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Transformative youth resistance and the School of
Ethnic Studies.

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“If There is No Struggle, There is No Progress”: Transformative Youth Activism and the School of Ethnic Studies

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Abstract In the wake of the Tucson Unified School District dismantling its highly successful Mexican American Studies (MAS) program, students staged walkouts across the district to demonstrate their opposition. Student-led walkouts were portrayed as merely “ditching,” and students were described as not really understanding why they were protesting. After these events, a group of student activists called UNIDOS organized and led the School of Ethnic Studies. This was a community school dedicated to teaching the forbidden MAS curriculum. In this article we present counternarratives from organizers, presenters, and participants in the School of Ethnic Studies. These narratives demonstrate the transformative resistance of students who created their own form of liberatory education. Our analysis highlights how student organizers led the creation of an autonomous, community-based educational space to allowed young people to engage in political analysis, self-reflection, and strategic organizing. We conclude with the implications for Ethnic Studies, urban education, and counternarrative.

Keywords Mexican American Studies · Ethnic Studies · Youth activism · Transformative resistance · Counternarrative · Tucson Unified School District

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Introduction

Frederick Douglass famously said, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will. If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” Since the 1960s, one component of the Tucson struggle has been implementation of Ethnic Studies within public schools, and particularly Mexican American Studies (MAS) classes. The youth movement has taken a central role in fighting for MAS classes, particular the youth coalition UNIDOS (United Non-Discriminatory Individuals in Demanding Our Studies). This group is comprised of local Tucson students and has played a central role in responding to Arizona’s HB2281 (currently A.R.S. § 115-12), which was designed to ban Ethnic Studies courses in public institutions. On April 26, 2011, UNIDOS demonstrated their commitment to the struggle for MAS through their dramatic takeover of the TUSD School Board meeting as an act of civil disobedience (Cabrera et al. 2011).

Despite the UNIDOS takeover and numerous other community protests, the classes were formally eliminated in January of 2012 by the TUSD school board. Almost immediately, hundreds of students walked out of school for 2 weeks throughout TUSD in protest of the ending of MAS classes (Huicochea 2012, January 24). Student walkouts were quickly discounted by school officials and media as simply cutting class. This dominant narrative portrayed student activism as reactionary and not connected to a critically conscious social movement. It is within this context that we present a series of counternarratives (Delgado 1989) that provide an alternative to the dominant narrative which highlight student transformative resistance. As Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) argue, there are multiple forms of resistance, and not all are equally effective at promoting equity. For example, if a student is not motivated by social justice and has no critique of oppression, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) argue that s/he is engaging in *reactionary behavior* that is ineffective at creating social change. They additionally argue that a student acting from a critique of oppression and motivated by social justice, is engaging in *transformative resistance* and this is when social change is likely to occur.

Amidst the walkouts, UNIDOS created the day-long School of Ethnic Studies where students could learn from the forbidden curriculum of MAS. Within this article, we present several counternarratives from organizers, presenters, and participants, to demonstrate how the School of Ethnic Studies was a manifestation of youth-led transformative resistance. We begin the article by defining narrative and its relationship to power/legitimacy, offering the Tucson context which led to the elimination of MAS, highlight the dominant narrative which infantilizes the student protesters, and offer our counternarrative regarding the School of Ethnic Studies.

Dominant Narrative, Counternarrative, and Tucson Context

In Delgado’s (1989) seminal piece, “A Plea for Narrative,” he argues that the power of the dominant narrative derives from the means by which it masks the reality of coercive influence and oppressive structures while, “tempting us to believe that the way things are is inevitable” (pp. 2416–2417). Delgado argues that the narratives of

the oppressed have the potential to subvert, destabilize, and challenge the “official narrative.” A counternarrative is one that functions to disrupt the normality of the dominant paradigm—demonstrating alternative interpretations and realities are possible while adjusting the future direction of the overall narrative. Many Critical Race Theory¹ scholars have utilized this methodological approach, highlighting racism and sexism in graduate school (Solorzano and Yosso 2001), the unintended consequences of sloppily implemented affirmative action programs (Aguirre 2000), or reframing campus segregation as cultural preservation (Villalpando 2003). These counternarratives not only disrupt the common sense of hegemonic educational practices, but also, highlight that alternative realities are possible.

HB2281, TUSD, and the Dominant Narrative

In the case of TUSD, a dominant narrative emerged as a means of justifying the District’s responses to HB2281. HB2281 allows the Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction to withhold 10 % of a district’s funding if s/he determines that a district offers classes that include any of the following:

- Promote the overthrow of the United States Government
- Promote resentment toward a race or class of people
- Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group
- Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals²

Even though the constitutionality of this law is being challenged,³ the TUSD governing board on multiple occasions attempted to eliminate the highly effective MAS program (Cabrera et al. 2012) after being found out of compliance with HB2281 (Cabrera et al. 2011; O’Leary et al. 2012).

For example, on April 26, 2011, TUSD Board President Dr. Mark Stegeman introduced a resolution that would make the MAS courses electives as a step towards complete elimination of the program. Although there had been massive student opposition vocalized since 2006, UNIDOS made an interesting, strategic calculation. They would physically disrupt the meeting because if there was no meeting, there could be no vote. If there was no vote, the classes would be preserved. Utilizing grassroots direct action training, UNIDOS students chained themselves to board members’ chairs just before the meeting was going to begin. TUSD Superintendent John Pedicone negotiated with adults in a back room to postpone the board meeting and voting to a later date without arresting any youth protestors.⁴

¹ Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a line of academic inquiry which seeks to uncover how superficially race-neutral social policies can and do recreate systemic racial oppression. CRT challenges the objectivity of social science research while concurrently highlighting the value of experiential knowledge from communities of color. It was originally developed within the legal field, and has been applied in education (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995).

² For full text of HB2281, please refer to: <http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/hb2281s.pdf>.

³ For more in-depth coverage of this legal challenge, please refer to: www.saveethnicstudies.org.

⁴ Description of this event is inadequate. For video from the inside of the protest, please see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPZxCDMbZec&feature=player_profilepage.

The students clearly understood there were going to be consequences for these actions, but they thought this act of civil disobedience was worth it if the actions preserved their classes (Cabrera et al. 2011). Some of these costs included a YouTube™ video saying the way to deal with the protesters was to “shoot them in the head” (McHugh 2011, May 5). In school board meetings after the April 26th action, UNIDOS students were warned by local community supporters that there was a police investigation being done and photos of them were seen on the clipboards of plainclothes police officers at subsequent TUSD board meetings.

Following the protest, a dominant narrative was created that infantilized the students and portrayed them as reactionary. For example, Superintendent Pedicone wrote an (2011, May 1) Op-Ed in the *Arizona Daily Star* where he argued “Adults used students as pawns in TUSD ethnic studies protest.” He believed the board takeover was orchestrated by adults in the community. The other statewide paper, the *Arizona Republic* (2011, April 28) also ran an editorial arguing that in TUSD, “Adults need to reassert themselves.” These narratives were completely devoid of the possibility that students acted intentionally, thoughtfully, and in a critical, strategic manner in the fight for education. Instead, the students were portrayed as incapable and in need of increased adult supervision and discipline.

MAS Elimination, Student Walkouts, and the Dominant Narrative

On January 10, 2012, TUSD capitulated to the pressure stemming from HB2281 and eliminated all MAS courses. The resolution the TUSD board adopted was almost Orwellian in its framing as it read, “[MAS] is and shall remain an organizational contributor to TUSD’s commitment to greater academic social equity for Hispanic Students” (TUSD 2012, p. 1). The next sentence stated that all MAS activities were immediately suspended, but programmatic elimination was insufficient. The next day, school administrators entered classes during school hours with boxes labeled “banned books,” proceeded to remove the texts from the classrooms in front of MAS students, and sent them to a repository.⁵ TUSD officially said that the texts were not banned,⁶ and to a certain degree they were correct. Non-MAS teachers and students had access to forbidden curricula in their libraries and at other schools/classrooms that did not teach MAS courses. Thus, these texts were only banned for MAS teachers and students, making the prohibition more insidious than a district-wide banning.

Subsequently, MAS teachers were instructed to remove all MAS materials from their classrooms which included additional books, artwork, and posters. In response, hundreds of students walked out of schools throughout the district (Huicochea 2012, January 24). TUSD Board President Dr. Stegeman was dismissive of their grievance when he stated, “I don’t think that the courses you choose to offer is a civil rights

⁵ For student first-hand descriptions of this event, please see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJW4q2QMZos&feature=player_embedded#! For the list of banned books, please refer to: <http://drcintli.blogspot.com/2012/01/tusd-banned-books-lists.html>.

⁶ <http://www.tusd1.org/contents/news/press1112/01-17-12.html>.

issue.”⁷ Additionally, TUSD Superintendent Pedicone sent a letter to the Dean of University of Arizona’s MAS Department stating, “On Tuesday, Professors from the Mexican American Studies Department, together with a student organization, encouraged students not to attend school.”⁸ The dominant narrative was simple, consistent, and straightforward. Students had no legitimate complaints, needed to be led by adults (although not pro-MAS adults), were incapable of doing anything on their own, and potentially dangerous. It is within this context that we offer our counternarratives regarding the School of Ethnic Studies.

Counternarrative: UNIDOS and the School of Ethnic Studies

Within days of the MAS elimination and the book banning, students throughout the district walked out of school in acts of civil disobedience reminiscent of the 1960s LA blowouts and 1969 Tucson walkouts (Biggers 2012, January 23). The student voice was noticeably absent in any of the decisions made about the future of MAS, and therefore, UNIDOS declared, “While the institution continues to fail us, the community continues to rise.” UNIDOS believed that if TUSD and the state of Arizona would not provide critical, relevant education, they would create it and offer it themselves. Therefore, UNIDOS members created the School of Ethnic Studies under the idea that “AUTONOMOUS EDUCATION IS POSSIBLE. Let’s create a school where education is meant to empower our community!”⁹ The School was opened for students who chose to walk out during a regular scheduled school day and instead learn the “forbidden curriculum” of MAS. We share the experiences of an UNIDOS student organizer, three University professors who presented at the School of Ethnic Studies, student poetry written at the event, and student participant reflection comments. The UNIDOS and University Professor counternarratives are first-person accounts of the School of Ethnic Studies while the student poetry and reflections are included as documents given to the authors during the event.

Counternarrative: Elisa Meza, UNIDOS Organizer, University of Arizona Graduate, 2012

While I was attending the University of Arizona in 2010, Arizona’s racist law SB1070 drew my attention and I began to notice how the entire nation was watching Arizona. While SB1070 garnered most of the headlines, there were several other anti-Latina/o bills passed that summer including the anti-Ethnic Studies HB2281. I felt as if my brown skin was under siege. When one of my local Tucson friends from elementary school asked me to come to a protest against the ban on MAS, I

⁷ http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=767&Itemid=74&jumival=8189 (11:05).

⁸ For Dr. Pedicone’s full letter, please see: http://content.clearchannel.com/cc-common/mlib/667/01/667_1327931624.pdf.

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/events/352274674784354/>.

discovered that youth had been immersed in the fight to preserve their studies for years. I was inspired and quickly became part of the struggle as a member of UNIDOS, devoting the next 2 years fighting for the rights to education and to youth organizing for sustainable change. After the elimination of MAS, UNIDOS channeled our collective energies into creating our school, the School of Ethnic Studies.

The Strategy Behind the School of Ethnic Studies

The voice of youth in Tucson is consistently disregarded by local media and administrators within TUSD. There has been an element of adult entitlement that came with being in charge of youth education needs. The elimination of MAS was a visible demonstration of that entitlement. Latina/o youth have subjected themselves to potential harm protesting the elimination of the only program in TUSD that successfully closed the brown/white achievement gap. Yet the privilege to drown out the voices of youth has since prevailed. Administrators opposing MAS have spent more time destabilizing youth agency than supporting youth development.

In the beginning of the 2012, UNIDOS set out to create the School of Ethnic Studies. It was paradoxically spontaneous, yet driven by over a year's worth of organizing to make it happen. We identified the date TUSD utilized to report daily attendance to receive state funding, Tuesday, January 24, 2012, and targeted this day to open the School of Ethnic Studies' first session. That day was already rumored to be a walkout day, and it seemed like the perfect time to provide autonomous, critical, youth-led education. It would be a day to celebrate the education TUSD refused to provide its community. The previous week was packed with sadness and anger as MAS entered its final moments of existence within TUSD. It was obvious that if there was any time to resist, it was then.

UNIDOS always imagined the possibility of creating autonomous community-based education. Education should prioritize the growth and vibrancy of its constituents. Education should celebrate the cultures, languages, and talent of its students. What happens, if these priorities have been oppressed and threatened? We also had to ask ourselves additional questions that were more pragmatic in nature: How can we create a space and make it available for the entire community? How can we do so in so little time, few people, and limited resources? How can everyone be a part of the organizing? What are the community resources we can draw upon to create our community school?

Every question had an immediate answer. It wasn't difficult to think of names to help us or to think of organizations that would mobilize, donate, and attend. UNIDOS members shouted out names, people, and venues. As quick as we could list every supportive group in Tucson, the skeleton of something beautiful emerged. We also listed potential presenters who would serve as educators and facilitators at the school. We had professors, community activists who have been fighting since the 1960s, media makers, artists, musicians, and cooks. I remember feeling empowered creating the lineup of folks who would be presenting as nationally-renowned scholars were clamoring for the opportunity to work in our school!

There were so many people who quickly replied to our requests to participate that the structure of the event shifted. It would not just be a day for presentations. It

would be a day for engagement, dialogue, and art creation. The concept of “school” transformed. Our agency as individuals was made possible from the support the entire community had for MAS. We were not the spokespeople for a cause. We were the instruments and foot soldiers who had a vision to reinstate the community’s voice, energy, and history, as our strongest source of education.

In less than a week, everything was secured. The historic *El Casino* Ballroom donated its space for the event. The room would be opened Monday evening for a community art event, hosted by UNIDOS and a local artist named Mel Dominguez. Mel donated her time and energy to getting paintbrushes or spray paint cans into everyone’s hands. We made original stencils for the School of Ethnic Studies while local DJ Alias had his speakers and turntables filling the Ballroom with mixes and beats. The creative energy of that evening set the tone for the following day. The walls and stage were decorated with community-created art to greet everyone bright and early the next morning.¹⁰

The urgency in Tucson’s situation always pushed us forward, and the community did not need convincing when UNIDOS sent out requests for attendance, participation, and resources, even on a school and work day. We simply filled a gap that formed when MAS faced its final days within TUSD. We wanted to show the possibilities of preserving our education by any means, even without the district’s permission.

The School of Ethnic Studies

With a full day’s agenda, we had an empowering lineup of professors, MAS alumni, poets, musicians and a home-cooked Mexican lunch to offer students. We mixed up the amount of critical lectures with slam poetry. For a couple hours in the day, there were breakout sessions. These sessions gave the community the opportunity to visit speakers and organizations individually while engaging in intimate dialogue. Community organizations such as *Derechos Humanos*, No More Deaths, MEChA from Tucson and Phoenix, *Tierra y Libertad*, and Tucson Youth Poetry Slam led these sessions. Professors had their own tables filled with participants. A local bookstore owner, Joy Soler from Revolutionary Grounds, facilitated a discussion at her table that was covered in banned books.

Just as important it was to engage the community in the making of our School, it was important to protect our own voices from being misinterpreted. UNIDOS always prepared to protect our narrative through strategic media tools. Jason Aragón from Pan Left Productions live streamed the event, which allowed supporters across the nation to take part. We had the local movement photographer Chris Summitt actively capture moments of learning and dialogue.¹¹ It was always crucial for us to continue telling our story on our terms. By having the support and encouragement of local media mentors like Jason and Chris, that storytelling became possible. However, to maintain agency within our own framework of our School, it was important to build distinct boundaries for local media who were not supportive in the past.

¹⁰ For images of the art event, please see: <http://chrissummitt.com/blog/protestaz/unidosart/>.

¹¹ <http://chrissummitt.com/blog/protestaz/unidosart/>.

Before the event began, UNIDOS sent out a press release to local news stations requesting that if reporters wanted comments from youth, they would have to wait until school was out of session at 2:30 p.m. Unfortunately, a local Tucson news reporter disregarded the large signs posted on the entrance doors stating “NO MEDIA ALLOWED.” When I noticed her taking notes in the back of the room, I reminded her that she needed to respect the education of youth and asked her to return at 2:30 for interviews. During her reluctant departure, she stated that the School of Ethnic Studies was not education and we were possibly endangering the safety of students who were supposed to be at school. All too often MAS (and UNIDOS) youth were portrayed as endangering the general public and not being serious about education. For once, the youth had the agency to set the narrative on our terms.

Education was brought to the masses in a way we envisioned it by breaking down institutionalized classroom structures. Youth resisted the boundaries the district had created by eliminating MAS. For one day, students chose to participate in youth-led education, demonstrating to TUSD and the community that MAS was going to exist in one form or another. While the community continues to attend TUSD board meetings pushing for the reinstatement of MAS, many still brainstorm what autonomous education will look like for Tucson. With national and local support, visions will continue to push forward our educational possibilities.

Introducing Counternarratives of Adult Presenters

Professors in the University of Arizona’s Mexican American Studies Department were singled out as orchestrating the School of Ethnic Studies without any clear description of their involvement. This was similar to the charges that adults were behind the April 26th school board takeover. The narrative that professors are manipulating students has tangible effects on the lives of those demonized. Dr. Nolan Cabrera had the nameplate on his office door defaced after giving a public lecture on MAS. Dr. Roberto Cintli Rodriguez has received multiple death threats for his involvement in the MAS controversy. One directly to his office phone line said, “You’re going to find a [357] magnum up your f***** a**” (Herreras 2011, July 7). A White supremacist pled guilty to making one of these threats, for which he only received probation (Huicochea 2012c, August 8). Despite the threats, the three professors in this counternarrative (Cintli, Cabrera, and Romero) all believe that supporting the students and the School of Ethnic Studies far outweighed these risks.

Counternarrative: Dr. Roberto Cintli Rodriguez, PhD, Mexican American Studies, University of Arizona¹²

I have been involved with MAS/TUSD virtually since its inception. I have contributed books, videos and nationally syndicated columns, to its *maiz*-based or Indigenous-based curriculum. In the past few years, I have also been actively

¹² Dr. Cintli does not consider his work a counternarrative, but a narrative unto itself, primarily because *maiz*-based stories have a presence on this continent, long before the arrival of Columbus and company.

involved in its defense. Despite the involvement of scholars such as myself one of the most amazing stories regarding the defense of *Raza* Studies is that, contrary to what the media and MAS critics have suggested, since 2006 it has been primarily student-led. In this sense the media and opponents of MAS have it upside down. They assumed the older activists and organizers were working with students leading them. It was quite the reverse. My involvement with different youth groups in this movement, from Social Justice Education Project to UNIDOS and MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*), has mostly been in a support role, advisor and as that of educator.¹³

When UNIDOS invited me to present at their School of Ethnic Studies, I was asked to address them at two separate times. I first addressed the students in the large opening circle that began that day's lessons, contextualizing the state's effort to dismantle MAS as part of a "civilization war." Of course, those were Tom Horne's words and his prism. Nonetheless, as a community, we had to respond to those charges. Indeed, I told the students that MAS derives its roots from *maiz* culture, as opposed to Greco-Roman and reminded them that we did not declare war against Western Civilization. Quite the contrary, it was Mr. Horne who declared war against MAS, repeatedly claiming its knowledge base is racist (Horne 2010, 2012, June 22). The knowledge-base is Indigenous, but the teachings are rooted in a combination of culture (e.g., the Aztec Calendar¹⁴) and respect for all humanity (e.g., *In Lak Ech*).

When I taught during the breakout session, I introduced participants to the *Nahuatl* (Aztec) Legend of the Suns creation story (*Codex Chimapolca*), the story of how the universe, the earth, and humans were created. As part of this story, humans received *maiz* reluctantly from the ants in *Tamuanchan*. I wanted to offer a Creation story to the students in my session for a number of reasons. Most are Mexican/Chicano but with very little sense of their Indigenous heritage. Creation stories have the potential to connect them to these roots. In addition, the racial politics of Arizona continue to marginalize these students, and Indigenous Creation stories can help students feel attached to the continent as opposed to alien.

This specific Creation story is unique in that it does not provide answers. Instead, the objective of teaching this story is for students to figure out why the ants were initially reluctant to share their corn with Quetzalcoatl and the newly created humans. Any two people, or any two groups of people, can spontaneously perform this as a play. At the UNIDOS School of Ethnic Studies, the students did this and told me the ants had good reason to be reluctant. The ants feared humans would be greedy, hoard the seeds, sell the corn, and (modern adaptation) genetically modify the *maiz*. This ancient creation story resonated with them as they interpreted it and added to it, while highlighting the important task of preserving the original and organic seeds of this continent.

¹³ I began my student activism indirectly in junior high school (1968 Walkouts), but more directly in high school in 1970–1971, when I joined my campus MEChA.

¹⁴ After the January 2012 dismantling of MAS, my colleague Norma Gonzalez at MAS-TUSD was forced to take down the image of the Aztec Calendar as she was teaching it. The principal said that it was now illegal to teach Mexican history and culture.

This was my contribution to the School of Ethnic Studies. The students, on the other hand, contributed to that Creation narrative, making them active participants of a culture and not simply recipients of long-ago stories. Through their participation, they also demonstrated the concept of Creation-Resistance. They did not simply resist, but created education independent of the state or TUSD. We can see the larger MAS struggle within the same context; it is transformational. We create as our opponents react. That is how one wins, not simply resisting but creating while resisting.

Counternarrative: Nolan L. Cabrera, PhD, College of Education, University of Arizona

Despite my activist background, I actually began my involvement in the MAS controversy running statistics regarding programmatic participation and student academic success (e.g., Cabrera et al. 2012). I thought that as a postdoc (now professor) at the University of Arizona, this was the way I could best utilize my skills at the service of something larger than peer-review. I was going to present my statistics to the TUSD school board during the night of the April 26th takeover. I fully expected the classes to be eliminated on that evening, but the idealism and dedication of the UNIDOS organizers snapped me out of my nihilism and helped rekindle hope.

When UNIDOS approached me to present at the School of Ethnic Studies, I was honored but actually wondered, why me? There are literally dozens of nationally-renowned academics who were willing and able to participate. I still do not know, but was honored by the invitation. I was also nervous having been previously targeted for my involvement in the MAS controversy. I felt, however, that the students were risking far more than me and it would be morally irresponsible to decline. UNIDOS members asked me to talk about the relevance of Paulo Freire's life work in the context of banning MAS. As *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was one of the banned books, this created an opportunity to truly engage the meaning of this work in the context of using education to fight for knowledge legitimacy and against oppression (Cabrera 2012).

When I entered the School of Ethnic Studies, I noticed a distinct stamp of youth ownership over the physical infrastructure. There were several six-foot tall murals hung throughout the building that were a combination of culture (e.g., Quetzalcoatl) and resistance (e.g., "Defend Walkout 2012"). I found it fitting that in a space dedicated to transformative education, UNIDOS first transformed the physical space. Not only were there constant visual reminders that this was an autonomous, youth-led space, but there were periodic interludes where the DJ would lead an impromptu dance party. I kept asking myself how much more I would have tolerated lectures on *The Scarlet Letter* if they were punctuated with dance parties.

I was the last presenter of the day and I had a lot of time for reflection. I was a student at both Stanford and UCLA where professors in each college of education taught Freire, and my peers frequently complained about these readings. In contrast, I held the stage in front of a hundred 14–19 year-olds who previously participated

in 7 hours of presentations/activities only to end with my lecture about Freirian pedagogy. I marveled the moment I took the stage. These were students wanted to learn about Paulo Freire, taking personal risks to attend as some of their peers were previously suspended for participating in walkouts (Huicochea 2012b, January 27). This did not matter, as they were willing to sacrifice for the possibility of meaningful, critical education. While my peers at Stanford and UCLA too often relied on Cliff's Notes© to get through difficult texts, these students were fighting for the right to learn from them.

This was, in large part, because they experienced oppressive practices in their everyday lives whether they are related to economics, race, gender, or sexual orientation. Thus, the text resonated with them. I spoke for 20 min at the end of the day, and the students were invested, engaged, and wanted to learn more even though they had been in school for all day. There was a certain irony being immersed in a district that continually espoused the virtue of civic engagement, and concurrently demeaned the actions of these students who were willing to fight for their education.

The students' dedication and investment in their education offered potential and possibility. They showed that critical, relevant education was possible despite the efforts of the state and the district. They demonstrated how dedicated youth do not have to wait for adults to provide them with educational opportunities. Finally, through the students' transformative resistance, they challenged and transformed me in the process. Frequently, I find myself isolated from the community in the ivory tower running statistics. Given the racial politics of Arizona, it is extremely difficult to remain hopeful. The lasting images of that day keep me going with the reminder that progress is always possible. If I cannot see how, it is because I lack sufficient creative imagination.

Counternarrative: Andrea Romero, PhD, Mexican American Studies, University of Arizona

For 12 years as a University professor, I have taught Mexican American Studies at the University and in afterschool sessions with teenagers in the community. So, the night after the vote to end MAS, faculty from the University of Arizona gathered and wrote a brief message to share with other faculty nationally. We were all in shock. Yet, the students were prepared and did not stop their actions. It was as if the end of traditional Ethnic Studies was a new beginning for them, an open road to a new path for education. They continued to mobilize, organize, and inspire. They walked out of schools, they chanted, and they withstood suspensions and racist discipline, such as staying at school on Saturdays to clean bathrooms. When TUSD pulled MAS books out of classrooms, and literally out of the hands of students, I think we all directly experienced how precious this knowledge¹⁵ really was and how easily it could be taken from our community. It was clear that we (teachers/students), as knowledge holders, desperately needed to share the books and

¹⁵ Precious Knowledge is a dual reference. First, is the concept of Quetzalcoatl (Quetzal = Precious/Beautiful and Coatl = Serpent (symbolic of knowledge)) which was a foundational component of the MAS curriculum. Second, is the documentary about TUSD's MAS program of the same name (<http://www.preciousknowledgefilm.com/>).

information. When the female UNIDOS students floated this idea of the School of Ethnic Studies, I thought it was brilliant. Of course, I would support them in any way that I could. They asked if I could teach a roundtable session on a banned book or the content from my Chicano/a Psychology class. I was very cognizant that it was risky for my job as a UA professor to attend this event. It was likely that there would be a lot of media, and we had already received messages from within the university that we should not be involved in TUSD MAS activities.

The morning of the School of Ethnic Studies I packed my traveling file folder with all the banned books I had on my shelf, and a few additional ones from my Chicano/a Studies class. I arrived mid-day to a packed parking lot, while the front door and sidewalk were crowded with reporters. I slipped by them and into the building. Beautiful aromas were drifting from the front kitchen. I walked in and saw mothers of the students stirring enormous pots of *pozole*. I was handed a cup of *pozole* and a spoon by an activist immigrant lawyer. I walked out and stood near the back of the packed room in *El Casino* Ballroom. Students and community members sat, engaged, listening, and reacting to a talk about Paulo Freire. I ran into one of the student leaders I work with at a local youth center, and he introduced me to other School of Ethnic Studies participants.

Soon after, Elisa found me and led me to a table and quickly filled the table with youth for a breakout session. We went around the circle and said our names and why we were at the School of Ethnic Studies that day. There was an indescribable connection at the table as we all were equal in our dedication to Ethnic Studies in that moment. I gave a brief intro about my Chicana/o Psychology class, and the concepts of ethnic identity and their importance in the study of psychology. Then we took turns reading stanzas from a poem, “Borderlands” by Gloria Anzaldúa. Students talked about what the meaning of the poem was to each of them. Then I gave them blank paper and we all wrote our own poems about that day. In turn, we each read our poems aloud and discussed them quickly before we had to move to the next breakout session. One of the youth with a leather jacket and a pink mohawk handed me his poem saying I could keep it and use it. It read:

“KIDTOXXIC”

young man, I see free,
 I’m me, not thee.
 So I give it my all.
 No need to start up a brawl,
 But I do stand up &
 Fight; back, push them
 back for what should
 be free. Our education,
 The Marathon shouldn’t
 be this way, for my
 ancestors passed on,
 but I’m here
 to stay
 G.T. 1-24-12

In a few short lines, the student lodged a critique, affirmed a commitment to non-violence, valued education, highlighted the need to resist, acknowledged the past, and looked the future. Powerful narratives like this were common throughout the day. It was the beauty of the action of the students, who moved with grace and purpose, as the school of their own imagination had become reality. The splendor of community education transformation was real, sustainable and truly the end goal of the movement and the protests. The objective was not only to push back, but also to create and envision something different from that which was not working. The School of Ethnic Studies set into motion something new that aligned our hearts, souls, and identities in a way that we had not felt in education before.

Counternarrative: Student Voices from the School of Ethnic Studies

Many of the student participants in the School of Ethnic Studies completed evaluations of their experiences during the day. While most responses were brief, they tended to point to one key issue: The event was empowering and filled a critical gap left by the elimination of the MAS program. When asked if they would continue participating in future Schools of Ethnic Studies, students almost uniformly responded with “yes” and then elaborated:

I finally get to learn about things that relate to me (15-year-old)

I want to know my history. (17 year-old)

I would like to learn more about my culture (15-year-old)

It is very eye opening, and helps me understand about other people in my community. (15-year-old)

The education is better than required history. I love it. (14-year-old)

It will educate me in the way TUSD doesn't want me to. (18-year-old)

I like education, and I want to fight for it (15-year-old)

It's exciting and just an overall great community. (15-year-old)

These are only a fraction of the responses received, but they highlight a number of critical issues. First, the students connected with the information provided and tended to see it reflected in their everyday lives. They consistently said that the forbidden curriculum presented at the School of Ethnic Studies directly related to their lived experiences and issues facing their home communities. Second, the lessons were self-affirming as they helped students learn more about themselves and their culture. They frequently referred to the School of Ethnic Studies as the “education TUSD does not want me to have.” There was an obvious void left by the elimination of MAS, and the School of Ethnic Studies was in part able to fill it. Third, the students were so engaged that they too were prepared to fight for their education. This stands in stark contrast to the official narratives where students are apathetic, potentially dangerous, and in need of stricter adult supervision. In contrast, these students were engaged, loving this form of education, seeing its relevance to their everyday lives, and willing to be part of the struggle to learn from this forbidden curriculum.

With the students as leaders, the School of Ethnic Studies became a collective, community effort to transform the meaning of education. Instead of being bound by

the walls of school buildings, it extended into the community usurping the draconian law HB 2281. It showed a different possibility for what education can look like, both in terms of curricular offerings (MAS) and physical infrastructure (youth art). The next question is: To what extent can efforts like these be long-term and sustained?

Conclusion

The School of Ethnic Studies was a direct critique of the racial oppression created by Arizona's racist anti-Ethnic Studies legislation (O'Leary et al. 2012; Otero and Cammarota 2011) as well as the capitulation of the TUSD governing board. The community led by students resisted and created their own school because the existing structured denied them the basic rights of Culture, History, Identity, Language, and Education (CHILE).¹⁶ Thus, the event was the epitome of transformative resistance as it was concurrently a critique of social oppression coupled with resistance meant to promote social justice (Solorzano et al. 2001). More importantly, the students creatively envisioned a possibility that did not exist and were guided by strategic demands on systems of power to get their classes. If TUSD would not offer them, students would find alternative means to be educated. This harkens to Pearl S. Buck's famous quotation, "The young do not know enough to be prudent, and therefore they attempt the impossible—and achieve it, generation after generation." The students involved in creating the School of Ethnic Studies did precisely that: leveraging every community resource available to attempt an almost impossible feat while succeeding at executing it.

This significance of this event stretches well beyond Tucson and even the state of Arizona. The American Educational Research Association, the largest education organization in the world, had an invited Presidential session dedicated to the TUSD MAS issue in their 2012 annual meeting. This issue has made national headlines in the *New York Times*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, and even garnered a spot on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart. This is, in part, because the questions posed in this controversy are relevant well beyond the type of curriculum in TUSD. For example, to what extent can a non-Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy be sanctioned as 'legitimate education'? Additionally, can critical approaches to oppression be part of public secondary education? Finally, to what degree can and should youth be treated as co-collaborators in their own education?

This final question is generally absent from media coverage of this controversy as youth voices tend to be ignored. This counternarrative demonstrated that critically empowered youth in Tucson are not only engaged in their education, but they have the imagination and dedication to lead a community effort to create alternative education when the school system fails them. This is specifically how counternarrative should function, to bring the voices of the marginalized to the forefront. The organizers of the School of Ethnic Studies were not only racially and socially

¹⁶ This concept is outlined in Dr. Cintli's presentation, "Outlaw Arizona," which cites 9 international treaties that protect these rights.

economically oppressed, but they were also marginalized due to their age. Their voices as the leaders of this community effort provided a strong, counter-hegemonic narrative that destabilized the official story where youth were infantilized, incapable, and concurrently dangerous. From the perspective of urban education, this means that youth should be represented when educational decisions are being made that affect their lives. We do not want to idealize the youth perspective, but rather to highlight that they should have a seat at the table. After all, it is *their* education we are all discussing.

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