

## **Book Review:** *Transforming Educational Pathways for Chicana/o Students: A Critical Race Feminista Praxis*. D. Delgado Bernal & E. Alemán, Jr. Teachers College Press, 2017. 126 pages.

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This book follows the first decade of a university-school-community partnership—called *Adelante*—with bilingual/bicultural students and their families to form a college-going culture in an elementary school with a large Latin@<sup>1</sup> student population. Created at Jackson Elementary in 2005, Dolores Delgado Bernal and Enrique Alemán<sup>2</sup> chronicled the path that the first group of students—L@s Primer@s—walked as they and their families participated in this partnership. One of the most important lessons outlined was to start small, recognizing the myriad assets and stakeholders that would be engaged to enact a sustainable partnership. Therefore, Delgado Bernal and Alemán commenced with a single dual-language kindergarten class, adding a grade level each year until the partnership encompassed a K-12 elementary, middle, and high school program.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors state in the Notes appendix that they use Latin@ to “recognize gender fluidity and to challenge the gender hierarchy and binary present in the Spanish language” (p. 99). There currently exist additional linguistic forms such as Latina/o or Latinx (in English) and latine (in Spanish) to disrupt these hierarchies and binaries, but I will follow the author’s choice for the purpose of this review.

<sup>2</sup> The authors refer to themselves in first person and by their first names throughout the book. I would like to honor their literary choice by writing in first-person.

### **Researcher Backgrounds**

When offered positions at the University of Utah, Delgado Bernal and Alemán (along with their spouses) did not want their children to attend schools with the stigmas and microaggressions commonly levied against students of color who live in predominantly White and/or wealthy areas (Steele, 2009; Sue et al., 2007), so they purposefully moved to the west Salt Lake community known as Rose Park, which has a much more substantial population of Latin@ students than neighborhoods surrounding the University of Utah. However, as critical scholars, the authors also recognized that schools in racially minoritized communities receive less funding (Bell, 2016) and are more prone to *institutionalized* deficits than schools in predominantly White neighborhoods (Smith & Stovall, 2008). Thus, Delgado Bernal and Alemán discussed how they could leverage their access to university resources to create equitable learning environments for students at Jackson, leading to the following guiding questions for the partnership:

- “What would it look like if a school began to cultivate college awareness and expectations starting with 5-year-olds?”
- How could we as university faculty and parents of children in the school utilize our connections to the

benefit of the students and families in this community that we were part of?" (p. 3)

### Formation of *Adelante*

*Adelante* means "forward" in Spanish, hence Delgado Bernal and Alemán sought to create a forward-facing, college-going culture with high academic expectations for all students, especially centering the historically disenfranchised Latin@ students at Jackson. The authors cite Urrieta's (2009) concept of *transas*, which are calculated practices to benefit marginalized students in Whitestream educational settings. One *transa* was starting small with a single grade at Jackson, which allowed them to gather every possible resource, grant, community fundraiser, and university resource in a "patchwork system" to initiate, grow, and sustain *Adelante*. Another *transa* the authors employed was reframing the messaging of the purpose of *Adelante* to strategically align to the university's mission statements of serving "all" students to leverage resources to benefit underserved students of Jackson elementary

As Delgado Bernal and Alemán labored to grow the partnership, the following community assets were engaged:

- field trips to the university so the Jackson students could envision themselves as future college students and become comfortable at the university (L@s Primer@s would visit the University of Utah nearly 50 times before leaving Jackson);
- engaging the families of students through *pláticas*: regular, informal conversations about their needs, experiences, and wishes for their students' education;

- parent workshops (resulting from requests in the *pláticas*) to help the Jackson families better understand concerns such as immigration laws, domestic violence, accessing legal services, sex education for children, childhood obesity—and perhaps most importantly—parental rights in school;
- graduate research assistants coordinating research and community liaison roles at Jackson;
- nearly 700 undergraduate first-generation college student mentors who mirrored the racial and linguistic assets of Jackson students;
- oral history projects to share Jackson Chican@/Latin@ students' family experiences and identities (these served to create solidarity among the families as well);
- after-school *baile folkórico* run by parents and university students;
- a patchwork of small grants to fund field trips, graduate assistants, and college mentors;
- and leveraging resources available to them as university faculty, such as initiating a *Diversity Scholars Program* to support first-generation students of color, many of whom served as undergraduate mentors for the Jackson students.

This book immediately captivated me as it begins with a conversation between Delgado Bernal, Alemán, and Octavio Villalpando<sup>3</sup> (who were parents of

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<sup>3</sup> Villalpando is the spouse of Delgado Bernal and started the partnership as a collaborating researcher, but later transitioned into a university administrator, where his support was fundamental in creating the *Diversity Scholars Program* to support

children at Jackson and faculty at the nearby University of Utah) and the Jackson principal who did “not want politics involved in the school” (p. 2, see also Lopez, 2003). The parent/scholar/activists cited statistics, state and national policies, and debates surrounding immigration (Solórzano, 1997), as well as the school-to-prison pipeline being a more solidified public narrative than the school-to-college pathway for Latin@ students (Alexander, 2010). As the meeting grew more heated, Villalpando stated, “As a parent in this school, I need you to care and understand how the children’s educational experiences are affected by these very significant issues” (p. 2). The administrator stormed out of the room and stated that the partnership was over before it even began. These “messy” (p. 5) tensions of navigating the deficit worldviews of some educators (Steele, 2009) while promoting the authors’ asset framework, exist throughout the book (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Their unflinching advocacy for students of color, while learning to trespass the “all” language of the university and school district, makes this book so useful for faculty seeking to form university-school-community partnerships (hooks, 1993).

### **Theoretical Framework of *Adelante: Critical Race Feminista Praxis***

Delgado Bernal and Alemán outline their theoretical framework, including the moral imperative to be scholar activists (Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2005), through the metaphor of a *trenza*—a “braid” in Spanish—which is a hairstyle commonly worn by both men and women in Indigenous and/or Latin@ communities.

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the first-generation undergraduate student mentors as they transitioned to university life.

The authors envisioned this metaphor both theoretically and pragmatically. *Theoretically*, they braided together the elements of Critical Race Theory and Latin@ Critical Race Theory (which they label “CRTs”) with Anzaldúan Chicana Feminist Theory in a complete *trenza* they label *Critical Race Feminista Praxis*. The CRTs informed their theoretical understandings of racism as systemic (Taylor, 2016), embedded (Parker & Lynn, 2016), institutionalized (Delgado, 2016), intractable (Bell, 2016) and intersecting (Crenshaw, 2016) with other aspects of identity including ethnicity (Solórzano & Yosso, 2015), language (Delgado Bernal, 2002), gender (Brah & Phoenix, 2016), ability (Artiles, 2016) and sexuality (Delgado et al., 2017). Most importantly, the CRTs contribute to the authors’ advocacy against perceived cognitive and cultural deficits against Latin@ students (Taylor, 2006), and to the idea that undocumented students are seen as problematic, burdensome, or “illegal” (Perez Huber, 2009). Moreover, Anzaldúan (1990) Chicana Feminist Theory informed the authors’ understanding of *Nepantla*, a Nahuatl word referring to the liminal spaces between worlds—the “in-between”—of identities, worldviews, and realities (p. 28). Indeed, Anzaldúa (2007) informed their thinking as co-existing as both colonizer and colonized as Latin@s; of being both insiders as parents of children at the school and outsiders as university faculty; and of the need to be navigating divergent worldviews between *nos/otras*—the *nos* (“us”) that understood the cultural and linguistic assets Latin@ students brought to Jackson and the *otras* (“others”) who held deficit worldviews of Latin@ students.

The second *trenza* speaks to the *praxis* aspect of Critical Race Feminista

Praxis and describes how the authors coordinated weaving together the assets and resources of the K-12 students, their families, graduate research assistants, undergraduate student mentors, the university, and the school (district) to initiate, grow, and sustain a college-going culture in Jackson (see also Stovall, 2016). This second *trenza* also allowed Nepantleros Delgado Bernal and Alemán to embrace the messy, confusing, and sometimes chaotic tensions and contradictions that arose as the authors organized a huge group of stakeholders with often contradictory worldviews to benefit the children in the school (see also Delgado Bernal, 2002).

### Transformative Ruptures

Perhaps the most important message of the book for faculty seeking to initiate, grow, and sustain partnerships is to foster space and time for *transformative ruptures*, which are “incidents, interactions, experiences, and moments where a disruption of pervasive coloniality, institutional racism, and systemic equity occurs” (p.29). Although the CRTs inform their understanding of the intransigence of racism (Delgado et al., 2017), these transformative ruptures did provide the authors hope in progression toward a more equitable and just future. One transformative rupture was a *choque*—a collision of divergent mindsets—regarding perceived deficits many educators held about the educational needs and family engagement of Latin@ students. One of the most poignant stories about these epistemological *choques* in the book occurred when parents found out that teachers were punishing students for various perceived offenses by making students sit on the hot asphalt during

recess. Despite many of the parent’s fear of surveillance and deportation, they mobilized against this harsh punishment, addressed the inhumane castigations, and received assurances from the school administrators that this practice would cease. Notwithstanding these assurances, parents found out it was still happening, so they mobilized and showed up to the district office and demanded a meeting with the administrator who oversaw Jackson. Despite being initially ignored by that district administrator, a more respectful district administrator met with them and guaranteed the practice would never occur again (see also Leonardo, 2016).

### Conclusion

The epilogue of the book features a graduation walk, where former Jackson students walk the halls in caps and gowns to show elementary students a milestone that they can envision. One of those graduates embraces younger siblings at the school and the authors comment that their mother served as the Adelante parent liaison for several years. These outcomes may not appear on standardized test scores (although those did improve among Jackson students during the time captured in this research) but are transformative ruptures that show elementary students and their families that there is a possibility of futurity in educational settings.

As a faculty member trying to initiate, grow, and sustain similar partnerships (Gambrell, 2019; Gambrell & Bennett, forthcoming; Gambrell et al., 2016; Gambrell et al., 2022; Gambrell & Freire, 2017), I have found Delgado Bernal and Alemán’s book invaluable, I have sought for transformative ruptures with school districts, university administrators,

and community members to create college-going cultures and more equitable learning environments for bilingual/bicultural students and their families (the references in this book alone are worth the purchase price for anyone considering university-school-community partnership work). One critique I thought of as I read was a desire to hear more about the micro-transas that took place to leverage the myriad of resources the authors gathered for the students of Jackson from university administrators, school (district) administrators, and various funding sources. However, in their final chapter Delgado Bernal and Alemán explain that while Critical Race Feminista Praxis works against the pervasiveness of racism and colonialism in K-12 schools, a holistic Neplantero recognizes that the work is deeply contextualized. The *praxis trenza* of Critical Race Feminista Praxis reminds me that our scholarship is nothing if it does not foster more just educational outcomes and learning environments for marginalized students and their families (see also Stovall, 2016). What this book does more than any other I have read, is give a *framework* of hope to be able to share with stakeholders that working against systemic inequities takes patience in ambiguity, nepantla in navigating diverse worldviews, unshakable belief in the assets students and their families bring to schools, and that sustainable outcomes often take more time and labor than expected.

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