

## **Transformative Education: Chronicling a Pedagogy for Social Change**

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Llano Grande Center

This article chronicles the work of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, an educational nonprofit organization in South Texas, by following the narrative of one of its students and two of the authors, who are also founders of Llano Grande. Through the use of ethnography, visuals, and storytelling, they present an emerging theory of practice and a hybrid methodology that has contributed to the development of the work, the school, and the community. An activist agenda informed by practice and supported with theory is woven through the text in biographical form. The text also documents the cornerstones of the work: building strong relationships; work originating from self, place, and community; and engaging in meaningful work. When integrated into a seamless practice, this combination of guiding principles yields a certain power that youth and adults alike begin to negotiate within and between their peers, teachers, and community for change. This sense of self, efficacy, and power then informs much of their work as adults.

[Latino epistemology and education, activist ethnography, Llano Grande Center, storytelling, community as text, pedagogy of hope]

### **Carmen’s Chronicle**

When Carmen Valdez was 12 years old, her mother hired a coyote to transport her two young daughters and herself from Mexico into the United States. They fled particular domestic troubles and risked the dangerous sojourn, “para buscar la vida” (to search for life), as Carmen noted in her oral history a few years later. They began their trip in Durango, where Carmen and her sister had been fully immersed in school life and where their mother took odd jobs to make ends meet. Life was good for Carmen in Durango; she was primed, after all, to be the school’s next *abanderada*, an honor given to a top student who would carry the Mexican flag at school functions, and she also had her circle of close friends. Her mother, however, found it difficult to provide for the family, particularly after escaping a controlling and abusive husband who had previously been the main provider. One fateful evening, when Carmen, her mother, and her sister slipped into the inner tubes that would float them across the Rio Grande River, the river that also served as the U.S.–Mexico international boundary, they did not know what to expect. Crossing was a profound experience, and it would become part of a narrative that would help Carmen generate personal and academic power as she moved through high school and into higher education.

Two years later, when Carmen enrolled at the local public high school, Edcouch- Elsa High (also called “E-E High”), she was surprised and even emboldened by the fact that her life narrative was respected. Her English teachers asked about her story, her history teachers encouraged her to write about it, and others in the school and community mentored her and her mother so that they would work toward becoming legal residents of the United States. Early in her high school days, she connected with a group of teachers, students, and community members involved in the work of the Llano Grande Center, an educational institution based in rural South Texas. In short, Carmen’s story, as was the case for stories of numerous other students at E-E High, became a central part of the text and curriculum that guided her four years of academic, social, cultural, political, and intellectual growth.

## **Road Map**

This article describes the community context in which we work and the sociopolitical and historical forces that have impacted a particular rural community and its schools. We reflect on data collection processes, and look at data itself through a show-and-tell format that takes the reader to our community and into the transformative process at the micro and macro levels (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004). Central to the article is Carmen’s chronicle, the story of a young lady that in other circles may have been seen as a challenge, or even a burden to society. Carmen is a specific person, but she is also a metaphor for hundreds of young people who have participated with and given shape to the work of the Llano Grande Center at E-E High. Through her narrative, the text looks at the work of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development and at how an emerging hybrid theory informs both Carmen’s narrative, as well as the broader scope of work. The work is multilayered and interdisciplinary. We show it through a series of stories that guide us into an articulation of methods, theory, and data. We find storytelling as a critical mode through which we conduct our day-to-day work, build our curriculum, and enhance our pedagogies. It also serves as the genre through which we explain the historical context. Storytelling is the way we place ourselves in the middle of the text, as we engage as reflective practitioners. Reflecting on selected stories from the field, we also attempt to answer the following questions:

- What can activist research look like—for students and for academics?
- What emerging theories and methods support education and community change?
- What strategies sustain engaged teaching and learning processes?
- What is the impact when the concepts of self, place, and community become the content-text for the teaching and learning process?

We employ curricular and pedagogical approaches that we believe are generalizeable and applicable to other schools and communities. We don’t believe the work is replicable, because conditions, history, and people are different; Paulo Freire (2000) warned us about replication. But there are principles, strategies, and ideas that can be taken and integrated into other cultural and political contexts. As we reflect on a range of Carmen’s stories, we look at the pedagogical process that has yielded power for Carmen, and for our community.

## **The Landscape–Context**

E-E High is located in rural South Texas, 15 miles north of the Texas–Mexico border, in a region defined by an economy and culture built on a century-long investment in agriculture. The Spanish settlers of the 17th and 18th centuries warned future settlers of the region about large-scaled agricultural pursuits because of weather and the scarcity of fresh water sources (Miller 1980). Settlers from northern states who came to the borderland region of South Texas during the late 19th and early 20th centuries had other ideas. They established land development companies and chambers of commerce that promoted the place as a “Magic Valley,” as a semi-tropical paradise where “cheap land” and “cheap labor” were plentiful. Through massive public investment and through the overuse of the Rio Grande River, the only significant freshwater source in the region, developers gave shape to an agricultural society. This new society was fueled by the entrepreneurial spirit and capital of white northerners, and essentially built on the backs of Mexican laborers (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004; Montejano 1987; Zamora 1993). The impact of this economic dynamic would be profound, as a two-tiered social structure emerged, where whites controlled the resources and comprised the ruling class while Mexican immigrants populated the ranks of the laboring class. Schools mirrored this reality. White children were expected to attend school and pursue higher education, whereas Mexican children were expected to leave school early and join the agricultural labor force. Political and social structures followed similar patterns in communities across the borderland of South Texas (Foley et al. 1974; García 1997; Navarro 1998; Shockley 1974).

We were raised in this environment. As immigrants from Mexico and as members of the migrant farm-working stream, we were tracked at E-E schools between our elementary years and the time we completed high school. During those years, we also saw a large majority of our classmates drop out of school, and by the 1980s, when we graduated from high school, the community and educational system had created a culture of low expectations regarding Mexican immigrant children going to college. Their place in the community and in the economy was clear. One local elder recalled a white bus driver’s refusal to drive the school bus closer to where the Mexican people lived by saying, “Mexicans aren’t supposed to get educated anyway. You are meant to work in the fields, as laborers” (Támez 1998). Moreover, the schools followed curricula and practiced pedagogies intended to assimilate youth into the mainstream culture. We recall all too vividly the deculturalization process we experienced throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004; Spring 1998). But the community had also experienced a youth-led revolt, when in 1968 more than 140 Mexican American students staged a vigorous school walkout that became a catalyst for institutional and community change (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004). The students protested against, among other things, the lack of Mexican American studies courses at the high school, as well as the punitive actions school personnel took to discipline students who spoke Spanish on the school grounds. The E-E High School Walkout of 1968 shifted the racial power dynamics in the community. It signaled the beginning of a complex community development trajectory marked by uncertainty, but also filled with opportunity. It was an environment primed for deep social change. Not a week went by without the locals rallying behind someone in need: a barbecue for a cancer patient, a chicken sale to pay for a funeral, or a fundraiser for a family that lost their home in a fire—philanthropic impulses in our community were strong and steady. It was a community that exported its human capital for the greater good: migrant farm workers to pick crops in California, Michigan, the Texas Panhandle, and many other

places; and young men and women to serve the country militarily. (Dozens served in WWII, six died in Vietnam, and legions of others have served in other capacities.) This community was a place with a huge heart and lively spirit and passion—a place that nurtured big ideas. We thought we lived at the best location on earth, although historical forces of oppression perpetuated a status quo of economic impoverishment and low levels of expectations. Our school was classified as the poorest school district in Texas, based on the property tax base throughout the time we were E-E students, and even during the first few years when we returned to teach in 1990.

We enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) after high school and did so with a number of other E-E High graduates; it had been many years since any E-E High alum had enrolled at UT. Within two years we formed a community of students that numbered more than 30, all from the same South Texas hometown. The group engaged in a sustained conversation that spanned several years during the 1980s, and through those dialogues we imagined that we would come back home after college to build new institutions, to change our schools, and to create new opportunities. We discussed how school curricula should be more reflective of regional and community history, how teaching and learning could be done differently, and how more people, and youth in particular, should participate in civic life. Those conversations gave shape to what would become the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development.

When we returned to teach at E-E High in 1990, we created an aggressive college preparation program. There was no question about the quality of the talent at E-E High. Like any community, we had smart, ambitious students who wanted to enrich their lives, but that year only 28 percent of E-E graduates subsequently enrolled in college (González 1998). This was not a new problem; E-E graduates had not fared well in college admissions—ever. We decided to attack this problem through a radical approach to college preparation: our goal was to get as many E-E students as possible into Ivy League universities. In doing so, we would improve the number of students going to college, and just as importantly, we would revolt against the chronic low levels of expectation. By 1996 we had placed more than 30 E-E students in Ivy League schools, and the community began to look at itself differently. Positive media attention descended on the high school. Locals began to feel better about themselves, and the college-going rate rose. In 2007, more than 60 percent of E-E High graduates attended college, and today we continue to place students in Ivy League and other exclusive universities across the country. The new reality is that the townspeople expect young people to attend college. A profound cultural shift has occurred, although it has taken a generation to transpire.

When we discussed returning home after college, we envisioned a body of work centered in the schools: a work that included community, history, and people's stories. As college students, we were deeply influenced by the seminal scholarship of Américo Paredes, the bold activism of George I. Sanchez, and the innovative theorizing of Gloria Anzaldúa. But we were even more moved by the stories of our padres, our *tios* and *tias*, and the narrative of our community. By the mid 1990s, our college preparatory work had gained acclaim for breaking stereotypes and raising expectations, but we fell short in the area of curriculum, instruction, and the integration of community stories in the way the school approached teaching and learning. As we evaluated our work, we applied a critical lens and resolved to reimagine how we approached college preparation for students at E-E High. Transforming curricular and pedagogical approaches were important

reasons for the change, but another factor was that we had created no plan in our college preparatory program for bringing our students back home after they completed college, especially those who wanted to return. We were participating in the ubiquitous rural “brain drain,” the persistent phenomenon that plagues rural communities across the world (Flora et al. 1992; Keillor 2004).

At that point we formalized the work under the banner of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. The college preparation morphed into a more comprehensive teaching and learning approach that focused on identity formation, youth leadership, and community development. All this would define our new college preparation efforts. Almost 30 years after the E-E High School Walkout, and more than a decade since we began to imagine how we could approach education differently, we officially opened the door to the Llano Grande Center in the summer of 1997 at E-E High. Carmen walked through the door that same year, her freshman year in high school.

### **Issues on the Emerging Methodology**

We employed qualitative research approaches as we followed Carmen through her school years and as her life mirrored the development of the Llano Grande Center. We collected data through ethnographic research, interviews, oral history, and a sustained dialogue with Carmen during the past ten years. Additional data was collected through interviews with E-E High School teachers, Llano Grande Center staff members, students, and other community members. We use the research process as an opportunity to teach and learn as we look to create new knowledge, a cornerstone of critical pedagogy (Greene 1986, 1995). This description would place our work under the critical ethnography camp, but that would be a simplistic description. An inherent complexity is built in when we pose the question: how does research change when the observed becomes part of the observing process? This question is central to the method; the authors of this text are merely weavers of a story that has unfolded with them in the middle, although realized as well through the labor of numerous community partners. We use the reflective process as a strategy for putting ourselves in the middle of the text, which we have done together since the early 1990s. The main data provided here originate from the dialogical process we had engaged in with Carmen, and continue to do so with others, and with the ecology (Keiny 2002). Like Carmen, we are also defined by the work.

This methodology must purposefully depart from the traditional modality if we are to understand it as an activist methodology. Margaret Wheatley aptly quotes Albert Einstein, who said, “The problems of today will not be solved with the same consciousness that created them” (2006:5). Heeding that wisdom, we must employ a different way of thinking, one that is more consistent with the spirit and realities of the community in which we live, work, and research (Smith 1999). Our task is to do more than construct a different theory of practice. We must also rupture the traditional paradigms and use methods as an instrument for change (Kuhn 1970). In rupturing the paradigmatic membrane through research and inquiry, we can deconstruct the tools—methods that have historically kept knowledge and power for the privileged; at this juncture, we can also begin to rebuild. In Smith’s nomenclature, we decolonize the research process to respond to the strengths and particular needs of the local community. This disruption of the traditional

paradigm creates space for new voices to surface and to contribute to a new method for documentation and knowledge creation.

Thus, as the observed has become part of the observing process, we use a different ontological reality that is congruent with the local ecology and its people yet distant enough where we can be reflective (Foley 2002) and open to disrupting the process when necessary. We use the reflective process as a strategy for putting ourselves in the middle of the text, which is important for a number of reasons. The first is that we have disrupted the traditional power dynamics that researchers bring to marginalized communities. The values of trust, respect, honesty, and dignity have informed the work we have been doing collaboratively since the early 1990s. In a traditional research methods course this approach could be discounted as potentially bias, for it could contaminate the data. On the other hand, we believe our long-lasting and deep relationships with the community validate the data, which are triangulated by the longevity of the work and the products we see in the people and our community (Guajardo and Guajardo 2002, 2004). As activist academics and community developers, we cannot simply follow the “dollars” or the most recent “faddish” research agenda. What makes activist research work is a sustained commitment to the work, where you can witness changes in people, in families, in institutions.

We have dedicated our time and careers to this work: it has become a way of life for us, for many of our research collaborators, and for the organization through which we formalize our work. We find power in this way of life, in the relationships and the commitments we have made to community (Stringer 2006). The realization of this relational power (Loomer 1976) allows us to negotiate the issues of hegemony (Gramsci 1971). We see research as one of the historical hegemonic structures utilized to reproduce the societal inequality, but we understand that we can turn that power around, particularly because of the relationships we have developed through the past generation of work as educators and researchers in this one community (Villenas 1996). We find that the research enterprise affords us the opportunity to disrupt the traditional discursive regimes and reclaim the agency that is part of our birthright in this country, the right to be active citizens and the right to receive a quality education. A second reason for putting ourselves in the middle of the text and work is that we role model the inquiry process as an instrument for change. This is important for educational leaders, teachers, students, and community partners as they become researchers in their own right, much like Carmen has become an activist–researcher. As we use the research process to author ourselves, we see young people in the community learning these skills. The ability to author oneself is a complex process that yields great power for our partners. As youth become researchers and creators of knowledge, they then gain richer learning experiences, and they generate power as they position themselves for life after high school. When they apply to college, for example, they apply as experienced community-based researchers who, as in the case of Carmen, play important roles as agents for social and community change. Because of this, we have seen colleges and universities across the country show a strong desire to recruit our students.

The activist methodology that emerges from our work is rooted in place, built on relationships, and sustained over a period of time. It cannot be relegated to one section of the document, for in an ethnographic form of “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973) we will paint the picture of Carmen, our community, and ourselves in the text. The work has been profoundly

transformational. We dare not describe it as an initiative, project, or program; instead, it has become a way of life, having spanned now a generation. We see the need for researchers to revisit their unit of analysis from looking at school to looking at communities. As participant-researchers and agents for school and community change, we view our experience and work as a process of reculturalization, rather than traditional school reform (Cuban 1990). It is about culture, politics, and building power within the context of a community's life and narrative. It is about honoring people's dignity, and about building hope for children and families. That is our brand of school reform.

### **Story as Data: A Ninth-Grade Experience**

Carmen recalls a classroom experience when she was a freshman in high school. The class was engrossed in an emotional discussion over a piece of literature. "I remember," she said, "that two girls in my class were going back and forth, and back and forth, arguing about a reading selection. I don't recall the specific details of the debate, but what I do remember is that it climaxed when Lila, one of the students, pounded her fist on her desk and said, 'No, that's not what my grandmother meant in that paragraph.'" That day, students were reading a narrative that Lila and some of her classmates had published in a journal entirely produced by students and their teachers, and that featured the voices of local elders. In this journal, the elders functioned as authors who narrated their life histories, and who shared stories of community history. "One day," Carmen recalled, "we'd read Mark Twain or William Faulkner, or some other traditional American author, and the next we'd read something that meant something to us personally, something we could connect with. It was a rich experience because we didn't just study our community stories, we also produced our own literature."

### **On Carmen's Training**

The ongoing skill-development work in which Carmen and her classmates engaged included learning the technological skills of how to capture stories, as well as the rules of ethnographic, life history, and oral history research (see Figure 1). Since the mid 1990s, E-E students began to read works such as Paredes's *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958), other border histories, resistance narratives, and selected ethnographic studies. From the readings they learned about theories, literary forms, and symbols, but from meeting with authors such as Paredes, they learned about the passion and conviction a researcher can bring to the work. Carmen recalls the day when don Américo visited E-E High in 1998. "He was so generous with his time," she said. "He signed our Pistol books, and he talked about the importance of knowing ourselves and our history. Students in the school listened to him with great respect." Carmen and her classmates also studied George Spindler and Louise Spindler (2000) to learn the process of ethnography. "Roger Harker" (1997b) and "Beth Anne" (1997a) became part of the discourse in English, history, and research methods courses. When Llano Grande brought George Spindler to E-E High early in 2002, students sat him down and peppered the "father of education anthropology" with questions on his life, his education, his interviewing techniques, and on "Roger Harker." Like don Américo, Spindler was a big hit at E-E High.

**Figure 1.**  
**From left to right: George Spindler, Ray McDermott, Doug Foley, Henry Trueba, Ardie Trueba, and Phillip Trueba. Elsa, Texas, 2002.**



Critical perspectives are also an integral part of the curriculum as students and teachers discuss social, political, and institutional inequities as they read Freire. Students also discuss critical perspectives when they study culturally relevant pedagogy, as introduced by Ladson-Billings (1995), and as Guajardo and Guajardo (2002, 2004) describe the local context. Henry Trueba's work also became part of the literature that guided the research work. Henry Trueba's (1999) interpretation of Vygotsky and the subsequent pedagogy of hope especially inspire students, many who felt increasingly hopeful about the world of possibilities for themselves, their families, and their communities. Much of this sense of hope was built through the process of reading, research, and creation of new knowledge. Trueba's influence on the Llano Grande Center

and E-E High was more profound because he actually relocated physically to Elsa, Texas, and became an integral part of the work of Llano Grande between 2000 and 2004.

Through these readings, Carmen and her classmates learned research skills such as interviewing, observing, and analyzing data; and they learned about critical ethnography and pedagogy as well. With that background, students identified potential interviewees who were family members, neighbors, or someone else from the community who simply had interesting stories to tell (see Figure 2). Typically, students worked in teams of three or four, and together prepared the logistics of when and where interviews would occur; on occasion, interviewees traveled to the school, while other times student interviewers visited the home of elders to conduct an interview or a series of interviews. Equipped with cameras, microphones, tripods, and pads and pencils, student researchers collected data while they also deepened relationships with elders and their community neighbors.

**Figure 2.**  
**Llano Grande students interview a local elder. Elsa, Texas, 1999.**



After the interview process, students then transcribed the oral histories by using transcribing machines. “We learned how to become good listeners,” said Carmen, “and we learned much more from listening to the stories over and over again, because we had to rewind over and over, to get the transcription right.” Under the direction of skilled teachers, students then

converted transcribed interviews into narratives that were subsequently laid out through desktop publishing software. Published in the local Llano Grande Journal, the narratives and scanned images, which included photographs or other historical documents, became part of the official content to be read and studied by local students. “The stories contained great data,” Carmen explains, “but the process of creating the literature was much more powerful” (Delgado-Gaitan 2004; Trueba 2004).

### **A Tenth-Grade Story: Authoring the Self**

Just as students work as researchers and creators of knowledge, essentially as producers of the literature they study, they also emerge as storytellers, particularly when they themselves become the subjects of oral histories. A typical scenario has a student interviewer sitting across from a student interviewee for the purpose of conducting an oral history interview. Carmen conducted her share of interviews, and she was the subject of one as well. She describes her oral history as the time when she was able to explore her immigrant narrative. “When I was encouraged to reflect on my immigrant experience, I slowly began to understand that my story was not something to be ashamed of,” she said. “To the contrary, I began to feel proud of my story and didn’t mind sharing very emotional things that I went through.”

Carmen saw the power of creating new knowledge during her ninth-grade year, and in the tenth grade she began to realize the power in her own story. “I remember telling the story,” she said, “of my father’s Peruvian ancestry, and of how he came to Mexico to join the circus, and of how my mother met him at the circus. That’s where I was born, in the circus. That’s the beginning of my story.” And she was able to explore it as part of her class assignment at E-E High.

### **11th-Grade Stories: Carmen as Activist–Researcher**

Carmen’s first two years in high school helped her find her story; build a strong sense of identity; and develop deep relationships with family members, teachers, classmates, and others in the community. Her junior year in high school moved the focus of her work from personal to community. Early during the academic year, several classes at the school engaged in a community-based research project that would be developed and implemented collaboratively between students and teachers; the students were the lead data collectors. The research methodology was informed by principles taken from action research, community change models, and asset-based community development work. The youth-led research team pursued three goals: (1) students would learn basic action research skills, (2) the research team would identify assets extant within the community, and (3) a plan of action based on the research findings would be generated.

Carmen quickly emerged as an essential part of the research team that conducted interviews, studied public records, took ethnographic notes on observed behavior, and even walked door to door in an effort to map comprehensively the assets in the community. In a recent dialogue in which she reflected on that research process, Carmen recalled the rationale for this research work when she said, “We wanted to see if through research we could get a different view of our town, different from what the media and the government always put out.” Indeed, the research purpose intention-ally challenged the deficit-driven (Valencia 1997) interpretations of

this rural community. As Carmen reiterated, “The students knew our community was a good place, but we wanted to see if we could prove it through this research.”

After months of honing their research skills, conducting community walks, and collecting a wide range of data, the young researchers began data analysis by using several software packages, including Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings were compelling. “We knew,” recalled Carmen, “that we didn’t have a lot of industry, tourism, and those kinds of traditional community assets.” But as they observed the data, the students found that local residents viewed the concept of assets differently. Carmen said, “They talked about their stories as they lived them in the community... with their kids, at the school, and with other *familiares y con los com- padres y las comadres*.” The concept of story—personal and community—emerged as one of the most important assets for people in the town. Carmen then described the second greatest asset as “the language people used to tell their stories: they mostly told stories in Spanish, especially the elders.” Contrary to the popular perception that people from this rural, South Texas community were somehow impoverished because a large number of residents did not know English, the research data demonstrated a radically different perspective. Because many locals were fluent in Spanish, that capacity was viewed as an asset (Gonzalez et al. 2005; Guajardo and Guajardo 2002).

“But what do you do with story and Spanish?” asked Carmen rhetorically. “Well, we decided to do strategic planning around those assets, and today we know that we’ve created a lot of jobs through our Spanish-Language Immersion Institute and our Digital Storytelling workshops.” Carmen and four of her classmates, in fact, created the Spanish Institute as an economic enterprise built on the assets of the local people. After the data collection phase, the young researchers—entrepreneurs collaborated with teachers to draft a language immersion concept, which they forwarded to a national foundation that awarded them a \$50,000 grant to launch the initiative. For the next several years, the community hosted paying customers who traveled to South Texas from places as far as New York, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and California for the purpose of immersing themselves in the Spanish language: in South Texas. Mono-lingual Spanish-speaking elders worked as hosts to visiting students who studied Spanish through a formal curriculum during the day; the students then spent evenings and weekends learning through a living curriculum. Carmen and her classmates worked as teachers during the day while elders functioned in similar roles after school hours. And everybody got paid. “That’s how I made money to pay for my freshman year in college,” Carmen recalls, “and it created employment for many other youths and people from the community . . . who otherwise would probably not have had jobs during the summer.”

How to conceptualize the concept of story as an asset and to capitalize on it for community or economic development was far more complex than building a language institute. But the question was worth posing: how can we use story, an important community asset, for greater teaching and learning in the schools, and to build power in the schools and in the community? Since we conducted the asset-mapping research, we have worked diligently to integrate the concept of story as a central part of curricula at all grade levels. During the past decade, just about every elementary student has been assigned the task of collecting stories of their families, whether that be through oral histories, family interviews, family album studies,

genealogy assignments, and so on. Middle and high school students similarly find curricula that require students to engage family members and others from the community to collect, study, analyze, and celebrate community stories. The Llano Grande Center has also led the effort to position story as the most important component of the college preparation and application process at E-E High, as well as in numerous other high schools in the region and in other parts of the country. “I have trained teachers, high school counselors, and students on how to build students’ stories to gain a competitive advantage for college admissions,” said Carmen. To be sure, Carmen has traveled to many places in this country to share with others how she has used her story to gain opportunity and to generate personal power.

Llano Grande has additionally capitalized on story as asset by creating a Digital Storytelling training program primarily to teach students, teachers, and community workers on the craft of producing stories through digital media. During the past five years, the center has trained hundreds of students and others in schools in South Texas, in more than 17 other states, and in several other countries. Carmen, for example, has traveled to New Zealand, Peru, Mexico, and Canada to assist others in understanding how to use personal, organizational, and community stories to build power. “The concept of story resonates with many people, especially people from marginalized communities,” said Carmen, as she reflected on her travels as an educator. “Interestingly,” Carmen continued, “the stories I have learned through the travels I have taken have been important not just for me but also for my family, and even my community... it’s how we’ve broken the isolation.” Like Carmen, dozens of other Llano Grande youth have traveled across the world to share stories, to learn stories, and to bring those stories back. The experience has had a profound impact on the future of this rural community that for many years appeared isolated, insulated, and marginalized.

The asset-mapping exercise and the larger community-based research work that Carmen was involved in yielded unprecedented results. It even inspired the local congressman to look differently at how he approached assets, data, and community and economic development. A favorite story Carmen likes to tell is when the congressman took the research report that identified community assets, and then used it to create a regional economic development board and a regional economic development plan. “Now we’ve gotten more than two million dollars in federal dollars to improve our community, and the plan to do that is the plan we created,” Carmen said as she beamed with the pride of a young activist-researcher.

### **A 12th-Grade Story: Carmen as Policy Activist**

When Carmen began her senior year in high school, she and her family had thus waited more than four years for notice from the Immigration and Naturalization Service to determine if the family could gain legal residency in the United States. Like dozens of her classmates, Carmen was an undocumented student who was also close to graduating from high school. “I was at a loss,” she recalls, “because I didn’t know if I could go to college because of my residency.” At the time, undocumented high school graduates in Texas were not allowed in Texas public universities unless they applied to college as international students, but that was not a palatable option for Carmen: too costly and too complicated. “We addressed this issue,” said Carmen, “just like we addressed the local park renovation, and the way we approached the brown field issue in Elsa; we addressed it through research.”

The problem was clear: undocumented students had little or no opportunity to attend college after high school. The question was clear, too: through research, how can Carmen and others in our school and community participate in changing this reality? The realities dictated the question, and the relationships between students, their families, and Llano Grande staffers allowed the question to emerge. Conditions and relationships were such that research questions emerged out of those realities. Readings for this research assignment further enhanced student understanding of the issue. One particularly useful text was *Immigrant Voices*, which was hot off the press at the time (Trueba and Bartolome 2000). Students and teachers engaged in conversations specific to critical pedagogy (McLaren 2000), and read stories of children from other parts of the country who had immigrant experiences very similar to theirs (Brueggemann 1987). The experience of reading and studying *Immigrant Voices* was especially profound because Henry Trueba, the editor and an author of the book, facilitated several class discussions. “El profesor Trueba helped us understand the issue better, simply because of his understanding of the big picture, but also how he talked about the organization of data, and about developing arguments with the data,” said Carmen.

“We critiqued the law, the institutions, and the values that pushed people to create and maintain those laws,” recalled Carmen, “and then we planned for how we could inform others of the injustices imbedded in that.” Students like Carmen were moved to view the immigration issues through critical perspectives, clearly, but they were also moved to act for change. Early in the research process, one of the teachers read a press release indicating that a state legislator from an urban area in Texas had drafted legislation that would allow undocumented students to attend public universities in the state if those students graduated from high school and if their families were in the process of applying for legal residency through the Immigration and Naturalization Service. “When we found out about HB 1403,” Carmen recalled, “we were ready to act.” After days of phone calls and e-mails, the research team learned of the status of the pending legislation and quickly developed a plan of action. Carmen and other undocumented students worked with teachers and Llano Grande staff members to prepare testimonials to present to a legislative committee that would convene in Austin. Months after the team first began to understand the issue, and a few weeks after learning of the legislation, a team of researchers traveled to Austin to tell their stories. Carmen and four of her classmates stood in a large chamber in the Texas Capitol and delivered their testimonials in front of legislators, the media, and others. Within weeks after their testimonials, the legislature voted to approve House Bill 1403. The next fall, Carmen and her classmates enrolled in college.

### **Current Challenges to the Work**

Unfortunately, the kind of education Carmen and her classmates experienced is not the norm in public schools across this country, especially in poor and historically marginalized communities. Even at E-E High School, where the work enjoyed significant support during the past dozen years, this teaching and learning approach is still not in the mainstream of school life. More than 1,500 students are enrolled at E-E High, but only about 200 are actively involved in place-based work. Several factors explain why more students are not involved in this process. One is that many teachers are not prepared to engage in this work because they did not experience it while they were in school, and, as a current E-E High teacher said in a recent interview,

“There’s really no frame of reference for many of us who haven’t done this sort of teaching.” Another factor that teachers cite is that it is hard to change the way they prepare to teach and the way they conduct the actual teaching. Students support this notion as well. Carmen commented on this point by saying, “It’s too much to change how you teach . . . to go from feeding students information so they can memorize it and spit it back on a test, to doing community research, working on student identity formation, oral histories.... Unless they’re really well trained, it’s very hard for teachers to change how they do things.” Moving away from what Martin Haberman (1991) calls pedagogy of poverty to what Freire calls “pedagogy of liberation” is an insurmountable challenge for many teachers, but “they can change,” Carmen said, “if they are willing to commit to certain practices and a new way of thinking.”

Although the Llano Grande Center routinely conducts teacher training on the work Carmen describes, the preponderance of resources that schools allot for teacher training and professional development is typically reserved for workshops to help raise state-mandated test scores. As one local principal stated, “Really, we’re measured by one thing and one thing only—test scores. So, we have to pump all available resources into test prep.” It has become the new reality in public schools across the country: schools have become testing factories (McNeil 2001; Nichols and Berliner 2007; Valenzuela 2005; Wood 2004). While Llano Grande work focuses on deep engagement between students and the subject matter, schools in the current era of accountability have become engulfed in what Padilla calls a “culture of measurement,” rather than a “culture of engagement” (Padilla 2005). The brand of professional development for teachers that Llano Grande offers, while engaging, becomes low priority for public schools, and some school leaders are quite candid about it. “The work Llano Grande kids do is exciting, but it needs to be more focused on strategies that help kids do well according to the state’s accountability system; that’s what really counts,” said a local assistant principal in a recent conversation. In this context, a significant obstacle is educational policy, and how that policy influences educational leaders’ decisions regarding allocation of resources, including teacher training (Valenzuela 1999, 2005).

In our context we have seen change occur most profoundly after institutional cultures are transformed and reculturalized. Llano Grande has partnered with the local school district because the school building is the center of school life and the nexus of where change will occur in this rural community. As change occurs, the institution of the school can be thrown off its equilibrium, and we believe that in this context we can build community, as we simultaneously create the conditions to usher in change. The change we have precipitated locally has been grounded within a pedagogical and community building framework. It is more effective to make change when people understand and respect each other than when they live in a state of anxiety. “Though my mother gets excited about the changes in my life, she also gets agitated because my sister and I are changing in ways she never imagined,” said Carmen, whose change can be seen as radical. “A lot of this is not safe,” she said, “challenging your assumptions, challenging other’s way of thinking, being challenged by others; most people don’t want to change. It can be scary.”

We must be patient with people, respect them, and “meet them where they are,” as Myles Horton (Adams and Horton 1975) professed. We see this change as a long, sustained effort where the work must focus on both micro- and macrolevels (Guajardo and Guajardo 2004); we work for local change, but a change that is couched in broader social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Although most schools, including the ones we work in, are driven by standards and values from outside, the Llano Grande Center is an organic organization that operates on a horizontal structure and creates spaces to maximize democratic participation. Although this organizational culture often clashes with school culture, we find that students, parents, and even school officials are energized by the homegrown quality of the work. Most importantly, the community appreciates the commitment to a long and sustained effort; the long-term approach is the most effective way we know through which we can build a sense of hope for children, families, and the community at large. Carmen's family is representative of this. "My little brothers know, without hesitation, that they will go to college and have good lives," Carmen said, "and I believe it's because of the modeling my sister and I have shown them."

### **Emerging Theory**

In Meteor Blades (2007), Jim Cummins claims that privileged children in affluent schools typically receive instruction that is grounded and informed by social constructivism, while students in poor schools get instruction informed by behavioral science. To change this kind of educational behavior, we follow a theoretical construct informed by constructivist principles, critical pedagogy, and practices useful for building strong cultural identity. The social constructivist movement, Vygotsky's work in particular, gives us a useful vehicle for viewing local knowledge and context—place as assets in the learning process. The "zone of proximal development" is congruent with the pedagogy of place we employ as part of the Llano Grande curriculum. Introducing global concepts and viewing them through local lenses center teaching and learning in a more meaningful and concrete manner, and it gives students and teachers the power to see themselves not as consumers of information and data but, rather, as researchers and creators of knowledge. The community becomes the classroom. In addition, we empower ourselves to frame research questions, to develop research protocols and create a plan of action to research the local park or investigate the brown field disaster left behind by the defunct Red Barn Chemical company or prepare to facilitate the local school board debates. The power of students and teachers as active participants in their learning and in the knowledge creation process has yielded a sense of ownership. If the negative conditions were socially constructed, then we too can deconstruct and reconstruct a vision and a positive reality based on community assets.

This dynamic curriculum that begins with place and is informed by the local context and condition has helped students learn about themselves, their history, and their ecology. This process has become counter hegemonic in nature. Since the introduction of the Common Schools Movement, a primary role of the schooling process has been to assimilate students, yet the work at Llano Grande has created the space for youth to learn about themselves, their history, and their culture. This process is not an ideological position; it is a process that helps youth and their families develop skills and create opportunities. It is a process that nurtures mentoring relationships between youth and adults. In short, the Llano Grande Center facilitates the process for youths and adults to author themselves (Holland et al. 1998). Holland and others use the combination of Vygotsky's developmental process and Bahktin's dialogical construction of symbols and their meaning to help develop the individual so that they can author their own identity. When youth arrive at a level of comfort with who they are, they become more resilient as actors in life. "I survived school because I had a firm sense of myself, of who I was, of my

personal identity,” Carmen said, when she reflected on how she responded to stressful times while in high school and while in college. In an academic context, Carmen said, “I was a better researcher as well, more resilient, like Trueba says, largely because I was comfortable with myself and who I was when I was in graduate school.”

Critical pedagogy has informed, and continues to inform, the work of the Llano Grande Center by helping youth and staff create the space needed to become researchers and creators of knowledge, and it inspires teaching and learning practices that identify injustices in different segments of social, economic, and institutional life. This theoretical premise informs youth and adults about their history through oral histories, life histories, ethnographies, genealogies, and storytelling sessions. Because much of this research focuses on issues of identity, both individual and collective, an important product of the work is identity formation. In the two years that Trueba lived in South Texas he engaged us in countless conversations and was wont to paraphrase Freire by saying, “Men and women who do not know their place in history will never understand their role in society.” We took this Trueba–Freire wisdom seriously and geared much of our work away from teaching and learning practices based on the traditional banking system that nurtures passivity (Freire 2000) and worked toward a liberating type of instruction in which students study their own story and the history and condition of their community. This practice builds student identity and allows them to gain ownership over their learning.

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 that students in communities such as ours, and other rural and isolated places need for the purposes of individual and community change. “Students,” said 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 2000:62). Freirian thought, however, is marginal at best, in how public schools pursue their purpose of educating children in this country. It was no different at E-E High, since the school district’s inception in the early 1930s, and the values that gave birth to local public schooling 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 one community elder. During the early to mid century, the education of Mexican American children, both during the age of segregation and after *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954, focused on Americanizing them through intense instruction in the culture and language of the dominant society (González 1998; 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 presented with the problems of our hometown,” said one local teacher, who attended local schools in the 1960s and 1970s. 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 functioned to reproduce the values and tenets of the dominant culture; schooling became an enterprise that perpetuated poverty and imprisoned youths to be little more than receptors of knowledge. Gaining a social consciousness or transforming community was not a priority for the local public schools. To the contrary, they became critical to the Llano Grande Center, when we founded it about a generation ago.

## Closing Reflections

Two years after HB 1403 passed, Carmen and her family gained legal residency status, and with that she then transferred from a Texas public university to a private college on the west coast, where she earned an undergraduate degree. She has since obtained a master's degree from an institution in the Midwest, and her next stop is a doctoral program in the Northeast. When she completes a Ph.D., she will be (approximately) the tenth alumnus from E-E High and the Llano Grande Center during the time of our work, each of those having participated in activist community-based research either as a student, a teacher, or a school administrator in this community. During the same time period, at least two-dozen others have earned master's degrees, and many others undergraduate degrees. A sampling of theses and dissertation titles reflects the close connection and commitment to community: "Narratives of Transformation," "Education for Leadership Development," and "Ethnic Resistance in a Mexican American Community." This kind of sustained pedagogy and activist research has inspired many young people to care about their story, their schools, and their community. Carmen's own master's thesis, "The Psychological Impact of Immigration on Mexican Immigrant Children in Rural South Texas Schools," reflects a commitment to her own story, as well as others with similar experiences. Without question, the community views itself radically differently today, than it did a generation ago. We understand ourselves better; we know the history more clearly; and we're engaging in teaching and learning processes that build on the strengths and energies of local people, rather than focusing on the deficiencies and/or limitations. We reject deficit thinking as a model through which to approach education (Valencia 1997); it does not move us forward in building the self-esteem of children, families, schools, or the community at large. We understand that unemployment rates in the area still hover around 20 percent, but we also recall that number at 32 percent in the late 1980s and early 1990s. On the other hand, population statistics show that high school diplomas have risen from 48% for those who attended E-E schools in the 1970s and early 1980s to 70% for those graduating from E-E High in the 1990s and into the new millennium (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). One of the most significant indicators is that local high school students are going to college at twice the rate as they were a generation ago. As is the case with school reform and community change, results emerge at a slow and deliberate pace. Change requires sustained work, long-term commitment, and wide-ranging support. We have sustained the work through the waves of young people who come in and out of the Llano Grande Center to engage in one research project or another; we have found the long-term commitment in teachers, parents, and others who work in community organizations; and we have found support from locals, as well as from partners from across the country: other students, educators, foundation program directors, and cultural workers in nonprofit organizations.

"I have been involved in this work for half of my life. I love my family, and I love the idea of knowing my community, and the idea of being able to change it through research," Carmen said. Legions of others have similarly found strength in the power of the idea, the idea that through a community-based education approach that facilitates the process for engaging in meaningful work, building strong relationships, and constructing a sense of identity, we can transform ourselves and our communities, and build hope for our children and the world they will inherit.

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### Note

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