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**NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION: EDUCATION AND
SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL SOUTH TEXAS**

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**NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION: EDUCATION AND
SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL SOUTH TEXAS**

by

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Dedication

To my wife and children; my parents and my brothers; my students and my Llano Grande colleagues; but above all, to Pablo and Karina, whose voices and spirits have tested and enriched our family.

Acknowledgements

Mis primeros maestros fueron mis padres, José Angel y Julia—que fuerza de padre y madre, if I could only approach their's... My brothers Pepe, Miguel, and Lauro are the best carnales any kid (and now grown man) could wish for. Me acuerdo cuando Pepe se quebro el diento, cuando Miguel le quebró la pierna a Lauro, cuando llevamos a Mami a la Virgen del Chorrito, cuando nos reunimos para la operación de Papi. They were all occasions of joy, struggle, and resiliency. I must acknowledge them and our experiences together as sources of strength; they are most important in shaping my identity, personality, and character. Beyond that, Pepe, who is a preeminent wordsmith, leyó todo este ensayo, and provided very valuable assistance. Miguel, who has been an exemplary mentor, continues to provide invaluable intellectual and spiritual guidance; he's been doing it desde que éramos chavalos.

The most important teacher in my life the last 16 years has been my wife, Yvonne. She teaches me daily about character, family, and what is most important in life; she is my most steadying influence. I also feed off my good friend Rice, who brings more zeal to life than anyone else I know.

Delia, Angie, Ernesto, Melissa, Martin, Celinda, Jay, Laura, Ricardo, Lauriano, Alfonso, and all other Llano Grande Center staff members have given me more than any teacher/colleague deserves; they have created the space and time so that I can complete this work. They provide the spirit for this document, and make up much of the data.

I acknowledge my dissertation committee for taking on a good risk, for allowing a classroom teacher from the Valley to be a migrant doctoral student. I never left the classroom, while I worked on this degree. This could only be done because of the steadfast support of my model academic mentors: Pedro Reyes, Angela Valenzuela, Emilio Zamora, Jim Scheurich, Jay Scribner, and our beloved Henry Trueba. I thank you and acknowledge your exemplary leadership.

I must especially acknowledge el gran Profesor Trueba, a mentor like no other. A couple of years ago, when he and his loving wife Ardie first visited my hometown in rural South Texas, el Profesor Trueba convinced me to get back to graduate school. He and my brother Miguel helped assemble an amazing team for my dissertation committee. With Pedro Reyes' sophisticated assistance and very able leadership, we were able to develop a plan to pursue and complete the degree. El Profesor Trueba was there at every turn, even while fighting a painful cancer illness. In the end, el Profesor read my dissertation and shared his own reflection—in essence, his own narrative of transformation. I acknowledge his loving words in the following space:

“These narratives are not the result of senior authors sharing with junior individuals their talents and experience; they are rather extraordinary discoveries of the strength of the human spirit. This is the reason why the descriptions are unique and extraordinary! G. Spindler

worked with many indigenous groups and innovated special approaches. Yali Zou visited places in China that no one else ever saw (villages, peoples, etc.). Trueba was involved with Indian groups in Chiapas and pursued complex issues of acculturation that taught him much about the human capacity for adaptation and change. Miguel Guajardo was intimately associated with the community and the culture of the family; he respected deeply the love of the family and the total dedication to children and their welfare. Francisco Guajardo was profoundly respectful of the youth culture and the capacity of youth to create new ways to cope with youth love. Foley identified the complexity of political systems and loved and respected with passion the nature of political systems that facilitated the survival of the ethnic groups, groups that had become highly marginalized. Francisco Guajardo followed with passion the historical processes that demonstrated human resiliency and respect for family and for youth. Without recognizing the power of youth love and originality, one cannot appreciate the accomplishments of youth.

This dissertation is a testimony of youth love and its unique dedication of youth to unselfish dedication and extraordinary capacity to love and sacrifice for others...

These are the most painful and difficult lines I ever wrote. I was exhausted and rather would sleep than write, but I had to write this before I forgot it.

With love." Trueba

**NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION: EDUCATION AND
SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL SOUTH TEXAS**

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This study shows how lives of teachers, students, and community members have changed as a result of a pedagogical approach based on story, relationship building, and community development. The study looks at 13 years of work of a high school teacher, his colleagues, their students, and members of the larger community, as they work to transform themselves, their schools, and their community.

The framework for analysis employed in this study is a hybrid that integrates the use of grounded theory as espoused by Glaser and Strauss (1967), common sense theory as suggested by Gramsci (1988), principles consistent with

critical theory (Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1997), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, this study utilizes research methods grounded on an assets based approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996), rather than the debilitating deficit-thinking models contested by Valencia (1997) and Guajardo (Guajardo, M., 2002). The study is a culmination of 13 years of field work, including stories collected through an oral history project and narratives created by students and other community members.

Micro narratives fill the larger narrative that illustrate and explain how theory and action have merged to create social change in rural South Texas.

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Context

This study focuses on the development of an approach to teaching and learning in a rural South Texas public school district named Edcouch-Elsa. Edcouch, population 2,500, and Elsa, population 5,500, were both born during the mid 1920s when the Southern Pacific and Texas Mexican Railroads were built through a strip of agricultural land approximately 16 miles north of the Rio Grande River near the southernmost tip of Texas.

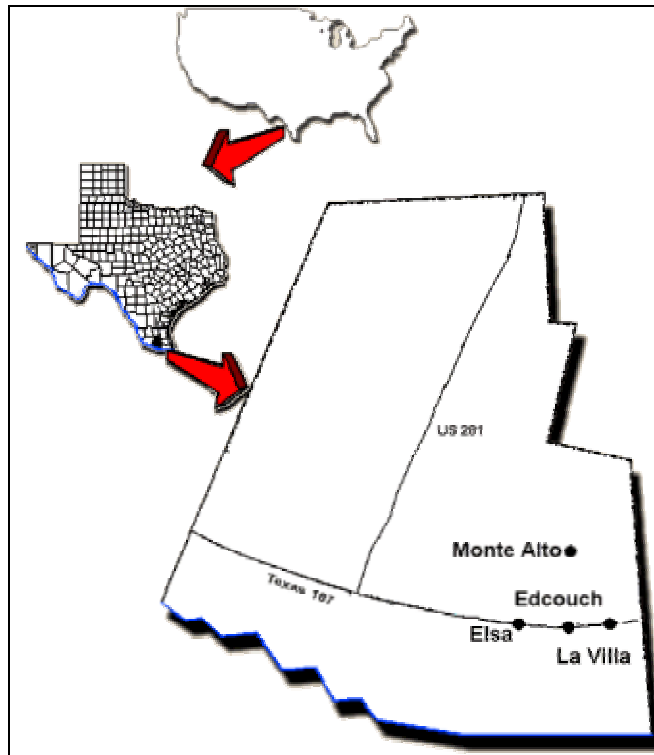


Illustration 1: Map of area. Courtesy of Jason Rodríguez, Edcouch-Elsa High School student.

In the early 1930s the two towns agreed to organize a public school district, and after much debate, both agreed that the original school facility would be built in Elsa, though the official name of the school would carry the name of Edcouch first; thus, Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District was born (Anderson, N., 1998). Many of the values espoused by the founders of the school resembled the values of policy makers and others who shaped the culture of the early 20th Century's Jim Crow South. Towns and schools alike operated under the dictates of segregation, and corresponding social and cultural conditions reflected this reality. As in most South Texas towns, Anglos lived in one part of town, and Mexicans lived in another. Local schools, segregated by ethnic groups, supported the racial social constructs; Anglos children attended one school, while Mexican children attended another. Consequently, a two tiered system evolved where leadership positions in the economy and in the schools were taken by Anglos, and most of the menial laboring jobs were occupied by Mexican people. These socio-cultural and economic conditions informed the backdrop for the growing resentment harbored by many Mexican American students, as well as the historical high school walkout of 1968. More than half of students attending Edcouch-Elsa schools in the 1940s and '50s were Anglo, but as immigration from Mexico accelerated during the 1950s and '60s, a demographic shift occurred. By the early '60s, Mexican American students comprised the large majority of the student body.

In 2003, close to 4,500 students attend Edcouch-Elsa schools and approximately 98% of the students are of Mexican origin. Though Edcouch and Elsa are still relatively small communities, numerous sprawling colonias surround the towns. Almost half of the student body resides in these colonias, or unincorporated communities. Between the mid 1970s and the early 1990s, Edcouch-Elsa schools held the dubious distinction as the poorest school district in the state of Texas. I grew up in Elsa, attended Edcouch-Elsa schools, and returned to teach at Edcouch-Elsa High School in 1990 after completing college studies. Through the ensuing 13 years, my high school students, community members, and I created a body of work that has distinguished Edcouch-Elsa High School as an exemplary learning environment. This dissertation chronicles the evolution of this work, with a particular focus on people's stories and the transformative value of those stories. Much of this has occurred through the stewardship of a nonprofit organization named the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, which we founded out of my classroom in the mid 1990s. Profound change has occurred between 1990 and 2003. In 1990, 29% of Edcouch-Elsa graduating seniors attended four year universities; in 2003, 65% of graduating seniors attend four year universities. In 1990, the Edcouch-Elsa senior class earned about \$1.5 million dollars in scholarships and other aid in preparation for college; in 2003, Edcouch-Elsa seniors secure more than \$3 million dollars in scholarships and other aid. In 1990, no Edcouch-Elsa graduates attended Ivy

League universities. Between 1993 and 2003, more than 80 students have been accepted in Ivy League schools, 51 Edcouch-Elsa graduates have enrolled. Numerous anecdotes also emerge that substantiate the deep transformation many students and other community members have experienced. This study documents those stories of transformation, and it also argues that the process students, teachers, and others undertake to collect, analyze, and reflect upon these stories is an effective learning method that cultivates student growth and can lead toward raising community awareness in students. This study is about chronicling the history of a community, collecting and analyzing narratives of change, and employing a pedagogical approach that fosters both personal and community development.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Joven...¿tú has tomado agua en este pueblo? En 1926, yo escarbé los ditches para sentar las paipas de agua para este pueblo...Yo soy fundador de Edcouch.” (“Young man...have you ever drunk water in this town? In 1926, I dug the ditches to lay down the water pipes for this town...I am a founder of Edcouch.”)

Isabel Gutiérrez, 1997, during first of four oral history visits

A VISIT TO DON¹ ISABEL’S HOME: A NARRATIVE THAT CHANGED A SCHOOL

It is usually hot in South Texas, and one hot November afternoon in 1997, a team of teachers and students from Edcouch-Elsa High School drove to don Isabel² Gutiérrez’s small, blue frame home in Edcouch, Texas, a rural border community approximately 16 miles north of the Texas Mexican border. Two rocking chairs, a coffee table, and numerous plants adorned the porch; La Virgen de Guadalupe and other religious symbols lined the exterior front of the house. Don Isabel stood by his door front, dressed in blue work pants, his typical white t-shirt, and rolled up cigarette between his withering yet hardened callous fingers. Supported by his silver cane, the 97-year-old man eagerly awaited his next storytelling session, as he erectly fashioned all 5 foot 2 inches and 95 pounds of his feeble frame. We had been there twice before and spent more than six hours

¹ Don and doña are titles of respect assigned to elders in the Mexican culture. This narrative refers to Isabel Gutiérrez as don Isabel as a show of respect, but also because that is how he was introduced and how we got to know him and build a relationship with him.

listening to his life history and getting to know him. He enjoyed our company, appreciated that students from the local school showed an interest in his life, his stories, and in the history of his community; and we looked forward to don Isabel's fascinating continuing oral history. He was ready to teach, and we were ready to learn in don Isabel's class.

Don Isabel captured our imagination and shook our entire view of history, community, politics, and education. Early in the interview process, a student asked don Isabel about the founders of the town of Edcouch. "Yo fui fundador de Edcouch," (I am a founder of Edcouch) don Isabel responded. "What do you mean by that, don Isabel? Wasn't the founder Edward C. Couch?" the student asked in his best Spanish. Undoubtedly this student, and his teachers, had fallen prey to what Donaldo Macedo (1994) calls a "poisonous pedagogy," which systematically provides information to students based on the dictates of what E.D. Hirsch (1988) calls "our common cultural" background knowledge. Don Isabel's post-common cultural awareness, however, dictated an entirely different truth. "No, no, no, joven...mira, tú has tomado agua en este pueblo?" (no, no, no, young man...listen, have you ever drunk water in this town?), he asked. The student said yes, and don Isabel proceeded to explain that in 1926, he dug the ditches to

² Isabel Gutiérrez was born on the day of the patron saint Isabel, Santa Isabel, and was thus named in honor of that patron saint. In many Mexican calendars, each day of the year honors a patron saint. Thus, the boy's parents gave him a saintly, albeit feminine name.

lay the water pipes to bring water to Edcouch. “Yo soy fundador de Edcouch,” (I am founder of Edcouch), he proudly proclaimed.

In stark fashion, don Isabel provided what Richard Delgado calls a “counterstory.” Critical narrators, suggests Delgado, “use counterstories to challenge, displace, or mock” accepted beliefs, premises or myths, especially those held by the dominant culture” (Delgado, 2001). As our teacher that day, don Isabel subverted the dominant paradigm instilled in many of us through traditional schooling and through the standard textbooks on history and culture (Foucault, 1984). We sat in admiration of this 97 year old South Texas pioneer who had labored in anonymity his entire life, but who had a great deal to teach us about our view of the world and even our view of ourselves. Don Isabel essentially taught us what Giroux describes as “tools necessary to analyze those socially constructed representations and interests that organize particular readings of curriculum materials,” (1997), and he even did it with a sense of humor. Before we left his house on our first oral history session, don Isabel asked, with a paradoxically serious yet light hearted voice, “Ya se van? Pero apenas voy en mil novecientos veintisiete.” (You’re leaving already? But I’ve barely covered up to 1927.) (Gutiérrez, 1997).

After four visits to his home, and dozens of stories captured, we developed a strong and respectful relationship with don Isabel. He also came to the school on three occasions: once to guest lecture in a world history class, another time to

visit the Llano Grande Center, a school and community based nonprofit organization my students and I founded out of my classroom in 1997. On a third occasion, don Isabel participated in a history fair at a local elementary school. On our last visit to his house, approximately a year before his funeral, don Isabel asked if we could help him repair his leaky roof. We did, and we found him additional assistance through a federally funded program that supported senior citizens, much as Helen Lewis and Suzanna O'Donnell describe in their work documenting oral histories in Appalachian communities (1990). Describing one interviewee, Miss Minnie, they recall college student volunteers helped repair Miss Minnie's home. She got "a bathroom and new floors and walls which she was able to enjoy for a short while before her death" (1990). It was important for us too, to go beyond honoring don Isabel's stories. We felt compelled to commit to a certain level of reciprocity; we did not want simply to take his story, in a fashion akin to what Sofía Villenas describes as the ethnographer as colonizer (Villenas, 1996).

Others who conduct oral histories similarly grapple with this issue. Irma Olmedo's recent article (1999) on her oral history work with Latina women in Chicago points to the importance of reciprocity as a central piece to oral history research. It should be viewed, she suggests, "not merely as what the researcher can return to the researched...but rather the ways in which the research process itself provides rewards and satisfaction and therefore meaning to participants"

(Olmedo, 1999). Similarly, it is important that we humanize the research process by attempting to build relationships with those we research, to create opportunities for rewards and satisfaction through the exploration of meaning, and to do what we can to make their lives better. In don Isabel's case, he helped us find meaning, while we legitimized him as pioneer and historian, and we also fixed his leaky roof.

After completing the oral history, we asked don Isabel permission to publish his story in the *Llano Grande Journal*, a school and community based publication, to use his story(ies) to teach a greater number of students and other community members. He agreed. We first took him a copy of the *Journal*, then circulated hundreds of copies to teachers throughout the high school campus. Shortly thereafter, we received a phone call at the Llano Grande Center. "It's don Isabel," said the teacher who answered the phone in relative amazement. He was surprised because don Isabel did not own a phone, nor was he known for making phone calls. He was, to be sure, a man from a bygone era, almost pre-industrial, agrarian, in style and manner. He called that day to request 30 copies of the *Journal* that featured his story; his friends at the Bluebonnet Adult Day Care Center (el "Bluvane," as he called it) had requested copies. We mobilized immediately, delivering said copies to the Bluvane. Ten minutes after distributing all the copies, the director of the Center approached me and said, "Mr. Guajardo,

do you know that more than half of these elderly who are reading don Isabel's story are illiterate.”

The literacy displayed by don Isabel's friends that day also influenced the way we thought, taught, and shaped curriculum. In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987), Freire and Macedo outline the different approaches to literacy ranging from the academic and utilitarian to the romantic approaches. They further posit that these literacies “have failed to provide a theoretical model for empowering historical agents...that is, they ignore the way language may either confirm or deny the life histories and experiences of the people who use it” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Don Isabel's story in the *Journal* confirmed and celebrated his 97 years of life, but it also moved his peers to want to “read” his story in whatever manner they understood it. As they “read” his story, they also exercised their considerable skills in “reading their world,” one in which they had taken part in authoring. Don Isabel as author, the student interviewers as researchers, and community members as readers gave shape to a new pedagogy. This pedagogy is consistent with Freire and Macedo's argument toward emancipatory literacy programs, where “Educators must develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy.” Through this oral history project, a new emancipatory literacy and pedagogy have emerged and have become important

elements through which a community and many of its people have been transformed (Gutiérrez, I., 1997; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

GROUNDING THE BROADER NARRATIVE

“I don’t know where we went wrong...thinking that learning comes from books instead of from people...and that the best learning happens in the university. I don’t know where we went wrong...”

*George Spindler
In conversation
Austin, Texas, Spring 2001*

Two notions principally ground this dissertation: (1) knowledge comes from people, their stories, their struggles, their triumphs, their pain; and (2) teachers and students learn best when they teach and learn in a community context. People’s stories, I have learned, are the richest material any teacher can use for instruction, for personal development, and even for transforming a community. Knowledge, spirit, and inspiration come from people, not from books; I have come to that realization after 13 years as a public school teacher, because I have listened to the wisdom and the stories of more than 350 of our elders through the oral history project my student and I operate. We have turned many of those stories into books, and the books are rich, to be sure.

Books and the written word occupy an important place in the chronicle of Mexican American people in the United States. Ramón Saldívar’s insightful analysis of Chicano literature as an expression of resistance, survival, and celebration argues for the vitality of a “dialectic of difference” (1990). Saldívar

writes, “The social world represented in the writings of Chicano men and women is an emphatically political one” (1990). Don Isabel’s story, however, combined with the comment by George Spindler, challenges Saldívar’s view of what literature means. Though Saldívar includes the corrido, the Mexican folk ballad, as a legitimate form of literature, this dissertation argues that the oral story exists as an even more influential form of discourse, and as a viable dialectic of difference as well, particularly as it relates to transforming young people’s lives, as well as the lives of elders and their community. Glenn Whitman, in his forthcoming book, *A Dialogue with the Past: Empowering Students to be Oral Historians*, quotes Edcouch-Elsa High School student Gilberto Perales, who said:

The oral history experience taught me a lot about myself and the people I live around, and my community. A lot of students just want to get out of here, but I realized through the interviews the importance of carrying on traditions and this community’s history. I learned that we were not merely living in a barren, desolate desert town at the tip of Texas. I also experienced the powerful emotions associated with the events that took place here and the uniqueness of our culture. Oral history brings history to life; it makes you excited about the past and how it affects you and teaches you. An author of a textbook has no connection to our town, the material is not geared to our personal history, but I could understand me and my community more by doing the interviews (Whitman, forthcoming).

While books are important, they are not central to building young minds, helping schools thrive, or revitalizing communities. Learning comes from people, primarily, from listening to them, working with them, and creating with them. This study shows a learning process where students, teachers, and other

community members engage in a development experience that has positioned young people for a wide range of academic, social, and cultural opportunities. It also demonstrates how the pedagogical process employed by the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development at Edcouch-Elsa High School has revitalized people and their community.

Since 1990, I have taught history, English, and Community Based Research studies at Edcouch-Elsa High School in Elsa, Texas; and I direct the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. Out of the Center, we (teachers, students, and other community volunteers) launched an oral history project as part of a larger ethno historical research project because we understood that as our elders passed away, hundreds of important stories died with them. Studs Terkel, one of the great oral historians of the 20th Century, suggested that while the United States is “the richest country in the world, [it] may be the poorest in memory. Perhaps the remembrances of survivors of a time past may serve as a reminder to others. Or to themselves” (1986). Since time immemorial, oral history has been an important means of communication. Greek historians Thucydides and Herodotus utilized the method to great effect. Before them, Homer kept his brilliant poetry alive through the oral tradition, and after the time of Christ, the Apostles kept much of Jesús’ teachings current and alive through the oral tradition. More recently, with the 20th Century rise of social history as a

system of inquiry, oral history offers a legitimate lens through which to learn from the past (Charlton, 1985).

At Edcouch-Elsa High School, we wanted to preserve the stories, and through the oral history project, we promised to confront the traditional method by which schools teach history. Moreover, we meant to “lift every voice” through the development and practice of a critical pedagogy in a public school district where ninety-nine percent of the student body was of Mexican ancestry (Bartolome, 2000). Nevertheless, in this same school every state adopted textbook generally disregarded the experience of Mexican people in the making of Texas (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1980; Apple & King, 1977; Ladson-Billings, 1995). We were nowhere in the history books. We addressed the issue by convening community people with teachers and students to develop a plan of action. The history of rural South Texas, we contended, had not been fully told.

Perhaps more importantly, we initiated the oral history project to have students understand themselves and their own identities more clearly. Identity as a form of self-identification and of self-understanding is also an important base from which “people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being” (Holland, 1998). Of course, Edcouch-Elsa High School students had a sense of themselves. They knew who they were, had an understanding of their school, and a general concept of their community; everyone, to some extent, has a kind of working understanding of himself. Students at this school, however, did not have

the privilege to understand themselves in relation to major socio historical, cultural, or economic processes in their lives. To a lesser degree, features such as ethnicity, gender, nationality, and sexual orientation were explored at school, but they were done in the course of social activities and not within the context of the school's organized or sanctioned curriculum.

Henry Trueba's essay on multiple identities in action makes the compelling case for a strengthened positionality for Latino youths because of their relative and often seamless ability to weave between cultures and between personal identities (Trueba, 2002). A vast and significant cultural capital further solidifies Latinos' sense of self and even sense of themselves in a community context. Trueba's more recent work, *The New Americans*, similarly argues the development of identity as an important process that often suggests personal success for Latinos. People's resilience and ability to succeed in south Texas, he argues, are often due to their ability to form strong ethnic identities and the subsequent ability to adapt to different social and economic environments (Trueba, 2003). Trueba's thesis is compelling and supported by the literature (Darder et al, 1997; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Guajardo, M., 2002; Min and Kim, 1999; Smith, 2002; Trueba, 1998; Trueba, 2002; Zou & Trueba, 1998). Unfortunately, public schools in South Texas, at least until the early 1990s, did not encourage the formation of self-identity through curriculum or through any other kind of systemic program. Any kind of identity building was done "outside

of what we did in formal schooling,” recalls Gabriel Farías, a local educator and lifelong resident of this rural community. Farías suggests he and his peers growing up in the 1960s and 1970s learned about survival, about group dynamics, and about their individual selves from the stories and experiences generated out on the streets, on the football field, on the basketball courts, or en las labores (in the fields) (Farías, 2003; Saldívar, 2002).

During my last few years of teaching, I have begun every semester by posing two questions to my students. First, I ask them where they live, physically. It is important I know the student’s street, neighborhood, or colonia; because I grew up in the same community, I can connect with every student through a story I have experienced and will recall that story as soon as my student announces where he or she lives. Secondly, I ask students, “What is your story?” The first question is easy to answer, but the second gave many students fits. “What do you mean, what’s my story?” is a common reaction. I cannot recall a single student failing to respond to this question, nor do I recall students unable to become expert about their story and their own reality. If done sensitively, and with due patience, the exercise of exploring one’s own story becomes a method through which a teacher creates conditions for student success. In addition, the process of finding, developing, and understanding one’s story is an academic, social, cultural, and psychological endeavor that makes school interesting, relevant, compelling, and often fun. Most importantly, through finding their own

story, students also explore and understand their own identity in a personal, familial, and community manner.

In the mid 1990s, my students and I initiated an extensive oral history project to achieve three principle objectives. First, we were intent on capturing the stories of elders in the community. Not a week went by without an important community elder passing away, and hundreds of stories and vast amounts of wisdom died with every one of those deaths. We understood the value of those stories and decided to explore ways in which the process of capturing the stories, as well as the content documented through the work, could potentially inform the formation of curriculum. Second, we understood the power of students' personal stories but also believed elder master storytellers could model the art of narration to the young people. Learning from the elders and their skills could also give youth a clearer understanding of themselves, both in terms of personal identity and as part of a larger community. Third, students needed to learn basic research skills, and the oral history project would help them learn a variety of skills ranging from understanding how to conduct an interview, to learning how to operate sophisticated digital technology equipment (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Guajardo, M., 2002).

Six years and several hundred oral histories later, we have come to the realization that through the hundreds of stories we captured, we learn much more than any book can teach us (Spindler, 2001). Spindler's quote on learning and

books is particularly relevant to the Mexican American experience, just as it is true of the experience of other marginalized groups in this country. The “silent voices” Trueba and others describe have not found a place into the content or pedagogical processes of how Mexican American and other children are educated. The stories and experiences of these populations are rich and can provide a vast reservoir of opportunities for schools and communities (Ladson Billings, 2001; Spring, 2000; Trueba, 1989, 2001). Just as importantly, the process of collecting the stories enriches students, teachers, schools, and the entire community. Students learn about themselves and their community. The content and rich skill building learned from the research process can inform curriculum development. Schools find important new community allies and partners in the storytellers, and the entire process simply revitalizes the spirits of individuals and community. “I didn’t know anyone was interested in my story,” said 97 year old Isabel Gutiérrez, “but I’m proud to share it...I think I have a thing or two to teach you” (Gutiérrez, 1998).

What follows are important parts of my work as a teacher, member of my community, builder of an institution, collector of stories, and storyteller. I live and work in what most consider an impoverished part of the country; I consider it the richest place in the world. Many see my students as at-risk; I see them as leaders of the world. The elderly in my community are viewed as burdens; I see them as conveyors of wisdom, and as those with whom I team-teach.

THE PROBLEM AND THE EMERGING STORY

In the fall of 1995, I began my 6th year teaching English and history at Edcouch-Elsa High School in Edcouch, Texas, and it was this year that I had the good fortune to meet Carlos García. During my 12 years of teaching high school, many students influenced my life, changed my approach to teaching, and helped me understand the richness they brought to school on a daily basis. Few students, however, challenged me or my pedagogical assumptions the way Carlos did; indeed, he disrupted the “discursive regimes” under which my teacher colleagues and I operated (Foucault, 1984). One autumn afternoon, as the history class reflected and discussed the proceedings at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1776, Carlos calmly raised his hand and asked, “Mr. Guajardo, were there any Mexican people around during the time Thomas Jefferson was writing the Declaration of Independence?”

“Of course there were,” I responded, “and you know that, Carlos.”

“Well, Sir, prove it to me,” he said, as he pointed to his history textbook. “I don’t see our people or any part of our experience anywhere in this book” (García, 1995). With that question, Carlos challenged not just me, but the entire establishment.

Carlos was right, and his question challenged me as a teacher to assess once again the kind of approach I used to teach history, language, and everything

else. It also forced me to evaluate the conditions and environment under which I worked. Though as a young teacher in the early 1990s I frequently challenged the school leadership to create curricula more relevant to the experience of our predominantly Mexican American students, and also questioned the quality of textbooks our school adopted, I had not yet persuaded the school to significantly modify its position or approach in either case. In a traditional sense, I worked as most teachers do, without the political influence or power to determine what or how I taught. Similarly, students and parents were powerless regarding the content taught, how it was delivered, or even who did the teaching. The dynamics at my school were such that students, teachers, and parents were essentially without power in determining issues related to pedagogy, curriculum, and instructional materials and practices (Scribner & Layton 1995).

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In the fall of 1990, the Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District owned the dubious distinction of being the poorest public school district in Texas. Since the mid 1970s, E-E had held on to that distinction based on the assessed value of property within a given school district. Numerous reasons account for this school district's property poor status, most of which are rooted in the local and even transnational history of the economy. There is the explanation of the boom and

bust cycles of the tenuous agricultural industry in the area throughout most of the century. Natural disasters such as the freezes of the late 1940s and early 1950s and the prolonged droughts help explain the circumstance. In addition, the economic shift from manual labor to mechanization of the 1950s that caused an impact on the regional economy; and the exodus of Anglos from the community following the economic downturns and the historic high school walkout of 1968 also explain the departure of wealth and the consequent existence of economic impoverishment in the area. All this created a problem in this rural border community, and the manifestation of that problem appeared clearly in the local schools, particularly at Edcouch-Elsa High School, my alma mater and the school where I returned to teach in the fall of 1990.

The problem of economic impoverishment in the community, coupled with the very public understanding that this was not only the poorest school but also one of the poorest communities in the state, created a realization in most residents' mind that they indeed were poor. To be sure, Suárez-Orozco and Páez document that poverty for Latinos across the country remains at an exceedingly high rate (2002). Rodgers also shows that poverty is particularly severe for Latino children, who comprise more than one-fourth of the children who live in poverty in the United States (Rodgers, 1996). Linda Smith further argues that historically, poverty has been designated as a "problem" for which indigenous and other marginalized populations are blamed. This thinking then feeds into popularized

theories of cultural deprivation and cultural deficits that weigh “even more securely on the people themselves” (Smith, 2002). In the South Texas context, Smith’s thesis is born out. As I saw my students in the early 1990s, being from Edcouch-Elsa somehow meant that one was inferior.

Countless stories of local residents describe how being from Edcouch-Elsa often elicited derisive comments from people who lived in other communities in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. “People from McAllen or from Harlingen frequently laughed at us and made snide remarks, just because we were from Edcouch-Elsa,” says local elementary teacher Gabriel Farías. “And, even at the university, we were humiliated constantly and treated as if we were from the backwoods, like we were some lesser kind of people, just because we were from Edcouch,” said Farías (2003). “The Valley was seen as underdeveloped by others across the state, but Edcouch-Elsa was viewed as the poorest of the poor,” said Amy Sánchez, who graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School and pursued her studies outside the Valley in the mid 1980s (2003). High school principal Robert Rodríguez recounted his first day as a freshman at the local university, when he answered the professor’s question of where he was from with, “I’m from Edcouch,” only to be embarrassed by the professor’s retort: “You’re from Edcouch, huh, do you know how to read?” (2002).

The humiliating anecdotes, which seem ubiquitous, the published reports announcing the school’s financial woes, and a seemingly deteriorating local

economy all created a collective psyche imbued in the minds of many locals. For me the disillusionment came when I saw it in the eyes and heard it in the words of my students when I returned to my alma mater to teach. The correspondingly low level of expectations most of my students had was a direct result of the social reality that existed locally, regionally, and even in other parts of the state. As a young, idealistic teacher who saw a world of opportunities for my students, I immediately faced the issue of helping they could take advantage of those opportunities. It was not going to happen, however, if they continued to believe what others thought of them, because they were from Edcouch-Elsa, lived, and went to school in the most impoverished community and school in Texas.

In addition, Edcouch-Elsa students, much like students in other educational environments, were subjected to a curriculum and a schooling process where their lives were not valued, where they did not see themselves or their ethnic group in the textbooks or in the curriculum, and where schooling was devoid of community life. This, to me, was a practical problem, as much as it was a social and cultural one. Moreover, the research problem is the focus of this dissertation. So, I asked myself: “How can I convince my students, their parents, the school, and even the community at large that they are better than what they think, and that there is a world of opportunities they can realize? And how can I do this as a teacher, by creating effective instructional practices and a pedagogy that corresponds to their realities?” I asked those questions of my students and of

myself, and they define the research problem I have spent the last thirteen years exploring, answering, and resolving. Teaching, learning, and research inform the research question and problem, and all are pedagogical processes rooted in both the traditional classroom as well as the larger classroom we know as the community at large.

CONDITIONS DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Local elders reminisce about the days when Edcouch was a thriving and emerging city in the Valley, a “real jewel” of the Valley, recalled Kate Bolten about her beloved hometown (Bolten, 1998). Both Edcouch and Elsa were founded as “planned Valley towns” located in the middle of what was seen as fertile agricultural lands that spread as far as the eye could see, but they were fertile only when there was water. In keeping with eastern United States and European architectural patterns, Elsa was designed in a style similar to Washington, D.C. Michigan and Pennsylvania Avenues led from the main road to a center point in town, just like in the nation’s capital. One big difference distinguished the two. Whereas in Washington the avenues lead to the capitol building, in Elsa the roads lead to the packing sheds. Large packing shed enterprises in both rural towns hauled large volumes of citrus and produce to urban areas across the United States and abroad, and the two railroad towns boomed from the late 1920s through the war years of the ’40s. A temperate

climate and an ample supply of rain helped agriculture thrive during that time period. Plentiful employment opportunities provided a pull factor for immigration from south of the Rio Grande as well as Midwestern states, so both Edcouch and Elsa grew at a steady rate. Industry thrived even during the Great Depression. New York native and entrepreneur Fred Vahlsing built a large packing shed in Elsa in the late 1920s and continued to import New Yorkers to form his management team throughout the 1930s. While the Depression ravaged the national economy, Elsa and Edcouch boasted of full employment. Ezequiel Granado recalls locals who routinely drove by the train depot in search of “white folks from the north” who sought relief from the oppressive conditions of the Depression. The packing sheds in Elsa and Edcouch provided the relief they sought (Granado, 1998). People liked being from Edcouch and Elsa. “Sure I came from a small town, but I was proud to be from Elsa, and I told others that too,” said long time Elsa resident Niles Anderson of the time he spent at Texas A & M University in the late 1940s (1997).

The good economic times, however, were short lived. Paradoxically, rural south Texas only seemed to have a good thing going when employment was readily accessible, even if it was during the Great Depression. A thriving agricultural industry fueled this era of productivity and wide scale employment. This industry was built on an infrastructure conceived by early 20th Century entrepreneurs who created an extensive canal and irrigation system that worked

effectively during the first half of the century. The regional agribusiness was also strengthened by the ample supply of cheap labor, or as Texas Congressman Lloyd Bentsen Jr. characterized in the late 1940s, a labor supply of “peaceful and docile” Mexican workers (Acuña, 1988; Almanac, 1950; Montejano, 1988; Zamora, 1995). A steady water supply, an abundance of cheap labor, and favorable year round weather became powerful factors that defined a burgeoning political economy that also produced a two-tiered citizenry that defined mostly by race (Acuña, 1988; Barrera, 1979, Montejano, 1988; Zamora, 1995). These socio political and economic conditions also gave rise to educational institutions that supported the two-tiered system (Foerster, 1999; San Miguel, 1987; Trueba 2003). Public school districts in the Valley established segregated schools, typically one school for the Mexican-origin children and another for the Anglo children (Calderón 1950, 1998; Guajardo, M., 2002). The long-term impact of this institutional and structural reality helps explain much of why this community had become so impoverished by 1990.

Some who dreamed of wealth and prosperity through their investment in agriculture realized their ambition in the early 20th Century. Laborers fleeing the hardships of the perpetually unstable Mexican economy also found abundant employment opportunities in the fields of South Texas. Few people, though, anticipated the severe freezes of 1949 and '51. Few also anticipated the profound impact the mechanization of labor would create among the laborer population,

which was primarily of Mexican origin. Few predicted the long droughts of the 1950s, or those of the latter half of the century. The climate and a high demand for laborers persisted between 1920 and the late '40s. Nevertheless, the Great Depression only minimally affected the harvests of the 1930s. And because the wartime economy demanded that South Texas continue to grow vast amounts of citrus and produce, business and civic leaders in the Valley were lulled into believing the agriculture boon would last forever (Granado, 1999; Limerick, 1987; Robertson, 1985; Scott, 1937; Stambaugh & Stambaugh, 1974; Worster, 1991).

Educational institutions predicated on the values of an agricultural economy continued to operate on those tenets, even as agriculture declined in importance. Whereas Edcouch and Elsa counted more than a dozen vibrant packing sheds during the 1930s and 1940s, the developments of the late 1940s and '50s set the communities' course on a very different path (Granado, 1998; Smith, 1998). Two large robust operations, Vahlsing Incorporated and Engleman Gardens, mirrored the boom and bust cycle of economic and community life (Simon, 1990). Created in the '20s, both ceased to operate by 1970. Vahlsing's produce packing shed, known as the largest packing shed in the world under one roof, hired workers from both sides of the border and shipped food to places across the world, even feeding American soldiers abroad during World War II (Granado, 1998). Engleman Gardens similarly played an important economic and

social role; it boasted of its own labor camp where more than 500 people resided at any one time, and the leadership that managed the enterprise played an important role in setting labor and educational policy in the region.

The loss of employment opportunities, coupled with a work force ill equipped to deal with the new economies of the 1950s and '60s, created unfavorable conditions for a local labor force that had largely bypassed schooling because of the widespread employment of the previous three decades. A laborer who toiled in the sheds for close to two decades recalled that he didn't have to go to school after he was about 12 or 13 because, "there was plenty of work for anyone who wanted or needed to work." The problem was, suggested Israel Cavazos, he didn't learn the skills he could have learned at school because the pressure of taking a job was so strong. Besides, he said, his family needed him to work. What he bypassed, he realized, was learning the skills required in a post agricultural economy (Cavazos, I., 2000).

Two compelling factors influenced schooling opportunities during that era. First, as Israel Cavazos suggested, the availability of jobs, particularly manual laboring opportunities, provided a compelling factor that persuaded many local youths to enter the workforce. Cavazos recalls numerous boys who falsified their date of birth in order to gain employment. "I was 12 and told them I was 15," he said. "And I got the job working at the Vahlsing shed" (Cavazos, I., 2000). Others shared similar experiences. Adán Escamilla exaggerated the truth

to find a job at the shed because, “we had to show we were big and strong enough, and besides, there were labor laws,” Escamilla recalls. Secondly, Escamilla remembers that local schools preferred to have their boys work at the shed, rather than being in school. “They said at the school that we were held back two or three times in the first grade because we hadn’t learned English well enough,” he said. “But that’s not the truth. I think they held us back so that we’d drop out and go work in the fields...where they really wanted us,” he continued. “What kid would feel good being in the first grade at the age of 10 or 11,” he asked rhetorically, “with a full moustache and already looking like a grown man?” Though Escamilla managed to graduate from Edcouch-Elsa High School in the early ’50s, he remembers the large majority of his contemporaries who did not enjoy the same good fortune (Escamilla, 2000; San Miguel, 1987).

In a recent essay, Luis Moll and Richard Ruiz further expound on Adán Escamilla’s comments when they argue that Mexican American youths early in the 20th Century were controlled and coerced by a process that Angela Valenzuela calls, in a more modern context, “subtractive schooling” (Moll & Ruiz, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). An intense Americanization schooling process that rejected Mexican American children’s language and culture became the method through which these children were educated. Control and coercion, Moll and Ruiz argue, were principal modes used to educate these children throughout the American Southwest. (Acuña, 1988; Moll & Ruiz, 2002; Spring, 1997).

Prominent Mexican American scholar George I. Sánchez decried the treatment of Latino children in public schools in Texas well into the 1960s, during which time he challenged intelligence testing and other discriminatory methods used by schools to label Mexican American children as less intelligent and genetically inferior (2002). Among other things, Sánchez argued that these children be taught in their mother tongue, as a way to ease them into the mainstream language and culture. Sánchez's pioneering work gained political strength after his untimely death in 1972. The stories shared by Escamilla and many other locals support the literature. Edcouch-Elsa schools mirrored the broader educational landscape across the American Southwest (Acuña, 1988; Barrera, 1979; Montejano, 1987; San Miguel, 1987).

The agricultural economy established in rural South Texas early in the 20th Century, and the contemporaneous growth of public schools supported each other. Workers needed to work the fields, and the school system, whether intentionally or not, provided at least a part of the labor force as it set itself up as an unfavorable place for Mexican American youths coming of age (Acuña, 1988; Apple, 1982; Montejano, 1988; Spring 1996). Numerous locals who attended schools between the 1930s and the '80s contend that the school system supported the labor market demands, and much of that reality simply mirrored the racial realities in the community. Bill Foerster recalls how he did not know any Mexican American children as he attended elementary school in Edcouch because

they were at the “Mexican school on the north side of the tracks.” As adolescents, he did not know them either; most had dropped out and “never made it to the high school” (Foerster, W., 2000).

Local people fared well, relatively speaking, with employment during the 1930s and '40s. Local elders recall a golden age in community life when “everyone had a job” (Anderson, N., 1998; Murden, 1998). Thriving stores lined the streets of rural Elsa and Edcouch, and customers came from cities such as McAllen and Edinburg to shop for clothing and other items in the bustling downtown of Elsa. Things changed dramatically, however, after the freezes of 1949 and 1951 devastated an entire generation of citrus trees and damaged previously profitable vegetable harvests (Johnstone, 1998; Trueba, 2003). After the freezes, workers found difficulty in securing employment similar to what they had enjoyed for more than two decades. Contemporaneously, the emerging mechanization of labor also displaced large numbers of workers, as large combines, tractors, and other agricultural machinery took the place of manual laborers (Bix, 2000; González, J., 1998; Valdez, 1991).

Equipped with agricultural labor skills, local residents began to seek employment opportunities in places that offered agricultural work. In this context, thousands of south Texas displaced workers became part of the migrant labor stream to places in the Midwest, the Texas Panhandle, California, and the Pacific Northwest. By the late 1950s and early '60s, many local residents began

to seek opportunities outside South Texas, where more conducive weather conditions almost guaranteed employment in agriculture (García, R., 2001; Runsten, 1995; Valdes, 1991). The industries of the 1930s and '40s have been long gone from this rural region, but the people are not. Whereas the nation suffered only a decade long economic depression, this rural region in South Texas has experienced, and continues to experience, an elongated economic depression. The infrastructure for this long struggle was built during the late 1920s and early '30s, when agricultural enterprises and the public schools were given definition. As the 20th Century ended, the region suffered acutely from the legacy of its labor and educational institutions. Today, some 45% of Edcouch-Elsa High School students are classified as migrant, and 89% of students are classified economically disadvantaged (AEIS, 2002).

THE COSTS

The price of these conditions has been enormous. Between the 1970s and early '90s, the unemployment rates in Edcouch fluctuated between 25% and 40%, depending on the time of year; if migrant laborers were back from their yearly sojourn to northern states, the high number of migrants swelled the unemployment figures. Elsa has not been much different; unemployment and lack of economic growth paint an unpleasant portrait of this rural area. The introduction of a Federal Empowerment Zone to the region in the mid 1990s has

provided for physical infrastructure development, and the robust national economy of the 1990s helped bring local unemployment rates to about 20% in 2002 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1990-2002). Indeed, the economic cost to the development of this rural area has been significant.

Bourdieu and other critical social theorists argue persuasively that dominant ideologies, knowledge, and other schooling practices are reproduced consciously through direct use of content and teaching that attempts to reproduce ethos and tenets of the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Freire, 1973, 1974, 1987). Similarly, Giroux (1983) and Apple (1990) posit that schools in nations such as the United States operate, often unconsciously, using a “hidden curriculum” that socializes students into the dominant ideology and neglects and/or distorts the histories of historically marginalized groups. In this regard, the history of the mainstream culture, the corresponding knowledge imbued in it, and the values that emanate from it become legitimized above the histories and realities of other population groups. Michael Apple’s important question, “Whose knowledge is of most worth?” was answered in Edcouch-Elsa schools, just as it has been in most other schools in this country through the use of the curriculum and pedagogy that favors the dominant group (Apple, 1993). Late into the 20th Century, Edcouch-Elsa schools continued reproducing the cultural values of the dominant ideology.

Historian Ron Takaki has produced a body of work arguing against the Eurocentric, myopic approach American public schools have undertaken to teach history and other disciplines (Takaki, 1990, 1994, 1996, 1998). Challenging the great events and great personages mode of telling history, Takaki takes a “bottom up” approach by allowing every day people who make history to tell their stories. A wide range of substantial contributions, many of which have gone undocumented and largely unnoticed, have been made by Mexican Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and many other population groups, claims Takaki, and that must be part of the content we teach in schools (1994, 1998). Chicano historian Rodolfo Acuña similarly protests the traditional historiography. He has produced several important books that both contribute to the historical record, and combat the mainstream historical method. In *Occupied America*, Acuña emphatically claims that history and the telling of history in this country are exercised by a set of racist impulses that favor Euroamericans, and marginalize Mexican Americans and other ethnic and racial groups (1988).

While content that reflects the experience of the dominant culture is a significant part of books used in schools and an important part of what is taught, an equally problematic subject is how teaching and learning are done. Henry Giroux’s critique (1997) suggests that positivistic mechanisms and impulses utilized as an integral part of the schooling process fail to connect teaching and learning to the more important realities of children’s lives. Social, political, and

historical dimensions often go neglected because of the deterministic nature of the scientific approach schools take. Unfortunately, much of the teaching and learning occurring in public schools seems to happen in a relative vacuum, devoid of the realities of every day life (Giroux, 1997; Guajardo, M., 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Historically, the method through which this cultural reproduction has occurred in schools is through what Paulo Freire coined the “banking” approach to teaching and learning; Edcouch-Elsa High School’s experience is no different. Teachers typically give information to students through lecture methods, or through use of a textbook, then evaluate students based on how well they can recall that information. Essentially, the teacher puts data in the “bank,” or the mind of a student, and demands the student simply recall that data. In Freire’s words, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 1973). The banking concept, in Freire’s view, is a strategy by the dominant society to keep students, particularly those historically marginalized, from gaining a true understanding of their history, their communities, their collective plight, or even of themselves. When I graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School in 1983, E-E schools had thus subjected me to 12 years of learning through the banking concept, and when I returned to my alma mater to teach in the fall of 1990, no other method of instruction had taken its place.

The cost of this schooling reality in this community has been enormous, just as it has been in rural communities across the country, and even across the world. As the community grew more and more economically depressed following the freezes of 1949 and '51, and the global economic shift toward mechanization, the schools did nothing to address the economic woes that affected the daily lives of students and their families. Students who performed well in local schools typically attended college and subsequently sought employment opportunities outside the region, and as jobs became more scarce in rural south Texas, few skilled youths opted to stay in the area because of a lack of opportunity. Throughout, the schools did little to influence the economy of the community; instead, they went about the business of exporting local talented youths to other parts of the state and country, in many cases never to hear from them again. Jacinto González recalls leaving Edcouch in the mid 1950s after graduating from high school. He learned many skills and built a successful business in a large city, but he never returned to address the economic needs of his hometown. “We didn’t bring our new expertise back,” says González, “nor were we ever encouraged to think that way” (González, J., 1998).

When I returned to Edcouch-Elsa High School, few of my students were interested in discussing the economic welfare of their hometown, nor were they interested in being part of a community revitalization effort. “We just wanted to get out of here,” said Ramiro Gomez, from the E-E Class of 1992. “We certainly

weren't interested in fixing anything in the school or in the community, even though we knew there was a lot of fixing that needed to happen" (Gomez, 2003). In the classroom, students were primarily interested in having teachers give them information so that they could memorize it and then "spit" it back during the test. They knew only the banking concept. Learning through different methods of inquiry, community-centered instruction, or public spirited methods was uncommon in this public school, and as one of my current students suggests, "I don't believe that kind of learning was happening, or is happening, in too many places...anywhere" (González, A., 2003).

Freire's counter to the banking approach, the use of a "problem posing" method, presents itself as a radically different way of teaching and learning, but it is the method, I contend, that students in communities such as Edcouch, Elsa, and other rural and isolated places need for the purposes of individual and community change. "Students," says Freire, "as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (Freire, 1973). But the values that gave birth to public schooling in Edcouch-Elsa schools early in the century persisted late into the century. "When I went to school in the 1940s and '50s, we talked about the classics, about mainstream history, science, and math," recalled Bill Foerster (2000). During the early to mid century, the education of Mexican American children, both during the age of segregation and after *Brown*

vs. *Board* in 1954, focused on Americanizing them through intense instruction in the culture and language of the dominant society (González, G., 1997; Montejano, 1987; San Miguel, 1987). Years after desegregation, similar processes persisted. Rarely, however, were children required to think about issues in their community as part of the instructional process. “We were seldom...in the schools... presented with the problems of our hometown,” said Gabriel Farías, who attended local schools in the 1960s and ’70s (Farías, 2003). There was no sense of urgency to inspire students to become active agents of change, nor was there evidence that the public school had a role in creating that change. Schools operated on the banking concept, and they functioned to reproduce the values and tenets of the dominant culture; schooling, then, became an enterprise that perpetuated poverty and imprisoned youths to be little more than receptors and regurgitators of knowledge. Gaining a social consciousness, or transforming community, was not priority for the local public schools.

Nor was awareness of one’s personal identity a priority. Eloy Garza taught at Edcouch-Elsa High School for more than 30 years and recalled that with a brief exception in the 1970s, during the height of the Chicano Movement’s influence in public schools, curriculum and instruction rarely focused on training students to understand their history, their community, or their family stories. “In the mid 1970s,” recalled Garza, “we brought in a textbook on Mexican American history, but we never built on that experience...we didn’t go anywhere with that”

(Garza, E., 1998). In this context, students, particularly Mexican American students, gaining an awareness of themselves through classroom instruction was difficult to achieve. While scholars such as Trueba argue that Latinos in this country negotiate multiple identities in a variety of contexts with uncanny deftness, much of this occurs in spite of Latino students' experiences through instruction given in school (Trueba, 1999, 2002).

The assumptions that drove local schools late in the century resembled those that existed early in the century, and the cost was a lack of student awareness of who they were historically, culturally, and even individually. Moreover, local students had little or no concept of the dominant forces that made their community and their school into one of the most impoverished places in the country. Elvira and Marcelo Lima argue that Latino children in American schools face numerous obstacles, but among the most overbearing is the difficulty children face in forging an identity grounded in their cultural and community experiences. Simply put, a racist and discriminatory schooling system represses an identity formation process consistent with children's cultural values and beliefs. The Limas contend that masking the history of Latinos in the public schools contributes to the creation of stereotypical ethnic myths, rather than true representations of Latino children's experiences (Lima & Lima, 1998). Without a clear sense of themselves, Freire argued, students were much less likely to "develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in

the world as transformers of that world.” Instead, students remained oppressed by a schooling system that stripped them of their identity, their history, and their willingness to change their community (Freire, 1973).

In this context, one of the greatest costs is of yet another rural community’s contribution to the global phenomenon known as the “brain drain” (Ghosh, 2001; Gruchow, 1995; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002). Young people from isolated communities across the world demonstrate a willingness to leave their hometowns in pursuit of greater opportunities in cities or other more developed places. Writer Paul Gruchow tells that when he grew up in a small community, he learned in school and through the conventional wisdom that he needed to leave his rural hometown if he was to achieve any level of appreciable success (Gruchow, 1995). The rate of departure is particularly acute in underdeveloped areas, and rural south Texas is no exception. Jacinto González spoke of his desire to leave this rural community soon after he graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School in the 1950s, and that trend persisted for the ensuing forty years (González, J., 1998). Students left to join the armed forces in large numbers during the 1960s and early ‘70s, and a number of the more talented and motivated students typically attended the local university, but most who graduated from college did not return to Edcouch and Elsa. “We all had a love for our community,” says Gabriel Farías, “but we had never really been mentored on how

to do work with it, how to ask questions about it, or how to solve existing problems” (2003).

In his recent book on the relationship between the public and public education, David Mathews makes a convincing case for the connection among healthy communities, productive public life, and an engaged school system (1997). Similarly, Cynthia Parsons argues for the civic involvement of young people as the most effective method to create future leaders and healthy communities (1995). Not involving students in community life, not engaging students through problem posing approaches to learning, and not showing them how to “worry” about their community, as George Spindler says, is a high price to pay (2001). Under these circumstances, young people will leave their community, never to return. Or, they will stay in their community but will be ill-equipped to deal with the seemingly daunting task of transforming the place in which they live.

Maintaining the status quo in this kind of school would further impoverish the school and community. Reproducing the values of the dominant society has not been an entirely positive experience for students in this border community, nor has it been a reaffirming feeling for students not to see themselves or people who look like them in their history, literature, or other textbooks. As students learn about popular culture and other things school offers, they gain what Giroux calls “disturbing pleasures” and fall into the insidious trappings of

commercialism, consumerism, and a set of corporate values (Giroux, 1994). In this context, students in general are at a disadvantage in terms of finding spaces and places in which they can explore their own identity, find their unique voice, or engage with issues in their community (Giroux, 1997). Not exercising any of these in an effective manner is cumulatively deleterious to students themselves and perhaps even more hurtful to the future of the students' respective communities. On the contrary, in order to find their voice, their true identity, and their place in their community, students must be engaged in an inquiry based learning process where they pose questions, create responses, and celebrate themselves, their families, and their communities.

RESPONSE TO PROBLEM

A response to the problem of identity-building at Edcouch-Elsa High School, valuing students' cultural assets, engaging community as part of teaching and learning, building young leaders, and capturing the story of a community is what my work as a learner, public school teacher, and community developer is about. This dissertation pieces together the history of a rural community in South Texas, while it looks at the process undertaken to build that history. First, however, I must place my students, their parents, our community, and myself in proper historical context. Many people have participated in gaining an understanding of this history. We have learned from the storytellers and from the

young researchers who have collected the stories and built relationships with the elders. Through research processes and community building work, we have reached a collective understanding of our place in history, which according to Freire is a prerequisite to gaining a critical consciousness necessary to be agents of change (Freire & Macedo, 1995). The oral history work, combined with initiatives aimed at creating conditions for youth leadership development has allowed us to reach praxis, where pedagogy and action merge and consequently transform individuals and community.

A rural region in South Texas has been revitalized because of this collaborative and participatory work that honors the cultural values of the community, celebrates the stories of the master narrators, and builds the leadership skills of youths along the way (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Guajardo, M. 2002; Navarro, 1995; Smith, 2002; Wiggington, 1972). The response also includes the formulation of an emerging theory grounded in school and community practice, which integrates the energy and passions of youths, values the wisdom and stories of elders, and builds on the values and assets of the community (Guajardo, M., 2002).

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

INTRODUCTION

The literature that informs this study appears in three different forms. The first is in the form of stories my students have produced that have, in one way or another, transformed them and/or others; hundreds of narratives my students have created and/or told through the years have served as catalysts for change. The second form is a product of the oral history project we continue to operate out of Edcouch-Elsa High School³; numerous stories told by community elders add to the review of this literature. As Ronald Takaki (1994, Linda Smith (1999), and Miguel Guajardo (2002) suggest, I privilege people's voices by including their words in this study, as I review narratives and other literature. In addition, the mixed methodology utilized in this study is born out of grounded and common sense theories, which validate what Gramsci refers to as the organic voices. These voices and narratives, in an inductive style supported by grounded methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), then inform the emerging pedagogy and theory that this study argues has optimal value for teaching and learning. The reader will see narratives written by youths, descriptions of oral history studies, and excerpts from life histories. Even autobiographical works make their way

³ More recently, we have also initiated an oral history project out of the Department of Educational Leadership in the College of Education at the University of Texas Pan American.

into this study. Finally, a more traditional look at selected and relevant academic work weaves into the review of the first two forms with the intent to provide context and greater insight to the selected narratives of change.

A PERSONAL STORY

When I was an undergraduate in the 1980s, I recall being frustrated because of the dearth of primary resource literature on the experience of Mexican people in the United States. It was an area of interest to me as I studied English as an undergraduate and history as a graduate student, and I read everything I could find that dealt with the topic. The secondary literature was not as scant. I read William Madsen's *Mexican Americans in South Texas*, which infuriated me because of the stereotypical depiction of Mexican people (Madsen, 1973). Arthur Rubel's *Across the Tracks* (1966) was slightly less stereotypical but similarly failed to capture the social and cultural realities of the people I knew who lived in South Texas. Stambaugh's *The History of the Rio Grande Valley* (1974) described the history of Anglo people primarily and subsequently described Mexican people as only peripheral to the development of South Texas communities. Florence Johnson Scott (1937) provided a more balanced account of South Texas development, though she too subscribes to the great events and great personage approach of telling history. Otherwise, most of the secondary literature looked much like Madsen's, with the exception of the seminal

anthropological work of Américo Paredes' *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1959) and the older work of Carlos Castañeda's on the history of the Catholic Church in Texas (Castañeda, 1936-1958).

While the primary written literature was sparse, I understood the stories of Mexican people along the border were voluminous. I had firsthand experience because I heard hundreds of those stories while growing up along the border. I remember telephoning home one night in the fall of 1986 and sharing my frustration with my father. I recall telling him in Spanish that it did not make sense that there could be so many rich stories that described the character, strength, and spirit of our people, but that very little of it had made its way into books. "You told us hundreds of stories when we were kids," I told him, "but they're not written anywhere...You should write your autobiography, so those stories can be passed on and read by others." My father took my words as a challenge and proceeded to write his autobiography during the ensuing six months. During the day, he swept and mopped floors as a janitor at Edcouch Elementary School, and in the evenings he wrote what would become one of the most cherished of the family's possessions—*Anécdotas de la vida de José Angel Guajardo: por insistencia de Francisco Guajardo* (1986).

My father's experience as a writer may be an anomaly, particularly given his limited formal schooling background. He attended school to the 4th grade in a remote Mexican village, an experience similar to many Mexican immigrants who

enjoyed only a few years in the Mexican schooling system. My father's presence as a storyteller, however, is not unique. The preponderance of Mexican men and women I have known in my life are exceptional storytellers, and most had minimal formal schooling. Part of my purpose as an educator is to respect the value of these people, their stories, and to formalize their stories as literature and knowledge. Through this process, their experience and voice surface as content and technique to be studied in schools. Moreover, the storytellers emerge as important teachers of history, culture, language, and sundry issues. Giroux argues for the importance of a teacher's voice because it reflects, "the values, ideologies, and structuring principles that give meaning to the histories, cultures, and subjectivities that define the day-to-day activities of educators." Through those voices, teachers provide the knowledge and wisdom necessary to allow "students to develop the power of critical consciousness" (Giroux, 1997). As my father continued to establish himself as teacher, writer, and critical pedagogue, I similarly took the responsibility of creating spaces and materials to allow my students to gain a critical awareness and to transform their way of thinking and their way of life.

When Carlos García asked the question whether Mexican people existed in 1776, he provoked others to think of more culturally appropriate methods to represent our existence. In her bold and compelling study *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2002), Linda Smith outlines a series of responses to a query such

as Carlos'. For indigenous peoples especially, Smith asserts, a wide range of research projects have been used to great effect in different parts of the world by indigenous populations to claim their history, culture, and essentially their existence. Among twenty-five indigenous projects, Smith describes "Storytelling" and "Testimonies" among the more powerful methods employed. Stories are useful for passing down beliefs and values from one generation to the next, and use the "storyteller to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story" (Smith, L., 2002). Stories also open painful wounds as they describe injustices and oppressive conditions, but because the people who experienced those injustices generally convey the stories, they represent a different truth from most textbooks. Those books, Joel Spring maintains, function as tools of the dominant society to "deculturalize" minority children, and to reproduce the beliefs, values, and stories of the dominant culture (Smith, L., 2002; Spring, 1997).

I fall into the category Antonia Darder describes as a Latino student, and teacher, who "may not learn as well by traditional means" (1995). My life experience, much like those of my students, defines more clearly my worldview, than does a book or set of books (Darder, 1995). In part because of this realization, my students and I have developed a "pedagogy of difference" much as Pericles and others describe in their new collection (2003). This pedagogy is fundamentally rooted in stories of people such as don Isabel Gutiérrez, but it is

also based on my story, and the stories of my students: an approach to teaching and learning uses oral history and other methods of research to decolonize traditional ways of thinking and learning (Gutiérrez, K., 2003; Smith, 2002). My role as teacher, activist (Ruggiano, 1998), and researcher (Kincheloe, 2003) is to engage my students, their parents, and other community members as part of a reflective process to rethink education for the purposes of individual, school, and community change. The teacher as researcher role, moreover, is essential if teachers and students are to be well equipped with the data necessary to create change (Kincheloe, 2003). What follows is an example of one of the several hundred oral histories we have collected during the past few years. In this case, we interviewed Rosa García because her granddaughter Myrta was a student in my class.

CREATING LITERATURE THROUGH RESEARCH: NARRATIVES OF GRANDMOTHER AND GRANDDAUGHTER

Rosa García's Story

Rosa García was one of the most highly anticipated oral histories we conducted last year. “I want to interview my grandmother,” said Myrta Ventura at the beginning of the school year, “but she’s in Utah now and won’t return until late January.” Since Myrta was born in 1983, she has been part of the yearly family trips to Utah and Wyoming in search of seasonal agricultural work. Since the 1950s, South Texas families have been making the annual trips to work in the fields of the Texas Panhandle, states in the Midwest, and California. Approximately half of Myrta’s classmates at Edcouch-Elsa High School are part of the migrant stream, and during the past decade and a half, more and more migrants are venturing to the fruit orchards of northeastern states such as New York and Vermont, or mid Atlantic states such as Virginia and North Carolina. Mexican and Mexican American farm laborers are in every state in the country (Akin, 2000; Griffith, et al, 1995; García, R., 2001; Velez-Ibáñez, et al, 2002).

Myrta’s grandmother first came to class with her daughter, Myrta’s mother simply to meet the class. She could spend only forty-five minutes with the class, however, really only enough time get to know each other on the surface. “My husband is in the hospital today, and I have to be with him at 2:30,” she said.

Myrta's mother also had a time constraint. "I drive a bus for the Weslaco schools and have to be at the bus barn to get my bus at 2:45, so we need to leave by 2:20," she explained. Therefore, we used the time to get to know each other. "How do you feel, Mrs. García and Mrs. Ventura, about Myrta and her college possibilities?" I asked them. Both women's eyes became misty. Myrta's mother especially became emotional; she had to turn away from the students as her tears rolled down her cheeks. Myrta, too, became emotional. "We love Myrta, but we've been preparing ourselves for this," said the mother.

"She will be the first one in the family to go to college, so we're very proud of her," said the grandmother. "We'll miss her, but she has our full support."

With that, the class bid farewell to both women, with the expectation that Rosa García would return to class in several weeks for an oral history.

Two weeks later, Mrs. García returned to class. Even before she set foot in the classroom, the students seemed excited about the imminent visit: even as they set up the technology, the stool, the glass of water, box of tissue. Everyone loves Myrta. When Myrta first began doing work with the Llano Grande Center during her freshman year in high school, it was difficult to get a word out of her. Today, she is a seasoned public speaker, having presented at several statewide conferences and even in front of representatives from national foundations. Regardless, she presents herself in an unassuming posture, as shy, demure, and

consummately respectful. Nevertheless, like many other migrant students, Myrta is tough, strong-willed, and smart. The students also like Myrta's grandmother, so when Mrs. García walked into the classroom, the students stood (as per usual), and they greeted her with a big, warm hug. "Me da gusto verlos a todos (It gives me pleasure to see all of you)," she said.

Though Mrs. García is fluently bilingual, she preferred to converse in Spanish, so the students interviewed her in Spanish. She told the story of when she was born in "El Rincón del Diablo (the Devil's Corner)," in Edcouch in the early 1930s. "People claim to have seen the devil in the Rincón del Diablo," she explained. "Pero yo no lo he visto. Nomás pura gente buena he visto yo ahí" (But I have not seen him. I only see good people there), she says. Mrs. García was born and raised in a segregated Edcouch, where Mexican people lived on the east side of Llano Grande Road, and when Mexican people were not allowed "to loiter" in the downtown after 6 p.m. The only Catholic church in town was built in the middle of the Rincón del Diablo, the largest Mexican barrio in Edcouch.

As a matter of public policy, people such as Mrs. García were also relegated to segregated schools. "Yo fuí a la escuela mexicana que estaba en el Rincón del Diablo, estaba en un army barrack" (I went to the Mexican school in the Rincón del Diablo; it was in an army barrack), she said. She liked the familial environment at the North Edcouch Elementary School, though she also understood the limitations for the students. "Muy pocos de nosotros salimos de la

escuela mexicana y fuimos a la high school” (very few of us finished the Mexican school and went to the high school). Conditions at the North Edcouch School were fundamentally different from those at the Red Brick School, which was about a mile south on Llano Grande Road. The Mexican school had outhouses, one water fountain for everybody, and poorly lit rooms. The Red Brick School, on the other hand, was a newly built, spacious school with indoor restrooms, good lighting, and more experienced teachers (Calderón, 1948; San Miguel 1987).

Economic conditions forced Mrs. García and her family to become migrants in the 1950s. The increasingly mechanized economy of the 1950s, the decade long drought, and the hard freezes of the early 1950s displaced a substantial number of South Texas agricultural workers (González, J., 1998; Montejano, 1989). For the Garcías, the migrant stream became the harsh alternative they were forced to pursue. For more than four decades, Rosa García has toiled in the fields of Utah and Wyoming, where the family spends almost five months of the year. In Utah, she and her husband bought an old house some years ago, as they did in Wyoming. “My grandparents bought an old, big house in Utah that used to be a brothel. And in Wyoming, they bought an old church. We stay in both houses when we go up in the summers,” says Myrta lightheartedly.

Mrs. García demonstrates a fierce yet noble pride in her experience as a field worker. “Trabajando en la labor, piscando fruta o vegetables es algo muy

sagrado. El trabajo es sagrado y la comida es sagrada” (Working the fields, picking crops is something very sacred. The work is sacred, and the food is sacred), she said. Her emotional commentary elicited a response from student interviewers, who were moved by her passion and wisdom. One student asked what she meant by “sagrado” (sacred), to which she stressed that people should be proud of their work in the fields. It is a noble act that contributes to society in an honest and dignified manner, and young people should understand that, just as they should understand the sacrifices that many people make to put food on their, and everybody else’s, table.

Rosa García told extraordinary stories, but it was clear that what she was most proud of were her grandchildren, especially Myrta. She told the story of when Myrta began to fly from Utah to the Valley once she passed to the 8th grade. Because her parents understood the value of school, they drove Myrta to Salt Lake City every August, saw her board an airplane, and sent her on her way in time for the first day of school at Edcouch-Elsa High School. Myrta became the modern migrant. Mrs. García told the story with great pride. Her stories, in fact, transformed Myrta as well; the week after her grandmother’s oral history, Myrta began to construct her own story. Chicana scholar Aída Hurtado in her new book *Voicing Chicana Feminisms*, suggests a pattern in Chicanas’ behavior toward intentionally creating opportunities to empower their daughters (2003). Mrs. García was clearly intent on doing just that by encouraging Myrta to tell her own

story, to do well in school, and to go to college. Hurtado also challenges herself and others to create the spaces for Chicanas to express their own voices (2003), and heeding that advice, we now turn to an excerpt from Myrta's narrative.

Myrta Ventura's Narrative

“Edcouch, Texas, is the only place that I can truly call home, but as a migrant it isn't the only place I live in. Every year as school comes to an end and the heat begins to burn, my family packs our bags and boards up our house. It would be nice to say that leaving gets easier every year, but I cannot. It's gotten tougher every year. I can't say goodbye to my friends because I'm not really leaving, and I can't get sad because I know that I'll be back. Sometimes the only thing you can do is close your eyes for five minutes, because that is how long it takes to leave Edcouch and Elsa. Then, when you open your eyes, all you can do is hope that the three months of upcoming labor will speed by.

I can honestly say that up until my twelfth year of life I did not know what work was. Then one morning before the sun rose, my mother shook me out of bed and told me to get up. It was time to work. I didn't take the moment seriously because it was summer, and I was still 12. No one under 20 woke up before the sun, especially when you didn't have school. Who was I to break this unspoken rule? Unfortunately, that didn't pass through my parents' minds.

The moment initiated my new stage of life, as a worker. I was to rise at the same time as the adults, and to do the same work as the adults. So at 12 years old my summer days were going to be spent in the fields. We started off thinning peaches, the job that I hate with all of my heart. We rose at five in the morning, to make the day shorter and cooler, and terminated each day at around three. This cycle continued for the first month, and proceeded with the picking of raspberries, cherries and blackberries for the last two months. While other kids were at home watching TV, and going swimming, I was beneath the sun in my peach tree wearing my long sleeved shirts.

I did not complain as I worked because I understood that this is what my parents needed me to accept. If I complained, I would only make myself look foolish because every other person there wasn't complaining. So, every morning as I rose my heart sank, and I longed to make the sun disappear or the clouds pour their rain. My 12th summer of life was spent in denial and confusion.

I am now eighteen, and I've gone back to Utah as a worker for the last five summers. As each summer passed, I learned things that I know other people would take a lifetime to learn. I experienced life with a new perspective, and I found myself being thankful to my parents for teaching me what hard work is. The opportunities that this type of work offers are overshadowed by society's stereotype of migrant farm workers. Positive effects are blurred by the negative statistics and other data that researchers, the media, and others collect.

My summers spent in and with the land have educated me. I still deplore thinning peaches, but I have an understanding of life and nature that makes my heart race. Every day that I begin before the sun is to my benefit. With this teacher, I have become a better student, not only of school, but also of life.”⁴

Like don Isabel before her, Myrta utilizes a strong political voice as she challenges “researchers, the media, and others” because of the manner in which they misrepresent her experience as a migrant farm worker. Aronowitz and Giroux (1990) have suggested that narratives of the downtrodden often provide stark contradictions to the recollection of history. Slave narratives, for example, offer dramatically different accounts from what traditional historians recall of the peculiar institution, much as other historically marginalized people describe their “counter memories” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1990). Myrta and don Isabel offer their own counter narrative as they affirm their identities in their own terms,

through their own voices, and in their own words. Gay (1995) writes, “Counter-memory breaks down the master narrative of Eurocentrism, attacks cultural hegemony, and penetrates the grand myth that U.S. society is a homogenous, unitary cultural system” (Gay, 1995). In cultivating a “pedagogy of difference” (Gutiérrez, K., 2003), we create spaces for young and old alike to be part of laying down a foundation for what Gay says can transform “society to achieve greater cultural representation, justice, and egalitarianism” (1995).

The summer after the oral history with Myrta’s grandmother, Mrs. García died in Utah after contracting pneumonia. According to family explanations, however, Mrs. García felt satisfied to have seen Myrta get into the college of her choice. In fact, Myrta used her personal narrative to gain acceptance to Brown University. Myrta took her experiences and the stories of her grandmother to Providence, Rhode Island, and she plans to pursue a Ph. D. in earth sciences after graduation. Thereafter, she intends to return to Edcouch to participate in creating a haven out of her neighborhood, el Rincón del Diablo.

Traditional history or literature books do not include stories such as Myrta’s narrative, or the story of her grandmother. Experiences such as those do not, simply put, reflect the values or beliefs of the dominant culture, so they are excluded from the books. Our work with oral histories is a direct challenge and

⁴ Myrta’s narrative also appears in Miguel Guajardo’s 2002 Ph.D. dissertation. Miguel and I facilitated Myrta’s class together and were both present when Myrta’s view of herself was transformed, in part as a result of her grandmother’s stories.

response to the traditional method of developing literature, as well to the traditional pedagogies. Similarly, Linda Smith's (2002) call for the creation of decolonizing pedagogies for indigenous people, and Kris Gutiérrez's (2003) writing on pedagogies of difference support the production of narratives such as Myrta's and her grandmother's. Elvira and Marcelo Limas suggest that population groups that have been historically marginalized must create a "pedagogy of the excluded," as part of a larger program to empower themselves (1998).

Other Sources

To create this pedagogy of the excluded, I have become an active and aggressive researcher, much in the manner Joe Kincheloe calls for in his updated *Teachers as Researchers* (2003). Antonia Darder's article on critical Latino educators (1995) and their role in empowering Latino students in this country presents a compelling theoretical explanation of critical race theory that Latino teachers should study, understand, and practice. Freire's historic and compelling work (1973, 1974, 1987) also serves as a model and method of critique, particularly his writings on problem posing approaches to teaching and learning, as well as his work with Donaldo Macedo (1995) on literacy. Donaldo Macedo's provocative essay on "poisonous pedagogies" (1999) adds to the growing body of work that we use to deepen our critique of injustices in public education and in society.

I draw on a good deal of secondary literature from critical race theory. Regarding story, Derek Bell and Richard Delgado show how to use story as a central narrative form. The nature of this dissertation is particularly compatible with the storytelling form (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995). Jim Scheurich's writing on the racialistic assumptions imbedded in school policy is also an important work; it is particularly useful in demonstrating how to understand the archeology of knowledge and cultural assumptions (Scheurich, 1997). Gloria Ladson-Billings' *The Dreamkeepers* (1997) and *Crossing Over to Canaan* (2001) are persuasive testaments to the importance of understanding race, culture, and community to educate children of color effectively. Ladson-Billings presents a strong argument for the integration of culturally relevant pedagogies in schools across the country (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings provides an important model for the work of Llano Grande Center at Edcouch-Elsa High School. In her seminal article on culturally relevant pedagogy (1995), she suggests that teachers she researched who were effective with African American students met three criteria. (1) These teachers showed an ability to develop students academically and thereby achieve academic success. (2) They also helped demonstrate a willingness to "nurture and support cultural competence" in their students, and (3) they helped their students develop a "sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Wortham & Contreras, 2002).

Paulo Freire's writings support much of Ladson-Billings' theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. A prolific thinker and educator, Freire posited the bold theses of how to educate the oppressed and subsequently how to develop pedagogy to liberate oppressed people (Freire, 1973, 1974). Through his very important work, Freire has influenced at least one generation of scholars, and continues to impact the lives of educators and institutions alike. Trueba also makes important contributions as he utilized both Freirian and Vygotskian principles when he argues for a pedagogy of hope in *Latinos Unidos* (Trueba, 2001). Henry Giroux's body of work is impressive and useful as well. His *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope* provides an insightful discussion on creating spaces for students to showcase their voice; before that, however, he makes the case for the importance of the politicization of teachers, who must understand history and the role schools play in the reproduction of cultural values (1997). Jean Anyon's analyses of how political economies affect the well-being of schools are very useful commentaries that help explain the intersection of history, economy, and political decision making in the context of schools (Anyon, 1980, 1997).

Smith's description of testimonials (2002) as an important method toward decolonizing traditional methodologies finds great support by those who study life histories and narrative forms (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1997). Olmedo's (1999) work on life histories of women provides an effective model, as does the critically

important life history produced by Rigoberta Menchú (1996). Though Stoll (1999) and others have found Menchú's descriptions questionable, Trueba's (2000) persuasive call for a cultural and linguistic understanding of Menchú's reality brings into question what is precise and accurate in qualitative research (Scheurich 1997; Tierney, 1999, 2000; Wolcott, 1994, 1995). The purpose of my work as a teacher, researcher, and community builder is not necessarily to question the veracity of people's accounts as they share their life history with my students and me. To be sure, we corroborate many of the stories as we conduct other oral histories, and even search through newspaper archives or books on selected occasions. However, the dearth in the literature pertaining to the stories shared through life histories, as well as the exclusive nature of books, makes this a difficult exercise. Unlike Saldívar's search for and analysis of existing literature in *Chicano Narrative* (1990), this work is about creating a body of literature, recovering stories, developing young researchers and leaders, and building a community.

We collect and create much of our literature through the oral history process, and for that, we consult a range of sources. Eliot Wiggington's chronicle of the Foxfire oral history project (1972) in northern Georgia communities serves as an important model for our work. Helen Lewis's work collecting stories in Appalachian communities (1990, 1995) is also useful, as is the body of work produced by Studs Terkel (1986). To understand the science and mechanics of

conducting ethnographic and oral history fieldwork, my students and I consulted numerous sources; most useful among those were articles by George and Louise Spindler, most of which appear in *Fifty Years of Anthropology and Education, 1950-2000* (2000). Thomas Charlton's *Oral History for Texans* also provided useful advice (1985) as we produce literature through oral histories.

The primary literature we have created is voluminous, as I draw from the several hundred oral histories we have collected and from student oral histories and testimonials. The secondary literature, though sketchy, covers an appreciable range. The historiography on Mexican Americans in the Southwest offers several relevant sources from which to draw, including Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America* (Acuña, 1988). As an activist historian, Acuña challenges the stereotypical representations in historical literature of popular scholars such as Walter Prescott Webb (1952) and J. Frank Dobie (1964) as they described Mexican Americans as "noncooperative, lackadaisical, and lazy" (Rippa, 1997). Webb and Dobie were but among the better-known writers; indeed, legions of other scholars similarly wrote about Mexican Americans in stereotypical and debilitating terms. David Montejano has added measurably to the historiography with his award winning *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas* (Montejano, 1987). As a sociologist writing history, Montejano ably delves into the historic issues of race relations and how they impacted the formation of economies, politics, and an entire state. *Anglos and Mexicans* also brings to light the

important early work of historian/anthropologist Paul Taylor, who early in the 20th Century gained access to the candid voices of Anglo farmers in south and central Texas.

The historical research of Arnaldo Deleón offers a substantial contribution to the field of Mexican American history. Deleón's early work on the 19th Century Tejano community in *They Called Them Greasers* (1983) and *The Tejano Community* (1982) are groundbreaking, as is his more recent work on community building in Houston (Deleón, 1989). Historian Neil Foley focuses on the south-central Texas political economy and suggests that whites, blacks, and Mexican laborers all came together in a laboring pool that propelled cotton and other economic industries in the region (1997). Emilio Zamora also looks at labor issues in communities along the Texas-Mexican border and persuasively argues that Mexican laborers were anything but passive and lazy (Zamora, 1993). Like Zamora's work, much of the recent historiography on Mexican Americans portrays them as active agents who strove relentlessly for survival, for the well-being of their families, and for their communities.

Patricia Limerick's book on the American West provides an interesting lens through which to view emerging western communities. In *Legacy of Conquest*, Limerick's argument that towns in the West were filled with broken promises, sounds much like the experiences workers from the North suffered when they migrated to South Texas towns such as Elsa and Edcouch. Limerick's

legacy of conquest theme also captures the reality of many Mexican immigrants who underwent a conquest of sorts as they were subjected to harsh economic conditions and in many cases to treatment as second-class residents in South Texas towns (Limerick, 1987). Richard White (1991) and Donald Worster (1994) similarly describe the history of the West as a rugged existence where those who succeeded did so because of their ability to form strong communities. Their work, along with Limerick's, effectively debunks the Turnerian notion that the experience of the American West best explains the American character, one born out of successful experiences of rugged individualism that people had as they conquered the West (Hofstadter, 1974).

Several important works on the history of education in the United States are useful to this study. Joel Spring makes valuable contributions to the understanding of American schools and their formation, particularly as public schools have impacted minority groups. Spring's breadth of scholarship is impressive. On one hand, he probes the life and influence of Horace Mann and his pioneering efforts with the establishment of the common school movement (Spring, 1995). On the other hand, Spring forcefully explains how American Indians and other minority groups in the United States have been deliberately and systematically stripped of their ethnic culture by a public school system that has historically attempted to deculturalize its students (Freire, 1974; Giroux, 1997; Spring, 1996; Taba, 1962).

Mario Barrera's important work in *Race and Class in the Southwest* provides a theoretical explanation for the development of a segregated society throughout the Southwest (1979). Institutional life grew out of that environment, and schools were no exception, Guadalupe San Miguel's *Let All of Them Take Heed* describes lives of Mexican American children in segregated schools in Texas (1987). Historian Abelardo Baeza focuses on segregated Centennial School in the West Texas town of Alpine (1992) as a place where Mexican American children were similarly Americanized. Martha Menchaca and Richard Valencia describe the ideological foundations that informed racially segregated schools early in the 20th Century (1990). San Miguel's work covers a good deal of the 20th Century and traces the emerging civil rights work of Mexican American organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (San Miguel, 1987). Armando Navarro's book on the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) is another useful study of the impact of a civil rights movement on the Chicano Movement and on the education of Mexican American students in Texas. Navarro documents MAYO's influence in orchestrating school walkouts through Texas, including the historic Edcouch-Elsa High School walkout of 1968 (Navarro, 1995).

The seminal work of George I. Sánchez in Texas provides this dissertation important intellectual themes, particularly as Sánchez challenged the prevailing

assumptions among educators that Mexican American children were intellectually inferior (Paredes, 1977; Sánchez, 1940). The oral history of Ramiro Casso, a friend and civil rights contemporary of Sánchez's, supports the notion that inequities in the schooling structure were more central to the documented underachievement of Mexican American students than was their natural ability (Casso, 2001). In a more elaborate position, Richard Valencia suggests that those who frame educational policy and those who run the schools generally view Mexican Americans as deficient. As Valencia describes the historical pattern of this deficit model, he also intimates that an assets based model may be a more useful framework through which to deal with Mexican American students (Valencia, 1991, 1997). Another important contribution particularly relevant to this study is Reyes, Scribner, and Paredes' *Highly Effective Schools*, which details the characteristics that make schools along the Texas Mexican Border work well. Schools profiled in this study are neighboring schools to Edcouch-Elsa High School, and many of the same conditions exist in these schools (Reyes, et al, 1999).

While the early ethnographic work on Mexican Americans by Madsen and others operated under a deficit framework, more recent education anthropologists have explored radically different approaches. George Spindler, the founder of education anthropology, has articulated a series of principles essential to conducting effective fieldwork. By studying the Menominee Indians of

Wisconsin in the 1940s and '50s, Spindler learned the value of respecting indigenous language, traditions, and other elements of culture (Spindler, 2000). Spindler's work has influenced at least one generation of education anthropologists. Henry Trueba, for example, has made enormous contributions to the field of language minority children through his ethnographic work (Trueba, 1989). Trueba's work on immigrant students, Latino leadership, and pedagogy of hope has also made an indelible impression on the field of education anthropology and on countless students (Trueba, 2000, 1998, 2003). In addition, Doug Foley's field research in the Winter Garden region of South Texas makes a strong case for a deep understanding of history and the formation of race relations in his books *From Peones to Politicos* (1988) and *Learning Capitalist Culture* (1990).

This dissertation also looks at different literary genres, such as poetry, prose, and some playwriting. In this regard, the writings of David Rice are most vital. Raised in Edcouch, Rice works as the writer in residence of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, and writes short stories about growing up in Edcouch. Rice's books *Give the Pig a Chance* and *Crazy Loco* published by Bilingual Press and Penguin Putnam, respectively, have gained a degree of legitimacy in the mainstream (Rice 1996, 2001). His work is important because it shows the possibilities of converting local stories into books, but his presence has also inspired both local youths and elders to publish their own stories. Other literary works, particularly Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* (1987)

and *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) offer insightful perspectives on issues of race, class, and gender. The older, brilliant works of Estella Ramírez O’Shea (2000) and Américo Paredes (1958) similarly make critical contributions to the cultural understand of South Texas people. In analyzing many of these works, Ramón Saldívar’s brilliant book (1990) posits that much of Chicano literature is a manifestation of political, social, and even economic resistance, as well as a search for individual and community identities. Interesting, an emerging theme from the several hundred oral histories we have collected similarly suggests voices and stories of resistance to an American society defined by the persistent issues of race, class, and gender. Santos Layton of Elsa recalled during her oral history, “I worked in the packing shed the same hours that Mexican men and that Gringo men worked, and I made less money than both...and we women were not just underpaid, but we were also harassed in other ways” (Layton, S., 1998).

Suárez-Orozco and Páez suggest that the new research agenda for Latinos in the 21st Century must be defined broadly, comparative in nature, and interdisciplinary (2002). The review of the literature necessarily crosses academic, literary, and cultural disciplines. I employ traditional historiography, just as I utilize a substantial archive of oral histories. I use the writing of educators, anthropologists, fiction writers, policy scholars, and critical race theorists. I reconstruct the history of a rural South Texas community by employing the stories of its residents and by using a range of other writings from

people outside the community. In similar fashion, I document a pedagogical process my students, other teachers, and community members have engaged to reconstruct the history and create the necessary conditions to make it happen.

What seem to be missing in the literature are examples of a research process grounded in critical pedagogy but happening in the public schools, where local knowledge combines with traditional methods of learning to create pedagogies of the excluded (Lima & Lima, 1998). Many scholars write and theorize about it, but are not actually involved in the day-to-day transformative practice. A notable exception of is the Algebra Project, a program founded by civil rights activist and scholar Robert Moses, who maintains that children can learn about civil rights through understanding algebra (2001). Believing the new civil rights struggle centers on issues of economic access, Moses views math literacy as an issue around which to organize and propel youths toward greater academic and subsequently economic success. The Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project based in Jackson, Mississippi, provides particular intrigue. It is the place where activist Dave Dennis directed the statewide Congress of Racial Equality in the early 1960s, and the place where he returned in 1992 to direct the Southern Initiative. Dennis writes, “In the years since the civil rights movement of the 1960s the customary role of adults to look out for children and offer role models to help guide them to adulthood has weakened. The Southern Initiative has developed a program aimed at bringing students together with adults...If the

educational system is going to change, the important customary role of adults being there for the young needs to be reinstated at all levels” (Moses, 2001).

The Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project and the Llano Grande Center are partner organizations with the Rural School and Community Trust, a national network of rural schools and communities that work toward education reform and community building initiatives. Other programs, particularly the Partnership Rural Initiative in Maine, which encourages youths to learn and participate in Maine’s important fishing industry, and the Appalachian Rural Education Network, which also values community stories and history, approach teaching and learning according to the principles of place based pedagogy (Perrone, 1999). Few programs, however, integrate the principles elaborated by Freire and other critical theorists for transformative education (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Guajardo, M., 2002; Trueba, 2003).

Chapter 3: Methodology

ON FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The framework for analysis employed in this study is a mixed model that integrates the use of grounded theory as espoused by Glaser and Strauss (1967), common sense theory as suggested by Gramsci (1988), principles consistent with critical theory (Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1997), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, this study utilizes research methods grounded on an assets based approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996), rather than the debilitating deficit-thinking models contested by Valencia (1997) and Guajardo (Guajardo, M., 2002). It is also important to note that this work of the past 13 years is about a research and data collection process created and collected by numerous ethnographers and storytellers. I count myself, of course, as one of the ethnographers. This is, then, about the research as much as it is about my life and the lives of hundreds more.

The inductive nature central to the use of grounded theory fits appropriately with this study, particularly as students and teachers collect data through methods such as oral histories. The narratives in the oral histories then surface to inform substantial sections of the study. Common sense theory provides a model for explaining the voices and stories “rooted in the popular

consciousness,” which at times, according to Gramsci, “is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude...the philosophy of non-philosophers” (1988). Gramsci qualifies the philosophers and non-philosophers as all potential intellectuals, and this study views oral history interviewees as organic intellectuals, because they “function” as intellectuals as they practice and operationalize their ideas (Gramsci, 1988). This work is also guided by the principles of critical theory, particularly those calling for emancipatory and transformative education. We find great utility in Freire’s problem posing approach to teaching and learning. In addition, the work of the Llano Grande Center takes a distinctly assets-based approach to research, teaching, and learning, and we find that among the greatest assets identified by youth researchers in our community are story and the Spanish language. Both story and language are core components of the culture of students who come to Edcouch-Elsa High School every day, and Ladson-Billings’ work on culturally based pedagogy offers an appropriate model for developing young minds, hearts, and souls.

On one hand, this study began when the Llano Grande Research Project launched its oral history project in the summer of 1997. On the other hand, numerous narratives of transformation included in this study transpired before that summer, especially the stories on the college preparation program my students and I founded at Edcouch-Elsa High School in the early 1990s; the program eventually grew into the Llano Grande Research Project and subsequently the

Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. The reality is, however, that this study has been about a way of life for me, for many of my students, and for hundreds of community members who have been an integral part of this work since the 1980s when about a dozen Edcouch-Elsa alumni were undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin. Nevertheless, during the 1990s and into the new century, the primary research undertaken for the purpose of this study are oral histories, student narratives, public seminars, a compilation of ethnographic notes my students and I have organized through classroom and community experiences, a collection of photographs and other historical artifacts owned by community members. We have conducted more than 350 oral histories since 1997; I have been present for more than half of those. We founded the Llano Grande Seminar Series in 1998 to encourage public conversations on issues important to youth and community; we have thus convened 50 of these meetings, and have documented each through video and written forms.

An oral history typically occurs in either the media lab of the Llano Grande Center, which occupies an office and lab at Edcouch-Elsa High School, or at a community member's home. Some prospective interviewees prefer to talk to students and teachers in the comforts of their home; others prefer to come to the school. We are agreeable to either, though we prefer their home as the research environment because it places interviewees in what the Spindlers describe as *in situ* (1988). Before the interview takes place, students are required to conduct

background research, and more importantly, they are required to have begun a relationship with the interviewee. Building a mutual trust between interviewer and interviewee is important to our research work, as we attempt to personalize the oral history process. Ideally, students and the interviewee have had one or more substantive conversations before the formal interview takes place. In addition, we request permission to video tape the formal interview, and usually provide a copy of the video tape to the interviewee before leaving the interview. The Llano Grande Center also keeps a digital video copy of the interview, as well as an additional copy of the research process in action, recorded by a second camera that shoots from different angles to provide varying perspectives of the research work. Concurrently, a team of students digitally copies historical photographs and other relevant memorabilia and/or artifacts belonging to interviewee that we have asked him or her to bring to the interview. On occasion, scanning occurs before the interview, or sometimes it may occur after the interview. A team of students usually conducts the interview with a teacher or two present to assist with the questions. As part of the training, students read previous oral histories to gain an idea of the history and context of community life and its people.

Students read from a wide range of disciplines, including the historical and anthropological writings such as Américo Paredes's *With His Pistol in His Hand* to understand the folk oral tradition of South Texas (1959). Acclaimed literary

scholar Ramón Saldívar writes, “Paredes’ study of the border ballads, that concern the historical figure of Gregorio Cortez and his solitary armed resistance to the injustices Mexican faced in Anglo Texas, may be said to have invented the very possibility of a narrative community, a complete and legitimate Mexican American persona, whose life of struggle and discord was worthy of being told” (1990). While the study of Cortez’s was Paredes’ magnum opus, he produced a great deal more scholarship. His “On Ethnographic Work Among Minority Groups” (1977) has particular utility and cultural relevance, particularly as it relates to different forms of language expressed by interviewees (Limón, 1977). Don Américo’s contribution to our work has been more than through just the written text. It was an exciting day at Edcouch-Elsa High School in the fall of 1998 when don Américo and Ramón Saldívar visited our campus to share their stories. As he struggled with an illness that would take his life just months thereafter, don Américo sat for an entire hour and a half at the Edcouch-Elsa High School library sharing his life history and responding to questions from students and community members alike.

Students also read George Spindler’s classic ethnographic studies on “Beth Anne” and “Roger Harker.” Another highlight for Edcouch-Elsa High School students occurred in January 2001, when George Spindler attended our class and sat in the interviewee’s chair in the Llano Grande Center’s lab. Students peppered Spindler with questions about research methodology, about “Roger

Harker,” and even about Louis Spindler’s influence on George Spindler’s own work. It was a historic moment for our students and for Spindler himself, because in his 50 plus years as education anthropologist, high school students had not interviewed him in this manner before.

While my students and I treated Américo Paredes and George Spindler with great respect and paid the highest tribute to their stories, we deal with the stories of elders in our community with as much care and value. Moreover, this research process has afforded us the opportunity to connect voices with theory, and value both just the same. Essentially, we have elevated the stories and voices of don Isabel, Santos Layton, and Rosa García to the same level as the stories and voices of Spindler and Paredes. The stories of the local elders, in fact, carry even greater power in transforming local lives. As Orlando Fals Borda suggests in his seminal book *Knowledge and People’s Power*, local people’s stories are what is needed “to orient the mobilization of the masses, and which can build alternative ways of producing useful knowledge that will eventually lead to true people’s power” (Borda, 1985).

After an interview, such as that conducted with Spindler, the students, other teachers, and I debrief about the research experience. We discuss the method of questioning and the interesting stories shared. We then begin to identify opportunities for further work. Thereafter, students and teachers will transcribe the interview, as well as view the video for possible editing. In the case

of Spindler, a team of video editors produced a 20-minute video based on his visit and on the oral history. Since 2001, that video has been utilized for teacher training, and for oral history workshops in front of over 3,000 students and teachers in South Texas. Similarly, we have used more than 20 videos prepared by teachers and students for community development initiatives and for conference presentations in over 35 public schools in South Texas, in 12 states across the country, and in two European countries since 2001. In short, the research work we conduct and produce has a purpose greater than academic; it is about using theory and research to create opportunities and change for young people, for elders in our community, for teachers, and for a community at large. The research work has yielded a range of products. The oral history work has inspired public schools throughout the region, in other parts of the state, and even in other parts of the country. The digital video work has produced content for a television series on the local PBS affiliate. Survey research work conducted by students has changed school policy on a local level, and the asset mapping research work has helped create two micro economic enterprises: a digital storytelling center and a Spanish language immersion institute. Indeed, we have reached praxis by uniting theory, research methodology, and practice (Darder, 1995; Freire, 1973).

OBSERVING THE POWER OF STORY: TRANSFORMING MINDS IN THE CLASSROOM

A couple of years ago I visited Manuel Garcés' English I class at Edcouch-Elsa High School. As I quietly found a desk to sit toward the back of the classroom, a fierce debate erupted. Two fifteen year old girls passionately challenged one another as they debated a particular literary passage. After several eloquent exchanges, one of the girls forcefully pounded her fist on her desk and emphatically declared, "No! That's not what my grandmother meant in that paragraph!" The student was Laila Layton, the reading was Santos Layton's oral history, and the book was the *Llano Grande Journal*.

Shortly after this episode, I shared it with Carlos García, who at the time was a sophomore studying history and economics at Yale University. I reminded Carlos of his question several years before and of the inspiration his question had engendered in others to put ourselves somewhere "in the book." Carlos understood clearly, especially because he was actively involved in preparing some of the early publications of the Llano Grande Center in 1997 and '98.

In the year before this story in Manuel's classroom occurred, student researchers at the Llano Grande Center and I had several conversations with 78-year-old Santos Layton. We developed a strong relationship with her and conducted a series of oral history interviews. During the ensuing months, students then transcribed the oral history, developed a narrative from the standard interview, and published the narrative in the *Llano Grande Journal*. The *Journal*

then became part of the reading list in Manuel Garcés' English class at Edcouch-Elsa High School. I share this story because it exemplifies the process and method through which the many students at Edcouch-Elsa High School collect stories, use those stories to expand the literary canon, and connect what they study and learn to the life and story of their community.

**ONTOLOGICAL REALITIES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EPISTEMOLOGY:
EXCERPTS FROM A PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

Frequently, my three children fall asleep as I lie next to them telling them a story. I tell them stories, because my father told me stories. And while my storytelling abilities will never reach the skill level of my father's, I nevertheless operate in the mode he modeled for my brothers and me as we grew up in northern Mexico, South Texas, and the migrant labor camps of Michigan, California, and the Texas Panhandle. I see storytelling as a "very weighty" (Williams, 1995) exercise, take very seriously the grand act and art of telling a story, and have positioned the collection and creation of stories at the center of my work as a public educator (Scott, 1999).

It has been the power of my father's story(ies), after all, which has mapped my life's path. As I grew up in rural South Texas, my father frequently told me the story of Pablito; it was a story from his fourth grade grammar book, which he still has and treasures as one of his greatest possessions. Pablito, a

fictitious rural Mexican boy, grew up en el rancho, attended and completed la escuela rural, moved on to the next school in the big city many miles away, then returned to el rancho to help develop it. Clearly, Pablito's experience in his rural area grounded him in that community, and he used the schools as a training ground for his eventual return to participate in rural development. More importantly, however, my father told that story several times a week, for a period of several years, during a very formative time for the three oldest of his children. Pablito's path became the path that made sense to me, the ideal model—the most personal and compelling of paradigms (Rodríguez, S., 1947). The stories my father told us were powerful and persuasive. My two brothers and I left to the university after graduating from our rural high school. Two of us returned to take part in rural development; from afar a third brother participates daily in our education and development work, while a fourth brother seeks out resources from his corporate employer to underwrite the education and community rural development work we do.

Before Pablito was introduced into my life, my psyche, and my subconscious, my father introduced me to la Señora Longoria, a second guiding symbol in my life. Beyond the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual need to return to my rural home after college, I had to become a teacher too. You see, when I was but six years old and a recent immigrant, my father introduced me to a woman he referred to as the most important person in the community. “Son,” he

said in his good Spanish, “I want you to meet la Señora Longoria. La Señora Longoria is the most important person in the community. La Señora Longoria is a teacher.” Enough said. When, at the age of six, the most important man in your life unequivocally asserts that a teacher is the most important person in the community, what is a kid to think? I had to become a teacher, if I harbored any ambition of being important in my town, which I had to return to, because that is what Pablito had done—about three times a week, for about four years, while I grew from pre-pubescence and into adolescence.

But Pablito and la Señora Longoria, as symbols of the models that were to guide my intellectual, academic, and emotional life into adulthood, would be challenged time and again by the intensely powerful forces of schooling, popular culture, and numerous other persistent cultural signals. Fortunately, shortly after my father introduced me to la Señora Longoria, I was placed in her first grade classroom at Edcouch Elementary School. What a terrific find that was, particularly for a Mexican immigrant child who knew not a word of English and who had to adjust to an English immersion school environment. I was indeed fortunate because la Señora Longoria, now Mrs. Longoria, made certain that I, along with many of her other young Mexican students, learned English in a friendly environment. Though the class texts were in English and the first grade curriculum dictated that we learn the ways of the dominant culture, Mrs. Longoria knew better.

To my “teetcher,” as I phonetically described her, textbooks did not appear to be paramount. Instead, it seemed that Mrs. Longoria always began the day by trying to understand the temperament, the disposition, and the general state of each child. Intuitively, it seems, Mrs. Longoria understood different knowledge, particularly the relational knowledge upon which Habermas and others expound (Habermas, 1972; Trueba, 1998). I remember that clearly. And many years later, when I caught up with Mrs. Longoria one morning in the early 1990s, I finally found the language to what I intuitively understood since my days in grade school. More than anything else, she suggested to me, building a good relationship with a child is what is most magical about teaching. Mrs. Longoria diligently and consistently practiced what the research on highly effective students demonstrates. She was building relationships with her students, and she saw it as fundamental to her realization as an effective teacher. My teacher was way ahead of the game. In a very conscious and deliberate manner, Mrs. Longoria was building on the core beliefs and cultural characteristics that were consistent with my upbringing and with the upbringing of many of my classmates. She was developing a culturally responsive environment, and it became an important learning experience for me (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Guajardo, M., 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1997, 2001; Reyes et al, 1999; Romo, 1999; Trueba, 1990, 1998, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). In essence, Mrs. Longoria exercised an ethic of caring that transcended an aesthetic that Angela Valenzuela suggests

(1999) “lies in an attention to things and ideas,” as Nel Noddings (1984) has also posited. Instead, Mrs. Longoria cared in a manner that valued the relationship she built with me and other students, and she did this by respecting and building on the language and values we brought to her classroom at Edcouch Elementary (Valenzuela, 1999).

Mrs. Longoria made sense to me. She treated me the way my parents treated me, and everybody around us for that matter. She was *procurando* (caring for) those around her, just as my parents nurtured and cultivated their relationships with relatives and neighbors. It was the model that made sense to me, and the model of building relationships that made sense to my brothers. Unfortunately, Mrs. Longoria was an anomaly, particularly in the manner in which she conducted her classroom, the manner in which she performed the instructional process, and the manner in which she connected with me; all predicated on the strength of our student/teacher relationship. Between the 2nd and 16th grades, I was hard-pressed to find another Mrs. Longoria. Though I have come across numerous teachers who were among the kindest, most intelligent, most efficient, best prepared, and conscientious people I have thus known. I cannot remember a teacher who was a bad person, but I cannot recall a teacher who taught through building relationships the way my first grade teacher did.

Mrs. Longoria spoiled me during first grade, and she inspired me for life. Today, I work as an educator in the same rural South Texas community where I was raised, and I have been at the center of a pedagogical, youth, and community development work that is being defined in large part by the influence of Marta Longoria. As we continue to give shape to our distinct epistemology, we place relationship building and conversation at the core of how we know, how we learn, and how we grow (Guajardo, M., 2002). A number of public school teachers, students, parents, and I are in the process of creating a new pedagogy and epistemology based on a set of guiding principles that build upon the cultivation of strong relationships and through fostering the art of conversation.

Though I had several conversations with Mrs. Longoria before she died about six years ago, I regret never having conducted an oral history with her. However, I did have a lengthy conversation with my second grade teacher, Mrs. Bolten. Second grade was a very different story. Some recall their primary grade experiences with bitterness and anger. Baez, for example, holds his second grade teacher with teaching him to forget the “intimacy associated with Spanish and the closeness” to his family (2002). I do not believe that happened to me, though I recall thinking I had mastered English while with Mrs. Longoria, only to realize quickly I had serious language deficiencies when I walked into Mrs. Bolten’s 2nd grade class at Edcouch Elementary. Mrs. Bolten was nice enough, and she came from a long line of educators. But I do not believe she was properly trained to

teach Mexican immigrant or Mexican American children, even though she was born and raised in a South Texas town herself (Bolten, 1998). Mrs. Bolten was different, not like Mrs. Longoria. She spoke a different language, had different customs, and seemed to really follow the dictates of the curriculum. Many of my classmates struggled through second grade. Many were left behind, while a few of us managed to win favor with our teacher because we followed her every order. I remember my classmates well, especially because 2nd grade is when they began to lose interest in school. Facundo Frausto is now serving life in prison. Javier Cantú has been in and out of jail during the past 20 years, Velma García hasn't been able to get off the welfare rolls; each dropped out of school before we reached junior high—and this is but a sampling of my classmates. School was not friendly to my friends, and I do not believe our teacher made things any easier, though I do believe she tried (McDermott, 1997).

Third grade was not any easier, nor was fourth. I had June Wagoner as teacher, both years. I remember spelling tests, multiplication and division, and a little phonics work, but only vaguely. What I remember most vividly is the first Monday in January both years, during which Mrs. Wagoner went down each row of students asking each of us what Santa Claus had brought us for Christmas. Surely, Mrs. Wagoner understood that her 30 or so Mexican American students were very poor. I recall feeling the anguish of having to respond to my teacher's blatantly insensitive question. I never got anything for Christmas, but Mrs.

Wagoner demanded a response from everyone so I had to give one. Like most of my friends, I lied. I had to or I would experience the humiliation of making public the fact that I was poor. In my thirteen years of teaching, I have never asked any of my students what they got for Christmas, not publicly anyway.

I do not believe I had another teacher like Mrs. Longoria. I am glad she set her own standards, and I am glad those standards were built around strengthening human lives through caring relationships. I left my rural community after high school, finished college and graduate school, even spent some time studying in Brasenose College at Oxford University. But I couldn't wait to come back home to my rural South Texas community; I was destined, you may recall, because of the stories I experienced with my father. I was coming home to teach.

I put myself at the center of this narrative, because I have played a pivotal role in the education of my students, because I was a principal founder of the Llano Grande Center, and because it is consistent with the storytelling process we utilize at Edcouch-Elsa High School. I must be subjective and dare risk breaking the scholarly convention of "objectivity," and I will use story as the method through which I convey my pedagogical practice and experience (Hurtado, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Pizzaro, 1998). In this regard, I heed the wisdom of my parents, my neighbors, and numerous others who have inspired me to tell stories. In the spirit and tradition of many Mexican origin people, I choose storytelling as

the principal mode through which I construct this paper (Anaya, 1971; Anzaldúa, 1999; Castillo, 1994; Galarza, 1971; Rice, 1996, 2001; Rivera, 1987; Rodríguez, 1982; Sor Juana, 1985). The lens through which I view the world is aptly represented in the frameworks provided by the critical race theorists, many of whom have boldly positioned storytelling at the center of their method of analysis (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lather, 1986; Moll & Diaz, 1993). The narrative form I employ is also supported in the literature by a wide range of interpretivists (Emihovich, 1995; Nee-Benham, 1995).

Many voices, besides mine, find their way into this study. My students and I have interviewed hundreds of people during the past few years, and we have written books about that (*Llano Grande Journal* 1997-2001). We have also interviewed dozens more between January and April; this paper focuses on several of those interviews. This dissertation, however, is about much more than that. It is about a participatory method of learning (Lykes, 1989; Shor & Freire, 1987), where teachers and students interview together, where the students and teachers act as researchers together, and where interviewing is done in a reciprocal manner—where the interviewee becomes as much the interviewer as the interviewer himself (Delgado-Gaitán, 1993; Olmedo, 1999; Scheurich 1997). Our interview process has evolved into a conversational mode, much more than a traditional interview mode. Conversation is a much more natural exercise than an

interview, so data collected from a conversation tends to be more insightful, more nuanced, and livelier.

THE LLANO GRANDE CENTER: A METHOD AS PRACTICE

We buy textbooks at Edcouch-Elsa High School, because school policy tells us to do so; school policy intends to set the instructional direction for all of us in the public schools. It is a misguided policy, failing to allow meaningful conversation to create alternative models. The conversation emanating from public policy is one that merely exchanges language, lays out options to schools, administrators, and teachers, in the profound absence of any kind of reciprocity. Policy in the schools is seldom about a reciprocal conversation; it is mostly about telling people in the schools what to do. Much like other public schools, we host sales representatives from educational publishing companies who attempt to dazzle faculty members and administrators with their fancy, colorful books and brochures. I do not use those books, nor do a fair number of my teacher colleagues, particularly those who were students of mine in the early to mid 1990s. Many faculty members have come to realize that adopted history textbooks do little to contribute to the healthy education of our students, particularly at Edcouch-Elsa High School, where 99% of our students are of Mexican origin. The textbooks only marginally reflect the experiences of our

students in history. They generally reflect the process endorsed by those who would follow the industrial model to schooling, that which was laid out by Horace Mann when he argued for common schools in the mid 19th Century. That philosophy is about reproducing the values and beliefs of the dominant culture and assimilating everyone into a single type, in order to prepare “good” workers for the industrial labor force (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1980; Apple & King, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This argument is particularly injurious to my students, whose stories, experiences, and realities are dramatically different from what the mainstream books contain (Spring, 1996).

The knowledge base and experience I brought with me upon setting foot in my classroom in the fall of 1990 were clearly limited. Immediately, I realized that I needed many partners to help me teach my classes. Today, I would not dare teach alone. As I teach out of the Llano Grande Center and Edcouch-Elsa High School, I utilize every possible teacher I can find to help me teach my students; therein, lies the strength and relevance of the Llano Grande Center—in its ability to democratize the process of teaching and learning. In the past four years, the Center has employed the teaching abilities of more than 350 elders from the community who have willingly given their time to share their wisdom with students. Most of these people, it is important to state, have never been asked to share their stories in a public way and have seldom been viewed as viable educators. As we bring them into the instructional process, they bring passion,

experience, and great wisdom. Indeed, they have contributed to the creation of an important knowledge base that we did not have before in a school setting. We have learned that our greatest educators are not necessarily people who complete teacher-training programs, or those best prepared to satisfy the state's accountability system. Our experience shows compelling evidence that the stories of people from the community, particularly the elders, can profoundly affect the way we educate.

The storytelling method is important for many reasons. It explains the political, and everything within the stories that follow is political (Shor & Pari, 2000; Scribner, 1991). It explains the cultural, in the broader socio-historical perspective (Cuban, Kantor and Tyack, 1982; Spring) and at the micro-cultural South Texas level. It delves into a wide range of scenarios, including political, cultural, economic, and institutional. But the storytelling method is even more important because it is the most useful mode through which people from a particular community in South Texas can share their experiences with others. The story, the people, the place, and the experiences therein, are what give us power to tell our history and make sense of our past (Conkin & Stromberg, 1989; Wolf, 1982).

Beyond the storytelling exercises through organizing oral histories, my students and I have also convened more than 50 public forums where students and other members of the community tell their personal stories, and we have created

the time and space where many of our residents become public historians. Historians refer to this type of bottom up approach toward reconstructing the past as social history. It is an attempt to move beyond the “elite man’s” view of history by viewing the human experience through the eyes of common people (Conkin & Stromberg, 1989).

The methodological approach employed here is inherently interdisciplinary. The preponderance of the data utilized are taken directly from hundreds of oral histories, and the historical analysis is informed by the words and stories of community people, as well as by the more conventional secondary literature. This is not traditional historiography; instead, what emerges is a mixed methodology that uses people’s narratives collected through a distinct ethnographic method, whereby high school teachers and students worked as practicing anthropologists (Gomez-Peña, 1996). Students work as researchers, or collectors of stories, and the elders become historians, or the storytellers. As educational, political, and economic policy are analyzed and critiqued through stories, community elders, through the sheer power of their stories, emerge not just as historians but also as organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1988; Freire, 1974). Their wisdom then begins to inform us, and as we learn from them, they become our “books” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Spindler, 2001). In this narrative, my role is as weaver of the stories, as Villenas and Moreno have described, rather

then the more traditional master narrator (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Villenas & Moreno, 2001).

My students and I approach oral histories, youth leadership, and community development initiatives as researchers. Early on in any given semester, as we “tell our story,” my students and I begin what essentially becomes a protracted exercise in reflexivity. Doug Foley has suggested the reflexive ideal and the myriad of faces ethnographers wear (Foley, 2002), but perhaps the countenance that best fits our experience is that which Ruth Behar describes as “anthropology that breaks your heart” (Behar, 1996). The purpose of our reflection work is to (1) build trust amongst researchers, and (2) create an environment of continual self and group analysis for the purpose of perpetual growth. Often times, we must make ourselves vulnerable, in order to gain that trust and create the conditions for optimal learning and growth. There must be depth and substance to the teacher researcher. If the teacher researcher is willing to “share pain publicly,” as Walter Bruggemann suggests, that researcher may find some yield. It is this terrain that is rarely visited, that brings forth ideas, memories, and knowledge. If the teacher researcher is willing to engage in research that “will break his/her heart,” then growth and learning will very likely be optimized. Teachers who are researchers and act as critical pedagogues, must then be willing to share power with youths, work toward transforming

themselves, their students, and their communities in order to get to a better place (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1986).

This study includes narratives told through four different modes. First, I utilize ample space for macro-narrative description, not to play the role of “master narrator,” but to provide context and perspective to the larger story. Secondly, I tell detailed stories that inform the development of people, places, and the organization; therein, I tell micro-narratives. Third, I put myself in the middle of the text and connect my own reality by employing a reflexive process. Finally, this study creates ample space to allow others to tell their stories. In so doing, the reader will also have the opportunity to learn from narratives of elders, youths, and other community members who are part of a teaching and learning process.

The culture of the Llano Grande Center is distinctly participatory (Lykes, 1989; Shor & Freire, 1987). I teach next to about 150 other teachers with whom I have very close contact. Some of those (about 15) are certified teachers; the others are teenagers, other alumni from the high school, and elderly people from the community. Teachers are teachers but they are also learners; similarly, students are learners, but they are also teachers. Skill building and relationship building are the blocks upon which we base our work. Moreover, very deliberately, the Center has created a distinct set of conditions that define a pedagogy and a culture of teaching and learning done in direct relationship with students, parents, and the community at large (Ladson-Billings 1995; Trueba,

1989, 1999). This pedagogy is predicated on the belief that sustainable teaching and learning cannot be optimized in isolation, within the four walls of the school.

On the contrary, the Center espouses a pedagogy where teaching and learning is an integral part of the life of the community and by extension, the continued development of the community. Moreover, our process of teaching and learning consciously attempts to inspire students and teachers to do well in school, to gain a clear sense of their own personal and family stories, and to become active participants in community life. Much of the pedagogy focused on the formation of identity is based on the storytelling process. Our students and teachers are constantly challenged to tap their memory, to share their values, and to tell their stories. Similarly, we build relationships with other people from the community, especially the elderly, and we create the environment and space for them to share their stories with us. Our pedagogy is grounded on the lives of our students, their parents, teachers, and the community. As we follow this process, students, teachers, and community members build the important skills of reading, writing, public speaking, technology, publishing, many other tangible academic skills, and a wide range of other intangible community development skills. This method is not merely an intellectual or academic exercise; rather, it is a teaching, learning, and research process grounded in both theory and practice. It is a process through which teachers and students collect data, build skills, and transform themselves and community life by extension.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE METHODOLOGY AT WORK: A WEEK OF TEACHING AND LEARNING AT THE LLANO GRANDE CENTER

At Edcouch-Elsa High School, my students and I frequently engage the community as part of how we created curriculum, how we conducted research, and how we learned academic and life skills. The approach I employ in this study is simply an extension of the methodological approach I use to teach and learn with my students and the community. What follows is a recent one-week snapshot of work at the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, which was born out of my classroom at Edcouch-Elsa High School, and now operates out of multiple places in the community and in numerous classrooms at Edcouch-Elsa High School. During this one-week period, my students and I conducted several oral histories and convened a conference with parents, as per the request of two of my students. On one occasion, Dr. Ramiro Casso, a long time civil rights activist from a neighboring town, taught class. On another occasion, Belem's and Juan's parents were invited guests in class. Belem and Juan were 17-year-old students at Edcouch-Elsa High School who summoned their parents to the classroom to have a conversation with them regarding their college aspirations.

Ramiro Casso

Ramiro Casso was born in 1922 in Laredo, Texas, to working class parents who received only a grade school education. He graduated from Martín High School, and gained admission into Texas A&M University where he expeditiously earned an engineering degree in order to be shipped off to World War II, where he helped guard the Panama Canal against the potential attack by the Axis Powers. Upon returning home from the War, young Casso became involved in the civil rights movement of the 1940s, addressing the systemic inequities in public schooling and other institutions. As an active member of the League of United Latin American Citizens in 1948, Casso met with then Texas Attorney General Price Daniels to resolve the seemingly contentious *Delgado vs. Bastrop* court case, which dealt with the segregation of Latino students in the Bastrop school district. Casso was accompanied at that meeting by attorney Gus García and University of Texas professor George I. Sánchez, both of whom convincingly persuaded the Attorney General to lobby against his employer (the State of Texas), against school segregation, and on behalf of Delgado. During the next fifty plus years, Casso would play an important role in many more civil rights triumphs.

In the early 1950s, Casso worked as a hidráulic engineer in the historic construction of Falcon Dam, a development that allowed much of the lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas to use an ample supply of fresh water for

municipal, manufacturing, and agricultural needs during the last half of the 20th Century. He was dissatisfied with his life as an engineer, however, and instead pursued his life long dream of becoming a physician. Therefore, he applied to medical school and earned his M.D. in 1958. Thereafter, Dr. Casso returned to South Texas, where he established his medical practice on the Mexican side of McAllen, south of the railroad tracks.

Dr. Casso walked into our class at 1:40 p.m., well groomed, and looking dapper in his nicely tailored suit. As he turned the corner around Hall A of the high school, one of my students saw him and alerted the class, as per usual. The students subsequently stood to wait for Dr. Casso as he opened the door, and each student proceeded to greet him with a firm handshake and pronunciation of their name. I then greeted him with a classic Mexican hug, over his left shoulder followed by the after-hug handshake. “Como está doctor Casso? Quiero que conozca a mis alumnos.” (How are you Dr. Casso? I want you to meet my students.) And I named each student by name, followed by a quick biography of each. “This is our history class, Dr. Casso, and you’re our guest lecturer today,” I told him.⁵

⁵ I met Dr. Casso in 1999, when the Llano Grande Center took the lead on applying for a Kellogg Foundation ENLACE (Engaging Latino Communities for Education) grant. The Center brought together a team of community organizations, religious entities, public schools, and South Texas Community College (STCC). Dr. Casso retired from his medical practice in 1995, and was thereafter recruited by STCC to become the College’s Vice President for Institutional Advancement. We have since developed a friendship and a strong working relationship.

Thereafter, a student led Dr. Casso to a chair positioned between an elevated light with reflecting white umbrella and a television monitor. There was a stool to Dr. Casso's right and center, where a glass of water and a box of tissue rested. In front of him stood a camera recorder perched on a tripod, and a class full of student interviewers sitting orderly behind the camera. One student, wearing headphones to monitor the sound sent through the boom microphone, also operated the camera, while the two principal interviewers were located on either side of the camerawoman. Lights, sound, and video are always efficiently set up for optimal recording in our classroom, and each student is well trained in the use and the set up of the sophisticated technology.

Dr. Casso told extraordinary stories. "I practiced medicine between 1958 and 1995, when I retired, and I delivered over 2,000 babies," he said, beaming with pride. "For many years, I was the only physician who would deliver babies to those who couldn't afford to pay." He also shared stories of his involvement on school boards, political elections, his run for the mayoral seat of McAllen, and his role as a vice president with the community college. He spoke of how he was the leader in raising about seven million dollars to build a new facility for allied health for the community college. "I raised the last two million from EDA (Economic Development Administration), after I met with regional director Pedro Garza," he said. Immediately, several of the student interviewees and teachers listening to Dr. Casso looked at each other. Pedro Garza and EDA, it turns out, is

a potential funding source for the Llano Grande Center, as we search for substantial brick and mortar resources to build the Llano Grande Leadership Training Center either in Edcouch or Elsa.

“Dr. Casso,” I commented, “we have a meeting scheduled with Pedro Garza on May 24th in Austin to explore the possibility of a large grant. Would you consider being part of our visitation team?”

“I’d be happy to go with you,” he said.

From the beginning, the conversation with Dr. Casso took on a historical and even economic perspective. After he established the historical context, Dr. Casso wanted to talk about economy, so we pursued those issues with intensity. He understood, just as we do, that education could not be analyzed or studied in isolation (Anyon, 1980, 1997). Larger historical, economic, environmental and other forces necessarily contribute to the formation of schools, just as they do to the development of other institutions (Apple, 1980; Apple & King, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Moreover, any meaningful discussion on education reform must be placed in the context of political economy and history (Darder & Torres, 1998). Historically, the dictates of the economy have directed educational policy. This has been particularly true in south Texas, where schooling for Mexican origin people was generally inaccessible to a large number at a time when many agricultural laborers were needed. While agriculture continues to pull many Mexican American workers into the fields, particularly as part of the migrant

labor stream, the economy of the 21st Century is clearly different. A goal of the Llano Grande Center is to challenge those who make policy in education not to be controlled by the economic imperatives. We want to be part of the conversation as educational policy is created, just as we want to be a central part of how the economy is fashioned. The oral history with Dr. Casso allowed us to engage in that kind of conversation. Once again, we observed how an oral history can imply so much: pedagogically, economically, and in a variety of unforeseen ways. The oral history project has yielded enormous results. It has helped the Llano Grande Center collect not only stories, but also millions of dollars in grant money from national foundations interested in investing in the work.

Dr. Casso spoke energetically, passionately, and with great conviction. During the 90-minute conversation, he inspired students and adults alike, and he shared stories that he had never shared before. “You know,” he said as we approached the end of the oral history, “Some of these stories have never been told before. I’m glad the camera is on me, and I’m happy these stories are finally being recorded.” With the benefits of technology, we handed Dr. Casso a video copy of his oral history, right there, on the spot, before he left the classroom. It was a small token of our appreciation, but it was most important to us to practice a level of reciprocity with our guest.

The Garcías and Ms. Pérez

In 1992, I took ten students on a two-week trip to visit Ivy League universities. Since then, my teacher colleagues and I have taken nine trips to visit Ivy League schools. We have taken at least thirty other trips to visit central Texas universities, and more recently, we have begun college visitation trips to Midwestern and California universities; the pipeline of Edcouch-Elsa High School students going to college now reaches from coast to coast (Lang, 2003; Zeibart, 2002). Ten students accompanied two teachers and a community member to visit west coast universities a couple of years ago. Among them were Belem García and Juan Pérez, two quiet 11th grade students who showed good academic promise during their first three years of high school.

The nine-day whirlwind trip to Stanford, Berkeley, Claremont, UCLA, and Occidental in December was intended primarily for Juan and Belem. They both have big dreams, but they have family issues they need resolved before they can gain permission to follow those dreams. Juan lives in federal housing in Edcouch, his mother works cleaning the Edcouch Catholic Church, and with another child, they barely make ends meet. Belem comes from an immigrant family; her mother recently earned a certificate as a beautician, and her father is a handy man who subsists on odd jobs. Neither Juan nor Belem is among the top students in their class, but they are both bright, they have both shown a strong work ethic, and they have suggested that they want to attend out of state

universities. Belem's parents, however, will not allow her to leave home to go to college. Similarly, Mrs. Pérez loves Juan too much, is overly protective of him, and opposes the idea of Juan's going away to college.

A few weeks later, Juan and Belem received their letter of acceptance from Occidental College. Then, they got their financial award letter in the mail. Annual cost to attend Occidental: \$36,000; scholarship and other financial awarded to each Juan and Belem: \$36,000. Cost, then, is not a problem. Both their parents, nevertheless, remained steadfastly against their going, encouraging them instead to stay close to home.

Shortly thereafter, Belem persuaded her parents to come to her community based research class, where at least eight of her classmates had already committed to Ivy League and other out of state universities. José was still deciding between MIT, Brown, and Yale; Sara has narrowed her choices to Stanford and Yale; Myrta had decided on Brown; Cecilia decided on Columbia; and the rest had thus committed to other competitive out of state colleges. It is worth stating that each of the students' socio-economic status is very similar to Juan and Belem's. Unlike Juan and Belem, however, they had all negotiated with their parents and had won permission to go away to college. In each case, the negotiation took shape through a series of conversations, sometimes involving teachers or alumni as part of story sharing sessions. When parents gain access to information and when they understand that their children can have support systems available to

them when they get to college, giving their kids permission to attend a far away college becomes easier to do. Ultimately, when parents become part of the conversation of their children's education, situations such as their children is going away become demystified.

Belem understands this, because she had taken part in numerous such conversations, but her parents had not. So she invited them to do just that. Her parents showed up promptly that afternoon, though it seemed they were not very clear what the meeting was about. "Buenas tardes," said Mr. García, "Belem nos dijo que viniéramos a una junta. A ver, de qué se trata (Belem told us to come to a meeting, so, what's it about?)"? We began by having Belem clarify the purpose of the meeting. "Dad, you know why we're here," she said, "it's because I want to go to Occidental, and you won't let me." He said, "why don't we talk about this at home? Besides, you know I want you to go to Arlington, because we have relatives there, and they can look after you." Shedding tears, Belem replied, "but you know I want to go to college in California."

About ninety minutes of emotional and very personal conversation and sharing followed among Belem, her parents, other students, and several faculty members. It was clear where Belem gets her good sense, her upright character, and her intelligence; she's got terrific parents. The themes that emerged from the conversation were familiar: family, money, support system, how often they would see each other. At first, Belem's father seemed particularly reluctant; it was

unclear at the beginning that he even wanted to be a part of the meeting, but he was good enough to stay.

Thereafter, two things seemed to sway the Garcías' perspective. First, Ernesto Ayala's stories seemed to resonate well with them. Secondly, the faculty and staff of the Llano Grande Center offered themselves as an integral part of the support system for Juan and Belem when they arrive in Occidental. Ernesto, who graduated from E-E in 1995, then enrolled and graduated from Brown University, shared the story of his own family struggle with letting him go. "My mother was dead set against it," he said. "But now, she's one of the biggest supporters of the whole college experience. I can go get her, if you like. She'd love to talk to you about it," he stated with great confidence in himself and his mother. Others followed with personal stories of how they got to college, and how many other youths just like Belem have gone away to college in the past decade. Other high school students shared as well. "I'll be far away from my parents next year," said 17-year-old José Cruz, "and I will miss them, but I think this is something I have to do in order to create more opportunities for myself and my family in the future." After the sharing of stories, the Garcías began to feel a little better about the Occidental prospect.

About forty-five minutes into the conversation Juan's mother walked in. "No quiero que se me vaya," (I don't want him to leave), she said, "pero yo creo que ya no lo puedo detener. Y si ustedes están dispuestos a ayudarlo, yo sí lo dejo

ir.” (But I don’t think I can hold him back any longer. And if the Center is prepared to offer support, I will allow him to go.) The two mothers quickly bonded. Ms. Pérez turned to Mrs. García and said in Spanish, "our children are leaving." Belem’s mother was already in tears by this point and her husband seemed a little choked up. Clearly the parents love their children, and their struggle to let them go off to Occidental was not about money, nor distance, but the fact they would only get to see their children was once or twice a year.

Both mothers talked about how they want the best for the children, and we carefully explained how Occidental was a wonderful opportunity for their children. “We are so proud of Belem,” said one of our teachers to Mr. García in Spanish. “Look at her. Es Mexicana, she’s smart, and she’s a leader. She’s exactly the kind of role model other Mexicanas need. And with a degree from Occidental, she’s going to make us all proud,” he continued, as he appealed to Mr. García’s ethnicity as well as his pride in his daughter. Moreover, we suggested to the parents, we do not expect them to leave home forever. In the end, Belem’s father agreed with his daughter’s decision to attend Occidental. Before our eyes, we observed the transformation of multiple people: Belem, her parents, the other students. It was a case study in liberation, adult education, and the education of everyone else (Freire, 1973; Guajardo, M., 2002; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Mayo, 1999).

In most circumstances, perhaps if Belem were a student at another school, this would probably not have happened. Our conversation with Belem's parents and with Juan's mother was built on trust; their parents would not have come to class if they did not trust us. We care for our students, but often times, teachers and students must go beyond mere aesthetic caring (Valenzuela, 1999). We must love our students, and we must be willing to take risks. We must be willing to be revolutionary, as Peter McLaren suggests of Guevara's mode in inspiring and moving others to act, in how we practice teaching and learning, in how we evolve as educators and members of the community (McLaren, 2000). Our pedagogy is about loving and caring for our students. It is about loving Belem, honoring her dreams, and respecting her parents. We trust Juan and Belem. They trust us, and their parents came to trust us as well. Dr. Casso trusted us too, and he has committed to becoming part of our long-term development plan.

At its core, the Llano Grande Center's pedagogy is political; it is, essentially, critical pedagogy at work (Giroux & Simon, 1989). It is grounded in history and in the cultural experiences and values of our students, their parents, and the community (Freire, 1973, 1974; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lang, 2003; Whitman, forthcoming). The Center's instructional approach treats history and politics as essential components that both teachers and students must be aware of. The daily conversations born out of the Center are deliberately contextualized historically and are bluntly political. It is an essential

mode of operation, particularly when we work in a system where curricula, textbooks, and uniform standards are fundamentally incompatible with the cultural experiences of most Mexican American children. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills have much to do with Anglo kids' language and cultural backgrounds, but it has much less compatibility with the cultural background of Edcouch-Elsa, and that of many other Mexican American students across the state. The state test, Advanced Placement courses, college entrance exams, and numerous other educational indicators favor Anglo children and work against ethnic and language minority children (Delpit 1996; Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995; Valenzuela 1999). When we teach, we must teach critically, and we must question what the state imposes. At the same time, we must also reflect critically on the methods we employ as we go about teaching our children in distinctly different ways.

DELIA BARRÓN, NEGOTIATING “BORDERS AND BREAKING BARRIERS IN THE 1950S

When we initiated the oral history project, a number of stories pointed to the Edcouch-Elsa High School Class of 1954 as an extraordinary group. “Mira,” said Elva González, “yo soy del '54, and in that class we had Aarón Peña the prominent attorney, Ben Villalon the research scientist at the extension center. Tambien estaba Chuy Hinojosa who is a professor of architecture at Texas A &

M, Rosie Zamora who owns her own company in Houston, Juan Gorostiza who is an administrator here, and several others who have done very well in life” (González, Elva, 1999). That year, half of Edcouch-Elsa’s graduating class was Mexican American, unusual for the 1950s, when the large majority of senior classes were comprised of Anglo students. Something was different, however, on campus during those years, and it intrigued my students and me. “Why was there such success during that time?” a student asked Mrs. González, who without missing a beat said, “It was because we had Delia Barrón as our teacher, and she cared about us” (González, Elva, 1999).

Delia Barrón taught us great lessons during the course of our oral history with her. She was born in Edinburg, Texas, in 1922, raised in Elsa by a fiercely independent mother named Sixta Tijerina, and graduated from Edinburg High School in 1939. Edcouch-Elsa High School first opened in 1936, but young Delia Tijerina had already developed friendships in Edinburg so she decided to complete her studies there, rather than be a member of one of Edcouch-Elsa High School’s first graduates. “My mother used to send me to Saltillo during the summers,” she recalled, “to continue studying.” And in Saltillo, Mexico, Delia made friends with girls who talked of going away to school in different parts of the United States. One place that especially intrigued Delia was Texas Women’s University in Denton, Texas, so, she says, “I convinced my mother to let me go there, and I did, and I graduated from TWU.” Thereafter, Delia joined the faculty

at Edcouch-Elsa High School, where she became the first Mexican American teacher. “For many years,” she said, “I was the only mexicana on the faculty” (Barrón, 1999).

Barrón recalls the time fondly, but she also remembers the blatant discrimination faced by Mexican American students. “It’s the way it was,” she said, “but I loved my students, and as a teacher I could do something about helping them succeed.” Within a few years, Barrón initiated several academic, cultural, and social programs aimed at developing a range of skills for Mexican American students. She created a new Pan American Student Forum (PASF) organization, which offered opportunities for Spanish speaking students to compete in literary and other academic activities against students from other parts of the state. She created a cultural event they called a “tamalada” where dozens of students gathered with parents and other people from the community to make large quantities of tamales to raise money for trips to PASF conferences, as well as to cover emergency situations. In addition, Delia Barrón acted as a very important academic mentor for Mexican American students. The successes of the Class of 1954 were “a direct result of the way Delia Barrón cared for us...and we cared for her in return,” said Elva González (Barrón, 1999; González, Elva).

Through the tamalades and the activities of PASF, Barrón found significant avenues through which to connect with Mexican American students and to build trusting relationships with them. This, in turn, enhanced her

effectiveness as an academic mentor. The Class of 1954 clearly responded by caring about their performance in school, and even in life after high school. Valenzuela argues that teachers who form relationships with students using social and cultural means find greater success. On the other hand, writes Valenzuela, “The view that students do not care about school stems from several sources, including social and cultural distance in student-adult relationships and the school culture itself” (Valenzuela, 1999). Barrón’s experience as a Mexican American growing up in Elsa, and her understanding of the social and cultural realities of her students, played a major role in helping her students succeed academically and in facilitating the process through which her students gained an awareness of their culture (Barrón, 1999; González, Elva, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Barrón’s experience as a woman was especially important for female students such as Elva González and Rosie Zamora, both of whom achieved high levels of professional success after college. “I learned a lot from my mother,” recalled Barrón. “She was a survivor and constantly negotiated things in life, with the work she did, with how she took orphaned children in, and with how she raised me.” Barrón took the lessons from her mother and she negotiated what Hurtado (2003) refers to as “borders,” as she returned to her hometown to teach. Though Barrón’s work with students at Edcouch-Elsa High School predates the emergence of modern Chicana feminist writing, she clearly went beyond the theory, as she crossed borders and broke down barriers (Barrón, 1999). She

effectively participated in reversing part of the reproduction of values of the dominant society by creating a different kind of cultural consciousness (Giroux, 1997). Unfortunately, after Barrón left Edcouch-Elsa High School in the early 1960s, few teachers extended themselves to Mexican American students in ways that were culturally and socially transformative. Even with the extraordinary work of Delia Barrón, the strength of the dominant culture's educational apparatus continued to wield itself after her departure. The domination continued.

ON ORAL HISTORIES

In class, we conduct between five and ten interviews per month, mostly in the form of oral histories, and we follow that pattern from the beginning of the school year until its end. The oral histories and the relationships we have built as part of that process have forced us to shift radically our approach to how we teach and how we learn. Our work with public education is about creating an environment where our students, teachers, and other community members can be part of a public discourse. When we interviewed 102-year-old Luisa Garza three years ago, for example, we realized what a gold mine we had found. Doña Luisa lived the entire 20th Century in relative isolation, as an intensely private person. On the other hand, she sat in her wheelchair and demanded that we listen to her treasured stories. She insisted that she become a public person. Like hundreds of other elders in our community, doña Luisa would like to share her stories; she

would like younger people to learn from her experiences, her tragedies, and her triumphs. In our society, however, doña Luisa and her peers seldom find the platform through which they can share, or the vehicle through which they can become public teachers. The Llano Grande oral history project is motivated by doña Luisa's desire to tell her stories, by her wish to become our teacher (Garza, L., 1998).

Stories can be a powerful tool through which to educate and subsequently transform young people. Maxine Greene points out that children understand life and themselves more clearly when their own stories are utilized for learning. Some teachers, she says, are finally beginning to understand, "they can best reach students with such ends in view if they try to do so against the background of their own life stories, their own narratives" (Greene, 1994). Dyson and Genishi also point out that "children, like adults, use narrative to shape and reshape their lives, imagining what could have or should have happened, as well as what did happen" (1994). Through our work at Edcouch-Elsa High School and the Llano Grande Center, we have created conditions where students spend long hours examining their own lives and the lives of others. In a recent article entitled "Life as Narrative," Jerome Bruner suggests, "that the only life worth living is the well-examined one" (Bruner, 1994). Few people have examined their own lives through stories as Alex Haley, who in his epic novel *Roots* (1976), describes sitting around the porch in his native Henning, Tennessee, listening to his

grandmother and aunts tell stories. Those stories defined his life and career, and in his persistent quest to find his family lineage, he recalled how the oral histories told to him by African elders provided a veracity and power that led him to the truth. When he finally found the *Lord Ligonier*, the slave ship his now-famous ancestor Toby was on, Haley said, “I trusted oral history now better than I trusted the printed page” (Haley, 1984).

The oral history process is a very serious exercise that requires great sensitivity. Interviewees make themselves vulnerable as they share their most personal stories. The power dynamics of the interview, then, becomes a complex activity that demands much thought and preparation. We dare not violate the spirit with which doña Luisa shares her stories, just as we will not violate the voice and experience of others (Scheurich, 1997). In that regard, I heed the wisdom of José Cruz, a former student who implores that interviewers not take a prepared set of questions into an oral history. José argues that an oral history should “start from scratch,” and the process should allow people to tell the stories they want to tell, and we as interviewers, he says, should respect that, first and foremost (Cruz, 2001).

José’s classmate, Cristina Capetillo, agreed with José by adding, “That’s when the oral history becomes fun, when you have to really be on your toes” (Capetillo, 2001).

Alexis Delgado, another student researcher, countered by saying that any kind of prepared outline is critical to her as an interviewer (Delgado, 2001). She would not want to be caught with nothing to say. “What if they’re not talkative, or if I get nervous and have no outline?”

Abbie García then offered a solution: “I think we can take notes with an outline of questions into the interview, but we shouldn’t let the notes intimidate them” (García, A., 2001).

“But we have to be careful,” argued Belem García, “because it’s already intimidating enough, with all the technology we take” (García, B., 2001).

The oral history is also a situation that presents complex power dynamics. An interviewer can easily assume a position of power through the design and purpose of the question posed. Might the research interviewer bring some sort of political agenda into the interview? Is there specific information the interviewer wishes to find for specific research purposes? Perhaps. Our purpose, however, is primarily to conduct research so that we can build relationships with people, give people a vehicle through which they can tell their stories, and validate their stories. In doing so, the research process also serves as an opportunity to share knowledge and skills with students and with other people from the community. Ramiro Casso, the students, and the students’ parents aptly played the role of teachers and learners during the selected one-week period.

CHAPTER 4:

HISTORY AND SCHOOLING IN RURAL SOUTH TEXAS: A VIEW THROUGH PEOPLE'S NARRATIVES

INTRODUCTION

Our work at Edcouch-Elsa High School in the early 1990s began as a quest to understand our community history and ourselves. We also felt a need to believe that we were capable of shaping our own future. We did not refer to our efforts as work framed by critical pedagogy, critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, or any other particular methodology. Through reading, research, and continued reflection, we came to understand that we utilized elements from each of those ways of thinking. Carspecken, Greene and others define critical methodology as work that seeks to emancipate historically marginalized people through a course of study and action (Carspecken, 1996, 1999, 2002). They describe it as a work where we as teachers are “learning along with those we try to provoke to learn...to inspire hitherto unheard voices” (Greene, 1999). Critical pedagogy is “not a technique, model, framework, or recipe for educational practice,” as Darder points out; it is rather a set of principles “for the enactment of an emancipatory classroom culture” (Darder, 1995). Unleashing the unheard voices of which Greene speaks, becomes a

strategy of the critical educator whose commitment is to equip students with skills, power, and a belief that they can transform themselves (Darder, 1995).

Practicing critical pedagogy in a real life public school classroom is a difficult proposition. Scores of critical pedagogues offer theories and practices that educators can reflect upon and operationalize as part of their work as teachers, but it is easier said than done. Shore (1992) eloquently and emphatically proposes ways educators and students can transform schools, but his contribution does not extend beyond the theoretical. Sleeter (1995) offers her reflections using critical pedagogy in her own college classroom environment, though she too understands the limitations of the field in offering “practical guidance for teachers.” Solorzano (2000) writes about creating classroom conditions based on principles of critical pedagogy, where his college students engage in dialogues regarding the portrayal of Latinos in the mass media. Through a problem-posing approach to research (Freire, 1973, 1974), Solorzano’s college students identified the problem, analyzed the problem, found solutions to fix the problem, and thereby affected change in their community (Solorzano, 2000).

The research work conducted by students at Edcouch-Elsa High School and the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development is similar to the work of Solorzano’s college students, with the major difference being the age levels of students. While the literature is rich in theorizing and showing how to develop critical pedagogy practices, it is rather sparse in showing examples of

places where it occurs in primary or secondary school environments (Shor & Pari, 2000, Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Guajardo, M., 2002; Whitman, forthcoming). Moreover, it is even more difficult to find examples of this type of work where student and community transformation occurs as a product of this pedagogical approach. The work of the Llano Grande Center is rooted in history, uses story as a method for growth and development, and emphasizes transformation both at individual and community levels as outcomes. What follows is the narrative of a rural South Texas community constructed through data collected by students, teachers, and community members. This research process focuses on collecting stories, building relationships, creating a history, and transforming a community for the better (Lang, 2003; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Guajardo, M., 2002).

A SOCIO HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN EDCOUCH-ELSA SCHOOLS, 1920-1990

For many years, Mexican American children in the rural South Texas communities of Edcouch, Elsa, and other neighboring towns had limited access to formal educational opportunities. Mexican people inhabited this particular part of the world for hundreds of years before the 20th Century and enjoyed life in sprawling ranches in the aftermath of the 17th and 18th century Spanish colonization of the lands along the Río Grande River (Alonzo, 1998). After the intrusion of northerners into the Mexican state of Tejas Coahuila in the early 19th

Century, followed by a continued influx of similar immigrants after the United States-Mexican War and the American Civil War, a significant number of Anglo-Americans established settlements in what became the state of Texas. As the ranching economy yielded to the emerging agricultural interests in the early 20th Century, the political economy of the region became profoundly altered, and it radically transformed the lives of Mexican origin people on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border (Montejano, 1987; Alonzo, 1998). This paper examines the historical developments of this south Texas region, particularly as they influenced educational access and opportunities for local residents. The narrative looks at the formation of communities and schools, and it looks closely at an evolving political economy that gives shape to institutions and the identity of a community.

To gain an understanding of the development of communities, schools, politics, and the economy of the region, one must observe the clear and compelling link among all of those developments. The political economy is that link; it is the intersection of politics, economy, policy and education, and the daily realities of people living in that community. Looking at the stories that inform that political economy gives us the best window through which to understand the history of the region, and it gives us the most insightful view to understand the important developments that influenced the access people had to educational opportunities (Darder, 1997; Anyon, 1997; Guajardo, M., 2002).

In many ways, the values that dictated the political economy of the region also prominently influenced the kind of access people had to educational opportunities. Between 1920 and the early '30s, the Common School system governed the rural schools of the area. Two schools, the San José Ranch Common School and the Carlson Common School, established the clear rules of segregation; the San José School operated for Mexican children, and the Carlson School only accepted and educated Anglo children. In 1929, the Carlson Common School became the Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District and perpetuated the segregationist policies for well over two decades (Beane, 1940). The racial division and broader thinking process upon which both Edcouch and Elsa were founded supported the established segregationist culture of the schools, and the profitable agricultural interests further defined a political economy where Mexicans were viewed as a critical part of the manual labor force. Numerous stories told by community elders, both Mexican and Anglo, demonstrate how Mexican people were the “cheap labor,” and as a consequence had little need for formal schooling. The Anglos had it differently. Local elder William Foerster has suggested about Anglos in the Edcouch and Elsa area, “We came to buy land, to manage the sheds, and to run the schools...yeah, some of us white folks were poor, but there was no question who was in control of the politics and of the jobs” (Foerster, W., 2000).

Through a series of stories, as told by the residents of the community, this section explores the dynamics of an early 20th Century political culture and system that gave shape to racially segregated communities and schools in South Texas. By taking a historical approach, the narrative draws on the macro historical perspectives in order to set the broader context of public schooling in this country (Spring, 1996). Against this backdrop, I then weave a series of stories that define a contentious political culture, as citizens of this rural South Texas community worked towards integrating Edcouch-Elsa schools (Villenas, 2001). As the numerous stories fill the larger narrative, the stories also challenge prevailing policies and/or suggest innovative perspectives that may lead to new approaches to public education. In short, this is a micro history of a political struggle of a community and its schools, and it is told through the words of the people who have lived that history. The stories demonstrate the passions, struggles, and triumphs of local people, particularly as they forced a community and its schools to afford greater access to educational opportunities, but the stories also point to a larger picture of a fight for justice and participation for which many Americans fought during the same time period.

THE BACKGROUND

Seventy five year old Kate Bolten recalled when her mother Beth Crutcher first came to south Texas during the fall of 1920. “My mother was 19, single, and had just completed her training at a normal school in San Antonio,” when she received an appointment to teach by the Hidalgo County Superintendent (Bolten, 1999). The assignment placed her at the San José Ranch Common School, located in the midst of thick brush land some 12 miles north of the Rio Grande River. As the head of the county’s Common School District, the Hidalgo County Superintendent placed Ms. Crutchfield in a common school, but in one known as one of the county’s Mexican Schools (Mycue, 2002; San Miguel, 1987; O’Shea, 2000; Rocha & Webking, 1993). “It was like the Wild West for Mother,” she recalled, because young Crutchfield was “out here all by herself,” in a ranch inhabited mostly by Mexican people, and teaching all Mexican children. Little about Crutchfield’s training at the normal school prepared her for this. She did not know Spanish, and her students at San José did not know English, “and she was scared to death,” said her daughter Kate many years later (Bolten, 1999).

During the late 1910s and early ’20s, Mexican laborers stayed up late into the night burning the mesquite and other grub they uprooted during the day clearing the brush area around San José Ranch. They were also very loud, “drinking, dancing, and socializing into the night,” and it simply made Beth Crutcher feel very uncomfortable and unsafe. After a short tenure at the San José

Common School, a terrified Crutchfield requested a transfer to another school, and the county superintendent obliged by placing her at the Carlson Common School, an all white school about five miles north of the San José Ranch (Bolten, 1999; Anderson, N., 1999).

Early in the 20th Century, Mexican people in rural south Texas had little access to schooling opportunities outside of attending a Mexican ranch schools such as the San José Ranch Common School. Some Mexican children were born and raised in old Texas ranches or in the countryside where many families simply “squatted” open lands (Stambaugh & Stambaugh, 1974). Noé Cavazos shares stories of his family’s settlement pattern, which often depended on the availability of unwanted land, “We set up our humble house in an area no one else wanted.” They moved on several occasions as land development companies purchased large tracts of land and began to clear and reclaim those lands (Cavazos, N., 2000). Before the settlement of towns early in the 20th Century, “we just lived in the brush. There was nothing else here,” said 103-year-old Luisa Garza. “There were no stores, no churches, no priests; there was nothing,” in the area where she lived, except for brush and the wildlife that came along with it (Garza, L., 1999; Foerster, W., 2000).

Other Mexican children arrived in south Texas with their families, as part of the land clearing movement during the first two decades of the century. Jobs abounded in that regard, and while the work was hard, many remember the

experience as an extraordinary education. Isabel Gutiérrez learned about hard work, and he learned how to deal with people as he cleared brush next to his father and brothers (Gutiérrez, I., 1997). Macario Sáenz learned how to write and how to compute numbers as he took copious notes of the work he and his father performed as they grubbed an acre at a time. Sáenz recalled how as a boy, he “always carried pencil and paper” and kept good track of the calendar as well. “It’s best to do some things when the moon is full and others when it’s not,” he said as he argued for the value of the empirical learning he experienced (Sáenz, M., 1999). In a Freirian sense, Gutiérrez and Sáenz were fluently literate with the “world,” even though they may not have been fully literate with the “word” (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

While clearing brush and other work offered rich learning opportunities, access to formal schooling for United States-born Mexican or for immigrant Mexican children was much more difficult to achieve. In rural Hidalgo County, formal schooling was hard to find for most children, regardless of race. Anglo children who lived far from the Carlson Common School found it a challenge to get there on some days (Odom, 1998). For Mexican children from the area, only those who lived in the San José Ranch could attend school there. Access to the Carlson Common School was not restricted by geography, but only the Anglo children could attend. Most Mexican children living in the rural area were then left without access to schooling. Even children at the San José Ranch faced

difficulties in consistent schooling because the school only opened seasonally, and often depended on the availability of teachers. Even when teachers were available, some did not stay for long periods, as the case of Beth Crutcher demonstrates. While Mexican ranch schools opened for only a few months every year, schools such as the Carlson Common School stayed open for the entire fall and spring, keeping pace with the traditional school calendar. Crutchfield taught at the Carlson Common School for several years, until she married and gave birth to her first child, at which point she left teaching and was replaced by another permanent teacher (Bolten, 1999; Alonzo, 1998).

Children attending the Carlson Common School came from recently arrived families such as the Liljestrands, Andersons, Odoms, Bolten, Crenshaws. Some came from Alabama and Georgia, others from Illinois and Minnesota, and others from Oklahoma and Arkansas. Most came as part of a land rush movement concocted by emerging land development companies. An elaborate public relations campaign aggressively marketed south Texas as the 20th Century's Garden of Eden, and people came from different parts of the United States in search of a better life in this "tropical paradise" known as the "Magical Rio Grande Valley," a place that offered great bounty and wealth (Limerick, 1988; White, 1993; Missouri Pacific, 1930). As the immigrants from the north responded to the advertisements, they quickly used their savings to purchase the purported fertile lands. During the late 1910s and early '20s in this Hidalgo

County area, the rural lands became transformed into places such as the Liljestrand Tract, and the Carlson Tract, and so on (Anderson, N., 1999). The Anglo children from these tracts comprised the student body at the Carlson Schoolhouse. Mexican children from the same rural area, on the other hand, were not welcome in the Carlson School, and thus found minimal access to formal schooling throughout the 1920s (González, V., 1998; Peacock, 1999; Foerster, W., 1998; San Miguel, 1987).

As rural Hidalgo County increased in visibility in the 1920s in urban markets such as Dallas, St. Louis, Chicago, and New York, the region would soon be profoundly impacted. Two factors most significantly changed the area: (1) the introduction of large agricultural interests and (2) the formation of the town sites, Edcouch and Elsa. In the early 1920s St. Louis-based entrepreneur J.C. Engleman answered the call from the land development companies and bought more than 10,000 acres of rich farmland in this rural region to establish Engleman Gardens, a vast citrus and real estate concern that created an immediate impact. By 1925, Engleman Gardens boasted of a burgeoning citrus processing plant, a nascent labor camp, a clubhouse with a lookout tower, and an organizational infrastructure that rivaled the best-managed industries in south Texas (Johnstone, 1999; Trueba 2002). Shortly after purchasing the property, Engleman employed an able young man named Austin Leroy Cramer to manage the sprawling citrus enterprise. A native of Minnesota and a recent graduate of Macalester College in St. Paul,

Minnesota, Cramer brought his young family to a large house overseeing the vast Engleman estate. After Engleman died prematurely just a few years after establishing his impressive operation, Cramer took control of the management of the enterprise and created a plan that included the aggressive lobbying of local, state, and federal officials toward assisting the profitable growth of the citrus processing plant. Cramer devised a labor recruitment strategy that effectively lured hundreds of Mexican laborers to the Engleman Gardens labor camp, and he ably utilized the business to position himself as a leader in the region's cultural, economic, and educational contexts. During his four-decade tenure as overseer of Engleman Gardens, Cramer became involved in water politics, he became the president of the board of directors of Edinburg Jr. College, and he hosted in his house renowned personalities such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Winthrop Rockefeller, and John Wayne (Johnstone, 1999; Cramer-Jones, 2001; Layton, B., 1999; Rodríguez, 2000; Trueba, 2002).

A second agricultural operation, Vahlsing Inc., rivaled Engleman Gardens in size and impact. In the early 1920s, Long Island, New York, resident Fred Vahlsing also responded to the alluring marketing ploys of the land development companies by buying large land tracts in the same rural area. Vahlsing also built a modest-sized packing shed next to land where a Southern Pacific railroad was to be constructed. "I worked en la Bolsin (Vahlsing)," recalls 103 year old Luisa Garza, "when it was just opened...oh, about 1925 or 1926, and at that time the

roof was but a simple tarp” (Garza, 1999). Another community elder remembers his father working at the Vahlsing shed. “I don’t remember when there wasn’t a Vahlsing shed,” said Ezequiel Granado, “I know I learned how to walk, run, and play right there at the plant, when I’d spend time with my dad at work.” Born in 1925, Granado recalls the importance of the shed in giving shape to community life. “We all have stories about our experiences at the shed. It’s part of the lives of all of us,” he said (Granado, 1998; *Readers’ Digest*, 1946; Tamez, 1998; Layton, 1999; González, 1998).

The Vahlsing shed similarly impacted community life, and it even spread its reach nationally and internationally. At the height of the Great Depression, the Vahlsing shed created more jobs than there were people in the Elsa and Edcouch communities. Throughout the 1930s and ’40s, more than 3,000 locals held jobs either at the shed or in the fields harvesting the vegetables that were trucked to the shed. In 1941 the shed earned fame as “The Largest Packing Shed under One Roof,” so coined by the *Guinness Book of World Records*.⁶ Vahlsing himself gained public recognition when he was tagged as “The Henry Ford of Vegetables” by *Readers Digest* magazine in 1947 (*Reader’s Digest*, 1947; Granado, 1998). The yield at the shed also fueled the war production machinery. As a member of the 332nd Engineer Batallion stationed in Landsburg, Germany, Ezequiel Granado

⁶ Though the locals claim The *Guinness Book of World Records* honored the Vahlsing shed as the largest packing shed in the world, this researcher could not find corroborating evidence. Apparently, Guinness did not begin publishing until the 1950s.

recalls the day he accompanied his sergeant to the train station to secure vegetables and other foodstuff to return to his battalion. “We went to the station in Augsburg, Germany, and to my surprise and shock, as I picked up a crate of top carrots, I noticed that printed on the crate were the words “Bonita Foods, Elsa, Texas”...and I felt right at home,” he recalled. As the brand name of Vahlsing vegetables, “Bonita Foods” were entirely processed at the Vahlsing shed in Elsa, Texas, and subsequently shipped throughout the country, and even to the European front during the War (Granado, 1998, 2002).

Engleman Gardens and Vahlsing Inc. emerged as economic giants in the mid Valley. Engleman’s “Won Up” citrus brand appeared in newspapers across Texas and in some areas of the Midwest. Dorothy Odom recalls securing a modeling job to advertise “Won Up” oranges and grapefruit. “My face was plastered in the Houston paper pretty frequently,” she said (Odom, 1999). While the Great Depression ravaged the national economy and put about a quarter of the American workforce on employment lines, Engleman Gardens continued to flourish. By the mid 1930s, the labor camp at “El Inglamo” (Engleman) was home to more than 500 Mexican people, and the larger complex was equipped with a mercantile store, a baseball field, and a clubhouse, though Anglos and their guests mostly used the clubhouse. Generations of families were raised at the labor camp. Residents married at the Catholic church that was nestled in the middle of the camp, and people organized frequent dances and other celebrations.

“I won the Cinco de Mayo beauty pageant in 1942,” recalled María Gutiérrez, as a romantic smile spread across her friendly face (Gutiérrez, J., 2000; Martínez, S., 2000; Trueba, 2003). “It was its own distinct community,” recalled 82-year-old Janet Cramer Jones, as she reminisced about the enterprise her father managed for more than 40 years (Cramer Jones, 2001).

Separated by only a two-mile distance, Engleman and Vahlsing left indelible imprints on the character and shape of the region. Contemporaneous with the birth of the two enterprises, land development companies determined to establish towns, and they plotted the towns around the burgeoning packing sheds such as Vahlsing (Stambaugh & Stambaugh, 1974; Anderson, N., 1998). In 1926, Edcouch was the first principal town founded in the area. Named after former county judge and Weslaco-based banker Edward Couch, Edcouch was designed around the recently built St. Louis, Brownsville, Mexico Railroad (Stambaugh & Stambaugh, 1974; HCHC, 2002). Elsa was auctioned off in March 1927 and was similarly designed around the all-important railroad as well as around the Vahlsing shed, which lay at the center of the town site. Clearly, agricultural and labor interests informed the philosophy of Dallas-based engineer Gordon Wood, the American Land Development Company, and other founding fathers.

As importantly, Edcouch and Elsa were designed as racially segregated towns. When the Elsa town site was auctioned in 1927 red, white, and green tags were placed in different land sectors. Red tags were designated as business lots,

white tags for residence lots, and green tags indicated land space for the Mexican colony (Advertisement, 1927). As occurred with many communities in the American South, Elsa was strategically established according the racialist rules of Jim Crow. The railroad separated the town into two; Mexicans would live north of the tracks, while Anglos would reside on the south side. “But lots on the Mexican side were tiny,” recalls Esperanza Salinas, “Mexicans were set up to live in small lots, and real close to each other, while the gringos built their houses in lots two to three times bigger than ours” (Salinas, E., 2000; Rubel, 1966; Montejano, 1987; Zamora, E., 1993). One community elder described why Anglo city planners chose to place the Mexican colony on the north side of the tracks. “The gringos were smart,” said Ezequiel Granado, “they put themselves south from us because they didn’t want to be downwind from us” (Granado, 1998). In south Texas, continued Mr. Granado, the wind blows from the southeast, and “we had hogs and outhouses,” that emitted foul odors. Occasionally, recalled another elder, a northern cold front came in, “and that’s when we got even” (Salazar, 1999).

OPENING SALE **ELSA** *The Planned Valley Town* **The New S. P. Town**
At Mile 5 North and 16½ West

No Auction Sale—All Lots Tagged and Marked With Price—Select Your Lot, Pull Tag and TAKE TO OUR OFFICE on the Ground, PAY ONE-FOURTH CASH AND SIGN CONTRACT, Balance Payable 8, 12, 18 Months

MARCH 2ND

Prices
 Business Lots, \$850 to \$150
 Residence Lots, \$600 to \$75

Elsa Townsite Company
 OWNERS AND DEVELOPERS
 Main Office: American Co. Bldg., Minersville
 PLAN CITY: ELSA

BUY YOUR LOT IN **ELSA** *The Planned Valley Town* **A GOOD INVESTMENT**

Red Tags On Business Lots
 White Tags On Residence Lots
 Green Tags In Mexican Colony

ELSA is Located in the Center of the Rich, Vegetable District
 The Land on which Elsa is the Valley Area in this vicinity
 ELSA will be the largest town on the Southern Pacific Extension between Edinburg and Harlingen

Modern Pavement and Traffic Drains
 Wide Streets
 Standard Building and Business Districts
 Labeled Sites
 Public Parks Already Created
 Parks
 Public Works
 Water Works

Illustration 2: Map of Sale of Elsa, March 2, 1927. Courtesy of Neal Galloway.

Racial segregation in Edcouch mirrored Elsa's, except that railroad tracks were not the dividing line. Instead, Farm to Market Road 1015 separated Mexicans from Anglos. During the early years of the town's existence, some of the more zealous locals apparently took the dividing line very seriously. Jacinto González recalled the day in 1932 after his father moved the family store from the east side of 1015 to the west side. "We woke up and found a burning cross on our

front yard,” he said, and later González’s father took out his rifle as he defended his family from several violent visitors who rode on horseback and wore white hoods over their heads (González, J., 1998). The original Mexican neighborhood developed east of 1015 and known as El Rincón del Diablo (the Devil’s Corner), resembled Elsa’s north side. Property lots were smaller than on the Anglo side, indoor plumbing was a rarity, and a Catholic church was built in the middle of the barrio (Montalvo, 2000; González, E., 2000; Calderón, 1998). During the early years, several local men, mostly in a drunken state, claimed to have seen the devil late at night in the barrio. And with the city’s political leadership persuading the Catholic diocese to build a parish on the east side of town, the compelling juxtaposition of God and Devil emerged in el Rincón. Alas, both God and Devil lived in the Mexican neighborhood in Edcouch, unless one believes the current revisionist storytellers who claim the devil lived west of 1015, and from there orchestrated the economic, political, and social developments of this rural south Texas town (Rice, 1998; Johnson, 2001; Montalvo, 2000).

A POLITICAL CULTURE & SYSTEM: COMMUNITY BUILDING, SCHOOLS, AND ACCESS: 1920-1940S

José Tamez was born in 1924 in the middle of rich farmland that would soon become Elsa, Texas. “I was born in Elsa,” he said, “before Elsa was Elsa.” The Tamez family came to South Texas as part of a wave of early twentieth

century Mexican immigrants that came to clear the South Texas brush, in preparation for the merging agricultural industry (Cornelius, 1980; Gamio, 1931). As the grown ups worked, the Tamez children were sent to school. Mr. Tamez recalls, however, that for Mexican children access to school was often difficult. “One of the experiences that most shaped me as a child,” he said, “was that when it rained we had to walk a long distance to catch the bus...One rainy day my father walked with us to the bus stop because he wanted to ask the bus driver to drive closer to our home.” The bus driver’s response would be etched in Mr. Tamez’s mind forever. “When my father asked the bus driver, the driver said, ‘No! Mexicans aren’t supposed to get educated anyway. You are meant to work in the fields, as laborers,’” recalled an emotional Mr. Tamez (Tamez , 1998; Kantor & Tyack, 1982; Spring, 1996).

Creating schooling opportunities for the purported agricultural labor force seemed counterproductive. Young José’s bus driver appeared to have understood the rules of the game. Ample historical documentation supports José Tamez’s story. Early 20th Century anthropologist Paul Taylor found repeated testimonials that pointed to the role of the Mexican worker in the economy and social structure of South Texas. Taylor interviewed numerous Central and South Texas Anglo farmers who unabashedly argued that Mexican children had no business going to school. Educating Mexicans, claimed Taylor’s interviewees, would upset the

roles already defined by the regional political economy (Taylor, 1934; Montejano, 1987; Kantor & Tyack, 1982; Spring, 1996).

Just as the American educational system of the 19th Century responded to the needs of an increasingly industrial society, educational institutions in South Texas also mirrored the regional economic realities (Spring, 1995). The new South Texas political elite responded to farming interests by building on the Common School system of the early 20th Century (Beane, 1940; Mycue, 2002). Shortly after the founding of Edcouch and Elsa, the community leadership intended to convert the Carlson Common School into an independent school district, so they decided to create the Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District in 1929, and followed the segregationist policies that governed the Carlson School as well as the San José Ranch School for Mexican children (Beane, 1940). Among the first orders of business, the founding board of trustees decided to create an elementary school system separated by race. Mexican children in Edcouch would attend the North Edcouch Elementary School, which would be located in the middle of el Rincón del Diablo. The school would be housed in two Army barracks brought in from Harlingen. The barracks had been used to quarter National Guardsmen who patrolled the border during the volatile decade of the Mexican Revolution (Gutiérrez, A., 1997). The Los Indios Elementary School would be located on lot 25 on the north side of Elsa and would be exclusively for Mexican children. This school would also be housed in a wood-

frame building, similar to the structure brought into Edcouch (E-E School Board minutes 1932-1933; Zamora, O., 1998).

Anglo children, on the other hand, attended the recently built Edcouch Elementary School, otherwise known as the Red Brick School. But 1932 was not the beginning of schooling opportunities for Anglo children. In the 1920s children who completed their studies at the Carlson or at the Center School, both schools for Anglo children, could take advantage of a school bus that would transport them to Edinburg. Several dozen students took this bus and subsequently graduated from Edinburg High School; no Mexican child graduated from Edinburg High School during this time period. The Edinburg route continued until 1935, when Edcouch-Elsa graduated its first all-Anglo senior class (Odom, 1999).

José Tamez's story encapsulates the thinking that informed policies that created towns and schools in South Texas. According to Mr. Tamez, Mexican children were taught just enough English so they could understand their patrones, "but we rarely made it out of grammar school," he said (Tamez, 1998). Edcouch-Elsa school policy created a clear segregated system that reflected the values of the ruling group. A group of Anglo farmers who found the school system as an effective vehicle through which to perpetuate the economic, political, and social status quo (Spring, 1995; San Miguel, 1987) held onto political, economic, and institutional power. "There were some things that were not fair in the early years

of the community,” refuted Elsa farmer Niles Anderson. “But that’s the way things were...and we tried our best to take care of one another” (Anderson, N., 1998; San Miguel, 1987; Fowler, 2000; Elazar, 1984).

Several scholars have documented the segregation of Mexican American children in the Southwest during the early 20th Century. González argues this segregation was a continuation of the legacy of conquest dealt to Mexican origin people since the defeat of Mexico and its people during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 (González, G. 1990). Spring (1996) and San Miguel (1987) place Mexican American children as part of a larger subordinated group of Americans subordinated and marginalized by the dynamics of economy, politics, and race. They further argue that schools subjected Mexican American school children to the systemic patterns of cultural reproduction of values and beliefs of Anglo-America. Specific case studies written by Baeza (1992) and Calderón (1950) support these theses. Through oral history recollections, Baeza found the Centennial School in Alpine, Texas, operated well beyond the Brown case in 1954, even though attending segregated schools did active damage to Mexican American children. Calderón taught at the North Edcouch Elementary school in Edcouch between 1949 and 1950, as part of his field work for his Master’s thesis at the University of Texas and discovered profound incongruence between the school for Mexican children, which was north of the railroad tracks, and the school for Anglo children on the south side. Menchaca and Valencia, in their

research on California school during the early part of the 20th Century, find that segregation was yet another manifestation of an Anglo-American racist ideology that called for the control and domination of Mexican people and other minority groups. A series of political and economic developments since early in the 19th Century nurtured this pattern of thinking (Menchaca & Valencia, 1990). Segregation in Edcouch-Elsa schools occurred within this ideological and historical backdrop.

CONFLICT & POLITICAL CULTURE: CHALLENGING SEGREGATION, CREATING ACCESS: 1942-1960S

Early one morning in the fall of 1942, Tila Zamora drove her six-year-old daughter Rosie to the Red Brick School in Edcouch. Mrs. Zamora and her husband were respected members of the community, for they owned and operated Farmacia Zamora, a modest but thriving pharmacy located on the Mexican side of Elsa. Mrs. Zamora understood that taking Rosie to Edcouch Elementary was a bold move because she knew only Anglo children attended that school. She was surprised, nevertheless, to find Superintendent Wilson waiting for her at the front steps of the school. “Good morning Mr. Wilson,” recalled Mrs. Zamora saying to the superintendent, “I’m here to enroll my daughter Rosie in this school.” The superintendent responded by reminding her that Mexican children already had their own school. Mrs. Zamora was determined, “Mr. Wilson,” she said, “I’ve

been preparing Rosie to come to this school since the day she was born. She's ready for this school." Wilson would not relent and Rosie was denied enrollment in the Red Brick School that day. But Mrs. Zamora was resolute. She went straight home to write a letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt requesting that he take immediate action against the injustice waged against her daughter. Within weeks, Superintendent Wilson received a directive. It came from Washington, D.C., was forwarded to the Texas Superintendent of Schools, and then sent to Edcouch-Elsa. In October 1942, Rosie integrated the Red Brick School in Edcouch (Zamora, O., 1998).

The Rosie Zamora situation forced Edcouch-Elsa to examine its segregationist policy for the first time. The response from the Texas superintendent in October 1942 informed E-E ISD that it could not discriminate against Latin American children by keeping them out of school. The correspondence did suggest, however, that the school district could institute a language proficiency test for the purpose of admitting students but it could not discriminate on the basis of race—except against Negro children (Hughes correspondence 1942; Zamora, O., 1998). Edcouch-Elsa reacted to the directive by implementing an English-language test. Rosie passed the test, but it was a clear policy move to conserve the segregationist status quo. Until the President of the United States and the state of Texas intervened, Edcouch-Elsa firmly followed the separate but equal doctrine as articulated in the historic *Plessy v. Ferguson*

case in 1896. The letter from the state superintendent informed Edcouch-Elsa that Latin American children were not Negro and could thus not be denied access to school.

Several years after Rosie enrolled in the Red Brick School, her younger brothers were also admitted, and other English-speaking Mexican American children followed in the late 1940s and early '50s. Nevertheless, the progress of integration transpired all too deliberately. At the same time the Mexican elementary schools gained importance as a place to funnel the increasing number of Mexican children. At these schools children were generally taught by Anglo teachers. Learning English was a top priority, and most of the students repeated first and second grades. "Many Mexicans repeated the first grade," Lupita Guzman recalled. Guzman attended the Mexican school in Elsa in the 1930s and '40s and also remember that many kids, "just stopped going when they were 11 or 12 years old and still in the first or second grade" (Guzman, 1997).

Inequities abounded in this educational context. Jacinto González, the first Mexican American to serve on the Edcouch-Elsa board of trustees, repeatedly petitioned other board members for additional resources to address the deficiencies at North Edcouch Elementary. In a 1936 letter addressed to the board, Mr. González requested that additional staff be hired to keep the school clean and in safe operational conditions (González, J., 1998).

Carlos Calderón, who lived in Edcouch for 2 years and taught at North Edcouch Elementary between 1949 and 1950, also addressed similar issues. While conducting research for his master's thesis at the University of Texas at Austin, Mr. Calderón documented the systemic inequalities in the education of Latin American children compared to Anglo American children. He observed that the physical structures of the Mexican school were clearly inferior and created poorer learning environments than the newer buildings and facilities at the Red Brick School. The ethnic composition of the faculty also added to the inequality. Mexican students found difficulty in understanding Anglo teachers and Anglo teachers often had little patience for under skilled Mexican students (Calderón, 1950, 1998).

While school and community leaders maintained control and perpetuated Jim Crow-like conditions, Edcouch and Elsa could not be immune from global forces at work during the 1940s and 1950s. The Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor and the emergence of Nazism in Western Europe impacted south Texas as much as any region in the country. Dozens of Edcouch and Elsa residents played a central role in defining what some have referred to as America's greatest generation (Brokaw, 2000). Pedro Salinas left his job at the Valshing packing shed in Elsa to volunteer in the United States Army. In 1945 "I helped to liberate Dachau," he recalled (Salinas, 1998). Ruby Peña of Edcouch took a job in Corpus Christi during the war processing and working with prisoners of war and

Japanese internment camp detainees (Peña, 1999). Martín Hinojosa Johnston was aboard the U.S.S. Missouri when “we signed the treaty to end the war with Japan in 1945,” he said (Hinojosa Johnston, 1998). Guadalupe Garza and Guillermo Carreon of Elsa served valiantly during the Normandy Invasion in June 1944; Mr. Carreon earned two Purple Hearts and a Silver Star for his heroism (Garza, G., 2000; Carreon, 2000).

As South Texans returned from the battlefields of the Pacific and Western Europe, they brought with them a new awareness of themselves as Americans. “When we came back,” recalled Pedro Salinas, “we expected more.” Salinas and a host of his contemporaries took advantage of the American GI Bill shortly after their return. “I remember car pooling with several others from Elsa to go to barber school,” he said (Salinas, P., 1998). Tila Zamora, buoyed by her victory in the Rosie experience in 1942, mobilized the Mexican American community to vote in order to gain representation on the Edcouch-Elsa School Board. She was particularly impressed with the efforts of local women as political organizers and campaigners. In the decade after the war, Mrs. Zamora led the efforts to gain three different seats for Mexican American residents on the school board: her husband Ben, local farmer Juan Morón, and businessman E.A. Carreon (Zamora, O., 1998).

Jacinto González served as the lone Mexican American voice on the school board in the 1930s and frequently addressed issues of inequalities as

Edcouch-Elsa built its physical and policy infrastructure according to the prevailing principles of “separate but equal,” said his son Jacinto Jr. “He frequently butted heads with the Anglos.” But the elder González had to carefully present his objections, because it was generally unacceptable that Mexican American people challenge Anglos in power (González, J., 1998). Shortly after the Rosie Zamora victory, her father Ben Zamora ran for a seat on the school board and won. While on the Board Mr. Zamora emerged as a strong advocate for the rights of Mexican American children, but like González, one sole voice yielded only minimal impact (Zamora, R., 1998).

The growing Mexican American population coupled with the community’s heightened sense of itself as an American community deserving to be treated fairly brought on further changes. As Juan Morón and E.A. Carreón gained seats on the school board in the 1950s, they too contested the status quo. Blanca Morón recalls her father telling her a story about a highly charged debate held at a board meeting regarding the inferior conditions at the North Edcouch Elementary School. When one Anglo board member argued that the facilities at the Mexican school were tolerable, Mr. Morón whipped, “if the school is as good as you say, why don’t you send your daughters there” (Morón, 1998).

Despite the gains, the broader movement to integrate American schools had little impact on Edcouch-Elsa schools. “Control here was pretty firm,” said Eddie González, who attended the Mexican school Edcouch. Mexican Americans

children who were fortunate enough to endure humiliation and who found teachers who liked them “had a chance to get to the high school,” said González. “But in the 50s and 60s most of the kids in that school were migrants and when they fell behind, the school did little to help...That is how we were kept out of high school” (González, J., 1998). A precarious agricultural economy clearly affected the educational progress of Mexican Americans in Edcouch, and the schools compounded the problems by failing to respond to the needs of the increasing number of migrant students. “As kids left school,” said González, “they became part of the labor stream...some for life. Things may’ve been different if the schools had encouraged kids to stay, instead of encouraging them to leave...to me, that’s where things went wrong” (González, J., 1998).

In Edcouch-Elsa, as was the case in other places across the country, progress toward effective school integration after *Brown vs. Board* in 1954 occurred “with all deliberate speed” (Wilkinson, 1979). While school leaders slowed policy changes, the rapid demographic shift in the schools could not be slowed. As expectations were raised in the Mexican American community during the post war period, the number of Mexican American children transitioning from grammar school to high school increased significantly. When Rosie Zamora graduated in 1954, she was one of 21 Mexican Americans in a class of 38. The Class of 1954 would be the first year where the majority of graduates were Mexican American.

But even as the population increased, and as more Mexican American children stayed in school, the school failed to respond sensitively to the needs of the evolving demographic. The Central School was built in 1950, though it merely replaced the Red Brick School as the new grammar school for Anglo children; after 1950, Mexican American children were then enrolled at the Red Brick School as part of the school district's plan (Foerster, William 1999; Cavazos, N., 1999). In 1961, the school district finally revoked its policy of forbidding Spanish from being spoken in school. Countless testimonials prove that high school faculty and administration continued to punish Mexican American students for speaking Spanish well into the late 1960s (Hernández, D., 1998; González, 1998; Reyes, 1998; Arispe, 1998). "We were also completely absent from any of the textbooks," recalled Esperanza Salinas, "except when the Texas history book referred to us as Greasers. They called us Greasers!" (Salinas, 2000; Deleón, 1983). Jorge Salinas, who was a staunch supporter of the student walkout, concurs with the critics of the Anglo-controlled status quo. "It was an oppressive environment for us in the schools and in the economy," he argued, "and we had to stand up for ourselves" (Salinas, J., 2000).

FORCING ACCESS AND JUSTICE: THE EDCOUCH-ELSA HIGH SCHOOL WALKOUT OF 1968

When Xavier Ramírez completed his junior year at Edcouch-Elsa in the spring of 1968, he found a ride to Michigan with a local family that took the annual trip as migrant farm workers. Xavier's destination was not the fields of southwestern Michigan: rather, he was on his way to Detroit to work on an automobile assembly line. As Xavier worked in that factory he also learned firsthand about the plight of the factory workers and how unsatisfactory working conditions were addressed by the powerful and influential labor unions. He learned lessons in organizing, planning, and mobilizing as he came into contact with labor leaders. The summer experience in Detroit would transform him, and he would return to South Texas late that summer with a new awareness of the power to organize. On November 14, 1968, Xavier would be a principal leader of the Edcouch-Elsa High School Walkout (Ramírez, 1998).

Early on the morning of November 14, 1968, dozens of Mexican American youths waited for the clock to strike 8:10. At that precise time a number of student protesters barged out of the classrooms chanting "Walkout! Walkout!" and subsequently led a mass student boycott of Edcouch-Elsa High School. Xavier Ramírez was among the student leaders as were Eddie González, Dalia Hernández, Raúl Arispe, Mirtala Villarreal, and Freddy Sáenz. More than

140 students followed as they chanted phrases of protest against what they charged was an unjust educational system.

The students were reluctant boycotters. For weeks before November 14, a committee of student activists approached school administrators and the school board to request that steps be taken to improve unfavorable conditions at the high school for Mexican American students. The students even took steps to “go through the proper channels” (Ramírez, 1968). But some school officials evidently viewed the student movement as “funnier than the Sunday’s news comic” (Ramírez, 1968). When school officials scoffed at the 15 demands presented by the students, the students and their supporters waged the impressive walkout.

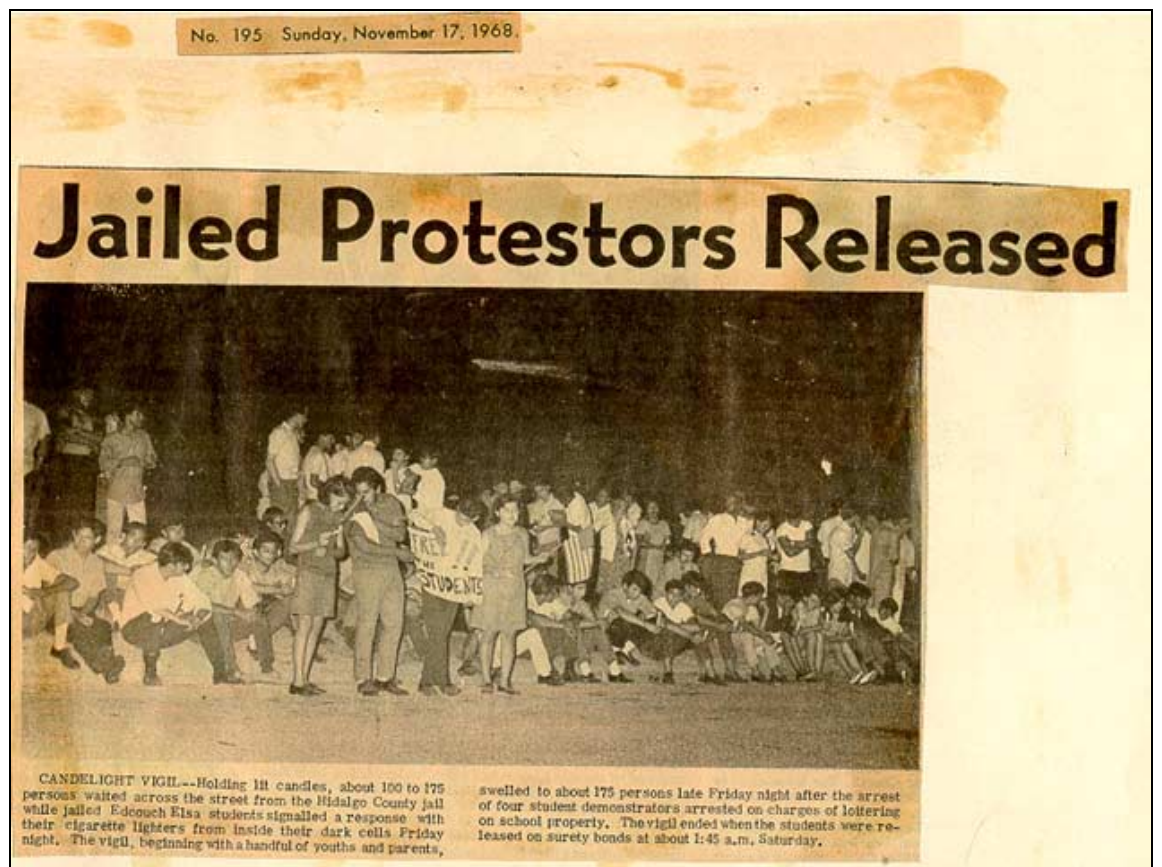


Illustration 3: One of many newspaper articles covering the Edcouch-Elsa High School Walkout. Courtesy of Pablo and Ofelia Ramírez.

In part, the Edcouch-Elsa walkout was yet another manifestation of the turbulence and activism of the 1960's (Gitlin, 1997). Taking inspiration from the antiwar, the Black Power, and the civil rights movements of the time, youth leaders at Edcouch-Elsa High School exerted their own will in protest against educational and political injustice. The Chicano movement of the late 1960's,

born out of the political activism of Mexican American college students across the country, also played an important role in the walkout.

The walkouts in East Los Angeles in the spring of 1968 provided a model for Edcouch-Elsa. Like the Edcouch-Elsa walkout, Chicano college students in Los Angeles pushed their civil rights agenda by helping organize student walkouts. The United Mexican American Students (UMAS), the Brown Berets, and other East Los Angeles organizations helped mobilize high school students as they staged successful boycotts. The historic walkouts in Los Angeles precipitated the demise of the old Anglo school administration and replaced it with a more diverse body of leaders that included a significant number of Mexican Americans (Navarro, 1995).

Similarly, the Edcouch-Elsa case received inspiration and assistance from the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) chapter based at Pan American College in nearby Edinburg. Freddy Sáenz a 15-year-old student at Edcouch-Elsa High School emerged as a key figure in the context of MAYO's participation. Freddy's older sister Lali was deeply involved in the work of MAYO; she would later be involved in the Colegio Jacinto Treviño chapter of MAYO. "As far back as the spring of 1968 Freddy complained at home about things that were going on in the school," she recalled. Lali understood Freddy's story all too well. As a 1965 graduate of Edcouch-Elsa High School she had first hand experience of the adverse conditions at the school. By the spring of 1968,

Lali began to share Freddy's story with her peers at Jacinto Treviño. "We just wanted a better education," she said (Moheno, 1998).

A semblance of burgeoning activism leading into the summer of 1968 was measurably altered because many of the student activists headed north with their families as migrant farm workers. While Xavier underwent his politicization on the assembly line, the Sáenzes and many others toiled away in the fields of southwestern Michigan, the San Joaquín Valley of California, or the Texas Panhandle. Summers were for work; political activism would have to wait for the fall, when everyone returned to Edcouch and Elsa. "The summers were for going with our families to work in the fields. That's how we made a living," recalled Eddie González (1998).

Many people played essential roles in creating the walkout. Xavier Ramírez inspired students, organized meetings at his house, and became one of the spokespersons for the students (Ramírez, 1998). Mirtala Villarreal surfaced as a strong leader and inspired other female students to become involved. She too organized numerous meetings at her house in Edcouch (Villarreal, 2000; Treviño, 1998). Eddie González and Raúl Arispe emerged as emotional and outspoken leaders. But the one person who played the critical role of organizing the students effectively and of leveraging outside resources was Lali Sáenz. Lali brought in MAYO. "And those guys really taught us how to organize...we had structured

meetings, wrote goals and objectives...that kind of stuff,” said Freddie Sáenz (Sáenz, 1998, 2001).

Lali became focused on organizing in September 1968 after she and her family “returned from working in the fields up north,” she wrote in a recent correspondence. When Freddie came to her, she claimed she was ready to organize because she had “worked during the summer in Michigan as a Migrant Education Aide and had met political people including some Quakers who educated [her] on how to address issues.” Lali also alerted Raúl Yzaguirre of the new Colonias del Valle organization, who then encouraged her to “organize the parents.” Lali’s important role, then, was about bringing in MAYO and other “outside resources” (Mohen, 1998; Sáenz, F., 2001).

MAYO was born in the mid 1960s as an offshoot of the political activism of older Mexican American civil rights organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens and the United Farm Workers labor union. In 1967 MAYO’s clarified mission called for an aggressive strategy aimed at addressing the historic discrimination of Mexican American children in Texas public schools. The center of MAYO’s initial activity took place in the barrios on the west side of San Antonio and on the campus of St. Mary’s University. Young Chicano leaders such as José Angel Gutiérrez, Mario Cómpean, and Willie Velásquez provided the initial leadership at St. Mary’s; within a few years, these student leaders created institutions such as the Southwest Voter Registration

Project and the Raza Unida Party. Under their leadership, MAYO would also lead the organization of thirty-nine school walkouts throughout the state (Navarro, 1995).

MAYO's emerging strategy focused on mitigating the laws of discrimination against Mexican-American children in schools. It proposed to do this by advocating for bilingual education curricula, hiring more Mexican-American teachers and administrators, and expanding school curricula to include Chicano history and culture courses. Current research persuasively argues for the value of each of the issues on MAYO's agenda. The research of George I. Sánchez on education, Américo Paredes on anthropology, and the sociological studies of Julian Zamora all supported MAYO's positions (Paredes, 1959; Sánchez, 1940; Zamora, J., 1972). Interestingly, MAYO's bold platform fell short of challenging the public schools systemically. MAYO's approach called for changing the curriculum and training new personnel, but it did not challenge the manner in which educational policy was created, how students and teachers were trained, or how anyone was evaluated. Scholars such as George I. Sánchez and legal activists such as Gus García and Ramiro Casso had long been promoting structural and systemic reform in the public schools (Casso, 2000; Sánchez, 1993; Calderón, 1950, 1998).

When in the fall of 1968 Lali Sáenz began to brief the Jacinto Treviño MAYO members about Freddie's stories, MAYO began to mobilize. What

MAYO found at Edcouch-Elsa High School was a fertile ground of profound discontent among students and their parents.

The history of American schools is riddled with stories of the placement of certain ethnic groups according to the values of the dominant ruling group. The Edcouch-Elsa experience was no different. One counselor, Gertrude Southfield, reflected the values of the dominant group, and she applied them conscientiously to her work as high school counselor and precollege placement officer. Mrs. Southfield's display of power with the Mexican children is consistent with what others have done with Indian children, African American students, and others (Spring 1995; Fowler 2000). Her story with Alicia, Eddie, Raúl, and many others painfully support her role.

In April of 1968, 17-year-old Alicia Tamez walked into the office of Edcouch-Elsa High School counselor Gertrude Southfield. In her deferential yet self-assured manner, Alicia asked Mrs. Southfield for help in filling out a college application. "I want to go to Pan American, Mrs. Southfield, to study to be a teacher. It's been my dream since I was a kid," said Alicia.

"Now, Alice, I don't believe college is a good idea for you," the counselor said. "Why don't you think about going to secretarial school instead?"

Alicia was in shock. She recalled that while growing up in Elsa in the 1950's, she frequently played school with her cousins and always convinced them that she should be the teacher. Mrs. Southfield had dealt her a crushing blow, and

Alicia did not know how to respond. “I walked out of her office humiliated, sat outside her doorsteps, and wept,” she recalled years later as she sat in her office as Superintendent of Edcouch-Elsa Schools (Reyes, 1998).

Alicia’s story points to the prevalent attitude in many biracial communities along the border that viewed Mexican origin students as innately deficient (Valencia, 1997). The story further supports the growing literature that describes the historic marginalization of Mexican origin women in cultural contexts, but also in institutional scenarios (Flores-Ortiz, 1993; García, 1990).

Unfortunately, Alicia’s story was not an isolated incident. “I went to la oficina de la Southfield,” said local businessman Eddie González, “and she told me that I should go to the Army to serve in Vietnam.” (1998).

“La Southfield told me,” said Raúl Arispe, “that I shouldn’t even apply to college. ‘The military is your best choice....’ She said this as she was giving out college applications to a bunch of the Anglo kids. And I was an ‘A’ student” (Arispe, 1998). Numerous other Mexican-American students share similarly painful stories of being insulted, humiliated, and “put in [their] place” (González, E. 1998). As for Raúl Arispe, he simply “had had enough” (Arispe, 1998). His encounter with the guidance counselor alone, he suggested, was enough to stage a boycott of the school.

Dalia Hernández was 15 years-old and a freshman at Edcouch-Elsa high School on November 14, 1968. She walked out without hesitation because she

too had endured repeated indignation and humiliation in the schools. “I’m not one who hates others, but I hated the Anglo coaches who made fun of me because of my weight and because of my language,” said Dalia. Anglo coaches apparently singled out overweight Mexican American girls. “They made you wear shorts, run laps, and do push ups...but they didn’t make the white girls do that,” Dalia continued. The thin girls, regardless of race were treated better, unless they spoke Spanish. “We got spanked for speaking Spanish in school,” she said. According to Dalia, only the skinny English speaking Mexican American girls had a chance to be treated well. “Imagine the pressure,” she said, “of having to be like them” (Hernández, 1998; Flores-Ortiz, 1993; Valencia, 1997; Anzaldúa, 1987). Coaches utilized a perverse power over Dalia, just as they mobilized a distinct bias against many of her peers (Fowler, 2000).

Mari Rodríguez was an eighth grader and walked out (in 1968 eighth graders attended E-E H.S.). “I knew there was some organizing going on...my brother was involved in some of it, but I was not,” she recalled. “When I heard the commotion that morning, and all the yelling in the hallway, I decided to go, too,” she said. It was an easy decision for Mari. She recalled that as an eighth grade cheerleader, it was difficult to make the cheerleading squad because tryouts were held during the summer. Many Mexican-American girls who wanted to be cheerleaders could not try out because they were migrant farm workers. For those who did make the squad, things were tough. “It was the Mexican Cheerleaders,”

she said, “who did all the cleaning and all the work that we were all responsible for” (Lozano, 1998).

To Mari’s dismay, her participation in the walkout had humiliating effects. “The school board forced my mother to publicly apologize for my behavior and to say that I was wrong in walking out,” she recalled tearfully. High school administrators took great care in documenting every walkout participant. Within days, the school announced that all participants were expelled. They could return to school, however, if the students (with some exceptions) took their parents to a school board meeting where they would publicly read a statement of apology prepared by the school. “My mother was so humiliated,” said Mari, “she was basically put to public shame... because I stood up for justice.” In addition, the school stripped Mari of her homecoming queen honors, which she had earned just days before the walkout. “I cried when they took that away from me,” she lamented, still tearful thirty years later (Lozano, 1998).

Emotions were intense that historic autumn in 1968, and to this day, many people close to the event remain angry. “At the hearings, Pipken (the high school principal) said they had no rule that punished students for speaking Spanish...what a lie!” said Raúl Arispe, “he paddled me and he paddled a bunch of other mexicanos.” Most of the students had deep disdain for administrators. “To me, they were just a bunch of rats...I didn’t respect any of them.” Not even the sole Mexican American administrator on staff, assistant principal Juan

Gorostiza, was immune from being loathed. “Gorostiza era un vendido (he was a sell out),” said Arispe (Arispe, 1998). (Interestingly, Mr. Gorostiza remains the only person who declines to be interviewed about the walkout; more than thirty years later, he maintains that he is simply following the federal judge’s gag order on the case.)

Eddie González recalled that teachers generally did not respect Mexican American students. He felt he was unjustly branded as troublemaker even though they did not even know him. “Only Rudy Cisneros respected me,” he said, “he was the only teacher that took the time to get to know us...and to this day we remain good friends” (González, E. 1998). The walkout unleashed passions and emotions that many of the participants had not experienced before, and have not felt since.

Those who opposed the walkout also displayed deep emotions, and to this day, they view the walkout as a big mistake. Francis Anderson served on the high school faculty for many years before the walkout. She thought it was one of the worst experiences in community history. “We lost some very good people because of that boycott,” she said, referring to the rapid exodus of Anglo teachers from Edcouch-Elsa High School in the years that followed. A long time resident of Elsa, Mrs. Anderson also left the faculty a few years after the walkout because of political reasons (Anderson, F., 1998). Geneva García, a close friend of Mrs. Anderson’s, taught at the high school in the late 1960s, and she too disagreed with

the student boycott. Ms. García claimed that the students were misguided rabble-rousers who were misled by outside agitators (García 1998). Willie Ruth Foerster also taught at the high school and similarly found the walkout as “unfortunate” and “unnecessary.” Mrs. Foerster acknowledged that she had some trouble with “discriminating against the Latins,” she said, “but it wasn’t bad enough” to wage a massive walkout (Foerster, Willie Ruth 1997).

For Principal Pipkin and Superintendent Bell the walkout would not be tolerated. Though both saw it as a serious act of insubordination, they initially misjudged the student resolve. In the days leading to November 14, student leaders drafted a list of grievances against the school. With the assistance of MAYO organizers, the students developed a list of 15 demands that they presented to the school board. Students demanded that they be allowed to speak Spanish on campus. They demanded the school create programs to address the obstacles faced by migrant students. They demanded that courses on Mexican American history and culture be offered. They demanded that the notorious and discriminatory college counseling practices stop. They demanded the facilities at school be repaired or update, “Give school buildings a facelift...we want to be proud of our school,” they said. And they demanded that “blatant discrimination against Mexican American students at this school stop immediately” (List of Demands, 1968; Ramírez, 1968).

The student committee presented the demands to the school board on

November 4, 1968 (School Board Minutes, 1968). The board, however, did not acknowledge the demands. Instead, the board passed a policy to respond to student and community grievances. Those with grievances, the policy stated, must follow a specific process. Grievances must first be taken to the school principal. The principal would then notify the superintendent, and the superintendent would report to the school board (School Board Minutes, 1968). According to student protesters, the board ridiculed the student demands. “We were not taken seriously...I don’t think they could accept that we could have power,” said Eddie González (González, E. 1998). Many Anglos saw Mexican Americans as laborers and little else. “I was shocked,” said one Anglo resident of Elsa, “when I first went to the bursar’s office my freshman year in college and the person on the other side of the counter was Mexican...there was something wrong with that picture” (Foerster, William 1999). Similarly, the Anglo administration at Edcouch-Elsa had difficulty in viewing Mexican Americans capable of masterminding an effective movement (González, E. 1998). When the board emphatically rejected the student demands, the students resolved to walk out.

The administration acted firmly and swiftly with the student protesters. More than 150 students walked out, and each was identified through a diligent identification process that included teachers, counselors, and administrators. “Pipkin had teachers taking notes of who was out there,” recalled Freddie Sáenz, “so I told the students to scramble, move around, in order to confuse them”

(Sáenz, F., 1998). But Pipkin's staff was efficient and every student on the list of walkout participants was effectively dismissed from school, pending further action. After the first day, many students found strength in the protest and found wide support from the community. So they followed with a second day of protest on November 15 (*Monitor*, 1968). On that day, Pipkin exhorted the police to incarcerate several of the youths whom he viewed as particularly troublesome (*Monitor*, 1968). "I remember I was getting ready to eat [while on school grounds]," recalled Freddie Sáenz, "when all of a sudden a cop came from behind and said, 'you're under arrest'"(Sáenz, F. 2001). Nine students were taken to the county jail and booked on that day. Immediately, close to 175 community members moved their protest activity from the school to an area outside the county jail for an all night vigil (*Monitor*, 1968).

The school's refusal to listen to the student demands, the student expulsions, and the incarcerations quickly convinced the students and their supporters that legal action had to be sought. Within days, McAllen attorney Bob Sánchez and lawyers from the nascent Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) filed suit against Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District for violating the students' rights to exercise their First Amendment right to peaceably protest.

On December 17, 1968, Federal District Judge Reynaldo Garza heard the case before a crowded and highly emotional crowd at the Federal Courthouse in

Brownsville. “I heard from both sides,” recalled Judge Garza, “and I ruled that the school was wrong because they had violated the students’ right to hold meetings and to protest” (Garza, R., 1998). At one point during the hearing Freddie Sáenz was on the stand outlining the series of student grievances. “All of a sudden,” recalled Freddie, “Superintendent Bell jumps from his seat in the audience and begins to argue with me.” With great swiftness and rigor “Judge Garza snapped at Bell and said ‘Sit down, Smiley; nobody’s talking to you.’ You should’ve seen la raza yell and laugh with excitement. No Mexican had ever talked to Bell like that and gotten away with it” (Sáenz, F., 2001).

Beyond the political and historical importance, the December 17 case is rich with cultural meaning. Judge Garza’s nuanced comical retort to Bell directly disrupted the traditional discursive court speak. As he lashed out at Bell, he disrupted the traditional power structure that suggested, “no Mexican could speak to an Anglo in that manner”; he used humor in an environment where only legalistic language is used; and, in English, he spoke in a South Texas vernacular that elicited an uproarious response. Judge Garza turned his court of law into a court of public opinion—clearly a counter hegemonic practice (Paredes, 1979; Limón 1994; Foucault, 1984; Foley, D, 1995; Sáenz, F., 2001).

Judge Garza’s ruling on December 17 also marked the first education-related victory for MALDEF, an emerging civil rights organization born with the assistance of a Ford Foundation grant just months before the walkout. MAYO

similarly gained great notoriety as an organizing vehicle. Edcouch-Elsa would become the first of some 39 school walkouts that MAYO helped orchestrate between 1968 and the early 1970s (Navarro, 1995). The activist energy and spirit of many Mexican American communities was unleashed during that time. The movement forced many changes in school leadership, particularly in the ethnic composition of principals, superintendents, and school board members.

Though the walkout became a pivotal moment in the transformation of the schools and communities of Edcouch and Elsa, the changes would not be abrupt. In response to the implementation of Mexican American history courses, a school administrator said, “There are no such books anywhere in the state” (School Board Minutes, 1968). The student demand for better counseling received a similar response when Superintendent Bell suggested the school had been looking for three teachers and an additional counselor, but “they were nowhere out there” (*Monitor*, 1968). It would take five to six years before new courses and effective counselors were added. Programs tending to the needs of migrant students, a central demand articulated by the protesters, also took several years to implement.

Changes in personnel, on the other hand, occurred more swiftly than curriculum or textbook modifications. A contentious issue for the students and MAYO in 1968 focused on the ethnic composition of school leaders. “We were in the majority, had been the majority for years,” argued Eddie González, “but the Anglos had complete control. Every important administrative position was

Anglo—the principal, the superintendent, the president of the board” (González, E. 1998). Inequities in the schools had a simple answer to González and his peers. The neglect of migrant students, lack of cultural relevance in the curriculum, and punishment of students for speaking Spanish all pointed to one source: the failure of Anglo leadership to develop effective educational policy, particularly for the Mexican American students of Edcouch-Elsa High School.

Anglo control of leadership positions at Edcouch-Elsa schools was the status quo since the incorporation of the school district in 1932. Every superintendent between 1932 and 1968 was Anglo, and the school board was also Anglo majority during the same time span. By the 1960s, a handful of Mexican Americans had won elections, thanks mostly to the increased politicization during the post war period (Zamora, O., 1998).

When Edcouch and Elsa were founded as agricultural towns in the 1920s, the ethnic breakdown of the population was evenly distributed. According to community elders, Mexican people began to outnumber Anglo people by 1930 (Granado, 1998; González, V. 1998). As the school district was established, the number of Mexican children in elementary school was about equal to the number of Anglo children in the elementary grades. High school students, however, were almost exclusively Anglo, at least during the early years of Edcouch-Elsa High School. The faculties at every school, even the Mexican schools, were all Anglo during the first decade. Principals, counselors, and superintendents were also

Anglo well into the 1960s (School records).

During the first four decades of the school district's existence, Mexican Americans were well represented only in the elementary school grades. A demographic shift occurred in the high school in the 1950s, though it was not commensurate with the ethnic distribution in the community. One community elder offers a sports anecdote to reflect the changing demographic in the high school. "Baseball was big in the mexicano community in the 30s and 40s," recalled Ramón Zavala, "but baseball lost popularity when Mexican boys began to get into the high school and found football" (Zavala, R. 1999).

By 1972 Mexican Americans comprised the majority on the Edcouch-Elsa School Board, and after 1974, 100% of school board members have been Mexican American. "The election after the walkout was important to us," said Eddie González, "and we made sure we got our people out to vote" (González, E., 1998). With a new political majority on the school board, replacements for Principal Pipkin and Superintendent Bell followed. The walkout affected how the new school leadership looked. Rubén Rodríguez, who attended the Mexican school in Elsa in the late 1940s and dropped out before he reached the high school, won a seat on the new post-walkout board. Jorge Salinas, Obe Leal, and Manuel López also attended segregated schools in Elsa and all won seats on the school board. Clearly, the new leadership brought a completely new set of historical and cultural experiences to their work as school leaders (Rodríguez, R.

1998).

While the old Anglo leadership rejected the ideas of bilingualism and multiculturalism in the schools, the new leadership embraced it, though not as a matter of systemic reform. Edcouch-Elsa schools thereafter aggressively pursued and supported federal bilingual and migrant education programs. The school also searched for textbooks that featured the contributions of Mexican Americans, though they did not find much material book marketplace (Garza, E., 1999). Mexican cultural programming was also implemented to supplement the core curriculum. Even additional counselors were hired to meet the precollege needs of all the students. All these changes were in place by the mid 1970s. Without question, the walkout inspired significant changes in the schools.

Ironically, the rich infusion of new cultural programming and federal funding for migrant students occurred at the same time the community saw Anglo teachers, students, and their families leave the community. The divestment of capital and exodus of political, economic, and educational experience from Edcouch and Elsa was significant. “When the gringos left,” recalled Benigno Layton, “they took their money, and they took the manual with them” (Layton, B., 1997). “We lost teachers, civic leaders, business people,” recalled long time Elsa resident Niles Anderson, “we lost a lot as a result of the student unrest and the turmoil that followed” (Anderson, N. 1998).

The history of the Edcouch-Elsa High School walkout directly points to

the conflicting values of two groups. Similarly, the history of the communities of Edcouch and Elsa can be seen through a conflicting values paradigm. One group created the rules and essentially wrote the policy manual. The other group was subjected to those rules for decades, before people within that group demanded that the manual be altered.

Control of the manual, however, was not for sharing. But the students who staged the walkout, along with Lali Sáenz and her MAYO peers, made a determination to exercise their growing power. Xavier learned about power in an automobile plant in Detroit. Lali learned about it by working with migrant students and with Quakers in Michigan. And when they emerged as leaders of the walkout, they quickly realized the substantial power unleashed as a result of years of frustration that many students and their parents had experienced. The historic subjugation of students and their families explains much of the origin. The asymmetrical manifestation of cultural values in the form of policy creation, institution building, and social control was, according to those who tell the stories, a key for the massive protest movement (Fowler, 2000).

Nineteen sixty-eight changed Edcouch and Elsa, much as it changed the rest of the world. The communities remained mired in a dependence on the agricultural migrant labor stream; close to 45% of E-E students are migrant. The socio-economic status remains amongst the lowest in the entire country; the unemployment rate in Edcouch fluctuates between 20% and 32% during the

course of the year. But to hear the stories of the people is to listen to a sense of hope and ambition that things will become good in this rural community. The students who led the walkout certainly think so. “I think we changed this place for the better, no doubt about it,” said Raúl Arispe, “just look at how a bunch of our Mexican kids now have a chance to go to any college in the country. There’s no way that would’ve happened when we went to school” (Arispe 1998; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002).

IMPACT OF 1968 WALKOUT

A clear transformation took place in access to educational opportunities in the rural communities of Edcouch and Elsa between 1920 and 1980. Consistent with the birth and growth of start up communities throughout the South, Jim Crow laws initially defined how Edcouch and Elsa functioned. As the railroad emerged and the Engleman and Vahlsing enterprises wielded their power, the emerging political economy then took on the values of the dominant Anglo group. Anglos owned the industries and the land, and they controlled city government and the schools. The Mexican people, on the other hand, filled the role as the manual laboring class. The educational implications of this reality meant that separate schools would be set up for Anglos and Mexican children.

Nevertheless, the segregated society was not unchallenged. Access to educational opportunities would come, but first local people had to act. “We all

knew that what was going on was wrong, that there was great injustice,” said Ezequiel Granado, “but it was too hard to stand up for what was right...we’d lose our jobs. It was that simple” (Granado, 2002). Still, many locals risked their livelihoods and much more as they protested the status quo. Numerous elders have shared those stories of struggle, contention, and triumph. Jacinto González moving his store to the wrong side of town; Tila Zamora writing to President Roosevelt, Juan Morón challenging a school board member; the youth of 1968 challenging the entire school apparatus; these stories make up the “books” that tell the story of this South Texas community.

CHAPTER 5:

The 1990s, New Stories Emerge

INTRODUCTION

When I left Elsa to attend college in the fall of 1983, the Edcouch-Elsa school district was the poorest school district in Texas. When I returned to my hometown to teach in 1990, it was still the poorest. The status quo was not good. The school was under-resourced, faculty morale was relatively low, students had low expectations of themselves, and parents remained on the margins of the schooling process. We were doing great on the poverty indicators; few other communities or schools in Texas could match us in that regard. The story of Edcouch, Elsa, or the Rio Grande Valley as an impoverished region has been told many times. Much like the stories of the Mississippi Delta, or Appalachian communities of Eastern Kentucky, the media, scholars, and others have capitalized grandly from the apparent poverty of the place (Yochum & Agarwal, 2000, 2001; Galán, 2000; Maril, 1989; Madsen, 1961; Caudill, 1963; Harrington, 1961). But that told only one side of the story. I was raised in Elsa, attended the local schools, and acutely understood that this was not an impoverished community. To the contrary, this was a vibrant community, with extraordinary young talent, and a wealth of stories held by the elders of the town. To me, the

most significant indicator reflecting the status of the community was the local leadership's inability to recognize the immense talent in our youth, and the rich wisdom in the stories of the elders.

From the beginning, I understood that as a classroom teacher I could become an important agent for social change, especially because I was an insider in the community. Clearly, change was needed, but change would not happen if others did not buy into the idea. In the classroom, I had the perfect audience— young, talented, idealistic and impressionable minds. As importantly, I had been in conversation with several childhood friends, all from South Texas, with whom I shared the basic philosophy of youth development and community building. Since we were teenagers my friends, particularly people such as Miguel Guajardo, Yvonne Cárdenas, David Rice, Jake Foley, and I talked and dreamed about the time when we returned to our South Texas communities to create positive change. Together, we would start with the youth—teach them, train them, and along the way develop the big vision. Indeed, we worked on a plan to transform our community. This section chronicles a pivotal point in my history and in the history of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. It also looks at the work my students, the Center, and I continue to undertake with great intensity. The work, I should note, is not linear, and this text corresponds to that omni directional trajectory accordingly. The work is dynamic, grounded in place, but situated within a global context and reality.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK, RAISING EXPECTATIONS

Academic and college preparation would be the lynchpin around which we would base our work. As we did so, we would train principled, highly skilled, conscientious leaders who had a sense of their own history, and an understanding of their community. Training students to become leaders was not a difficult task, but training them to be extraordinary leaders was, particularly because most of our students in 1990 wallowed in a culture of low expectations. Upon setting foot in the classroom the first set of questions I asked my students was, “What are your plans for college, what colleges do you want to go to, and what are your dreams in terms of higher ed?” To my dismay, though not to my surprise, many of my students responded by saying they wanted to go to trade school. Others planned to enroll at Pan American University, the local four-year school. The few adventurous ones in the class, those who dared to dream, said they wanted to apply to the University of Texas at Austin, or maybe Texas A&M University.

Shortly before I returned to Edcouch-Elsa, I spent a semester as a teaching assistant at the University of Texas at Austin grading essays of sophomore level students. From that experience, plus the fact that I had had much exposure to the quality of work of other college students, I gained a good idea of the skill level of 19-20 year old undergrads at UT. During the first week of class at Edcouch-Elsa High School, I also requested an essay assignment from my students. I was

pleased to see, subsequently, that the skill level of my high school students was on par with, and in many cases superior to, the writing ability of many of the UT undergraduate students. At least, that is how I chose to remember the UT writing samples, compared to what my high school students produced. I used this story to argue with my students that the skill level they demonstrated, the intellect they displayed, and the general talent that I saw in them was immense. “So please help me make sense of this,” I asked them, “how can your ability and talent be way up here, but your dreams and aspirations way down here? Please help me make sense of that,” I pleaded, in the best histrionic style I could muster. Therein began an intense conversation with my students about themselves, their dreams, their community, how they saw themselves, and how others saw them.

“I REMEMBER THAT DAY”

A collective conversation on youth leadership and community development had begun years before I returned to teach at Edcouch-Elsa High School, but some of my students point to a pivotal day in the fall of 1991 as a catalyst. “I remember the day,” says Delia Pérez, who was in my junior English class at the time. “We were reading a story, I don’t remember the story, but it was based in New York City.”

During the course of conversation that September morning, I recall asking the class very specific questions about New York City, about the streets, the buildings, and the history. “Well, Mr. Guajardo, why don’t you just take us on a fieldtrip to New York City so we can see for ourselves? Then maybe we can answer your questions,” asked Lisele Zavala, another student.

“Maybe I will,” I said.

Seven years later, Delia reflected on that one high school class meeting: “Lisele was the whole instigator for the idea, really. She was the inspiration for it all...I remember that day. You got fired up from there, and all these plans were made in that one class period.”

It was a historic class period and a historic day for us. In a span of twenty minutes, thirty high school juniors and I created a plan whereby we would travel to New York City. Visiting New York, however, would be difficult to pull off politically and maybe even economically. Politically, the difficulty lay in winning permission from the high school administration and the school board for a twenty five-year-old teacher to take a bunch of teenagers on a trip across the country. Economically, the task would be to raise a substantial amount of money, about a thousand dollars per student to make the trip happen.

We needed a good rationale, because simply going to New York to see the place would not be good enough. Within five minutes, we figured out the best reason for going would be to visit colleges in New York and in the surrounding

area. “Why not visit Ivy League schools?” I asked. “What’s that?” one student asked. “It’s colleges that make up an athletic conference,” I responded, “except they’re not really known for their athletics. They’re known for their academics, and Columbia is part of that.” “Isn’t Colombia in South America?” inquired a confused student. “No, no, no, he’s talking about Columbia University, the school, not the country,” said one of the more enlightened students. “So, what if we plan the trip, and we tell the school that we’re doing it because we want to visit Columbia, Princeton, Yale, Harvard, Brown, and maybe a few non-Ivy League schools like MIT and Georgetown. What do you think?” I asked.

A few students stared at me, perplexed by the outlandish proposition. Most simply giggled or laughed. “Yeah right, sir,” said one of the more skeptical youths, “You want us to believe that the principal and the school board are going to let you take us 3,000 miles across the country, I don’t think so.” But there were a few students, who just sat, seemingly pensive, apparently taking the idea seriously. “How would we do it?” asked one of them. “I’m not sure yet,” I answered, “but I think that if we plan it well enough, we can make it happen by next summer, just as soon as we break for summer vacation.” So we imagined, we dreamed, and we began to talk about it. To realize the dream would require much hard work, but to me, we overcame the toughest challenge that fall morning in 1991. Hard work would not be a problem; believing in a dream, was, and we overcame it that morning.

The first step in making the dream come true was to approach the school principal. “Mr. Castillo, I’d like to talk to you, if I may,” I brashly approached my principal a couple of days after our class conversation.

“Sure, Mr. Guajardo, come on in,” he said inviting me into his office.

“Mr. Castillo, I would like your permission to take my entire junior English class on a trip to New York City,” I said. “Really, on a trip to visit the top universities in the country, you know, schools like Columbia, and other Ivy League schools in the northeast.”

“Wow, that’s a pretty big idea, quite a dream, don’t you think, sir,” said Principal Castillo with a smile.

“It’s big, Mr. Castillo, but I think we can do it.”

“Well, Mr. Guajardo, you know you’ll have to go through the school board first. Also, you know that I can’t provide money for this kind of activity. First, it’s not part of the budget, and secondly, the high school budget is pretty tight this year,” he said.

“That’s fine Mr. Castillo, we really only want permission. We just need the green light from you, and it looks like you’ve given it to me. Now, we’ll just request to speak to the Board at the next meeting. And about the money, don’t worry about a thing, sir, because the students and I have already begun to develop a fundraising strategy. We start selling taquitos the morning after the school

board gives us their consent,” I explained.

That very day, I announced in class that the Principal had given us his blessing, though not his money. “So, what do you think, who want to join me to the next Board meeting?” I asked. Several students raised their hands, and we called for an after school meeting to prepare a presentation that very day. About ten days later, six of my students, four parents, and I sat before the school board in anticipation of our presentation.

“Next on the agenda is Mr. Guajardo from the high school. Mr. Guajardo, what is this about a trip to New York?” asked the school board president.

“Mr. Villalpando, first I’d like to thank you and the Board for giving us time tonight to present our idea. With me are Cristina Salinas, Delia Pérez, Marc Bazán, and several other students. These three would like to present the idea to you. They’ll only take a minute.”

As my three students presented, I detected some strange body language from several board members. Some seemed not to understand what Cristina and Delia meant when they mentioned Ivy League schools, others seemed genuinely interested in the students’ plea for permission, while two others simply smirked and giggled at what they apparently viewed as some kind of quixotic idea. At the end of the talk, the Board President and the Superintendent announced that we could go, as long as we followed the proper protocol for out-of-town trips, and as

long as we raised the money.

“You know, Mr. Guajardo, that we are a very under resourced school, and we can’t really fund this kind of trip, but you have our support,” they said, and with that, we set off to raise money.

The taquitos sold well, as did the daily donuts and other pan dulce. All that was good work, but what really sustained the work in the years to come was the six-week exercise we embarked upon in English class whereby everyone in the class learned how to write a grant proposal. Through grant requests, we raised nearly \$3,000 during the following six months—we raised another \$9,000 through a variety of other means—but the grant writing process turned out to be an invaluable skill. Between 1997 and 2001, after several years of learning and perfecting the grant writing process, we have raised over \$2,000,000 for student programming and for other components of the Llano Grande Center’s work. Of the students who presented that night at the Board meeting Cristina and Delia gained admission into Yale; Marc into Columbia; and José Luis into MIT. As I write this dissertation, Cristina is close to completing a Ph.D. in history, and Delia, Marc, and José Luis all graduated from college and returned to the South Texas to teach. Since 1993, approximately 80 Edcouch-Elsa High School students have gained admission into schools such as Harvard, Columbia, Yale, Stanford, and MIT.

The dreams of the early 1990s focused on raising the expectations of youths and their parents, building academic skills, training for SATs, and raising money for the East Coast excursion. Good dreams and a sound program, to be sure. It played well in the mainstream press, and it brought national attention to the Edcouch-Elsa schools. Between 1990 and 2003 Edcouch-Elsa High School also increased the college going rate among its graduating seniors from 30% to approximately 65%. Clearly, the level of expectation of hundreds of students and their families has risen dramatically. In part, the story of students going to Ivy League and other top universities raised the collective level of expectation of the entire student body, and the community by extension.

CHALLENGES IN THE MIDST OF SUCCESSES

But not everything felt right. In a community where acute conditions of poverty still persisted, it made little sense to create a program that exported its young talent to far away places, especially in the absence of a clear plan that at least attempted to recruit that same talent back home. The regional conventional wisdom already suggested, “There is nothing in south Texas to come back to.” There were few compelling economic reasons or opportunities that would attract young college graduates to return, particularly Latino graduates with Ivy League degrees. Many of us certainly did not want to participate in the ubiquitous “brain drain” game. Some of us, in fact, decided to return to our home communities, in

part to combat that same phenomenon. But that was exactly what we were doing, preparing our students academically, culturally, and socially to become part of another, very exclusive cultural environment. There was a degree of incongruity, even dissonance, inherent in the work; it did not fit, and it felt uncomfortable.

The precollege advising work was also intensely political (Anyon 1980, 1997; Bowles and Gintis 1976). Part of working on the affective domain of our students' development included serious conversations centered on issues of race, class, and gender. "Don't you dare sit in front of me passively, playing right into the dominant culture's stereotype, that you're a passive Mexican," I recall challenging many of my students in class on several occasions. I, for one, would not accept the notion that my students were any less able because they were poor, or because they were recent immigrants, or because they were migrant farm workers. They were more prepared than others, I suggested to them, because they were poor, or immigrants, or migrants. Besides, I was living proof of a Mexican immigrant, of a migrant, and of somebody who grew up poor in their community who did well. And I stood right in front of them, wearing a tie, and challenging them to learn, to build skills, to be proud of who they were, and to dream big. They had no choice, and they certainly had no excuses.

I generally geared my instructional process so that students understood that their struggle, their family, their hard work, and their hardship, was all part of what made them strong. But finding instructional material that was intimately

connected to the students' lives was very hard to come by. When I delivered a good lesson, it generally happened because I got lucky, and because I had a degree of talent as a teacher; unfortunately, it happened because of chance. Few resources available in the educational marketplace offered a curriculum that I felt my students could connect with. The examples where a book, a resource guide, a curriculum, or other materials emphasized the experiences of my students, those examples were typically included as attachments, or as inserts; they were seldom presented as an integral part of a text, or a learning process, or a paradigm. There was a clear systematic marginalization of my experience and the experience of my students in the books we were supposed to read, in the curriculum we were supposed to follow, and in most other things in public education.

So, we could do one of two things: feel sorry for ourselves because there was nothing on the market to purchase, or we could create our own materials. We did the latter; we forced ourselves to be creative, and radically restructured our curricula, sometimes several times per year. One year, we read only novels. Another year, my students and I created all of our instructional material together, as we followed our own storytelling and story creating process. The students' personal and family stories inspired me more than anything else did. The story of José, for example, showed great strength of character. At the age of 7, 8, and 9, he took public transportation from his home in a colonia in Reynosa, Mexico, to the international bridge; he crossed the bridge, and subsequently walked another

two miles to Hidalgo Elementary School. In the afternoon, he took the same route back to his Mexican home, where his family awaited. At the age of 9, José came to Elsa with his family. In addition, there is Olga, who told her story that brought her from Guanajuato to the Mexican border town of Las Flores. At the tender age of 9 and 10, she sold paper flowers to American tourists on the streets of Las Flores to help her family make ends meet. Olga came from Mexico at the age of 10, graduated from E-E High as valedictorian and awaits her legal residency documentation from INS so she can go to college. There is the story of Ernesto Ayala, who was diagnosed as a special education student in grade school because of his apparent English language deficiency and his shyness. His mother pulled him out of the Special Ed curriculum, and Ernesto went on to graduate from E-E High, enrolled at Brown University and graduated four years thereafter. My students' stories were simply too rich, too compelling, so we deliberately developed an instructional process around the concept of story. If the students had great stories, I also surmised, their parents and grandparents had to have stories that were just as rich.

FOUNDING THE LLANO GRANDE RESEARCH PROJECT

In the context of understanding the meaning and power of our own stories, creating our own instructional materials, and trying to build a vehicle through which we formalized and institutionalized the work, we founded the Llano Grande Research Project. In 1996 Mary Alice Reyes, then the Superintendent of

Edcouch-Elsa Schools invited me to draft a proposal, which we would then submit to the Annenberg Foundation for a Rural Challenge grant. In partnership with Miguel Guajardo and Carmen Pacheco, then the principal of La Villa High School (a neighboring school), we submitted a thought piece where we proposed to create an ambitious oral history project based out of the high schools in Edcouch-Elsa and La Villa. In 1997, we received \$375,000, and the Llano Grande Research Project was formally born out of my classroom at Edcouch-Elsa High School as an oral history project, though the founding members clearly understood the broader experiences and stories that brought us to the point of formalizing the work in the name of the Llano Grande.

With the introduction of the Llano Grande Research Project, we created the space for youth to engage in interesting community-based research projects, to interview elders, and to explore their own stories. The energy of our youth invigorates the daily operations of the Center, but the wisdom and experiences of our elders give us the spirit and inspiration to become creators of our new pedagogical, community, and economic development models. The oral histories and the relationships we have built as part of that process have forced us to shift radically our approach to education. We have learned that our greatest educators are not necessarily people who complete teacher-training programs, or those best prepared to satisfy the state's accountability system. Our experience shows compelling evidence that the experiences and stories of the elders can profoundly

affect the way we educate. The opening narrative in this dissertation has don Isabel Gutiérrez challenging us to examine our paradigms and teaching us that his stories and life experiences had substantial pedagogical value. Clearly, he became a significant asset to us. In the story that follows, we see important teachings about community life, about economy, history, and values that are essentially universal.

Santos Layton

Like don Isabel, the Llano Grande Center's research work has given more than 350 other elders from our community the space to become public storytellers. When a research team comprised of high school students and Llano Grande staff visited 76-year-old Santos Layton, they quickly learned what master storytelling is about. La Señora Layton told the joyful story of when she raised her children in Elsa during part of each year, and in the fields in west Texas as the family followed the crops every summer (Layton, 1998; Perrone, 1990).

Uplifting anecdotes characterized her narrative, until she told the story of young Pablito, the oldest of the Layton children. Early one morning in the mid 1950s Pablito was out delivering newspapers on his bicycle as part of his daily routine, when a car fatally hit him. The entire Mexican side of Elsa mourned the death of the youngster, and a traumatized Señora Layton was devastated.

Shortly after the death, and against the wishes of la Señora Layton, el señor Layton bought an accordion and a guitar for the four remaining children.

The event would forever change the Layton family, just as it would change the cultural complexion of the entire community. Today, Los Hermanos Layton stand as an important institution in the music industry of South Texas. They have been featured at the Smithsonian Institution and have played an integral role in the formation of Tejano music in the Rio Grande Valley (*The Monitor*, 1999; Layton, S., 1998).

Santos Layton's oral history has made its way into classrooms at Edcouch-Elsa High School and in numerous other classrooms across the country. Her interview is part of a collection of stories from rural America that is used in some 600 rural public schools across the nation. But at Edcouch-Elsa High School, her story resonates particularly well, and her story is part of the literary canon (Perrone, 1998).

THE YALE CONFERENCE, APRIL 4, 1998: YOUTH NETWORKING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

In April 1998, within a year of the formalization of the Llano Grande Research Project, four Llano Grande staff members and two Edcouch-Elsa students traveled to Ivy League universities where E-E alumni were enrolled to conduct interviews with each of the students. In addition, Llano Grande staff members organized a one-day seminar at the campus of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, to discuss issues of youth development, higher education,

and the community and economic development of our south Texas hometowns. Several objectives would guide the proceedings that day. Although we all knew each other, we were nevertheless intent on formalizing the network of E-E people who lived and studied in far away places.

E-E alumni studying at Yale, Columbia, Harvard, Brown, and Stanford convened in the Chicano/Chinese Cultural House at the Yale campus on the morning of April 4, along with Llano Grande staff members and other E-E alumni.⁷ Some stayed in the Yale dorms the previous night; some rented rooms in a local hotel, while others drove from New York City, Providence, or Boston for the mid-morning meeting at Yale. Of the 25 people who participated in the conversations, 22 were raised in the rural south Texas communities of Edcouch and Elsa. Every one of us grew up working class; some, such as Blanca Rojas and the Guajardos, grew up as migrant farm workers in the agricultural fields of Texas, Michigan, and California. Others, such as Carlos García, were raised in

⁷ Those in attendance included Llano Grande founders Francisco (E-E 1983, UT Austin 1987) and Miguel Guajardo (E-E '82, UT Austin '88), staff members David Rice (E-E '82, SWTSU, '98), Lisele Zavala (E-E '93, UT '97), and Jorge Lozano (E-E '99). E-E alumni included Jake Foley ('83, UT '88), who had by then become an important financial benefactor in the work of placing E-E students in Ivy League schools. Jake is an investment banker with a major firm on Wall Street. Student participants in the interview process and in the Yale conference included Delia Pérez (E-E '93 and Yale '97), Blanca Rojas (E-E '95, Brown '99), Modesto Hernández (E-E '96, Brown '00), Carlos García (E-E '97, Yale), Verónica Deleón (E-E '96, Columbia '00), José Saldívar (E-E '97, Stanford '01), Juan Ozuna (E-E '96, Yale '00), Eric Rodríguez (E-E '96, Yale), Karina Cardoza (E-E '96, Columbia '00), Daniel Gómez (E-E '97, Yale '01), Steve Rodríguez (E-E '97, Brown), and Juan García (E-E '97, Brown), Ernesto Ayala (E-E '95, Brown '99), Marilena Marroquín (E-E '97, Columbia '01); Monica Marroquín (E-E '95, Harvard '95, Baylor Med), Israel Rocha (E-E '96, Columbia '00); others who could not join the meeting were: José Luis Deleón (E-E '93, MIT '97), Rudy Fuentes (E-E '84, Stanford '88, Berkeley Law '93), María Cáceres (E-E '97, Yale '01), and Geno Rodríguez (E-E '95, Brown '99, UCSD Law).

federal housing. Many grew up in one of the many colonias, unincorporated communities that dot the south Texas landscape. Delia Pérez, Ernesto Ayala, Juan García, Steve Rodríguez, and the Marroquin sisters, for example, were all raised in isolated rural enclaves outside of Elsa and Edcouch. The meeting occurred on a Saturday, after two and one half days of intense interviews with about 20 of our alumni. During that time, we spent approximately 15 hours interviewing our alumni, capturing their stories, their emotions, and their reflections as we sat with them in their college campus environment. In addition, we reconnected with numerous students with whom we had lost relative contact during the previous year. The Yale conference, then, was part of a larger documentation and relationship building process with youth from our community.

The conference began with informal pláticas (chats), where participants simply filled their need to reunite with their friends and acquaintances from back home. We spent about two hours reconnecting and building on previous relationships. After two hours of “catching up,” we then passed out a portfolio of historical and contemporary photographs of Edcouch and Elsa. There was a picture of the old Tropic Theatre in Elsa; “el cine de los gringos,” is how some of the elders in Elsa referred to it. The theatre opened its doors in 1950 and closed just a few years later, meeting the same fate as other South Texas businesses (González, J., 1998; Anderson, 1998). There was a picture of an open green, about 20 acres of grass lined next to the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks. It was

the same place where the Vahlsing packing shed stood between 1926 and 1960. There was a picture of the remains of the Red Barn Chemical Company. Only the cement foundation and a weathered eight-foot cistern remain. The remains of the Red Barn, twenty years after it ceased operation, are conspicuously ominous. During its peak years, the Red Barn occupied an entire city block. Today, the soil in that area is contaminated, and the entire block is condemned. The remains, as shown in the photograph, are weeds and the elevated cistern, which has the bold letters, “DANGER! SULFURIC ACID” marked on its exterior. Yet another picture shows the Elsa water treatment plant, which is no farther than 100 yards from the condemned location of the Red Barn property. Interestingly, the water plant was built in 1947 and is down-wind from the Red Barn, which was built in 1957 (Anyon, 1997).

The photograph presentation was critical. Each of the images reflected an array of historical themes. “The reason for the photographs,” announced David Rice, one of the conference organizers, “is because we need to understand our own history. These pictures force us to focus on the history of our community, and we need that because most of us have been whitewashed by the mainstream history, and as a result we don’t know much about what forces shaped our community into what it is today” (Yale conference, 1998). Another conference organizer, Miguel Guajardo, cited the importance of what the elders in our community had shared with us, “the viejitos y viejitas are teaching us the history

that is closest to us,” he said. “And we have the great opportunity to build our new community based on what we learn from their stories” (Yale conference, 1998). Indeed, our conversations had to be historically grounded. The history that would inform our historical perspectives would be the stories of our elders (Wigginton, 1972; *Llano Grande Journal*, 1997-2001). Thus, the conversations on community and economic development that morning in New Haven would be framed by the stories of our elders (Lewis, 1995; *Llano Grande Journal*, 1997-2001).

The stories and spirit we took to Yale that morning were directly out of our archives, from the elders in our community. The following narratives placed the day in proper historical context, and were instructive in teaching us that there is wisdom in the voices and experiences of the elders. Our history is grounded in the story of our forbearers, and it was important that our young college students understand that. The following story taken from the Llano Grande Oral History Project was shared with the group that April morning, in order to give historical context and community development perspective to the gathering.

Jacinto González

Jacinto González told us stories that depict our local, regional, and even international historical context as few books can. Don Jacinto challenged us to rethink the history we were being taught and to rethink the way Mexican Americans are today. Several things, he said, have contributed to why Edcouch has a high unemployment rate today (it hovers around 32%). First, he recalled that Mexican Americans worked hard when he was a kid, because there was plenty of work in the fields and in the sheds. But in the 1950s, the mechanization of labor displaced many workers: “The machines began to take over. Then shortly after that, welfare started to come in, and many people who felt they were losing their livelihood began to take part in welfare programs. That, unfortunately, created a dependence...Instead of getting retrained, our people got welfare. The investment was made in welfare instead of on people, and that changed a lot of concepts that we were used to” (González, J., 1998).

“I’m not sure we’ve been able to recover from it,” suggested don Jacinto, just before he began to place responsibility on himself. “I also think that people from my generation also failed our community. Many of us, myself included, left Edcouch and Elsa and got trained, educated, and created opportunities for ourselves. We followed the jobs and bettered ourselves, but we didn’t bring our new expertise back” (González, 1998). While the decade of the 1950s may have brought economic gain to a good part of the country, South Texas communities such as ours did not benefit from the prosperity (Galbraith, 1958).

Through his oral history, don Jacinto laid out for us the factors that affected our community’s long-term economic conditions. He spoke to the economic reliance on agriculture in a place where one major freeze, such as the one in December of 1950, or a sustained drought, such as the one from 1951 to 1957, could harshly impact an economy and its people. Beyond the mechanization of labor, he spoke to what he saw as misguided investment on behalf of the public sector regarding the training of the Mexican American worker of the 1950s. With that, don Jacinto gave context to his community, and to his own history. Through his oral history, don Jacinto reached into his inner soul and shared his pain very publicly. That morning in New Haven, Connecticut, his story inspired many of us to look within ourselves, as we talked about education, personal growth, and a vision for the future.

As we left Yale that day, it became clear to many of us that the most important knowledge that we harvest is that which the people in our community share with us. The elders own much wisdom and are always willing to share it. Our youth own great wisdom too, but in the absence of their relationships with the elders, that wisdom is often ahistorically placed and sometimes misguided. The Yale conference was about grounding ourselves in the wisdom of our community and our people—just as it was also about informing our young college students of the opportunities the Llano Grande Center was creating back home.

Carlos, His Mother, and Yale

One of the youth participants at the Yale conference was 19-year-old Carlos García, Edcouch-Elsa Class of 1997 and a freshman at Yale. When Carlos García was about to graduate from high school, he grappled with a deep dilemma: whether to decide to attend Yale, or stay close to home, where his mother would rather have him. Carlos was an outstanding student, a star athlete at Edcouch-Elsa High School, a class leader, and a kid well grounded in the community. He grew up in federal housing in Edcouch and came from one of the lower income homes in his class. Carlos was smart and had been seeking opportunities since his early years in high school when he began to participate in summer programs at the local college. Clearly, he had positioned himself for good opportunities regarding college admission, but he understood that going away to Yale would be difficult. It was difficult for Carlos because his mother did not really understand what Yale

meant. Carlos' mother, who was from the state of Durango, did not have the good fortune to attend school as a youth. She understood little about the American schooling system, and understood even less of higher education—much less an Ivy League experience. I took Carlos on a tour of Ivy League schools in the spring of 1996, and took the occasion to see three Broadway Productions, skate at Rockefeller rink, and stroll down Harvard Yard. Nevertheless, perhaps the most important thing I did was to form a relationship with Carlos' mother from the time I met her, when he enrolled in my United States History course.

I continued having conversations with her during the ensuing two years. Then, she called my house one spring night, shortly before the response deadline required by Yale; we knew each other fairly well by then. “Señor Guajardo,” she said softly. “Dice Carlos que quiere ir a Yale.” Clearly, she was calling for advice.

I was stumped. What do I say to a mother who does not want her child to leave, and who probably did not yet understand what Yale represented? I responded, “Señora García, ¿usted se acuerda de George Bush?”

“Sí,” she said, “él fué presidente.”

“Bueno, él fué alumno en esa Universidad, donde quiere asistir Carlos. ¿Y sabe quién es Bill Clinton?”

“Sí, pos él es el presidente.”

“Bueno, Señora García, él también fue a Yale. Quizás si Carlos va a Yale, quizás él también pueda ser presidente,” I said.

With that, la señora García hung up on me. The next day Carlos approached me in the hallway and told me that his mother had given him permission to go to Yale, that she thought that he too could be president one day.

Ernesto Ayala, His Mother, and His Return

Mothers, it seems, have the greatest influence on our students. I learned this lesson from my own mother, who once suggested that if I wanted to change a way a student thought, I should get to know the student’s mother (Guajardo, Julia, 1999; Hurtado, 2003). Another student participant at the Yale conference was Ernesto Ayala, the former special education student, who makes for an interesting story on transformation. In 1991, Ernesto’s sister, Brenda, was in my class. She was smart, hard working, and deserving of a spot on the trip to the northeast.

“No, Brenda can’t go, she doesn’t have my permission,” said Mrs. Ayala when I approached her. Too bad, I thought, but I have to keep working on her, because I knew that Ernesto, a freshman at the time, was also a good student. Maybe Mrs. Ayala will change her mind by the time he comes into my class. Two years, and numerous conversations with Mrs. Ayala later, I again approached her with the same question. I knew her much better now, and by this time, she trusted me because I had established a good record of accomplishment as a teacher at E-E High.

“So, Mrs. Ayala, what do you say, can I take Ernesto on the trip to New York and Boston next spring?” I asked.

“Okay,” she said, “but don’t think that because he can go on the trip, that he has my permission to attend any of those schools! It’s too far.”

A year later, as the deadline approached for Ernesto to decide where to attend college, he contemplated whether to agree to Princeton, Brown, or the University of Texas.

“Brown,” he said to me one afternoon, “I’m going to Brown; it’s the place that felt right for me. My mom doesn’t like it, but she’s accepted it.”

It took more than four years of relationship building and hard work, but Mrs. Ayala’s paradigm shifted, and she supported her son’s dream. Today, she is one of the leading advocates for students wanting to study out of state. Last year when a student who had gained admission to MIT was having problems convincing his parents to allow him to attend, Mrs. Ayala stepped in on his behalf. She approached the student’s parents, talked to them about the benefits of their son’s studying in the northeast, and in the end, played an important role in the student’s successful transition to MIT.

In May 1999, when Ernesto graduated from Brown University with an economics degree, the Llano Grande Center aggressively pursued a grant to launch a community based research program. In June, Ernesto turned down a three-year contract with a multi national corporation, in favor of an opportunity to

return to his rural South Texas community to participate in community based research, youth development work, and economic development initiatives. He now teaches economics at Edcouch-Elsa High School and directs the Llano Grande Center's finances and community based research program. Mrs. Ayala is happy, and Ernesto is happy. Like Ernesto's story, the Center has similarly created space for the return of more than a dozen other Ivy League graduates, as well as for local youths who attend other universities across the state and country.

BUILDING THE NETWORK

As we shared pictures of our place and stories of our elders at the Yale conference, we grounded the conversation on place and people. We care about our hometown, we care deeply about our people, and we based our discussions on those principles. There is a particular sense of place rural communities possess that nurtures a particular identity and connection to that place (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). Rural South Texas communities are no different, and one of the first topics of discussion centered on the commitment participants had to their hometown, and to the youth.

"I'm real busy, as I'm sure everyone else is," said Karina Cardoza, a sophomore at Columbia at the time, "but I'd be happy to take part in anything to help kids back home. I already take part in a literacy program in Harlem...I think

we can do something like that back home.” Karina also expressed the need to be informed about things happening in her community and in her old high school.

Other alumni voiced the same concern: “I find out what’s going on back home from my mom and dad, but usually that happens when I go back on break,” said Juan Ozuna, a sophomore at Yale.

To which Steve Rodríguez, a Brown freshman said, “Maybe we can create a list-serve or an e-group so that everyone here can keep in touch electronically. I’d be happy to create it” (Yale conference 1998).

The electronic communication sounded like a good idea. Steve acted on it, others assisted him, and as of today, we have thus utilized that mode to transmit countless messages to organize numerous subsequent conferences, workshops, grant proposals, and publications. The electronic communication, however, is not what has anchored the work. I met most of the people on our list-serve when they were 15 or 16 years old, when they first stepped into my classroom at Edcouch-Elsa High School. I have built a history with every one of them, and they too have stories to tell about their interactions with me, in my classroom, or in the frequent out-of-class projects we conducted. I know their parents, their parents know me, and we have built a history together as well. I trust the people on the electronic list-serve, and I expect that they have a high level of confidence and trust in me. Thus, the relationships that we built with each other when we were together, face to face, for extended periods are what have sustained the work, and

allowed this network to flourish. This is the antithesis of Valenzuela's "subtractive schooling." This is about building relationship and building trust through cultural, social, and academic work both inside and outside of the classroom (Valenzuela, 1999).

Shortly after the Yale conference, several of the participants conducted an interview with 85-year-old Otila (Tila) Zamora of Elsa. Doña Tila told beautiful stories about her youth, about the community of Elsa in the town's early days, and about the importance building our own network as we worked as teachers and students to improve community life. It was as if she had been present at the Yale conference just a few months before.

Chapter 4 includes part of the narrative of doña Tila, who challenged Superintendent Wilson of Edcouch-Elsa schools to admit her daughter Rosie into the Red Brick School for Anglo children. After doña Tila Zamora drafted a letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, urging the President to intervene on the side of justice, the White House delivered a directive to Edcouch-Elsa schools to revise its policies on segregation. Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District subsequently instituted a literacy test and administered the test to little Rosie, as part of their "new admission policy" into the Red Brick School for Anglo children. She took the test, passed it, and integrated Edcouch Elementary School. Rosie graduated from Edcouch-Elsa in 1954, left Elsa in 1955, and was seldom

heard from again in our community. Her story intrigued us, and we decided to seek her out (Zamora, O., 1998).

Through doña Tila, we made contact with Rosie and quickly found that she was owner and president of a Telesurveys operation in Houston. We also learned she was on the board of directors of the Houston Endowment, Hispanics in Philanthropy, Chase Bank in Texas, and other foundations and corporations. She flew down to Elsa one weekend to visit with a team of students and teachers for an oral history. After an hour's worth of conversation/interview, we asked Rosie about her business. She described to us the work of her business, Telesurveys Research Associates. We have since formed a fascinating relationship with her. Several summers ago, Rosie trained one of our youths on the intricacies of survey research. The following year, the Llano Grande Center's survey research team became an important instrument through which young people learn research skills and even affect local school policy. With Rosie's mentoring, the Center enhanced its research infrastructure. Rosie also assisted our efforts in gaining a \$250,000 grant from the Houston Endowment, a foundation on whose Board of Directors she sits. Importantly, much of this occurred because of the strong relationships our students and teachers build with those we interview.

IMPACT OF THE YALE CONFERENCE

The Yale conference was a historic event. The conditions were set for open, honest conversation between people who had known each other for many years. People present, most of who ranged between the ages of 18-22, were once again connecting to a sustained conversation which had begun two, four, or more years before when they lived in rural South Texas. We challenged ourselves to institutionalize the conversations and the work. We committed ourselves to using technology to deepen the sometimes-faltering communication we had thus experienced. We spoke of the necessity to mentor each other, to train young people, to seek out more resources, and to continue to build alliances. From beginning to end, we forced ourselves to ground every conversation in historical terms. Understanding our place in history was critical, if we were to develop a plan of action for the future (Freire, 1973). Finally, we challenged ourselves to think differently. “Enough of falling prey to the pitiful indicators,” roared David Rice, the Llano Grande Center’s writer in residence, and so began an intense conversation on why and how deficit thinking so predominates.

Upon our return from the Yale conference, the staff and students of the Llano Grande quickly assembled at Edcouch-Elsa High School to address the myriad issues that surfaced at Yale. One of the first issues focused on the name of Llano Grande. It became clear to everyone at the conference that the Llano Grande Research Project had thus established itself as the organizing body around

which the network would work. Llano Grande would be the entity around which we institutionalized the work, but one student quickly challenged the nature of the name. “Project doesn’t sound like it’s long-term,” said 16 year old Orlando Castillo, one of the youths involved in founding the Llano Grande. “A project starts and it finishes; what we need is an institute or something like that,” Orlando reiterated, as the Llano Grande staff deliberated over the name of the organization. Two months later, the Llano Grande Research Project became the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, an important distinction, particularly as we positioned ourselves for a long-term vision and plan.

The central issue at the conference was how to strengthen the network in order to sustain the important conversations focused on personal and community development. “When’s the next meeting or conference,” asked one youth. At that point, Miguel Guajardo, one of the founders of the Llano Grande Center, presented the idea of a seminar series. In 1998, Miguel participated as a fellow with the Kellogg Foundation’s International Leadership Program and through his involvement with the fellowship, he traveled to many parts of the world to meet with other Kellogg fellows. Wherever he went, Miguel consistently returned to South Texas to share his experiences with the Llano Grande staff, with our students and with others from the community. As part of the Kellogg program Miguel attended a Salzburg Seminar in Salzburg, Austria, where he shared his south Texas perspective with people from across the world. After several long

conversations with Miguel regarding that particular seminar, some of us became inspired to know more about the structure of such a seminar, and we began to explore the possibility of creating such a process. Since Miguel's participation in the seminar, I have been invited to serve as faculty member. I delivered a lecture on youth leadership and community development in December 2001, and Delia Pérez, another Llano Grande staff member, attended a seminar on community building in July 2003. In 1998, however, we decided to use the Salzburg Seminar as a model. Known as the premier seminar series in the world, the Salzburg Seminar was founded in 1947 by three young Harvard graduates who intended to bring world leaders as a way to nurture conversations in order to rebuild a ravaged Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War (Eliot, 1987). In 1998, the Llano Grande Center's intent, through our nascent seminar series, was to engage in a similar process that will lead to the rebuilding of South Texas.

A CASE OF YOUTH AND RISING EXPECTATIONS

The pitiful indicators would suggest that our students would be dropping out of school, working in the fields, and on the welfare lines. The prevailing paradigm that influenced many of us growing up in the latter part of the 20th Century is distinctly rooted in a needs based or deficit-driven model (Valencia, 1997). Community development initiatives typically begin with the question, "What does this town need?" and civic leaders react to the identified needs. The

teaching profession similarly is guided by the needs of children, although today's needs are increasingly identified in the context of what a child needs to pass the state-mandated test. Our region is easy to describe as an area with high needs, a region with pronounced deficits. For decades the pitiful indicators of high poverty, high unemployment, and low levels of educational attainment have defined our South Texas communities. Not surprisingly, educational and other public policy makers characteristically respond to the needs (Valencia, 1997; Guajardo, M., 2002).

While the Llano Grande Center is acutely conscious of the needs of our youth, our schools, and our community, the needs approach does not define the core of our philosophy. To the contrary, the Center has deliberately departed from the traditional deficit-driven model to education and community development by creating an aggressive asset based approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). The conventional approach suggests that because the majority of people in our community do not speak, read, or write English, we are deficient. On the other hand, our students and staff believe that we have extraordinary assets in our community because many of our residents are very proficient in Spanish. Because we have used this approach, some of our youths have created an economic enterprise based on this research finding and reality.

In the spring of 2000, three recent immigrant students at Edcouch-Elsa High School, all Llano Grande interns, decided to put the Center's research

findings to work. Since 1997, data collected through the Center's asset mapping research showed a compelling case for the Spanish language as a community asset. Two of the students were undocumented immigrants who found difficulty in gaining employment, so they turned to the staff of the Llano Grande Center and asked for permission to use resources of the Center to develop a Spanish Language Institute. Together with teachers and other staff members, the three teenagers designed a proposal and submitted it to a national foundation for resources to found a language institute. That year the three youths, one of whom is now an undergraduate at Yale, another at Occidental in Los Angeles, and the other at Southwestern in Georgetown, Texas, established a summer institute where people interested in learning Spanish travel to South Texas for four weeks of intense Spanish language training. The summer of 2003 marks the third year of the Institute's existence, and the founders intend on growing the enterprise so that it becomes an important employer in this rural community. To date, the youths have raised over \$150,000 from national foundations to support the work; they began learning the craft of grant writing as high school students, and as college students, they continue to improve this and other skills, including managing an organization, creating a public relations plan, evaluating a program, and so on.

While a cultural asset primarily guided the creation of this institute, two problems also contributed to its fruition. First, recent immigrant students sought

employment but found none. Therefore, they turned to the Llano Grande Center, with whom they had already built relationships, and found employment. Secondly, people from both inside and outside the community viewed only English as a language of value, and Spanish as a language with less value. Through an extensive asset mapping research program, and by taking a problem-posing approach to teaching and learning, three students then collaborated with teachers to create a micro enterprise where the native language of most community members was valued, utilized for economic development, and even celebrated (Freire, 1973, 1974; Guajardo, M., 2002; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002).

The community based research work of the Center has revealed abundant assets within our towns; our researchers, in fact, utilize research data to engage the community in development initiatives (Lather, 1991). The Center's purpose for conducting youth development programming, community based research, and a school reform initiative focuses primarily on creating positive social, cultural, and institutional change (Lather, 1991; Trueba, 1999). Youth, teachers, and a wide range of community members who participate in the Center's ongoing work drive much of what is created; they are the ones who emerge as the experts of our schools, our community, and our history—as we continue to grow together as researchers, educators, and agents of change (Scheurich, 1997). In short, we utilize a wide range of assets, including our young researchers, our wise elders, and the distinct assets based approach to development.

Deficit thinking would suggest that because José Cruz's parents earn only \$6,000 per year and because they are both undocumented immigrants, that José would have no opportunity. To the contrary, we have used José parents' story as a source of strength, in the face of great adversity. José could feel sorry for himself, but he chooses to feel proud of his parents and himself instead. José Cruz shares part of his narrative in the following space:

“Before I begin, I would like to speak a little bit about my family. Although we are very poor monetarily and we lack the luxuries that other students my age may have, I have to stress that my family has had a great influence on me. Every time I speak at a national, state, or local conference, it is not I that speaks; rather, it is my father's wisdom and my mother's humility that speak. It is the laughter of my brothers and the sparks of friendship of my two sisters. It is the stories shared by my grandfather, and the struggle to live and laugh of my grandmother. Everything that I stand for, everything that I am is my family. Those are the roots of who I am and that is what I portray. It is the feelings and the *sentimiento* of my family that speak through me. I am just a vehicle through which their words are spoken.

To many people, their roots seem to be unimportant. I am glad that all of my classmates learned to value the importance of family, of their roots, and not being ashamed of who they are. As people read this, I would like to encourage them to converse with one another, to speak with their *abuelos*, their *ías* o *íos*, to be one with their friends and family. The importance of conversation has been a forgotten art, an art we used to practice with pride. Fortunately, I have always conversed with my parents, aunts and uncles. The stories they tell are most valuable. It is not whether they are making up their stories, or whether they are boring. It is the history they share, and the richness of the experience of sharing that is important.

The thing I learned the most at Edcouch-Elsa High School through my work with the Llano Grande Center was learning from each other. I learned from Cecilia's grandfather regarding the Normandy Invasion. I will continue to understand the importance of vocabulary and the correct

use of it. I learned from everybody, as I know that everybody learned something from me.

I presented at four conferences in just one semester and learned that many people have many misconceptions. Although the conversations regarding oral histories have made me a better public speaker, what I learned most at conferences is about how differently people think. I believe that an oral history is largely about knowing how to understand each other. That is why people that do not understand each other cannot have a good conversation, or have a good oral history. We should understand the importance of one another and know that each one has a valuable history to tell.

As we are placed in this system where competition and change are introduced, unfortunately the thing we learn most is to assimilate and feel ashamed of what we have. I had always been ashamed of what I was, of what my parents owed, of the food that I ate, and of speaking the language that I speak. I don't feel that way anymore. I have changed, and I believe I have also seen a change in the community in general. I credit much of my transformation to my work with the Llano Grande Center.”

Similarly, Cecilia Garza's transformation occurred in large part because of her new awareness about her family's history. Cecilia came into Delia Pérez's class during her sophomore year as a volatile and emotional 15 year old. When she enrolled in my history class her senior year, she had gained an awareness of her family's story, and continued to work on building her own story. Cecilia shares her story in the following space:

“In August I became a student intern for the Llano Grande Center and then became involved in the collaborative research with UT graduates. It wasn't until I began doing oral histories that I learned that immense value that a person's story has—even more so when I had the opportunity to interview my grandfather.

As graduate students from UT and I interviewed him, it was as if I was getting a history lesson on WWII all over again, only this time I realized

that my grandpa played an important role in it. I had no idea that he was part of the Normandy Invasion. I had heard of D-Day, but I never paid as much attention as I did in that interview. My grandfather has wonderful stories to tell but I never bothered to ask until then.

Since that interview, I saw my grandpa's eyes light up. He was no longer scolding me: he was acknowledging the hard work that our class was doing. Now every morning that he takes me to school we talk about the weather, about his cows, and every now and then he'll take a detour to show where the old Mexican school used to be or anything else I should know. I'm glad that now I've learned to appreciate my grandpa's words because I had always taken them for granted.

However, I did not go without punishment for my ignorance. My grandmother is no longer able to speak, so I can't talk to her the way I used to or even the new way that I learned how it's too late for those conversations: all I can do now is read the expressions on her face and reassure her that I love her. If people learn to value others' words and understand the power that the story has to strengthen relationships, perhaps they will not miss out on all the special encounters they could have had, such as with me and my grandmother."

Barry Checkoway writes, "Young people can create community change," especially when they collaborate with caring adults who mentor youths and gives youths opportunities to take risks (Checkoway, 1996). Pittmann and Irby further argue that youths and their families be viewed as assets, in order to create opportunities and effective work in developing young people as active agents of community life (Pittman & Irby, 1998). Guajardo and Guajardo (2002) outline the strategies that define the process the Llano Grande Center utilizes to create opportunities for youth leadership development.

The five strategies include:

(1) *developing a safe place* where youths can take risks without being discouraged or humiliated for experimenting with innovative ideas;

(2) *creating positive relationship* between youths and adults for personal growth and sound community development work;

(3) *learning skills* through research and youth and community development initiatives;

(4) *creating opportunities to apply skills; and,*

(5) *celebrating our victories* (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002).

José and Cecilia, as well as hundreds of other youths, have taken part in creating and building these strategies, and they have utilized them for their own development.

Another student, Kinny Llanes, first became part of the work of the Llano Grande Center during his senior year in high school. He reflects upon that experience in the following space:

“During the course of this semester, many of my classmates were asked to present at conferences, but I was not asked. At first, it did not really bother me too much, but eventually it did. I wanted to present, I wanted my voice to be heard, and I wanted to express my opinions. Finally, my chance arrived. I insisted I wanted to be part of a panel on a seminar on higher education sponsored by the Llano Grande Center and State Farm Insurance. It was part of how my classmates and I would share the community based research work we had done during the previous three months with the public. Also part of how we as teenagers were becoming public people.

I cannot even begin to explain the rush that one gets presenting to an audience like that. I am used to audiences, but this was a different kind.

These people were not there to be entertained; they were there to be informed and to be part of a conversation.

My moment in the spotlight is a moment that I will never forget and is a moment that changed me. Having people come up to me and tell what a great job I did, and to keep it up is a wonderful experience. I am used to having people tell me stuff like that, but this time it just felt different. For the first time it felt like a compliment. I now feel that I am stronger and I now feel that I am a better person because of it. Now that I have done it once, I cannot wait until I get the opportunity to do it again.

I now feel that the tables have turned and that I am now the teacher. Adults are learning from me. That amuses me—that adults feel that “kids” can teach them anything. Damn it we can! When I was standing up there in front of all those “adults,” I felt like I had absolute power. Funny thing is they all had these looks in their eyes; they were not viewing me as a kid. They were viewing me as an equal.

That makes me prouder than words could ever express, but to show how proud I am, you would have to hear me speak. You would have to hear my voice!”

An abundance of young people’s stories from one small South Texas community powerfully argue against the perception that young Mexican American youths cannot achieve at the highest levels, according to the highest standards of measurement used in this society. The evidence provided here also supported Valencia and Black, who argue against the notion that Mexican Americans do not value their education. That myth, they write, “lies in the pseudoscientific notion of ‘deficit thinking,’ which is rooted in a historic pattern of racist intellectual currents in this country (Valencia and Black, 2002). More than 80 Edcouch-Elsa High School graduates, who since 1993 have enrolled in Ivy League and other highly exclusive universities, support Valencia and Black,

and add to the Edcouch-Elsa High School story. In addition, hundreds of other youths have also found great successes in other universities and in other environments. It has happened because of much hard work, to be sure, but the pedagogy and practice we have employed is what has given strength and power to the hard work (Lather, 1986; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002).

In the early 1990s, we began to imagine that a kid like Delia Pérez, whose father worked in the fields and whose mother was a homemaker, could go to a place like Yale University. Or a kid like Blanca Rojas, who didn't have indoor running water until she was in high school, could go to Brown University (Ruben, 1999). Or that Mónica Marroquín, who lives in an isolated colonia, could go to Harvard and then medical school. Or that Carlos García, who grew up in federal housing in Edcouch and whose mother earns \$4,000 per year cleaning houses, can attend Yale, which cost \$35,000 when he studied there. We imagined that José Luis Deleón, a lifelong farm worker, could leave his family working in the fields of Wisconsin, hop on an airplane at O'Hare Airport in Chicago en route to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he would enroll at MIT in August of 1993. He did, and he graduated from the Sloan School of Management in 1997 (Arrillaga, 1997; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Lang, 2003; Partheymuller, 2000; Scott, 1999). We imagined that recent Mexican immigrants and second or third generation Mexican American alike could achieve great things, and they have.

Because we also determined to reverse the debilitating “brain drain,” we also challenged ourselves to create opportunities for many of these youths to return to rural South Texas. We determined that young people such as Delia would attend Yale and then return to Edcouch-Elsa in 1997. She did, and she taught for two years, and then left for another two to complete a Master’s degree the LBJ School of Public Affairs. She wrote her Master’s Thesis in 2001 on the work of the Llano Grande Center, and then returned once again to continue teaching. Blanca graduated from Brown and returned to teach, just as Ernesto Ayala also graduated from Brown and returned to develop a community-based research program with the Llano Grande Center. Karina Cardoza graduated from Columbia and now directs our local Congressman’s grants division, just as Israel Rocha, who also graduated from Columbia, and now directs the Congressman’s public relations division. Similarly, José Salívar took undergraduate and graduate degrees from Stanford and now teaches at the University of Texas Pan American and serves on the board of directors of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Zeibart, 2002; Lang, 2003). The evidence is clear. The Center creates space for youth to do good work, and good things happen.

The Yale conference would be the first of many seminars planned by the Llano Grande Center. Since 1998, the Llano Grande Center has organized and sponsored dozens of major seminars on issues ranging from higher education, to

health insurance, to economic development. In the process, we have secured almost a million dollars from the Kellogg Foundation and more than another million from other philanthropic entities, specifically to build on the Center's youth leadership and community development initiatives. Similarly, we have organized numerous college visitation trips to visit northeastern, Midwestern, and West Coast universities, on top of the frequent visits we make to in-state universities.

CHAPTER 6:

Edcouch-Elsa Students in the Ivy League: A Look at the Numbers

INTRODUCTION

This section integrates numerous stories that my students and I have experienced with data we have collected specific to their academic records, their economic status, SAT scores, and numerous other variables. I identified 51 students who graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School (E-E) between 1993 and 2002 as the total population for this study and have collected data from personal interviews and through official school documents.⁸ Every student gained admission into an exclusive university of national prominence; 30 to Ivy League universities, and the others to schools such as Stanford, MIT, Vassar, Rice, and the University of Chicago (Table 1).

⁸ I do not include the Class of 2003, though I will note that 10 students from the Edcouch-Elsa High School Class of 2003 gained admission into Ivy League and similar type schools. Those 10 are not reflected in this analysis.

college attended

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Brown	13	25.5	25.5	25.5
	Columbia	6	11.8	11.8	37.3
	Yale	11	21.6	21.6	58.8
	MIT	5	9.8	9.8	68.6
	Harvard	1	2.0	2.0	70.6
	Stanford	3	5.9	5.9	76.5
	Grinnell	2	3.9	3.9	80.4
	University of Chicago	2	3.9	3.9	84.3
	Vassar	2	3.9	3.9	88.2
	Bowdoin	1	2.0	2.0	90.2
	Occidental	2	3.9	3.9	94.1
	Emerson	1	2.0	2.0	96.1
	Rice	1	2.0	2.0	98.0
	New York School of Design	1	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	51	100.0	100.0	

Table 1: College attended by Edcouch-Elsa students

This section looks at quantitative data to make sense of the experience 51 students from one rural community and one high school have had as they prepared themselves for life as active members of the community and for college. While the quantitative data tell much about SAT scores, family socio economic status, college retention rates, and other variables, more data are needed to complete the stories. This paper then becomes a combination of numbers and storytelling. The numbers are important because they describe snapshots and patterns of particular variables and subjects. The arguments and suggestions

posited through the numbers are augmented in this paper through a mix of qualitative data. A mix-method of numbers and stories, then, combine to tell the larger story of these students and their experiences.

At least two dozen of the subjects of this study are active participants in this research. This participatory research process is a principle on which we operate at the Llano Grande Center. All 51 students in this study are products of the Center's college preparation program, and many have also been actively involved in the work specific to education reform and or youth leadership development. Hundreds of E-E students have been part of the college prep work with the Center since the organization was launched in the early 1990s. Many students subsequently gained admission to very competitive state and private schools in Texas. Dozens of those have enrolled at schools such as the University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University, the University of Houston, St. Mary's University, the University of Texas at San Antonio, Incarnate Word, the University of Texas Pan American (UTPA), and other such universities. This section, however, focuses on 51 students who gained admission into and enrolled in some of the most exclusive universities in the United States.

I have identified 51 E-E students who graduated between 1993, when my students and I initiated an aggressive college placement program, and 2002. Variables identified include students' race, gender, parental status, parent educational attainment, family income, high school rank, SAT scores, college

attended, retention rate, and number in family. I look at these variables as a method to understand why this population succeeds. On occasion, the numbers may be sufficient data to tell important stories; on other occasions, the paper employs the use of ethnographic and qualitative data to make sense of the lives of the students and to understand why they succeed.

The 51 students studied here are part of the bigger story. This is a story about a community supporting its youth, and the youth actively working to give shape to a better community as they build their skills through their participation in community life and in elite university environments. The population of 51 is selected because it constitutes people around which I have built my life as a teacher, and because many of those 51 have also built their lives as young intellectuals and leaders through their work building the Llano Grande Center (Gramsci, 1988). Selection of the population is not consistent with the positivistic social science approach to research, but then, our experience is far from being positivistic (Giroux, 1997). It is instead an experience grounded on relationships and a strong sense of place. The rich stories shape the experience that defines us as individuals, families, and community. Though numbers heavily influence this section, the narrative is nevertheless epistemologically based on story, critical race theory, and constructivism (Scheurich, 1997; Pizarro, 2001; Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings 1998). The narrative that emerges is a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative stories. It also emerges as counter

hegemonic narrative that runs counter to the positivistic approach to mainstream social science. As such, it tells the story of a practicing educator and his students and the work they have done during the last decade (Foley, D., 1995; Foster, 1993, Guajardo, M., 2002). This is a story of people who have done extraordinary things by breaking the cycle of low institutional expectations (Foucault, 1984).

RETENTION

Staff of the Llano Grande Center is frequently invited to conduct workshops with teachers, counselors, and other community members on issues of community based research, digital storytelling, and college preparation. In the fall of 2001, as I shared success stories with several dozen south Texas educators, one school counselor raised her hand and asked, “So, you show your students’ success rate with admissions, but how many of them run into academic problems when they get there?”

It is a commonly asked question. People want to know how Mexican American students from one of the most under resourced schools in the country can achieve success in Ivy League and other exclusive universities. A compelling reason we identified Ivy League universities as priority schools for our students was because of the retention rate each of those schools boasted. Yale, Harvard, Columbia, Brown, and the other Ivies each proudly proclaimed that 92% to 95% of students they admitted graduated from their institutions. At the same time, we

learned while visiting large public universities such as the University of Texas and Texas A&M University that their retention rates hovered around 50%. Information from admissions offices as well as testimonials from admissions counselors clearly showed that our students had a higher probability of success, if they gained admission into the most exclusive colleges.

Every Edcouch-Elsa student who has enrolled in an Ivy League school has either graduated from college or is still in college. One student left Yale after three academically successful years, because of family reasons. He had little problem subsequently adjusting to a public university and is now in law school at the University of Texas. Twenty Edcouch-Elsa students graduated from Ivy League universities between 1997 and 2002. Eight students have graduated from Yale, seven from Brown, four from Columbia, and one from Harvard. In addition, eleven others have graduated from schools such as Stanford, MIT, the University of Chicago, Emerson College and Rice (Table 2).

college attended * degree earned Crosstabulation

Count		degree earned			Total
		yes	no	current	
college attended	Brown	7		6	13
	Columbia	4		2	6
	Yale	8		3	11
	MIT	1	1	3	5
	Harvard	1			1
	Stanford	2		1	3
	Grinnell	2			2
	University of Chicago	1		1	2
	Vassar		1	1	2
	Bowdoin			1	1
	Occidental			2	2
	Emerson	1			1
	Rice	1			1
	New York School of Design	1			1
	Total	29	2	20	51

Table 2: College attended, degree earned, and/or current status of E-E students

Of the 51 students, two dropped out. One returned home after completing two successful years at MIT, and has since enrolled at the local public university. The second student left Vassar during the first semester after she was unable to adjust to the new cultural and geographic environment (Table 3).

college attended * retention rate Crosstabulation

Count		retention rate		Total
		graduated or still in college	dropped out of college	
college attended	Brown	13		13
	Columbia	6		6
	Yale	11		11
	MIT	4	1	5
	Harvard	1		1
	Stanford	3		3
	Grinnell	2		2
	University of Chicago	2		2
	Vassar	1	1	2
	Bowdoin	1		1
	Occidental	2		2
	Emerson	1		1
	Rice	1		1
	New York School of Design	1		1
	Total	49	2	51

Table 3: Retention rate of Edcouch-Elsa students in selected universities

When both students left their respective schools, they were the only people from Edcouch-Elsa High School on their campuses. The MIT student survived during his first two years, because of the support he found from his brother, who completed his undergraduate degree at MIT during the same period. When the older student graduated, the younger brother left the school as well.

“At the risk of sounding arrogant,” said Llano Grande staff member Delia Pérez in response to a question from a guest last month, “when our students go to

an out of state school, most of them will step into an environment where Edcouch-Elsa alumni are already there.” Unlike the experience of the two students who left school, most E-E students have had the important benefit of finding an existing support system made up of familiar faces from back home. Student testimonies suggest that this support system has been an important reason for their success. “At Brown,” says Ernesto Ayala, “we always made sure we taught the ropes to the younger students coming up from Edcouch.” Ernesto, who graduated from Brown University in 1999, banded with other E-E students to form an impressive recruitment and retention support system for Brown undergraduates from E-E as well as other Latino students from other parts of the country. “We founded the South Texas Enrichment Program,” he said, “and we used it to help people adjust to life in the northeast, and to graduate from Brown” (Ayala, 1999). Since 1995, thirteen E-E students have attended Brown; seven have graduated, and six are current undergraduates.

Like Ernesto at Brown, Delia and other E-E alumni also formed a support network at Yale. Subsequently, eight E-E alumni have graduated from Yale, while three are current undergraduates. Several years ago, I sent an email to Carlos, a former student of mine who was celebrating his birthday while in his first semester at Yale. I wished him a happy birthday, and he responded with an email that said: “Mr. Guajardo, my friends threw me a birthday party at my college last night. A lot of people were there, including all my friends from

Edcouch...Then a Jewish friend from New York turned to me and asked, ‘What is this Edcouch place you guys are from? Is it a private school for rich Mexicans?’ (García, 1998). The humorous story clearly points to the viable community of support created by Edcouch-Elsa students. Carlos and others have been beneficiaries of that support. A similar story can be found at Columbia and at Stanford, where E-E students have capitalized on their ability to build networks for multiple purposes—for survival, retention, and graduation. As a result, the population of 51 shows a success and retention rate of 96.1% (Table 4).

retention rate

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid graduated or still in college	49	96.1	96.1	96.1
dropped out of college	2	3.9	3.9	100.0
Total	51	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: Retention rate of Edcouch-Elsa students in selective universities

Students support each other at the local campus level, but the network is strongly encouraged by the students’ hometowns in a variety of ways. Families, for example, come together to support their children. A constant flow of information, clothing, tortillas, school supplies, and other goods has been in motion since the early 1990s, when the first groups of students set off to the northeast. Students and their families tap their social and cultural capital to build

communities that stretch from south Texas to New England, to the west coast, and to other parts of the country (Coleman, 1988; Gándara, 1995; Trueba, 1999).

Building on the family network, the Llano Grande Center further adds to the support system. Teachers, students, and other community members operated loosely in the early 1990s to build the college preparation program focused on placing students in Ivy League and other elite universities. In 1997, the network of teachers then founded the Llano Grande Center, which began as an oral history project. Importantly, the Center also operated as a vehicle through which college students and others could maintain communication with teachers, students, and the work taking place in Edcouch-Elsa. Between 1997 and 2002, the Center also engaged in an aggressive fundraising campaign to secure resources to hire high school and college students to participate in a wide range of research and technology projects. To date the Center has raised more than two million dollars in grants from foundations, corporations, and private citizens and created seven full time and approximately 100 part time jobs, principally as a way to continue to cultivate the relationships with alumni from the area.

It is worth noting that the directors of the Llano Grande Center are among members of the selected population for this study. Delia Pérez graduated from Yale in 1997, teaches history and government at E-E H.S. and directs the Center's community based research component. Ernesto Ayala graduated from Brown in 1999, teaches economics at E-E, and is the Center's grants director. Angélica

Tello, who recently completed her study in writing at Emerson College in Boston, directs the Center's publishing work. In addition, another 10 teachers and community members work closely with the Center to constitute the core of an evolving support system that has contributed significantly to the 96% retention rate and to the sustained nature of the work over a ten-year period.

GRADES AND STORY

"I'm nowhere near the top 10 of my class, not even the top 15, so I'm not sure I have a chance to get into any of the Ivy League schools," said Cecilia, an E-E junior in a conversation with a staff member of the Llano Grande Center. "Well, aren't you involved in work around campus or in the community?" asked the staff member. "Not really...I do have my own rock band, but that's about it," Cecilia responded. Shortly after the conversation, a meeting took place between Cecilia and members of the Center to create a plan of action through which she could do meaningful work, develop important research skills, and participate in community development initiatives. "By doing so," said one of Cecilia's mentors, "you will build your skills and strengthen your college application. Then, universities will forgive you a bit on your GPA and class rank" (Garza, C., 2001).

The summer after Cecilia's junior year, she secured a job with the Center conducting community-based research. From the beginning, she asserted herself

as the leader among a team of a dozen student researchers who worked on mapping community assets, collecting oral histories, publishing newsletters for the towns of Elsa and Edcouch, and organizing community seminars. Within a year, Cecilia became proficient in interviewing, analyzing data by using SPSS, organizing public forums, and public speaking. During that time, she also presented her work at two state conferences, three regional forums, and one global conference in Stockholm, Sweden. When she graduated from E-E last May, she was not in the top 2% or even the top 5% of her class, but she was able to create a powerful and compelling story about herself, based on her hard work and connection with the Llano Grande Center. By April of her senior year, Cecilia found herself deciding on whether to attend Columbia, Brown, Vassar or one of several public universities. She chose Columbia in New York City, where she has completed two successful years.

To be sure, all 51 students in this study graduated in the top 25% of their class. Thirty-nine of them graduated in the top 2% of their class, or the top 15 in a typical class of 300 graduating seniors. University recruiters often point to the number of valedictorians and salutatorians in their incoming classes, and to the high importance of having a strong transcript and grade point average. Cecilia and 11 other students from this population, however, were not in the top academic range. But Cecilia and the others were interested in attending a university of national stature, and all 12 were in the top 25% of their class (Table 5).

h.s. class rank

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid top 2% of class	39	76.5	76.5	76.5
top 5% of class	8	15.7	15.7	92.2
top 10% of class	2	3.9	3.9	96.1
top 25% of class	2	3.9	3.9	100.0
Total	51	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: Class rank of Edcouch-Elsa students enrolled in elite universities

Cecilia positioned herself as researcher, community activist, and public person—all before she turned 18. Additionally, her personal statement described the emotional odyssey she experienced after she conducted an oral history with her grandfather. "My grandpa was in the Normandy Invasion, and I had no idea," she said. "There are so many stories about my family, and such richness I uncovered after that one conversation with my grandpa...I had no idea...and I live right next door to him," she continued (Garza, C., 2001). Cecilia's research experience with her grandfather and in the community transformed her as a teenager, citizen, and student applicant looking for a good college. Cecilia's education came to life, and her learning became accelerated and meaningful (Perrone 1999; Reyes, et al, 1999; Trueba, 1989, Guajardo, M., 2002). Brown University found Cecilia interesting and accepted her, as did Columbia University and several other national schools. Each school understood that Cecilia's grade

point average told only part of who she was, and they took her record as researcher and her personal story as important attributes.

THE SATS

When I returned to teach at my alma mater in the early 1990s, I engaged in conversation with my students regarding the reasons they thought their college options were so limited. "Why do you only aspire to the local school, or the big state schools?" I asked. Frequently, the responses suggested that private schools were too expensive. "But, you will qualify for financial aid," was always my retort. "Well, you're right," a yielding student would always say, but would quickly follow with "but our SAT scores are too low." While cultural and family factors, cost, and distance played a part in discussions, we always had an answer for all those issues. How to beat the SAT, however, remained a mystery.

It was probably a mystery for E-E students throughout the history of the school. Edcouch-Elsa graduated its first senior class in 1935, with a class of 15 white teenagers. As the high school developed its infrastructure during its first decades, the overwhelming majority of its students were white. Its faculty was also exclusively white until Delia Barrón took a position teaching Spanish in the early 1950s (Barrón, 1998). White students who graduated and sought a college education typically enrolled at the Edinburg College, which later became Pan American College, Pan American University, and eventually the University of

Texas Pan American. A few adventurous students attended the University of Texas, Texas A&M, and one went to Rice University to play football (Smith, F., 1998). The chance to pursue higher education existed for white students and some took advantage (Cavazos, N., 1999).

For Mexican American students opportunities existed in the 1950s, but primarily for those who graduated from high school. "It was hard for the mexicanos because most of us started school not knowing English, so we were held back in the first and second grades...and it was embarrassing to be in the first grade and be 10 or 11 years old, so many kids just dropped out," said Noé Cavazos. Cavazos was one of the fortunate ones who graduated in the early 1950s, but "I wasn't accepted to A&M," he said, "Because the university said I needed to have taken chemistry." Edcouch-Elsa High School did not offer a chemistry class in the early 1950s, "but one of my white classmates at Edcouch-Elsa got into A&M," he said. In Cavazos's case, A&M kept him out because of his race. "Those were the rules of the game then," he said (Cavazos, N., 1999).

As Edcouch-Elsa High School became more integrated in the 1960s, the college-going rate steadily improved, though students did not attend out of state schools. One exception was Jesús Hinojosa, who graduated from Edcouch-Elsa in 1954, subsequently enrolled at Texas A&M, and went on to Harvard for a Master's degree in architecture in 1961 (Hinojosa, J., 1998). After Hinojosa, several E-E students took advantage of migrant advocacy programs from the

University of Michigan, Michigan State University, and Eastern Michigan University in the 1970s, "but the numbers were small, not even a handful," suggested longtime E-E H.S. counselor Alberto Gonzales (Gonzales, A., 2002).

As the number of high school students applying to college rose in the late 1960s and into the 70s and 80s, universities became increasingly reliant on SAT scores as a way to measure the value of student applicants (FairTest 2001-2002). More students from historically excluded population groups began to apply to college, and many gained admission to universities. But the growing importance of the SAT for admissions effectively kept many students from even applying. "The national schools were clearly out of our range," said Dorothy Cantú, a 1976 graduate of Edcouch-Elsa High School, "because it wasn't expected by any of us, but also because of the SAT" (Cantú, 2002). Many Mexican American students did not even know the SAT was a requirement. Those who were aware of the SAT also believed that their scores were too low to compete for admission (Vela, 2002).

Persuasive arguments have been posited recently showing the successes of affirmative action programs in university admissions in the 1970s and 80s (Bowen & Bok, 1998). In their compelling quantitative study, Bowen and Bok demonstrate the significant results that affirmative action admissions policies yielded during a three-decade period. The data reveal that thousands of minority students gained admissions into exclusive American universities because of

affirmative action programs. SAT scores of minority students were consistently lower than the SAT scores of white applicants, but those minority students admitted under these programs nevertheless achieved academic success and subsequently became contributing members of the labor force as doctors, lawyers, Ph.D.s, teachers, social workers, and as a myriad of other professionals (Bowen and Bok 1998). What Bowen and Bok do not discuss, however, is that while affirmative action programs inspired some to pursue admission into the nation's top schools, many other students stayed away because of the SAT. "It's a tough test. We took it, but we were discouraged when we saw our scores...so we didn't apply to some college," said Jaime Vela, an E-E graduate of 1983 (Vela, 2002).

In the context of E-E students searching out higher education opportunities on a national scale, a small breakthrough occurred in the 1980s. Two students from the class of 1984 gained acceptance to elite schools: one to Harvard, the other to Stanford. In 1985, another E-E student also went to Harvard, and a third followed to Harvard in 1986. For the next six years, most E-E college bound students opted to attend public schools in Texas, primarily UTPA, while another handful attended the three Michigan universities.

The turning point occurred in my junior English class in the fall of 1991, where a student asked a question that started it all. After nine months of aggressive fundraising, nine students and two E-E teachers squeezed into a van and traveled across the country for 16 days in June of 1992. Each of the students

agreed to apply to at least one of the schools we visited, which included Columbia, Yale, Brown, Harvard, MIT, and George Washington University. Four of the nine students who applied got admitted: two into Yale, one into Columbia, and one into MIT. Two of the students, Delia and José Luis, subsequently enrolled at Yale and MIT, respectively. “I applied to Yale and Harvard on a long shot and really only because of a sense of responsibility to my teachers who had taken me to visit the campuses in the summer of 1992,” said Delia (Pérez, 2001). Though the other students also applied, they all had apprehensions about the SAT. Prior to the class of 1993, few E-E students even took the SAT. “The ACT was the test of choice, so this was a new test, and a frightening and intimidating one” (Pérez, 2002).

The students clearly recalled the campus tour and visit at Yale when the admissions counselor said the average SAT score for incoming freshmen was about a 1465. At Harvard, the mean was a 1495, MIT’s was a 1452, and so on (Princeton Review 2001). So, my students were especially disillusioned when they received their scores. Three scored above 1000. One scored a 1330 and got into Yale; another scored an 1100 and was accepted by Yale. A third student scored a 1090 and got into Columbia. And José Luis scored an 880 and got into MIT. José Luis, of course, could also boast in his application that he was an all-state football player, the class valedictorian, and a lifelong migrant farm worker.

His low SAT score became less important, because his personal story and statement were unique—in the context of an MIT applicant pool.

José Luis and his classmates quickly became important symbols, almost hero-like figures whose stories I could use to inspire younger E-E students to expand their possibilities about where they could go to college. They demystified the SAT, and created the tipping point in the history of our schools and community (Gladwell, 2000). The handful of students from the class of 1993 essentially helped others believe they could dream. Between 1993 and 2002, more than four-dozen other Edcouch-Elsa students followed the same path.

Of the 51 students in this study, 50 are Mexican American; one is white. The white student, who is a junior at Yale, scored a 1540 on his SAT, well above the average of the other students, and even above the average of Ivy League schools. Altogether, however, the 51 E-E students scored a mean of 1150 on the SAT, well below the average of the universities they attended (Tables 6 and 7).

Report

sat composite score

student gender	Mean	N
female	1130.00	25
male	1170.77	26
Total	1150.78	51

Table 6: Average SAT scores of E-E students, total and by gender

Report

Mean

University	SAT math average	SAT verbal average	SAT composite average
Brown	690.00	690.00	1380.00
Columbia	693.00	701.00	1394.00
Yale	730.00	735.00	1465.00
MIT	752.00	702.00	1454.00
Stanford	717.00	715.00	1432.00
Total	716.40	708.60	1425.00

Table 7: Average SAT schools of selected universities E-E students attend. Source: *Princeton Review Guide to the Best 331 Colleges*, 2001 Edition.

Thirteen Edcouch-Elsa students with a mean of 1167 on the SAT have attended Brown University. On average, Edcouch-Elsa students scored 213 points lower than their classmates at Brown. Edcouch-Elsa students at Columbia fare similarly on SAT scores, producing results 236 lower than the Columbia mean for incoming freshmen. At Yale, the difference is 248 points, 382 at MIT, and 206 points at Stanford (Tables 7 and 8).

Report

sat composite score

college attended	Mean	N
Brown	1167.69	13
Columbia	1158.33	6
Yale	1217.27	11
MIT	1072.00	5
Harvard	1380.00	1
Stanford	1226.67	3
Grinnell	985.00	2
University of Chicago	1125.00	2
Vassar	1100.00	2
Bowdoin	1060.00	1
Occidental	945.00	2
Emerson	1170.00	1
Rice	1090.00	1
New York School of Design	1120.00	1
Total	1150.78	51

Table 8: Average SAT scores of Edcouch-Elsa students attending elite schools

Brown's SAT mean for incoming freshmen between 1993 and 2002 has fluctuated between 1380 and 1400. Similarly Yale, Columbia, Stanford, MIT, and the other exclusive colleges publish their SAT composite means between 1400 and 1500 (*Princeton Review*, 2001).

Within the Edcouch-Elsa group, the 26 males in the study show an average composite SAT score of 1170 or 40 points higher on average than the mean of 1130 for the 25 females in the study. The mean verbal scores for males are 12 points higher, and their average math scores are higher than the female

scores by 30 points (Table 9). FairTest and other critics of standardized testing and the SAT have consistently argued that the SAT is a race and gender biased test, and the Edcouch-Elsa experience confirms those arguments (FairTest 2000-2001).

Report

student gender		sat verbal score	sat math score	sat composite score
female	Mean	548.40	577.60	1130.00
	N	25	25	25
male	Mean	560.77	607.31	1170.77
	N	26	26	26
Total	Mean	554.71	592.75	1150.78
	N	51	51	51

Table 9: SAT scores of E-E students by gender

The data also reveal a minimal difference between Edcouch-Elsa students who come from single parent homes compared to students who live with two parents. The mean for the 10 students from single parent homes is only three points lower, at 1148, than the average for students from a two-parent household, whose mean is 1151 (Table 10).

Report

sat composite score

parent status	Mean	N
one parent	1148.00	10
both parents	1151.46	41
Total	1150.78	51

Table 10: SAT scores by parent status

In 1994, we obtained resources to pay for Princeton Review SAT preparation courses. For a fee of \$700 per student, the Princeton Review Company guarantees that its six-week intensive study course will help students raise their scores by at least 100 points. Between 1993 and 2002, most students who took the course raised their score significantly. Forty-four students who enrolled in the Princeton Review course scored a mean of 1177, compared to the nine students who did not take the course and who scored a mean of 1007 (Table 11).

Report

Mean

Princeton Review SAT prep	sat composite score
yes	1177.44
no	1007.50
Total	1150.78

Table 11: E-E student participation in Princeton Review courses

None of those who did not take the course scored above a 1250 composite, compared to the 37% of those who took the course and scored above a 1250 (Table 12). This finding is consistent with the position that one can pay to improve SAT scores (FairTest 2000-2001).

**SAT composite recentered range * Princeton Review SAT prep
Crosstabulation**

			Princeton Review SAT prep		Total
			yes	no	
SAT composite recentered range	950-1049	Count	1	4	5
		% of Total	2.0%	7.8%	9.8%
	1050-1149	Count	8	2	10
		% of Total	15.7%	3.9%	19.6%
	1150-1249	Count	15	2	17
		% of Total	29.4%	3.9%	33.3%
	1250-1349	Count	13		13
		% of Total	25.5%		25.5%
	1350-1449	Count	2		2
		% of Total	3.9%		3.9%
	1450-1549	Count	3		3
		% of Total	5.9%		5.9%
	1550-1600	Count	1		1
		% of Total	2.0%		2.0%
Total	Count	43	8	51	
	% of Total	84.3%	15.7%	100.0%	

Table 12: Princeton Review participation and E-E students' SAT scores

Several reasons account for students not taking the Princeton Review course, but chief among them is cost. For many years, Edcouch-Elsa ISD was the poorest public school district in Texas, based on property tax rates (Texas Education Agency, 1992-2002). Students generally come from low-income homes where paying \$700 for an SAT prep course seems like an unreasonable expenditure. Similarly, the school district uses most of its discretionary resources on training teachers or students for the TAAS, the state mandated test. In the last eight years, finding money to pay for 43 students has been something of an achievement. Beyond the cost, the availability of some students is another reason a few students did not take the Princeton Review course. In some cases, they could not attend classes because of work, extracurricular activities, or other family related reasons.

The family income levels of students and SAT scores showed slight correlations but no pattern. Six students in the population whose family income is under \$10,000 per year scored a composite average of 1103. Students in the second lowest economic range, \$10,000 to \$19,000, scored a composite average of 1149. Thereafter, the composite means fluctuate between income levels, so no discernible pattern emerges (Table 13).

Report

sat composite score

family income	Mean	N
below \$10,000	1103.33	6
\$10,000-\$19,999	1149.17	12
\$20,000-\$29,999	1121.43	14
\$30,000-\$39,999	1155.00	2
\$40,000-\$49,999	1296.67	3
\$50,000-\$59,000	1163.33	6
\$60,000-\$69,999	1137.50	4
\$70,000-\$79,000	1226.67	3
\$80,000-\$89,000	1170.00	1
Total	1150.78	51

Table 13: Family income of E-E students who attend elite universities

In comparative terms, the number that clearly stands out is the average SAT score of 1150 for the 51 students, because it is almost 300 points lower than the average SAT scores for most of their classmates in the Ivy League and other exclusive colleges (Tables 13 and 14). Regardless of SAT scores, however, Edcouch-Elsa students have performed well in these elite university environments and even graduated at rates comparable to, or even higher than the averages of the respective universities. According to this data, then, SAT scores do not appear as a strong predictor of success in college, or of completion of a college degree.

Report

Mean

University	SAT math average	SAT verbal average	SAT composite average
Brown	690.00	690.00	1380.00
Columbia	693.00	701.00	1394.00
Yale	730.00	735.00	1465.00
MIT	752.00	702.00	1454.00
Stanford	717.00	715.00	1432.00
Total	716.40	708.60	1425.00

Table 14: Average SAT scores of selected universities E-E students attend.
Source: *Princeton Review Guide to the Best 331 Colleges*, 2001 Edition.

FINANCES

I received a phone call at home one April evening in 1997 from Carlos García's mother. Carlos was in my English and history classes and was now seriously weighing his college prospects. Of all his options, he preferred Yale. His mother, however, was skeptical, and she called me to express her confusion and anxiety. In Spanish, she described how excited Carlos had been since he received notice from Yale, but she also explained how she had no idea what any of this Yale stuff meant. Yale was a foreign concept to la señora García. Having been raised in the rural Mexican state of Durango and having had access to only an elementary education there, she had no point of reference from which to relate

to Carlos's situation. Most importantly, she explained, "how can we ever come up with \$36,000 per year to pay for college, when I only make about \$6,000 per year cleaning houses" (García, 1997).

Like Carlos, every other student and his or her parents have worried about how to pay for college. "Thirty-eight thousand dollars is a lot of money," said José Cruz just a few weeks before he graduated from high school in May of 2001, "but I'll place my faith in financial aid" (Cruz, 2001). José's family income is similar to Carlos'. His father earns about \$6,000 per year as a tile setter. "My father doesn't have a Social Security number, so he can't find too much work," José explains. Nevertheless, Carlos, José, and many others—more than 60% of the students in this study—have family incomes that are less than the cost to attend their schools in one year (Table 15). "Thank God for financial aid," quips José, "or else none of us would be able to go to these schools" (Cruz, 2001).

family income

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	below \$10,000	6	11.8	11.8	11.8
	\$10,000-\$19,999	12	23.5	23.5	35.3
	\$20,000-\$29,999	14	27.5	27.5	62.7
	\$30,000-\$39,999	2	3.9	3.9	66.7
	\$40,000-\$49,999	3	5.9	5.9	72.5
	\$50,000-\$59,000	6	11.8	11.8	84.3
	\$60,000-\$69,999	4	7.8	7.8	92.2
	\$70,000-\$79,000	3	5.9	5.9	98.0
	\$80,000-\$89,000	1	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	51	100.0	100.0	

Table 15: Family income levels of E-E students who attend elite universities

PARENT EDUCATIONAL LEVELS

When Myrta Ventura brought her grandmother into our history, we all learned a lesson in the meaning of education. In Spanish her grandmother recounted her grade school days at the North Edcouch Elementary School, the school for Mexican children in a segregated Edcouch. “I had little education,” she said in the oral history the class collected with her, “but I think that my years working in the fields have been a good education for me.” The fields, she

suggested, not only taught her the great lessons of life, but it was also a “sacred” and important place from which to learn (García, R., 2001).

Myrta’s grandmother did not come to class alone. Her daughter, Myrta’s mother, brought her. Myrta’s mother also remarked, “Wow, this is pretty advanced stuff,” regarding the video technology equipment in the lab. “I didn’t learn about this when I went to high school,” (Ventura, María, 2001). Myrta’s grandmother, her mother, and Myrta herself, as migrant farm workers, have an understanding of education being more than traditional formal schooling. Myrta wrote her personal statement for application on the lessons she learned from her “unbiased instructor...the land” (Ventura, Myrta 2001).

mother's education

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid elementary	13	25.5	25.5	25.5
high school	24	47.1	47.1	72.5
college graduate	14	27.5	27.5	100.0
Total	51	100.0	100.0	

Table 16: Mother’s education level

Like her mother and grandmother, Myrta also values real life experience as meaningful education. Mothers of the 51 students also acquired more formal education than the fathers. Twenty-eight percent of mothers earned college

degrees, compared to 21.6 % of fathers who earned university degrees. Forty-seven percent of mothers also earned high school diplomas, compared to 35.3% of fathers. And consistent with the lower levels of educational attainment, 43% of the fathers acquired only an elementary education, compared to 25.5% of the mothers (Tables 15 and 16). Mothers, as the data and literature suggest, play a critically important role in the education of young Mexican American women (Villenas, 1999).

father's education

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid elementary	22	43.1	43.1	43.1
high school	18	35.3	35.3	78.4
college grad	11	21.6	21.6	100.0
Total	51	100.0	100.0	

Table 17: Father’s education level

While parents’ formal educational levels can be quantified, it is much more difficult to quantify the value of Myrta’s grandmother’s education. She attended segregated schools in Edcouch in the 1930s, became part of the migrant labor stream in the ’50s, and shared a number of incredible stories when she taught class that day. “When we’re in Corrine, Utah, during the summers,” recalls Myrta, “about 24 of us live in one house...it’s a great time because we all depend on each other and help each other in any way we can” (Ventura, Myrta,

2001). This is how Myrta was raised, and according to their testimonies, it is how most of the other students were raised as well.

The story of these 51 youths is the story about building, utilizing, and extending the social capital of a rural agricultural community in south Texas. For many years our communities seemed isolated. “We know about the world out there, but only because of our travels as migrant farm workers,” said Edcouch-Elsa High School teacher Raúl Valdez (Valdez, 2002). Otherwise, Edcouch and Elsa are as isolated as any other rural towns in America. Through sophisticated and extended family networks, students in this community created a strong identity, a support system, and community values that they took with them wherever they went (Coleman, 1988; Reyes et al, 1999). The social infrastructure and capital was well established when I returned to Edcouch-Elsa to teach, even though the level of expectations was low. Inspiring my students to expect more out of themselves and working toward creating greater academic opportunities became plausible simply because of the vast social capital that had already been built.

I did have to make adjustments as a classroom and community-centered teacher. A culturally relevant curriculum based on place defined my teaching approach, and using story for instruction emerged as an important method (Perrone 1999, Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan 1988, Foster 1993, Guajardo 2002). Many students resist the place-based pedagogy and story focused method of

instruction, but they do so because traditional schooling has conditioned them to be rote learners. “Just give me book work, please,” said 15-year-old Michael Sepúlveda in my world history class recently. “It’s too hard to find or create stories” (Sepúlveda 2002). Using story for instruction requires that students search for stories—from their own lives, from their families, and from their communities. Story, students soon realize, is one of their most valuable possessions (Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995, 1998, Rice 1996, 2001, Delgado 1995, Bell 1992). As students and teachers begin to engage families and communities as laboratories for learning, the abundance of assets surfaces, as it has with our research and learning approach at Edcouch-Elsa High School (Ladson-Billings 1994, 1995; Guajardo, M., 2002; Perrone, 1999). Family stories, kinship networks, and other relationships begin to give shape to a substantial and rich social capital that inspires students, teachers, and community members alike. It creates a powerful intangible that has become a source of strength for this population of 51 students. This analysis is not only about 51 youths who gain acceptance to elite universities, but it is about 51 people and their families, their teachers, their community, and their stories.

SUMMING UP THE NUMBERS

If SAT scores, or low economic status were objective predictors of success in college, Edcouch-Elsa students would have dropped out of Ivy League schools

in large numbers. But they have not. And schools such as Brown, Yale, and Columbia would have stopped admitting our students, if they had not succeeded as they have. But they have not. The annual cost to attend an elite university in this country is \$38,000, yet 62.7% of the students' families have an income of under \$30,000 per year (see Table 15).

Why, then, have E-E students succeeded? According to the students themselves, the answer lies in their families, their communities, and in the support systems they have either stepped into, or created for themselves. "If we were to believe the Horatio Alger, pull yourself up by the bootstraps mentality of the rugged individual," says Ernesto Ayala, "then we'd be lying to ourselves...the fact is, we succeed because of each other, and because of our communities" (Ayala, 2002).

Chapter 7:

Analysis & Recommendations

“Common sense is not a single unique conception, identical in time and space. It is the ‘folklore’ of philosophy, and, like folklore, it takes countless different forms. Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is.”

Antonio Gramsci, from *An Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 1988

INTRODUCTION

The analytical framework guiding this study is a combination of common sense theory, grounded theory, culturally based pedagogy, critical theory, and an assets model. The numerous narratives of transformation presented in this document emerged because of a set of conditions established in the classroom and in the community where youths learn and live. Youths have spaces where they build relationships with adults, where they learn and practice skills, and where they take risks without fear of ridicule. Gramsci’s common sense theory accepts this context; it honors the stories of the masses as legitimate forms of expression;

and it values common folk who have ideas and are functional with those ideas as intellectuals. I see my students as burgeoning intellectuals too, and my students see their parents and the elders in the community as conveyors of wisdom, spirit, and life. These are perhaps the principal assets in our community: the people, the stories, and their spirit. The stories, the history, and the cultural characteristics of my students and their families also comprise valuable content and invite dynamic instructional approaches as part of a culturally relevant pedagogy. We understand the value of this pedagogy at the Llano Grande Center and utilize it to great effect. In short, we view our students, their families, and the community as treasures rather than liabilities.

While great things have happened at Edcouch-Elsa High School, not everything is ideal. In some classroom environments, the banking concept persists as the chief mode of instruction. The state test, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, which is the cornerstone of the state accountability system, places overwhelming pressures on superintendents, principals, and teachers to prepare students for the test. The widespread reality, particularly in poor schools such as Edcouch-Elsa, is that teachers teach to the test, and that every available dollar in the school's budget is allocated for test preparation. Some good things can be said about the state test. At a minimum, schools are held accountable for at least some degree of student learning. On the other hand, very little in this system of education focuses on posing questions about social, economic, or

political issues in the community. In this test-centered environment, teaching and learning for transformative purposes is not what public schools do. We challenge the current system through the work of the Llano Grande Center, and continue to develop a framework for participating in transformative education.

ANALYSIS

Common sense theory suggests a level of resistance to change by common people; Gramsci writes, “Common sense is crudely conservative and opposed to novelty” (Gramsci, 1988). We see the resistance to change in many of the narratives included in this study. Mrs. Ayala expressed an unwillingness to allow her children to venture too far, just as Belem’s parents did. Myrta chose to continue working the fields the summer after her first year at Brown, even though she had numerous opportunities for summer internships. Bill Foerster felt a deep dissonance when he saw a “Mexican” working in the bursar’s office during the late 1950s. These narratives describe a profound change occurring in the minds and emotions of the storytellers, but they also point to a desire to hold on to what is familiar. In each case, Gramsci’s notion of crude conservatism is informed by a particular survival sense and instinct of each of these storytellers. Mrs. Ayala had little idea of what Brenda or Ernesto would experience in a place far away from the security of family. Myrta’s fear of losing contact with family and her

unbiased teacher, the land, drove her back to the peach orchards, even with a year of Ivy League experience behind her. Bill Foerster could not imagine a Mexican handling a white man's money; it was not part of his experience growing up in the segregated Elsa of the 1940s and '50s. Survival and even resistance define this particular brand of conservatism opposed to novelty.

During the process of relationship building, the crude conservatism begins to rehabilitate and eventually morphs to a radically different level. After Mrs. Ayala built a trusting relationship with her children's teacher(s), and after gaining a new set of knowledge about life in a university far from home, she began to change. The passion she displayed resisting novelty in 1993, became a transformed energy that precipitated the transformation of others. Similarly, Bill Foerster once knew little about Mexican people, other than the "laborers Dad hired to dig a cistern" when he was a child (Foerster, W., 1998), but he has gotten to know them. Between 1997 and 2001, Foerster provided valuable leadership and counsel to our teachers and students at Edcouch-Elsa High School. He had life long relationships with Anglos in the local community, and negotiated access so that our research teams could interview a number of elder Anglo residents. Foerster assisted us, and he changed because of his experience as teacher, storyteller, and community asset. As researcher and mentor of the Llano Grande Center, Foerster's former crude conservatism today manifests itself as active lobbying to improve the lives of Mexican American youths.

In *Raising Silent Voices*, Trueba frames Vygotskian theories in the context of social interaction and learning. Therein, Trueba suggests that children learn best through social interactions within their zone of proximal development, or distance between their actual development and their level of potential. When schools do not create conditions for children to reach that distance, or when schools fail to facilitate those social interactions, children are placed at risk. If we believe Vygotsky's notion that children learn through interaction, and if schools do not provide the space for meaningful social intercourse, then children's failure "is not an individual failure." It is "a failure of the social system to provide the child with an opportunity for social intercourse" (Trueba, 1989). Not only children, but adults also learn best through social interaction; Mrs. Ayala and Bill Foerster are but two of the many cases that prove this. The Llano Grande Center's research agenda is grounded on the concept of social interaction. Oral histories, community seminars, the Spanish Immersion Institute, the adult-youth mentoring work and the daily operation, all are organized and arranged to maximize the practice of social interaction.

Through social interaction, youth researchers have surveyed the community and found, in this economically distressed community, the two greatest assets in the community are story and language. As we identified those assets, we have also capitalized on them to develop micro enterprises. On story, youths and teachers who work with the Llano Grande Center have gained

employment to conduct oral history workshops and digital storytelling trainings. They have also documented conferences in many parts of the country and twice in Europe. Four recent immigrant students from Mexico founded the Spanish Immersion Institute in 2000, and they continue to work the program into the year 2003. They expect to grow the program further when they graduate from college in a couple of years. In replacing deficit thinking with an assets-based approach to teaching, learning, and research, we have shifted the mode of thinking in the minds of many and have created learning and even economic opportunities. Whereas story as a mode of instruction was relatively absent from the curriculum in the early 1990s, today curriculum across Edcouch-Elsa schools encourages the exploration of every child's story, and oral history as a method of instruction has gained currency in a number of curricular designs.

Every campus in the Edcouch-Elsa school district performs at acceptable levels or above, according to the Texas Education Agency's methods of measurement, so there is clear measured student academic success. A greater indicator of achievement, in my view, centers on students' ability to achieve a level of cultural competence and their ability to read the world (Freire & Macedo). Ladson-Billings suggests that culturally relevant teaching meets the following criteria: "an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness" in students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Perhaps the most

salient example of the practice of this pedagogy is the teaching, learning, and research we conduct around the concept of story. Students gain cultural competence and a sociopolitical awareness (Ladson-Billings, 1995) by developing stories. Interviewing community elders allows students to deepen the historical, cultural, and social understanding of their community. Through this work, and through student work organizing public spirited conferences on a range of social, cultural, and economic issues, students also gain a sociopolitical and critical awareness of issues and life in their community. Ladson-Billings' research grounded in the practice of eight teachers is similar to the research we conduct, except we are the practicing teachers conducting research on ourselves as well as on the pedagogical process we undertake with our students and community. As both practitioner and researcher, I weave in and out of both roles. I live both roles, and am committed to both. Just as many of the students, teachers, and other educators who comprise the Llano Grande Center, I too am committed to the work and view it as an integral part of my life. We live this research. In essence, our work is theory in action; it is praxis, where young and old meet, and where conversation and story bring the spirit of people to life. It is where theory and practice merge.

Critical theory also guides the work of the Llano Grande Center, particularly as it relates to teaching, learning, and research for social change. Freire's challenge to the banking concept and subsequent recommendation to

employ a problem-posing approach to teaching and learning resonated especially clearly in a few classrooms at Edcouch-Elsa High School in the early 1990s. By 1995 when Carlos posed the question, “Were Mexicans around in 1776?” we responded by using Freire’s problem posing approach. Today, both Carlos and I can answer the question satisfactorily, as we are now teacher colleagues in local schools. We can respond to the question positively because we answer the broader question of how to create a pedagogy and instructional process that values the stories and experiences of our students. The oral history project, the creation of the Llano Grande Center, challenging low-income kids to think differently about themselves and their communities, and challenging an entire community to shift its way of thinking have all been strategies and methods that define the Llano Grande philosophy. We continue to build on this philosophy in a manner that is organic, and with the counsel and wisdom of what Gramsci termed the organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1988). This brand of education, grounded in place and fueled by the narratives and spirit of people, is informed by youths, traditional teachers, elders, and the community at large; it is, in essence, public education, and it is public education that creates social change.

THE MEXICAN INVASION

Richard Baker's *Los Dos Mundos: Rural Mexican Americans, Another America* (1995), reflects the realities of numerous communities across the country that have seen an influx of Latino people during the past few decades. Baker undertook the study because of a series of volatile events that occurred in an increasingly racially divided environment. Bitter, hostile, and racist behavior demonstrated by Anglo residents of rural Idaho communities against both the established and the recently arrived Mexican residents has created a two-tiered society. In this context, Mexican American children find great difficulty succeeding in the public schools. High drop out rates, high levels of crime, and high illiteracy rates describe the condition of the Mexican American community, according to most local media reports. On the other hand, Baker finds a culturally rich and united minority population that daily strives to create a better life for its children. Nevertheless, Baker suggests, "The essence of American colonialism can be seen in the failure of the Midwest schools to educate Mexican American students. The American ideology holds that everyone can achieve success through the public schools" (Baker, 1995). Mexican American children do not achieve it in Idaho, Baker argues, because the Anglo population is not willing to change to accommodate its new neighbors.

The story of rural Idaho is unfortunately the story occurring in too many places across this country where we find recent influxes of Mexican and/or Latino

immigrant groups. Since 1997, my students and I have presented in numerous conferences and in approximately 35 different communities in various parts of the United States. On most occasions, we are asked to assist communities such as the Idaho rural towns in Baker's book, as these communities attempt to understand the Mexican people in their town. We have seen this in Maine, New York, North Carolina, Georgia, Montana, Kansas, Idaho, North Dakota, and many other places where Mexican origin people have made recent arrivals. In most of these communities, Mexican American children are seen as problems, as if they arrive in schools with built-in deficits. School leaders typically view parents of these children as uncaring and generally unsupportive (Valencia, 1997, 2002).

We have learned many lessons through our work with South Texas youths and with building the Llano Grande Center. As we engage in conversations with educators, schools, and communities from other parts of the country, we approach those conversations in a manner similar to how we engage our students and community members in Edcouch and Elsa. As we cultivate the story of each child, as well as the stories of elders from the community, we heed the following guidelines that inform our work. The theoretical pieces that frame the guidelines include a rehabilitated form of Gramsci's common sense, Glaser's grounded theory, Freire's critical pedagogy, Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy, and McKnight's assets-based model.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Understanding History and Story

Our work begins with understanding history at different levels. We begin with personal history, and accomplish this by creating learning conditions where students and teachers share stories with one another. Ideally, teachers and students create a trusting environment through the process of story sharing. In this context, poignant and life-defining stories shared may be used for further development and growth opportunities. Oral history research offers a substantial opportunity for enriching the story development process. We conduct oral histories for multiple purposes: for the reconstruction of community history, community revitalization, but also to build skills such as research and interpersonal. Students gain a new awareness of themselves and their culture; and they gain a critical consciousness, if problem-posing approaches are properly managed.

Several years ago, 15-year-old Roxanne Martínez listened to don Isabel Gutiérrez's stories with great interest. "I've heard my mother mention don Isabel. She has said that he knew my great grandfather," said Roxanne, "and I'd like to ask him if he remembers him."

Roxanne and don Isabel found the occasion to talk about her great grandfather at length. At one point in the conversation, don Isabel made reference

to his friend's facial expressions, at which point Roxanne said to don Isabel that she did not know what her great grandfather looked like.

“There are no pictures of him,” she said.

Don Isabel then stared at Roxanne in bemusement and said, “Yo tengo un retrato de el en mi album” (I have a picture of him in my photo album) (Martínez, R., 1999).

When don Isabel returned to the school the following week, Roxanne saw her great grandfather for the first time in her life.

When young people understand history, they become more reflective about the forces that shape current society. When they understand their community history, they become better grounded in community life. Nevertheless, the most powerful history students can learn is their own personal and familial history. With an understanding of their own story, youths affirm their own lives and existence. Genishi and Dyshon write, “Stories help to make sense of, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experience: the past with the present, the fictional with the ‘real,’ the official with the unofficial, the personal with the professional, the canonical with the different or unexpected” (1994).

Students in rural Idaho schools would probably be more engaged in school if they studied themselves and explored their own stories, rather than pursuing a system of school that marginalizes them and pushes them to drop out (Baker,

1995). Cultivating and using story for learning and growth works in South Texas. Genishi and Dyson add to their explanation by writing, “Stories help us transform the present and shape the future for our students and ourselves” (1994). It takes political courage and principled leadership to implement such programming, especially in a community where recent immigrants are viewed as liabilities. “Instead,” writes Baker, Mexican American youth in rural Idaho “are destined for the secondary job market, their self-esteem shattered and their intelligence demeaned” (Baker, 1995).

(2) Finding What’s Good: Using an Assets-Based Approach

“It’s the same old story. Everyone looks for what’s wrong with us...,” said Amy Sánchez in a recent interview (2003). Growing up in South Texas, one becomes accustomed to “experts” from myriad fields of study visiting communities, particularly economically distressed rural areas, searching for problems. This kind of thinking, deficit thinking, also permeates analyses on school performance by placing blame on children who fail, “Rather than examining how schools and the political economy are structured to prevent students from learning optimally” (Valencia & Black, 2002). Failure then becomes an attribute of the children, their families and by extension, of the population group. Moreover, the group is characterized as unwilling to support

their children in school, or not caring about their children's well being. University of Texas School of Law Professor Lino Graglia has repeatedly asserted that Mexican American families show this characteristics of not caring as much as Anglos do about their children's education (Valencia & Black, 2002).

The reality is, however, that Mexican American parents do care about their children's education. Mrs. Ayala cares about her children. Mrs. García, Mrs. Layton, Mr. González, and every other parent and grandparent we have interviewed cares deeply about their children and about their performance in school. "A veces no voy a la escuela," says José Cruz's father, "pero es porque no les entiendo. Siempre hablan en inglés" (Sometimes I don't go to the school [for functions such as open house], but it's because I don't understand them. They always speak in English) (Cruz, J., 2002). The problem, according to Mr. Cruz, is not so much with him or with other parents, as much as with a school system that appears unfriendly and culturally disconnected from his own reality. Contrary to the deficit thinkers and the Graglias of the world, I contend that Mexican American families caring about their children and about their education is a glaring asset that schools do not quite understand how to cultivate. In my thirteen years of teaching, I do not recall parents of my students not caring about their children's performance in school. Every parent I know wants his or her child to do well. The preponderance of evidence included in this study

demonstrates that Mexican American parents and children in our towns care passionately about education.

The philosophy and work of the Llano Grande Center stand in direct contrast to deficit thinking. Children bring innumerable intelligences and qualities to school, and the responsibility of the educator and school is to (1) identify those assets and (2) develop a plan of action to build upon them. At Edcouch-Elsa High School, data collected through the Llano Grande oral history project, which is part of the broader teaching, learning, and research program yielded results that affected personal, school, and community change. Students heard life defining stories from elders; they learned interviewing and technical research skills; they gained a mature degree of cultural competence; and they became aware of the socio economic and political status in their community. In short, the oral history project informs the broader philosophy and pedagogy utilized by the Center which emphasizes the cultivation of one of the community's greatest assets—story. Every student has a story, but not every student understands that story. A pedagogy that emphasizes story as a method for teaching, learning, and research, is a pedagogy that cares for the lives of all children, but especially of children from historically marginalized groups (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002). Through story, every voice is lifted (Beykont, 2000) and students and community members emerge as authors of their own experience.

Beyond story as an asset, mining through cultural characteristics, or multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999) that students bring to school is essential. When Armando García first walked into my classroom in the fall of 2000, he looked like bad news. He wore tattoos and long hair, dressed in baggy pants, and appeared like the stereotypical gangster. Turned out he was a gangster, and had even been selling cocaine on campus the year before—all this he confided in me after he and I developed a trusting teacher student relationship. Armando was not very skilled academically, at least not in the three areas the state of Texas tests: reading, writing, and math.

One night, however, the Llano Grande Center organized a movie night for students at the high school, and Armando showed up. While the host teacher clumsily dabbled with the equipment, Armando noticed the teacher wrongly plugged an analog wire into a particular input jack.

“Mr. Rice,” Armando said, “I think you’re plugging the wrong wire in that input.”

“You think so,” responded David Rice, the teacher. “Why don’t you give me a hand with this? Maybe together we can get this projector rolling.”

Armando was indeed technologically savvy. That night “turned my life around,” Armando later claimed as other students conducted a life history recording with him (García, A., 2001). The next day, he walked into the Llano Grande Center and spent the next two years as researcher and subsequently as

founder and manager of a nascent student radio station at Edcouch-Elsa High School. In a two-year period, Armando changed from leader of a gang and dealer of cocaine, to founder and manager of a youth radio station. During that two year period, Armando ran a radio station, produced a grant proposal that won a grant from a national foundation, and passed the state test—albeit after three times trying—to graduate from Edcouch-Elsa High School. The teacher who welcomed Armando’s tech assistance during movie night identified Armando’s intelligence. Whereas we could have easily dismissed him as a troublemaker, we honored his intelligence and built upon that strength as we also worked on building a relationship with Armando. We looked for what was good about him, rather than searching for his deficits. Consequently, Armando generated his narrative of transformation.

In Middletown, Idaho, the rural community Baker studies, Anglo residents believe Mexicans are lazy and lack motivation. Baker suggests that Anglos “hold a set of beliefs that effectively serve to blame the victim” (Baker, 1995). It appears Gramsci’s common sense model applies to Idaho as well. A crude conservatism seems to prevail in the minds of Anglos in this community, much like the case of Mexican Americans in rural South Texas. Just as relationship building and storysharing mitigated the crude conservatism in the case of Mrs. Ayala or Bill Foerster, people in rural Idaho would do well to begin building relationships and sharing stories across racial lines and will begin to expose the

ontological blindspots of both groups. Using story as a pedagogical approach in Middletown may unleash an intense anger and bitterness between Anglos and Mexican, but the process may also present an opportunity for honest dialogue. Through the practical application of this kind of pedagogy, communities anywhere can find “the stories to be healing” (Vascellaro & Genishi, 1994).

(3) The Usefulness of Critical Theory

Story as an instructional strategy presents numerous possibilities for important social change. The Edcouch-Elsa High School Walkout of 1968 produced one of the most volatile racial environments in the history of this rural area. In 1998, the Llano Grande Center hosted a 30 year retrospective to reflect upon the 1968. As part of that process, students and teachers conducted numerous oral histories and posed tough questions focused on issues of race, class, and gender. A critical theory framework guided the research, and the data showed an interesting discovery that there had not been a public conversation regarding the walkout in 30 years. “It’s a black eye in the history of the community,” suggested Niles Anderson. On the other hand, Eddie González countered by saying the walkout was the best thing to ever happen in the community. Though deeply held beliefs persisted, people with differences for the first time spoke openly about the walkout. The narrative and counter narrative nature of people’s recollections points to a contentious time in history. Through the research process and the culminating conference in November 1998, the

community experienced a healing process, as participants of the walkout shared their stories.

Teachers and students initiated the oral history project on the walkout because of a need to understand community race relations through a historical perspective. We also conducted a larger research project on the history of schools, as told through the people's narratives; the data presented in chapter 4 is part of that study. In short, a quest to understand why things are the way they are guides our research questions, methods, and responses. Why are Edcouch-Elsa schools among the poorest in the state? Why are the majority of residents in our community of Mexican origin? Why do we have a long history of migrant farm workers in our community? These problem-posing questions prompt one critical issue. Do relationships exist within the school or community environments where students, teachers, and community members from across ethnic lines come together to find out about themselves? If not, then there is much work to be done, as a prerequisite to transformative teaching and learning. Building the relationships, nevertheless, is essential. It is, I believe, a first step in the transformation of people.

Research is a tricky proposition. In the absence of trusting relationships between researchers and their subjects, subjects often feel violated. We learned this lesson painfully well when a community elder ran us off his land because he felt we wanted to simply report his misery to the world. We explained otherwise,

visited him on several occasions, and he finally granted us an interview. But we learned our lesson. We co-research with community members, in fact, as we attempt to democratize skill building and gain a mutual understanding of what research means. We approach research cautiously. Smith suggests that many indigenous communities view the concept of research as violent one. “Research,” she writes, “is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (2002). We approach the research enterprise with an awareness of power dynamics and continuously attempt to neutralize them. The neutralizing of power is at the core of our work.

REFLECTION

Every school in the country has caring teachers, every community has caring parents, and every school has principals and other leaders who care. Very few schools, however, function in a deliberate and intentional way for liberating children from the shackles of oppression and marginalization. In an era when public schools are measured by test scores and other scientific methods, the value of a child’s story, or the prospect of improving community, is not part of how children or schools are measured. By contrast, critical pedagogy emphasizes teaching and learning processes for changing and improving the children’s lives. This transformative educational process also seeks to transform communities.

The Llano Grande Center's approach is consistent with the principles of critical pedagogy, and it is inherently political.

Beyond the political, the work we have done during the past 13 years has been deeply transformational. Thirty years after Robert Rodríguez's professor berated him for being from Edcouch, the President of the University of Texas Pan American (UTPA) invited five of Rodríguez's students to lunch. Each of them had gained admission into Columbia University in New York City, and President Nevarez was interested in recruiting them to UTPA. How perceptions changed in those three decades.

Beyond those five students, 75 other E-E graduates have gained admission into Ivy League universities since 1993. In 1999, *Hispanic Magazine* named Edcouch-Elsa High School one of the top five schools in the country for achieving with Hispanic students, what few other schools have achieved (Hispanic, 1999). National media outlets such as *People Magazine*, *Parade*, and *People en Español*, the Associated Press, CNN, Univision, and the NBC Nightly News have featured the work of the Llano Grande Center. In the last decade, we have broken the cycle of underachievement and low expectations in the schools, and have created a sense of hope for youth, parents, and the community at large (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Guajardo, M., 2002; Trueba, 1999; Vygotsky, 1962). One recent publication suggested wrote that the work of the Llano Grande

Center is “a world-changing micro-event...powerful story of the changing of the world on the most local of levels” (Seale & Partheymuller, 2000).

Unfortunately, the media and others view our story as “unbelievable,” or “extraordinary.” My response and the response of my Llano Grande colleagues are typically to challenge those who believe this is an extraordinary experience. “What do you mean, this is extraordinary?” is our usual retort. “You believe it is extraordinary because you don’t believe we are capable of doing this. Well, we are, and the problem here is not that we are extraordinary but that you simply don’t believe we are capable.” That usually ruffles some feathers. The social reality is, however, that many in the mainstream see us as the “other”; and the “other” (Said, 1979) is not supposed to be practicing a pedagogy that transforms students and communities. We feel we have begun to understand the decolonization process (Guajardo, M., 2002; Smith, 2002).

Middle America, of course, is enamored with the Ivy League story, the story of the poor Mexican American students from poor rural schools along the border who gain admission into the most exclusive universities in the world. Seeing our story as the Ivy League thing is facile and misses the point that this work is about developing and maintaining a way of life. It is about a way of life based on understanding oneself, through an intense examination of one’s own narrative, and through the examination of other people’s narratives. All this becomes part of a community development enterprise where the community

becomes the classroom, and the definitions of teacher, student, and learner are shared. This is democracy in action, at its most basic level, in the community, in people's homes, and in the schools. This is public education in a Mexican American community in South Texas.

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Vita

Francisco Javier Guajardo was born in Rio Bravo, Tamaulipas, to Julia Cantú and José Angel Guajardo on September 15, 1964. He came to Texas with his family on the last day of 1968, was raised in the rural border community of Elsa, Texas, and attended Edcouch-Elsa schools. After graduating from Edcouch-Elsa High School in 1983, he enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, from which he took a B.A. degree in English in 1987 and an M.A. degree in History in 1989. He returned to his hometown to teach in 1990 and has remained at Edcouch-Elsa High School as classroom teacher and/or director of the Llano Grande Center. He currently holds a Lecturer position in the College of Education at the University of Texas Pan American. He is married to Yvonne Cárdenas, and they have three children: Daniel, 13; Andrea, 12; and Macario, 9.

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