various forms of oppression based on language and citizenship and racial and ethnic discrimination; extreme poverty; re-segregated schools; lower college attendance rates; and the criminalization of Brown bodies (Davila & Bradley, 2010; Garcia Bedolla, 2012; Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Latinx youth encounter language brokering, where they have to translate and interpret for their Spanish-speaking family members, especially at school meetings, and the stressors involved with this role (Anderson, Cox, Giano, & Shreffler, 2020). Latinx youth face increased homelessness, due to families' housing instability either because they immigrated alone to the U.S. or a family member was deported or the high rate of poverty impacts their ability to afford increased rents, and the negative impact this has on their schooling (Azmitia, 2021). And there is increased research on Latinx communities within the 'borderlands', and how where Latinx youth live, straddling two countries of Mexico and the U.S., can determine their educational outcomes, increase their marginalization by teachers, administrators, and educational policy makers (Busssert-Webb & De La O, 2019). These

educational challenges "…negatively affect Latinos' ability not only to achieve socioeconomic mobility but also to engage in politics and therefore to be represented in the policymaking process at a level commensurate with their proportion of the electorate" (Garcia Bedolla, 20012, p. 23). These educational challenges are plague-like, negatively impacting the overall well-being of Latinx communities at-large. Schools are not meeting the needs of Latinx communities in cultivating strong civic engagement while maintaining them in an oppressive state. What follows will specifically focus on how Latinxs are negatively impacted by educational issues and injustices in place within a contemporary context using the categorization criteria set forth by MacDonald and Monkman (2005) and as described earlier.

Positionality of Latinxs within School and Society

It is important to understand how Latinx youth negotiate their multiple identities and cope with stressors – including poverty, discrimination, academic difficulties, criminalization, fear of deportation and family separation (Azmitia, 2021). In studying the lived experiences of Puerto Ricans in Chicago public schools, Erica Davila (2010) uses life histories to capture how these students identify and understand their positionality within the schools and society at large. Davila (2010) states: "It is critical to consider what it means to belong to any group or institution that is known as the worst in any category, nonetheless the whole nation" (p. 34). Latinx students are met with a crushing image when looking in the mirror, not through their own doing, but through structural and systemic social and educational injustices that force Latinx students to be positioned as the 'other' along with all the negative aspects that come with that stigma. Within contemporary scholarship focusing on Latinxs and education, many focus on student and group positionality and the impact on how students are taught, viewed within educational spaces as well as how it impacts their experiences with schooling. Immigrant Latinxs continue to be

depicted as lazy, uncaring students, gang members, teen mothers, or as taking resources from schools and society in general (Ochoa & Ochoa, 2007). Ultimately, the educational experiences of immigrant Latinx students are negatively impacted by a dominant racist and nativist ideology where citizenship and Whiteness are privileged and Latinx identity is marked as the marginalized other (Covarrubias & Lara, 2014). Current Latinx students tend to internalize it, and when academically successful Latinas were asked why they did well in school, some answered it was because they sought out the friendship of White students and embraced the perceived social capital of those relationships (Colon & Sanchez, 2009). The experiences of Latinx students in schools cause a negative reaction to students' 'Latinidad' or embracing of culture which in turn leads to an internalization of a negative message regarding their value as a culturally specific people (Davila, 2010). Latino students must engage a negative positionality within schools, oftentimes labeled as potentially violent and prone to aggression. Within urban ethnographic studies of the role of gender for Latinx students in schools, male students were sent to the principal's office much more frequently while the Latina students received lenient punishments for their transgressions. It was noted that Latinas who embodied 'feminine' traits such as passivity and silence were oftentimes valued and marked as 'good' (Lopez, 2002). Cammarota (2004) also detailed how gender played out differently within urban schools. The gendered responses to the negative stereotypes ascribed onto them by the schools and its faculty were played out differently. Latina students resisted the raced and gendered oppression by getting their high school degrees. Latino students' response to their criminalization was to skip school and exhibit their power to be physically present in the school or not.

Latinx students experience ethno-racial trauma that can lead to psychological distress and negatively impact their educational experiences (Chavez-Duenas, Adames, Perez-Chavez, &

Salas, 2019). This trauma is caused by the interlocking systems of oppression (nativism, racism, and ethnocentrism) and affects health, mental health, and everyday functions as well as negatively impacts their functioning within school by making it difficult to concentrate and complete assignments, increasing anxiety, and impacting school attendance (Chavez-Duenas, et al., 2019). In addition to these interlocking systems of oppression, Juliet Stumf (2006) emphasized the detrimental effects of anti-immigrant policies on Latinx populations. She introduced the concept of 'crimmigration' to describe the convergence of criminal and immigration law, which aims to single out, confine, and remove immigrants with criminal records (Stumf, 2006). These legal frameworks exacerbate the marginalization of Latinx immigrants, undermining their sense of security, consistency, protection, and optimism. Consequently, these communities face increased susceptibility to ethno-racial trauma and significant obstacles to educational achievement (Stumf, 2006).

Schooling and its Role in the Sociocultural Experiences of Latinxs

Latinx students continue to be negatively positioned within deficit schooling practices. Educational systems hinder academic achievement and continue to fail in cultural understanding while also negatively impacting the overall sociocultural experiences of Latinx students. Recent scholarship focusing on immigrant Latinx students highlight many of the barriers to educational achievement they face including: a lack of understanding of U.S. school systems; perceived low parental involvement; lack of residential stability; little school support for student needs; few incentives for the continuation of education; barred im/migrant access to higher education (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2012). There is a failure to understand the issue of transnationalism, how educational policy does not have the capacity to meet the needs of groups like Dominicans, who tend to travel back and forth between the U.S. and Dominican Republic, and how

Dominican students are suffering academically in both spaces (Pita & Utakis, 2002). When looking at undocumented Latinx youth and their schooling experiences, Michaels (2020) describes a critical bureaucratic incorporation, one which denies enrollment to, and forces increased dropouts of, undocumented Latinx youth. Undocumented youth receive a poor education from under resourced schools with limited opportunities for engagement and develop a cynicism towards education and their own place within educational systems (Michaels, 2020).

When looking at language practices of schooling systems, or the lack of accommodating dual language learners or welcoming the cultural value of the Spanish language, one can see the impact on the sociocultural experiences of Latinx students. Language, the politics of language, the Spanish/English language dichotomy, is an important aspect of the cultural, social, and political contexts of Latinx educational experiences. Many emergent bilingual students learn in English only and schools too often contribute to language loss and cultural assimilation (Newcomer, 2020). Recent research interrogates the educational experiences of Latinx students participating in dual language curriculum and programming. There is growing consensus that there is a gentrification of dual language bilingual education, where it is seen as ‘white property’ benefitting white English-speaking students in ways that are frequently a detriment to minoritized language students, their families and their communities (Chavez-Moreno, 2021; Chavez-Moreno, 2022; Delavan, Freire, & Menken, 2021; Valdez, Delevan, & Friere, 2016). They see dual language programming marketed to white students and families, subverting equity goals, elevating English, and exacerbating inequities because of linguistic and racial hierarchies (Chavez-Moreno, 2021). In essence, Latinx students are rendered invisible in spaces that were initially designed to provide them with the resources to gain academic success. Teachers in these programs submit to embracing raciolinguistic ideologies, adding to the deficit discourse that

Latinx students face (Garcia & Alonso, 2021; Chavez-Moreno, 2022). Efforts to stigmatize the Spanish language and implement English language's dominant place have continued to resurface over recent years within the political arena. This was notable with the implementation of Proposition 227 in California (Revilla & Asato, 2002) and Proposition 203 in Arizona (Gonzalez & Portillos, 2007) which aimed to eliminate bilingual education in schools and recreate English-only spaces. The internalization of English-only practices, of claiming any opportunity for academic success through the implementation of these practices and the shunning of native Spanish language can be pervasive and traumatic.

Understanding the role of gender within the schooling of Latinx students is of further significance. In the current scholarship, gender is analyzed to explain the gender disparity in how Latinxs experience school. Lopez (2002) observed in a NYC high school which was ninety percent Latinx at the time, mostly second-generation Dominicans. She was interested in how ordinary day-to-day school practices and classroom interactions are racialized and gendered. Her results centered on the intersection of overcrowding, policing, and raceing/gendering. The overwhelming number of students in hallways between classes was a microcosm of one of the major issues that plague urban public schools that are Latinx majority – severe overcrowding. The school instilled a policing mentality, where they policed the halls and used bullhorns and 'contained' force to move students along. Lopez discovered how "…although officially security guards were supposed to protect and supervise all students, in practice they were only patrolling the young men" (Lopez, 2002, 1192). Rolon-Dow (2005) specifically studied Puerto Rican girls and their educational experiences. She was interested in how they interpreted the way teachers engaged them within the school structures. Specifically, how did Puerto Rican girls recognize and interpret 'care' within the school and within their relationships with teachers. Rolon-Dow

(2005) categorized their responses as: caring as a structural attribute – students acknowledged the decrepit and demoralizing conditions of their school building and lamented how, if the teachers really cared, they would help fix up the school; care as knowing – students recognized that most, if not all, of the teachers did not live or frequent the neighborhoods in which the school served, only to arrive for 'work, and thus it impacted the amount of care they could offer as they did not 'know' what the students' lives were really about. The students oftentimes centered race in their interpretations, recognizing the whiteness of the staff in contrast to the Brown bodies of the student population. What is important about this work is that students are not naïve to their surroundings. They are aware of the injustices and inequalities. They are not silent observers but rather need the avenue by which to challenge the negative perceptions and deficit discourses. Colon and Sanchez (2009) sought to better understand why Latinas did better in schools than Latinos. Specifically, they sought to understand if acculturation and economic value of education impacted academic success and whether it varied by gender. They found that Latinas tended to maintain their linguistic and cultural identity more than Latinos, perhaps because of the tendency of Latinx parents to be more strict and protective with their female children. This stronger sense of cultural self actually increased academic outcomes. Also, Latinas were more apt to believe that school was the best option for social mobility and this also positively impacted their success. Latinos tended to dislike school and did not believe in its ability to help increase their life's chances as they tended to be the target of overcriminalization and higher suspension rates, along with their response by skipping school, all impacted their academic achievement. What these scholars show is the way Latinx students are gendered and raced in school systems, how they are negatively marked, and how there still are differences in treatment based on gender that significantly impacts access and achievement.

Parent/school involvement has been shown to strongly impact children's educational outcomes (Anderson et al., 2020). A perceived lack of visibility and barriers with communication between schools and parents often lead school officials to describe Latinx parents as uninvolved (Williams-Johnson & Gonzalez-Dehass, 2022). The lack of intentional school partnerships with Latinx families, parents, because of ingrained stereotypes and embedded biases and practices of a Eurocentric educational system, negatively impacts the direct academic outcomes for Latinx students (Mortier & Arias, 2023). Due to their vulnerable position in American society, Latinx immigrant families report challenging relationships with schools as they must overcome frequent labels such as "…limited in English, submissive and unassertive, uneducated, and lacking knowledge about the education system which places the failure to advocate for their children on them" (Mortier & Arias, 2023, p. 643). One study showed that mothers wanted to be more engaged but they felt silenced by language alienation and lack of respect (Salas in Mortier & Arias, 2023). Latinx families report feeling a sense of abandonment and inferiority, a feeling of a barrier invisibly erected between them and the school, negatively impacting their parental involvement (Anderson, et al., 2020). Teachers' use of academic and rapid speech makes listening and comprehending an exhausting experience, causing an unwillingness for continued engagement on the part of parents (Anderson, et al., 2020). Educators interpret this as a lack of interest, resulting in a cycle where Latinx parents are less likely to be asked by schools to participate in school activities with parents feeling their roles in their children's education are not seen or validated by the schools (Petrone, 2016).

Current scholarship shows that Latinx families and communities believe that schools are built to create failure for marginalized Latinx students; schools still embody spaces that mute expression and engage in oppression (Irizarry, 2011). They are unequal and do not offer Latinx

students the resources to succeed (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002). As Carrillo and Mendez (2019) state: “The national political climate also centers a series of assaults against the knowledge, opportunity pathways, and dignity of Latinx communities…dehumanizing forces continue to provide challenges toward equitable outcomes for Latinx students” (p.444). But there are ways to challenge and interrogate these perceptions and battle systemic oppression in schools. There is the need to redefine what high achieving is, go beyond the White, middle class normative definitions (Cuadraz, 2006) and embrace new definitions that are expanded “to include the personal qualities of students as they confront challenges and barriers along their educational trajectory” (Malagon & Alvarez, 2010, p. 150). It is to acknowledge that Latinx communities do value education, in contrast to popular deficit discourse (Cuadraz, 2006). It is the importance of having culturally responsive teachers help students achieve academic resilience (Sosa & Gomez, 2012). It is the empowerment of Latinx students through culturally responsive pedagogy that creates an additive discourse of academic success (Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009). It takes the efforts of school representatives, community members, families, policy makers, and students – together – to combat these discourses and re-create spaces that empower and allow for access to the potential at high achievement and academic success. How the literature captures these efforts will be discussed next.

Activism and Advocacy

One can take an issue discussed above, like language rights and the erasure of the Spanish language in schools and creation of English-only policies, and one will quickly realize that the community pushed back and continues to do so. Community can be described as the geographic space embodied by racial and ethnic designated social bodies (Moje, 2004), a place where its members can act as a collective, rooted in identity, language, and culture (Villenas &

Deyhle, 1999). Historically, looking at an issue like language, there were many instances where the community was able to create bilingual spaces within school classrooms with the growing acceptance of bilingual education, seen in the victory by the grassroots Puerto Rican organization ASPIRA and the historic Aspira Consent Decree of 1977 between the New York City Board of Education and the Puerto Rican organization that established bilingual instruction as legally enforceable mandate in schools (Reyes, 2006) and the efforts of Puerto Rican women teachers prior to these mandates and their attempts to provide alternative modes of instruction to meet the language needs of their communities (Korrol, 1996). Viewing the contemporary educational experiences of Latinxs, while engaging those experiences through a historical lens, captures how Latinx communities, the Latinx diaspora - from Mexican-Americans and Chicana/o populations in the Southwest to Caribbean Latinxs in the Northeast - embody a spirit of activism that flows strongly throughout, one of mobilizing culture, mobilizing language, mobilizing community, educational, and pedagogical practices (Moll, 2010). Some of these moments take precedence within larger sociocultural moments, such as the Mendez family's legal battle to challenge the denied access to local schools for their children due to their skin color and Spanish surname (Moll, 2010). The *Mendez v. Westminster* case of 1946 paved the way for, directly influenced, the more famous *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 (Moll, 2010).

While the issues are great and plenty burdensome and extremely oppressive, Latinx communities do not sit idly by, choosing instead to voice their frustrations and strongly challenge the systems. Activism and advocacy has been vital in the Latinx community in order to enact change in deficit discourse, exclusionary practices, and overall institutional oppression and injustices that negatively impact Latinx students. Multiple aspects of Latinx 'community' need to come together. In large scale activist efforts like the Walkouts of the 1960s, it was teachers like

Sal Castro (Garcia & Castro, 2011) that helped mobilize students and community, be the 'inside' representative that battled from within. It was the Chicana women of the communities that taught at the annual Mexican-American Youth Leadership Conference at Camp Hess Kramer for high school students, a space which became the center for organizing the Blowouts and other progressive movements and fostered civic responsibility and school leadership (Delgado Bernal, 1998). These women also were the leaders of the grassroots movements, leading and engaging in networking, organizing, developing consciousness, holding elected offices, and acting as official or unofficial spokespersons (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 124). It was the students themselves who initiated the walkouts and endured police brutality and jail time (Garcia & Castro, 2011). All these aspects are important to enact change of that magnitude. All are important in smaller actions as well.

There have been examples of activism sprouting from unexpected subsets of Latinx community throughout history. Once example is the activism of the Chicago Young Lords from 1966-1975 and the actions that led them, an identified 'gang' of mostly Puerto Rican community members, to interrogate educational systems, policies and practices (Aviles, Davila, and Benson II, 2019). The Chicago Young Lords realized education, especially one that transforms, must be rooted in students' lives – a holistic experience that includes their families and communities (Aviles, et al., 2019). They actively resisted the schooling that was being provided by local schools, pushed back against educational initiatives that focus on remediating and punishing and built on existing funds of knowledge to increase critical consciousness, educational relevance, and transformational practices for urban Latinx youth (Aviles, et al., 2019). The authors described Puerto Rican youth discussing, analyzing, and strategizing on street corners to develop consciousness, political action and change for the Latinx community. They drew on community

concerns to develop materials (like newspapers) that raised awareness of community and educational issues (Aviles, et al., 2019).

Activism and challenges to the deficit discourse have been a part of the Latinx educational experience for a very long time. Many have surmounted overwhelming challenges to become activists for social justice and educational change (Azmitia, 2021). There were small acts – grassroots organizations that challenged local school practices (Donato, 1997). There were medium acts – Puerto Rican women who demanded changes in the school systems of Chicago and succeeded in creating a high school that specifically catered to the Puerto Rican community and another that created a teacher exchange program with Puerto Rico so as to increase the number of bilingual teachers (Whalen, 2005b). And many of these acts took place on grand stages – the *Mendez* case, as mentioned earlier (Moll, 2010) and the Chicana/o youth movement and 1968 East Los Angeles high school blowouts (Garcia & Castro, 2011; Delgado Bernal, 1998). Overall, throughout history, activist efforts were focused on social justice, improving the academic achievement of Latinx students, maintaining ethnic identity, and increasing the community's political power in schools (San Miguel, Jr., 2013). Whatever the type and scale of the activist responses, it was necessary to build a community of support and action needed to occur from all areas of the Latinx spectrum, from school officials to community family members, from political and economic representatives to grassroots organizers. The following will look at some specific efforts from within this vast spectrum.

Latinx youth participation in activism is highly researched. Current research looks at Latinx youth involvement in sociolinguistic justice (Ferrada, Bucholtz, & Corella, 2020) and affective agency. They focus on the production of social action in this area and how it is informed by and involves embodied, emotional encounters with the world (Ferrada et al., 2020).

When this affect is mobilized as a resource, it can be used by youth to act upon the world in more sustained ways (Ferrada et al., 2020). Other studies looked at the sociopolitical development of Latinx youth and the process by which they acquire the knowledge, skills, and commitment to analyze and challenge oppressive forces (Seider, Kelly, Clark, Jennett, El-Amin, Graves, Soutter, Malhotra, & Cabral, 2020).

Teachers and administrators can play a key role in action towards the social, political, and cultural changes in the education of Latinx youth. First, it is important to have Latinx presence within the school staff (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). Having Latinx teachers allows for students to have support, mentorship, people that understand the injustice. They can help students navigate the schooling, particularly in difficult contexts. They can provide a stronger connection to the community-at-large. Overall, they are valuable resources to both families and students (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). It is important in that it makes it easier for schools to then embrace the 'funds of knowledge' that Latinx students bring with them, the cultural knowledge and cultural capital that, when embraced by schools, positively impacts academic achievement (Gonzalez et al., 1995). It is important for administrators to be conscious and purposeful in their efforts to create school environments that impact positive change for Latinx students and their families, communities. Yet, in a study of multiple educational and political leaders, Enrique Aleman, Jr. (2009) shows that these educational leaders, in efforts to maintain a sense of 'niceness' and respect for their growing Latinx student body, continue to maintain a status quo of dominant power dynamics. He shows that change cannot occur via this status quo but must begin with these individuals interrogating their positionalities and that of their students in relation to the larger structural and systemic issues in place. It starts with their self-reflection and acknowledgement of the power and institutionalized racism that schools embody (Aleman, Jr.,

2009). It then leads to a recognition of privilege these administrators have and to an acknowledgement and privileging of the experiences of Latinx students and acknowledgement of the potential of these communities in the larger political process and involvement in change (Aleman, Jr., 2009). It also entails leaning on the efforts of community activists as a representation of the community needs and working in collaboration without usurping the core principles of the community (Aleman, Jr., 2009). Finally, it is accepting the responsibility to change the school climate for Latinxs, by abiding to recommendations made in the work of Marx & Larson (2012): create additive school climate; adopt a loving school climate; get to know students through Funds of Knowledge teaching practices; encourage culturally relevant teaching; reach out to Latinx families; examine/reduce Latinx youth in special education; value the needs and experiences of Latinx students.

Studies also discuss the value of community/school collaborative efforts. Warren (2005) conceptualizes community involvement to be a part of a collaboration with schools - either through service (community school models); development (community involvement in creating or sponsoring charter schools); and organizing (where schools collaborate with specific community organizations). While organizing is included, it encompasses incorporating community members and organizations into the school structure and seems to be steered by school efforts, or centers the school and moves outward. The school, or educational system, dictates what the issues are and works with the community to figure out how to challenge it. This seems to be the case in many community-school models, such as the Harlem Children's Zone, where community plays an active role in the schooling of their children but efforts tend to be designed or motivated by the school structure (Tough, 2008). The research literature points to a knowledge of how to improve schools, understanding the importance of community

involvement. It focuses on building positive relationships, improving the outer environment, of creating 'community' by building trust and forming bonds, and gaining its support (Chapman & Harris, 2004). It focuses on changing community well-being, again through controllable acts like those found in community-school models While changes like these may not embody large-scale change, changing schools climates one at a time, in conjunction with collaboration with community and students, can be a start to potential larger movements of change. Ultimately, it must be honest and purposeful change, not continuing to maintain and support the status quo.

Parents and families play a key part in activism, most importantly and specifically in mobilizing culture (Moll, 2010). Yosso (2005) describes the significance of this mobilization of culture and its importance in challenging deficit thinking while empowering communities. Her notion of community cultural wealth decenters White, middle-class norms and celebrates and mobilizes the cultural wealth of Latina/o communities and other communities of color. It highlights the communities' multiple strengths, such as language, cultural knowledge (the strong sense of "community history, memory, and cultural intuition" (p. 79), and provides the framework that can infiltrate spaces of systemic educational oppression. Latinx families can especially embody this framework, as "…families are the starting point for surviving and effecting resistance to cultural assault, to valorizing and (re)creating a family education which stresses dignity and pride in language and culture" (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999, p. 441). Their efforts can lead to educational success as families can mobilize, rising from individuality into a collective, and become action systems (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). It is important to embrace action-oriented knowledge so as to benefit all that engage the school systems (Lawson & Alameda -Lawson, 2012), to empower these families as researchers and advocates, allowing for confidence to question the status quo of schooling (Perez, 2009). For example, Latina

mothers in New York City were concerned that Latinx students were being negatively impacted by new policies of school choice within the city and by the educational system's rhetoric of family disengagement, of Latinx families not putting in the effort to understand the new practices and policies (Perez, 2009). These mothers formed a group that challenged the practices of schools in that they did not make the effort to help inform families and decided to research all the school options for Latinx students and create pamphlets that listed as much information for each schooling opportunity so that families were informed. This information included how the educational space treated Latinx students, how welcoming these spaces were to community members, and if these spaces accepted the cultural capital it students had to offer. These pamphlets were also written in both English and Spanish. Another example highlighted whole families who participated in a community-based family engagement movement to show schools they were visible and active participants in the schooling of their children (Flores, Morgan, Rivera, & Clark, 2019). Their advocacy consisted of attending legislative hearings on education funding and cuts, establishing a youth council that consisted of entrepreneurship seminars, and daily visits to local schools to meet with administrators and simply volunteer (Flores, et al., 2019). They engaged in a collective struggle to increase the educational achievement of their children. When community organizations, Latinx parents, and schools come together to interrogate local policies, it is an opportunity to realize collective power in advocating for positive educational experiences of Latinx youth – a chance to expand the sense of 'community familia' (Carruba-Rogel, Duran, & Solis, 2019). Families are and can continue to be a key cog in the 'spirit of activism'.

Recently, there have been efforts to capture how Latinx communities attempt to enact change through a challenge of the educational systems in place – a community-centric view

focused on community action. Efforts within scholarship and academic media sources have increased to identify how community members form intragroup cultural bonds and collaborate across class and gender identities to engage in activism, the type of activism that can be "…synonymous with civil and human rights, human agency, self-determination, and voice" (Mercado & Reyes, 2010, p. 251) - activism as civic engagement, as the impetus for larger social movements, as embodying lessons learned from historical moments of activism and advocacy, both great and small. Ortiz-Wythe, Warren, and King (2022) described these efforts to address systemic inequities in education as an educational justice movement, featuring gains such as eradicating various discipline policies in school districts, mobilizing against mass school closings in Black and Brown communities, and increasing funding to public schools in low-income communities. Recent scholarship highlights the necessity of identifying and understanding the issues and problems so as to advocate for meaningful change, of understanding this activism and advocacy as "everyone's responsibility" (Mercado & Reyes, 2010, p. 254). Some research captures this understanding of community activism in regards to educational change, highlighting current movements, grassroots efforts, and smaller scale acts of resistance (De Genova & Ramos – Zayas, 2003; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2007; Valencia, 2012; Stovall, 2013; Valocchi, 2013) but these are usually within larger pieces dedicated to analyzing the larger issue, a mere mention as opposed to a centered theme. Melissa Michelson (2013) fully focuses on the efforts of Latinx community members in Chicago in their struggles for school equity. Latinx parents engage in protests, demonstrations, and even hunger strikes in their efforts to show political and educational leaders that the treatment of Latinx students and the lack of quality schools serving Latinx neighborhoods was unacceptable and must be challenged through action. These actions led to favorable outcomes, to "…renewed promises and promises kept"

(Michelson, 2013, p. 78). Involvement in activism also inspired a certain sense of 'community power', impacting beyond educational change but also into the political spheres as well.

Jeannie Oakes and John Rogers (2006) are explicit in understanding current contexts of activism and organizing for educational justice, centering their work on community activism from multiple perspectives and the actions needed to enact change. They capture an understanding of the challenge to and interrogation of educational systems as the responsibility of all within the community. Their study captures the efforts of multiple stakeholders, from students disrupting high school inequality through engagement in participatory social inquiries and participatory action research to teachers in Los Angeles disrupting the schools' status quo and altering curriculum to reflect a more social justice focus; from grassroots organizers leading school reform movements to parents organizing and speaking out to hold schools and educational leaders accountable (Oakes & Rogers, 2006). The community comes together across any divides to raise their voices and act against injustices. It goes beyond individual efforts and stresses the need for the building of community power.

Finally, one must turn to recent history to bring about an understanding of community power in engaging in activism and advocacy in interrogating and challenging educational injustices and oppression. In 2008, students in the Tucson High School (Arizona) were continuing to take part in a very successful Mexican American Studies Program. As the film *Precious Knowledge* (2011) portrays, this program was very impactful, empowering the mostly Chicana/o students and creating an environment of success where 93% of the enrolled students graduated from high school. Students were also taught by teachers that looked like them, had similar experiences. The film documents the challenges to this program, specifically ramped up after the passing of SB 100, which totally changed the immigration law in Arizona creating an

oppressive space for Brown bodies. One of the byproducts of this law was House Bill 2281, which aimed to terminate all Ethnic Studies program in the State. As the film documents, this bill helped fuel a fire that claimed ethnic studies programs like the one in Tucson High School, were communist, preached the use of terrorist acts, was anti-American, and was reverse racism. However, in encompassing this spirit of activism that has been historically present in the Latinx communities throughout the United States, students and teachers rallied against this bill, challenging its merits and interrogating its racist and oppressive under/overtones. The film centered it focus on the teachers and students within the schools and their efforts but made all attempts to show the audience the importance of the community's involvement – from grassroots organizers building a wall of bodies in protection of the protesters to community members taking part in a marathon-like run from Tuscan to the state's political center and community members also taking part in sit-ins at federal buildings while risking arrest and potential police retaliation.

This chapter identified the literature that provided a historical and contemporary overview of the educational barriers, obstacles, and injustices facing Latinx communities and the ways in which community members have engaged in activism and advocacy to interrogate and challenge these issues. The following chapter will delve into the methodological choices I made within this qualitative dissertation project, leaning on the voices of community members as they shared their stories and experiences.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the educational issues that negatively affect Latinx students from perspectives outside the school building, away from engrained educational systems, and the ways in which these educational issues were being interrogated and addressed, via activism and advocacy, directly from the experiences and stories of those that make up the community-at-large. When analyzing the state of Latinx youth in education, much of the discourse, scholarship, and recommendations have focused on what occurs within the school building. It centers on the injustices and inequalities that occur within the building structures – how policies are shaped that continue to negatively impact Latinx students; how subtractive schooling practices within the school perpetuate stereotypes and uplift deficit discourses (Valenzuela, 1999). Recommendations to eradicate these policies and practices and interrogate the injustices focus on embracing the lives of Latinx students outside of the school community and its potential to positively impact their educational experiences within the school building (Anderson et al., 2020; Galindo, 2021; Moll, 2010; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Yosso, 2005). With this research project, I set out to understand how Latinx community members within a smaller urban space, oftentimes neglected in research, treated these educational injustices and inequalities as a civil rights issue that needed to be addressed and embraced a community responsibility to "…create a vision appropriate to our society in this century…new understandings of the forces that create and sustain unequal opportunity and expanding the definition of the basic rights so that it works in transformed context" (Orfield, 2014, p. 278).

This chapter highlights the methodological choices I made to best capture the experiences, the stories, of community members as they identified the key educational issues plaguing Latinx youth, provided accounts of the communities in which they lived and worked and from which these students called home, and the ways in which they actively supported and curated Latinx culture while interrogating educational injustice. I strove for a holistic picture of community, its members, and its actions. I chose a critical qualitative approach rooted in Latinx history, methods, and relationship-building "using methodologies that are critically sensitive in their abilities to situate lived experience within a broader sociopolitical frame" (Malagon et al., 2009, p. 253). The choices I made also embraced my own Latinx culture and the impact it had on my role as researcher.

Following this section is a restatement of the problem and research questions. Then a rationale for the methodology selected for this study including a discussion on the research design, philosophy, and approach. After that, an in-depth account of the study population, data sources, reliability, collection and analysis procedures are described. The chapter will close with ethical considerations, limitations to the research, and a critical self-reflection of my role as a Latinx researcher engaging with Latinx research participants.

Restatement of the Problem and Research Questions

As mentioned in Chapter One, Gary Orfield (2014) felt the prevalent educational injustices experienced by communities of color were civil rights issues that need to be addressed. This brings up an important question: are communities within urban spaces with larger Latinx representation viewing educational issues as a civil rights issue and thus taking the steps necessary to challenge and interrogate educational systems and enact change? There is a long and rich history of many members of Latinx communities serving as activists and advocates to

improve the educational opportunities of their children (San Miguel, Jr., 2013). It is this spirit of activism, of advocacy, of engagement, that led me to develop questions seeking to embrace the efforts of community members and amplify their voices as it relates to how they feel and view the education of their community's children and how they are serving as critical agents in mobilizing culture, mobilizing language, and mobilizing practices to create stronger communities that will in-turn impact the quality of students' education (Moll, 2010). The research questions sought to capture how these community stakeholders are involved in promoting actions and reforms that meet the Latinx community's cultural, academic, and political needs and interests – partaking in educational reform movements that improve their children's academic achievements (San Miguel, Jr., 2013). The following research questions were developed and guided this critical qualitative research study:

1. Perspectives and active roles of Latinx community participants in engaging educational systems, practices, and policies
    - How do these active participants perceive issues of educational inequalities which negatively impact the Latinx community?
    - How are informal educational spaces created and what are the motivations for creating these spaces?
    - How do active participants in Latinx communities within urban spaces engage and interrogate educational policies and practices?
    - How do active participants in Latinx communities within urban spaces serve as activists and/or advocates in the schooling of their PreK-12 students?
    - How are community members rendered inactive or ineffective? What are the causes for inaction, ineffectiveness, silence?
2. Socio-historical understandings and definitions of community, Latinx identity, and education
    - What are participants' notions and definitions of community? Of Latinx identity?

- How are historical contexts of educational inequalities for Latinx communities understood?
- How have participants' own life histories, experiences, impacted their present-day roles?

3. Local context and its impact on national discourse

- How is Syracuse a site for these tensions, struggles, movements?
- How can an understanding of these issues from a community perspective within this geographical context impact the larger discourse?

Research Methodology

Research Type

This study utilized a critical qualitative research approach (Denzin, 2017). This form of inquiry critically addresses issues of power, inequality, and injustice (Mertens, 2009; Denzin, 2015). Central to critical inquiry is the researcher's explicit value position, which shapes the research question even before the study commences, with a clear aim to pursue a cause (Charmaz, 2017). As a critical qualitative researcher, my passion for interrogating educational issues that are oppressive to students of color motivated my research interests. My identity as a Puerto Rican scholar who navigated similar educational obstacles and was raised in urban public housing comprised of poor and working-class Black and Brown community members was an integral piece in seeking to conduct this study and develop questions that focused on community perspectives. A critical qualitative research approach allows me to raise probing questions, delve deeply into the data, and scrutinize both my role as researcher and this research process (Charmaz, 2017). Moreover, critical inquiry is closely linked to the concepts of emancipation and transformation throughout the research process. This approach, as Huber (2009) highlights, is not about determining an absolute truth in the data, but rather about understanding realities

within a broader framework of structural and systemic inequality, challenging conventional notions of research, evidence, and legitimacy.

An essential aspect of this research approach is its ethical framework, grounded in social justice. It necessitates an awareness of the importance of prioritizing the voices of society's least advantaged groups (Mertens, Holmes, & Harris, 2009; Denzin, 2017). It advocates for the use of qualitative research as a tool for social justice and community transformation. This research type is not merely a qualitive study, but a form of activist research that does more than just expose and critique daily life inequalities and discrimination. (Denzin, 2017). The open-ended nature of this qualitative research approach allows me, as the researcher, to exist within a space where experiences and self-understandings clash with broader sociocultural assumptions about race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and as Denzin (2017) states, the critical qualitative researcher's key question is not "who am I?" but "when, where, how am I?". By utilizing this approach, I was able to identify research philosophies and theories that best aligned and offered a holistic experience with this study, centering the lived experiences and stories of the research participants, creating space for their testimonios, and allowing for their words to directly interrogate social injustice and oppression.

Research Philosophy

My research philosophy is heavily influenced by Malagon, Huber, and Valdez (2009) and their work on Critical Race Grounded Methodology. Relying heavily on Critical Race Theory and Grounded Theory, Critical Race Grounded Methodology allows for a methodology that is critically sensitive in situating lived experiences within the larger society (Malagon et al., 2009). It examines the ways in which racialized and marginalized community members experience myriad of oppression (Huber, 2010). Data analysis becomes a tool to interrogate oppressive

conditions and empower communities of color (Malagon, Huber, & Perez, 2009). Utilizing this methodology creates space to engage in a reflexive research process, drawing from the researcher's cultural intuition to interact holistically and intentionally with the research problem and research questions asked (Malagon et al., 2009).

I felt this methodology was too broad to guide my study and therefore sought to utilize a theory, methodology, that better captured the identities and lived experiences of my research participants and better interrogated the issues that impacted this community. Therefore, I narrowed the focus and utilized a LatCrit Constructivist Grounded methodology. This combination of two theoretical frameworks allowed me to take a holistic approach to the dissertation project, allowing me to critically examine the problem while also critically self-reflecting on my role as researcher with a shared racial/ethnic identity and similar lived experiences while also recognizing my power and privilege as researcher and academic. The following offers an overview of each theory and how combined it best informs my approach.

LatCrit theory emerged out of a series of debates stemming from various Critical Race Theory (CRT) meetings during the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the first meeting for what would become LatCrit taking place in 1995 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, as part of a Hispanic National Bar Association Law Professors meeting (Ross, 2020). It builds upon the foundations of CRT, illuminating the multifaceted experiences of Latinx persons (Chavez-Moreno, 2023; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Ross, 2020; Yosso, 2005). The core principles of LatCrit include the centrality of oppression based on intersectional identities; the challenge to dominant ideology and resistance to educational and societal subordination frameworks that are used to 'explain' Latinx educational inequality and cultural inferiority; a commitment to social justice; the centrality and legitimacy of experiential knowledge; and the adaptation of an interdisciplinary

perspective and multidisciplinary approach to understanding a pan-Latinx educational and societal condition (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez & Portillos, 2007; Rolon-Dow, 2005; Lynn & Parker, 2006). The LatCrit framework aims to provide a comprehensive view of the unique experiences of the Latinx community, interrupting the conventional Black-White binary in racial discussions, and bringing to light the specific experiences of racialized Latinx populations often neglected by CRT, such as immigration status, language, phenotype, and cultural identity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002; Munoz & Maldonado, 2012; Chavez-Moreno, 2023).

The LatCrit framework affirms and uplifts Latinx voices and knowledge, acknowledging the complexity of Latinidad and the importance of understanding Latinxs as a racialized group (Chavez-Moreno, 2023) and, as Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) and Huber (2009) describe, integrates a coalitional pan-ethnic identity and community memory while enhancing empowerment. It enables an exploration of the complexities of race and other issues impacting the Latinx community, challenging the essentialization of this heterogeneous group and emphasizing counterstories as a means to illuminate Latinx experiences (Chavez-Moreno, 2023). LatCrit contributes to scholarship by offering theoretical, epistemological, and methodological approaches that enhance qualitative research in education, emphasizing the need for reflexivity in examining race (Ledesma, Ojeda, Coon, & Parker, 2023). It functions as a theoretical framework that shapes research questions, methodologies, and data analysis, emphasizing the production of knowledge from previously silenced voices, advancing transformation, building connections across struggles, and fostering community and coalition (Valdes, 1998). This framework values non-dominant forms of knowledge and documents social injustices, recognizing the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression (Osorio, 2018).

It is the importance and value of critical reflexivity and centering the experiences of the study's Latinx participants that makes constructivist grounded theory a strong match to LatCrit theory in serving as the framework for my research. Theory and knowledge are co-created by the researcher through interactions with their research participants (Charmaz, 2006). This approach aims to clarify and problematize assumptions, making these explicit to others (Mitchell, 2014). This approach encourages me, as researcher, to clearly state my role within the research field while maintaining flexibility, embrace data born out of the experiences of participants while paying attention to language and meaning, and embracing the moral responsibilities that arise from my research (Charmaz, 2020). One critical aspect of Constructivist Grounded Theory is being sensitive to the conditions under which research is produced (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2017). It entails a deep understanding of the problems and perspectives of the community members being studied. This approach is geared towards studying processes and identifying connections between events, situations, meanings, actions, and the lived interactions of individuals and social structures that might otherwise go unnoticed (Charmaz, 2017).

Integrating constructivist grounded theory within a LatCrit framework, and building off of Malagon, Huber, and Perez (2009), potentially strengthens the interdisciplinary potential of qualitative critical race research. This combination offers a holistic approach, embracing the lived experiences of both informants and myself as researcher, offering a robust approach to exploring complex social phenomena. In my dissertation research, the relevance of a LatCrit constructivist grounded theory approach is emphasized by Valdes (in Fernandez, 2002), highlighting its goals of knowledge production, transformation advancement, struggle connection, and community and coalition cultivation. This framework enables a comprehensive understanding of education, including the crucial community perspective (Cook & Dixson,

2012). It allowed me to focus on issues that affect Latinxs as the research participants, valuing experiential knowledge yet recognizing that Latinxs (like all people) can perpetuate hegemonic ideologies and practices; define and theorize race and racialization; conceptualize Latinx as a racialized group; and advance the specificity of Latinidad (Chavez-Moreno, 2023). As Levy (2016) states, "As a constructivist grounded theorist, I acknowledge that my subjectivity will be present in my research" (p. 95).

Research Design

Research Site

My study takes place in Syracuse, NY with a focus on the Near Westside community comprised of many of the city's Latinx population. The Near Westside is part of the larger Westside community which consists of other neighborhoods such as Tipperary Hill, Skunk City, Park Avenue, and the Far Westside (Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today, 2023). Figure 1 shows a map of the Near Westside neighborhood, highlighting meaningful streets (such as Gifford St., Seymour St., S. Geddes St., and S. West St.) that are directly identified or alluded to by newspaper articles describing the 'space' that houses Latinx community members (Greenlar, 2014) or by participants in this study when they offer their answers as to what constitutes the Latinx community in Syracuse.

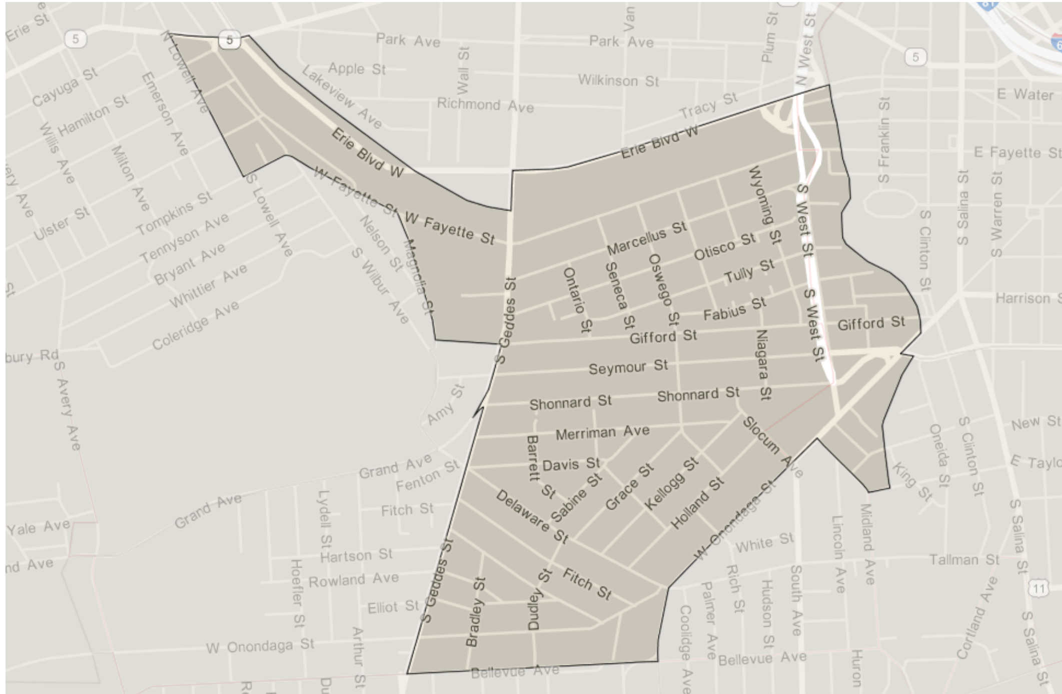

Figure 1: Map of Near Westside Neighborhood, Syracuse, NY (statisticalatlas.com)

The 2010 U.S. Census, the most recent census at the time of this study, shows that Syracuse, NY had a population of 145,170 in 2010. Of this total population, 12,036 (8.3%) were identified as Hispanic/Latino. The Latinx population increased from the 1990 U.S. Census, where there were 4,177 Latinx residents making up 2.5% of the city's population. While the Latinx presence in the city was growing, within the Syracuse City School District the Latinx population was even more pronounced. The Latinx population within the Syracuse city schools was 13% of the 19,713 total students enrolled in the school system for the 2011-2012 academic school year (nysed.gov), almost double the representation within the city as a whole. Beyond these numbers, the research site is important because Syracuse also houses organizations known for their work with the Latinx community. There are local chapters of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR); local community-based organizations (CBOs) in existence for decades dedicated to overcoming the barriers that the Latinx community

face; partnerships with local universities that created cultural spaces for the Latinx community to engage in fellowship and support programs that met the communities' educational needs; myriad grassroots organizations and individual efforts. The size of the city, the fact that it is not a metropolis like New York City or Chicago or contains a major and nationally recognized cultural centers like Los Angeles, Phoenix, and other Southwestern cities, oftentimes allows for these efforts to be ignored or simply not important enough to be captured – a mere blip in the larger research arena. Finally, Syracuse allows for a capturing of a heterogeneous Latinx perspective, as the Latinx population at the time of the study consisted of Puerto Rican, Cuban, Chicana/o, South American, and Central American peoples, both born within and outside of the contiguous United States. Latinx identities are not static, monolithic, or essentialized notions of culture and must incorporate the variation found within the group, the importance of an awareness of Latinx heterogeneity (Ochoa, 2007). Syracuse's demographic representation allows for this.

Study Population and Sample Selection

This study focused exclusively on the testimonios and experiences of Latinx identified members of the city of Syracuse, specifically those that lived or worked in the city and had articulated an active role in supporting and advocating for the Latinx community-at-large. As such, the selection process included a combination of purposive and criterion sampling to limit participants to those who were contacted by myself either based on my previous connections with various community members through my past experiences of engaging Syracuse (and the Near Westside specifically) in multiple capacities or through snowballing techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) based on recommendations from these participants. Participants met a predefined set of characteristics to ensure the questions explored for this study were appropriately understood and addressed (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Teddlie & Tashakkori,

2009). In this study, important criterion sampling factors were based on a shared Latinx identity and work or residence within the city of Syracuse. The participants:

1. self-identified as Latinx
2. on their own accord, or through an organization or program, were actively involved within the Syracuse Latinx community
3. had a personal lived history with the Syracuse Latinx community

These factors were significant to obtain insight into the Latinx community, understanding the history of this community, and identifying the ways in which these community members identified educational issues and subsequently engaged in advocacy and/or activism to interrogate these issues, either directly or through other indirect means. A total of 30 people participated in this study. They were ordinary people involved in "…countless organizations and individuals of different ages, occupations, genders, and ideological perspectives" (San Miguel, Jr., 2013, p. 143) with a common goal to have a positive impact on community. The 30 participants represented the Latinx diaspora, identifying as Puerto Rican, Cuban, Colombian, Mexican and Mexican-American, Chicanx, Peruvian, Venezuelan, Costa Rican, Dominican - each representing countries from the Caribbean, Central, North and South America. They were immigrants and born in the contiguous United States. They represented a variety of roles and areas of impact within the community: 7 were actively engaged with community-based organizations; 7 worked as community organizers; 6 were in education-related fields; 4 were in health-related or social work fields; 3 were in the legal field; 2 were involved in the media and/or arts; and 1 was affiliated with a local church. Ten of the participants were considered community elders, having had a long history living and working with the Latinx community of the Near Westside. Table 1 offers an overview of participant demographics in the aggregate.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Demographic variable	Category	Number of participants
Ethnicity/Nationality	Puerto Rican	12
	Mexican-American	3
	Colombian	3
	Chicana/o	2
	Peruvian	2
	Venezuelan	2
	Cuban	2
	Costa Rican	1
	Dominican	1
	Spanish (Spain)	1
	Spanish (Spain)/Puerto Rican	1
Country of Birth	Born outside of contiguous U.S.	17
	Born within the contiguous U.S.	13
Gender	Women	21
	Men	9

Research Strategy

This research project utilizes counterstorying and critical race testimonios, methods that capture "powerfully written stories and narratives" which "begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs…by calling attention to neglected evidence," (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017, p.51). These methods, originating from Latin American Studies and recognizing the power of storytelling traditions in Latinx, African American, and Native American communities, document the experiences of oppressed groups and denounce injustices (Booker, 2002; Yosso, 2006). It reinforces "…traditions of political, social, and cultural resistance and survival" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Testimonios serve as verbal journeys, sharing life experiences and injustices endured, conveying a life story (Blackmer & Curry, 2012; Huber, 2009).

The testimonio process allows individuals to mold the intersections of their past experiences and personal identities in shaping a new present and future (Cienfuegos & Monelli in Huber, 2009). As a method, it facilitates the creation of knowledge and theory from personal experiences. They typically reflect collective experiences rather than individual ones (Huber, 2009). The narrative journey reveals the intersectional societal and systemic injustices suffered by the narrator, allowing for spaces of healing, empowerment, and advocacy (Huber, 2009).

Critical race testimonios / counterstorying as methods expand the LatCrit Framework. It offers the opportunity for research participants to describe the injustices Latinx communities face as a result of oppression; it directly challenges dominant ideologies; it builds from the lived experiences of Latinx people to reveal injustices that have infiltrated the histories and memories of the larger community; and the community's push towards actively interrogating these injustices (Cruz in Huber, 2009). They challenge objectivity by situating individuals within a collective experience of marginalization, oppression, and resistance, fostering new understandings of solidarity and resistance against dominant culture, laws, and policies (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012).

Differing from oral history, testimonio involves critical reflection on personal experiences within sociopolitical realities (Beverly, 2005; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). It fosters a sense of solidarity as a precursor to social change and offers collaborative "modes of analysis attuned to diverse ways of knowing and learning in communities" (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). Testimonios reveal epistemologies of truth and understanding (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012), privileging personal and communal experiences as crucial sources of knowledge (Burciaga & Navarro, 2015).

Researchers using testimonios position themselves as knowledge holders and producers, bridging collective and individual experiences (Huante-Tzintzun, 2020). Testimonio serves to highlight wrongs, viewpoints, or urgent calls to action (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). Testimonio transcends mere data collection, becoming a process for theorizing lived experiences in research contexts (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2021, p. 528).

The "cornerstone of testimonio, like oral history, is not the speaking of truth but rather, the telling of an account from an individual point of view whose conscience has led to an analysis of the experience as a shared component of oppression" (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2021, p. 528). Testimonio is both an eyewitness testimony (based on firsthand knowledge) and bearing witness (to that which cannot be seen) (Villenas, 2019). The testimonio has an overtly political intent, "…to inform people outside a community/country of the circumstances and conditions of people's lives (Haig-Brown in Villenas, 2019, p. 156).

Counterstorying serves various functions, including: building community among those at the margins of society by identifying shared experiences, organizing community intelligence and experience to make educational theory and practice more accessible; interrogating dominant narratives; spotlighting the collective and showing members of the community they are not engaging this society in isolation; and providing contexts for understanding and transforming established belief systems (Delgado, 1989; Osorio, 2018; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). These methods offer rich, alternative perspectives for understanding and addressing issues faced by marginalized communities.

Data Collection and Data Sources

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), semi-structured interviewing includes asking a set of pre-determined questions and then following that with probing questions. It consisted of a specific interview outline that allowed me access to some control on how the specific questions were constructed and created space for asking new and additional questions throughout the interview (Creswell, 2013). These semi-structured interviews allowed me to capture testimonios of participants, creating space for participants to share their relationship with the community, educational systems, and the ways in which they interrogate educational injustices. Questions were intentionally designed, as per a LatCrit Constructivist Grounded approach, to cull information that helped me better understand how participants realized their experience within the Latinx community of Syracuse. It allowed me to gather a sort of community history, a sense of Syracuse, the Near Westside neighborhood more specifically, and the education of its Latinx youth across a time continuum, where participants could allow for a deeper understanding of their experiences, of "…the complexities, complications, and confusions within the life of just one member of a community to gain insights into the collective" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11). These interviews allowed me to engage participants in reflecting on childhood memories of community, reliving early life experiences with education and family, so as to better understand why they engaged in activism and advocacy, why they themselves decided to actively interrogate issues negatively impacting their communities and the educational experiences of the community's youth. It allowed for a personal, cultural, and social rendering of why they did what they did, of defining their "activist identities", locating participants into three categories: activism as a career choice; activism as a calling; and activism as a way of life (Volocchi, 2012). All interviews were conducted in person,

lasting between 90 minutes and two hours. In order to create a space where participants felt comfortable sharing openly and holistically, I tried to make the experience as informal as possible, aiming for a humanizing approach which allows for organic and genuine perspectives on the social, cultural, and ethical relationships these interviews produced (Ortega, 2023). To do this, I adapted a version of *charlas* that Ortega (2023) defines as a "form of conversational engagement about a specific topic in which the participants explore an issue, problematize it..." (p.6) and is more akin to the literal Spanish translation of 'personal chat', creating a richer experience that was culturally embedded and allowed me to be perceived as concerned citizen/community member and less as university interviewer. Using this informal approach to build trust required using my prior facilitator training and experiences through Intergroup Dialogue, especially in being an empathetic and active listener (Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2013). I tried to create this environment by meeting with participants in coffee shops and talking over a cup of coffee or tea, meeting in spaces where we sat on comfortable chairs as if in a living room, meeting in community libraries or community spaces, and even meeting in the homes of some of the participants, at their kitchen tables, sharing homemade guava pastelitos and café con leche. As I will share in the Reflexivity section, I tried to make the experience conversational and less like a formal interview, for better or for worse.

History is an integral part of this dissertation research project. As a qualitative researcher, behaving like a historian comes with the territory – I cannot always directly observe events or situations but, instead, I learn about them by talking to witnesses and informants and seek out variations in perspectives (Benzecry, Deener, & Lara-Millan, 2020). Not only are the lived histories of the participants vital to utilizing Testimonios as methods, but the history of the urban space is vital to understanding present occurrences and social interactions in relation to previous

years. “Bringing time into urban sociology is necessary to isolate the process shaping a neighborhood formation that has emerged within the last 30-40 years” (Katz, 2010, p. 32). It allows me the opportunity to identify the space I am studying across time, understanding that my present observations are at the “…end of a temporal continuum” (Katz, 2010, p. 41) in which the past must be made visible so that the visibility of the present space is better understood. For this dissertation project, an attempt to understand historical context - of the Syracuse Latinx community, a setting for potential activist and advocate spirit; of its members’ and stakeholders’ personal history with the community and with education; of my own history with the community and education as a Latinx researcher - was woven throughout the fabric of the project and the methods used. It was first realized in intentionally identifying ten study participants who, in addition to the community engagement they were already participating in at the time of the study, were longstanding members of the Latinx community in Syracuse and served as elders able to connect my questions to the past and speak to community action as far back as thirty years prior to the time of this study. Incorporating a historical understanding into this study was also especially realized in my intentional efforts to conduct archival research. I accessed the Onondaga Historical Association located in downtown Syracuse and partook in over 10 hours of archival research. I was able to access their *Population: Latinos and Hispanics* archive collection, consisting of two large folders stuffed full of resources. Most of these resources were newspaper articles from as far back as the early 1960s that helped paint a picture of the Syracuse Latinx community over time and told the story of the issues and success, and the ways in which community members engaged in activism and advocacy. I was able to review past issues of the Syracuse Herald-American, the Syracuse Herald-Journal, and the Syracuse Post-Standard and it allowed me to identify the commonalities between the past and the moments this research project

occurred, the ways in which progress was being made as well as the ways in which things remained stagnant. While it was a wonderful opportunity to frame my work as well as validate some of the testimonios that were shared by community elders when they detailed their earliest memories and reflected on an 'activist' spirit as part of the history of the community, there were limitations to the resources available. Most glaring was that the journalists writing the articles were exclusively White and did not represent similar identities to the Latinx community members they were covering, offering what oftentimes felt as a very homogenous perspective and at times bordered on a voyeuristic lens. However, as this was all I had to work with considering this was all that was available to me within this archive, it was made that much more imperative to center the voices of the participants of this study, especially those 10 elders, as a way to juxtapose their experiences to what was being reported and affirm those commonalities as well.

Data Analysis

My data analysis was framed by LatCrit Constructivist Grounded methodology, especially utilizing cultural intuition. Delgado Bernal (1998) identifies four sources of Cultural Intuition that researchers draw upon during the research process: personal, academic, professional experiences, and the analytic process itself. Personal experiences encompass a researcher's background and history, shaping their understanding and interpretation of events, circumstances, and data. My own identity and history could not be removed from my engagement with the data. It shaped my perspectives and interpretations even as I centered the voices and experiences of participants. Academic experiences guide how researchers interpret related literature on their topic, while professional experiences, especially within their own communities, provide significant insights. My graduate work influenced the literature I pulled

from to best identify a framework for this project while my professional experience working for community organizations and as a public school/community liaison provided insight into the data. I was able to connect with the stories shared by participants because I interacted with the people, communities, organizations they referenced. I had a solid point of reference, especially in relation to the Near Westside Latinx community, because of my professional experiences within that same community. The analytic process is the final source, where researchers bring meaning to their data and the broader study. This concept is instrumental in recognizing the multiple knowledge sources a researcher brings to their work (Malagon, Huber, & Velez, 2009). Being attuned to these sources of knowledge enabled me, as researcher, to be more reflexive throughout the analytic process, grounding my work in the life experiences of Latinxs. This approach acknowledged the multifaceted ways in which data analysis of Latinx testimonios by a Latinx researcher, became a process that was, as Delgado Bernal (1998) described, experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic.

All interviews were transcribed, meticulously reviewed, and coded. I transcribed all interviews myself, wanting to immerse myself in the data as I listened to the interviews during the transcription phase. I read through each transcript and began engaging in a deductive coding process (Saldana, 2016), as I felt I had solid categories formed by my larger research questions. Therefore, I made notes on the data that fit the following categories: community, Identity, educational issues/barriers/challenges, community issues/barriers/challenges, roles (activist & advocates). Simultaneously, archival research data was reviewed and coded by themes as well, focused on history of the Latinx community in Syracuse, including demographics, neighborhood boundaries, and engagement with the city-at-large; the issues faced; and the ways in which community members served as activists and advocates in interrogating these issues. I created a

document that captured these themes from a historical perspective. Once I completed the first round of coding, I reread all the transcripts and transitioned into a more inductive approach (Saldana, 2016), seeing where the data took me and what I may have missed by focusing on predetermined categories. During these multiple readings, I noted data that continued to fall within the predetermined categories as well as developing new categories. For example, it was this process that allowed me to identify instances where some participants were actively victim blaming and I categorized it as such. When writing this dissertation, I was able to see how the data within this category aligned with scholarship calling on researchers researching Latinx community to not ignore the ways in which Latinx community members reinforce hegemonic ideologies (Chavez-Moreno, 2023) and it became a key component of my findings. In old school fashion, I created several documents headed by the larger categories, and cut data from the transcripts and pasted them into their appropriate categories. I also incorporated the historical data into these categories. I was able to use the historical data from the archives to check against the testimonios I received from community elders, especially as they discussed historical moments, and vice versa. Finally, I continued reviewing these documents of categorized data and continued to refine and narrow the data until key findings were unearthed. My analysis did not shy away from race, acknowledged the complexity of the Latinx diaspora/identity, and spotlighted instances of community memory and community power. I entered the analysis experience with an understanding of the problem, of the perspectives of both participants and myself as Latinx researcher. As Charmaz (2020) stresses, developing a situational awareness, where research participants are situated within their social and cultural contexts, and acknowledging how structural conditions and positions impact both the researcher and the research process, is paramount. This situational awareness is crucial in locating findings within

their broader contexts, placing a responsibility on my researcher self to delve deeply into my own experiences as well as those of participants, fostering strong reflexivity and methodological self-consciousness (which is discussed later in this chapter).

Ethical Considerations

Each study participant signed an IRB-approved consent form prior to their interviews. I provided a copy and read the entire document aloud prior to asking them to sign if they consented to the interview. It was clearly communicated that I would record the interview in its entirety. After each interview concluded, I offered each participant the opportunity to read the transcript once it was completed. No participants accepted this offer. As I have made the decision to name the site (Syracuse and the Near Westside community specifically) so as to capture its rich history, I had to consider participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Janet Heaton (2022) states: "Researchers often have no choice but to de-identify data to meet ethical and legal requirements, especially when conducting studies on sensitive topics or with small populations" (p.123). Because the Near Westside community of Syracuse is closeknit and many of the participants knew each other, including too many descriptive language detailing participants' work and other potential identifying features could potentially impact trust, especially if participants thought other participants would find out what they may have shared. Therefore, I have decided to offer broad descriptions of the participants within my findings chapters less I betray this trust. There is a moment within my findings (Chapter 6) where I use pseudonyms as I share more in-depth testimonios. I felt it was important to have a name, even if a pseudonym, to link to these stories for ease of readership and to continue maintaining confidentiality. In these moments where pseudonyms are used, I try to be cognizant of the identity-framing and positioning effects of these naming practices and "…reflect the culture and

ethnonational background of participants' names" (Heaton, 2022, p. 128). To do this, I have chosen pseudonyms from recent works of literature written by Latinx authors and focused on the Latinx experience. These works have had an intellectual and cultural impact on me and I hope the use of these characters' names as pseudonyms honors the value of the testimonios shared within this dissertation.

Limitations

While I was able to engage in 30 interviews and felt I reached saturation, I do feel one of the limitations of this project is that I was unable to capture more voices representing two distinct subsets of the Latinx community: grassroots community efforts and local chapters of national Latinx organizations. Many of the potential grassroot community leaders and representatives of national organizations I reached out to did not respond to my request for an interview. I also did not have a chance to interview one of the religious leaders in the community, a man that many pointed to as the impetus to focused activism in support of the Latinx community. His name came up many times, during the interviews with elders and in the newspaper articles within my archival research. These were missed opportunities that would have provided a more robust and holistic view of the activism that was and is occurring and provided some more insight into the balance and tension between institutional and hyper-localized efforts. It could have provided some more insight into how deliberate action was realized in these two bookend activist efforts.

A second limitation is that I did not engage in participant observations. A true ethnographic project would have found me observing participants in their places of work, as they were actively engaged in advocating for the community, via afterschool activities, board meetings, or visiting with families and their children. These observations could have added to the rich data collected within the interviews and archival research.

Finally, another limitation was my archival research did not include reviewing the past editions of the local Spanish-language newspaper – CNY Latino, an integral part of the cultural capital within the community and a great opportunity to gather more insight and historical context. While I was able to review past issues of the Syracuse Herald-American, the Syracuse Herald-Journal, and the Syracuse Post-Standard, I did not do the same with CNY Latino. At the time of the data collection, the newspaper was in its 5th year of existence. I was provided access to all the issues of the newspaper but was unable to make time to delve into a detailed analysis much as I did for other historical artifacts.

Reflexivity

"The only voice I can represent is my own and this is where I place myself" (Absolon & Willett, 2005, in Charmaz, 2017, p. 36). One of the reasons why I was drawn to a LatCrit Constructivist Grounded framework that this framework necessitates a thorough scrutiny of the researcher self, underlining the importance of reflexivity, especially on the researcher's identity and role in relation to the research (Charmaz, 2020). It brings to the forefront the methodological self-consciousness. Methodological Self-Consciousness, as defined by Charmaz (2020), is a reflective examination of how the researcher's perspectives and positionality affect their research processes, the entire research experience. This process can be a vulnerable experience, centering the researcher's privileges and biases, and sparking deep reflexivity about their research practice. Charmaz (2017) stresses the importance of examining oneself in the research project, the meanings created, and actions taken at each step, as well as becoming aware of unearned and taken-for-granted privileges associated with one's position and roles. Charmaz (2017) articulates this self-consciousness as "...defining intersecting relationships with power, identity, subjectivity - and marginality - for both the researcher and research participants" (p. 36). This echoes Adele

Clark's (2005) emphasis on positionality, which invites researchers to consider their social locations and to envision how their research project, process, and personal roles appear from the perspectives of their participants. It prompts researchers to interrogate how individualism influences their research actions and analyses, considering the extent, consequences, and variations of this influence. Charmaz (2017) underlines the need for this depth of reflexivity, which may not be routinely undertaken but is essential for comprehensive and responsible research.

My identity could not be ignored throughout my interactions with participants. It was a source of connection, where finding commonalities and shared childhood experiences helped build trust. During one interview, upon finding out that the interviewee was Puerto Rican and grew up speaking English only at the expense of her native Spanish language and its impact on interacting with grandparents, I found myself engaged in a 5 minute conversation on these shared experiences.

- ***Interviewee:*** *So it was always... When you saw the grandparents, you're only saying hello. They would talk to you in Spanish, and most of the time you would just twinge, because you're trying to process and understand what they were saying. But it was always just a part of our lives, even though I think in hindsight with conversation with my parents, they probably regret not.*
- ***Jermaine:*** *Yeah. No, ______, you're scaring me right now [laughter] 'cause that's my story.*
- ***Interviewee:*** *Really?*
- ***Jermaine:*** *No seriously, that's something I...*
- ***Interviewee:*** *Wow, isn't that something…*
- ***Jermaine:*** *That's why this project has been, for me, wonderful, but also very... I get to critically self-reflect.*
- ***Interviewee:*** *Oh, absolutely.*

- ***Jermaine:*** *Because sometimes I feel like an impostor, even in my own community, 'cause...*
- ***Interviewee:*** *That is so true.*
- ***Jermaine:*** *That was the issue, my growing up in the... Sorry, this is your interview, not mine.*
- ***Interviewee:*** *No, it's okay.*
- ***Jermaine:*** *But just to share, 'cause I don't get this often. Growing up, let's say, went to school in the early '80s. My parents... My mom is from Puerto Rico, and she came as a dyslexic, at 11 years old, thrown into the New York City public schools. There were not good ELL programs at the time.*
- ***Interviewee:*** *So she came in through the '50s and '60s?*
- ***Jermaine:*** *She was born... Yeah, she was born in Puerto Rico. She was born, what, '54?*
- ***Interviewee:*** *Okay.*
- ***Jermaine:*** *So she came in the early '60s. So just thrust in, but for her, she got her high school diploma and everything. But the thing was, for her, it is a scar. So she always vowed when she had her child, when she met my dad, they vowed I'm not going to go through that. And also at that time, to speak in Spanish or having an accent labelled you already as lesser than. And so, again, they did not want me to go through that, so as soon as I started kindergarten full-time, no more Spanish in the house.*
- ***Interviewee:*** *Wow.*
- ***Jermaine:*** *And same thing, and when you said that, "I talk to them," I still talk to them, we have those conversations, like, "Man... " 'cause I feel like a certain part of me was ripped away. And those are the issues I deal with even today, especially with the work I do and what I'm passionate about. So, yeah, but then like my mom said, and my dad, "It was a decision, a sacrifice in order to have you not experience what we did and also to get you moving forward." So it's an interest and something I hope to do in the future to have a historical project looking at those of us that have had that happen to us.*
- ***Interviewee:*** *That's interesting, because I don't know if my parents... I don't think... I think, in reflection, they didn't know why they didn't do it 'cause... And I can't say if it was a matter of trying to fit in; I don't think it was even that. I don't think they knew any better. Because here they were, my mom was a dropout; she dropped out at 16,*

eventually got her GED. She was going to a school that was graduating kids who couldn't read. My dad got his high school diploma, took a couple college classes, and went into the NYPD. Got laid off during the late '70s when the city was going through that financial turmoil, and then wanted to look for stability, and his answers to get out of the drugs, to get out of the neighborhood that they were living in, off the Grand Concourse, was to maybe move upstate. So in hindsight, there's lots of regret because there isn't that bilingualism in all of us, but...

- ***Jermaine:*** *So do you think some of that impacts you and your work you do today?*
- ***Interviewee:*** *Absolutely. I think even... You talked about some of the challenges, because you went through that in your early age. We encounter it all the time, and I think there's been some resistant to want to learn Spanish. Because even... For example, I remember and recall my grandfather criticizing my mom because we didn't speak Spanish when we used to visit him, 'cause he used to work at Columbia as a security guard. So here are these... They're raising kids, they're raising really strong kids, they're doing well in school, but that Spanish-speaking piece, the ability to communicate in that other... Their home language, was a big issue for my family. So we were often... "You're not Latina enough, because you don't speak the Spanish." So that always resonated with me, and I was often embarrassed. And even when I've had conversations and encounters with Latinos growing up in college, "Oh, Mami, you don't understand Spanish? Oh, you're not Spanish, you're not Puerto Rican." Despite the fact that I put myself through college, the fact that I encounter some of the same obstacles, that my family was plagued with drugs and pregnancies and all these other things and incarceration, the speaking Spanish was just such an important part of who the (last name of interviewee's family) were.*

In this example, the roles practically flipped. I was so struck by the connection of someone who dealt with shifting from Spanish to English only and the impact it had on communicating with my grandparents that I could no longer ignore my own story and felt the need to share. This resulted in a great conversation on the impact of language, and language as identity, and feeling like an imposter within your culture because of the inability to speak Spanish well. I do feel this opened up the interview to allow for a place where the interviewee felt comfortable, trusted me, and was able to share openly and honestly. It also allowed me to create an almost organic, informal *charla* (as mentioned in previous sections) and gather rich data. I truly could not avoid

my positionality when analyzing this data because my story was inserted into the data. Capturing these testimonios was also allowing for my own testimonio to show itself.

While the above was an example of a connection over shared experiences, there were moments when I inserted myself into the interview as a means to defend myself, my Latinx identity in the face of an interviewee defining it so rigidly. In these moments, I wanted to prove my Latinx identity even though I lacked certain cultural aspects, speaking Spanish the primary one. These instances were different than the example I just shared. The tone was different, defensive. I wasn't seeking connection but in a way was trying to protect myself. While there wasn't a noticeable difference in the impact on data that was captured, it did cause me to feel angst and after these interviews caused me to critically self-reflect and try to fight feelings of being a cultural imposter. In one example, the interviewee was discussing the Latinx community and those he was meeting felt like they weren't truly embracing the culture. Enough of these experiences led him to actively seek 'true Latinos'.

> *In the process I start meeting the who's who in the Latino community because in a way I wasn't really involved back then. I was what, and I don't know if you're aware of this, there are many Latinos in this country that are Americanized* (air quotes during interview) *and they practically even lose not only their language but almost their culture. I can name a few here but we're gonna put that aside. So I was like that. I was losing my Latino culture. So after what had happened to me, which I consider a tragedy, you know because I wanted an American family, an American wife, all that and I was losing all my true Latino identity…*

This participant explicitly delineates what a 'true Latino' is, and at the mention of 'losing language' and equating that to a tragedy, I remember tensing up. In my notes as I was conducting the interview, I wrote "*I am not a fake Latino*". It really struck a cord and I don't recall the next few minutes of the interview, until I listened to the recording and transcribed afterwards. It was

interesting that I did not interject and share my story, much like I did in the first interview. However, I believe in this case I did not want to expose myself as a fraud in his eyes. I also realized the impact it had later as I was analyzing the data, as I homed in on instances of this participants hegemony and 'blame the victim' mentality.

In a couple other interviews, I found myself interjecting with the reason why I didn't speak Spanish when a participant defined Latinx culture as primarily being one where Spanish was the main language. I would tell of my parents decision to make our household English-only so as to, in their eyes, support my educational success. I would tell the story of my mother's dyslexia and illiteracy and strong accented English and the abuse she would face from teachers and peers, how she did not want me to experience this and therefore refused to have me speak Spanish at home. It was my way to prove my Latinx identity, to explain away what I was lacking in the participant's definition of true Latinidad. The following is my response when the interviewee was discussing how Spanish was centered and uplifted in her childhood home and became such an integral part of her cultural identity:

> *See, that's so different from me. Because my parents stressed English. Because my mom, when she came to this country from Puerto Rico she was 11. But she was also dyslexic and she was just thrown into the schools. So when she had me, she was like, as soon as he starts school I'm not gonna have him go through the same issues. So as soon as I started Kindergarten, when I got home, they were like, English only. Which kind of screwed me over, because ... I went back to them, no. Because I don't speak well. I understand it perfect. I write it perfectly, but I can't ... I speak like a five year old. I go back to my mom, man, what the heck? It was a sacrifice. She was like ... Going to school at that time for you, people would have thought you were an idiot. And she went through that. She didn't want that to happen to me. That's interesting that you go to keep Spanish.*

I am mourning the loss of my native language but also defending myself, defending the choices of my parents. In a way, someone questioning my Latinx identity felt as if they were accusing

my mother and it was important for me to share why I was missing this part of the culture. This occurred in a couple other interviews. In these spaces, I felt comfortable sharing my mother's stories. It is interesting that the moments I shared my mother's story as a defense mechanism, it was with participants that identified as women. I believe that sharing my mother's story would perhaps offer a connection via gender that I was unable to achieve based on my privileged male identity. These stories helped build trust.

Conclusion

The researcher acts in social spaces embedded in historical, socioeconomic, and institutional power relations and is guided by purposes, interests, and experiences and not only in their epistemological or methodological approaches (Chavez-Moreno, 2023). This sums up my approach to this very important research project. This chapter highlighted why I chose a LatCrit Constructivist Theoretical framework as a methodology, landing on Testimonios as an appropriate method to capture the stories and experiences of Latinx community members engaged in disrupting educational injustice within an urban community. This chapter highlighted how integral my role as researcher and a person with a shared racial/ethnic identity was to the semi-structured interviews I conducted and the ways I engaged in the data analysis. Cultural intuition and a methodological self-consciousness meant I had to be aware of how I integrated myself into the research, the positive ways it impacted relationship-building with participants, and the ways in which it may have negatively impacted the experience. I could not engage in this project as merely a researcher with no personal attachment to the research questions, community, participants, and data. This approach would have done more harm. As the following chapters will show, building trust and identifying shared experiences with participants allowed for a robust, holistic, and personal experience – for all involved in this project.

Chapter Four

Defining and Constructing Community/Cultural Wealth

In the tapestry of human relationships, community threads its way through the very fabric of our lives. The term community can represent multiple entities, including educational institutions and community-based organizations, service agencies, and/or groups of people (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). But what does community truly mean? How do we define it, especially within the dynamic interplay of cultural heritage, physical boundaries, and personal experiences? What does the community have to offer, its assets that can shift years of deficit discourse and systemic oppression? This chapter embarks on a deep exploration, delving into the multifaceted nature of community as seen through the eyes and experiences of its members. It journeys into the heart of Syracuse's Latinx community, where perceptions of community are as diverse as the individuals who compose it. This chapter explores the nuances of community construction, the richness of culture, the empowering assets, and the profound impact of history on the present. Through the voices of the participants and the echoes of the past, this chapter seeks to illuminate the essence of community – a living, breathing entity shaped by the dreams, struggles, and triumphs of those who call it home. One participant, a community organizer, summed up the complicated definition of community, all of its nuances and the different impacts it has on a person's life and the different aspects a person embraces:

> *Community is, can be a few different things. It is the different ways people do community. It is the different levels. You have your immediate community – which is your family, friends, your support networks. Then I think there is also the community that is the larger environment where you live – neighbors, schools, places of work, businesses. The value structures play a role – what's shared, what's not. It all makes up your full community, each piece having a role in how you function, how all the people function, each and every day.*

Bridging the Past and Present: Constructing a Syracuse Latinx Community

Community Is…

When participants were asked to define community, a fascinating collection of perspectives emerged. Some painted community in the vivid hues of physical spaces, pinpointing the Near Westside of Syracuse as the epicenter of the Latinx community. To them, community was marked by tangible boundaries, streets, and buildings. For others, the essence of community resided not in bricks and mortar but in the intangible connections between people. It was about shared cultural ties, the warmth of extended familial bonds, and the feeling of belonging to something greater than oneself. Within these definitions, the interplay between space and sentiment became a defining theme, shaping the very essence of what community meant. Through testimonios from the elders and archival research, which included local newspapers from the 1960s-1990s that documented Latinx community and its members, this research project also unearthed the historical roots of the Syracuse Latinx community – the community of the past and its impact on the community at the time of this research project.

Community as Sentiment: Weaving the "We Feeling"

When asked what community is to them, many of the participants provided general definitions that saw community as a sentiment – not just people living together but developing a 'we feeling'. For one participant, the ideal community is one where there are shared interests, where community members feel empowered and are actively engaged. Community is for the benefit of the individuals who embody it but is also on the receiving end of various levels of engagement by its members. Another participant defined community as "…not necessarily physical. It exists where there's a group of people that you know are supportive of you. You

share the same goals and some of the same guidance and you know you can lean on each other if you need to”. A third participant saw community as a reinforcement of who you are, what you are comfortable with, the levels of support and the advantages born out of that support. “You can’t have value in a community until you have individuals who feel valued”. Their definitions highlight a strong sense of belonging, of shared values, of mutual support. Participants emphasized the importance of relationships and the mutual empowerment in shaping community sentiment. One participant stated this clearly: “The Latino community is hermandad – a sisterhood, a brotherhood. Tight knit – for better or for worse”. Many participants defined community as a ‘tapestry’ – of multiple experiences and identities coming together.

Community as Locality: The Heartbeat of the Westside

Community was also defined as the locality, the shared physical space, and the key institutions and markers within that space that impacted the lives of its community members. All participants identified the Near Westside of Syracuse as the Latinx community. One participant stated how even as Latinos moved all over the city, they still considered the Near Westside as the center of the Latinx community, the heart and soul, which welcomed its members with open arms if they left and eventually returned. As another participant shared “even as I moved away, I always went back and found comfort there – it was my community, my people”. The Near Westside was mostly identified by its key institutions, those that influenced Latinx people and actively engaged in their wellbeing. A local non-profit with an extensive history within the Near Westside was often cited when elaborating on the Near Westside. A recently created community space with ties to the local university was also cited as a key Near Westside institution. The elementary schools within this neighborhood were named, as their bilingual programming and access was highlighted to show the influence of the neighborhood and its needs. A local church

was referenced for its influence, not only as a religious center but the main cultural center for many years. Participants mentioned bodegas, supermarkets, parks, street names, restaurants, and other physical markers that comprised the Near Westside in their minds. They were very clear about what was the Near Westside. Finally, the Near Westside is where the bulk of those that identified as Latinx lived. The Near Westside was linked to the Latinx identity and the Latinx identity was linked to the Near Westside. It was more than just location but also a symbol of Latinx identity and pride.

Community as Ethnic Identity: Uniting the Latinx Diaspora

In addition to community as sentiment and community as locality, community was defined by the ethnic identities embodied by its members. Participants could not define community without explicitly referencing the Latinx diaspora, the clear ethnic makeup of the community members. As mentioned before, the Near Westside was the Latinx community in their eyes and once this was established as foundational then identifying the people who comprised that space were ways to fill out the definition of community. For the most part, the Latinx community as defined by participants was made up of primarily Puerto Ricans with a mix of Dominicans, Cubans, and Columbians and a smattering of Mexicans. There seemed to be consensus that the Puerto Rican portion of the community came from a little town in Puerto Rico called Loíza. The town itself was tightknit, segregated, with African roots, an agricultural background, and high poverty rates when juxtaposed to the opulence of resorts in nearby Isla Verde (Hiraldo & Ortega-Brena, 2006). Several participants stated how this background impacted the ways in which they navigated the larger Syracuse community. All of these ethnic identities were seen to comprise a diaspora that, as one participant stated, "…created a wonderful, friendly, happy, colorful culture that was family oriented. A melting pot that came

together and learned from each other's unique experiences from their different countries". However, even if there was a sense of shared cultural identity, a connecting Latinidad, many participants also highlighted the differences that impacted cohesion and limited community power. One was race, and how Puerto Ricans that presented as Black experienced racism, even amongst the larger Latinx diaspora. It created a unique sense of isolation – not fully embraced by the Black community due to language differences and not fully embraced by the Latinx community due to race. There were also intragroup perceptions that pitted one group against another. One participant theorized that this intragroup tension arose because of the experiences in their home countries and how it was negatively perceived within the Near Westside community. For example, she stated how Puerto Ricans that settled in the Near Westside community were from an agrarian background, making their living and sustenance through farming. Settling into the Near Westside didn't afford them access to farming and therefore they became dependent on federal subsidies such as welfare. They were then perceived as feeding off the government by Cuban members of the Near Westside, who saw federal welfare programs as a reminder of their experiences with Communism in Cuba and eschewed what they considered handouts and would rather scrape by than receive welfare. This community tension impacted relationship building and the ability to mobilize to combat issues facing the larger community.

Historical Understandings: Roots of the Latinx Community

Testimonios from community elders helped provide some historical context to the definition of Latinx community within Syracuse. Archival research was able to add to these historical snapshots. Taken together, the Latinx community was fast growing with a rich history in Syracuse's Near Westside, showcasing extensive cultural capital and a motivation to have a significant impact on the city of Syracuse.

The earliest mention of a Latinx presence in Syracuse was in the 1880 census, where ten residents of Mexican, South American, or Cuban descent resided in the city (U.S. Census Bureau, 1880). The 1950s saw a large influx of mostly Puerto Ricans, whose arrival was necessitated on a failing economy – extremely high poverty rates and unemployment rates – in their homeland. This influx of Puerto Rican immigrants fit with the larger national trend at that time of 'cheap' labor from Puerto Rico by business interests and U.S. government incentives (Thomas, 2010). James T. Mulder, in a 1982 Syracuse Herald American article, documented how this first group of Puerto Ricans worked as migrants on farms in the surrounding counties picking lettuce, onions, and other vegetable crops. They were typically penniless and with little education. However, their cultural and familial capital was already being recognized: "What they lacked in terms of cash was more than offset by their rich traditions, their strong sense of family, religious faith, ambition and pride" (Mulder, 1982, p.5). Language, family, and religion was seen to be what connected Latinx community members, with family being considered the backbone of the Latinx community. A Catholic priest juxtaposed this dynamic with American society, stating: "We Americans live in a throw away society. If you're tired of your wife, throw her away. If you're tired of your kids, throw them away. That's totally against the culture the Spanish-speaking people are coming out of" (Mulder, 1982, p. 8). The early Puerto Rican residents of Syracuse settled in the South Side. During the 1960s, with a still prevalent economic crisis in Puerto Rico, many more Puerto Ricans migrated to Syracuse, eschewing the very cold and snowy weather, to work jobs in restaurants and factories. Roots began to be set in the Westside of Syracuse. Over time, these two communities were juxtaposed as the one that housed conservative, middle-class homeowners (South Side) and the one that housed a transient community, battling 'urban poverty', and newly arrived in Syracuse (Westside) (Mulder, 1982).

In 1961, the first wave of 19 Cuban refugees entered Syracuse. Many of these new residents were from the professional class of Cuba – doctors, lawyers, engineers (Holland, 1961; "Diocese to welcome", 1961). They were described as economic refugees and had many sponsors within Syracuse, through Catholic Charities. They were met by the director of Catholic Charities, "catholic families" from the Diocese of Syracuse, and interpreters from the Sisters of Social Service of the House of Providence and students from LeMoyne University ("Diocese to welcome", 1961). They were quickly interviewed by the New York State Employment Office to immediately start "…the process of securing gainful employment" ("Diocese to welcome", 1961). They were celebrated for the strong careers they held in Cuba and the potential to work hard and be good citizens of Syracuse. By 1967, approximately 300 Puerto Ricans lived in the Westside. In 1969, an informal survey conducted by the Spanish Action Committee counted 1,100 Puerto Ricans, with half of this number coming to Syracuse between 1964 and 1969 (Feeney, 1969). At this time, the Puerto Ricans were described as a hopeful, motivated, and adventurous group (Feeney, 1969). By 1982, the number of Latinx people in Syracuse rose to 3,000, now including other newly arrived residents from Spanish-speaking countries like Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, and other Latin American countries (Mulder, 1982). The Westside was coined "Little Puerto Rico", bodegas were sprouting up in various corners, St. Lucy's church was offering mass in Spanish, and what was considered an 'invisible' group was invisible no more (Mulder, 1982). The Borinquen Latin American Club, created in 1974, was at its peak influence in the early 1980s, serving as a space to celebrate Latinx culture, where "Hispanics of all origins…came to a place where they speak Spanish, cook island food, play the popular Puerto Rican game of dominos and organize dances, softball teams, and Mother's Day celebrations" (Shelly, 1982, p.A11). Preserving culture continued to be valuable and important to the Latinx

community. As the community grew, challenges and obstacles also increased. These issues, as well as the ways in which community members historically engaged in activism to preserve culture and battle racism, discrimination, and other injustices, will be explored in later chapters.

Constructing Community from Personal History

Cultural Capital and Empowerment

Participants reflected on their childhood communities with deep fondness, focusing on how their home/childhood communities were nurturing grounds where cultural capital was cultivated, where a strong sense of identity and belonging flourished. They discussed the many opportunities to display their own unique cultures. One participant, who identifies as Colombian-American, grew up speaking Spanish and eating traditional Colombian foods. She was able to learn every single Colombian dance, from bambuco to la cumbia. Her parents were intentional about making sure she knew about her cultural heritage. Her culture was reinforced at the local elementary school she attended in Brooklyn, NY. Here, her bilingualism was celebrated, both languages embraced and nurtured. However, the school placed a specific focus on encouraging her native Spanish language, encouraging her native Spanish literacy. It was a positive culturally responsive experience. Many participants spoke of their childhood communities as being spaces that increased their cultural capital, strengthened their cultural power, and enabled a shared communal culture. One participant, who identified as Mexican American from San Diego, discussed how cultural capital was built into her educational pursuits. Her father was a migrant farm worker who instilled a strong sense of the power of education but stressed the value of maintaining their Mexican roots. He started college the year she was born, working the fields while taking classes here and there, and finished his degree the same year that she finished hers at a Hispanic-serving university. Watching and experiencing her father straddle these two worlds,

fiercely dedicated to both, offered her a first-hand account of embracing all of her cultural and ethnic identities while pursuing educational opportunities. Another participant, who identified as Colombian, discussed how being surrounded by people who shared her culture, who celebrated this culture, and who pushed her to embrace her culture completely, allowed her to have an unshakeable pride in who she was.

> *Daily I would see…I would interact with different family members, neighbors, there were always exchanges of bringing food over or having you over for a shared meal. If you had leftovers and you knew someone had a pet, they would just bring over the food and say here are the leftovers for your dog and know your dog's name. And we always played outside. So you always interacted with the kids you went to school with and the kids from your block. You always had interactions with the adults, the elders. The entire neighborhood would get together, eat Colombian food, play dominoes, dance. Just a massive amount of people looking out for each other, happy about who we were, celebrating who we were. Telling me to remember who I was always. And I still do.*

From Colombian-American families fostering language, dance, and culinary traditions to the vibrant Mexican American community in San Diego, where educational pursuits were rooted in maintaining cultural roots, these early experiences were marked by an unshakable pride in heritage. Memories echoed with the laughter of communal gatherings, the aroma of shared meals, and the wisdom of elders. Others shared similar impactful experiences. There were stories of communal farms, of local baseball games whose competing teams were comprised of the local Puerto Rican men, of cooking in neighbor's homes, of conversations celebrating history and culture. There were stories about cultural appreciation, both internally (within the home) and externally (typically at the schools they attended). Very few spoke negatively of their childhood or home communities. Each expressed the tremendous impact it had on their lives. These stories reinforced cultural pride and communal support, establishing a foundational experience that they would lean on as they experienced Syracuse.

Puerto Rican Identity and Community Connection

Of all the participants, it seemed that those that identified as Puerto Rican and grew up in communities similar to the Near Westside of Syracuse, felt a stronger connection to the Syracuse Latinx community. The participants found echoes of their childhood communities in pockets of Syracuse, especially within the Near Westside, where shared Puerto Rican experiences fostered a sense of belonging and pride. The interconnectedness of these Puerto Rican roots provided a foundation upon which community connections could be rebuilt. They learned to love and value the culture of the Near Westside, learned to love self and embrace their Puerto Rican culture. One participant discussed how moving to the Near Westside from Puerto Rico allowed her to reconnect with her native island and also make new connections. "I learned to rediscover the island and spots where the people I learned from, that I met here (in Syracuse), the stories that they were talking about, and then going back and connecting these stories and places, and making the culture more valuable". It seemed this shared ethnic identity, the Puerto Rican experience, allowed for greater understanding and acceptance. So, while a larger Latinidad was celebrated when defining the ideal Latinx community, where the diaspora was what made a beautiful tapestry, one's level of connectedness or disconnect was still dependent on very granular definitions of community, identity, and experience.

Amplifying Community Assets

Community Cultural Wealth

As shown earlier, participants recalled their experiences with their childhood communities to articulate the impact of Latinx cultural capital on their lives. It many ways, it was empowering. In focusing on the Syracuse Latinx community, capturing that same sense of belonging and empowerment was important. As participants described the Syracuse Near

Westside community, it became apparent that they were highlighting its assets, what community members brought to their daily lives that shaped the way they engaged oppressive systems and navigated unjust educational spaces. For this section, I find it valuable to use Tara Yosso's (2005, 2006) theoretical framework of community cultural wealth to understand the Syracuse Latinx community's accumulated cultural assets and resources as identified by this study's participants. Identifying some of these assets here allows for a deeper understanding of how community members mobilize these assets towards action in interrogating educational systems, policies and practices and the injustices Latinx students may face (this will be presented in Chapter Six).

Yosso (2005) critically reevaluated Pierre Bourdieu's traditional concept of cultural capital, which Bourdieu described as "…an accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed and inherited by privileged groups in society" (Bourdieu in Yosso, 2005, p. 76). Contrary to Bourdieu's perspective, which posits cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital as assets acquired primarily through familial privilege or formal education, Yosso proposed a more inclusive definition of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). She argued that cultural capital also encompasses individual's assets that exist in the form of intangible capital, even outside privileged circles (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) introduced the concept of Community Cultural Wealth, elaborating that it comprises various forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, resistant, and navigational. This framework challenges Bourdieu's narrower view by recognizing the diverse and valuable forms of cultural capital present within all segments of society, not just those traditionally deemed privileged.

Yosso (2005) defined aspirational capital as the ability to remain optimistic despite the existence of barriers. It explores the resiliency and the ability to nurture hopes and dreams within the community. Linguistic capital celebrates the intellectual and communication skills developed

through multilingualism. Familial capital recognizes the value of family contributions in producing and maintaining cultural wealth and nurturing a sense of community. Social capital highlights the significance of community resources and social connections. Resistant capital demonstrates how community members deploy their knowledge and skills to challenge inequality and oppression. Finally, navigational capital is defined as the community's capability to navigate through systems that may often be hostile to oppressed groups. The first four components of community cultural wealth will be explored in depth below while the remaining two will be the focus of Chapter Six.

Aspirational Capital

Many of the Syracuse Latinx community members immigrated from a Caribbean, South American, Central American country or Mexico. Their willingness to leave family and all they knew to come to a place filled with unknowns was brought up multiple times by participants. They saw a place like Syracuse as a place with the potential for myriad opportunities. As one participant shared: "What Syracuse has done to them is given them hope". Many brought up the fact that they left agrarian ways of life, leaning on farming as a source of livelihood, to settle in an urban space with no access to farming, as a strong example of their resilience. And after settling in Syracuse, they push back against the racist narrative constructed by dominant society, that of the immigrant feeding off of U.S. government, seeking subsidies. As one participant shared, it is important to highlight the successes that are oftentimes buried in the dominant narrative, that shows the resilience and ways in which Latinx community members are able to nurture hopes and dreams within the community. She states:

> *So what I see a lot now change is that we have more home ownership. So we have a lot of community members that are achieving and we don't see them much because we don't talk about it. We don't write about it. We don't talk about the achievements. We have a lot of*

> *community members that have achieved diplomas, GEDs, that after they're adults, that they have commit to some kind of training program, that they got a certificate. And then they start looking into owning property, so we have a lot of home ownership, home-owners. And that have changed the way of getting themselves out of the street life and breaking the cycle that it have within the families. I see that maybe now one member of the family have gone through the Army or Navy and that have changed the way of breaking the circle of the streets. And that is really encouraging for me because it's hope that things are gonna change.*

Considering the history of housing discrimination against Latinx community members, including redlining, substandard housing options, overcrowding, and overall housing deprivation (Lynch, Malcoe, Laurent, Richardson, Mitchell, & Meier, 2021; Yzaguirre, Arce, & Kamasaki, 1999), the fact that these community members are realizing the dreams of home-ownership, something they may also not have had access to in their home country, provided a sense of hope for the community-at-large - including this participant who works as a community activist. It is this resilience in the face of oppression, this ability to nurture hopes and dreams within the community, that proves to be an asset that, when mobilized, can be empowering.

<u>Linguistic Capital</u>

“Ethnic identity is twin skin to my linguistic identity – I am my language” (Anzaldua, 1987, p.81). Language, specifically uplifting Spanish and articulating the benefits of dual language or bilingualism, was also a community asset that was highlighted. Many pushed back against the demonizing of the Spanish language, especially within poor Latinx communities. They pushed back against the deficit discourse that equated Spanish language with lower academic abilities. They highlighted the intellectual and communication skills developed through multilingualism. As one participant stated: “If it is good for these private school kids to know two, three language and jobs are saying how they want to hire people who know many languages than why isn’t it celebrated that our Latino kids can speak two languages, some of them better

than most adults? These kids are smart because they can do this. The schools need to recognize this". Many of the participants brought attention to the programs that were intentionally embracing dual language/bilingualism and celebrating these students. They talked about specific teachers that went above and beyond within their classrooms to heap praise on their Latinx students and continue encouraging them to speak Spanish when they can, to not abandon their native languages. They celebrated after-school programs that offered bilingual reading circles for children, reading books in both English and Spanish and engaging in conversations with children in both English and Spanish, as a way to cultivate a sense of pride in being able to speak both languages. They shared their appreciation of a new Seal of Biliteracy on high school diplomas that was approved by the NY governor, showing, in their eyes, and investment in acknowledging the value of bilingualism and its potential impact at the next stages of students' life experiences. They also highlighted the families that continued to preserve the Spanish languages of their children and didn't automatically shed the Spanish language for an English-only approach. What was most impressive, what captured the ways in which linguistic capital showed an intellectual maturity that should be celebrated, was how young children would immigrate to the United States not knowing one word of English and in a short time they would learn to not only speak it well but read and write in English as well. To be able to do this while also preserving their native language was impressive and pushes back against the deficit discourse. Additionally, to be able to learn other subjects in a language that is new to them becomes impressive. As children became bilingual, they then assumed new roles within their homes, taking on the burden of responsibility to translate and interpret for their parents. As one participant stated:

> *The English, they will learn. Kids learn English so quickly. It's harder for the parents, which of course, creates a lot of problems in terms of communication between the parents and the schools sometimes. Kids assuming roles of responsibility that really should be the parents' role, and the kids are taking on jobs of going with a parent to open a bank account and the*

> *kid being the translator. Going to the doctor, going to the pharmacy, going to the school meetings ... It's crazy. It's impressive these kids can do this and still be kids.*

Here, linguistic capital intersects with navigational capital (which will be discussed in Chapter Six). It is an asset that should be celebrated, cultivated. As another participant stated, it should be recognized as a superpower. If celebrated, being bilingual can positively impact self-esteem, a sense of cultural pride, that can have tremendous benefits in their educational experiences. One participant, summed it up nicely when she states:

> *It's incredible. I think that's* (speaking Spanish) *a really important contribution to their education. The idea of them knowing who they are, knowing what they're good at. What are their skills? What are their strengths and things that they can feel proud of? It's something that builds self-esteem, which is a typical problem you find in poor communities. Everywhere in the world, kids grow up thinking, again, that they are not worthy of other opportunities that other kids have because they are told that speaking Spanish is not a good thing, won't help them get good grades. There's a low self-esteem problem, there's no doubt in my mind. As soon as they begin to see that speaking Spanish is a positive thing, it will do a lot for them to bring out confidence.*

Familial Capital

One participant in this study believed that the Latinx community has a better chance of overcoming systemic issues and obstacles compared to other racial/ethnic communities due to stronger family support. In fact, many of the testimonios felt because of strong family support, children were able to overcome many challenges. Many of the testimonios shared how participants felt family was instrumental in producing and maintaining cultural wealth and cultural pride. It was influential in building a strong sense of worth, increasing self-esteem, and realizing its benefits. One participant recounted her experiences of growing up in Syracuse's Near Westside. She discussed how her family was bombarded with negative statistics about Puerto Ricans and their potential, how she was called a "dirty spic" by some Polish girls in

elementary school. She felt defeated, even at one point expressing to her parents, who were budding community activists at the time, that she wished she wasn't Puerto Rican. Her family would not let this define her. They overwhelmed her with Puerto Rican history, highlighting successes and the long history of overcoming racism, both in Puerto Rico and in the United States. She remembers her parents sharing stories of Pedro Albizu Campos, his academic successes as the first Puerto Rican to receive a law degree from Harvard and his passion for uplifting Puerto Rican culture through his activism and political work. While she eventually went on to receive undergraduate and graduate college degrees, the immediate impact was empowering her to push back against her school bullies and embrace her cultural power and bright academic future. She recalls "…dragging that little Polish girl home one day 'cause I'd had enough with her telling me I was not worth anything, calling me a dirty spic. So I said, 'Okay! We're done! Today is the day!'. I took her to my house opened the door and said 'Where's the dirt? I have a clean home. Look at all the books. I can read and I'm getting better grades than you!'. (laughter) So literal, right? We can be so literal when we're kids. But I made my point". Her family's support and ability to empower her through a strong cultural pride allowed her to push back.

Another participant discussed how she taps into familial capital to help strengthen Latinx student outcomes within schools. In her work with families, she highlights the power of their stories, and how they can use their life experiences to help their children understand perseverance, how they can celebrate their cultures to provide a stronger sense of worth within their children. She states:

> *So I meet with families and see how they value education, the importance of education. And we talk about their stories, how they made it here (Syracuse) from their home country, how they're working very hard to help their kids. I tell them to use this, tell your*

kids "I want you to be better. I want you to be proud of who you are and who you can become". Because I think this is the role of the parent. I mean, I want my boys to be better than me. I want them to have better opportunities, better everything. And I always push how they should be proud of who they are and do great things.

Empowering families to embrace their cultural wealth and pass it along to their children was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews with community members. Many realized the need to tap into familial capital to have a greater impact on changing educational experiences of Latinx students.

<u>*Social Capital*</u>

For many years, one of the schools within the Latinx community of Syracuse's Near Westside hosted a big yearly Hispanic Heritage Month celebration. As one participant stated: "It was an opportunity for the entire community to show off what we were about, for the entire community to show off what our students could do". It was held in the evening, within a combo cafeteria/auditorium and was always jampacked. Classrooms competed to present the best work, the best art, the best dances. And everyone attended. As one participant, a community elder who used to be a teacher, shared:

Everybody attend because the students, they were the best. In classroom work, they were ... we were competing with the classrooms. We are gonna present. We are gonna represent Celia Cruz. We are gonna represent ...We're gonna represent. I mean, they were like a competition. They say the Latino students were so, so proud to share their music and everything. That was the main day for us to bring all the parents, all the members of the community, all Latinos leaders, all community leaders inside of the school. There were politicians, judges. The mayor would sometimes stop by. And we would highlight local businesses. We would celebrate our culture, our community. For us, it was incredible ... incredible. We have parents who used to bring food ... arroz con gandules, pernil, beans, and all kind of stuff because we were serving food to the students, serving food ... Parents were drinking. Spanish spoken everywhere. English spoken everywhere. I mean it was huge celebration - year after year after year after year after year.

This event showcased the best of the community, the best of the culture. It created a space to build social connections, not just within the community but with those that held political and economic power. It was the social capital the community held, all in one room. Many of the participants pointed to this yearly event to discuss the significance of community resources and social connections, not just in putting together such a prominent event, but as a snapshot of all the assets the community had to offer. It was embraced by the entire community. Many from outside the community attended so it was an opportunity for others to experience firsthand what the Latinx community lived every day.

Another example of social capital included the role of mentorship in shaping the careers of Latinx community members, allowing them to be the best they could possibly be and have a larger societal impact. One participant discussed how a community elder became her mentor and steered her towards politics. She talked about how this person helped her fully understand the world of politics. She helped her embrace the community, embrace her own Latinx culture, and show how it could be a positive force. She was brought into their circle of friends, their networks. As she reflected, she shared that the biggest impact was this person was a resource and she saw how another person born and raised within the Near Westside community could play a major role in politics and help guide her, without losing her cultural identity. She states: “So that was really, really inspiring to meet people that barely knew me, that believed in me, that believed that I could do”.

A final example highlights how tapping into the diverse knowledge of community members helped one participant build programming to support the larger Latinx community. By identifying the places and spaces in which Latinx community members gathered, by intentionally asking them about their day-to-day lives, it provided a wealth of information and the ways in

which community members interacted, providing an opportunity for mobilizing culture and community knowledge. As the participant shares:

> *Every time I do a program, I do my research, and that's important. You have to know your populations – Latinos are growing. There's many new people that I don't know and I get fascinated. I go to supermarkets, and I just like to go and meet people. I like to go to the bank, the mall…You'd be surprised where you find…like, I discovered a new place downtown where, it's not a bank, but where they cash checks. I discovered that there's a lot of people that don't have a bank account, so I go there. And I meet a lot of Latinos there. So meeting them, for me, is fascinating because it's like you get to know who is in town, who is not in town, what they do, how they live. And then when you provide them with developing a program or something, you need to know the people, how they socialize. So as a provider and as an educator, you have to learn about them. These people are amazing! They have stories, they are unbelievable, their stories – it gives me a picture of what a rich life they live.*

Not only is this a great example of ethnography at work (many of us as researchers can really learn some strong qualitative approaches from this participant) but it shows the participant acquiring new knowledge of where community members engage one another, how to identify spaces in which they access, and actually having rich conversations to learn more about the needs and ways in which community members engage Syracuse. It is valuable capital that can positively impact community engagement.

Through the lens of personal and community histories and the lived realities of various community members, this chapter attempts to tackle the multi-layered idea of community as a construct. From the cherished memories of childhood communities fostering cultural capital and identity, to the nuanced experiences within Syracuse's Near Westside, this chapter underscores the powerful interplay of aspirational, linguistic, familial, and social capital – as community cultural wealth - in shaping the lives of individuals and the collective. The narratives show that community is not merely a geographic locale or a group of individuals sharing similar backgrounds. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic, evolving entity, deeply rooted in historical

legacies, personal struggles, and triumphs, and a relentless drive towards a future where cultural identity and communal bonds are not just preserved but celebrated. The following chapters will identify the concerns of the community, as it names the community and educational issues that plague Latinx community members and show how the Latinx community in Syracuse continues to navigate the challenges and opportunities ahead - a testament to the enduring power of community cultural wealth, where every story, every achievement, and every challenge contributes to a richer, more nuanced understanding of what it means to belong, to thrive, and to empower one another. Hope, resilience, and unity not only illustrates the past and present of the Syracuse Latinx community but also illuminates the path toward a future where the Latinx diaspora is strength, where cultural wealth is a cornerstone for progress, and community members are actively engaged in mobilizing community power and embracing their cultural power.

Chapter Five
Community & Educational Barriers, Obstacles, Injustices

The previous chapter painted a holistic picture of the Latinx community of Syracuse, highlighting how community members defined and constructed notions of community and the value of community cultural wealth as assets ripe for mobilization. This chapter seeks to identify the challenges, barriers, obstacles, and systemic injustices the Latinx community faces that negatively impact community wellbeing and stifles the educational advancement of Latinx youth. Study participants and archival research offered a snapshot of community and educational issues that have plagued the Latinx community within Syracuse since their first instances of arrival. Study participants identify and define what they perceive as the most concerning community issues and the educational issues that arise as well as what they perceive as the most prevalent educational issues and its impact on community wellbeing. Finally, this chapter explores how community members can be rendered inactive or ineffective in actively interrogating these issues.

Historical Perspectives of Syracuse Latinx Community Issues

Key issues that impacted the Syracuse Latinx community crystallized during the 1970s and 1980s. One prevalent issue across the history of the Syracuse Latinx community was the language barriers and its impact on the Spanish speaking community members, especially as it related to resources available. A lack of English-speaking capabilities resulted in a lack of work (Davis, 1972b). As the Latinx population increased and the need to learn English to obtain a living wage became apparent, the demand for ESL programs also increased. However, federal and state budget cutbacks significantly diminished the availability of these programs (Shelly, 1981). Many Cuban refugees felt the American government reneged on their promises,

exclaiming how expectations were not being met and negatively impacting the Cuban community's ability to thrive (Shelly, 1981). These lack of services impacted the Latinx community in many different ways. A lack of bilingual mental health providers was troublesome in the early 1980s (Mulder, 1982). As far back as 1972, limited number of interpreters disrupted access to social services, with a tremendous impact on local community organizations in which community members depended on for services, support, and emergency help ("Spanish action league", 1972). There was also tremendous negative impact on the schooling of Spanish-speaking Latinx students. One family shared the impact of language and the obstacles they faced in their education. They state: "My brothers, who had started school in Puerto Rico, were placed in the third grade here instead of the sixth grade because they didn't know the language. That automatically created problems. Of my four older brothers, three of them dropped out of school" (Mulder, 1982, p. 7).

Another key issue was the isolation of the Latinx community – both self-imposed and forced by external societal factors. The Latinx Spanish-speaking community was insulated within by Spanish-only mentality and strong cultural customs and ignored by the outside due to stereotypes and discrimination (Mulder, 1982). This self-imposed isolation was partly a byproduct of a desire to be around other Spanish-speakers and strong connection to others who shared cultural norms, and partly based on a fear of 'Americanos' that prevented them from venturing out of their community (Mulder, 1982). This was commended but also rebuked. "Their strong cultural ties gives them support and makes them the self-assured people they are, but it also adds to their isolation…They don't know what is going on in the world" (Davis, 1972a). There were also feelings of being forced into isolation due to the stereotypes and discrimination Latinx communities faced. There were prevalent biases and stereotypes of Latinx community as

a very violent space, with a pervasive fear of what was called “mini-Vietnam” (Mulder, 1982). All Puerto Ricans were thought to carry knives (Mulder, 1982). These stereotypes made it a rare occurrence for an ‘outsider’ to venture into the Latinx community. Many within the community bemoaned this fact, stating how the outside community “never hears about the good ones” and thus makes so many assumptions that breeds fear (Mulder, 1982).

The prevalent discrimination and racism towards the Puerto Rican community and general Latinx community was a few of the many perceived societal factors that negatively impacted the Latinx community during these times. A 1977 letter to the editor of the Herald Journal detailed conflict between the Puerto Rican & Polish communities in Syracuse, where Puerto Rican community members believed they were discriminated against by the Polish community. Concern about racism continued in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the context of police interactions with Latinx community members. A 1989 article in the Syracuse Herald-American (“Latinos grow weary of run-ins with police”) interviewed a local grocery store owner who discussed how grocery store owners were being pressured to serve as informants for police as they investigated drug activities in the neighborhood. The store owner claimed police were treating all Puerto Ricans like criminals, detailing how even senior citizens were being detained by police and how pregnant women were being strip searched. The community feeling was that Latinx community members were being targeted and created animosity between the community and police. A 1990 article in the Syracuse Herald-American (“Police pressure rankles Latinos”) focused on the increase of illegal traffic stops of Puerto Ricans in the community, stating that 25 Latinos were harassed by police each month. The article also highlighted that there were no Latinos in the police force at that time, even though there were ten thousand Latinos living in the city.

Other societal factors that impacted the community included housing issues. One family in 1982 shared their family history with challenging housing situations. They discussed how the father brought his family to Syracuse from Puerto Rico in the 1950s, securing work in a factory and a one-bedroom apartment that housed their family of eight, the only housing they could afford at the time. However, they were quickly evicted from this apartment as the neighborhood in which it was situated was razed to make room for Interstate 81 (Mulder, 1982). The negative impact of the construction of Interstate 81 has been far reaching and effectively destroyed Syracuse's historically Black neighborhood and displaced many in the name of urban renewal (Zarroli, 2023). She continues how the family "moved from one inner-city flat to the next, always just one step ahead of the urban renewal wrecking ball" (Mulder, 1982, p. 6). Finally, they found a decent affordable house, provided a down payment, and "signed the deal with a handshake". Unfortunately, after a couple months, they were evicted as the landlord wanted the house back. As she states: "Legally we had nothing and my father had put all his savings into the down payment. On top of that, there was the language barrier, so my father couldn't have fought it in court even if he wanted to" (Mulder, 1982, p. 7). This heartbreaking story captures how this family is set back for years to come. Combined with issues of unemployment and under-employment (Shelly, 1981) and rigid bureaucratic systems that were difficult to navigate (Davis, 1972b), and it was the recipe for maintaining an oppressive lived experience for many Latinx community members throughout Syracuse's history.

The final community issue captured in a review of historical documents was Americanization and assimilation. Specifically, the pressures to assimilate to American culture and the impact on Puerto Rican culture. Rosebrugh (1970) highlighted a forum held to discuss the needs for adequate communication and understanding between Puerto Rican residents and

what was described as ‘Americans’. The Spanish Apostolate in Onondaga County spoke on behalf of the Puerto Rican community, highlighting the influence of the local Catholic church within the community. The forum was in response to racist and discriminatory acts towards Puerto Rican community members that negatively impacted transition into American culture and articulated the clear need for ‘Americans’ to understand the history of the Puerto Rican and create space for a merging of their native cultures with that of their new homes. It stressed the values the Puerto Rican community held. It identified a sense of self-worth and dignity of work; recognizing the community’s talents and finding ways to work in unison; empathy and compassion for community members; and living in peace and harmony within a multi-racial society. Davis (1972a, b) discussed the burden and tensions caused by assimilation. The question of whether to assimilate caused stress in the community. The price of assimilation was considered high. It created conflict between elders wanting to maintain culture & language and youth being Americanized. Puerto Rican community members felt Americans lacked warmth and were not welcoming. Challenges of adjusting to an urban space after immigrating from home communities that embraced an agricultural way of living impacted well-being and quality of life. The articles highlighted how community members went from easier access to daily sustenance such as fresh fruits & vegetables to limited options like canned or frozen substitutes and dependency on federal welfare. Many questioned whether they could fully commit to American culture and if so, would they even be embraced by this culture.

Transition to Syracuse: A Culture Shock

Davis (1972b) captured the stories of Puerto Ricans living in Syracuse, highlighting one family who discussed community in their native homeland of Puerto Rico in comparison to Syracuse. They talked about the communal bond and care, sharing a story how in Puerto Rico, if

someone was hungry, you took them into your home and fed them. Another family member continued, “In Puerto Rico, when someone has trouble, everyone suffers for them. Here, there is no…no community” (Davis, 1972b, p. 9). Mulder (1982) highlighted a homesickness that was palpable within the community, as one Puerto Rican community member discussed never having intended to stay as long as he did, concluding by stating: “If I could go, I would go back tomorrow” (Mulder, 1982, p. 6). This fondness for their home/childhood communities juxtaposed with the Syracuse community they eventually lived within was echoed in the stories of the participants in this study as many shared examples of how the transition to the Syracuse community was oftentimes not a positive experience. A palpable shift occurred. Many who immigrated from another country recalled the culture shock, how they felt disconnected, isolated. One participant who identified as a Puerto Rican Afro-Latina discussed the impact of race on her family’s experience with Syracuse and her own experience. She described her family as ‘jibaros’ (hillbilly people) from Puerto Rico who settled in Syracuse because they couldn’t settle in the south due to Jim Crow laws and her father, who was seen as a Black man, and her mother, who was seen as a White woman, would have encountered racism. They thought Syracuse would provide protection from this. Unfortunately, the participant felt overwhelmed by extreme identity challenges. She struggled in trying to straddle a Black/White racial binary seen as a biracial woman that spoke another language. As she stated – “I was quite the oddity, right”. Another participant stated she felt disconnected upon arriving to Syracuse. She felt the Syracuse community was so far behind her home community, was lacking in the cultural power she had experienced. There was no communal embracing of culture in her eyes. Another described that being an immigrant from Colombia, she felt isolated from the larger Latinx community in Syracuse. Because she was not ‘Caribbean’, she felt she was dismissed. There was an

unwillingness to understand a different dialect. People stuck to who they knew and did not attempt to integrate her into the community. “I don’t have a sense of community here because it is very divided and you have to work hard to seek it out. It takes effort and time to build community because it is not immediately available to you”. Another echoed this sentiment of disconnect, of isolation, recounting her experiences at school upon arriving to Syracuse.

> *I remember avoiding some transitions and lunch being one of them because everybody was just wild and is hungry and I remember also just having a really hard time with clothing and style, just before it was very different coming from a place where the coldest it gets maybe it's 65 and so my clothes reflected that. so culturally I just felt very out of place. Not only didn't I know the language, but I dressed way completely different. Later I found out people said I dressed like a whore. We tend to wear really tight clothing and so my pants were tight and at that time it would send… I guess the style was baggy stuff and so I was completely different. But I didn't know that was my label because of the way I dressed. So because I had no idea what kids were saying to me. So feeling out of place and not having a support system to help me with that was really hard. And I kind of just went through the motions.*

The tightknit communities of participants’ childhood memories were replaced by a permeating individualism that threatened to erase the cultural power they accrued. It was not only in the ways folks engaged the community but in how the physical space was constructed. One participant shared how the physical layout of homes mirrored the disconnect she felt with the Syracuse community, with vast spaces replacing the intimacy of shared neighborhoods. She stated:

> *Everybody just kind of lives in silos and even the way the houses are constructed, there is a lot of space in between home since so I think that creates, especially in some areas even within the city, where the proximity of the homes are just not close enough unless you live in the projects or in lower economic areas. But, and even if they're close in proximity there, you just don't even know your neighbors anymore or if you do it you barely say hello. Growing up, as a kid and as a teenager I couldn't do anything wrong because I had all of the adults around me know me and know my family. Here, I feel kids and teens can do whatever they want because everyone just cares about their own thing. They don’t care about each other.*

Another participant discussed how insular the community was, and how all the communities of Syracuse were siloed and segregated based on race/ethnicity. He discussed his own racial/ethnic identity, as a White Mexican American, and how he could not be placed upon moving to Syracuse from Los Angeles, how he was shunned by various racial communities. He was often approached with the question – “Who is this white boy coming in here?”. He continued:

> *When I came here, that was the first time I experienced awkwardness. "What do you mean what am I doing here? Just giving you a flyer. What the hell's wrong with you?" Where I'm from it's every race. It just didn't matter, as long as it wasn't a gang thing. It didn't matter where you were at. Know what I'm saying? Definitely here just different corners. You just know certain corners you're not going to see certain people. I think you can visually see... Then in just in the community talk. They just know. What sides are gonna be all your folks that moved up from Puerto Rico and all the other people that are Latin folks that feel come from over there. You've got all your refugees and what not on the North Side. In the South and the East holding down the black communities. Then you got your Tip Hill where all the Irish folks squeeze in. It's really just where they live.*

The culture shock of transitioning to Syracuse, as juxtaposed to their fondness for childhood communities and the foundation of cultural pride and communal support, took an emotional toll on many of the participants. Feeling like an outsider and the great effort to recreate their childhood experience led some participants to react negatively to their experience within Syracuse, in contrast to those that used the community differences to fuel their advocacy and activism.

Isolation and Its Complex Impacts on the Latinx Community

When research participants were solicited for their insights on the issues that were pervasive within the Latinx community, a dominant narrative emerged - that of isolation and its profound impact on community dynamics. But what engenders such isolation? Is it a self-imposed sanctuary, a shield against external oppressions, or is it the consequence of systemic and societal segregations and oppression? Whether self-inflicted or externally imposed, this isolation

was pervasive, leaving the community grappling with limited access to essential services and almost negligible political representation. Delving deeper, some respondents pointed fingers inward, suggesting that community members themselves were to blame for the challenges faced.

Root Causes of Isolation: Social and Systemic Oppression

Systemic and social oppression and injustice was seen as a major factor in the isolation of the community which in turn caused community members to deal with issues such as poverty, language discrimination, violence, and others. One participant discussed how there was an attempt to dehumanize the Latinx community which led community members to disassociate themselves from the larger community so as not to deal with the consequences, the reality of the situation. He discussed the violence the community was experiencing and its impact on the youth of that community. He stated:

> *This idea, because of the erosion of community, because the devaluation this community has endured, that you no longer have that connection anymore. So at the end of a gun, I would see my family or I would see your family before I pull the trigger. These kids don't see anything. That's why it is easy for them to shoot. There is no longer a connection, with their immediate community or the larger society. For me, for you, a lot of things would flash before us. Nowadays, these kids, it just ends. No connection. A disconnect. How do you combat this?*

Systemic segregation and oppression kept the Latinx community removed from the resources necessary to overcome these barriers, limiting social capital and opportunities for recognizing socioeconomic mobility. Participants raised the issue of poverty and its impact on the community. One participant described the poverty in Syracuse as worse than anything she has ever seen, even more so than in Los Angeles where she had lived for many years. Others used examples of the Cuban population, how they were highly educated in their home country, holding prestigious jobs and professions, but the door of opportunity was "slammed in their face

in the U.S.", forcing them to take menial jobs just to get by and '…drowning in this cycle of economic disenfranchisement where poverty begets poverty and it becomes impossible to break out of it". Isolation caused by systemic poverty allowed pervasive underemployment and lack of home ownership, an inability to generate generational wealth. Families struggle with lack of jobs and the economic structures in place as they do not have a lot of the skills required to do the jobs that become unattainable. Young people feel the need to find a job which impacts the home, with parents working hard but not seeing the benefits and their children trying to help them but then negatively impacting their schooling. They cannot attend summer school because of work and then fall behind in their schooling, leading to high dropout rates, drugs, violence. Young people of the community are faced with the burden to navigate this landscape and feel pressure to engage in activities they typically would not consider. Poverty and its impacts are demoralizing to families and by extension to the community at large.

Some participants described their community as a "cultural desert," a space where cycles of intergenerational struggles persisted. External factors like inadequate transportation and unfavorable weather further intensified the feelings of detachment. When it snows, unplowed sidewalks force kids to walk on busy streets, leading to tension and spaces for potential violence with older drivers. Participants juxtaposed this with suburban children and their belief that these children did not have to experience this as their roads were immediately plowed or they had universal access to school buses thus making walking in snow to get to school a non-existent issue. Language barriers and the demonization of the Spanish language added another layer of complexity. There was limited access to language services. Poor bilingual programs within the schools negatively impacted the self-esteem of the community. Youth felt forced to abandon their native language. Participants shared stories of speaking with an accent and being automatically

categorized, forced into a monolithic identity (typically assumed to be Puerto Rican), discriminated against, assumed to be incompetent or having their intellect questioned. Their accents or just speaking Spanish in public became equated with poverty, criminality. They felt the need to work harder to prove society wrong however found themselves facing burnout in their jobs or dealing with physical and mental health issues because this level of effort was not sustainable and oftentimes not acknowledged by the larger society. A lack of translated materials and interpretation at public meetings was viewed as a "devaluing statement" towards non-English speaking community members by one participant. It was viewed as a way to continue systemically oppressing the community, keeping them away from access to political power and important decision-making opportunities.

There was a general sense that systemic segregation equates forced isolation which creates severe disparities. One participant was able to summarize this by stating:

> *You know the majority of Latinos, where exactly they live. You see the disparity in the community. It is really evident. Especially when you're working in the system and see the treatment and how the segregation is so evident. Forced into certain housing. Not possible to move out, to the suburbs, other communities, because of the high costs. The city continues to support segregation. You see it. Because it is a small city you see what is going around you more easily, clearly.*

There was a feeling that this forced isolation was intentional, a way to keep the Latinx community from accessing community power and challenging the status quo. Keeping them ignorant kept them in place. As one participant shares: *"*A poorly educated community who do not have positive experiences, whose voices are stripped away as is their power. And maybe even their belief to be able to speak on behalf of themselves*"*. It was a direct action to quell any potential for activism and advocacy.

Community Isolation: Preservation and Survival

To survive oppression, many participants shared their belief in the importance and necessity of maintaining cultural identity. In order to create a haven of shared identity and culture, reminiscent of the communities they once knew, isolation became a necessary choice. This, they felt, was the key strategy for survival. Participants discussed the need for the Latinx community to embrace the Spanish language, visibly embrace their Latinx culture, in direct opposition to how it was perceived externally. Self-imposed isolation created a stronger sense of belonging, empowered their community members. They embraced latching onto all their cultural power at risk of shunning the larger society. It was a defense mechanism. One participant stated it best when she said: "Yes, you can live and die between Oswego Street and West Street, and don't have to speak one word of English. Keep it among themselves". She continues:

> *I think that the community here faces challenges of how do you walk that fine line between assimilation, but keeping who you are at the same time? Why do you give up the language that you love for a language that even after 20 years is still hard for me to pronounce. Those are honest challenges. How do you fight stereotypes everyday and a system that doesn't really want you? Maybe you have to stick to your own community and help each other overcome.*

However, the cost of isolation was considered high. It was a noble effort in the eyes of many of the participants, but it created issues where community members were not aware of the resources, services, and rights they had or needed to combat these injustices. Participants felt the community thought they were empowering themselves by isolating from the larger city community and even society-at-large, but in actuality were exposing themselves further to these injustices. A local lawyer and political activist stated how this self-imposed isolation weakened the community, negating community power and limiting civic knowledge. He bemoaned the fact that the community did not know how to wield this cultural power, build up strategies to

strengthen political representation and give voice to people. Another participant described how this self-isolation bred distrust of 'outsiders' and caused missed opportunities at mobilization, a disjointing that made it nearly impossible to get a wave of support and momentum to overcome issues plaguing the community. The community, according to one participant, "…lacked all the things you need to have a strong, successful community – it was shut out from the larger society and was okay with it". Others shared how this self-isolation kept community members away from learning English, which would impact potential earnings in society that stressed English-only workers. As one participant talks about how this plays out on a day-to-day basis:

> *The Latino kids ended up mostly in this area. What happened? You know, they finish school, they go home, they keep speaking Spanish, and at home they watch TV in Spanish, and they go to the store and speak Spanish. Because there's a lot of people coming and going that are speaking Spanish that prevent them from making more progress in English, because they have that, I don't know if it's inconvenience, of having Spanish around all the time, so they don't feel forced to kind of catch up with English just because everybody speaks Spanish down there.*

Another participant stated this self-isolation was not unique only to the Latinx community. He felt that the entire city was self-segregating and you couldn't create a sense of unity amongst the different communities to combat the issues that were plaguing them all. Narratives of mistrust, missed opportunities, and a disconnect from the larger society painted a vivid picture of a community caught in a larger vortex of isolation.

Latinx Community Interrogating Educational Systems, Policies and Practices

Societal Factors and Impact on Latinx Educational Experience

> *Think about this, you're a girl, you're five years old, you're gonna put your foot for the first time in kindergarten, you have never heard a word in English in your life, because your mother and your grandmother speak Spanish. Your mother left school at 16 years old, probably pregnant with you, and never felt welcome in that school. You live in the projects or in some small apartment on the Westside. You have brown skin, like me. What*

> *are your chances? Even before you cross that school door, what are your chances to be fine? When by 3rd grade, you need to understand the system, speak the language, acclimate, leave your home environment, give up your culture. By 3rd grade we know, statistics tell me and statistics never lie, that you either make it or break it by 3rd grade. That is the reality of my children, our children. I think that the community, and talking about community or me, you, we need to reclaim our schools. Because they are not going to solve these problems. They don't care.*

This story encapsulates the ways in which societal factors impact the educational experiences of the Latinx community, and how schools, and education systems more broadly, perpetuate what feels like a hopeless cycle for many. Immigration. Language discrimination. Teenage pregnancy. School dropout. Poverty. Racism. All impacting the future of a young child even before they step foot inside a school building. This story touches on the pressure to assimilate, abandon one's culture in order to 'make it' by 3rd grade, a point in a child's education where long-term decisions about that child's ability to be successful are already being made. And it captures the failure of the school, its dismissal of these issues, unwillingness to make things better, its lack of care. As participants were asked to identify what they thought were some of the most prevalent educational issues impacting Latinx youth/communities, many went straight to speaking on the societal factors, and how many of the injustices and challenges faced within the community, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, directly impacted the educational experiences of their children.

Poverty was seen as the biggest societal factor that impacted education. The lack of jobs available to Latinx community members or very limited access to higher paying jobs. Many pointed to this as being discouraging, continuing to keep many community members in a state of poverty with few solutions. Some highlighted the intersections of Spanish language and race/ethnicity and how it impacted access to quality jobs. One participant discussed how language discrimination and racism combined prevented many community members from

finding jobs that provided benefits, that paid a living wage. There was an overabundance of minimum wage jobs but these did not allow people to support themselves or their families. As one other participant observed, this led youth to seek other alternatives, stating:

> *There's a lot of part-time jobs, but they have no benefits. And they're minimum wage jobs, which they can't support themselves or their families. And I think that in itself hurts in many areas obviously in the community. And again, maybe this is where we see youth falling, again, into the pits of gangs and things 'cause they can't get things that their family can't provide. So it's this vicious cycle. So, I think somehow or the other that still has not been addressed or answered, and I'm not sure who has that answer. But I think that's some of the issues or concerns still ongoing for the community.*

Poverty, and its byproduct of seeking other ways to obtain the basic necessities of life, directly impacted the high dropout rates in the eyes of many of the participants. School wasn't a viable option in their eyes if the outcomes of schooling was not a strong job, a career. As another participant shared: "This is the culture of poverty, which is a culture of its own". They felt schools could have countered some of the alternative pathways towards sustained income the youth were pursuing by creating more summer job opportunities. Recognizing that the students were facing poverty and access to jobs would not only be financially beneficial but also increase self-esteem and trust with schools. Many discussed the challenges of a single parent household or of a grandparent raising the child with limited access to a living wage. Homelessness was also discussed. One participant shared a heartbreaking story of a child that was homeless because the family was kicked out of the apartment they lived in for failure to pay rent. She discussed that after they were evicted, the student had to live with a grandmother while his brother had to live with an aunt, effectively breaking apart the family. She mentions how these factors impacted the students educational experience, with one student being expelled from school for 'violent' behavior and another with high levels of absenteeism that forced the school to threaten calling

child protective services, potentially negatively impacting the trust between the family and the school. She goes on to share:

> *I actually think he shouldn't have been kicked out because he actually needs to be in school. He needs someone to be there and say, "Hey, it's gonna be okay." I mean, the kid was crying when he said, "We don't have a house." I've never felt that. Fortunately, we always had a house, a place to live, so I don't know what that feels. But this kid was crying, an 11 year old, because he was frustrated that he wasn't gonna see his little brother anymore and then he got kicked out, and it's like, that's when they need someone else, kind of be like a role model.*

Fracturing family dynamics was explored through discussions of the impact of immigration policies, especially deportation, on Latinx children. One participant shared a story of a family that immigrated from Cuba to the Near Westside community. They didn't speak English. The father of the family was deported and it had terrible consequences for the family. They were pushed into poverty after losing their primary wage earner, the children were grieving the immediate loss of one of their parents, and they were under threat of losing their apartment. School and education in general were the furthest things from their minds at that time. But the feeling was that the school would not empathize in any way. The impact of immigration on schooling also was highlighted via another story shared by a lawyer in the community. He states:

> *This kid who is twelve years old was enrolled in school. Well, they put her in the same grade that she was in in Cuba. Well, first of all, if you don't assess what her real ability to kind of transition into the school here, you're not going to be able to determine what grade level she is in. The fact that she was in twelfth grade in her country doesn't mean that she's in twelfth grade now. Not only because the curriculum is different, but also because the language barrier is huge. So, you know, the mother, just three months later, receive a letter. And we are talking about Syracuse school. Receive a letter from the principal of the school. Saying that she was not trying hard enough. That it's not possible, that in three months, she was not able to improve her grades. Okay. Hello? Are you a teacher, really? You know, like three months? Someone in a different country will know a language? There is no way someone can do that. And, you know, any study can tell you that. But, you know, they're giving up on her already. Only three months after. They're saying that they don't know what to do with her anymore. How is that possible? Well, then test her, and see what her real level is, and put her in a different grade! You know?*

> *Don't make her fail. And that's what happens. All these students that are in high school right now, that they come from other countries, and they are placed in the same grade that they were in, they're going to fail. They are set for failure.*

“Set up for failure” was a permeating theme, especially within the intersections of immigration and language. A holistic review of the child’s education, her language capabilities, was necessary in this example yet was not undertaken. The automatic assumption of bad behavior or disinterest in schooling was made by the school instead of empathizing with the student’s situation and working with the family to figure out what would be best to help the student succeed. As with other participants in their interviews, this person was visibly emotional as he shared this story. They felt the student was wronged, they felt the community was wronged, and they realized the tremendous consequences this family, this student, would now face after being branded as a ‘problem’ student.

Ultimately, the unrelenting social factors placed the burden of responsibility on many students. As mentioned earlier, the high poverty in the community placed the burden of employment on students at an earlier age, oftentimes impacting their school attendance and/or leading to school dropouts. As one participant stated: “And so I don't blame the kids because we kind of create this thing, but the families can't afford some of that stuff and so I don't know what the drive is to drop out and do other things to acquire material things that the family doesn’t have”. Another participant shared a story of a student encounter with a substitute teacher during summer school. The student rushed through a test so as to make his work shift on time, one of two jobs the student had to help support his family. During this incident, the substitute teacher would not let the student leave early even though he completed his test, telling the student he needed to sit and wait until everyone was done taking the test. This caused the student to scream at the teacher, telling him that he will be fired from his job if he didn’t make it on time. The

screaming led to a visit to the principal's office and a suspension. The participant felt that if the teacher was only more empathetic or aware of the student's situation, it could have been an example of working together to ensure the student was not only academically successful but also supported in helping his family meet their basic needs. Many talked about students' roles in serving as interpreters and translating for their parents and other family members, how attending all the medical appointments or other appointments with parents took them away from school. As one participant shared, this level of responsibility was great and oftentimes not acknowledged by the schools. She states:

> *Those children, they have all the responsibilities in that family, that it's hard to actually maintain both of them. For example, a family that just got here from a different country. It can be any country. Usually, children, they actually learn the language faster than adults because they're learning. The TV, the everything. They have to serve as interpreter for the family. If that family has medical appointments, that kind of stuff, that takes the child away from school. I think that the system, they don't understand those kind of things and struggles. There's not support for the family. The priority is not, unfortunately, the education. It's not because of the parents fault. I don't think that it's totally their fault. I think that they don't have any other resources. They rely in the first person that they trust, that is their child. The child become the parent. There's a mix of roles.*

The role reversal due to societal factors causes students to be overburdened. And not necessarily because they are partaking in these roles, but also because it is not being recognized by the schools, educational systems. What should be embraced as an asset, as mentioned in the previous chapter, as familial and linguistic capital, is ignored and in many ways punished. Ultimately, as one participant shares, Latinx students do not have time or are not given permission to just be kids. They have to grow up so fast, undertake responsibilities that a child should not have to take on, and they have to do all this while trying to find academic success. One participant captures it well as she juxtaposes her own childhood with those of Latinx students she encountered in Syracuse's Near Westside community:

There was no time for them to be really kids. I mean there was no time for jam like I mentioned growing up I always had, you came home you can change out of uniform and you played and you ate something and you just played and then you did homework. And in school I was always, we had recess time where you just played and had fun and sweated and here there is no time for that. So I think it's just really hard and it always baffles me how our kids in particular, either they can't read or write or they dropped out of school and I don't think that dropping out it's such a surprise when you're in seventh, eighth and ninth grade and you can't read and you're reading at a second grade level. The frustration level of these kids must be just so high then why bother going to school when you can't even understand what's in front of you. I wouldn't bother getting up in this weather and going to school, you know what I mean? And so I just think it's really tough for all the kids.

<u>*Educational Systems/Policies and Its Impact on Latinx Communities*</u>

Many participants discussed the visible educational disparities that plagued the educational experiences for Latinx youth, homing in on the systems and policies in place that seemed to create inequitable educational experiences for Latinx students. Some highlighted how schools in the Westside were under resourced in comparison to neighboring suburban school districts. They pointed to crumbling physical infrastructures, outdated textbooks, broken plumbing, poorly lit hallways, windowless classrooms, littered playing fields. As one participant, a parent of a student in a Near Westside school, shared,

Here's what kills me, is that the public school for the kids in the near Westside, my kids again, is not the same public school for the kids in JD (Jamesville-Dewitt – a suburban school district that borders Syracuse) – that's what kills me. The disparity, that's not good for me. I can't deal with that. Poor and inner city communities – we always get the short end of the stick

They blamed yearly budget cuts that took away programming which could benefit students, including reducing social workers and family aides. However, when discussing the school district, and school systems and policies more broadly, participants focused on two key areas: curricular decisions, specifically on how they handled bilingual education, the push towards a

rigid English language and Eurocentric curriculum, and the underrepresentation of Latinx teachers/administrators/school staff; and, the disconnect between the district and community, specifically towards community needs and the ineffective communication with parents, community members.

The way the school district handled bilingual education was an area of concern for community members. The Near Westside schools that catered to Spanish-speaking Latinx students offered either a transitional/standalone ESL program or a dual language immersion program. In the transitional ESL programming, students were pulled from their traditional 'core' classes to get English language courses. Many of the community members felt this approach made student's inability to speak English salient and thus led to negative biases, discrimination, and deficit educational practices. They also felt the focus was to achieve English-only status, thus abandoning their native Spanish language. The dual language immersion program offered at one of the local elementary schools was the preferred option for community members. It's goal was to achieve biliteracy, an integrated approach where students learned in English half the day and in Spanish the other half. All students, regardless of their native language, engaged in this programming, leading to mitigated biases and perceptions towards Spanish speaking students. Overall, there was frustration with both approaches. Some participants pined for programming in past years, stating it felt more genuine and tuned into the holistic needs of students. It wasn't just about language and learning but about empowering the whole child. They felt the quality of bilingual education diminished, either because of a lack of funding, lack of qualified teachers, or the lack of urgency on the part of the district. They pointed to the lower educational standards and expectations that the district had towards Latinx students, with one participant stating: "…the program just dissipated and all of a sudden the bilingual students in the city now are some

of the lowest performing students in the district. Its disturbing, especially considering the research on bilingualism and how there should be so many benefits to speaking in both languages, including stronger grades". One participant felt that students weren't ready for dual language immersion programming because they were so far behind academically, emotionally, that she felt the district should work on these areas first before homing in on language. She also questioned the quality of bilingual/ESL teachers.

> *They were not trained to be bilingual. To be a bilingual teacher or bilingual administrator, doesn't mean you know Spanish. It doesn't mean that you can speak Spanish. No. You have to know the philosophy of bilingual education. Not all of us can be a bilingual teacher. We need to learn how to be bilingual teachers. Not because I speak Spanish. I can say, "Oh, you know. I am bilingual. I can teach them." Because you have to understand so many tricks in order to ... a bridge to the student. You have to understand the culture. You can't tell the kids, for example, "Look at my eyes when you are talking." You can't say, "Don't say 'wawa', say autobus." You cannot say, for example ... I mean, so many words that ... You cannot tell them just to avoid saying those words, because they are part of the culture. You need to know the culture of the students. If I'm working with Puerto Ricans students, I have to learn the way that they relate. I have to learn how they ... how and when and what they eat. Because if somebody say, "Oh, I'm gonna give you pastelillos." It's pastelillos not the same like pasteles. And pasteles is not the same like in my country called pasteles. If I say "torta", they are not gonna know. They know biscocho or something else. So you have to know the culture of the students that you are working with. If I go to Mexico, the Mexicans are use different words for different things, but that's part of their culture. I cannot tell the Mexican students, "Oh, you can't say camion", because that's acceptable in their own language. I can't tell them it's not the correct word. So many things. You need to learn, you need to learn the culture. You need to interact with the parents and the community. This is a very small community, very small community. It's so easy ... it's so easy to go and look for the parents and request help. And most of the parents are very responsive, but you need to know how to reach them.*

In her eyes, being a successful bilingual/ESL teacher was not just the ability to speak two languages. It was not just the ability to teach towards a curriculum. It was necessary to take a holistic approach, to be culturally aware and embrace the full life experience of the student. She talked about how seeing Latinx students as part of a monolithic identity group could lead to miscommunication, as certain words for one Latinx group may mean something different for

another. She also stressed the need for community engagement, and leaning on the community to help impact the full learning experience of the students.

Continuing to look at language and the ways school districts engaged this, participants highlighted the rigid structure of the curriculum, especially the impact of majority English-centered, Eurocentric, and test focused curriculum on Latinx students. Many participants discussed how engaging in this type of curriculum impacted the self-esteem, language, and vocabulary development of Latinx students. How could Latinx students get excited about a curriculum that ignored their culture, promoted a culture they did not share or understand? One participant questioned a curriculum that pushed Spanish speaking students who struggled to read at all, even in their native Spanish, to perform successfully in courses that required a high level of English competency, literacy ability. As one participant states:

> *A lot of kids, they do well, and you know, regular classes, but they have issues reading, you know. And mostly news history is kind of tricky for them, because it's all new for them. So they have to learn the dates, and all this stuff. And then English also can become a problem. Today, actually, I was talking with a student, and he said "you know what - I regular read, but I can't understand poetry. Which is something in English (laughs). You know what I mean. It's hard to analyze poetry. So they had to go put up with that. They might have a very basic grasp of English. With that they can make it through a lot of stuff, but they get so disappointed, and then, you know, they might fail the tests because maybe a couple points, five points, or something like that because their English skills still developing. They get punished. There's no exceptions in the system.*

This rigid structure became punitive, negatively impacting students. And students felt defeated. This student claims he can "regular read" but when confronted with something that is difficult for even native English speakers, he felt like a failure. Another participant added to this by criticizing how districts created an educational culture that taught to the state tests and how Spanish speaking students were being left behind as they were not considered to have the capacity, linguistic and to some teachers full academic abilities, to do well in the tests. He felt

this forced teachers to focus on the English speakers only, pushing to help them be successful at the expense of the Latinx students.

Finally, criticism was aimed at the school district for a lack of Latinx representation in the schools. As one participant, a community liaison who engaged as a social worker between schools and community families, states: “We need to have good representation. I mean, in reality, if you ask me how many Latino teachers are in the schools I work with, I think we have one. Maybe two. (laughs). I mean, I say two because maybe there is someone I don’t know. But I know for sure there is one”. One! Other participants called this out as well. They felt it impacted the trust between community and schools. They felt it showed the district did not care to meet the needs of Latinx community members by having more representation that can relate with their Latinx students. As another participant, who used to be a teacher in the local schools, shared:

> *So, there's a misrepresentation in the population, and the parents can't really communicate with the school. You know, because I mean, yes, we have two secretaries that speak Spanish when I was there. And they get overloaded with other work, and there's plenty of them for them to do, but they can't really be everywhere and so communication with the parents in schools is kind of deficient. Then other people like me, I bring some...no I don't think it would be, how to say, I just help a little bit. And I do what I can, and I do have a lot of twenty-five kids. And you know, I see other kids in the side, you know maybe at night. I don't even count those. But you know, how much time I can invest in their classes, in their home life.. The more kids you have, the less quality service you are going to provide.*

The lack of representation burdens the few that are present at the school, and they end up having to serve various roles not recognized by the district. In this case, secretaries had to act as translators, interpreters, in addition to all the work they had. She recounts her days as a teacher, and the sense of responsibility she had for her class but how that also expanded to other Latinx students at the school. It was overwhelming but could have been addressed with more representation.

The school district was also criticized for the perceived disconnect with the Latinx community and dismissal of the community's needs. This was especially true in the ineffective communication between district and community when detailing new policies or even the educational rights of parents. One participant claimed the district was "clueless" when it came to understanding the needs or concerns of the community – "…either that or they just don't care". A few mentioned some Latinx families were scared to send their children to the schools, because of perceived violence or they didn't know who the teacher was and it was hard for them to communicate with the teacher. She felt that instead of the district working with the families to understand this as a reason for their children's absences, the district just sent letters home detailing the child's 'truancy' and the penalties for missing schools. She continues: "And they send it in English. Can you believe that? How clueless can you be!". Other families are concerned about their child being 'labeled', being "…stuck with early, special education for the rest of their lives". This seemed to be a prevailing concern within the community. Yet the school district didn't show empathy in many of these cases, or didn't clearly articulate the parents' rights in these cases. Parents felt penalized for things they felt the district should have been responsible for. They felt a lack of communication that negative impacted their children's experiences within the schools. One participant captured the sentiment around ineffective communication when describing a new program that was being implemented, replacing another that was around for three years. She shares how the Latinx families had no clue what was happening because they were not well informed, either because they did not receive any information or it was sent in English only. She stresses how most parents feel threatened by the educational system because they don't know it well – "How can they advocate for their child when they don't understand what is going on?". She continues:

> *So then what happens then you have a child, as a child who do you look up to when you're in trouble? Who do you look up to? Your parents. Exactly, but now if the parent can't come advocate for you or be your support in the most important piece of your day where you spend eight hours a day in school, then what do you do with that? Right? So now there's a lack of respect because now the parent can't help you, and you know it escalates to effect, and it goes open and wide to different areas, levels of problematic things. What's the solution? A lot of people bring good thoughts to the table, they bring good ideas, but they're just brushing the leaves of the trees, we're not really hitting the root of the problem.*

The ineffective communication, or blatant ignorance of what the community needs by the school district, breeds distrust, which impacts and enhances the issues the students face. One participant bemoaned the fact that the after-school program she runs struggles with Latinx participation because they equate the program with the school district and because they don't trust the school district they don't trust her program.

According to one participant, the school district does a good job of "blaming". She states that the district doesn't provide the tools the community needs be informed, to help them care more, to help with the education of their children. They focus on what the families didn't do or how their children are underperforming instead of their own role in creating a divide. Instead of reflecting on the ways in which they communicate with the community. She states:

> *The families are blamed for something that sometimes they have no idea it's happening. And to get a report card, I mean it's not fair to say that in May, you're saying, it shouldn't be a surprise that your kid might be retained because the report card would have shown for three different marking periods that you're failing. But a meeting should have been called a lot earlier from the school's part to then rectify that and see what we can do together rather than having a meeting to give you the end result, which is to your kid has to repeat third grade again. So I just think that we're lacking in doing a good service at informing people of their rights and responsibilities. But I don't think the entire district is doing a good job here.*

The lack of communication in this example results in a student having to repeat a grade. She highlights the ineffective communication, of not making a parent aware of their child's academic

performance earlier in the semester, and also not communicating and informing families of their rights, there responsibilities. But she goes on later to share that there are solutions out there, ways in which the school can rebuild trust, show they care for their Latinx students and communities. She states:

> *But I think having, recognizing the need for just something as small as an interpreter that so a lot of people take for granted. Just having those resources in place and having material translated, I think are small things that people are doing that, it even in, with all the gadgets that we have, it's easier. But a lot of people take for granted, so I think little things like that make a difference. I think it I would have from come from the school, I think you would begin with a school in order to impact the larger community. Information it's power, I think that giving people the tools so that they can be empowered to be self reliant and to know what to look for. I mean it's really very simple, but we don't do a good job at doing those things. With special education it's just one example. There are some pamphlet that's about 27 pages about your rights and responsibility and so it's like need a PHD to understand that thing, so it's out there, it comes from the state, but come on who's going to read all of this. And so just breaking it down and offering information so people can actually be partners rather than just throwing things. Just to satisfy regulations. But I think that informing people so that they can be active partners and in the education of their kids. And because I think that majority of people want their kids to do well*

Its about seeing the community, its families as ‘active partners’, believing that these families want their children to do well and want to be engaged in their success. If the district can embrace this approach, care enough to changes the ways in which it interacts with the community, it can have a tremendous positive impact on the educational experiences of students.

School-Based Practices and its Impact on Latinx Community

As the focus shifts to the school space and the practices in which school employees engage, we see how biases and deficit discourse negatively impact Latinx students, and by extension their families. These negative perceptions are oftentimes held by teachers towards Latinx parents, towards Latinx students, and creates an unwelcoming school culture/climate devoid of empathy and positive educational support. The individual schools, the teachers,

continue reinforcing negative stereotypes and add to the disconnect between school and community.

Schools were considered to hold tremendous negative perceptions of Latinx parents. Latinx parents were perceived to not care about their children's education, not be active partners with schools, and were vilified as an impediment to teachers success. One participant shared a story of a board meeting that she was a part of that also included a school administrator. She shared how she heard the school administrator exclaim that "…Latinos, they are not involved in the schools. The parents, they don't participate in school activities". The participant continues: "That's the perception from these schools. I said, 'That's wrong! We do want to participate. Have you actually think why we don't do it? Have you think that the meetings are so unfriendly, the schools are so unfriendly. You don't have the warmness". Others highlighted the unfriendliness of schools, the lack of empathy, as potential reasons for parents not 'engaging', not the lack of care by parents. One participant shared her story of school in Puerto Rico, and how active her parents were, and juxtaposed this with what she believes is a desire by Near Westside families to be more involved in the schools. She states: "I'm thinking back in Puerto Rico. I remember my parents going to every single meeting, every single ... Why? They felt welcomed. They felt the school wanted them there. The parents here, they want to do it here too. I think it's the same thing. They really want to do it here. They don't have the ways to do it." This quote alludes to the lack of resources, some of the social obstacles that may impede parent engagement, in the traditional sense of the term. Schools don't accept the whole child, or don't understand, or care to understand, students lived experiences. As one participant stated: "There is a lot of resentment, anger, and you see that expressed in the school yard, in the classroom. These kids are emotionally scarred. And the schools should be a safe space, make them feel like they welcomed,

not make them feel stupid or alienating them. Here, schools are never going to be welcoming to students, to Latino parents". There was a feeling that schools, and teachers specifically, looked down upon the parents. They were quick to call out parents for not using the right terminology, for not knowing what was going on in the school. They were, quite simply put by one participant, "cold, callous". One participant shared her experience as a parent of a child walking the halls of her child's school, and how unwelcomed she felt. She states:

> *And so it's fascinating that a group of people that are in charge of kids futures act so callous I think. To me it's been fascinating from day one walking through the halls of the school and it feels really cold and unwelcoming and there was no like, not that they have to send your flowers because you're a parent at the school and look at you, but, Oh my God just make me feel welcomed. I mean you walk down the hall and you're lucky, if you get a return hello back. And so it's really weird. It's very different. And I have, I don't know, sometimes I come down on educators maybe too harsh because I just think that the way, that they should be role modeling what they want from their kids. And like I said, it's should be a win win situation.*

The imagery of a parent walking within the school halls, ignored, feeling alienated, is powerful. Others shared that it went beyond a cold shoulder or alienating parents. They talked about the strict security measures and how Latinx parents felt as if they were being 'watched' and seen as 'criminals' as they entered the school building. As one participant stated:

> *Why would a Latino parent want to go into a school if as soon as they walk in there is a guard look at them like they did something wrong, and while they are in the office another guard is pacing or standing outside of the office door like they are waiting for something to go down. Would you want to go into a place where that happens?*

Participants also interrogated how parent involvement was defined by schools, by teachers. They shared how they felt teachers, when they think of parent involvement, automatically think that it is attendance in PTO meetings or attendance at open houses or parent-

teacher meetings. They pushed back against this traditional view of parent involvement. As one participant states:

> *I think the definition overall is so skewed that it in turn skews what people, how people perceive it because parent involvement for a parent could just be making sure that you're up every day and you're dressed and you are in school and I might never have to set a foot in the school to be involved. And so people don't think of those things that you do behind the scenes. It always means having to go to the school and having to do something actively. And I just, I don't think that's the case. And so a lot of the families that I work with, they're really doing the best they can with what they have.*

This example focuses on the need to acknowledge what is being done "behind the scenes" that should be considered parent involvement. It is also interesting how this example also reiterates how parents are "…doing the best they can with what they have". It feels like a plea to schools, to teachers to see the full picture, recognize what Latinx families have to overcome to be present, and acknowledge the community cultural wealth that is ever present even if it runs counter to traditional parent/school engagement. Participants also continue to put the burden of responsibility on the schools, teachers, to better engage parents. As one participant states:

> *You know obviously they complain about parent engagement all the time and it's hard and it's messy work. But I don't think it's very sincere work and I think the schools fail to acknowledge that you have to go further to engage someone, parents who had their own negative experience. Didn't have a positive experience in school, didn't have a positive outcome. And grandparents as well. So sending home a PTO flyer and saying you show up isn't enough.*

The inability to understand and relate with the Latinx community was one of the areas participants highlighted when identifying educational issues they felt negatively impacted Latinx students. As one participant stated: "And so that's where I felt most inadequate in education, in a room with educators". One participant was able to share her experiences with teachers, juxtaposing the kindergarten teachers of one of her children to the 3rd grade teacher of her other

child. The kindergarten teacher lived in the Near Westside community and was described as being part of the community, understanding the community. She ‘got it’ and it made a big difference. The participant saw her at the grocery store, at various restaurants. The teacher would communicate effectively, reaching out with positive news not just when there was an issue. In contrast, the 3rd grade teacher did not live in the community and the participant felt she did not understand the needs of the community. The participant felt this teacher made assumptions, only reached out to her when there were issues. Many participants felt this lack of cultural and community awareness didn’t allow for them to provide a holistic educational experience for students and lean on potential biases and lower expectations and standards. As one participant stated:

> *It’s simple. It’s not just teaching kids and ignoring their culture its hearing about their communities and cultures from the people who live there. It’s also going deeper, not just hearing from people saying this is their culture but actually seeing it. Do home visits in the summertime. Have more relationships with families. If you know that these 30 kids are gonna be in your class the next year, reach out. Go say hello. Unfortunately, teachers only get taught what they need to teach. They don’t really get taught to relate to their students’ cultures.*

It is the need for teachers to go beyond curriculum delivery, to embrace the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity, to actively engage within the community. One participant juxtaposed what she felt were excuses from teachers in engaging students beyond the classroom to her own experiences with teachers as a child. She likened the experience to the social work field she was involved in, the need for holistic care for each client with the goal to have a greater impact on the larger community. She continues:

> *So looking at societal and environmental, and I think that the teachers are always like, "Well, we're not social workers." Well, we don't expect you to be social workers, but a good teacher invests herself in her class, so that's like 25 kids that you can have an influence on. And I remember from my days in grade school, I went to public school for*

> *the first three years and then went to Catholic school. My 8th grade teacher, she had 50 kids in her class, and she knew what was going on with each of us, what was going on in our families. That was the way she operated. I think that that involvement... I'm not saying that not all teachers are doing it, but certainly I think that, that teachers have to get more involved in what their students are doing.*

Throughout our interview, she grew visibly upset when discussing teachers. She continued to call out teachers for not being aware of what was occurring in the community that could be impacting their students' experiences with the classroom material. She wanted them to be held accountable, to do all they can to support their students' improvement. She felt is was a tremendous injustice for any teacher to not be concerned when they see a student struggle. As she states: "If the kid's not mastering the skills they need to master, then what's going on? And it may be that what's going on is in the community, in their home experiences, and, well, then maybe you (*the teacher*) needs to step up and get involved in the community".

Some participants felt it was extreme injustice to have inexperienced teachers that did not have the cultural awareness to engage Latinx students. One participant shared a scenario of two teachers seeing a child's actions in the class in two very distinct ways. He states:

> *You get two teachers seeing two different things. You get kids playing the dozens or ribbing on one another. It's not going very far. You got one teacher will be, "Hey guys. Funny, funny, but let's save that for later. It's not the time." Or you get another teacher comes in and just like, "You're bullying. You're being mean. I'm gonna throw you to the principal." It causes an escalation because it wasn't a big deal in the first place. I think there are some things like that where you get teachers who are on their way out, they don't really care, who don't put in the time that other teachers who feel like they're called to be there do.*

This inability to connect with Latinx students was an issue that was raised often. One participant discussed a student he was working with at an after school program. He shares:

> *I said, "Have you met with your teacher?". There were kids in tenth grade, they said. "Well, yeah, I went one day," but they feel you know like there's no connection there. They said the teacher said "Yeah well, you know, what you got to do is come back another time." I don't know. The depression, the way that we deal with it, I don't know what it is. The communication is different. And they kind of felt like very cold. They didn't feel that warmth from that teacher. And it's kind of weird, really. You don't think about those things. Well, yeah, teachers have so many people, students, in their classes. But is this people really making a connection with those kids, right? What did they need to make that connection happen.*

Again, it's the lack of warmth, the lack of empathy. It is the disconnect. The negative impact on the student. It just feels hopeless.

Finally, participants were concerned with what they felt were low expectations, low standards on the part of teachers towards Latinx students. As one participant bluntly states: "I think that teachers have…I think that there's a lack of expectation. And I think students are tempted to take advantage of this, know they can underperform and teachers won't care". And these lack of expectations, the deficit discourse, was not aimed at only the low performing students. One participant shared a story of her son, who was attending the same school she had attended when she was younger. She used this story to highlight that her son, who was academically high performing, still faced negative perceptions. She shares:

> *And it's complicated because even when you're not an underperformer, and I think my son and I experienced the same things, we went to the same school, so that's kind of funny. We even had some of the same teachers, [chuckle] and we were both honor students, but he experienced it very differently than I did. He experienced it in more of an isolation. And he experienced it as, "Why are you here" from his teachers, which it felt like gave his non-Latino classmates permission to question his presence too.*

<u>*Latinx Community Members Reinforcing Hegemonic Ideologies*</u>

Laura Chavez-Moreno (2023), in her review of 125 peer-reviewed education-research articles that employ a LatCrit framework between 1995 to 2020, concluded that very few

researchers "…explored the fact that some Latinxs may subscribe to hegemonic ideologies and practices" (p.22). She highlighted how, in using LatCrit to examine Latinxs' perspectives, "…the literature largely ignores and/or deemphasizes this inconvenient reality *(how Latinx do not always advance counterhegemonic ideas)*" (Chavez-Moreno, 2023, p.22). She concludes that this "…prevalent trend might lead one to the erroneous conclusion that Latinxs' experiential knowledge is free from hegemonic meaning-making, and thus should be unconditionally accepted rather than scrutinized and critiqued" (Chavez-Moreno, 2023, p.22). What follows are instances where seven participants in this dissertation study seemed to succumb to hegemonic ideologies, taking a 'blame-the-victim' approach when trying to make sense of the issues being faced. It is important to highlight these perspectives to show, as Chavez-Moreno states, the Latinx experiential knowledge is not free from hegemonic meaning-making.

While interrogating educational issues led participants to focus on educational systems, school policies, and teacher practices, some community members could not avoid laying the blame on their fellow community members, feeling they should bear some responsibility for the issues and challenges faced. Some participants used this opportunity to call out the Latinx community role in perpetuating some of these issues, either through certain decisions or actions and certain inaction.

One key area that drew the ire of participants was parents' lack of involvement in advocating for their children. While earlier I was able to show how social factors played a role in parent disengagement or inability to meet the unrealistic expectations of schools, teachers, here participants put some blame on parents themselves for sitting back, for settling, or for blaming the schools entirely and not taking some of the responsibility. One participant chastised community members for not filling in the educational gaps for their children. Instead of blaming

the schools for failing the students, he felt parents should step up and take on the role of educator within the household. As he shares:

> *The community will blame, "Oh, it's just our school." No it's not. It's you and your kids. My kid did not learn the alphabet because of a school. He learned the alphabet because of me. Your kid didn't learn the alphabet? It wasn't the teacher's fault. It was your fault. Because you didn't do a damn thing to teach your kid. I believe those are the basics. Obviously there's such a breakdown at home. It's difficult to get that. A lot of times what happens is when you pass blame upon the school system for that, then I have a problem with that.*

He went on to share that he felt strongly about this because he saw his mom, who he felt was not the most intelligent person and was dealing with a lot of issues, step up when it came to school and education and instilled a pride in effort and perseverance. He stated he didn't get the best grades but his mom made sure he worked hard.

Others felt that by not helping students learn English, parents were feeding into the deficit discourse held by schools, teachers. Some participants wanted parents to prove schools wrong. Others felt that instilling a sense of isolation and shielding their kids from an 'American culture' would only add to the discrimination children would face as they got older. One participant shared how she felt there was immense value in learning and speaking English in her own education in Puerto Rico, juxtaposing this experience with what the Latinx students and families she was working with. She shares:

> *School was, for me, was very good. I learned a lot, from the beginning, you know that we have, I don't know if you know that but we have to learn English from the beginning. I loved the English. It's mandatory. Every year you've got to take English classes. Some can take other classes, but it's not, you've got to learn English. I learned English that way and also when I went to University, to college, I learned more. For me, it was good. Now, there In Puerto Rico? It's not happening It's not very, things are very different now. They're closing a lot of schools and they laid off a lot of teachers. So things are now not very good. Here, I think they have a very good opportunities and very good way to learn, but some, not all, of them, not all of them, but some of them, don't like, how can I say,*

> *don't take advantage of the opportunities that they have here. So that's another thing that I see.*

Another participant also juxtaposed the current community interactions with education with her own growing up. She reflected fondly on her mother's involvement and determination. She shares:

> *In my experiences, when I was growing up, it was... My mother would sit me down and say, "Okay, let's go through this. Do you have homework?" She would be talking to the teachers. She would be very involved in school life just to be sure that we were on track. And if we weren't on track, then she would try to figure out how to get us on track. And this is from a woman who did not attain her high school education until I was ready to graduate from high school. My mom went and got her GED. When I was in grammar school and high school, I had to depend on her to get me help in grammar school. And then in high school, I depended on tutors to get me help, to where I could get a basic understanding of what I needed to do and talking to classmates and stuff like that. I just don't know if those connections exist. I think our community is sometimes a little fragmented for various reasons.*

In this example, it is not just the parent's responsibility or determination to positively reinforce their children's education but the community as a whole was involved, from tutors and classmates supporting her educational growth. She felt the fragmentation within the community impeded this opportunities for educational advancement.

The community was also held responsible for their perceived role in enabling high absenteeism. Much of the student absence issues was due to families going back to Puerto Rico during the winter and not returning until early March, sometimes even in April. Some participants felt this was extremely detrimental to their learning and helped feed stereotypes. One participant expressed frustration with both the schools and parents, feeling that schools were not doing enough to get students to school or show concern but also parents were not doing their part. She shares:

> *"Why were they absent?" "Well, the parent called and said they were sick." After four or five days, something's going on, why aren't we trying to find out what's going on in the family? Is this child really ill or is there some other situation going on that they can't attend school. 'Cause when you miss three, four days, you're way behind at that point and if this is a consistent pattern. So you look at month after month after month and you see kids just missing chunks of school. It's like, "Why is this happening? Why aren't we being more proactive in getting kids to school?" And part of that is working with the parents too, because sometimes the parents... I've seen parents bringing their kids to school at 9:30 [chuckle] and I will say, "Classes started a little earlier than that." What is it that that parent isn't able to get that child to school on time? Because even a half hour that you miss, is stuff is going on all the time. I think part of it is that societal parental involvement, and the other half is the school district, I think needs to do more to get those kids into school and to stay in the school*

In her eyes, it is a shared responsibility, but parents must share in the responsibility. The impact of absenteeism is great and can derail student achievement.

Apathy was another issue that participants felt community members took on to the detriment of their students potential academic success. A couple of participants pointed to the high drop out rate within the Latinx student population and felt that schools, policy makers, and community members were apathetic. Some felt that it was unavoidable when you had an education system that has given up on the Latinx community or tells community members that the chances for success are slim for Latinx students coming from immigrant Spanish-speaking families and if their child is not mastering ‘school’ by 3rd grade then statistics show it will be difficult for them to graduate high school. As one participant shared:

> *Our families just give up. They don't get involved because they don't think that they're gonna be heard. And the issue is because when something happen, and it's a conflict in school, the way that things are being handled within the same office, and the student. With the system that they have, the parent feels that, ‘They're not doing much for me’. So if the school is not doing much for me, and I'm talking about this is information that the parents provide to me, ‘If they're not doing much for me, why I wanna get involved?*

Others expressed their frustration directly with the community members. They felt it was this apathy that impeded action, that allowed the injustices they felt were occurring within the schools to continue without anyone held accountable. One participant discussed her attempts to organize a group of community professionals to address educational issues plaguing the Latinx community. She expressed her frustration with their reactions and how their refusal to act was harmful to the community. She shared:

> *So we've got this group of professionals that we can have these conversations and then I get together with some other folks in the community, trying to engage them and get them to see, look at what we've got going here. Ah, you would've told them I was going to rip their arms off. I mean, oh, we can't trust them, or, this will never happen or we've tried this before or if that person's on the group I'll never do it ... It was like talking to my kids.*

This inaction by community was echoed by many participants. Some felt a sense of hopelessness, realizing that the community didn't have the power necessary to change school policies. They felt the community could make some noise but stopped short of drastic action, of, as one participant stated: "…going to city hall and demanding change". They pointed to the lack of access to government officials and the potential fear to stir the pot. For a large immigrant community, participants rationalized this fear as a fear of potentially being deported for some and for others continued discrimination if they pushed too hard. Another participant highlighted this lack of community action by sharing:

> *I think it's both because if the community doesn't demand more of the schools, the schools are not gonna do anything because they're like, "Okay, why are we gonna go out of our way if no one's really asking for our help?" If you don't start protesting or asking for stuff, then the school's not gonna get to it. I mean, that's how things ... I mean, things don't just get done because, "Let me do this out of my kind heart." Just like laws, laws are passed because an incident or an accident had to happen and someone started saying, "Hey, we need to change this."*

In her eyes, action was integral to change. The schools were not going to take the lead in enacting change so it was up to the community to do so. This movement towards action by the community, towards activism and advocacy, will be explored in the next chapter. However, it is important to look a bit more in-depth to the obstacles and impediments to community progress as shared by study participants.

This victim-blaming had some historical precedent within the ways in which Latinx community members were described in the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1970s, some Puerto Ricans pointed to the overdependency of their fellow Puerto Rican community members on government benefits or welfare (Davis, 1972b). A Syracuse Herald-American article (Sori, 1981) looking at the difficult adjustment of Cuban refugees to Syracuse chastised Cubans for their financial decisions in the midst of a new freedom of choice after leaving a communist system. They state how “some Cubans make ‘childlike’ decisions – buying whatever provides immediate gratification, rather than managing their money to pay bills…” (Sori, 1981). Any economic hardship is their own doing, not the cause of any external injustice. Similarly, participants in this study, arguing against a mentality of perennial victimhood, expressed frustration over perceived complacency, dependence on government benefits, and an unwillingness to adapt or overcome challenges. One participant stated he felt Latinos were lagging way behind other ethnic groups because they were taking a victim mentality approach. He felt the Latino community was failing because they blame discrimination/racism for their issues, use the race/ethnicity card, and are paralyzed into inaction. He was very defensive when discussing this topic, juxtaposing his whiteness with the experiences of the Afro-Latino community members. His response became a rant that aligns with some of the conservative political rhetoric of today, almost a precursor to some of the intragroup tensions within the Latinx diaspora as it relates to race and politics.

I know what's discrimination. I been discriminated in all the things that has nothing to do with my ethnic, my culture. And I understand that some Latinos always tell me in my face well you don't look Latino, if you were darker, if your eyes were not blue and this and your hair not blonde, blah, blah, fine. I understand that the appearance probably might help me but I can tell you that there are many Latinos out there famous ones and not famous ones that they'll obtain what they wanted to obtain, that they reach success, if they play the game by the rules, if they playing the proper way. Yes, you're gonna run into competition and don't get me wrong, you're gonna run into competition where you as being Latino might have a disadvantage, don't get me wrong. You might not see these in the rules, you might not see it legally and stuff like that but there are issues, especially in the big corporations where the white conservative, white haired person is the boss and stuff like that you might have a disadvantage but to me that's a leverage for you to push harder. To try better. That I think is something that will help you, not only you as a Latino but us as a culture to do better. Now, when you start using that as excuse, not a reason, as excuse, on why you couldn't get that job, why you couldn't do this, et cetera, et cetera, to me is …Yeah and then the other thing is you gotta be factual. You gotta be very careful when you using that as a reason when it's not a reason. If three consecutive things happen in a negative way because you are Latino and you can actually see it, vivid, then that is discrimination, you know what I mean. But if it is not happening all the time, if it's a different scenario, if it nothing that you can contextually prove that it's like, well don't hire him because his last name is Martinez, then you know you cannot. Don't use it like that. That's the way I see it.

Another participant blamed community for relying on government benefits and perpetuating stereotypes and maintaining a cycle of poverty:

I believe that they have more opportunities here but when they get here, and I'm not talking about all of them, I just want to be clear about that. I don't want to, I'm not saying that all of them, because I know people. I met friends and people from their students at SU. They're very Some of them come here and they have a lot of opportunities here, but they come and they just start doing the getting the government help or benefits and some of them keep studying or try to learn the language, but some others are like, stay like that in the same. That's a thing, yeah. Could be better. I met a couple of person, three maybe four, when I was doing the mental health therapist work and I talked to them and I asked them, very young 40s and 30s, and I said why are you taking the government benefits? Why are you not studying or doing something? You're very young, you can do it. "No cause I have this healthy issue, mental health issue and I cannot do it." But I talked to you and you look, you seem very smart and you can study and that's going to help you with your mental health issues if you're dealing with depression or something like that. If you do something you're going to feel better. But they were like, some of them from, that was in 2009. Those people were taking benefits from the government since 1980-something. So they came very young, but... Parents don't know how to speak or read.

A few more participants echoed these sentiments, feeling strongly that welfare was causing all the problems, making community members dependent, and leading to increase of drug usage and continued poverty.

Obstacles and Impediments to Community Progress

The community and educational issues and challenges were identified above. As community members moved towards action, they identified some of the obstacles that impeded community progress, that muted community power. As one participant stated: "I think it also amazes me in a place like Syracuse how many different organizations there are and nobody can solve the problem!".

The Struggle with Time Commitment

A big issue for the Latinx community that stalled action was time commitment required to engage in this activism. A community organizer stated how the community was to busy putting out fires and plan strategically and mobilize efforts to challenge community and educational injustices. Another participant shared how difficult it was to engage in community activism or even attend events that supported the community after long days of work in their day-to-day jobs. As she states: "…you want to empower community members to participate in the community but its hard. You yourself at the end of the day, after a long day of work, and if something is going on at 6:30 at night and I have to get up at 7 in the morning…I'm wiped. I can't do it". These time constraints impact community members ability to contribute to community engagement, development, and activism. Many discussed how they want to do more, be more engaged, but the demands of 'life' was too much to give even a few more hours to a worthy cause. It felt as if the most impact would be led by those whose jobs it was to directly

engage the community – non-profit organizations, after school programs, community centers, and other positions where a person was paid to impact and engage community. The time commitment required to have a meaningful impact was a barrier for many.

Bureaucracy in Community Service (Institutionalization of Impact)

There was also a noticeable tension between those community members that wanted to engage in grassroots efforts with no restrictions on the work they could do and others that felt it was imperative to work within an organized system to have the most impact. A few of the community elders interviewed for this study decried what they felt was an overwhelming bureaucracy in community work, an institutionalization of impact. Individual efforts, out of the goodness of one's heart or born out of a passion to selflessly serve the community was vanishing. A local artist shared an example of this:

> *There was this community organization that did a lot of work for the Latino community. One time I'm outside smoking a cigarette, and this couple came out asking for do you know where such and such, like direction, asking direction. So I gave them direction. So I finished my cigarette. When I went inside, they wanted me to make a report because I did a service to those people. I said, "What service? They lost. They asked direction. I gave it to them. What I got fill an application?" Because United Way wanted all and Catholic charity, they want ... I say that bullshit. So I didn't waste my time. I told them that.*

There was a feeling that this bureaucratic approach, of filling out paperwork for every little act of 'service', created a disconnect from practical needs. It bred frustration and anger, as this participant felt limited in what he could do. He shared another story to show the challenges of rigid institutional policies and its impact on community work. He states:

> *Another time I'm in the lobby and here come this lady. Old lady, Latina. And she look very sincere. There was no if and buts about her. So she went to the reception desk and asked the lady could she get five dollars from the Liga. So the secretary look at her, five dollars, for what? They say I need it to add to for my medicines. You got to buy the medicine. So, no we don't do that. Their philosophy was if you do one for one, then there be line people asking*

> *loan me two dollars, I need to take the bus, give me a ... So what I did, when the lady walk out, I went right behind her and gave her the five dollars. Said don't worry about it. Just get ... That was a no-no. I not supposed to do that because that when I found out that their philosophy was you can't do that because they be coming in and then you have to be handing out money to everybody. I said well, you could tell that old lady needed it. You know what I mean. So you got to distinguish who's serious and who the jokers around here. But everything started being more paperwork. And I didn't like that. I didn't like that. I don't know what really. I never got into none of those nail places, like they nail you to that job and you got to do it. I was always in out out in and out. I was dealing with the community. I was dealing with the kids. I was dealing with real Latino people.*

You can feel the tension here, of the 'old' way of doing things, of just helping people with no questions asked, with the organizational policies in place for a more systemic approach. This participant did not want to be 'nailed' down to this approach. He continued to stress how he deals with the community, with the 'real Latino people'. It was this perceived shift towards paperwork over direct community engagement that was frustrating for many of the elders who helped launch these community organizations and they felt it was holding up progress and true impact.

A Generational Divide

This tension between bureaucracy and grassroots, organized approach and individualized passion, was also apparent in a perceived generational divide towards community action. This divide caused friction within community leaders and impeded progress. One participant observed a significant gap between the younger generation doing community work and the elders. While he respected their work, he felt they were lacking in innovative approaches and leaning on a series of individual actions may help a few but would not have a greater impact on the larger community. Another participant, an elder of the community, acknowledged that the younger generation of community activists had a lot more technological savviness and a better grasp of fundraising, especially in securing grants. They knew how to network. However, she felt this came at the expense of traditional face-to-face interactions with community members. She felt it

was "…too quiet, like there's not too much action". Another elder latched onto traditional methods of fully immersing oneself in the community, engaging holistically and in-person with community members. He felt current community leaders, younger leaders, were too distant, weren't physically present and this negatively impacted action. In comparing past community leaders, the current elders, with the current crop, he states:

> *They separate. They separate. At one time they don't ... a new person will come to the neighborhood and he don't know where to lean to. At that time, people knew coming in here, they knew what the community leaders were. And they could talk to them. They were everywhere. And one of them had a store that you go to the store and talk business while he's chopping the meat, you know what I mean. And so you knew where to go. Now you come here, who's who? And they could see the musicians, the artist, the professional Latino. So they could get a little inspired. A role models really. That's always been very important for the kids that growing up. They lived here. They were a real part of the community.*

He talks about the accessibility of community leaders in the past. They were easily accessible, involved in everyday life because they lived and worked in the neighborhood, 24/7. He felt it was unclear who the younger community leaders were because they didn't live in the community, only came to 'work' but didn't fully integrate into the community.

In contrast, a younger generation community leader stressed the challenges of the older leadership leaning on outdated strategies and felt they were not adapting to current problems. As he states:

> *I think that there is a huge disconnect between the youth and the elders, and elders include teachers and facilitators and things of that nature. Not all of them, but I think that the administration is not properly trained to handle the caliber of problems that exist today, I don't think the system has been changed too much. What was the norm, and what was the issue even five, ten, twenty years ago, is not the issue now.*

While he felt it was noble to address issues on a person-to-person basis, he felt it wasn't getting at the root of systemic issues. He supported a more systemic and institutional approach to action, the strategic use of technology, and utilization of relevant data.

Internal Division and Community Discord

This community divide continued to be a source of frustration for many of the participants. They felt there was a lack of unity and collaboration within the community. One participant felt it was political, with key community leaders failing to coalesce around single issues and competing across political lines. One participant highlighted that it wasn't an issue of coming together across ethnic differences or cultural differences but because of a 'division of clans'. He explained how one group would support one leader while another leader was pulling a group of community members to her side. "There are like 4 or 5 clans, all fighting each other", he states. He compared this division and discord to Rochester, where he felt it was much more organized and less visibly divided. They publicly presented a united front despite any internal disagreements. This discord and division hindered collective progress, with the different groups "…pulling down those that are rising or succeeding, rather than supporting them". "It's petty", another participant stated. One participant shared a story on the impact this division had on building a unified collective. She shared:

> *But I remember years ago, we were trying to create a chamber. A chamber for Latinos only. And so all of it was politics, right? So, "don't do it this way, don't do it this was. Oh, why do you all have to take the lead roles?" Meaning me. And I'm like, "Well, you do it then." You know? I'm just trying to help, but I'm not tying to, you know, to get anybody upset or anything. And so nothing happens. So then I come back, and I say, "Okay, so let's try to do it again." So, we have certain people that already started putting some money, you know? To one of the guys. And then they said, "Okay, you come and run the meetings." I said, "but that's not how it's supposed to work." I think my idea is to be connected to the chamber. Cause they have everything. Why do we want to create a separate organization? We should an arm, actually, you know? Connected. Because when we need something, they can provide. They already have the experience to them. Anyway,*

> *so...right. So some people, they don't want to do it this way, some of them did. And I said, you know what? I better take myself out of here, because I don't like to be in like- pulling this way, pulling that way. If we're going to work, let's work till we're wove(?). Right. Then you don't do nothing. Right, nothing gets on. So I said take me out. I'm not doing it, I'm not doing it. And so I'm just going to focus on what I wanted to do, which was the radio and then La Liga, and then the festival. I said, I'm going to put the energy in that. And so... but then, you know, they didn't do anything. And then they come out again. And then they come out again. And then they come out again. And then when ( ) talked to me about the chamber, I told them, "you know what? I want to be out of there. You can ask me, I'll give you everything. I will support you from the outside." But I don't want to know- I don't wanna be involved. I said, "because when I was involved, this happened, that happened. I really don't want to get into that. You two... move forward. Yeah. So they said, "Oh, okay. Yeah, thank you, thank you." Same thing when they were trying to create the Latino Professional. I said I don't want to be involved. Not because I don't agree. I said, "It's a great idea, and you two can do it. I just don't want to be involved, because I know that there's some people that don't like me." And that's okay, I said. Because not everybody likes each other, right.*

These personal slights led to infighting which led to an inability to build collective power. In this story, there was the feeling that leadership in the community was through a small group of people. As others try to take on leadership roles, there was competition which led to a lack of communication and ultimately certain community members bowing out altogether from engaging in this role based on frustration and unwillingness to work together. This aligns with the generational divide discussed earlier, as this story detailed the tension between older generation which held a lot of the community leadership roles and a newer generation that wanted to engage in community work with more contemporary approaches. It felt like a soap opera, a novella, where grudges were held, there were bitter infighting and insurmountable tension that ultimately led to division and discord. As one participant states: “There is a tendency within the group to pull down those that are rising or succeeding, rather than supporting them. This jealousy, this competitiveness, doesn’t help our progress”. This seemed to be the case when trying to organize and collaborate for major community cultural events, like a yearly Puerto Rican Festival that was the highlight for the community. Competing ideas and questions about

leadership styles were consistently at the forefront of the planning and implementation of this festival. There were stories of fierce battles over changing the name of the Festival, to move beyond Puerto Rican to incorporate the larger Latinx diaspora. There were battles over how the proceeds should be used. One year the battle was over whether to use the proceeds to create an emergency fund for community members in need or use it for educational scholarships. One side felt the money could help feed community members, help with weather-related emergencies while the other side felt this was redundant as there were already community organizations that supported efforts such as these. As one participant who pushed for educational scholarships stated: “I said there’s a lot of places that people can go when they have an emergency. But there’s no scholarship for Latinos. This is what we need to do. But they complain, complain, complain (*imitates a person complaining in Spanish*). (*Pause*). Anyways, they threw me out of the festival.

Questioning Motives

A lot of responses also questioned the motives of community leaders, of community organizations, of community initiatives. Some were worried that those organizations that accepted grant funding became less likely to interrogate larger systems and injustice for fear of losing this funding. As one participant states: “You get kind of caught between this ability to deliver much needed services due to full funding and maybe a wariness about offending or losing your funding if you speak too loudly on particular issues. You need to embrace the saying "no permanent friends, then no permanent enemies." It really has to be about the issues, and there's times we'll agree and times we won't”. This person wanted community organizations to focus on the issues, focus on why they were in existence, and less on a fear of losing the funding. Others pointed to concerns that community organizations only focus on short-term projects driven by funding availability, usually resulting in a lack of sustained support for the community,

especially kids. "The issue never goes away because its just bandaids" one participant exclaimed. Others questioned whether community organizations and the people that led and worked for them were only in it for personal gain and not for the greater good. As one participant shared: "What are the genuine intentions of the people working in youth outreach? Are they in it for the notoriety, for getting to say 'look at me with all these grants' or are they in it for the community, a real desire to help even if they had no money?". There was a consensus among the research participants that growth and change happens when the community leaders focused on the collective good and selflessly engaged in this work rather than personal gain and recognition. The feeling was that depending on the funding, or engaging in the work for personal growth/gain, led to inaction or a lack of urgency, and the greater community suffered for it. As one participant shares: "While you are organizing plans and deliberating how you are going to meet the criteria of the grant, or while you are talking to a newspaper saying look at what we are doing, aren't we great – while you do that the youth in our community continue to face life-threatening challenges. We need direct, immediate action not paperwork or empty words".

All the issues and challenges, obstacles and barriers, infighting and dysfunction, systemic injustices discussed above could have easily immobilized this Latinx community. Hopelessness could have easily permeated and destroy the fabric of the community. However, as I will show in the next chapter, a spirit of activism was engrained in the community, a willingness to mobilize the community's cultural wealth and generate community power to push back against age-old deficit discourse, ethnocentric and racist policies. As shared in the final quote above, "…direct, immediate action" was embraced and enacted.

Chapter Six
Resistant Capital and Community Power: Mobilizing Assets towards Action

As previous chapters explored how Latinx community was constructed, identified the assets and cultural capital that Latinx community have to offer, interrogated community and educational issues that created unjust and inequitable experiences and outcomes for Latinx youth, and explored the internal dysfunction and divide that impeded community progress and impact, this chapter delves into ways in which community members tap into navigational and resistant capital to mobilize the community cultural wealth towards action and community power. This chapter will articulate community perspectives on actions that should be undertaken to positively impact the educational experiences of Latinx youth. It will spotlight the spirit of activism that is prevalent, both throughout the history of the Near Westside and through the testimonios of community members as they reflect on their roles and responsibilities, including how their own histories and cultural experiences birthed their passion towards activism and advocacy. Finally, this chapter will focus on collective action, the power of the community to organize their efforts in their tireless quest to enact change.

Activating Community Cultural Wealth: Navigational and Resistant Capital

Chapter Four explored aspects of the Near Westside's community cultural wealth, focusing on the hope and steadfastness of Latinx community in the face of oppression, the value of Spanish language, the power of family in cultivating cultural capital, and the richness of the community's networks and social resources. While this chapter focuses on action and community power, it is important to understand the value of navigational and resistant capital.

As mentioned earlier, navigational capital is the Latinx community's capability to navigate through systems that may often be hostile and oppressive to them. The testimonio of one participant, a community activist entrenched in the Near Westside community for many years, wonderfully captures navigational capital. She talks about being offered a job soon after she arrived to Syracuse from Puerto Rico. Working in a warehouse, her ability to speak both English and Spanish was utilized and she was tasked with supervising a group of Spanish-speaking employees. The warehouse foreman wanted her to instruct them on the employee manual, translating all relevant items. She was excited, thinking this was the opportunity she desired when she left Puerto Rico: "I was like, wow. I'm gonna be supervisor, and I'm gonna be in charge of all these people". However, this excitement quickly dissipated as she saw how unfairly the Latinx employees were being treated, being given extra work and no breaks. "It was like they were being taking advantage of. They were forced to do work that nobody else was gonna be doing…work that was nasty, dirty, dangerous", she said. When she complained to the foreman she was given an ultimatum: "Either you instruct them what to do, or if you not, you're gonna be fired, or if not you can walk out if you don't like it". She stated how she didn't stand for being exploited, and she stood up to the foreman, threatening to expose the warehouses actions and leaving the job. What should have been an empowering moment quickly shifted to disaster, as her lack of job left her unable to pay bills and rent and she was homeless for a year, with a child. She felt other jobs wouldn't give her opportunities because of her accent, or the way she dressed, or, as she stated: "Because I'm Spanish and I'm Brown". Whatever little money she was able to make she spent on her child. On top of this, as she states: "Not only I was homeless. I took with me seven other teenagers that nobody wanted, and I took them with me because they didn't have any family. So we move from place to place, and we tell the landlord, 'We gonna go

and apply for welfare and the rent's gonna be a voucher'. And that's how we survived for that period of time". In the face of obstacles, of injustice and hostility, she was still able to maintain her humanity, still able to care for others, and able to navigate a system until she was financially stable and consistently housed. She also was able to utilize other services in the community to help her navigate these spaces. By telling this story, she wanted people to know that you needed to find ways to navigate these systems. She continues:

> *People have to know that there are services. After that, I just start learning what are the services. Where I start looking into what people do, if they need food, what churches they can go. If they need shelter, what places they can go. For single moms, for families. If the kids got in trouble, how do I advocate for them? So that's why I start then, pondering, and volunteer with organizations and then be part of the committees. And that's where everybody's going to me. It makes a huge difference. And that's why you see that Latinos now are advancing. They're growing in different ways just because they are getting information. They are getting more educated. They get in more ... And one of the things I do is that when people come to me for help, is that I don't do things for them. I guide them through the process. So it's important that they know, so if that happen to them again, they can do them by themselves because they shouldn't rely on one person. They should rely on themselves.*

An awareness of what services are available, guidance from those that were able to navigate these hostile systems, getting beyond the basic unmet needs, and the confidence they can successfully do so as well is what adds to navigational capital.

Resistant capital is the ways in which community members deploy their knowledge and skills to challenge inequality and oppression. The rest of this chapter details the ways in which resistant capital is such an integral component of the Syracuse Latinx community, capturing how the Near Westside community is able to mobilize its assets, its community cultural wealth, and interrogate educational injustice.

Redefining Education: Latinx Perspectives on Challenging Educational Injustice

When asked what needs to be done to deal with the inequitable educational experiences of Latinx youth, the Syracuse Latinx community called for a holistic and united approach to confront these educational injustices. Their perspectives highlight the necessity of addressing not just academic needs, but the entire spectrum of familial, social, and cultural factors that influence educational outcomes. This section explores these multifaceted views, emphasizing the role of community members in identifying solutions for systemic change and taking action. As one participant shares: “Then it does become the community members. Holding teachers accountable, unifying organizations like churches and programs, doing whatever they can to make a difference. People out of the goodness of their heart or frustration or whatever, doing what they can to push back”.

Holistic Approach: Addressing Familial Needs and Empowering Community

Many participants stressed the need to consider the whole family in educational interventions. For one participant, empathy and understanding of local cultural nuances, embracing cultural capital, was crucial in tailoring support. Schools and teachers needed to be empathetic, relate with the community and families, and take responsibility for respecting culture and accepting the whole child. As another participant stated: “It takes a different heart to do things with respect and care. You need to know that you may be the last possible hope for the community, for this child, and embrace that role”. Another participant states: “It’s very frustrating when there’s always an agenda, focusing just on school items. So cold. There’s no more work with a heart, no nothing”. This image of educating or community engagement with a heart was prevalent. Compassion, thoughtfulness, grace. They just wanted teachers to be holistically engaged with their students’ lives, understanding of all that is impacting them. There

were calls for teachers and schools to better engage families through thoughtful and intentional home visits and community engagement, informal phone calls to discuss positive attributes of student as well as just ask how the family is doing, and one creative idea of sharing notebooks with families and asking them to write or draw their highs, lows, questions, and celebrations and decide whether to send back with their child so the teacher/school can engage with their joy or address their concerns. It could start with better communication with parents, providing them with the information they needed to support their children. As one participant shares:

> *I know schools offer orientation or other welcoming events, but that's like a one day thing. You know what I mean? You know, I guess schools need to do a better job of reaching out to parents. I think if we start with parents, then the parents know what their kids should have. Then they can demand the school to also be accountable. Let's start with the parents cause their voices could be empowered and have a great impact on the kids.*

Other participants stated this cultural understanding and empathy required schools and teachers to be aware of nuances, aware that not all Latinx kids were the same. Don't assume they were all from Puerto Rico. Don't assume they all had the same issues, life experiences. As one person vividly stated: "Teachers are not learning their kids, their kids families. They need to be proactive. It's like dissecting a frog – open it up and try to figure out what parts are inside, how it is really like for them!". Another participant stated that this responsibility couldn't be that of the schools and teachers only. She challenged community organizations and educational programming to take a holistic approach. She felt programs should be designed to address specific needs and tailor programming to the realities of the teens they served, including addressing language barriers and the various challenges they face at home, like domestic violence and food insecurity. She stressed the need to provide resources and assistance that addressed the broader circumstances of their lives as opposed to just focusing on reading and

math. Educational success hinged on stable and supportive home environments, not only on textbooks and curriculums. Many quoted the cliché *It takes a village to raise a child*. Every aspect of that community needed to be a part of the child's life, actively engaged. One participant summed the holistic approach and community/school responsibilities best when she says:

> *I think it takes a community, a complete community. And I'm talking about every single aspect of the child's life. The social component, like community agencies that can help families get on their feet and understand whatever they need. The schools. The social workers to help with mental health. The churches, to go out and give life lessons, to say God loves you and so do I. The police to better protect the community. Everything's about relationship. And everybody can impact your life one way or another to make it better…they all need to be involved. If a family feels loved, and respected, and cared for, good things can happen.*

Unity, Collaboration, and Collective Action

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there was discord, disunity, and dysfunction within the interactions of community leaders and organizations. Many participants stated that the community would not make a dent in addressing educational injustice unless it unified and strengthened it collaboration among the various community entities. They stressed the need to find common ground when dealing with the concerns of the community, the need for community leaders and organizations to come together and collectively address gaps in services, raise awareness of what resources are available to combat these issues, and mobilize the community at large to act. As one participant stated: "We need all of us in the community to grab the handle of that heavy door, pull together and as hard as we can, and walk through hand-in-hand". Another participant focused on early childhood intervention, from a health perspective, and ways in which different community entities could take a unified approach and lean on the strength of collaboration, recognizing how the interconnectedness of medical, educational, and community serving sectors could foster conducive learning environments for Latinx youth. Other

participants called for the open flow of communication between community organizations so that they have a holistic understanding of community needs. They felt students fell through the cracks because information that could help that person is held by one organization yet they were not able to share with another organization which leads to a limited and inadequate services. As one participant shares: “We all need to put aside personal gains, individual organizational goals, and information hoarding and focus on a unified mission. We need coordinated community-wide efforts to ensure continuous community support. Do this and you’ll see things changes for our kids when it comes to their education”. They continued to state that it required involvement from professionals from various fields, bringing their diverse expertise, and a shared mission to address the multifaceted nature of educational injustice.

Collective action was unanimously embraced. Community-driven initiatives were considered to be the way to effectively impact the educational experiences of Latinx youth. There was a call for organized community action to collectively advocate for students. As one participant stated: “Right now it seems like the school district has control. No, you don’t. It has to come from the community advocating for their children!”. Many felt there needed to be structure in this action, a focus on specific goals to better mobilize community members. One participant felt strongly that it started with mobilizing parents. She states:

I would start by gathering as many parents as you possibly could, ‘cause usually within our community word spreads fast about things, especially in a small city like Syracuse. You know the movers and shakers in the Westside and you gather them and say “You know what? We’re having this problem, trying to figure this thing out. And we need your suggestions, your ideas”. So I think mobilizing parents would be the first thing to do. Because I think when parents become aware of the facts and how things work, it really changes the dynamics. It shifts the power back to the community.

Others echoed the need for action to start with parents. They discussed how this would build self-esteem and better understanding of the dynamics that impact Latinx educational experiences. And by building up the self-esteem of parents, empowering them, it would also seep into the children. As one person stated: “If the parents lead, then the kids will look at them as role models in a good light. We need to get parents back to being the role models”.

These community perspectives underscore the importance of community involvement, holistic support systems, and consistent, culturally sensitive engagement as key elements in reshaping the educational landscape for Latinx students. They stress the need for unifying various community stakeholders and intentional collaborations to ultimately mobilizing the assets of the community and engaging in collective action. The next section explores the roles of community members in this action a bit more in-depth, focusing on a spirit of activism that has been present within the Westside community from its onset.

A Spirit of Activism

“And we’ll probably annoy a lot of people. I don’t care! You have to. You have to annoy people to make change”. These words were spoken by a community activist when she was asked about her activism. It underscored the nature of the work, how activism was not neat, was not an action meant to please all people. It would make some people uncomfortable, especially if the end result is changing oppressive and unjust educational systems. In the heart of the Near Westside of Syracuse, Latinx community members stand as pillars of change, challenging and attempting to reshape the educational landscape, attempting to empower their community. They embraced a spirit of activism, one that has flowed through the community since it was created. This section aims to capture how the Latinx community historically engaged in activism, how participants in this study leaned on their own histories to become actively engaged, highlighting

their origin stories, and spotlights the testimonios of a few of these participants to center resilience, advocacy, community empowerment, and the reasons they have dedicated themselves to interrogating and transforming educational systems, policies, and practices.

Historical Underpinnings of Activism

Historically, the Syracuse Latinx community was a showcase of grassroots beginnings, motivations for collective action, and fully invested caretaker of cultural capital. There were examples of individuals that had a tremendous impact on the Latinx community. In 1969, Milton Valladare was appointed as the new Spanish Apostolate by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse and charged with serving the needs of the Spanish-speaking community ("Apostolate for Spanish", 1969; "Spanish Apostolate director named", 1969). A native Puerto Rican, he quickly "…facilitated social services for Spanish-speaking people in the areas of health, housing, education and employment…" ("Apostolate for Spanish", 1969). He did this by setting up counseling services to serve the community. Reverand Robert Chryst was the leader of St. Lucy's church, a staple of the Westside community, and heavily engaged with the Latinx community upon his start in this role. Chryst was studying the Spanish language and culture in Puerto Rico and was determined to be a strong advocate for the Latinx community ("Spanish Apostolate director named", 1969). In 1968, Chryst would serve as a court interpreter to help Spanish-speaking community members who had to be present for a hearing. As he stated "After about five years of that, I figured I'd be better off doing a whole job in court than just translating" (Mulder, 1982) and he eventually went to Syracuse University, earned his law degree, and ended up handling hundreds of assigned cases involving Latinx community members (Mulder, 1982). Juan Cruz, a local Puerto Rican artist, recognized an absence of creative arts outlets for Latinx youth and decided to bring the arts to the Westside, directly to these youth (Mulder, 1982). He

worked with students to paint murals on several buildings in the Westside. As he said, "My purpose was to bring art out onto the street so that people could appreciate it and relate to it. The Spanish people on the West Side don't have the time to visit the Everson Museum" (Mulder, 1982, p. 8). Finally, in 1974, Linda Ulmstead and Terry Bullitt led a course on Latinx culture, including the Spanish language, for 18 police officers from Syracuse and surrounding areas (Lucey, 1974). They started this program to help the police become "…more aware of the Spanish-speaking people with whom they haven't been able to communicate with well" (Lucey, 1974). Each of these individuals carried a passion to serve the Latinx community, some would call it a 'calling', and engage the community as activists and advocates.

Important community-based organizations began to appear in the late 1960s with a mission to serve the Latinx community. One of the most important and foundational organizations was the Spanish Action League, otherwise known as 'La Liga' to community members, founded in 1969 and the mission "to build on the rich cultural heritage of the Latino community through advocacy, education and counseling" ("Spanish Action", 1997). They offered a myriad of services, from housing to crisis intervention, job counseling to after school programming for children. One of their first influential programs was Project Adelante (Russo, 1969; Jerome, 1970). It was started to help combat what was considered the most serious problem facing the Latinx community at the time – unemployment and underemployment (Russo, 1969). It identified the unemployed and underemployed within the Latinx community, taught them basic English so as to prepare them for employment, provided counseling and follow-up services for them and their families, and worked on job development or placement through a job training program (Russo, 1969). The Spanish Action League also conducted a community survey in 1970, building off a survey a couple years before by the Spanish

Apostolate (Jerome, 1970). This survey was conducted to seek the size and clearly demarcate the Latinx community, identify whether community members were able to obtain adequate social services and if not, why not. This survey helped them identify the needs of the community and provided justification for creating programming to serve the community. In 1973, Spanish Action League led a voting education and registration drive to stimulate voting interest among the Latinx community, recognizing their potential to impact the political landscape ("Voting education", 1973). They "…explained the right to vote in the state, how to use the voting machines and to encourage all who attend to participate fully in the election process" ("Voting education", 1973). Finally, another key role the Spanish Action League played was in supporting newly arrived Cuban refugees in collaboration with the local YMCA (Rhodes-Lewis, 1980). They provided a variety of services with the focus on helping newly arrived Cubans navigate the city of Syracuse and the many systems that created barriers to seamless transitions.

Finally, efforts to maintain and preserve Latinx culture was prevalent throughout the history of Syracuse as the Latinx community grew. Many were created to stem the rapid Americanization that was occurring. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the Borinquen Latin American Club was organized to preserve cultural practices and experiences (Shelly, 1982). A public library station on the second floor of the Spanish Action League was created to offer a broad collection of books, magazines, and records in Spanish ("Spanish Library", 1974). El Grupo Folklorico Dance group was created in 1978 to increase cultural awareness and preserve traditional dance for the Latinx community (Case, 1978). Consisting of Puerto Rican dancers, the group was created to "…not only awaken young Hispanics to their heritage but lift the awareness of outsiders to the city's Spanish community" (Case, 1978). A typical show included a performance of a native Latin American dance (such as the Puerto Rican peasant dance "Baile

Jibaro"), pinatas for the children, and a short program on Puerto Rican history and general dancing for those who attended. As Ivonne Santos, one of the dancers, states, "We want them to know their history. We want to awaken cultural awareness that may be lost in the American System…trying to show outsiders who we are. If they understand our customs, maybe they will understand us" (Case, 1978). Lastly, a youth service program directed at preserving ethnic identity and culture for the young people of the Latinx community was created in 1976 (Gordon, 1977). El Primer Paso (or the First Step) consisted of a bilingual, bicultural staff and sought to celebrate and preserve the identities of both the young people and their families through recreation and community interaction. A collaboration between St. Lucy's Church and the Spanish Action League, the program offered art classes with artist Juan Cruz, music classes, drama, karate, and a course in photography. During the summer months, outdoor activities and excursions were offered.

The testimonios of community elders reinforced what was gathered via historical documents. Their stories also showcased their efforts in combating discrimination and advocating for the Latinx community, in playing integral roles in helping shape the community service efforts within Syracuse's Near Westside. A few elders talked fondly of the Spanish Apostolate, mentioned above, who was an advocate for the community and spearheaded needs assessment surveys to get a sense of the community makeup, issues, and needed resources. While the larger city was just recognizing the Latinx community in the late 1960s and early 1970s, these community surveys were a proactive approach to spotlight the community needs and create action plans to achieve resources. One elder stated this local census was her first job as a teen and she appreciated how all the survey takers were Latinx and bilingual. She felt it helped build trust with the community and begin to mobilize them. Another elder mentioned how a third

community needs assessment took place in 1990, also led by the local church, and used to show city leaders that not much was changing in regards to services provided since the original assessment in the early 1970s. This third survey helped launch a community organization comprised of key stakeholders with similar interests in advancing the interests of the growing Latinx population.

The various community organizations that were created in response to limited resources provided by the city and state had one thing in common, according to the elders interviewed. They each were community-driven and comprised of community members that lived in the Westside. One elder described the value of having organizations that lived within the same community as the constituents they served. He likened it to a 24/7 call center which could act on any issue at any time, at any moment. He recalled incidents when they received emergency calls in the middle of the night and many of the organization's members were able to respond immediately, oftentimes in person. He continued:

I remember one time they arrested this Spanish guy and I was working at the organization. It was the middle of the night. He had nobody. Nobody to talk to or to counsel him. No nothing. So, anyway, we get the message and I go straight to see him. And they let me see him and talk with him and everything. And one thing I noticed is that when I say 'I am from the (community organization)' right away they listened. The organization was new, it was growing. But it already had a tremendous reputation. The police knew if they messed with our people, we were gonna start picketing and making all kinds of noise and trouble for them. We commanded respect!

These organizations understood the needs of the community better than most because they lived in the community. They were able to mobilize and build community power. They organized community festivals that celebrated the culture. They supported local artists. One elder discussed how his efforts to establish a mural project in the Near Westside was easy because the city let him bypass the typical red tape due to his association with the community organization. They

were heavily involved in translation/interpretation support services, healthcare access, and educational initiatives, such as a daycare embedded in a local high school, with their work and efforts reflecting the community's resilience and determination. It was an all hands-on deck approach where, as one elder stated, "…the way we had it before was that the people from the neighborhood were taking care of the neighborhood themself".

Origin Stories of Activists and Advocates: "We Have a Superpower"

The sharing of life histories for many of the participants allowed them to reconnect with the memories of their childhood home communities. As they shared their stories, it became clear that many articulated their early community experiences as an 'origin' story that explained some of the reasons for the roles they play within the Syracuse Latinx community and the motivation for serving as advocates and activists. These 'origin' stories highlighted how close proximity to a family member engaged in community activism, or close proximity to a community member interrogating social injustice, or just the strength of cultural and community power and its potential for impact, led them to interrogate issues and actively engage within the Syracuse community. One participant discussed being a product of the 1960s and 1970s, where community enrichment included food co-ops that were actively engaged, where you needed a lot of community members to be involved, pool their resources, actually go and pick up produce from farmers and then redistribute it. She saw how community members engaged one another and how networks were created – a very organic, grassroots approach which informed her work with the Syracuse community. She engaged in this grassroots approach, often finding tension with what she called "a more robotic, imposed approach – not of the community but forced on them". She felt it important to try and replicate the community mobilization and community power she experienced in her youth, community-led, to have a greater impact. Another

participant discussed how her parents were engaged in activism in the Near Westside of Syracuse (where she grew up). She experienced meetings in her home. She recalled coming home from school one day and seeing her parents and a handful of other adults around the dining room table discussing plans for creating a community organization. This would become the leading community organization within the Near Westside community. This would also engrain in her an activist spirit that she embraced in adulthood and impacted her work at a local university supporting local Latinx youth. Another participant discussed her Spanish/Puerto Rican history, and her family's long history of social justice and fighting the oppressive government regimes at the time. She recalled fondly a school her grandparents used to own and operate, which was destroyed by Franco, and forced her family to move from their small town to Madrid. Her grandparents continued to fight for educational rights, continued to support local schools and strengthening educational opportunities for the youth of their community. It was her proximity to their activism, to their ability to overcome being run out of their original communities and still stand up to injustice, that impacted her to fight to make a better life for those in the Syracuse Latinx community, allowing her to see a bit of herself in all the women in the community – "Whenever I drive through the Westside community, I always make this story of saying that office is full of people like me, they are me. And I think of my grandparents and realize I have a duty to make an impact on their lives". Another participant discussed how witnessing the community rally around her mom upon arriving to the United States, translating for her when necessary, mentoring her, and eventually supporting her through job skills training, impacted her work and role within the Syracuse community. She shared a story of an instance when she accompanied her mother to a meeting and a person looked at her and asked her what she wanted to do and she responded "I want to do things for the community. I want to start a program to help

young women who are pregnant" The person told her when she got older and still wanted to do this she would help her. And when she did get older and reached out to this person, she was told they just started a grant program and she was asked to lead it, something she continued to work on at the time of our interview. She stated what she learned, how "…advocacy is better informing parents born out of our own challenges, like not knowing how to navigate systems because of language and cultural differences. Someone advocated for me and my mom and now I get to do the same for other women". Ultimately, what each of these origin stories highlighted was how the community empowered them, taught them the value of caring for their fellow community members, of belonging and creating spaces for other to belong and thrive.

There were many other origin stories that highlighted specific events or key people that impacted participants' choices to be engaged in and with the community. One participant told of her love for learning and speaking multiple languages ever since she was seven years old – "I was always exposed to languages. I took seven years of French, three years of Spanish, then Italian, then Hebrew. I always loved languages". She went on to explain how this love for languages led her to understanding the power and importance of being multilingual, and she used this understanding and knowledge as fuel for the work that she did in advocating for stronger and more comprehensive dual-language programming within schools. Another participant discussed why he became a social worker, focusing on those moments in his childhood when he struggled in school, was considered a behavioral problem, and was constantly sent to the principal's office. He shared how challenges within his home led to outbursts of anger in school and how these outbursts led to teachers within his school wanting him to be expelled. These experiences led him to want to be a role model for Latinx students with similar challenges and experiences and to using the social work field to holistically engage the Latinx community. As he states: "These

experiences shaped who I am today, what I do. I feel like I'm a really good advocate for kids. Even though they're a little bit different, you know the generational stuff, I can still empathize with them. I can listen to them. I can try to understand where they come from and push to make things easier for them in their schools".

Another participant shared how her family's involvement in politics inspired her own foray into local politics and realization that political power can impact educational experiences of Latinx youth. She shares:

> *My involvement with politics started back in Puerto Rico when I was young seeing my parents, my father heavily involved with politics. And then when I moved to the Bronx I saw my aunt involved with the Latino community, working with a community center. She got me into doing petitioning, doing voter registration. So at a very young age I kind of learned that empowerment of we as a community getting together to have people being in office representing us Latinos.*

She goes on to discuss how this pushed her to be more involved in the community, working with the school district on after school programing and advocating for parents. And when she was approached to run for the school board, she said yes without hesitation. Another participant discussed how an elder in the community inspired her community activism. He owned a corner bodega, one of the first bodegas on the Near Westside, and stressed the importance of loving and valuing the Latinx culture. He exposed her to many cultural creative expression, from music to dance to poetry. He taught her how to love her Puerto Rican identity. She saw how he used his social capital to help found the Latin Festival that was a staple of the Syracuse Latinx community for many years. His mentorship and passion for Latinx culture led her to actively engage the Latinx community through the creative arts, leading after school programming that focused on traditional Puerto Rican dance and lead community art projects.

Finally, it was a visit Chicago to see a sister who worked for a local college and their subsequent visit of a community organization that was invested in community engagement that shaped this participants passion to replicate these efforts in Syracuse and lead one of the more influential early childhood programs in the city if not the state of New York. As she states:

> *I observed college students who were majoring in education, go into a community neighborhood and develop an early childhood program in a church in collaboration with this local organization. Church rooms, wherever they could find space. And a couple days a week they'd go and engage moms, and grandmothers. Mostly women. And children, infants, from birth to five years old – children that were not yet in school. And I saw the college students engage them in song, reading, conversation, English, Spanish – mostly in Spanish. And I said "This is absolutely fabulous". And I came back to Syracuse after that visit, I met with some community leaders, and made it my mission to start a program like this in Syracuse. Nothing was going to stop me. I walked the entire neighborhood of the near Westside where the majority of Latinos lived, and I talked to the mothers, asked them what they needed, and knew there was a lot that could be done to support them and their children.*

These experiences, these key relationships, these reinforcements of community cultural wealth were instrumental in shaping the work, passion, and roles of many Latinx community members, allowing them to serve as activists and advocates.

Individual Impact: A Collection of Testimonios

It is important to identify the ways in which individual community members took it upon themselves to act, utilizing their skills and access to resources to impact the community in various ways. This section is a collection of a few of these testimonios, setting the stage for the myriad ways community members answer the call to action. Together, these narratives form a mosaic of activism, each story contributing to a larger picture of transformative change within educational systems. The Latinx community, through these activists, demonstrates the power of unified voices in challenging established norms and advocating for a more inclusive, responsive,

and equitable educational landscape through community transformation and direct action to address issues.

The Bridge Builder

In the 1980s, a Latina leader emerged in Syracuse determined to combat the many issues plaguing the Latinx community. As Fermina[1] said, "…we just had barriers, language barriers, all sorts of obstacles that was holding the Hispanic community back". She recognized the need to build a coalition of various community entities and harness the power of political influence to advocate for the needs of the community. Her journey in activism began with a fortuitous encounter with a New York state senator at the time - a prominent, influential, and financially well-off political figure. His support helped open doors to opportunities that were previously inaccessible. His seed money, access to a network of influential politicians and donors, and even access to his office in the State Senate building allowed Fermina to work with a couple other key community stakeholders and create an impactful community organization that positively impacted Latinx community members for over thirty years. This community organization's mission was to address the specific needs of the Latinx population in Syracuse. And it intended to do so with access to political networks and leveraging these networks to implement real change.

The organization's strength lay in its monthly meetings, which became vital networking hubs. These gatherings attracted a diverse group of attendees, including long-time Latinx community members, non-Latinx economic leaders, agency directors, and various state, city and county officials. It was a convergence of ideas, resources, and support, united by a common goal

[1] Pseudonym

of uplifting the Latinx community. These meetings focused on practical and immediate needs, such as employment opportunities for bilingual individuals and addressing systemic issues within various sectors. It became a platform for sharing information, from job openings to essential community announcements. These sessions were not just about discussions; they were action-oriented, leading to concrete initiatives and solutions. And it leaned heavily on the networks that were expanding.

Crucially, the organization maintained a balanced approach, ensuring it did not position itself as the sole voice of the Latinx community. As Fermina shares,

> *…we were always careful we didn't become the entity of an authentic voice for the community. We're not, we weren't 'the voice'. We didn't want to misrepresent or claim we were the only ones doing anything for the community or the only ones that knew what the issues were. That wasn't our cause. Our cause was to bring people together, and through information, gathering experiences, research – whatever we could do to bring the facts to the powers that be. We wanted to bridge our community, the Latino community, to the rest of the city, the state, and not be so isolated. Basically, we just wanted this bridge, a two-way bridge instead of just people telling us what we should or should not do without our community's input.*

As Fermina states, their mission was to unite, not to dominate. They sought to foster mutual understanding and cooperation. This approach led them to question and challenge existing systems, such as why essential services were not more accessible within the community. Through their collective efforts, they addressed diverse issues ranging from housing and health to education and substance abuse. Representatives from various organizations brought their expertise and concerns to the table, enabling the larger group to tackle problems from multiple angles. They learned about funding opportunities, grants, and other resources that were previously unknown to them, which further empowered their efforts.

Fermina's role in this organization exemplified the power of building strong networks, bridging key community leaders with larger political networks. By leveraging political connections, fostering open dialogue, and promoting collective action, Fermina and the organization she had a hand in starting made significant strides in addressing the unique challenges faced by the Latinx community and impacting change.

The Retired Teacher as Mentor and Community Champion

Roser[2] was a retired educator who transformed her passion for teaching into a vital role as a mentor for teachers on community engagement and cultural responsiveness. Her approach to education extended beyond the classroom walls, emphasizing the importance of understanding and integrating with the community. As she shares, "This is a very small community, very small community. You need to learn, you need to learn the culture, you need to interact with the parents, with the whole community. It's so easy…it's so easy to go and look for the parents and request their help so you can better educate the kids". It was this recognition of the crucial role of parents in the educational process that Roser tapped into to help current teachers effectively reach students by first connecting with their families. As she tells it,

> *What was the best time for me to visit them? In the morning? No. They may be working or they may be sleeping. So nobody would maybe respond. What was the best time? Lunchtime? No. So, because I know them, my best time to visit the parents was 7 o'clock at night. The main reason for me to visit them at that time is because they were ready to be in front of the TV watching the novellas (laughs).*

This unconventional approach was born from her deep understanding of the community's rhythms and preferences. "New teachers, they just want to go to the job and leave. I am an old

[2] Pseudonym

teacher that was always behind the families in some way, there in their house, in the school. The community knew I had their back, knew how they functioned".

Roser's philosophy was rooted in the belief that teachers should work closely with parents, not just as educators but as friends and community members. She often reminisced about her active involvement in community activities, such as the Latino Festival and local radio programs, which helped her develop strong relationships with parents. These interactions were not limited to formal settings; she engaged with families in various community events, dancing and celebrating with them, thereby breaking down the barriers often perceived between teachers and parents. As Roser shared, when families saw her, they weren't afraid. They knew she wanted to work together with them to help their children.

Her dedication to understanding the community extended beyond local interactions. Roser traveled to Puerto Rico, to Loiza specifically, a place from which many students in her community had migrated. There, she met with the mayor and conducted research to understand the unique needs of these students and the reasons behind their migration to Syracuse. This proactive approach provided her with insights that were invaluable in addressing the challenges faced by her students.

Roser's commitment to cultural responsiveness and community engagement helped make her a respected figure in the Latinx community. The community knew she was dedicated to helping new teachers be more involved and caring towards their children. She has shown that the role of a teacher extends far beyond academic instruction; it involves being an empathetic and culturally aware member of the community who is dedicated to the holistic development of students and is committed to collaborating with families to embrace their cultural wealth and better connect with their children.

The Advocate for Educational Reform

As a dedicated member of a task force reviewing the new code of conduct for the Syracuse City School District, Pastora[3] witnessed firsthand how Latinx children were perceived and discussed in educational circles. She says, "… the prevailing narrative often paints our kids as loud, disruptive, and uninterested in learning, which unfairly labels them as problems rather than recognizing their potential. This kind of rhetoric not only demoralizes our children but also undermines their educational opportunities". Recognizing the gravity of these issues, she took a proactive stance in advocating for change. It was clear to Pastora that speaking out on these matters was not enough; she felt a more aggressive approach was necessary. She highlighted one critical step as promoting candidates for the school board who truly represented the best interests of the Latinx community. In her eyes, the board in Syracuse did not adequately reflect the diversity of the community, and she felt it was time that "…Latinos are not just token representatives but active voices in decision-making".

Her involvement wasn't limited to the task force. She was also the first Latina to serve on the Board of Housing, a milestone that highlighted the lack of representation in key areas. While change did not happen overnight, Pastora believed in counting every small victory. For instance, during task force meetings, she would challenge dismissive remarks about "loud children," asking for clarification and confronting stereotypes head on.

Pastora was fully committed to community organizing, dedicated to being an activist that directly addressed educational issues. She captured the value and impact of activism, of organizing and mobilizing for change, when she says:

[3] Pseudonym

How do you organize? I've been an organizer my whole life, that's what I do, but I don't organize in just one random issue. I think first of all you need to, you don't create the issues, the issues are there and you find them. And you find out what mobilizes the people, the common theme, and that's how you build your alliances with people. Organizing is a lot of work, there is a lot of door knocking, a lot of phone calls, a lot of conversations that need to happen. But I think it is the community responsibility to do this. We need this call to action, understand that it is bigger than each of us alone. We need to figure out what it is that is in all of our interest and that will grow us.

Pastora's journey as an advocate for educational reform was driven by the belief that Latinx children deserved better. It was about breaking down stereotypes, promoting fair representation, and ensuring that the educational system served all students equitably. Through persistent efforts and community mobilization, she felt there was the potential to create a more inclusive and effective educational environment for Latinx children.

<u>*Grassroot Efforts, Multifaceted Advocacy, and the Diversity of Impact*</u>

Our responsibility is to take action. If we encounter injustice or inefficiency, we should mobilize support to address these issues. Every small effort, whether it's organizing a Hispanic heritage event or supporting local organizations like the Spanish Action League, contributes to our collective strength.

As educators, community members, or professionals in any field, we have the power to make a difference. Sharing our culture, experiences, and knowledge can help change perceptions and foster understanding. In politics, supporting Latino candidates and participating in decision-making processes is crucial. By working together and supporting each other, we can create a strong, unified voice that drives positive change in our communities.

These two quotes from study participants that considered themselves activists and advocates captured the spirit of activism that many community members engaged in. In the Latinx community, grassroots efforts play a critical role in addressing complex social issues, fostering community empowerment, and bridging gaps between various societal segments. Latinx leaders provided examples of spearheading transformative change through multifaceted

advocacy and engagement. These changemakers recognized the economic, political, and social power potential of the Latinx community and were dedicated to channeling this dynamic force toward significant reforms, strengthening community power. What follows are some brief examples of these efforts.

Blanca's[4] grassroots advocacy emphasized the necessity of a bottom-up approach - recognizing that top-down strategies often fail to address the real needs of the community. By bringing people together to identify needs and resources, Blanca's initiatives created tangible changes. She held focus groups to gauge the pulse of the community, and these groups included diverse community perspectives – from gang members to leaders of local community-based organizations. She wasn't afraid to include some of the gang members in constructive activities like providing security at festivals. This inclusion not only gave them a sense of belonging and responsibility but also helped in redefining their roles within the community.

The use of media, like radio, was another potent tool in Blanca's community work. She utilized it to educate the community on various topics, ranging from health and spirituality to effective parenting and civic duties. She was especially proud of a recent suicide prevention effort that highlighted the responsiveness of her programs to the community's evolving needs. She was especially tuned into the educational needs of the community, working hard to secure money to provide scholarship funds for Latinx youth by networking with wealthy donors.

Xochitl's[5] work in the community complements some of the efforts listed above. Her involvement in local politics and organizations underscored the importance of having a seat at the table where decisions are made. "I'm not Cesar Chavez" she says, "But at least I can say my

[4] Pseudonym
[5] Psuudonym

work in the community and on these boards brought little bits of success for the community". Upon settling in Syracuse, Xochitl's intentionally moved to the Near Westside – "My work here is in the community…when I moved here I knew that I had to do work in the community otherwise what would be the meaning of me being here". This call to action led her to purchase a house that was boarded up for 15 years, in dire need of repair, and she renovated it and began housing youth with no place to go. Her decision to live and work within the community was a testament to her commitment to genuine grassroots advocacy. By renovating a house in a neglected area and actively engaging with local residents, Maria became an integral part of her community, fostering trust and solidarity. As she states, it needed to include full commitment to the community, living and working there:

> *You cannot organize your community from the outside, they are issues that are important for me, like immigration, increasing Latino representation in politics and in the schools, that you cannot live in the suburbs and go there and act like a savior, because you won't belong. My role in the community…I think one of my main roles is to show the community members, the youth, that another life is possible, another world is possible.*

Her work extends to mentoring and supporting local youth, providing them with opportunities to see a different life path, and addressing immediate community needs while also fostering a long-term vision for change and empowerment. Moreover, Xochitl's approach to community engagement was highly personal and impactful. By involving young people in her daily life, whether it was attending formal events or working on community projects, she exposed them to new experiences and possibilities. This one-on-one mentorship approach fostered hope and aspiration in the youth, and potentially impacted their sense of belonging and increasing their self-esteem.

Pietro's[6] advocacy centered on raising community awareness and participation. He actively engaged Latinx professionals from diverse fields to voice their concerns, attend key meetings, challenge detrimental policies, and "do something about all this mess". Pietro was adamant about modeling this by serving on as many community organization boards as possible and creating a grassroots forums for discussing and addressing community issues. Even amidst his hectic schedule, Pietro still found time to mentor students, instilling in them the importance of community involvement and making a difference.

Chula[7], driven to expose the flaws of the education system to parents, worked towards empowering them to become vocal advocates for their children's needs. She collaborated with school principals to advocate for bilingual and bicultural support staff, bridging cultural and linguistic divides. As the coordinator of dual language reading circles, Chula nurtured pride in bilingualism and biculturalism among children, using literature as a means for cultural affirmation and connection.

Talia[8] devoted herself to youth empowerment and community service in the Latinx community. Her passion was evident in her leadership roles, notably as chair of the Latino Festival and parade coordinator. Her most significant impact came as a youth program director, where she actively engaged with local schools to recruit students and provide opportunities to supplement the education they were receiving in their schools, focused on strengthening cultural awareness and cultural pride. Beyond recruitment, Talia's work encompassed court assistance, counseling, and translation services for families.

[6] Pseudonym
[7] Pseudonym
[8] Pseudonym

These Latinx leaders exemplify the power of community-led reform through their diverse strategies – from political advocacy to educational mentorship, grassroots organizing to cultural education. Collectively, their efforts contribute to a more inclusive, empowered, and vibrant community, showcasing the strength and resilience of the Latinx population in driving positive change. The combined efforts of these individuals reflect the essence of grassroots advocacy in the Latinx community, of understanding and addressing the community's unique needs, empowering individuals and families, and building a stronger, more cohesive community from the ground up. Through their relentless dedication, these advocates are not just solving immediate problems but are also paving the way for future generations to thrive and succeed.

Community Power + Collective Action = Organized Impact

> *We know there's power in a larger voice. It's people power, you bring them together. And then places like the Syracuse City School District can't say no. We come together and you have a community plan. This is what we want for our Latino children. This is what we want for our Latino community.*

Organized efforts were prevalent within the Syracuse Latinx community. From foundational community-based organizations to recently created community cultural centers, from athletics to the media, there were many examples of various community members formally coming together to engage in challenging inequitable and oppressive systems. This section provides a deep dive into these organized efforts, these established organizations, and the action undertaken to positively impact Latinx youth.

Innovative Early Childhood Education, Adult Learning, and Community Impact

In 1989, an informal preschool program catering to Latinx children and their families was created. Partners in Learning was founded because of the concern that Latinx children were not

receiving proper early education and the families of these children were not being supported in their education (Velasquez, 2009). The main program at the start was MANOS Early Education Program, which brought in Spanish-speaking caregivers and their children and created a holistic early childhood education experience which bridged cultural gaps while also filling in educational gaps. Eventually, the West Side Learning Center was formed within the PiL umbrella, an adult education program specializing in teaching English to nonnative speakers and providing job training courses. One of the unique synergetic pieces between these two programs was that the adult students within the Learning Center had to volunteer in the MANOS classrooms in exchange for English lessons (Velasquez, 2009). The focus on these two areas of need was celebrated within the community and was held as a gold standard by participants in this study about an organized and collaborative effort that yielded tremendous community impact and addressed educational gaps and injustices.

Collaboration between various community stakeholders was instrumental in this organization's impact, as was the buy-in from community members. Word of mouth helped bring caregivers and their children. Local grocery stores donated food. Local politicians and school district officials helped secure grants, eventually leading to a partnership with the Syracuse City School District to fill their early childhood education gaps. The Spanish Action League let them use some space for programming. When they outgrew this space, St. Lucy's Church gave them a whole floor in their school building. Eventually, they gave the entire building to Partners in Learning. It was a true community effort – organic, grassroots, organized, strategic. More importantly, it was about the trust built with community members. As one person associated with the programs shared "You see how the whole program, the foundation, was built from trust, right? A little education, understanding why this is important, and putting genuine efforts to

support the community. It became a social outlet for the Latina moms, a skills development space for them and their kids. For the community, with the community". With the trust of the community, getting school district buy-in required persistence and active engagement, shining a light on the challenges the community was facing and pushing the school district to act. As one participant discussed meeting with the school district and pleading with them realize the urgency in acting to support the Latinx community, she stated it was important to get them to see that these families were their families. She said "We had these meetings and we needed them to be aware of their role, their responsibility. And I said, 'These are your families. These are your children who will attend your schools. This is the time to connect with them and they will be all in, will be your to educate and nurture, formally, some day".

So how did Partners in Learning engage the Latinx community. As participants shared, they valued early childhood education practices and the power of holistic practices, recognizing the importance of engaging parents in their children's education, particularly for those whose first language is not English. "Everything is focused on early learning. The child, the child, the child", one participant shared. "We can't remove the parent from that or the caregiver or whomever is the significant adult in the child's life…they need to be a part of it". They aimed to empower parents and caregivers, integrating them into the learning process. They devised innovative approaches, such as teaching parents and children a book in Spanish that the child would later encounter in English at school. This method not only facilitated English language learning but also fostered a deeper cross-cultural connection. Parents were encouraged to share stories from their own backgrounds, tying their personal histories to their children's educational experiences. Recognizing that parents are the first teachers of their children, the organization helped parents become better advocates for their kids in the school system, including

understanding school expectations and being able to navigate the educational landscape effectively. The organization also publicly advocated for increased culturally and linguistically responsive early childhood programming in the schools. Mobilizing a united voice in advocating for the Latinx community's needs in the educational system was pervasive throughout.

The Westside Learning Center program was introduced in 1992 (Velasquez, 2009) with a mission to "support diverse adults, children, and families in their efforts to learn, earn, and live well". As mentioned above, this consisted of English-language classes, job training programs, and even citizenship classes for those seeking to become U.S. citizens. The program seeks to push back against common stereotypes aimed at Latinx people. As one person shared "All the Latino parents I see here at the West Side Learning Center, they want to work, they have skills they brought from their home countries. They just can't find jobs or people are not embracing their skills. So job development is big. They are not 'lazy' like people want to say. Give them an opportunity and see what great things they can do". The organization wanted to improve the economic stability of the community members, realizing the tremendous influence it could have on a child's educational experience and tried to provide them the networks and education needed to be successful when given the opportunity. As one participant shared, "When parents feel economically secure, they are better able to support their children's education".

Overall, Partners in Learning was seen by participants in this study as a beacon of hope for the Latinx community. It served as a model for how community-driven educational initiatives, born out of grassroots efforts and community collaboration, could create meaningful change and improve the lives of children and their families and impact educational experiences.

Empowering Latinx Youth Through Athletics and Community Engagement

A community organization that used athletics and recreational programming was another example of using a comprehensive approach to empower Latinx and address their needs holistically. It blended creating a space to play sports, specifically basketball, with a willingness to provide for the youth's immediate needs, from clothing to food. The director understood his role went beyond coaching sports or just opening the doors and turning on the lights of a gym - it involved nurturing and supporting the whole individual. Recognizing the limitations of traditional education in poor, urban spaces, the director of this program advocated for a more adaptive and creative approach to teaching, one that resonated with the realities of these young people's lives. He was a self-described "pusher of education". He continued, "you need to encourage education, the importance of education to use it for all it's worth. You need to take advantage of this. It's something if the kids are forced to do or feel they have to do it, they won't do it. I just encourage them to take advantage of education as much as I can".

The program also aimed to foster a sense of community and respect among the youth. The program director emphasized the importance of mutual respect in his interactions with the youth participating in the program, modeling behavior that counters the prevalent narrative of disrespect and disregard for authority in their environments. He taught them that respect is a two-way street, something to be earned and reciprocated. Current and retired teachers were heavily involved in the program, playing a crucial role in helping the youth see how what they were learning within the program could be applied in their schooling experiences. They reiterated messages of understanding and respect, stressing that students deserve to be respected and their culture better understood. In their eyes, these methods proved to be more effective than

traditional classroom management techniques, particularly in challenging environments where students may not automatically respect authority figures.

The program integrated education and life skills into the youth participant experience, using athletics as a vehicle to convey broader lessons about life, hard work, and community involvement. The program organized trips to college campuses, exposing the youth to environments and possibilities they might not have considered attainable and, as the program director shared, "…open their eyes to potential futures beyond their immediate circumstances". Taken together, all of these aspects of the program produced a vital community resource that empowered Latinx youth through sports, education, and mentorship.

Social Work and Using Empathy to Connect Communities and Schools

There is an organization in the Near Westside that offers holistic social work services to Latinx youth and their families. Many of the employed social workers identify as Latinx, speak Spanish, and are fully invested in positively impacting the life experiences of community members. Their work supports cultural identity, family responsibilities, and the pursuit of academic success. They recognize cultural identity plays a crucial role in the educational journey of the students they work with. Being Latinx themselves, these social workers strive to bring a sense of connection and understanding that is pivotal to impacting students. This connection is not just about shared heritage; it's about shared experiences and struggles that resonate deeply with them.

One participant in this study who was a social worker in this organizations shared a story of a teenage student he was working with to highlight the challenges Latinx youth were trying to navigate and the ways in which he was able to have an impact on this young person's life. These

students often juggle multiple responsibilities that go beyond the typical teenage worries. His story was of a young man, on the cusp of graduation, who is not only a student and a part-time worker but also a crucial support system for his family. His daily routine includes not just homework and classes but also driving his grandmother to work, an obligation borne out of necessity due to the lack of other available family members:

> *Grandpa is sick, had a stroke. His grandma needs to get to work but doesn't drive. So this kid, he's trying, you know. He goes to school, he works evenings, he's about to graduate, he's doing fairly well. But he also has to get home after work and drive his grandma to her job in Liverpool (a suburb of Syracuse), a night shift. He has to do it. There's no one else. And he then has to pick her up after her shift ends in the morning. Late to school, his grades are not the greatest. He's tired. It has an effect. He could be on time, get better grades, but his grandma needs him.*

Such responsibilities, though carried out with dedication, inevitably impact this student's academic performance – he is unable to fully concentrate on his studies. However, this story also served as an example of how the social worker felt his role could be impactful. A situation that was profoundly complex yet where the presence of someone who can understand and advocate for these students becomes invaluable. He continues:

> *He comes to me, says 'Listen, this is what's going on'. I make sure that I understand where he is coming from. We speak Spanish to each other. I make him feel comfortable, let him know I get it. I know how hard it is. And because I get it, they come to me. They don't go to their teachers because they think their teachers don't get it. They don't want to go tell every teacher what's going on in their lives. They believe what happens at home stays at home. No excuses. But I hear them. I can speak for them with their teachers, explain their situation. Help them. I help them, build relationships with them and their families. I help the teachers, give them tools to better understand their students, the families, help them find a creative way to support the kids, support their success, not let the kids drop out.*

It's about having someone in the educational system who can be their voice, who can explain to teachers and administrators the intricate realities of these students' lives. This understanding goes

beyond empathy; it's about effectively communicating and advocating for these students' unique needs and circumstances. The students and their families need a trusted figure who can bridge this gap, someone who can discreetly and effectively convey their situation to the educational staff. And also help the teachers build relationships and understanding for the students' backgrounds, help educators begin to tailor their approach, providing tools and strategies that cater to each student's specific needs. In his eyes, it involves asking the right questions, exploring their extended family and community resources, and finding solutions to keep them engaged in school.

The impact of such support is profound. It not only helps keep these students in school but also empowers them. They begin to see that there are avenues for assistance, that they are not alone in their struggles, and that their community can be a source of strength and support. This realization often leads to a transformation in how they interact with their educators and peers, fostering a more positive and productive educational experience. The presence of understanding individuals within the educational system who can advocate and relate to these students is not just beneficial but essential. It helps in creating an environment where these young individuals can thrive academically while navigating their complex personal responsibilities, ultimately shaping a more inclusive and responsive educational landscape.

The Local Church: Continuing a Rich Community History

Similar to the role of the church in advocating for the Latinx community during the 1960s and as the Latinx community continued to grow, the local church during the time of this study played a pivotal role in community engagement, offering vital support and educational programs to meet the diverse needs of the Latinx community. Spearheaded by dedicated individuals with

similar lived experiences, including coming to Syracuse from Puerto Rico, the church was more than a place of worship and evolved into a central hub for social and educational services.

One of the key initiatives of the church was to provide educational support to children and adolescents in the community. Recognizing the low levels in ELA and mathematics among Latinx students, the church established a tutoring program to enhance their academic skills, particularly in reading and math. This initiative was not just about homework assistance; it's focus was on building foundational skills to ensure these students could continue their education and aspire for higher achievements, such as college. The church's approach to tutoring was holistic and inclusive. It involved inviting parents to participate in an orientation meeting at the start of the school year, where they could discuss their children's needs, strengths, and weaknesses. This meeting was not just about imparting information; it was about building a partnership between the church, the parents, and the students. As one participant shared, it was about being assertive in their approach with parents, investing in them so they can invest in their children. She shared their approach with parents by stating, “With them, invite them more, talk to them more, and that’s what I think. Be in touch with them more…build relationships with them more, that’s what I think”. The church understood the importance of parental involvement in a child's education and was proactive in encouraging and facilitating this engagement.

The church identified some challenges that were impacting access to programming, mainly the inability of some parents to attend meetings due to work commitments or childcare needs. In response, the church offered solutions like providing childcare during meetings, allowing parents to participate without worrying about their younger children. This thoughtful consideration helped in removing barriers to parental involvement.

Moreover, the church extended its support beyond education, engaging in social work and assisting community members with various needs: "We help them when they have appointments or when they need to not work or they're supposed to go to their benefits or welfare benefits meetings, things like that…if they need translation I'll go with them and help them". This support was crucial, especially for those still learning English and navigating the complexities of various systems. It was part of a larger vision that the church had, one of creating a more interconnected community through the church's Latinx ministry – a "community service for the Hispanic population through the worship service, through the Hispanic ministry that we're doing here, through the social work, the tutoring, the relationships". This involved organizing small group meetings in homes, fostering closer relationships, and understanding the unique needs of community members. The goal was to establish a Syracuse Westside Urban Mission for Hispanics and Latinos, a mission that embodied the church's commitment to serving and uplifting the Latinx community.

This local church's role in the Latinx community was multifaceted and impactful. It went beyond spiritual guidance, attempting to address educational gaps, facilitate parental involvement, provide social support, and foster a sense of community. It sought not only to empower individual students but also strengthen the community as a whole.

Educational Policy Advocacy

Many community members exemplified the powerful impact of community-driven educational advocacy. Some participants in this study were integral parts of community-based organizations that focused on systemic change. For example, one participant discussed her work with the Alliance of Community Transforming Syracuse (ACTS), which she described as "having a role in impacting the community". ACTS worked tirelessly to expand access to full-

day pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds, a crucial foundation for lifelong learning. Through grassroots leadership development, ACTS collaborated with community members to advocate with state legislators and school boards, ensuring that the voices of the Latinx community are heard and represented in educational policies. ACTS's work extended to mitigating the high suspension rates of Black and Brown students and students with disabilities, highlighting the organization's commitment to equitable education. By engaging in the development of a new code of conduct for the school district, ACTS addressed disciplinary practices that disproportionately affected marginalized students, thereby advocating for a more just and inclusive educational system.

Other participants in this study shared their grassroot efforts to bring various stakeholders to the table and address the importance of bilingualism and biliteracy in education. Understanding the global market's demands, they advocated for programs that support students learning English as an additional language while valuing and leveraging their home languages. This approach not only benefitted Latinx students but also enriched the educational experience of American white students through exposure to different cultures. One area of focus was their support and voice in pushing the Seal of Biliteracy, piloted throughout the state by the New York State Education department. One grassroots activist interviewed for this study gave an overview of the program as such:

> *They're currently piloting the program throughout the state with several districts and developing a plan to recognize students who go through a rigorous process which provides them an opportunity to demonstrate their mastery, not just in English, but another spoken language. Once they get their region's diploma, and they're able to demonstrate that they've mastered multiple... An additional language, then they would get on their diploma a Seal of Biliteracy. Everybody's accountable for all their students. And that piece regarding the biliteracy, the bilingualism, leveraging the home language, and leveraging the expertise and experiences of students who are new to the country, is so*

> *important. And also incorporating and involving parents and other community stakeholders to educate the whole child. So it's pretty powerful.*

This program recognizes students who demonstrate mastery in English and an additional language, highlighting the value of multilingualism in today's global society. It values the linguistic capital of the Latinx community. It was also an opportunity to open the door for more community participation, an opportunity to convene various stakeholders and increase the social capital of the Latinx community, increase community power. As the same participant shared:

> *But I think the most important thing is it started all these new conversations that may not have existed before. So now we're looking... Okay, we're not just looking at our ELLs who are learning an additional language now, we're looking at them, we're looking at ways to provide access and leverage the home language. So things people may not have done before, but now having conversations now, let's look at everybody else. It's not just about the ESOL teachers providing support, how are we going to ensure that everybody else understands that and learns how to provide the necessary support? There were some community-based organizations we had worked with to help us enhance some of the programs we had put in place this past year, and I can't tell you how important it is for the community to be part of this process. It's essential.*

It also empowered the community to hold school leaders accountable. There was the understanding that pushing the school and other education leaders to partake in real conversations and efforts with the community would increase the likelihood of buy-in for policies like the Seal of Biliteracy and enhanced holistic support for students and their families. This grassroots activist discussed meeting with a local school principal directly, stressing the need for her to not only include community within the process but to also ensure that high level education leaders are at the table listening and working with the community. She shares her direct approach by stating:

> *If you want us to bring all these key people to the table, we can make that happen to you, but we also have to remember part of that work as well, that community-based organization piece, in order for them to bring it to the table, then you're going to have to*

> *bring those people at the district level to come to the table as well. It can't just be you, the principal, it can't just... It has to be the person who is at the very top, making all the important decisions. You got to bring all the key people to the table, just so you're on the same page about how you going to move forward. Because if you don't bring the superintendent here to sit down to have this conversation with people...we just won't be taken seriously if that doesn't happen. That can't happen.*

A collaborative, culturally responsive approach to educational policy was seen as vital in having an impact on the educational experiences of Latinx youth. Holding leaders accountable to incorporate community members in policy making was echoed by many participants. The potential for enacting policy that can truly value the linguistic and social capital was possible, as evidenced in the Seal of Biliteracy, but sustaining these efforts required community power and focused activism.

Local Spanish Language Media

Spanish radio and community newspapers served as crucial platforms for communication, education, and cultural integration. These media outlets had a profound impact on the community, offering more than just news and entertainment; they were a source of empowerment, representation, and cultural pride.

Spanish radio, particularly bilingual educational programs, was instrumental in providing individuals with the tools and inspiration to succeed. A key community figure and participant in this study discussed the impact of a bilingual educational radio program that was developed to inspire and guide Latinx youth. This unique program, according to him was possibly the only one of its kind in upstate New York and brought together Latinx professionals from various fields to engage with children. As he said, "You know, it's not just like what we have seen on TV, what we always see on TV – like a career day in a school where someone come in and talks about their work. Not like that. It was more – an opportunity for kids to be able to hear from Latinos

that succeeded and tell them, you know, you can succeed too". This radio series occurred over three months during the summer, with fifteen Latinx students interviewing key Latinx professionals about their careers and gaining advice on how to navigate these careers. The students were not just high achieving students but represented a wide cross-section of youth in the Latinx community, with some students having expressed considering dropping out of high school at the time of programming. This initiative demonstrated to the children that success is attainable, countering the often limited and stereotypical representations of Latinx community seen on TV. By seeing and interacting with Latinx professionals, these children gained a sense of hope and possibility.

On the other hand, community newspapers like CNY Latino played a vital role in keeping the Latinx community informed and connected. It provided a wealth of information on Latinx-related events, political news, and practical advice tailored to the community's needs. It offered explanations of American cultural traditions, which was particularly beneficial for those coming from different cultural backgrounds. One of the unique aspects of CNY Latino was its role in spotlighting Latinx culture. It celebrated the community's heritage and achievements, fostering a sense of pride and belonging. For newcomers, especially those from tropical environments, CNY Latino offered practical advice on coping with new experiences, such as winter weather, helping them adjust to their new surroundings. CNY Latino also served as a bridge between the Latinx community and the broader society. They provided a platform for cultural exchange and understanding, promoting integration while preserving cultural identity. This publication was not just a source of information; it was a tool for empowerment, giving voice to a community that is often underrepresented in mainstream media.

Spanish radio programs and Spanish-language community newspapers were more than just media outlets for the Latinx community; they served as sources of support, education, and cultural preservation. They played a critical role in empowering the community, providing essential information, and fostering a sense of identity and belonging. Through these platforms, the Latinx community could stay connected, informed, and inspired, contributing to their overall growth.

La Casita: The Curator of Community Cultural Wealth

La Casita Cultural Center was established in 2011 as a bridge between Syracuse University and the Latinx community of Syracuse's Near Westside community – a community center to celebrate the rich culture and traditions of the Latinx community. Located in the near Westside community, La Casita is equipped with an art gallery, classroom spaces, bilingual library, performance spaces, workshop facilities, general meeting spaces, and a kitchenette (Syracuse University webpage). At the time of this study, La Casita was highlighted by many of the study participants as an integral part of the Latinx community, one that transcends the conventional roles of a cultural center by deeply engaging in the educational and personal development of its community members. One participant described La Casita's impact as follows:

> *La Casita is more about the traditions, the traditional aspects of the culture, the music, the dance, the food. It has a much stronger connection, I think, with this West Side community. Certainly it designs its programming to serve the needs of a rather underserved community, focusing on Hispanic culture and appealing to the interests and the needs of Hispanic families living in this community. But it's definitely established not only to do that. It's through that work with the community… I think the intention was more to bring education, bring resources to attend to the needs of the community.*

It is its holistic impact and role as curators of the community's cultural wealth that resonated for this study. The center is much more than a venue for celebrating Latinx traditions such as music, dance, and food. It is a dynamic space that fosters a strong connection with the Near Westside community, tailoring its programs to serve the needs of Latinx families.

Defined as a space that curates the Latinx culture to empower Latinx community, La Casita was utilizing community cultural wealth in a way that was not being done by the schools. As one study participant stated, "La Casita is supplementing what is happening at the schools during the day. Our Latino students don't get to learn about their culture. Teachers don't feel equipped to teach them about Latinx cultures. So they say 'students can get that from La Casita'. And La Casita fills the gaps". This notion that La Casita is 'filling the gaps' was echoed by other participants. One participant juxtaposed the learning experiences of students attending suburban schools or private urban schools with those of urban Latinx youth attending community public schools. They felt the more 'affluent' students were exposed to all kinds of programming that elevated their sense of place within American society: through bus trips to D.C. and Albany to meet with representatives from the political sphere; through field trips to museums and concert events; through access to high level music and arts programming; and, through regular travel with their families intent on exposing them to these types of high level experiences. On the other hand, Latinx students in underserved urban public schools were not exposed in the same way, due to lack of resources and unwillingness to expose them to the values of their Latinx culture. As she shares,

> *Our Latino children should have some cultural enrichment for them to understand diversity not as something that is marginal in this country, not as we are the marginalized group in the United States, but as an essential aspect of their identity within society as a whole. This is not a marginal culture. They are not 'the others'. Latino culture is a part of American society. There is power in that. And I don't think schools do enough to help our*

Latino kids understand this. I don't think schools are anywhere near drilling this into our kids. It's like La Casita is filling the gaps, in that sense.

As another participant shared, "It's important for this youth to learn that the countries they come from are very cultured, rich cultures, a rich history of making huge contributions to society – through the world of art, through the visual arts, music, theater, literature. They need to feel proud of this". La Casita pushed back on stereotypes of the Latin American arts being seen as only "…indigenous pieces, a lot of clay", associating a sense of cultural pride in the contemporary in addition to the historical. In short, Latinx culture was great, was valuable, now and not just in the past. La Casita felt its mission was to empower Latinx youth by celebrating Latinx culture, historically and in the present, to provide an enriching experience with Latinx culture that was absent in their daily schooling experiences. And they did this in a variety of ways focused on the arts and education outside of the traditional classroom space.

La Casita developed a lot of programming that helped Latinx students engage with Latinx culture through the arts. There was El Punto Arts Studio, a collaboration between La Casita and Point of Contact, sponsored by the New York State Council of the Arts. This contemporary art workshop exposed children to artists from the Latinx diaspora. It was a journey of discovery, where children learned about the rich, contemporary artistic contributions from their countries of origin, instilling a sense of pride and empowerment. There was Balcon Criollo (Creole Porch), a permanent corner installation in the center's gallery that highlights the artists, community members, and events that define Latinx culture. It was representative of a space where community engagement was front and center, for the community and with the community. Different themes were explored each year and intentionally centered the Latinx community of Syracuse, an opportunity for Near Westside community members to see themselves represented

and valued. Finally, there was programming that focused on Latin American dance, specifically Bomba y Plena, and the role it played in cultural preservation and empowering Latinx youth. Young community members learned this traditional Puerto Rican musical and dance tradition, and, as one participant stated, "…it was all about building up the self-esteem of our Latino children. It was more than dancing – it was about making them proud of who they were, where they came from". It was not just about learning an art form; it was about personal growth and development, particularly during critical times like adolescence.

Impacting a sense of cultural pride through curriculum development and after school programming was also centered within La Casita's overall efforts and impact. This educational approach was mirrored in the center's involvement with local schools. During Hispanic Heritage Month, La Casita became a living classroom where teachers design lesson plans around the center's exhibitions. These lessons were not limited to teaching the Spanish language; they encompassed the broader cultural context, providing a holistic educational experience. La Casita was purposeful in how they consulted with teachers, engaging directly to ensure that teachers were culturally responsive and appropriate. As one participant shared, "La Casita was educating the teachers too. They held them accountable". Participants underscored the importance of La Casita as an after-school haven, a place where Latinx community members from diverse backgrounds came together, creating a nurturing environment different from school settings. The center offered a platform for children to connect with their heritage through bilingual literature, activities, and interactions with adults who understand their unique experiences.

La Casita Cultural Center is more than just a celebration of Latinx culture; it is an integral part of the community's educational and personal development. Through its diverse programs and deep community engagement, La Casita fills gaps in cultural knowledge and academic

support, empowering its members to recognize and embrace their rich heritage. The center stands as a testament to the power of cultural education in shaping confident, informed, and proud individuals within the Latinx community.

The Transformational Role of a Foundational Community-Based Organization

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Spanish Action League ('La Liga') was a foundational and instrumental community-based organization that served the Latinx community of Syracuse. Their success spanned decades, across generations, and their work was still influential at the time of this study. As one study participant who was a part of the organization shared, "I think that we are a community-based organization smack in the middle of the community we are trying to serve. And after 46 years of dealing with different community members and their issues, we do earn their respect and confidence and they still use us as a resource". La Liga continued to play a pivotal role in supporting and uplifting families and held a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of various aspects of community life, from education and health to socio-economic challenges. They had a finger on the pulse of the community, with an intricate knowledge of their needs, concerns, and an embedded trust that allowed La Liga to represent the community in many moments of advocacy and activism. This was a key difference between La Liga and other organizations that may not have been as established in the community. As one participant put it,

> *None of the people sitting at the table have a clue or an idea of what this community is all about. What they live every day, what makes them tick, what makes them act or react, you know. Or who the children living in the households are – they have no basis for reference, because that's not their life. It not that they don't want to help, just that they don't know how to because they don't really know the community. We do and we can immediately start tackling the problems whenever they arise.*

By being present in households, schools, and even doctor's appointments, La Liga becomes an integral part of the daily lives of the families it serves. When addressing the needs of a child, for example, the organization also considers the well-being of the entire household, recognizing that individual challenges are often linked to broader family dynamics. Theirs is a holistic approach where the organization's support extends to the entire household.

La Liga’s advocacy is evident in its educational initiatives. One successful initiative at the time of this study was around adult and trade education. Participants described a program piloted with support from the Workforce Development Institute, a state agency, that took courses for trade positions and developed Spanish-language curriculums and materials to reach a Spanish-speaking workforce. The goal was to remove barriers to increase employment opportunities for Spanish-speaking Latinx community members and support their success. As shared by one participant, the effort was impactful:

> *So we call the potential employer, we tell them that we doing this, they give us materials. Often it's that. They give us material to target the community. So we create the course based on the directives that they made, and things of that nature so that when they employ them, they're not going to be speaking in a perfect English, but at least they're understanding what they're being told. Because it came from their end what we are teaching them. Then at the end of it, they go through job interviews. Last we did with the pilot, we got 18 people employed.*

La Liga’s approach is methodical and patient, recognizing that sustainable change occurs gradually. By expanding into new areas and adapting to the evolving needs of the community, the organization remains a dynamic and responsive entity, one that demonstrates the profound impact that a community-centered approach can have. By understanding the complexities of the community's challenges and adopting a holistic, patient, and inclusive strategy, the organization

plays a crucial role in empowering individuals and families, ultimately contributing to the betterment of the entire community.

Many community members were determined to serve as activists and advocates for Latinx youth in interrogating educational systems, policies and practices and having an impact on uplifting the entire Latinx community. Either through individual efforts or within community-based organization, grassroots or systemic, a sprit of activism flowed freely within the Syracuse Latinx community. It wasn't just active engagement in a moment in time but throughout the community's history. These efforts, and the stories that captured the motivation to engage in activism and advocacy, can serve as a template for other Latinx communities as they consider mobilization and leveraging community cultural wealth and strengthening community power.

Chapter 7

Discussion/Conclusion

Denzin (2017) states critical qualitative research "…requires an ethical framework that is rights and social justice based" (p.8). This dissertation project attempted to answer the call put forth by Denzin and other scholars by placing Latinx's testimonios at the center of an educational research project (Yrigollen-Robbins, 2023). This study centered 30 Latinx community members, creating space for them to share their testimonios, define and construct notions of Latinx community, explicitly name the community and educational issues and barriers negatively impacting Latinx youth, and articulate the roles they play in interrogating educational systems, policies, and practices by embracing a spirit of activism. Through these testimonios, I offer an examination of how Latinx community members attained and utilized *concientizacion*, "…a critical awareness of important problems and surrounding social conditions that need solutions" (Duran, Carruba-Rogal, & Solis, 2020, p.90). I gained *concientizacion* myself by gathering these testimonios and attempting to understand and show the "…power in their collective voice, experiences and knowledge" (Duran, Carruba-Rogal, & Solis, 2020, p. 90). Participants in this study were very much aware of the problems impacting their communities and the education of their youth, clearly articulated these problems, through their testimonios reflecting on those problems they felt needed resolutions, offered actions or potential solutions for addressing these problems, and in a sense holding me accountable to evaluate the productiveness and potential actions to attempt to solve these problems (Duran, Carruba-Rogal, & Solis, 2020). Ultimately, it was an understanding and clear articulation of the roles these community members played that allows for rich data that can have future social justice implications. Study participants recognized the opportunity and achievement gaps of Latinx youth, were able to focus on the limitations and

failures of schools and policies to address these, and embraced their roles in impacting the Latinx community to help shift the narrative and fill in the gaps in the spaces where schools and educational policies have let Latinx communities down. Community members embraced their roles as cultural brokers (Mortier & Arias, 2023), their presence in the trajectory of Latinx students' lives, making a real difference. As cultural brokers, they provide information to Latinx families and students that helps in navigating school systems, demystifies school policies, and helps expose 'hidden' agendas. They empower community members by elevating Latinx culture and spotlighting community cultural wealth, connect with them and connect them to relevant resources, and holistically assist Latinx families and students to support their success and equip them to advocate for themselves (Mortier & Arias, 2023). Community members embraced their roles as empowerment agents (Newcomer, 2020), acting as guides to support students' and families' efforts in developing critical consciousness and enacting change. In criticizing the fractures within the Latinx community leadership, participants recognized that these efforts needed to be better conceived as a collaborative ongoing process, involving multiple community stakeholders (Newcomer, 2020). Many community members who worked within or led community-based organizations recognized the importance of these CBOs offering sanctuary spaces (Chavez-Duenas, et al., 2019), ensuring that within their spaces, the experiences and stories of Latinx community members are sacred. Chavez-Duenas, et al. (2019) state how creating these spaces uplift tradition and community cultural wealth, and "...can serve as a protective factor against ethno-racial trauma" (p. 57), especially in helping Latinx community members "…build psychological armors to survive, cope, and heal from the ongoing attack on their humanity" (p. 57). These CBOs can be instrumental in building collective social action and positively affect the overall mental health of their community. Overall, study participants

recognized their potential in mobilizing community knowledge and power, stating what has already been done.

Participants in this study were able to name the educational issues they felt were most pertinent and negatively impacting Latinx youth. One issue was the severe lack of Latinx representation within schools, specifically within the population of teachers teaching Latinx youth in Near Westside schools. As one participant shared:

> *I mean, there is presence in a lot of places, but it's not exactly...we need a little bit more than that. More presence perhaps… And we have a bunch of kids that are Latino. How can we serve them? And it's important for them to have some presence of people they can identify with because they say, "This person may understand my situation, that person...". We have to work with the kids, we need to continue to do that, perhaps the community needs more presence of people that can communicate, and kind of judge people in a different way.*

In 2017, there was a significant teacher-student diversity gap in the Syracuse City School District, with Latinx students accounting for 13 percent of city school students and only 2 percent of teachers were Latinx (Mulder, 2017). This 'gap' was prevalent in many cities, as one study looking at the Kansas City public schools detailed how the most noticeable representation gap was the one between Latinx students and Latinx teachers (25% Latinx students with only 5% Latinx teachers) (Espinoza & Taylor, 2021). In fact, this was a prevalent issue throughout the U.S., with a 2018 report from The Education Trust showing how 25% of U.S. students identified as Latinx yet only 8% of teachers identified as such (Griffin, 2018). Participants recognized a need for increased representations, understood the value of shared identity for Latinx students, which included: increased connectedness with Latinx students, serving as an advocate within schools, honoring Latinx culture, serving as translators, having higher expectations and thus counteracting deficit discourse oftentimes found in schools towards Latinx students, and having

positive impacts on Latinx students' attitudes, motivation, and performance (Espinoza & Taylor, 2023; Griffin, 2018). Increased Latinx teacher representation in schools can equate to a stronger spirit of activism, allowing Latinx teachers to serve as 'cultural guardians' for Latinx students (Carrillo, 2023; Espinoza & Taylor, 2021). Latinx teachers have also shown a willingness to engage in civic activism, with recent efforts including partaking in teacher strikes within historically 'red' states to push back against anti-immigrant, anti-ethnic studies educational laws - an example of advocacy and civic action on the 'streets' and becoming known in recent years as 'Red State Revolts' (Carrillo, 2023).

It wasn't just increasing Latinx teacher representation in schools that participants brought up but also the need to increase the professional development of all teachers so that they can be more culturally aware and culturally relevant. There is value in helping all teachers who teach Latinx students learn more about and respect the cultures that Latinx students embody (Espinoza & Taylor, 2021; 2023). Ultimately, it is about teachers being more holistically engaged, empowering parents and communities, and being knowledgeable of the cultural capital of their students. What the participants in this study did not identify was the limited power and challenges teachers had in impacting school policies overall - how teachers are unfortunately not the ones in charge or even part of the development of policies and practices being implemented in their schools (Espinoza & Taylor, 2023). How, even if there was to be a tremendous increase in Latinx teacher representation, these Latinx teachers would find themselves in "…a double bind with the pressures of being expected to be fully committed to the larger Latinx community while serving a culturally subtractive education system" (Espinoza & Taylor, 2023, p. 3). What may have been missed in their overview of educational issues was the need to focus on the roles/spaces that had power over educational policy and change, like school boards. A few

participants did talk about either being on a school board for a brief period or considering a run for a school board seat at the time of the interviews. These handful of participants recognized the potential impact of being on a school board. For many school districts, school boards hold a lot of influence and power, developing policies and strategic plans, approving budgets and curriculums, and hiring and managing superintendents (Sampson, 2019). However, most of the participants within this dissertation study never mentioned school boards, instead focusing on the schools themselves, and teachers specifically. There seemed to be a lack of awareness and knowledge on the roles school boards have played in enacting, establishing, and perpetuating structural educational inequities – or, as a 2022 report from School Board Partners states, "School boards enacted policies to preserve 'de facto' segregation rather than embrace integration after the ruling in Brown v. Board. They built school finance systems, school assignment policies, and teacher contracts to privilege whiter and wealthier communities at the explicit expense of Black and Brown communities" (Ashley & Douglass, 2022, p.7). Studies have shown that there is a positive link between school board representation and Latinx student achievement, yet Latinx are underrepresented in these spaces leading to missing perspectives on equity, addressing systemic racism, and closing achievement gaps for marginalized youth (Ashley & Douglass, 2022; Sampson, 2019). Those Latinx community members that answer the call and serve on school boards are met with significant barriers to achieving equity, such as: prohibitive state laws, the inability to secure a majority vote within the school board, lack of credibility, and fewer supports to even being elected (Sampson, 2019). There is a need to educate Latinx community members on the value and vital importance of Latinx representatives serving on school boards and creating a pipeline of potentially strong community advocates who can be

representative and share experiences with the communities they serve. This in turn could offer solutions to some of the educational issues participants identified.

Participants in this study highlighted the disconnect between schools and the Latinx Near Westside community as a major issue that impacted the educational achievement of Latinx youth. This was articulated as enabling deficit thinking towards students and especially towards Latinx families, little to no communication with the community regarding policies, and an unwillingness to be active partners with the community. This aligns with research on school leadership, and how educational leadership tend to focus on what occurs within the school building (Green, 2017a). There is a focus on issues within the school, such as curriculum, instruction, staff development, and discipline, in absence of engaging the community cultural wealth present in the surrounding community (Green, 2017a). There becomes a clear barrier between schools and neighborhood communities, where interaction is so fraught with tension and distrust that both parties would rather keep apart. Schools seem to alienate communities counter to what research shows as being impactful solutions – the value of strong and intentional relationships between school and community as foundational to improving student academic success and community vitality (Green, 2017b). There is tremendous impact when schools think and act equitably to improve school and community conditions in solidarity with local community members, especially in low-income Latinx communities (Green, 2017a). As one participant in this dissertation study stated: “Well, we don’t need to invent a crazy, new, sexy way to do it. The answers are there”. Another dissertation study participant shares: “That’s part of the evolution of education, it’s like the evolution of medicine. We’ve moved from a simple x-ray to an MRI. We’re not depending on x-rays anymore, we have other tools. And I think I would view education as the same, there must be other tools…”. As many of the participants in this

study mentioned, there needs to be intentional movement towards a holistic approach by schools, one that bridges parents/families, community, and school partnerships/collaborations. It cannot be the same school-only focus by educational leaders. Community members can hold educational leaders, schools, accountable and push them to uplift and support community, support policies that eradicate issues that negatively impact the community, and most importantly care about the well-being of the community. Again, there is a lot of recent research that offers recommendations for schools to engage communities holistically. Achinstein, Curry, Ogawa, and Athanases (2016) discuss the concept of boundary crossing to access community cultural wealth. Schools are stronger when they enable students to cross boundaries that separate the schools from their external communities, broadening learning opportunities. They discuss how schools should examine how community-based organizations (CBOs) could help transform schools, how harnessing the expertise of these CBOs regarding effective strategies to engage and empower youth can help by responding to the youth's lived realities (Achinstein, et al., 2016). This approach creates a collaborative spirit within the schools, a sense of *familia* where physical, social, and multicultural capital are exchanged (Achinstein, et al., 2016). My dissertation study was able to identify CBOs that had a tremendous impact on Latinx youth and in some cases, like La Casita, were able to assist schools in this 'boundary crossing' approach. The testimonios of study participants showed there were an abundance of community members ready and willing to help support schools in this way if only schools were more receptive to embracing them as resources. Other studies stressed the importance and value of cross boundary leaders, who can serve as bridges between schools and CBOs and leverage broad networks for mutually beneficial school-community ends (Green, 2017a) and community-based educational leadership, where schools are immersed in urban life, committed to urban transformation, openly counter

institutional and social injustice, and school-based action is tied to neighborhood and community conditions (Green, 2017a,b). Other studies highlighted a Bridging Multiple Worlds (BMW) theory (Duran, Carruba-Rogal, & Solis, 2020) when looking at school roles within communities, arguing that schools should account for relationships across home, community and schooling and help bridge these worlds to benefit Latinx children and families by building on cultural funds of knowledge with assistance from 'cultural brokers' familiar with families' homes and cultural backgrounds (Duran, Carruba-Rogal, & Solis, 2020). Finally, Green (2017b) pushed forth an approach for schools that leaned on equity-centered knowledge base and skill sets to embrace more socially just approaches and practices across urban school community relationships. Called the Community Equity Literacy, it is comprised of five components: understanding community history; working from asset-and structural-based perspectives about community; recognizing and leveraging community assets; navigating community power structures; and, advocating for community and school equity (Green, 2017b). By engaging in these approaches, schools serving Latinx communities can help build more trusting partnerships and engage in humble practices that recognizes and acknowledges the community's cultural wealth and moves towards an asset-based relationship (Mortier & Arias, 2023). Participants in this dissertation study recognized that this was missing and by expressing that this was an educational issue negatively impacting Latinx youth, creates the potential to coordinate efforts to hold schools accountable for engaging in these types of efforts.

While these school/community relationships are important and there is value in schools and teachers embracing the lived experiences of their students and moving beyond the boundaries in place, there is the potential for causing harm to the community when schools/teachers romanticize community, essentialize it (Philip, Way, Garcia, Schuler-Brown, &

Navarro, 2013). As they state, schools/teachers may see themselves as "…enlightened and omnipotent saviors…and there is a penchant for these individuals to see themselves as possessors of knowledge that must be given to those that they seek to help" (Philip, et al., 2013, p. 176). They offer criteria for centering the community, allowing community members to define/construct their own community. I believe my dissertation project does this, allows community members to answer the question: "What makes a 'community' a community?" (Philip, et al., 2013, p. 176). The first criterion states "…members must be able to articulate, at some level, how they are mutually invested in each other" (Philip, et al., 2013, p. 176). Participants in my study shared the ways in which they supported one another, how they were curators of culture, and embraced their roles as activists and advocates in mobilizing community power. By engaging in this study, they wanted to voice their concerns for the Latinx community, identify and interrogate the injustices, and highlight the efforts taking place to uplift one another. The newspapers highlighting Latinx community in the 1960s through the 1980s showed the ways in which Latinx community members were invested in each other throughout their settlement within the Near Westside. And the community-based organizations that became the bedrock of the community were created through mutual investment in the community. The second criterion stressed the need to amplify member diversity, move past a monolithic and homogenous grouping of community members, and not gloss over "…tensions, divisions, and struggles within communities…and conceal power relations among its members" (Philip, et al., 2013, p. 176). By highlighting the larger diasporic makeup of the Near Westside Latinx community, I attempted to foreground the diversity within the group. I was also able to show all the warts, show that this community was not a utopia, how it was as if family strife was exposed. The infighting, internal division, decades long grudges, generational divide – all present and exposed, impossible to

ignore. I was able to see how this can impede coalition building. By sharing some of the community discord, grievances, inferiority complexes as well as hegemonic thinking of some of the participants as they engaged in 'victim-blaming', I attempted to not idealize the community and portray a single-mindedness that is not the reality of the everyday experiences of community members. Finally, the last criterion "…cautions against prescribing or presuming membership in communities…" (Philip, et al., 2013, p. 176) and ignoring multiple memberships. Participants in my study self-situated themselves as members of the Near Westside. While detailing their roles in this community, they also reflected on the various communities they were a part of, including those of their childhood, within different states, different countries. However, I must acknowledge that my study fell short in expanding the situated memberships. I didn't situate these experiences within the broader Syracuse city, in comparison to Black/African American, ethnic White, and refugee communities that make up a large portion of the city. While I did share some stories of the Black/Latinx identified experience, I didn't delve deeper into the intersectionality of community members and the intersectionality of neighborhoods, of expanded alliances, of larger tensions and successes. Future studies can take on this research and add more robust data to what was started within my study.

The city of Syracuse, and the Latinx community of the Near Westside, became a participant in this study. I asked "Why Syracuse?" at the outset of this study and quickly realized that the city is relevant within educational research on Latinx communities and urban schools. It provided a space for a sociohistorical understanding of a specific Latinx community, a specific urban neighborhood within a smaller city – a community and neighborhood that can be relatable to many cities within the U.S. Syracuse was a small enough city that allowed me to capture its rich cultural history by centering its Latinx community and the Near Westside community. It

offered a picture of a relatively recent Latinx community, yet firmly established within the overall city formation and structure. The review of decades worth of newspaper articles focusing on first the new arrival of Puerto Rican and Cuban 'migrants', and how these newly arrived Latinx settled in, the challenges they faced, and the immediate impact they had on the larger city, allowed me to see the line from the early construction of this community to the point at which this study took place in 2015. By interviewing community elders, I was able to corroborate much of what these newspaper articles spotlighted and give fuller voice to these historical moments. I was able to hear firsthand about the impact of foundational CBOs with programs that were spotlighted in the 1960s still running strong in the 21st century. One could see the footprints of their impact in the stories of the elders and the solid community institutions they became. This study became a snapshot of a moment within this rich historical trajectory, of a specific year - 2015 - and all that had changed but also all the issues that still remained, even after sixty plus years, and the fight that community members still engaged in. The testimonios painted a portrait of the Near Westside at a moment in history where it had grown tremendously, had more representation in leadership roles, yet still grappled with social and educational injustices. Language, access to equitable educational services, poverty, racism, ethnocentrism, feelings of abandonment by educational systems, policies, and practices – all still present in 2015. Yet, as this study highlights, the year 2015 still saw a community embracing a spirit of activism, mobilizing culture, centering community cultural wealth, and interrogating injustice. While growing, while continuing to amplify its community voice and assets, it was also interesting to see the 'little sibling' mentality many community members had, as they consistently compared Syracuse with larger neighboring cities like Rochester, NY and Buffalo, NY, oftentimes claiming those two cities were more effective, efficient, and unified as well as pining for the ways in

which more established and larger cities like New York City and Los Angeles created more opportunities for community and cultural power for its Latinx population. In the writing of this dissertation, I hoped to show how the city of Syracuse, the Latinx community of the Near Westside, was a valuable resource in providing a very holistic view of the Latinx experience and relationship with community and education and has as much to offer scholarship as these larger and more established communities within larger cities. And while capturing a moment in the larger history of the Syracuse Latinx community, I also recognize the value of recent history, of events and experiences that continue to move forward in the years between conducting research for this study and the writing of this dissertation. More of the story needs to be told. This recent history needs to be captured. There is a need to continue the conversation, how Syracuse's poverty rate continued to be very high for Latinxs while it declined across the state and the nation (Weiner, 2018). There needs to be a deeper understanding how 2017's Hurricane Maria and its destruction of much of Puerto Rico impacted the Syracuse Latinx community, as community members talked about the emotional crisis they were experiencing, the increase of Puerto Ricans relocating to Syracuse, and the ways in which the Near Westside united in welcoming these new arrivals (Rivera, 2021), reminiscent of the ways in which the community embraced and supported Cuban refugees decades ago. It is also important to better understand how the Trump presidency, and continued anti-immigrant, xenophobic rhetoric and policies, impact the Syracuse Latinx community today and continue spotlighting the activism that flourishes and stands tall in the face of continued oppression.

The collective wisdom and intelligence of the multiple and diverse perspectives of this study's participants can offer a roadmap for educators, policymakers, and community leaders to collaboratively work towards equitable and responsive educational systems. This research

highlights the value of community members in impacting community and educational change. There are implications for strengthening the roles of community members, helping them become more targeted in their efforts, and helping them acquire the knowledge, strategies, and drive to directly impact educational policy. As I mentioned earlier, strategically impacting educational policy can produce change. Considering the current climate, where ultra conservative and Christian nationalist organizations like Moms for Liberty are coordinating and targeting their efforts to increase their participation in school boards and other areas with direct impact on educational policy, there should be a focus within Latinx communities to equip community members with the resources to run for and serve on school boards. Community members should be equipped with strategies for directly lobbying state/federal level policy makers to remove barriers that inhibit school board participation (Sampson, 2019). Provide community members with the knowledge on the complexities of educational policies and the ways in which to directly impact them. Fund community leaders to run for local and state political positions, impacting educational policy by advocating within the legislature. As participants shared within this study as their call to action, intentionally increasing Latinx representation within schools can have a direct impact on school-based policies and practices. Recent studies have argued that widening the Latinx teacher pipeline is integral in counteracting the recent increase in state policies seeking the removal of culturally relevant pedagogy and ethnic studies within schools (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). A holistic effort by school districts and teacher education programs within institutions of higher education to increase the Latinx representation in teacher and administrator pipelines is imperative. Intentional action and increased representation by Latinx community members within schools, localized educational policy-making entities such as school boards, and state political systems can drive institutional change.

Berliner (2006) asks, "Why do we put so much of our attention and resources into trying to fix what goes on inside of low-performing schools when the causes of low performance may reside outside of the school…is it possible we might be better off devoting more of our attention and resources than we do now toward helping families in the communities that are served by those schools" (p. 963). In addition to the ways in which Latinx community members have impacted and can continue impacting educational policy, as mentioned above, continuing to empower Latinx community members to effect community change can drive institutional change. While participants called for increased cultural awareness and relevancy within schools, it is acknowledged that for many school districts within many states, equipping teachers with culturally relevant and culturally aware professional development is no longer feasible, due to anti-CRT, anti-EDI, anti-woke policies. It is imperative to fund active community members and CBOs, providing them with the knowledge and professional development to strengthen their roles as cultural brokers, empowerment agents, and mobilizers of community cultural wealth. By helping community members organize parents/families to see their involvement in schools as a political act it has the potential to hold schools accountable for ensuring equitable outcomes (Duran, Carruba-Rogal, & Solis, 2020). There is an opportunity to be more organized in articulating the community cultural wealth and how it explicitly and positively impacts schooling. There is an opportunity to shift how schools engage communities, moving towards actively advocating for community policies that eradicate poverty, addresses racism and xenophobia, and strengthens community resources and infrastructure so the youth can focus on their educational achievement and thrive. There is an opportunity to shift how schools of education within higher education view their roles in shaping future educators, administrators, and policy-makers. There is a great opportunity to broaden their reach beyond a traditional

approach to the training of future educators and create programming or certification for community members to build skills in educational advocacy, activism, policy, etc. There is an opportunity to shift how large organizations and philanthropic groups fund educational projects by intentionally funding community members to support them in continuing to strengthen community power. Participants in this study named the injustices that directly impact Latinx community and articulated the ways in which a focus on uplifting the community and addressing these issues can in turn impact the educational experiences of their youth. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a holistic and intentional effort that includes schools and educators directly has the power to radically change educational institutions.

Rusoja (2022), in studying the intergenerational literacy, teaching, and listening practices of Latinx immigrants' political mobilization, argues that Latinx immigrants mobilize against oppression through a communal pedagogy of resistance – "an intergenerational pedagogy enacted in communal spaces that grows from Latinx *facultad*, meaning the critical consciousness and epistemic privilege that results from living in the liminal space of the borderlands" (p. 301). I love the implications of this theory for a site like the Near Westside of Syracuse, for the Latinx community members who were a part of this dissertation study. This theory positions Latinx cultural, literacy, and linguistic practices as strengths and resources for resilience and resistance (Rusoja, 2022). My dissertation study showed the value of the Syracuse Latinx community's cultural wealth and the ways in which key community members mobilized these assets to begin interrogating educational issues, inequity. A communal pedagogy of resistance broadens the sense of interdependence with others who are oppressed, as well as the sense of who belongs in Latinx families and communities, to affirm and enact a vision of justice (Rusoja, 2022). My dissertation study showed how 30 Latinx community members recognized the need to strengthen

community power and collaborate and unify to enact change. A communal pedagogy of resistance spotlights "…how our community is filled with experts who are in mutual relationships of learning from each other" (Rusoja, 2022, p. 323). By centering the testimonios of Syracuse Latinx community members, my dissertation study attempted to give voice to 'experts' who shared their lived experiences and ways in which they learned from the community, their culture, each other, the history of the Syracuse Latinx community, and by being a part of this study, allowed me to learn from them. There is a spirt of activism that flows within Syracuse's Near Westside Latinx community. It has flowed throughout the history of the community. My dissertation study captured a snapshot of these efforts in time and hopefully has created a conversation on what the Latinx community's capacity is for staying steadfast in their activism and advocacy in the face of new oppressive societal and educational challenges.

Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email

Dear _____,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Jermaine Soto and I am currently working on my Dissertation research project. I am interested in understanding how members of the Latina/o communities within urban spaces engage and challenge educational policies and practices and serve as activists and advocates in the schooling of their PreK-12 students. I feel your work and presence within the Syracuse Latina/o community is very valuable and would love to include you as a participant in this research project.

Your participation will consist of agreeing to be interviewed individually. Interviews should last between approximately 1 and 2 hours. The interview can be conducted at Syracuse University or at another community space that is convenient to you. You are under no obligation to be a part of this project. But if you are interested, please feel free to email me at jsoto01@syr.edu. Also feel free to email me with any questions, concerns, etc.

Thank you so very much for considering being a part of this research project. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Questions regarding demographics

These questions are designed to gain demographic knowledge of the participant as well as how he/she socially locates him/herself. Sample questions are as follows:

- What is your age?
- How do you racially/ethnically identify yourself?
- Where were you born? Raised?
- Where do you work?
- Do you live within the city?
- How long have you lived and/or worked in the city?

Questions regarding community: definition of; experiences with; role within

- How would you define community? How would you define Latina/o community? How does the Latina/o community fit within Syracuse?
- What do you feel are the challenges or issues for the Latina/o community?
- What are your experiences with the Latina/o community here?
- How do you regularly engage the Latina/o community?
- How would you define your role within the community?
- How does this community compare/contrast with the community you grew up in?
- What are your earliest memories of the community from which you were raised in?
- How would you define the community of your childhood? Of your early adult life?

Questions regarding Education: views of; interaction with; issues impacting community/school relationships

- How do you view the state of education today for Latina/o students?
- What are some of the major issues in education? What are some of the major issues that impact Latina/o students?
- How do educational systems (policies, the schools themselves) engage with or interact with the Latina/o community-at-large?

- How does the Latina/o community engage with or challenge educational systems (policies, schools themselves, etc.)?
- How do you view your role in engaging with and/or interrogating educational systems?
- What are your earliest memories of your education as a child?
- How do your experiences with education from your childhood compare/contrast with the students' experiences today? How does the community's experiences with education from your childhood compare/contrast with the community's experiences today?

General Life History questions:

- Share your earliest memory of understanding your ethnic/cultural/racial identity
- Share your earliest memories of being part of a Latina/o community
- Share your earliest memories of your educational experiences
- Share your earliest memories of understanding educational issues impacting Latina/o students, communities. Share your earliest memories of how you engaged these educational injustice and/or inequalities.

Questions regarding historical context of Syracuse and its inhabitants

- Please describe your earliest memories of the Syracuse Latina/o community. How would you describe your role within the community?
- How do these memories of Syracuse compare to your current experiences?
- How would you describe the past educational experiences for Latina/o students in Syracuse specifically?
- How have the Latina/o community in Syracuse historically questioned and challenged educational injustices?
- What worked/didn't work in these historical moments/movements?
- How would you place yourself within this historical trajectory?

Appendix C: IRB Approved Informed Consent Form

Syracuse University IRB Approved

FEB 2 5 2015 FEB 2 4 2016

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
Cultural Foundations of Education

Urban Latina/o Community Engagement in Activism and Advocacy: Community Members Interrogating Educational Systems, Policies, and Practices

My name is Jermaine Soto and I am a Doctoral candidate in the Cultural Foundations of Education department at Syracuse University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. This sheet will explain the study to you and please feel free to ask questions about the research if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything in detail if you wish.

I am interested in understanding how members of the Latina/o communities within smaller cities like Syracuse take part in understanding and challenging educational policies and practices and advocate for their students. You will be asked to participate in an interview that will ask questions about your interactions and relationships with the Latina/o community in Syracuse, how you identify your role within the Syracuse community, and questions about your own life experiences and your cultural/ethnic identity. This interview will take between approximately 1 and 2 hours of your time. If necessary, a second interview may be needed. All information will be kept confidential. No one except for me and my research faculty advisor will have access to what was shared in these interviews. All attempts will be made to maintain privacy, including doing the interview in a private space on Syracuse University or a private space closer to where you work. In any written work or presentation that I make, I will use a made-up name for you, I will not reveal personal details or I will change details about where you work, where you live, etc.

For the purposes of capturing your responses to the interview questions as accurately as possible, the interview will be audio taped. I will listen to the taped interview at a later time in order to transcribe onto paper what was recorded. No one except for me and my research faculty advisor will have access to these audio recordings. The audio recording of the interview and written transcriptions will be kept in a password protected electronic file on my personal computer. After the study is complete, recordings will be erased and written transcriptions shredded.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping me to understand how community members embrace the culturally relevant experiences of the Latina/o community and how this applies to the educational policies and practices in place within the community. By taking part in this research study, you may experience benefits as well, such as: space to reflect upon and share your experiences as an engaged member of the local Latina/o community and your role in impacting positive educational change; opportunity to contribute knowledge on best practices for interacting with Latina/o neighborhoods and addressing social issues; opportunity to understand local historical context as well as local movements and relationship with larger national movements. The risks to you for participating in this study are minimal, and may include: discomfort with describing instances of isolation and/or discrimination; discomfort with sharing personal life stories and/or experiences; discomfort with sharing role in challenging local school / educational policies and practices; ambiguity or questions of self-identity;

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frustrations with community environments and multiple community stakeholders upon reflection of interactions and relationships with these. Risks are minimized by your ability to refuse to answer any questions you are not comfortable with.

If you do not want to take part in this study, you have the right to refuse to take part, without penalty. If you decide to take part and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

If you have any questions, concerns, complaints about the research, please feel free to contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Gretchen Lopez, at 315-443-8344. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, please contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

All of my questions have been answered. I am over the age of 18 and I wish to participate in this research study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

___ I agree to be audio taped.

___ I do not agree to be audio taped.

_______________________ _______________

Signature of participant Date

____

Printed name of participant

_______________________ _______________

Signature of researcher Date

____

Printed name of researcher

Syracuse University IRB Approved

FEB 2 5 2015 FEB 2 4 2016

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Vita
Jermaine A. Soto

ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY
PhD, 2024 (expected)
Cultural Foundations of Education
Dissertation: *Urban Latinx Community Engagement in Activism and Advocacy: Community Members Interrogating Educational Systems, Policies, and Practices*

Syracuse University, School of Education, Syracuse, NY
Master of Science, 2011
Cultural Foundations of Education
Master's Thesis: *Latino Educators and Urban Public Schools: Voicing Identity, Experiences, Relationships*

Cornell University, College of Arts & Sciences, Ithaca, NY
Bachelor of Arts, 2001
Major: English Literature

HONORS/AWARDS/CERTIFICATIONS

Vanderbilt Diversity Leadership Award, Vanderbilt University, 2023

Vanderbilt Leadership Academy, Vanderbilt University, 2022

Diversity and Inclusion Certificate, Cornell University, 2018

Cook Ross Unconscious Bias Certified Facilitator, 2018

Recognition of Distinguished Teaching & Contribution to Student Success, Middle Tennessee State University, 2016

Ronald E. McNair Graduate Fellowship, Syracuse University, 2015

Certificate in University Teaching, Syracuse University, 2014

RECENT EMPLOYMENT

Office of Faculty Development, Director, Vanderbilt University
June 2019 – Present

- Lead the Office of Faculty Development within the Office of the Provost in supporting faculty throughout all areas of their experiences at Vanderbilt, from recruitment to retirement.
- Lead rigorous and equitable faculty recruitment and hiring initiatives including the design and facilitation of workshops and consultative processes for inclusive faculty search practices (resulting in over 400 faculty across all schools and colleges engaging this programming)
- Lead academic leadership development initiatives, including searches for all senior academic leader positions and the creation and implementation of a new dean integration initiative which includes a two-day orientation experience and year-round onboarding programming.

- Lead faculty advancement efforts through learning opportunities, resources, and networking for faculty peers, experts, and key campus leaders on issues related to career growth and success.
- Lead all university award processes, from the nomination process through the selection process, including the Fall research awards and Spring teaching awards.
- Lead faculty recognition and appreciation initiatives with the goal of increasing Vanderbilt recognition in the form of prestigious national awards and academies. Recent efforts led to faculty elections to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Andrew Carnegie Fellows Program.
- Lead new faculty orientation and onboarding efforts.
- Serve as the Vanderbilt liaison for the SEC Academic Leadership Development Program, which includes managing the university's SEC ALDP Fellowship, the SEC Travel Grant, and the SEC Faculty Achievement Award.
- Represent the Office of the Provost and the Office of Faculty Affairs & Professional Education at various advisory committees, search and selection committees, and working groups.
- Facilitate yearly conversations on mattering and marginality for various campus stakeholders, including the School of Medicine's Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Biological and Biomedical Sciences and the Program for Talented Youth orientation for summer staff
- Highly requested moderator and facilitator for various campus partner initiatives, including serving as a key facilitator for Vanderbilt's Community Engagement Forum and moderator for TPAC's Inside Out panel – a partnership between the Tennessee Performance Arts Center and Vanderbilt University's Division of Government and Community Relations.

Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, Director of Operations, Vanderbilt University
October 2017 – May 2019

- Provided leadership in the development and delivery of EDI educational offerings, trainings and workshops to various university stakeholders, including large-scale offerings to the Division of Administration and the Division of Information Technology
- Collaborated and consulted with campus stakeholders on EDI-related priorities, including the development and accountability practices for departmental and divisional diversity plans.
- Represented the Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion on various advisory committees, including: Employee Recognition Task Force, BlueSky Energy Vision Advisory Committee, MLK Planning Committee, and Latinx Student Graduation Planning Committee.
- Represented the Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in various engagement opportunities within the larger Nashville community.
- Provided thought partnership to Human Resources, including consulting on kickoffs for executive level searches and New Leader Orientation.
- Led, managed, and developed team of program coordinators.
- Provided thought partnership to the Vice Chancellor for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion on strategic planning and other EDI-related efforts.

New York State Migrant Education Program, Consultant, State University of NY-Brockport
January 2017 – September 2017

- Provided though leadership to deliver programming and culturally responsive strategies to family liaisons working within the migrant education system.
- Developed five-part curriculum focused on increasing self-advocacy in migrant parents, including content focused on effective use of stories, communication, networking, advocacy, and negotiating educational spaces and systems.
- Developed and delivered online professional development to employees.

Conexión Américas, Training & Leadership Development Manager, Nashville, TN
August 2016 – June 2017

- Developed, coordinated, and facilitated trainings, workshops and professional developments on Cultural Relevancy, Social-Emotional Pedagogy, Educational Equity, and Welcoming School Climates for schools, school districts, and other educational organizations throughout Tennessee.

- Created, implemented, and managed a statewide leadership development fellowship as part of the Tennessee Education Equity Coalition.
- Engaged community partners and participated in any organizational initiatives as needed.

Underrepresented Minority Dissertation Fellowship, Fellow, Middle Tennessee State University
August 2015 – July 2016

- Visiting faculty member within Sociology & Anthropology department.
- Designed and taught courses within the Sociology & Anthropology department.
- Engaged in all relevant faculty initiatives.

Intergroup Dialogue Program, Research Assistant, Syracuse University
August 2013 – August 2014

- Managed all high school and community initiatives including the management of work study students and graduate students serving as workshop facilitators.
- Designed curriculum for a high school Intergroup Dialogue course.
- Designed curriculum for an after-school Intergroup Dialogue workshops for local high school.
- Taught a high school Intergroup Dialogue course and after-school workshop.
- Assisted in the preparation of grant proposals, consisting of: Literature searches, the use of Qualtrics software for survey design. Grants included those specific to creating sustainable pipeline of Latina/o graduate students and faculty within institutions of higher education as well as the implications of certain undergraduate courses and their impact on student well-being.
- Conducted qualitative interviews for specific grants.
- Designed and conducted co-curricular workshops incorporating Intergroup Dialogue frameworks.

Office of Multicultural Affairs, Diversity Education Specialist, Syracuse University
Spring 2011 – Summer 2013

- Managed and implemented the *Conversations about Race/Ethnicity* (C.A.R.E.) dialogue program designed for new resident advisors within the university. Responsibilities included working with the Office of Residence Life to organize the dialogue circles, recruiting and hiring of facilitators (from various departments within Students Affairs and community organizations within the greater Syracuse community), creating evaluation reports to be shared with the Office of the Senior Vice President & Dean within the Division of Student Affairs.
- Designed and co-facilitated a C.A.R.E. dialogue circle for faculty and staff within Syracuse University.
- Served as the co-advisor for the Multicultural Empowerment Network (M.E.N.), a weekly program for male students of color across the Syracuse University campus.
- Advised the students participating in the Multicultural Living/Learning Community.

Onondaga Community College Summer Success Academy, Summer Program Director
Onondaga Community College, Syracuse, NY
June 2012 – August 2012

- Directed summer program for 30 incoming first-year students transitioning from the Syracuse City School District high schools.
- Managed and collaborated with OCC faculty and staff to create schedules, lesson plans, and academic success plans for each of the thirty students participating in the program.
- Advised individual students.
- Coordinated media requests.

UNIVERSITY TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teaching the Diverse Learner (EG 5303), Instructor, Lipscomb University
Spring 2017

First Year Seminar: Can We Talk? Intergroup Dialogue, Social Identities, and the College Experience (GND 1015), Instructor, Belmont University
Fall 2016

Foundations/Contemporary Issues of Education (EDU 2100/5010), Instructor, Belmont University
Summer 2016

Schools and Society (SOC 4150), Instructor, Middle Tennessee State University
Spring 2016

Social Problems (SOC 2010), Instructor, Middle Tennessee State University
Fall 2015

Intergroup Dialogue: Race & Ethnicity (SOC/WGS 230; CFE 200), Instructor, Syracuse University
Fall 2011 – Summer 2014 (Selected as part of the 2013 Syracuse University Humanities Center Symposium Seminars)

Dialogue in Action: Class Matters (CFE 600), Instructor, Syracuse University
Summer 2012

Living in a Diverse Society (LAS 300), Teaching Assistant, Syracuse University
Fall 2011

INVITED PRESENTATIONS/ PARTICIPANT

American Camp Association 2019 National Conference, Camp Includes Me Keynote Speaker
Nashville, TN (February, 2019)

Studio Tenn Theatre Company's Diversity Education and Community Panel, Panelist
Franklin, TN (October, 2017)

Tennessee Department of Education ESSA Directors Institute, Keynote Speaker
Franklin, TN (August 2017)

The City of Clarksville (TN) Diversity Symposium, Panelist
Austin Peay State University (May 2017)

TN Education Research Alliance, Reimagining State Support for Professional Learning, Facilitator Vanderbilt University (January 2017)

Nashville REAL Talk Forum on Race, Equity, and Leadership, Table Facilitator
Nashville, TN (September 2016)

Vanderbilt University Athletics (Football) Summer Speaker Series, Keynote Speaker
Vanderbilt University. (July 2016)

Nashville Continues the Conversation on Race: Access and Equity in Education, Panelist
Lake Providence Missionary Baptist Church. (April 2016)

Getting Real About Race (Part of the Belmont University Student Convocation Series), Panelist Belmont University. (February 2016)

Reclaim Ourselves Podcast on Race, Panelist
Murfreesboro, TN. (January, 2016)

Belmont University Bridges to Belmont Summer Program Orientation. Keynote Speaker
Belmont University. (June 2015)

11th Annual Sisters Empowering Sisters Conference (If You Were My Little Sister: Insights from a Big Brother), Panelist
Syracuse University. (March 2015)

Express Yourself: **A Syracuse University Community Conversation on Diversity and Inclusion Forum**. Keynote Speaker
Syracuse University. (October 2014)

RECENT WORKSHOP FACILITATION / GUEST LECTURES

How to Fight Racism, Strong Tower Bible Church, Curriculum Design and Facilitator, 2023

Learning, Diversity, and Urban Studies Seminar (EDUC 6620), Vanderbilt University
Guest Lecturer, April 2018

Cultural Responsiveness and Diversity in Organizations (EDU 6050), Belmont University
Special Visiting Lecturer, April 2018

Creating and Engaging in Caring and Empathetic Relationships, Classroom Spaces Across Cultural Differences, KIPP Nashville Professional Development Workshop (Nashville, TN), Facilitator, July 2017

Understanding Identity and Building Purposeful Relationships across Cultural Difference, Knowledge Academy Professional Development (Antioch, TN), Facilitator, July 2017

Building Purposeful Relationships across Cultural Difference, FiftyForward Diversity Training (Nashville, TN), Facilitator, May 2017

Exercising our Ears: Creating and Engaging in Dialogic Spaces, Battle Ground Academy Advisory Training (Franklin, TN), Facilitator, January 2017

A Justice Journey, Strong Tower Bible Church, Facilitator, July 2016

What's in a Name?: An Entry Point to Intergroup Dialogue, Knowledge Academies, Inc. (Nashville, TN), Facilitator, July 2016

Critical Conversations: Historical Explorations of Racial Inequity, Justice, and Reconciliation, Strong Tower Bible Church, Facilitator, February 2016 – May 2016

Race, Class, and Gender in Schools and Society (FYS 1050), Belmont University, Guest Lecturer, December 2015

Workshop on Diversity for the Onondaga-Cortland-Madison Counties Board of Cooperative Educational Services (OCM BOCES) 9th Grade World History Class
Facilitator, November 2014

Workshop on Active Listening for the Syracuse University Student Leadership Institute

Facilitator, November 2014

Education for Transformation (EDU 221), Syracuse University
Guest Lecturer, November 2014

Arts & Sciences First Year Forum (CAS 101), Syracuse University
Guest Lecturer, September 2014

Intergroup Dialogue Summer Workshop on Social Justice for Syracuse University Office of Residence Life
Facilitator, Summer 2014

Intergroup Dialogue Summer Workshop on Race/Ethnicity for Syracuse University Literacy Corp
Facilitator, Summer 2013 – Summer 2014

CONFERENCE/RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS

Soto, J.A. (2015, November). *Capturing a Community Testimonio: Oral History Interviews, Urban Latina/o Community, and Education*. Paper presented at The American Educational Studies Association (AESA) Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Soto, J.A. (2015, June). *Engaging Race in the Dialogic Space: The Impact of Racial Battle Fatigue for a Facilitator of Color*. Paper presented at The Northeastern IGR Conference, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY.

Soto, J.A. (2014, November). *The Latino Facilitator of Dialogues on Race: A Tale of Emotional Labor and Racial Battle Fatigue*. Paper presented at The American Educational Studies Association (AESA) & The International Association of Intercultural Education (IAIE) Joint Conference, Toronto, ON.

Soto, J.A., & Nastasi, A.W. (2014, November). *Generating Criticality and Coalition: Confronting the Black/White Binary in Race Dialogues*. . Paper presented at The American Educational Studies Association (AESA) & The International Association of Intercultural Education (IAIE) Joint Conference, Toronto, ON.

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