

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Como una flor/like a flower, we bloom: Memories along the community college pathway

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**Abstract:** Previous studies on Mexican American students in community college have demonstrated a sense of resilience in completing their studies. However, such studies have been student-centric in advising that cultural capital be utilized in fostering student success. In this article, we advise the incorporation of pedagogical *conocimientos* as a tool for the professional development of faculty, staff and administrators in humanizing the community college experience. The findings in this article explore ways in which three students draw upon their memories in furthering their education. We analyze how students make sense of lived experiences and transmit them into their educational trajectory.

**Keywords:** Mexican Americans, community college, pedagogical *conocimientos*

## 1 Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States faced many challenges in relation to global economic competition. Local and national leaders projected that an effective and skilled 'workforce' would be needed to reinforce the nation's economy. During this time in history, about three quarters of high school graduates were not furthering their education, particularly because they were reluctant to leave their communities. In response to the diversifying student population, community colleges began with the democratic principle of serving as vehicles for social mobility, by providing workforce training and a higher education for the surrounding populations where they were established [1]. The first of such institutions was Joliet Junior College, which opened in 1901 [2], premised on binary beliefs that education within such institutions must necessarily be practical and liberal, as informed by a community college philosophy based on the notion that education serves both the good of industry and society [3].

Since their inception, there have been divisive and conflictive views as to what the purpose of community colleges are in US society, particularly as it pertains to workforce training or bridging students onto university education [4,5]. Contested by sociology of education scholars, these institutions normalized social stratification, sorting individuals based on the division of labor, as US American educational systems manage ambitions by funneling qualified individuals into structured labor [6] characterized by inequalities of status, power and income [7]. These archaic beliefs fan the flames of internalized prejudices [8].

Social stratification as to educational rights plays a decisive role in sustaining selective perceptions of minoritized students within community colleges. Often, premised on factory model schooling and the self-efficacy doctrine, remedial schooling reinforces obsolete pedagogical approaches to education [9,10]. Community colleges are touted as institutions of access of opportunity, under the premise of educating students from diverse backgrounds to realize their full potential. However, political and economic policies that manifest privilege, power and difference reproduce social stratification within such institutions. Argued, is that community colleges should also empower students to be actively engaged citizens in a democratic society [11].

### 1.1 Mexicans as minoritized in Oregon

From its inception, Oregon was established as a white supremacist nation, its laws enshrined to benefit a discourse of whiteness and that population's rights to land and jobs. As evidenced by the case of minoritized groups in the state of Oregon, in the United States, racism and views of difference have been socially reproduced from one group to another [12]. In this

process, whiteness plays a role in the reproduction of inequities within Oregon's institutions, and is deeply entrenched in beliefs that can only be combated with mutual cooperation and the cultivation of consciousness for the common good [13].

Early community memories of the Mexican American presence in Oregon are attributed to the 1942 Bracero Program, which filled labor shortages during World War II. With approximately five thousand people traveling to work annually, with the condition that workers return with their families when their contracts expired [14]. During this time, Japanese Americans were interned in relocation camps, and nativist sentiments shifted to Mexican laborers residing in the state of Oregon [15]. Valued only for their labor and not their humanity, little was done, if anything, to improve their living conditions, regulate wages or provide a just education for their children [16]. Such views would mark Mexican American school children with the stigma of mental inferiority for speaking Spanish [17]. To date, Mexican Americans in Oregon are racialized as a social class and viewed with disdain. [18–21].

Schools in the United States have deculturized Mexican Americans through coercive assimilation practices such as Anglo-conformity [22–24]. These experiences are traumatic and have made Mexican Americans feel ashamed, humiliated and denigrated inside their collective group identity [25,26]. Given their sociocultural reality, to create an egalitarian institution of higher education, community colleges must necessarily be reimagined as therapeutic communities to foment the healing of victimized and subordinated students who have contended with linguistic and cultural violence perpetrated against them [27].

## 1.2 The community college pathway

As the fastest growing demographic group, Mexican American students will continue to diversify institutions of higher education into the 21<sup>st</sup> century [28]. Chicana Feminist scholars posit that the pervasive institutionalized racism of Mexican Americans maintains substandard K-12 schooling. Community colleges thus become a pathway for education [29], fulfilling the educational needs of those who have been miseducated; these institutions are the first and only option they have to pursue a higher education [30]. For these reasons, educators must scrutinize, question, and contest deficit ideologies institutionalized into the ways in which community college funnels students into the job market, without guiding them toward a university education [31].

As some community colleges create alternative pedagogies and curricula that incorporate students' lived experiences in their education agenda, these institutions are influencing the transfer of students to universities [32]. According to The Chicano Studies Research Center at The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), twenty-three percent of Chicanas/os began their educational journey at a community college—a point of access to higher education—and received their doctorate [33]. In the case of Oregon, community colleges, which often serve as repositories of remediation, failed to promote student persistence in the pursuit of higher education [34]. Recent scholarship on community college populations indicates that, for Mexican American students to succeed, their experiences must be conceptualized within an understanding of the ways in which cultural capital emerges in their community college experience [35,36]. Thus, it is urged that these institutions tailor their programs to the cultural strengths Mexican American students bring [37]. Research must explore the ways in which Mexican American students utilize language and their social locations, in the context of the students' abilities and interests [38,39]. They must necessarily affirm and humanize the students' experience in their community college, while fostering active student engagement in the process of their language and cultural development, to encourage their transfer to four-year institutions [40].

## 1.3 Transformative resistance

Chicana/o scholars of education suggest that the educational experience of Mexican American students surfaces as a transformative resistance reinforced by an educational environment that supports resilience. When students are included as teachers/learners, the creation of knowledge centers on and draws from their experiential knowledge to make meaning of the world. When students learn to rely on free-thinking and their own knowledge about oppression, critically examining their world, they are inspired to engage social justice [41]. Transformative education liberates students from the unconscious subordination reproduced through cultural norms and patterns that inhibit their self-actualization [42].

According to Transformative Learning Theory adult learners quickly learn to become aware of their limited power, distorting their view of society. By critically examining such views, and accessing alternative perspectives, students change the ways they see things and engage in

transforming the world [43]. Transformative education acknowledges and recognizes the right for educators to cultivate an ethos of peace, human rights and social justice, by working with students to access the necessary tools to address the structure of oppression for the common good of humanity [44].

## 1.4 Chicana Feminist Theory

This study is mediated by Chicana Feminist Theory, which argues for the simultaneity and intersectionalities of race, class, gender, ethnicity, culture, immigration, and language [45–47]. The theorists posit that no form of oppression is above the other. That is, Chicana means more than just identifying with Mexican culture, it is a social and political stance in problematizing deeply entrenched social inequities [48, 49], aiming to achieve, social, political and economic equality for all [50, 51]. Because Chicana feminists recognize intersecting forms of disempowerment such as racism, homophobia, and social inequality, they render obsolete archaic misconceptions of superiority [52, 53].

Next, the authors present an overview of the methodology and identification of the participants in this study. This section is followed by a subsequent analysis of themes that emerged, followed by a discussion and conclusion of the study, closing with recommendations for practice.

This study focuses on:

- (1) Memories about early schooling experiences.
- (2) Major influences in attending A Gathering Place of Peace Community College.

## 2 Methodology

This case study relies on critical ethnographic methods and embodies an intersubjective consciousness in highlighting the stories of people of color as necessary in the disruption of master narratives that reproduce racial inequality in schools and society [54–56]. *Testimonio* surfaced as the most appropriate approach to collect the data as it gave voice to the silenced realities of the participants and enabled them to speak their truth at the forefront of their lived experiences [57].

### 2.1 Participants and data collection

Data were drawn from continuing research that began Spring 2011; the data include students with whom the researchers have continued to have contact. Among the participants, nine attended community college immediately after high school, while six enrolled later in their adult lives. Six female and nine male students between the ages of eighteen and thirty-three participated.

In collaboration with Mexican American students at A Gathering Place of Peace Community College located in *Santiam* (*Santiam* in the *Kalapuya* native indigenous language of Oregon refers to a place of many seasons), Oregon, and through the relationships established and maintained over time, the experiences of the participants were culled and presented. Fifteen students engaged in guided interviews, and *pláticas* (*Pláticas* are informal conversations in Mexican communities used as a research methodology by Chicana feminist scholars) whereby participants provided their *testimonios* [58, 59]. Data were also collected through participant observation and recorded in field notes and later analyzed to isolate the themes participants shared in common [60].

### 2.2 Data analysis

Data were analyzed by utilizing a thematic coding process relying on the dialectics of subjectivity with the research participants. Important in recalling memories was to identify feelings associated with such thoughts, exploring the students' motivation to pursue a community college education [61, 62]. Emergent themes about students' resilience to overcome life difficulties emerged and were utilized in the completion of the coding process [63], to document their respective community college pathway.

Three themes emerged: The first one focused on Pedagogies of Hurt. It informed traumatic memories experienced by students in their early schooling, as they spoke about the ways in which they internalized feeling of hurt and of being perceived as incompetent. Number two detailed stories of *Pobreza* or Poverty as Numbness. While carrying constant recollections about growing up poor, participants shared that they have never divulged their experiences with poverty, not even among family. The third and final theme was The Community College Experience

as Transformative Resistance. This indicated their idealism as motivated by memories of their lived experiences and their desire to make change in society.

### 3 Findings and discussion

There was overlap in the three emergent themes in relation to the research participants which are explained in detail below. Most importantly, students remained committed to their education, they recognized that reflecting on their past amplified their understanding of the importance of education, even when mediated by difficult experiences they had endured. The discussion begins with recollection of their internalized trauma.

#### 3.1 Pedagogies that wound

The students who participated in this study displayed a strong need to speak about their early schooling experiences. Their recollections were often narrated with deep emotion and anger. In the *pláticas*, they expressed feelings of powerlessness and subordination. For example, as we discussed pedagogies that wound, *Lucha* spoke about an interaction with a teacher during her senior year.

I was in class and I couldn't remember what he said, I asked him something, and . . . he flat out told me; I don't know why you're here you're not even going to graduate . . . I was like . . . I have enough credits to graduate.

The teacher devalued and put in "her place" as someone from whom not much was expected. Despite having more than the necessary credits to graduate, *Lucha* kept the knowledge she carried inside herself, clarifying that she only took the class to increase her GPA. She continued: "I am only taking this class because I got a D on my transcripts." Triumphant, when she graduated, she brought him proof.

I showed him my diploma and said to him, "You thought I wasn't going to graduate—what's up?" He didn't say nothing back to me, I think that is the best way to deal with people who try to put you down and stuff, by showing them otherwise, saying to them "I thought you said I wouldn't do it."

Although deeply wounded by his words, *Lucha* did not give him the upper hand. So, in addition to taking her diploma as evidence of her competence, she challenged his thinking about her ability to complete high school. His treatment of her was par for the course. The teacher did not even acknowledge his mistreatment of students, when he devalued or put them down for what he perceived to be their lack of interest or what he perceived as their inability to do the work.

Another participant, *Bella*, spoke about stereotypes attributed to Mexican schoolgirls during her secondary education. She often felt belittled and expressed that students felt demoralized, often accepting these exaggerations as truth. This was the case with their notions that all Mexican girls end up pregnant and dropping out of school. *Bella* recalled, "Both in middle and high school, [I heard] white teachers talking about Mexican girls and how they would get pregnant and not finish . . . I didn't want to be one of those statistics . . . given to Mexican girls."

*Bella* was interested in school. As she experienced it, teachers of her ethnicity were there to support her and helped students with their work, teaching them to take a position against such comments. She recalled being told, "'You are not going to get pregnant; you are going to go on to college.' They really pushed us to do good." Without exception, the participants in this study learned to resist and contest such racist and classist ideologies.

Early on, respondent, *Felipe Angel*, was mindful of the ways in which ideologies emerged as racialized social class. At the time, *Felipe Angel* said he didn't have the words to express what he felt, but his contribution states.

In high school I had to do three years in one; I didn't have an understanding of schooling when I was younger. The teachers didn't care if I continued in school or not. It didn't matter if you failed, you still got passed anyway. You had to continue where you left off, it felt like you were tossed over.

In his view, *Felipe Angel* experienced teachers seeing him as unworthy of investment in his educational development. Such deficit views have been upheld by socially reproduced ideologies of smartness linked to whiteness by mainstream educators within the structure of schooling that surveil and exile the other [64–68]. *Felipe Angel* continued:

In high school teachers would ask white students what colleges they wanted to go to and would help them out. . . . In the Willamette Valley of Oregon, Mexicans worked the fields and whites . . . owned everything; we were just the kids who would work

for them when we got out of school. White kids were the ones who would take over the family business, but as Mexicans, I'd take over my mom's job ... That's what we were taught to believe.

What *Felipe Angel* experienced illustrates what critical pedagogues of teacher education have presented as the draconian and hurtful policies of tracking, underfunded schools, subtractive curriculum and low expectations that have been historically upheld through normalized white narratives that are exclusionary of minoritized groups through a narrative that reproduces notions of inclusive and universal access [69–72]. Sociologists argue that critical analysis of minoritized groups, socialized in rigid competitive societies disadvantage the other through social structures such as schools [73].

Mexican Americans are viewed as commodities for agricultural labor and perceived from deficit perspectives [74]. Such punitive pedagogical approaches in learning have been traumatizing to students [75]. These experiences have both cognitive and affective consequences when such values and beliefs are relied upon to evaluate students. Educators must learn to recognize and provide alternative options to frame the experiences that derided groups in society have sociohistorically endured [76]. Given their reality, community colleges must reimagine their institution as therapeutic communities where alternative spaces are created for students to feel empowered through reflection of their family legacies and their writing [77, 78]. Central to their internalized trauma, was their experience with poverty.

### 3.2 *Pobreza* numbness

When it came to examining poverty, students spoke about experiencing an emotional numbness, at times struggling to make sense of how they are in comparison to more privileged students. Students seldom spoke about their experiences and were reluctant to share their recollections, as they looked down and away, suggesting discomfort with such memories. *Lucha* spoke about her family's living conditions.

It was really hard for us, I was like five or six years old, and I remember my mom waking us up like at four in the morning—it sucked. She would leave us with our aunt sometimes; my aunt treated us so bad. My aunt—ooh my aunt! *Y era familia* and she was family. Our early lived experiences were like many other Mexican families.

Aware that such conditions were something she had in common with Mexican Americans in the community, and given lack of resources, parents often relied on social networks for support in order to work and provide for their families. This is a stressful and difficult reality of Mexican immigrants, as their working-class experience is often misunderstood as lack of ambition by apathetic parents who devalue the schooling of their children. *Lucha* recalled her family's struggle,

In middle school my mom got us our own apartment she was with my dad already. But it was really cramped conditions, there were thirteen people to a three-bedroom apartment, including my mom and dad. My mom was pregnant during that time with my younger sister, so they had their own room. My aunt, her baby and her partner were living in ... my sister's room ... My other cousins, three or four of them were sharing one room, and my sister and I would sleep in the living room.

Cramped quarters was a common everyday reality. Lack of privacy and a stressful environment dominated her life, but *Lucha* recognized that it was what families did to survive—a reality she shared in common with many in her neighborhood. Such lived realities are outside the experiences of most white mainstream educators, and often not included in the pedagogical or historical narrative of the student experience [79].

*Bella* remembered the difficulties that her family endured. When they settled in the city of *Santiam*,

My dad worked in the *pinos* or pine trees. My mom did not work as my dad would make her stay home. When my dad got arrested she would work in the canneries, restaurants, fields whatever work she could get. It wasn't too good. After he got arrested [for drug violations] my mom was always working, and we moved back and forth a lot.

*Bella's* memories of her mom and dad reference a stereotypic Mexican family headed by the male, reaffirming sexism with machista attribute assigned to Mexican males. Timid and uneasy about her family experiences, *Bella* expressed that it was important for people to know the complex, difficult and painful realities that Mexican working-class families struggle to overcome with the scarce resources they are able to allocate while living on the margins of poverty. In that context, *Bella* recognized her mother's strength and her resilience. The environment in which

they lived added to the internalized harm they carried, while *Bella* did not talk about relying on public assistance, *Felipe Angel* recalled the stigma of surviving on aid, something he shared in common with most of the participants.

*Felipe Angel* recalled feelings of humiliation in relation to lack of resources. He spoke about the struggles to overcome impoverished conditions.

[We] lived off welfare our whole lives—there were six kids total. My older brothers worked at a potato shed to help pay for stuff; it was the way it was. Christmas time was the worst, three presents underneath the tree, me and my brothers had to share one basically, and we shared clothes; it was embarrassing that people noticed this at school, it was pretty hard.

Given the everyday realities of poor and miseducated students, community college scholarship on Mexican Americans speaks to the need of creating a sense of belonging for students from diverse backgrounds. This particularly holds true about the way students interact in the classroom. When and if the experiences of students are recognized and acknowledged as part of the learning process, the literature advises faculty to explore relying on culturally affirming approaches for understanding diverse lived experiences [80]. In addition to making them visible, they and others learn about the divergent realities they confront.

### 3.3 Community college experience as transformative resistance

As a social laboratory where students from divergent experiences interact, community colleges as sites for therapeutic healing, must necessarily incorporate students' lived experiences into instructional practices. By teaching them to claim their stories and experiences and listening with a heart, the master narrative becomes disrupted [81, 82]. Despite the participants socialization, an idealism of survival and hope emerges during their community college experience. *Lucha* offered that her education inspired her to become an entrepreneur,

I want to start my own business . . . [without] forgetting about my community—it's important to always return. It's what Chicano Studies has taught me . . . don't forget your roots, where you come from, or the people that helped you along the way. [With] financial means, do it . . . or even by talking to them and passing on knowledge.

While she might have had such insight in her daily interactions, *Lucha's* community college Chicana/o Studies classes guided her moral and social responsibility in regard to the needs of her community [83]. As *Bella* spoke about difficulties endured by her family, her aim was to improve conditions for her family and the community, carving a path for social mobility.

I hope to get a better job [to] help people. Most of my family have been working in restaurants, canneries and the fields most of their lives . . . I want to get . . . ahead . . . help Latina/o students in high school. For example, ESL students got a lot of help in going to college—I never got help because I was not in ESL.

Mindful of working-class struggle and social mobility, *Bella* perceived her education as a platform for advancement. Aware about pedagogies of hurt that excluded her from an equitable schooling experience, *Bella* relied on her feelings and experiences to help others.

Like all who participated in this project, *Felipe Angel* expected to use his education to help his family. He explained, "I couldn't go straight to college; my mom didn't have a job—we still had my little sister. It was hard on me and I went to work just to pay the bills." Consistent in *Felipe Angeles's* *testimonio*, such hardships inspired him to create access for others to pursue an education. Clearly, he understood his class position and expressed the need for his education to alleviate the socioeconomic burdens that he had overcome, and others continue to experience. He recognized the importance of staying grounded and never forgetting one's origins, because knowing who you are is foundational to practicing the holistic critical empathy and compassion he has harvested in the working-class struggle where he's gained a sense of belonging [84, 85].

## 4 Conclusions

In this study, participants spoke about the difficulties Mexican Americans experience in community college. While they want their experiences to be acknowledged and respected, they would like to see their experience used as guides in the transfer process. As they see it, such an approach is most likely to inspire self-determination in the pursuit of higher education [86, 87]. They expect faculty and administrators to perceive cultural differences as strengths, as they recognize the diverse learning experiences students confront in intercultural interactions [88].

Among participants, two students successfully completed courses to finish their associate degree. They both transferred to Oregon State University (OSU) where they obtained Bachelors of Arts in Ethnic Studies. At the time of completion of this article, one of the participants had

obtained his Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS), while a second was preparing to defend his thesis. The educational trajectory of the participants was one where a community was established at the above-mentioned institution to address student need. They were socialized and introduced to the culture of the college, meeting faculty and staff where they were provided a welcoming space to learn and interact. These approaches were critical to their success, as the culture of academia can be intimidating, especially to those of working-class experience. Those who advanced to higher education worked as graduate assistants, taught ethnic studies, and mentored students in their department. Because they were able to link their lived experiences in the academy, they were able to devise learning interactions to share with faculty and peers.

## 5 Recommendations for practice

Drawing on Chicana Feminist Theory, community colleges must gain an understanding of the ways in which transformative resistance is cultivated, so as to bridge a greater understanding of the transfer process. Toward that end, historical nuances deeply embedded as normalized practices in the institution must be addressed, beginning with the disruption of nativist discourses that target ethnic groups such as Mexican Americans. Historical deficit ideologies must be confronted in Oregon's community colleges, challenging and contesting beliefs that have been normalized as common sense practices.

Through critical reflection, educators must deconstruct internalized prejudices, stereotypes, and traumas accumulated in schooling and education. Collaborative work with students facilitates an examination of the inequalities they and their ancestors have inherited. Aailed, pedagogical *conocimientos* as a self-reflexive praxis whereby teachers, as teacher/learners, engage self and other in interaction, to explore tools of socialization deriving from family legacies of immigration, religion, language, work and education [89–91].

*Conocimiento* or coming to self-knowledge in interaction reveals experiences across time and space to fully engender self-love and social change among individuals who engage it, as communities of learners critically understand and analyze the systems and structures that keep them subordinated [92,93]. This approach must be incorporated in the professional development of faculty and staff to modify their views of Mexican Americans. Of equal importance is the need to address social distance and selective perceptions as both reproduce and justify stereotypes and assumptions about the population's abilities to attain a higher education. The literature on community colleges suggests that faculty-student mentorship is key in harnessing Mexican American student resiliency in the pursuit of higher education.

When students are disempowered through their K-12 education and their lived experiences, they act out as disqualified voices reinforcing deficit ideologies. Community colleges must begin a social transformation in serving the needs of the communities in which they work. By becoming conscious of one's sociohistorical position one is enabled to empathetically connect to the broader struggles of diverse communities. With such connections faculty and staff come to understand the critical social role they play in making a difference in students' lives, in regard to a college education. Through self-reflexive methodologies such as *conocimiento*, community colleges will move in the direction of social justice, as they work toward the common good.

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