TRANSFORMING ANTHROPOLOGY
JOURNAL *of the* ASSOCIATION *of* BLACK ANTHROPOLOGISTS

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Dreaming in Context: Micro- and Structural Transformations in an Age of Standardized Testing

A PARTNERSHIPS INSTITUTE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Consider academics who are committed to learning, teaching, and ongoing interaction with communities beyond the university, and who are simultaneously not satisfied with the learning opportunities for children in their community schools. What roles might they play in their local community? One answer, made compelling by contemporary models in practice, involves institution building—specifically, the co-construction and operation of critically engaged, action-oriented research groups to address challenges facing students, families, and schools. Examples include CREATE at The University of California at San Diego (Mehan 2008), The Cesar E. Chavez Institute at San Francisco State (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008), The Llano Grande Center for Research and Development (Guajardo *et al.* 2008), and the Lastinger Center for Learning at the University of Florida. All interweave work in academia, schools, and communities to collaboratively impact students; all strive for the transformation of schools and neighborhoods into communities of learning that serve all students well, regardless of racial, socio-economic or regional background. The Institute for Community, University, and School Partnerships (ICUSP) was founded in 2006 with similar hopes for educational and community transformation. We connect graduate teaching, academic research, and service in our communities to develop, implement, and support the research programs and practices that positively impact students.

This *reflective essay* considers the development, project work, and theoretical interventions that characterize the young institute. It is authored from the standpoints of two engaged researchers at the institute (the faculty member who serves as the institute executive director and a former graduate student who served as one of the institute's project directors).Both were agents of a university institution, yet also working within the larger structures of K-12 public schooling.[1] Following these introductory remarks, we discuss the founding philosophy of the institute. Partnerships are central to our work, and so we specifically address both theory and praxis of collaboratively engaging local communities. We think of our project work and community engagement in Freirian and Gramscian influenced terms of the move from theory to praxis. Next, we provide the story of one of our recent projects—a school-wide student advisory that was piloted on a low-performing middle school campus. We focus on our efforts to navigate the conflict between the systemic constraints of testing accountability on one hand and our agenda of transformative work on the other. This section illuminates the challenges often attendant with work in community and schools—especially that **related to working within** and yet hoping to alter prevailing societal and bureaucratic structures. Finally, the discussion section that follows the case study is a dialogue between the authors about the theoretical implications of the challenges we face. We introduce the idea of *micro- and structural transformations* as a way to further think about the intended outcomes of community engagement and partnerships. As we focus on our distinct notions of transformative work in education contexts, we add nuance to a theoretical frame that distinguishes between reformist and insurgent actions that amount to *contextual interventions*, *structural interventions*, or that lead to *structural transformations*. This frame was introduced by anthropologist Ted Gordon and further developed in other ICUSP publications (Foster 2010; Kraehe et al. 2010).

In our closing, we don't initially agree upon what constitutes transformative work yet work through the tensions between our conceptions to produce a theorization that captures a range of emancipatory possibilities (Freire 1970) that accompany action-oriented scholarly work in schools and communities. We describe the thoughts, work, and actions of actors asserting their humanity amidst oppressive, dehumanizing or demeaning circumstances as either *contextual*

Transforming Anthropology, Vol. 21, Number 2, pp. 122–134, ISSN 1051-0559, electronic ISSN 1548-7466.
 DOI: 10.1111/traa.12016.

interventions (which produce the opportunity for what we call *micro-transformations*), or *structural interventions* (which can lead to what we call *structural transformations*). We hope that our dialog, the new terminology, and the additional layer of nuance that we bring to increasingly familiar terms of "resistance" and "transformation" will inspire others, especially other activist researchers, to interrogate their own notions about transformative work and to proceed with a clearer sense of the limits and possibilities attendant with community and school engagement.

Theorizing Critically Engaged Partnerships

The creation of ICUSP was informed by the aspiration to organic intellectual life (Gramsci 1971), alongside a desire to be dialogic and collaborative (Freire 1970). We draw on local funds of knowledge (González et al. 2005) and cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) to produce culturally and contextually relevant programs and practices (Ladson-Billings 1994) that facilitate positive student outcomes and help students see themselves and live as knowers and doers with rich backgrounds to build upon. The institute was founded by Foster and several of his students with five priorities:

1. Partner with schools and communities to develop and implement programs that facilitate student development and achievement and that enhance college and career readiness.
2. Support the development and efficacy of youth-serving, nonprofit organizations.
3. Facilitate intellectual exchanges by connecting faculty experts to local schools and bringing practitioner experts to the university.
4. Initiate and conduct community-resonant, culturally anchored research projects related to student engagement and achievement.
5. Support the intellectual development and funding of graduate students who are interested in the social and cultural dimensions of education.

For participants in ICUSP work, organic intellectual life is informed both by experiences in local settings, including our experiences as teachers, parents, activists, and community members, as well as by time spent in traditional academic settings, such as lectures, seminars, and conferences. The tension we experience is that articulated by Gramsci and Freire, where too few enjoy the privileges of the academic intellectual, who has more time than others to engage in reflective practice, consider scholarly texts, and enter dialogue with others to produce analyses of circumstances and structures. With our understandings about structural inequalities—where class, region, language, and race play underlying roles—we often experience dissonance as we engage segments of our communities and schools. The dissonance occurs as we encounter pervasive deficit thinking and practices in schools (Valencia 1997). In community conversations, and when working with students, teachers, administrators, and others, we draw not only upon antiracist, anticlassist ideas that are expressed within the academy and that thrive therein but also upon local community-based funds of knowledge. Community-based ideas frequently articulate with antiracist or anticlassist thought while reflecting greater concern for the negotiations of life's daily realities. The dynamism, resilience, and creativity within struggling communities constitute cultural wealth that often go unrecognized and untapped when school, district, or state-led "parent trainings" or "student behavioral supports" position students and families as deficient. Thus, we experience a potentially productive liminality where our ideas, plans, and actions are (we hope) informed from the best of what the academy offers as well as by the funds of knowledge of local communities.

Consistent with Freire's concept of dialogic pedagogy (1970), we experience greatest success in helping to address the challenges faced by students and communities when we ground our thoughts and actions in the interplay among experience, dialogue, analysis, and action. Whether building student leadership groups or teacher teams, working in coalitions to address a set of identified challenges, or ensuring that institute staff meetings are open and that community friends attend and contribute, the cycle and structured space—for dialog, emergent consensus, planning, action, and renewed consideration—helps ensure the contextual relevance of the ideas and practices that emerge. When ICUSP is invited into a space, we do not enter as problem-solving experts, but rather as co-imaginers of possibility and co-constructors of reality. We have knowledge and skills that we bring to bear, but we are also learners whose training is oriented in part toward helping to identify, name, and bring to bear the strengths and skills that exist in the communities in which we are participants or into which we are invited. Instances where we have experienced success (and even instances where we have faced formidable challenges) in bridging community knowledge with academic theorizing are captured in other ICUSP publications, most notably in Kraehe et al. 2010.

Finally, in all of our work we seek transformation. We are dissatisfied with the level of opportunity typically afforded to marginalized and underserved students (Anyon 1981; Kozol 2006). Our dissatisfaction is informed by low college going rates and extremely high incarceration rates for Black and Latino men (Mauer 2006), high numbers of Latinos and African Americans who do not receive the support necessary for them to graduate from high school, and limited academic opportunity for economically disadvantaged students and students of color (Lewis *et al.* 2008)—especially in terms of access to advanced coursework and to effective, experienced teachers (Ford 1998). The coauthors examine the sometimes unwieldy outcomes of the transformation(s) that we seek. We note a lack of precision in the scholarly literature around the idea of transformation. In the closing section, we seek to sharpen our understanding of transformation to more precisely account for what constitutes transformative acts and transformation.

Praxis of Critically Engaged Partnerships

ICUSP—which is comprised of one university faculty member, nonstudent staff that are shared with other community engaged and academic units on campus, two to six graduate students annually, and several dozen facilitator and volunteers—serves students and schools in the greater city area. Project work is constructed in collaboration with community partners and led internally by advanced graduate students. As the executive director and graduate student staff are engaged in community in a variety of ways (e.g. parents, civic organization members, volunteers, churchgoers, neighbors of others with children), individuals or groups approach us to explore collaborative possibilities or simply to seek additional perspective on issues they face. Individuals we work with may be parents, leaders of local nonprofit or civic organizations, teachers, or school leaders. Sometimes it is difficult to say who initiated conversations leading to an eventual project as we are often operating in the same spaces, noticing the same problems, or facing similar dilemmas. Projects organically emerge in instances where, through conversation and meeting, we discover opportunities for collaborative solutions.

Challenges that projects address may include disengaged students, lack of enriching after-school or summer opportunities for students, or parent dissatisfaction with teachers or their schools. They may also address under- or overrepresentation of students from one group or another in remedial or advanced programs as well as in disciplinary settings like ISS (in school suspension) or ALCs (Alternative Learning Centers for students who no longer fit in their traditional district schools). Because projects are community-needs responsive and operate in fluid contexts (e.g. shifting school personnel and policies, high student mobility rates), projects are ultimately defined as much by ongoing dialog, complexity, and challenge as they are by narrowly and initially conceived project goals.

Projects that emerge may include student support groups, summer camps, professional development workshops, or reports recommending revised classroom, school, or district policies and practices. In the case of any project that we engage, we seek partnership in the establishment of spaces of "authentic caring" as called for by Angela Valenzuela (1999). And yet even in the context of partnership we routinely face structural challenges working with highly bureaucratic, ironically ineffective technocracies. We also experience the discomforting reality of achieving incremental gains when full structural transformation appears in order.

The area the institute most often serves is east of the interstate highway that divides the city, and includes considerable socio-economic and ethnic diversity. A disproportionate number of students and families are marginalized by local and state socio-economic and political realities, and the area is home to the largest concentration of the less affluent residents of the region.[2] The fact that most institute staff have lived there—including the authors of this article—introduces an element of synchronicity. We have an interest in working with historically marginalized students but are also invited to do so by friends, neighbors, teachers, school leaders, and other community members.

The vision, activities, and operations of the institute reflect the academic training of an educational anthropologist, Foster, and his students in the Cultural Studies in Education program at The University of Texas at Austin. Foster and the graduate students are not only practitioners implementing programs, but they also use anthropological methods to inform their approaches, gather data, and reflect. For instance, for the project that is addressed in the case study section of this article, Kasun kept regular fieldnotes (Emerson et al. 1995) detailing her participant-observation (Spradley 1980) at the middle school. She also participated in reflective journaling (Saldaña 2009) where she

examined her own positioning as a researcher/practitioner and regularly engaged collegial dialog with the other ICUSP project directors—advanced doctoral students who were also advanced education practitioners with similar anthropological orientations as a result of their training in the Cultural Studies Program. At the same time, our work is grounded in the lived realities, experiences, and hopes of local students, families, teachers, and administrators. We have experienced considerable success in our program areas[3] but have also occasionally stumbled, become frustrated in the face of structural impediments, or have failed to achieve outcomes that, we had hoped, would come to pass. Accordingly, this article eschews "research as cheerleading" (Cuban 1988; Ravitch 2010; Weiner 2003) as we next describe and work through an example of the challenges we face working in school contexts. In the following section, we discuss a schoolwide advisory program that was initiated at the request of the principal of a low-performing middle school.

The advisory program story includes facets that are familiar to those working in schools today. Most specifically, it acknowledges the constraints attendant with running a program within the context of high stakes testing on a low-performing school campus. At the same time, the story remains important and timely because, with the reelection of President Obama and despite rhetoric to the contrary, state and federal education policy remains firmly oriented toward curriculum standardization, and school accountability to the outcomes of high-stakes testing. We feel that it is important to consistently bear witness to the challenge and reality of program building in schools whose communities are under tremendous stress and pressure from many angles, including the socio-economic (e.g. lack of healthcare and unemployment), the legal (e.g. families under constant threat of dissolution because of parents' residency status), as well as "educational" (e.g. state-driven testing systems that threaten to punish individual students and close entire schools). Second, our ongoing work in schools provides the basis for the theories and models that we develop to more effectively strategize, plan, and implement our work. Third, we believe that community-engaged scholarship holds great potential for positively impacting schools and communities. As such, examples of how our programs operate, the challenges routinely faced and how programs are adapted, provide an important contribution to the literature of educational research and action.

The campus upon which we were invited to work had been designated "Academically Unacceptable" by the State of Texas as a result of low test scores, and this was only one year after the school opened its doors. Over the course of the following school year, we experienced the reality that in schools characterized by low-test scores administrators' responses to testing often severely limit the range of possibility for teaching, learning, and community building. As has been noted elsewhere, the focus on testing led to the displacement of effective teaching and school activities in favor of narrow, decontextualized, alienating, and ultimately ineffective test preparation practices (Au 2009; Nichols and Berliner 2007). As our work focused on constructing and implementing culturally relevant instruction (Ladson-Billings 1995), including responding to the contextual reality of students' lives, experiences, and concerns, the focus on the external imposition of "the test" severely undermined our work.

A CASE STUDY IN COMPLICATIONS (A FAMILIAR NARRATIVE)

The southwest sun begins to relent in late August; moving from triple digit temperatures into the nineties. The slightly cooler air lends itself to the promise of growth through education as a new academic year begins. The executive director, graduate student project directors, and community facilitators are excited about the work we hope to accomplish in partnerships with local schools. We share visions of the youth we work with leading seminars for other youth in the community, earning scholarships, creating moving works of art, engaging structures of power with their own voices, and developing clearer purpose through their work. By the end of the school year, we will have experienced success across many measures. These include students' expressions of enjoyment and heightened aspirations, another year of near 100% college going rate among the high school seniors in our programs, and several tangible products of engaged and project based work. Student work will include a short film produced by 6th graders, artwork, and a performance by middle and high school students for their parents following a summer camp dedicated to empowerment through the arts.

Yet, even as we enter educational spaces with a strong sense of what we hope to do, a call to do it from the community, a clear plan of how to go about the work collaboratively, and by the end, some measures of success, we nonetheless find that

governing structures often undermine the work, put it to alternative uses (especially regulatory compliance to state mandates), or at the very least complicate it. In the schools where we work, school personnel are subject to regular surveillance and disciplined when they do not comply with state and federal mandated approaches to the delivery of instruction. As a result, school staff increasingly comply with, and eventually even embody, teaching and governance styles that are consistent with the apparent desires of the state (Foucault 1977) for drill-oriented delivery of agreed-upon pieces of information (equated with knowledge) and agreed upon approaches to working with those pieces of information (equated with the idea of skill), including the five paragraph essay, multiple choice questions, and worksheets.

School-wide advisory program—Efforts toward transformation … and setbacks

In ICUSP's first school-wide venture, we developed a twice weekly advisory class at Ron Rodriguez Middle School (pseudonym), a Title I school of 630 students, almost all of whom are some combination of Latino and/or African American.[4,5] We were aware of the complications of working in a U.S. school, from lived experiences as a former K-12 teacher and as educational researchers.

U.S. schools are complicated microcosms of life. Prior to beginning our program, and based on preliminary meetings with administrators, students, and staff, it was clear that the school reflected many of the issues described in educational anthropology, especially the work conducted in historically marginalized communities. There was clearly a mismatch between the cultural backgrounds of the teachers and those of the students who attended the school (Lewis 2005). Students' racial identities and community resources were largely negated by the curriculum and daily instruction (Anyon 1997; Fordham 1996; Lee 2005; Valenzuela 1999). Similar to Ladson-Billings's *Dreamkeepers* (1994), there were a handful of teachers who had a heightened sensitivity to the students' marginalized identities and worked to transgress the hegemonic curriculum that was otherwise imposed on their students. These teachers were recruited to work as part of the team who helped develop the advisory curriculum.

The advisory curriculum was responsive to the school context and built around regular feedback from stakeholders including students, staff, families and faculty. The project director wrote biweekly lesson plans based on the stakeholder's feedback, worked in additional feedback from stakeholders, and distributed them, along with accompanying materials, to all advisory teachers. Lessons and activities ranged from interrogating power and race during the historic 2008 presidential elections, to discussions about future aspirations, to door decorating contests using college-based themes. Like most educational objectives, we cannot fully know how much the objectives were achieved (Eisner 2004), nor can we know how much additional thinking this could have spurred among the student and faculty participants. We hope these plans helped plant seeds that may have taken root at during advisory or in other times during or outside the regular school-day. As administrators recognized that they were not likely to meet the state testing accountability standards, the advisory program, and its lesson and activities were increasingly compromised. At first a few sessions per month were trimmed, and then the entire program was nearly cut out of the weekly schedule. This happened despite the protests of several teachers who saw benefits for their students. One assistant principal apologized to the project director, "I don't know why the principal thinks we have to do so much prep; I've never seen it this bad anywhere." We describe this progression below.

Upon a staff request for additional school-wide competitions among advisory classes, we wove academic writing in around the annual Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. Over the two days before the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, students were to first reflect upon Dr. King's individual and community work and imagine how they could fight for civil rights. They would also write a collective group poem based upon the famous "I have a dream" speech. After having been planned and scheduled, however, the poetry would have to wait until after the holiday had passed, thus rendering it impossible to implement the plans in a timely manner. The delay occurred because the school leadership, under surveillance and scrutiny from district and state monitors, had decided that on one of the assigned advisory class days, their students needed to spend a day in a manifestation of test preparation designated as "[state-mandated test] Camp." In lieu of writing collective poems the day after they had considered King's radical work as a community organizer and activist and how they might participate in similar work, they would spend the day doing practice tests. Frustrated teachers who regularly participated in planning advisory sessions complained

about the switch and the interruption in routine to do an activity whose pedagogical value they questioned, but they lacked the authority to change the circumstances. A school counselor who met regularly with the planning team commented, "So many of my higher needs kids really love advisory; they need this space, but the tests are somehow more important." In a midyear focus group session, several students echoed this sentiment, many of them agreeing that advisory was the only classroom space during the day where they could "be themselves." Those spaces where students could "be themselves" are possible points of entry for transformation, both for the individual, where change usually starts, and for the greater society.

The next advisory session was the day after President Obama's historic inauguration. The planning team had wanted to spend both days of the advisory reflecting on the historic moment but sacrificed one of the days in order to reclaim the poetry writing around the "I have a dream" theme. We did this because we feared that pushing the poetry competition even further back would be too disjointed from the Martin Luther King holiday. The plan was already 11 days beyond his holiday and 14 days beyond the first advisory time lesson about his life. As a result, when a school full of students of color and mixed racial background could have spent two days examining the newly inaugurated president's call to service for the country and his historic inauguration speech, they were only able to spend one.

What were the results? Students were shortchanged an advisory session about the historic election during the height of their collective excitement about a president who, like so many of them have said they hope to do, beat the odds of racism in the United States to achieve a seemingly impossible dream. Additionally, the return to the Martin Luther King, Jr. lesson plan was disjointed and produced a problematic curricular transition. "How can these plans have any positive impact if we can't deliver them appropriately?" complained one guidance counselor and school-wide advocate of the program. While the project director helped facilitate the writing of one of the collective poems and marveled at the depth of the students' dreams as they articulated them in a polyphonous voice, she wondered if it wouldn't have been better for them to have written the poem before the holiday so that we could announce the winners the week of Martin Luther King Jr.'s holiday as we had planned. Ironically, two of the collective poems written by students voiced the dream that state mandated testing would one day be abolished, specifically including, "I have a dream that there will be no more TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] testing."[6] As the testing season approached, more and more lesson plans were delayed, co-opted for test preparation, displaced, and dismissed altogether.

What would drive a thoughtful principal, who had in meetings the previous August emphasized the need for strong relationships among students and staff, to deviate from a curriculum that her own staff was helping create, in response to the needs the community had identified? The answer seems to lie partly in labeling. The previous year, before the current principal had been hired, the school had been designated "Academically Unacceptable" by the state education agency. This label is the lowest of all possible designations in the system and placed upon schools with test scores that do not rise above certain testing thresholds. The label triggers heightened district and state monitoring as well as interventions in the school's daily functioning. As testing crept closer, this particular school mirrored the activities of so many other public schools across the state; it shifted into what has been called "[test] camp" (and oftentimes even "[test] boot camp") mode (Heinauer 2009). In the case of Rodriguez Middle School, the stakes were high, because if scores did not improve sufficiently within a few years the entire school will be "reconstituted"—the current leadership and staff replaced and the students dispersed to other schools.[7]

"Collateral Damage"

Nichols and Berliner (2007) have referred to the unintended consequences of this punitive accountability system as "collateral damage." Our project, and that of social service providers on campus, appeared to become part of that collateral damage. Our program wove together relationship building, academic language, and higher level thinking skills, but after half a year, was in danger.

In late January, when it became apparent that our program was being dramatically curtailed, we met with the principal to share our concern that practices that were successfully engaging students in learning, addressing their community-grounded interests and concerns, and building productive relationships between teachers and students were compromised in the name of testing preparation. The principal struggled during the meeting as she attempted to convey the immense pressure she felt

to turn around the school's test scores in order to reverse the threatening "academically unacceptable" label they lived with (and the consequent repercussions of high levels of district and state oversight). At one point, she turned her computer monitor toward us to demonstrate a recently purchased interactive software program that she seemed to celebrate. The students in school, and even at home, could practice taking sample test questions and play a five-second video game after each correctly answered test question. We questioned how this was a practice about which children might be excited, but, comparing it to much of the other "camp" work we had observed, we could see why students might prefer it to worksheets and more paper-and-pencil practice tests, which often included highly decontextualized sample exercises ranging from expensive vacations to math problems grounded in examples that were incongruous with student's cultural experiences or materials conditions.

Despite our frustration about the testing regime the principal advocated (and yet sympathizing with her difficult predicament), by the end of the meeting we agreed we could support the school's efforts by allowing advisory activities to include testing preparation strategies. We hoped we could still maintain the community building we observed in the advisory sessions—at least advisory could remain a somewhat "different" space from the regular classroom. Nonetheless, because of complicated testing regime schedules where entire grade levels of students participated in test camps for weeks at a time, our program could no longer function within the ever-shifting schedule that teachers regularly complained about, noting that they could be neither effective in their subject areas of expertise nor in the testing preparation regime. The program was not officially canceled, but Foster, the institute director, alerted district officials that: (1) while we understood and respected the interests and concerns of the principal and the education agency monitors and had altered our programs as much as possible to accommodate testing concerns, (2) the program had been so frequently and fundamentally altered that we were concerned that the anticipated program outcomes had been compromised because the program itself had been so compromised.

During test and test preparation season (i.e. the second half of the school year) the campus shifted fully into test prep mode. In a two-month calendar distributed to staff during the height of testing preparation, 7 of 40 academic days were labeled as "testing shutdown" on the campus. This limited or effectively killed several programs and initiatives, and dramatically altered daily instruction. On "shutdown" days, students spent the day taking real and practice tests. All decorative and potentially pedagogical materials in the classrooms were covered over with large swaths of butcher paper, and teachers were stationed like sentinels throughout the building so that no space would go visually unattended during the testing and that so that no testing "irregularities" would occur. The physical positioning of teachers—whether they wanted to participate in the careful observation of hallways or not—looked much like what Foucault described as the practice of so many modern institutions—panopticonic surveillance (Foster 2003; Foucault 1977).

Ultimately, our program was suspended for three months in order to accommodate the rigorous testing preparation schedule. The advisory program was not the only "collateral damage." Field trips were postponed or canceled, and students who had not performed well on practice tests were not permitted to attend those that did take place. Counselors paid by external agencies to work fulltime on the campus could do very little of their regular work, as teachers did not want to sacrifice time from the practice sessions. Schedules changed so radically and frequently in order to accommodate camps that counselors and other support staff and providers could not perform their work. A counselor from an external agency who had excellent rapport with the students most at-risk of failure explained, "I can no longer provide my services nor justify my hours on this campus. I have to return to my base office." In the last several weeks of school, she seldom occupied her campus office and instead focused her efforts elsewhere in the school district and in the nonprofit organization for which she worked. Meanwhile, teachers were largely unable to move forward with their curriculum but rather were stuck in a loop of repetition of that which would be most likely to appear on the tests.

The irony of the collateral damage is at least two-fold. First, thoughtfully established supports for the students in greatest need are often the same supports that are uprooted and undone in the name of the "greater good"—getting the school community to an "acceptable" rating. For instance, a student with a healthy relationship with a counselor who was helping her understand her gifts as a speaker, writer, and thinker was pulled away from that relationship and into a larger and

newly configured classroom to complete practice tests and worksheets. Second, program displacement favoring test preparation was not grounded in any theory or research of effective instruction, but rather, brought to life Jean Anyon's classic finding that marginalized students are more often forced to endure ineffective teaching practices that would not be imposed upon students from communities with greater social and economic capital (Anyon 1981). Practices most immediately, narrowly, and directly tailored to test improvement have a common-sense appeal, even where there is no solid research base to demonstrate that the activities improve scores. To the contrary, there are many indications that the activities are not enjoyable and in fact are painful for most if not all participants, including staff and administrators.

Challenges do not come simply from a difficult principal, teacher, counselor or student, but rather from external structures of power imposed upon the school community and that come to dominate school life. The schools where we work often find the administrators' and teachers' efforts—and subsequently our efforts—co-opted by the need to achieve test scores above an arbitrary threshold. The federal accountability system mandated through the 2001 No Child Left Behind federal legislation has consolidated a superstructure (Williams 1977), the power of which is increasingly derived from the punitive side of the accountability system. Previously, historically marginalized students, like the ones we attempt to serve, suffered because of the constraints of hegemonic discourses and practices surrounding low expectations, race, and class (Foley 1997; Valencia 1997). A new layer of constraints began to play against our work in the form of school testing. Ironically, where our efforts are enlisted by principals and community members to help students engage with schooling and develop interpersonal skills that will help them achieve success in schools, our work is often later distorted to accommodate the immediate needs of improving test scores. School staff know that if they do not perform on the tests, they risk being shut down, to the detriment of the staff and, more damaging still, to the communities around the schools. We find ourselves frustrated often, for instance when administrators attempt to retool programs toward test preparation, when students are pulled from field trips or in-school activities so that they can attend test prep sessions, or any of the many times we observed students in monotonous and uninspiring test-preparation work that provides little opportunity for higher-level thinking. We are further disheartened by the testing activities and materials, which were usually further from culturally responsive curriculum than even the normal prescribed curriculum and instructional practices. However, it would be short-sighted to place this set of circumstances solely at the feet of principals and teachers; schools are under the constant threat of surveillance, loss of autonomy, and eventual closure if test scores do not measure up.

DISCUSSION

We opened this reflection with an acknowledgement of our commitment to action-oriented work in schools and communities, and of our deep dissatisfaction with the levels of service to students. As we revisit the initial goals of ICUSP's community work and the example of our work at Rodriguez Middle School, we now ask: "Does our work meaningfully contribute to the changes that we and our partners seek?" To answer, we attempt to clarify our understanding of transformation and transformative work. We examine several ideas about transformation and how those infuse our standpoints.

Using a critical lens to approach U.S. educational experiences that we find limiting, if not damaging, to so many marginalized students, we would like our work in the community, including the research we do, to be transformative. We want to imagine that we can effectively engage various communities with critical lenses, linguistic skills, and sensitivities to the varying and valuable sources of cultural wealth (Yosso 2005). On several levels, we believe our work has contributed to transformation. In this section, we show how on one level we can celebrate our transformative work, but on a deeper level, we question just how transformative the work we do is, especially when additional layers of structural constraints seem to work against our agenda.

First, we draw upon Solórzano's and Delgado Bernal's work on transformational resistance to support our assessment (2001). As a corrective to those who have argued that students' resistant behavior is often self-defeating, their work demonstrates that internal and external resistance among students of color is often "political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that social justice is possible through resistant behavior" (2001: 320). They further argue that as such, students' resistance is transformational. In our work at Rodriguez Middle School, we witnessed students sharing counterstories (Delgado 1989) in advisory sessions;

these included affirmations about Latino and African American community identities in the public space of advisory classes. Patricia Hill Collins explains that "subordinate groups have long had to use alternative ways to create independent self-definitions and self-valuations and to rearticulate them through our own specialists" (1990:202).

We believe the ICUSP work at Rodriguez allowed space for students to create their self-definitions and self-valuations in a more public way, thus expanding the space of transformation and possibility. We recognize that advisory sessions could not fully undo the regular micro-aggressions or frequent insults that people of color, including these students, experience regularly (Davis 1989; Solarzano and Yosso 2000). We argue, however, that if there can be micro-aggressions, then there can also be *micro-transformations* that work against and in tension with these micro-aggressions. Micro-transformations are voices, thoughts, and acts that are infused with a consciousness regarding social and political inequities, and as such stand in individual and/or collective opposition to structures of oppression. McMunn Dooley (2008) has argued they are changes in "conceptions" or understandings; we take the word more broadly in terms of consciousness, which can include knowing beyond rational thought. We believe some of the work we did in advisory, including writing and mailing letters to the newly elected President, writing poetry in collective voices, and giving voice to counterstories, were acts of micro-transformation.

To this point, the sense of ICUSP work, and the advisory program specifically, may appear celebratory in terms of theorizing micro-transformations. But what about all the months when we were not allowed to conduct our program because of the school's preparation for high-stakes testing? What was so transformative then? Were students able to build upon the moments of counterstory telling in different ways and spaces thanks to our program? To trouble our sense of transformation, we invoke a question from Patti Lather: "How do our very efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance?" (1991:16). We realize the work of a white woman, Kasun, in an almost entirely Latino and African American school deserves reflection, and we called this into question regularly with the ICUSP team, which, as it reflected the demographics of the central Texas school districts, is mostly non-White. Were Kasun's ideas for the curriculum and the ways she worked reproducing norms of success from U.S. Whitestream schools (Urrieta 2009)? In attempting to answer this question, the team at times leaned toward feminist ideas regarding transformation. These "suggest that an educator take a stand on an issue, overtly identify his or her own epistemological position, recognize the partiality and contradictions within the position, and then engage in a constant self-interrogation of that position" (Capper 1998:268).

Our work in advisory was designed to help create culturally relevant spaces for community building, and to some extent, we believe we achieved that. "Unlike critical theorists, educators taking feminist perspectives do not cling so tightly to rationality and the intellect but value intuition, emotion, experience, and relational over abstract moral reasoning" (Capper 1998:359). Students at Rodriguez Middle School and in other ICUSP programs expressed that they have felt valued in our programs and that they have left with tools to change the world. Their micro-transformations are the kind of student resistance that we look to bear fruit in the future, a possibility that seems likely given students' assessments of their growth and learning in the student programs. As one student remarked, "No matter what background you came from, no matter what race you are, no matter what culture, you can be heard, you can use your voice to put yourself out there." Another offered that his group, which operated in single-gender groups on a different campus, "discuss[es] the different opinions on how a brotherhood should be and how we can improve on society as African American and Latino men—or just as men, period." While we recognize the entire school culture of Rodriguez and all the sites where we have worked have not changed in their structural make-up, we also see change itself as "non-linear, cyclical, indeterminant, discontinuous, contingent" (Lather 1991:161) and that our transformational work is unwieldy.

Yet, as we come to terms with our ongoing work and situate it within a disappointing and familiar context, we believe we cannot focus on everyday acts of resistance (Scott 1987) to be *enough* to constitute transformative thought or action. At the same time, and perhaps as a reflection of our disgust with the state of affairs in U.S. public education, we believe we need to think of transformation in broader and more sweeping terms than is typically present in educational literature. Whereas many educators, honoring the importance and power of seeing individual students overcome systematic miseducation, speak of

such success as "transformative," we seek an additional level of nuance. We agree that with the individual student as the unit of analysis we see in such cases transformation, but we caution that we should not overstate the lasting impact of such instances. Micro-transformations is thus an apt term, even as such instances exist in isolation, or as part of programs that are themselves anomalous within larger structures of power. With the term micro-transformation in place, we then have conceptual space to distinguish those important moments from resistant acts that produce sustainable structural changes in the systems of power that otherwise overdetermine the academic and life opportunities and outcomes for masses of historically marginalized students (including students of color; poor and working class students; girls; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students; linguistic and religious minorities; and others). As an analytical complement to micro-transformations, we propose that we refer to the latter instances of resistance as *structural transformations*.

While resistance as described by Solórzano & Delgado Bernal and others is a critical element to discussions of transformation, we do not see resistance as in and of itself systemically transformational if it does not result in a sustainable structural change that is supported in policy and practice throughout the changed institution. To further delineate terms and concepts, and again drawing upon the ideas of Foster's mentor Ted Gordon, we believe we need to think in terms of ***contextual interventions*** that can lead to ***micro-transformations,*** and ***structural interventions*** that can lead to ***structural transformations***. Contextual intervention refers to internal and external instances of resistance to dominant ideologies, practices and norms that assert the humanity and agency of individuals but that do not of themselves lead to fundamental changes in the structures of oppression that produce the need to resist in the first place (Foster 2010; Edward T. Gordon, personal communication, 2009). Micro-transformations occur when contextual interventions lead to, or are infused with, an element of critical consciousness. For example, a teacher who keeps granola bars in her desk or quietly allows children to bring food from the cafeteria even though it is against school regulations, engages contextual interventions to address her students' hunger, despite inflexible (and often culturally nonresponsive) school rules that disallow eating in classrooms. Her action is an immediate response to a set of circumstances but has no broader structural impact, even when the teacher willfully resists the school regulations in order to mitigate the undesired circumstance. Meanwhile, structural interventions speak to strategic incursive acts that are designed to create space for alternatives to the norm within a system. They can be policy changes, programs, or organized groups that, when strategically coordinated with additional similarly directed interventions, have the potential to fundamentally alter systems of power in a sustainable way (Foster 2010). Such a fundamental alteration would constitute a structural transformation.

Interventions	→	Transformation
Contextual Intervention	→	Micro-transformations
Coordinated Structural Interventions	→	Structural transformation

Figure 1. The implicit hope of the critical educator is that their work is not "business as usual" in systems that do not serve students well. Rather, critical educators hope that their work disrupts the status quo, constituting interventions that will lead to transformations in the lives of students and broader communities.

Without the nuance distinguishing micro- and structural transformations, we do not agree with those who argue that resistance is transformational simply because those "transformed" have a new sense that social change is possible. Such a belief overstates outcomes and limits the ability to name the type of radical structural changes that are necessary to produce across the board positive outcomes for students. From our political and personal perspectives, the transformation we seek for U.S. education would be a full alternative hegemony, the contours of which are as yet unimagined, but would at minimum include all students finding meaning and fulfillment in what they do; students' social, emotional, and physical health as the system-wide norm across demographic groups; students taught and developing critical thinking skills and curiosity; and the attainment among all students of the intercultural, emotional, and academic skills necessary for social and economic success.

The distinctions we draw between contextual and structural interventions and the corresponding scales of transformation are important precisely because our work exists in context, be those contexts lack of access to resources, high stakes testing, or inexperienced teachers. Most of our

successes, no matter how apparently dramatic by some standards, have done little to fundamentally alter the structures of power that oppress the youth with whom we work. In the case of our school-wide advisory project, our students may have appreciated the twice-weekly space for conversations that were closely tied to their lives and experiences, but they still were fully subject to testing, test preparation practices, and the school-wide anxiety associated with the "unacceptable" label of their school and, to some extent, of them.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this discussion we have recognized different lenses that inform our work. We share the same frustration with structures of power, control and limitation—in this case, high-stakes testing, and the way it adds an entire new layer and structure which limits historically marginalized students' agency—that we believe need to be changed. Nonetheless, we recognize that regardless of the extent to which we are engaged in efforts to directly change those structures, it is important to work toward micro-transformations. In our work in community, we temper our frustration with a recognition that contextual interventions contribute to micro-transformations. Contextual interventions are also important in and of themselves and in the lives of individual actors; they also have the unpredictable potential of leading to broader systemic change. We recognize the need to be careful about the use of language to describe change and the acts of resistance that may create change in the face of such oppressive practices as standardized testing as currently enacted and utilized. We do not want language surrounding resistance to be co-opted in a way that celebrates the smallest acts as somehow transformative, when, in fact, they are not.

We feel the need to think and act, and to critically engage with a steadfast hope for all manner of transformation, micro-transformations as well as structural transformations. We hope the way we frame transformation will help those who work with historically marginalized youth to think critically about what kind of transformation they hope to achieve with these young people. Using our framework, teachers and educators can consider the ways they might transgress the systems that have impeded structural transformation. Community engaged researchers can frame their work toward both kinds of transformation and likely be more purposeful in considering how they can work toward structural transformations. In our continued work, we maintain a shared vision of a hegemonic change brought about through structural transformations, where emancipatory ideals become structurally ingrained and systematically acted upon, creating a more just educational system and more equitable society.

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NOTES

1. For an article about navigating structural challenges from the varied standpoints of "parent," "activist," or "consultant" that [the institute] director also occupies, see a separate article, "Careful What You Ask For: Tales of Parental Involvement in Schools" (Foster 2008).

2. The historically African American neighborhoods on the west side were systematically targeted in the City of Austin 1928 Master Plan to relocate to the east side of Austin. According to The Handbook of Texas, in order to encourage relocation, "Negroes" were refused utility service and their west side schools were closed. Similar plans were enacted against African American communities in other parts of the U.S. (Texas State Historical Association 2010).

3. Successes include a 94% college going rate of the high school seniors in our student programs over the last three years (93 out of 99); reduced disciplinary referrals among participants; providing planning and logistical support for a residential summer camp based on empowerment through the arts; partnerships with local schools, nonprofit organizations, and arts institutions; and strong supportive relationships with local community groups.

4. Title I is a federal program to provide funds to support the academic achievement of students from families with low incomes. Title I schools are eligible for funds on the basis of having a certain number of students whose families qualify as low income.

5. Advisory programs are designed to deal directly with the affective needs of [young adolescents]. Activities may range from nonformal interactions to use of systematically developed units whose organizing center are drawn from the common problems, needs, interests, or concerns of

[young adolescents], such as "getting along with peers," "living in the school," or "developing self-concept." In the best of these programs, [young adolescents] have an opportunity to get to know one adult really well, to find a point of security in the institution, and to learn about what it means to be a healthy human being (Beane and Lipka 1987:40; quoted in Anfara 2006)

6. Other dreams included an end to racism, families being granted legal papers to live in the U.S., that all children would attend college, and that they would see the first Latino president (and perhaps be it themselves) in their lifetimes.

7. Unfortunately, the students' scores, while improving dramatically, did not improve enough to move beyond the "Academically Unacceptable" rating they had been burdened with the previous year. In June 2011, the district superintendent announced the restructuring of the school. Teachers and staff do not know yet whether they will be retained, transferred, or fired.

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