

Chapter 25

Collaboration, Community, and Collectives: Research for and by the People



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Abstract This chapter is a reflective piece on my research trajectory rooted in collaboration, community, and collectives. I provide a discussion of my development as a scholar-activist and my work with justice-centered research projects. This chapter aims to: (1) highlight work with and for our people; (2) highlight lived experiences grounded in struggle and hope; and (3) complicate the power that schools/universities have to liberate and oppress. I have consistently worked on these three goals, and yet they continue to guide my work and I understand there is no finish line; this work is not static, it is the work of humanity that is always evolving.

My path in educational research began at a very young age, probably around the fourth grade, when I started noticing that school policies and practices were simply unfair and discriminatory, albeit without a conscious or deliberate awareness of the reasons why. Some of the injustices I recall include my (and my peers) transition to a monolithic English curriculum, unjust discipline policies for very young children, and teachers and principals that devalued my home culture. Collection of data for my dissertation brought me back to my public high school to recruit potential interviewees and conduct some formal observations. This was not only a physical return but also an emotional and cognitive one. As I walked the hallways, I began some much-needed *introspection*. Recalling the days, I navigated my neighborhood high school with all the beauty and pain that came with those few but vital years in my life. For my dissertation studies (Dávila, 2005), I conducted a qualitative research study that provided an in-depth analysis of the experiences of Puerto Rican students in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and the narratives of my participants have shaped most of my research agenda for the past three years. Some of my findings included the priority of a Eurocentric curriculum resulting in the erasure of Puerto Rican history at best and demonization of those racialized or othered bodies at worst

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(Spring, 2016), and the desire for more teachers and counselors who understood their lived realities and valued their cultural capital. Another key finding uncovered the value one's Puerto Rican home identity provided as they navigated their schooling experiences as youth of color and for many, learners of the English language. Hearing these stories and reflecting on my experiences with schooling, my role as a scholar become clear—I was to investigate the curricular issues, inclusive of the nuances that come with these realities, while highlighting and learning from the stories of resistance, hope, and love. From this early research through today, my positions as researcher and scholar-activist have become critical to my work in three specific ways: (1) working with and for *our* people; (2) highlighting lived experiences grounded in struggle and hope; and (3) complicating the power that schools/universities have to liberate and/or oppress.

First, I want to define what I mean by “working with and for *our* people,” the *our* is contextual and varies depending on my role in various educational environments. For example, my first cousin (Ann M. Aviles, PhD) and I have worked together to lift the experiences of our own *familia* and as an extension we have worked to expose the inequities embedded in our hometown of Chicago and even more specifically investigated the CPS where we both matriculated from K-12. One piece that has been significant in our scholarly trajectory is an article titled, “Examining Education for Latinas/os in Chicago: A CRT/LatCrit Approach” (Dávila & Aviles, 2010). In this article, we explore the sociopolitical context of education policy, particularly as it relates to Latinx education, highlighting the status of Latinx students and teachers within CPS using a Latina/o critical race theory framework. This publication is part of a larger project that began in the early 2000s, where, as graduate students, we worked with community leaders and educators across Chicago to assemble two reports (Aviles, Capeheart, Davila, & Miller, 2006) on the status of Latinos in the CPS; this was my entry into the world of research. I was intentional in working with this group of researchers because I experienced the problematic ways research is conceptualized and disseminated in academia. This research experience was empowering, as I was able to see firsthand how research can impact policies and practices, it restored my hope in research and led to my grounding as a scholar-activist. In this work, I had the honor of being mentored by an amazing scholar-activist who has passed on by the name of Angela Perez Miller, her ancestral wisdom from countless years in CPS as a parent, teacher, and principal was invaluable then and now; her presence in the landscape of Latinx educational research is far and wide, and we miss her every day. In addition to Perez Miller's mentorship, this committee also worked with other elders in the community who had been fighting for equity in CPS for decades prior to this project.

Some of the specific practices of this collective that I have carried in my work include translating the reports in Spanish, collective reading and writing, and grassroots dissemination. Currently, I ask every publisher I work with if we can provide a Spanish version (for scholarship specifically about Latinx people); although these publishers do not often or always take on this charge, simply making this request creates awareness, and it is my intention that it leads to a change in broadening readership that is more inclusive. In community spaces, when creating flyers,

reports, and conference programs, the idea to translate is not only welcome. I have seen some researchers who themselves pursue this translation, taking their own time; most recently, I witnessed Ramona Meza, a Latina doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois Chicago also studying CPS take on an arduous translation task for the good of our people. Although the collective has changed over the last 13 years, what I have witnessed is the power of *our* people fighting for CPS, who are alums, parents, teachers, and counselors, on the ground. More recently, we have assembled a larger collective of Latinx academics who have lived experiences in Chicago and who have built their scholarship in an effort to challenge inequities and lift the beauty of resistance in our city. Together we assembled an edited volume titled, *Latinx education in Chicago: Historical trajectories, contemporary realities and transformative possibilities*, which is in submission with University of Illinois Press, and three fierce Latina scholars who are editing this volume are leading this collective. I have made it a point to lift other women of color in the academy because we are underrepresented and undervalued (Gutiérrez, 2012).

This lived reality has pushed my “prima scholar” and me to move our work into the sphere of investigating our firsthand experiences as Puerto Rican women in academia; we are undergoing a critical autoethnography. In a recent publication, we reflect on our identity and positionalities in higher education as Puerto Rican women. We have generated two scholarly publications as part of this intellectual journey. In the summer of 2018, a book chapter entitled “Afro-Puerto Rican Primas: Identity, Pedagogy, and Solidarity,” where we weave together our personal and professional narratives to highlight the struggle of our work as academics as well as the hope and love embedded in our work, was released. The second piece that has come out of this project is an article submission scheduled to be published in spring of 2019 for *Taboo* titled “Un réquiem para la lucha Afro-Boricua: Honoring moments of decolonization and resistance to white supremacy in academia,” which has a similar framing, but we focus more on our lived experiences in higher education; we close this article stating:

Continuing to build upon the mentorship and work we have been inducted into, we seek to continue to create opportunities that build solidarity amongst Black and Brown faculty as an act of resistance and self-determination within institutions of higher education. Often these collaborations lead to networks and professional organizations that provide literal and figurative space(s) to collaborate and grow through shared community. Other times these networks provide support when we are resisting the oppressive symptoms of white supremacy and its subsequent microaggressions. One of those instances occurred several years ago as one of the authors struggled to keep teaching courses that unpacked concepts of institutional racism and white privilege primarily to middle-class suburban students at a PWI.

One practice that Aviles and I undertake is being strategic about our order of authorship. Since we think and write together, we struggle with the traditional notion in higher education of ranking the weight of our work, in other words the common practice is that the person with a better rank and power takes the top spot in order of authorship, or in more equitable circumstances, the person who does more work and provides guidance for co-authors may be appointed as first author. However, we challenge these norms because we recognize the way academia values the order of authorship, which demonstrates a practice that pits scholars against one another, which we resist. As we state:

As an act of solidarity, resistance and healing/love to the mistreatment of women of color in the academy, we discuss and consider each other's positionality when making decisions regarding authorship order. Our approach to shared authorship is grounded in a pedagogy of collectivity and familial relationships. We do not view the project as something to be "completed"; instead we view it as an opportunity to learn, grow, and nurture each other's scholarship and humanity. We consider factors such as: where is our co-author(s) in their tenure process?: what is their teaching/workload?, etc. Further, as part of the writing process, we consciously and deliberately take time to check in with one another about personal situations (partnerships/marriage, divorce, children, familial responsibilities, etc.), centering and honoring our humanity—people over product; process over outcome. What we do in community with colleagues informs the ways in which we understand and interact with our larger social world, including personal relationships and struggles. While these actions may appear minor, it is these "small," but important acts of humanity that help us to nurture and heal. Our discourse guides our actions, and we are continually working to implement restorative and healing practices in spaces that too often dehumanize and objectify us and our work. (Aviles & Davila, 2018)

In the fall of 2016, I received an invitation to co-write a chapter for a book titled *The Long Term* which was published in the summer of 2018. This invitation came to a collective of activists in Chicago known as People's Education Movement, a chapter of a larger national collective. This work is mostly connected to my recent work investigating the school-to-prison pipeline because it connects to my own research interests, but also in my experience, working with doctoral candidates who are professionals in the police force, we aim to bridge the conversation with school officials and the Department of Corrections. This chapter, which was crafted in partnership with Free Write Arts & Literacy (www.freewritechicago.org), is titled "Redefining the Long Term: Schooling and the Prison Industrial Complex." And in this chapter, we state:

We listen to the youth writers who are affiliated with *Free Write Arts and Literacy*, a project based in Chicago that engages incarcerated and court-involved youth in the performing, visual and literary arts. By designing creative space for their students, *Free Write* incarcerated and court-involved youth to "become the narrators of their own stories and the authors of their futures" and in turn, supports young people in "developing educational and career opportunities that reduce recidivism. (Davila et al., 2018)"

Writing this chapter was an empowering experience as I was able to work closely with activists from all across the Chicago area. In this chapter we complicate power dynamics, collectively trying to understand and analyze the school-to-prison pipeline and the positionality of researchers/community folks working together to resist hierarchies of power embedded within institutions of higher education and other institutions such as prisons. Especially exciting was being able to publish with one of my mentors, David O. Stovall, PhD, Professor at the University of Illinois Chicago, who served on my dissertation committee 13 years ago, and while we have worked together on multiple projects, this is the first publication in which I was able to work with him at this level. This project was a collaborative research study where seven of us ranging from professors to youth writers, to community workers worked together to highlight the experiences of youth who are resisting the oppressive nature of the prison system through writing and the creative arts.

Another research project that I am currently working on aims to bridge our scholar-activist work in academia to our predecessors conducting activist work in Chicago, specifically connected to the Communiversity and the Chicago Young Lords. This partnership came after what Aviles and I wrote about in the forthcoming *Taboo* issue (discussed above) that mentions our familial connection to the Chicago Young Lords, and Richard D. Benson, II, PhD, an educational historian, invited us to collaborate with him on this project. Our first publication from this work was an invited chapter that is currently in press with Lexington Books titled ““Our political line was to *serve the people*”: Community education and the transformational praxis of the Chicago Young Lords Organization.” This archival research project has been in the works for years as the three of us have participated in writing retreats where we have supported one another as we navigate academia. Our identities are grounded in our lived experiences as kids of color growing up in Chicago during the 1980s and 1990s; not only is this an opportunity to understand the work of our people in Chicago communities better, but it also serves to inform our collective aim to make our city better for the kids of color who are navigating/negotiating many of the same issues such as police brutality, Eurocentric curriculum, disinvestment, gentrification, and racial/ethnic and gender discrimination.

Overall, reflecting on my development as a scholar-activist, I am both humbled by the powerful humans I have been able to work with and eager to keep pushing my justice-centered research projects. As highlighted at the onset of this chapter, my work aims to: (1) work with and for *our* people; (2) highlight lived experiences grounded in struggle and hope; and (3) complicate the power that schools/universities have to liberate and/or oppress. Finally, as expressed in this chapter, I have consistently worked on these three goals, and yet they continue to guide my work. I understand there is no finish line; this work is not static, it is the work of humanity that is always evolving.

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