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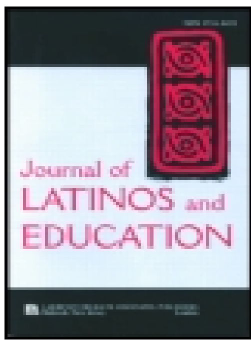

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Community-driven leadership: Mexican-origin farmworking mothers resisting deficit practices by a school board in California

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ABSTRACT
We examine how the community-driven leadership (CDL) of farmworker mothers challenged deficit practices of the local school board, which decided to close the school in the community. CDL is the ability of mothers to activate their community cultural wealth to mobilize their resources in search of better educational opportunities. The mothers organized to take action in order to disrupt systems of oppression embedded in their local public school system. *Testimonios* showcase the inequalities the mothers experienced in attempting to advocate for their children's education, and the ways in which they responded to oppression.

KEYWORDS
community-driven leadership (CDL); Mexican farmworkers; mothers; Chicana feminism; deficit practices; *testimonios*

Introduction

This case study focuses on the institutionalized bias and prevalent culture of deficit thinking (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997) that led to the closure of the local school serving a predominantly farmworking community in a rural town in Northern California. The deficit-based model frames the lack of educational success as a problem of students and families. In this article, we discuss the deficit approach embedded in the practices of the school board and administration, along with the response of Mexican-origin farmworker mothers. More specifically, we present a detailed description of the attempts by educational authorities to disenfranchise both, farmworker mothers and students. Through *testimonios* of the mothers, we showcase their activism and community-driven leadership (CDL) to address the inequalities and deficit actions taken by the school district. Thus, we address the following questions: (1) How do the deficit-based actions of the local rural school board promote educational inequities among primarily Mexican-origin students? (2) What are the understandings and beliefs that sustain mothers to continue engaging in CDL actions to advocate for their children's education?

In 2009, the mothers invited the authors to their community to help them organize after the decision of the school district to close the only elementary school in their community, Pitbull Elementary (all names are pseudonyms). The governing school board voted 5 to 2 to close the doors of the school and bus the children, 99% of whom were children of farmworkers, 16 miles away to the nearest neighboring elementary school in Timberland. The farmworker mothers mobilized and became unintended leaders to ensure education for their children while challenging the decision of the school board of the Timberland Joint Unified School District (TJUSD). The mothers, as their *testimonios* reveal, were outraged that the school board had voted to close the school and bus their children to Timberland. The trustees of the TJUSD had cited "money issues" and "deficit" as the rationale for closing the school. However, as mothers shared later, the trustees failed to communicate to the Squire Town community members that another elementary school was being built in a wealthier neighborhood nearby, despite the budgetary difficulties and economic crisis. As a mother complained later, "Why is it always the poor that get affected? It was our school that got closed, not the ones in wealthier communities" (field notes, 2009).

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After learning about the decision to close the school, the mothers contacted other immigrant and farmworking communities in Northern California who had dealt with school closures, and began to mobilize. The farmworker mothers challenged the school board, and in doing so, engaged in grassroots leadership (Bernal, 1998), using the strengths and assets found within their community. Similar to the women described by Delgado-Bernal, we seek to examine the concept of leadership in the community activism that the mothers in Squire Town initiated to address the educational disparities in their community.

By drawing on community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and the use of *testimonios*—i.e., resistance narratives—we examine the challenges and defiance that farmworker Mexican mothers faced while addressing the changes attempted by the school administration in Squire Town (this, and all place names, are pseudonyms). Yosso (2005, p. 7) defines community cultural wealth (CCW) as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression." CCW is rooted in critical race theory (CRT), and it challenges traditional notions of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). CRT scholars argue that by privileging the voices of those disenfranchised by institutions, such as schools, we can begin to discern the systemic factors at work in their oppression (Solorzano & Delgado, 2001). Central to CRT are the assumptions that racism is endemic, and that race and the "experiential knowledge of people of color" are vital to comprehending our society (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Williams, 1993; Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001).

CCW informs our analysis and contributes to the understanding of the different dimensions of leadership that emerge within disenfranchised communities. Using *testimonios* enabled us to document the lived experiences of farmworker mothers with the school district and examine how the district's deficit practices (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997) attempted to disenfranchise farmworker mothers and students. *Testimonios* are a methodological tool that aligns with feminist epistemologies by privileging the voices of Chicanas and bearing witness to the injustices they face (The Latina Feminist Group, 2002). Similarly, Chicana feminist epistemology proposes to integrate Chicanas' life experience and knowledge into the research process by redefining the intent of the research as that of empowerment and social change (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991). We examine how the mothers activated their CCW to mobilize and address the educational inequalities in their community. Our goal is to describe the ways in which the Mexican mothers challenged the prevalent deficit-thinking culture (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997) exhibited broadly by local educational authorities.

Literature review

Racialized discourses about immigrants describe them as a threat to "a U.S. way of life" and an invasion by criminals and abusers of public resources. Such nativist discourses have provided ideological justifications for limiting immigrants' access to institutional resources like schools and healthcare facilities (Chavez, 2008, 2009, 2011; Gutierrez, 2008; Santa Ana, 2002). Contesting the conditions of inequality and racialized ideas of cultural deficiency in schools has been at the heart of the struggles of many mothers in U.S.-Mexican communities (Coll, 2004, 2010, 2008; Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006; Pardo, 1990). Mothers have taken on the debunked notion of "deficit thinking," which posits that minority students and families do not value education (Valencia, 2002) and are at fault for poor academic performance because students lack mainstream cultural knowledge and skills, and because parents do not engage in mainstream practices of involvement (Apple, Au, & Gandin, 2011; Delgado Bernal, 2002). Delgado-Gaitan (1992) has demonstrated that Mexican families indeed value education; however, their forms of interacting with the school differ from mainstream middle-class families. School involvement is usually defined as attending parent teacher association (PTA) meetings, conferences and one-on-one consultations with teachers; tutoring; and volunteering at school (Epstein, 1995). Goal Eight of the Goals 200: Educate America enacted by Congress states, "By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parent involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (Sec. 102, 8, A). These policies fail to address the different forms of parent involvement. For example, Mexican

families interact with schools differently. Lopez (2001) demonstrated how farmworkers instill the value of education by exposing their children to the hard work of farm labor. Farmworker parents may not have the resources to be involved in the mainstream forms of parental involvement, but by instilling the value of hard work, parents were involved in their children's education. In rural communities, teachers may not recognize and value the forms of resources Mexican families may use to encourage their children to strive for academic achievement, and may develop misconceptions about students of low socioeconomic students.

Mexican Americans, as Delgado-Gaitan (1994) claimed, have resources to encourage their children to develop educational aspirations. For example, they may provide physical resources, emotional support, and a motivational climate to encourage their children to continue their education. Parents may be aware that they can provide limited skills for children to navigate an unfamiliar educational system; thus, they encourage their children to seek that help from their teachers (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). Similarly, Yosso (2005) showed that students of color may not possess dominant forms of capital, but they bring various forms of their own cultural capital to the classrooms, which facilitated their navigation through the system.

The education literature highlights several instances of how mothers utilize their cultural assets and knowledge to become advocates for their children's education. For example, the works of Dyrness (2011) and Delgado-Gaitan (2001) exemplify how mothers were invested in projects that could create educational opportunities for their children. Moreover, in her ethnographic study of Latina mothers in North Carolina, Villenas (2001) examines their understandings of moral family education. The Latina mothers' counternarratives claimed *el hogar* (the home space) to produced "educated" identities and created community in the rural South.

Likewise, as in the work of Deeb-Sossa and Moreno (2016), Mexican immigrant farmworker mothers in Northern California resisted local practices and policies of educational inequity to ensure an education for their U.S.-citizen children. These women negotiated with the school board and mobilized as cultural citizens—a process by which these farmworker women, as an excluded group, interpret their histories, define themselves, forge their own symbols and political rhetoric, and claim rights. The efforts took place within three distinct community-organizing phases: (1) negotiating as a collective with the school board; (2) seeking negotiation and schooling alternatives; and (3) expressing cultural citizenship through collective efforts to be included within the U.S. polity.

Lastly, Terriquez (2012), using survey data from Los Angeles, suggests that Latina mothers are just as civically engaged as White mothers in school, after accounting for differences in educational attainment and factors. Results also show that after Latina immigrants have lived in the U.S. for a decade, their participation in their children's schools resembles that of their U.S.-born counterparts. Although Latinas' English-speaking abilities predict their parental school engagement, their citizenship and legal statuses do not. Findings challenge assumptions about Latina parents' disengagement from their children's formal education.

The farmworker mothers in this study were primarily concerned with their children's education for various reasons. First, they faced the imminent closure of their children's school without community discussion (i.e., lack of a democratic process). Second, they recognized that schools and school-related activities were fundamental to their children's opportunities. Historically, education has provided opportunities for children, especially from poor and working-class families, to engage in different social and cultural spaces that prepare them to participate in society and the labor market. For U.S.-Mexican transmigrant communities, the quality of education has determined the opportunities available and their degree of participation in schools and society (Darder, Torres, & Gutierrez, 1997; Fry, 2002).

Theoretical framework

Community cultural wealth (CCW; Yosso, 2005) frames our analysis of community-driven leadership (CDL). We define CDL as the ability for mothers to activate their CCW to mobilize their resources and provide better educational opportunities for their children. We used CCW, which is rooted in critical race theory (CRT), which examines how institutionalized bias impacts educational

structures, practices, and discourses (Solórzano, 1997, 1998). CRT acknowledges that institutions reproduce power structures that marginalize communities of color, while maintaining dominant ideologies and mainstream privilege. Centering a CRT framework within the examination of the experiences of people of color enables us to highlight the lived experiences, assets, and resources of mothers in the community. As Yosso (2005) indicates, a CRT lens questions racially stereotypical portrayals of deficiency and cultural deficit schooling by moving from cultural deficits to community assets. CCW is a community's cultural assets and resources added together over time.

CCW allows for an analysis of how parents activate their community assets and knowledge to navigate the challenges they faced. CCW allows us to frame mothers as agents who mobilize, respond to power, and develop political skills and strategies for change and resistance in actively appropriating and accommodating, but also resisting, these structures by implementing their CDL and activating their CCW. Moreover, CCW allows us to frame a discussion of the epistemological and ontological bases for CDL, and how the mothers' ways of knowing and ways of being are important to CDL.

Methodology: Chicana feminist use of *testimonios*

This study is guided by Chicana feminist theory, which Téllez (2005, p. 49) describes as "…the goals of advocacy scholarship, which both challenges the claims of objectivity and links research to community concerns and social change…[and] creating bridges between the production of knowledge in the academic world and communities struggling for social justice is absolutely fundamental." Thus, in the tradition of Chicana feminism and women of color feminists (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Collins, 1990; Lugones, 1990), this project is grounded in politically engaged research in alignment with Mexican farmworking communities, emerging from our relationships with farmworkers and other community groups as well as a "feminist, political vision of research as a vehicle for meaningfully engag[ing] the world and collectively act[ing] within it… in order to name the world and transform it" (De Genova, 2005, p. 25). Advocacy work with farmworkers was a core component of the research design of the study. In addition, as feminists, we "affirm differences among women and promote women's interests, health and safety and promote justice and the well-being of all women" (DeVault & Gross, 2006, p. 174).

Feminist methodology and practice is distinct from CRT, which in this article we use in complementary ways. When using a feminist methodology—theorizing about our research practices and their implications for farmworker mothers and communities—we problematize gender and bring farmworker women and their concerns to the center of attention (DeVault & Gross, 2006; Harding, 1987); we challenge the idea that research needs to be neutral or unbiased, and that our bodymindspirit must be separate entities (Lara, 2002).

Testimonios

For this article, we utilize *testimonios* (testimonies). *Testimonios*, especially in Latin America, have been used as resistance text (Smith, 2011). As women of color feminist scholars, we look to the Latina Feminist Group (2002, p. 13) anthology, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, which theorizes *testimonios* as "a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle an effort by the disenfranchised to assert themselves as political subjects through others, often outsiders, and in the process to emphasize particular aspects of their collective identity."

As Chicana feminists, we ground our use of *testimonios* on Moraga and Anzaldúa's (1981) notion of "theory in the flesh" (p. 23), which develops in urgency and favors the real experiences, voices, and knowledge of marginalized women of color demanding attention and action. As Cervantes-Soon (2012, p. 374) states,

> If theory in the flesh is the unification of the mind and body (Cruz, 2001), then the personal narrative becomes a means for agency…. She breaks the silence, negotiates contradictions, and recreates new identities beyond the fragmentation, shame, and betrayal brought about by oppression, colonization, and patriarchy (Moraga, 1993). *Testimonios* allow us to put the scattered pieces together of a painful experience in a new way that generates wisdom and consciousness.

The Latina Feminist Group also contends that *testimonios* reveal dynamics of power, agency, and forms of resistance not often recorded in official histories or narratives. They have considered women's *testimonios* as a *sitio*, or a space (Pérez, 1991), from which to theorize gender, as well as cultural, economic, and political borders (Bañuelos, 2006; Burciaga & Tavares, 2006; Delgado Bernal, 2006; Holling, 2006). In this sense, the farmworkers' *testimonios* can be defined as "a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure." (The Latina Feminist Group, 2002, p. 2). Like other *testimonios*, the farmworker mothers' *testimonios* captured their everyday lives, struggles, and resistance, and we found in them both histories of inequalities and of liberation (Zavella, 2001). Their challenge to official histories is among the reasons this article highlights the *testimonios*. The mothers' *testimonios* address issues of inequality as they attempted to interrupt the "othering" of their community by the school district and other educational authorities.

The mothers' *testimonios* challenged the school official's stories, as they tell "the story of those experiences that are not often told and [are] a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse." (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 475). Their *testimonios* captured what Hurtado (2003, p. 33) has called "conversations with power," which shed light on how "authority" had been imposed on them on a daily basis and how they have resisted those barriers. By writing, discussing, and documenting their experiences, the mothers situated themselves as participants and they "work[ed] to recognize and validate their existence and experiences as subjects" (Holling, 2006, p. 81). Finally, *testimonios* offered the mothers an opportunity to develop and expose theory in the flesh and urge action. As Anzaldúa (2002, pp. 558–559) states: "You've chosen to compose a new history and self—to rewrite your *autohistoria* [self-story]. You want to be transformed again; you want a keener mind, a stronger spirit, a wiser soul. Your ailing body is no longer a hindrance but an asset, witnessing pain, speaking to you, demanding touch. *Es tu cuerpo que busca conocimiento* [It's your body that seeks knowledge]; along with dreams your body's the royal road to consciousness."

We created what Diaz Soto et al. (2009, 762) termed the Xicana Sacred Space—a space in which the mothers shared and validated their experiences and thus this space "function[ed] as a crossroads where our projects overlap[ed] in their emancipatory purposes. The X is a crossroads where a multiplicity of individual identities [met] where diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, shades of brown, nationalities, upbringings, genders, sexualities, and positionalities br[ought] us together to a collective political goal that seeks to displace and unlearn patriarchy and white supremacy" (Diaz Soto et al., 2009, p. 762).

Thus, we used *testimonio* as a pedagogical, methodological, and activist practice to transgress traditional paradigms and to challenge objectivity (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). *Testimonio* highlights that we, as Chicana feminist researchers, equally value the mind, body, and spirit as sources of knowledge, creating a "space of reclamation" (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 366) from which to theorize and develop transformative pedagogies (Prieto & Villenas, 2012). Finally, *testimonio* is also a product that draws from the mothers' telling, writing, and sharing (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013) their current and past experiences as educational advocates for their children in the U.S.

Data collection

We began our activist-advocate research with this farmworking community in 2008; one author (NDS) continues, to this date, her politically engaged research, advocacy, and support work with mothers of Squire Town. We, as engaged researchers, collected women's *testimonios* from the multiple *pláticas* (heart-to-heart talks) conducted with the farmworker women, as well as from ethnographic field notes taken systematically during direct observation with community members in

this farmworking community. The *pláticas* were conducted in the women's homes or in locations that were chosen by them. During the talks, we discussed their experiences as immigrants, experiences with school officials, and their mobilization efforts around the school closure. During the spring, summer, and fall of 2008, we completed 15 one-on-one *pláticas* with the mothers throughout the process of the school closure to learn about the interaction of the community with local authorities and the community's multiple actions and responses. In addition, we conducted three community *pláticas* with the mothers during the winter of 2008. We completed a community *plática* with the mothers after the implementation of the after-school tutoring program as an evaluation tool, and we conducted two additional community *pláticas* on the mothers' experiences a year after the school was closed in 2009. Additionally, five *pláticas* were completed with authorities in the school district, which included the principal and school teachers during the closing process, as well as with local activists who became allies to the community and students who serviced the community after the mothers' mobilization in spring 2010.

Our direct observation included attending multiple meetings and community events the mothers convened throughout the summer and the following year after the school closure. At least one of us went regularly, if not always, to the mothers' weekly meetings, in which mothers, even today, get together on a weekly basis to discuss their lived realities, their everyday lives, struggles, joys, and find in each other *consejos* (advice) on ways to cope, ways to heal, and ways to resist. After the *pláticas* and community *pláticas*, native Spanish speakers transcribed audiotape data verbatim and the names of the participants were removed to protect their identity. Text was coded to identify significant themes, and categories were identified from the data content.

Data analysis

We conducted a qualitative analysis of all of the text by focusing on the themes discussed by the mothers. Our framework and experiences as ethnographers and advocates led us to identify a set of common themes. We identified several, including: (1) confrontational relationship with local educational authorities; (2) sacred space; and (3) leadership, advocacy, and resistance. We then selected ethnographic narratives, direct quotations, and mothers' *testimonios* and voices from our field notes and interviews that elucidate and typify these themes. The major units of analysis were based on the mothers' application of cultural forms of wealth, contrasting expressions of leadership, and use of deficit practices by the school district. Emerging themes that were analyzed include: the use of formal and informal expressions of leadership; the contrasting attitudes between parents and the school district when coming to a solution for the educational opportunities of the children in light of the prevalent deficit approach; and the different forms of parental involvement and the application of tenets of cultural wealth that include the value of education for this community and other forms of capital as described in the following.

The farmworking community

Squire Town is a rural community located in Northern California's agricultural heartland. Its population of 1,500 is composed of 65% Latino-origin families, and it relies economically on agricultural work, along with several industrial canneries and casinos located nearby. The community members are employed in temporary or seasonal work in agriculture, which adds a particular socioeconomic context to the conditions faced by families in the community. According to a 2000 report by the U.S. Department of Labor entitled *The Agricultural Labor Market—Status and Recommendations*, farmworkers are described as "a labor force in significant economic distress." The report cited farmworkers' "low wages, sub-poverty annual earnings, (and) significant periods of un- and underemployment" to support its conclusions. Farmworkers, in general, have the lowest annual family incomes of any U.S. wage and salary workers, earning an average of $10,000 per year (Thompson & Wiggins, 2002). As a result, two-thirds of farmworker households, and 70% of

farmworker children, live below the federal poverty line (Rothenberg, 1998). According to the 2000 U.S. Department of Labor report, farmworkers remain “among the most economically disadvantaged working groups in the U.S.” and “poverty among farmworkers is more than double that of all wage and salary employees.” (p. 7). This context is important, as it puts into perspective the contrasting conditions and resources that the community relied upon when facing the school closing and the reduction of available resources for their children.

Findings

Leadership and community

Two themes throughout the *testimonios* were the expression of leadership and the wide and constant sense of community in the face of challenge, which is the CDL or the process by which the mothers activated their CCW to mobilize their resources to provide better educational opportunities for their children. The mothers were consistent in showcasing their surprise and distress at the lack of a democratic process when the governing board of the TJUSD decided to close the Pitbull Elementary, and how this represented a direct contradiction of the community’s values and goals. During a meeting, a mother shared that “the school was the heart of the community” (field notes, 2009). The elementary school served as a community center and as a gathering place for families. A mother recalled, “They never asked for our opinion. They didn’t even talk to us directly. We learned about their plan through rumors” (field notes, 2009). The fact that the school leadership did not consider the mothers’ input in their decision making demonstrated that the administration did not value the mothers’ experiential knowledge. The administration did not provide mothers with the opportunity to express their concerns, and they did not inform them of their decision. Once the decision was made, the explanation given had no basis in facts, as it was evident that the district did not have a deficit budget because it had begun planning on building an additional school. The fact that school officials were not partnering with the mothers during the decision-making process exemplified the administration’s lack of commitment to social justice and further reinforced the administration’s marginalization of students of color.

Nonetheless, this event activated in the community, and in particular in the mothers, multiple actions of leadership. After learning about other communities that had dealt with similar school closures, the mothers began to mobilize their own community. They started to gather information about the educational rights of their children and the possibility of opening a charter school. In the summer of 2009, a community organizer from the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF) aided the mothers by introducing them to local academics knowledgeable about charter schools and with lawyers specializing in that area of education. That summer, parents also attended school board meetings in the middle of the agricultural season, after usually long workdays. At these four school board meetings, parents recalled requesting repeatedly to keep the local school open for their children, citing the improving test scores, their children’s level of familiarity and comfort in the school, and the fact that the school was a vital part of the town.

Sometimes, during the board meetings, a few of the mothers had to leave to return home to prepare dinner for their families because they had come directly to the meetings from work. School board members subsequently publicly scolded these mothers for leaving the hall while the meetings were in session, illustrating a lack of sensitivity to issues of labor and gender among school officials.

One mother recalled how she and her fellow mothers had to learn about process and procedures to address the school board formally so that their concerns and demands would be taken seriously:

> At our first school board fifteen parents went. We had chosen 2 as our spokespeople. But the board went and told the press that only 2 parents were concerned about the closure of the school. They told the newspapers that only 2 parents went to the school board meeting and they never mentioned the other 13 parents because they only counted the 2 that went up to the microphone (field notes, 2009).

The farmworker parents, with the aid of the community organizer from the CRLAF, strategized on how to maximize their presence at the next school board meeting. As the community organizer recalled in an interview, “We had to find a way to maximize our presence and make our voice count. All, parents and children, everybody, must go up to the mike and even if you blank out, and even if you just say ‘I agree with the parent who spoke in front of me,’ then that is all you have to say with your name and you will be counted.” Another mother noted, “This time we were prepared to meet the board. The board was all White. But we did not stop. Although we are Mexicans, we told them: ‘You want to decide for our children. We want the welfare of our children. Therefore, we, not you, have to decide.’”

One mother recalled how the board members were taken aback by their presence. She explained: “One member of the board was very racist. He did not expect this reaction from us. He was very angry, because he did not expect our struggle. So one of the things that this man did was to make fun of us. He mocked us. He said: ‘You are all wasting your time since the school will close.’ We would come out of the meeting very disheartened and disappointed.”

During a Grupo de Mujeres (a “women’s group” instituted to discuss issues of concern to the members) meeting, a mother remembered, “Nothing changed their minds. Nothing got to them, not even tears from both mothers and children. Not even the cheers that the children did, showing how proud they were about their school” (field notes, 2009). Another mother who had attended the board meetings recalled that “they lied to us. They tricked us. They were racist. They targeted our school. They said that they were closing another school in Timberland, but that was a lie, they only closed it temporarily, because they were replacing it with another newer building. So, they only closed our elementary school” (field notes, 2010). The CRLAF community organizer also recalled how the trustees of the TJUSD decided to close Pitbull Elementary. In an interview, she explained:

> When we were saying that parents of students at Pitbull School were getting discriminated, they [the Trustees of the TJUSD] kept saying no. They said to us that they had this other school in Timberland that they also were going to close. But what they didn’t tell the parents from Squire Town is that the school in Timberland was marked to be closed because another one was being built.

While basic educational resources for the poor farmworking community were being taken, educational resources for the “well-to-do” were being spent. The community organizer and mothers were aware of how those in the farmworking community were being discriminated against and disenfranchised. They witnessed that, even in a climate of austerity cuts, those who were affluent were not impacted as much, if at all. In their view, it was at their expense that well-to-do children had a new elementary school in their neighborhood, while Squire Town had only one elementary school. Furthermore, the administration’s decision to close the only school in a Mexican American community exemplified the intersections between race and class embedded within the leadership of the TJUSD. Specifically, the school administration decided to close the only school within the district where the majority of the students are of Mexican origin and of lower socioeconomic status in comparison to the other schools.

The mothers expressed how they did their best to make sure that their self-esteem did not plummet after the decision by the TJUSD to close Pitbull Elementary. As a result, nearly 80 students from Squire Town were sent to Clearfield Elementary, located in Timberland and the farthest from Pitbull. Mobilizing, the farmworker mothers demonstrated transformational resistance, engaging multiple community cultural assets and resources. In the process, they drew upon four of the six tenets of interrelated cultural wealth, as discussed earlier (Yosso, 2006): The mothers used their networks and community resources (social capital); learned the skills necessary to maximize their presence at the school board meetings (navigational capital); never gave up their goals and aspirations for their children’s future, undeterred by intense discrimination (aspirational capital); and with the knowledge and skills they had acquired, they continued challenging the unequal educational opportunities their children faced (resistance capital).

Challenging deficit thinking

The district's decision and the interactions between the school board members and farmworker mothers demonstrated the lack of accountability that educational officials held regarding the farm-working community. The superintendent's actions reflected stereotypes that educators often have about "deficit" capacities and skills of Latinos/as in general, and in particular of children of farm-working parents (Yosso, 2006).

When Author 1 interviewed the principal of Pitbull Elementary several years after it closed, he recalled his tenure at Squire Town and his work at the school:

> [W]e were probably one of the lowest performing schools. So I wrote a healthy start grant designed to address the health and social needs of the students and their families to help build self-sufficiency in the families and have kids come to school ready to learn and be successful. We academically were really making some progress. … That year we made a 101-point growth API. The superintendent never acknowledged the growth!

The principal challenged the assumption that students and their families in Squire Town enjoyed the same access to health and social services that gave them access to the same educational opportunities as other students. The superintendent never acknowledged the experiences of racism and faulted the students and the community for unequal schooling outcomes (Yosso, 2006).

One of the most salient comments during that interview with the principal was his recollection of the negative and stereotypical views the school superintendent had of the Mexican farmworker community that Pitbull Elementary served, and the consequences of it. As his head moved from left to right, as if in amazement, he noted:

> The superintendent… was sure [the school] needed to be shut down 'cause… we're all Brown and she had her preconceived notions about the school.… She [the superintendent]… said, "*Those people* [his emphasis] came here from Mexico, never really having the intent of staying. They always had in the back of their minds that they were gonna go back to Mexico.…" Then, she said that her plan was to close the school for a period of time, until the stigma of serving "illegals" was gone.

The decision to close the school in the summer of 2009, regardless of the consequences to the children, or without informing the parents, revealed how farmworkers were treated as devalued members of schools and society, having no input in their educational future. The interview with the principal indicated that the school administration had been disengaged from the local community and had had no interaction with the Pitbull Elementary community for many years. When the decision was being made, the superintendent decided to meet with people who were not from the community, unknowledgeable about the lived experiences of the parents and students, exemplifying how the administration discounted the stories of the parents and students.

Similarly, the reaction of the board members to the organizational efforts of the mothers highlighted the negative stereotypes they held regarding the capacities and skills of farmworker parents. As one farmworker mother told us through tears:

> The school board thought that simply by being [Squire Town] people, we could not defend ourselves. We wrote letters and read them in the board meetings, and the board members were shocked…. They thought we could not read or write…. They thought parents would not defend themselves. They thought they could give the order to close, and we would do what they wanted. But it was not like that. We were up for the fight! (interview)

The parents experienced firsthand the institutional neglect of school officials. They felt that the school board members assumed that they were illiterate, did not value education, and would not challenge racial injustice and unequal schooling because they were farmworkers. It was clear to the mothers that they could not work with the school officials and they had to look for alternatives.

Seeking alternatives

After the closure of the Pitbull Elementary School, some of the farmworker mothers explored the possibility of opening a charter school. Embodying their CDL, with the help of the community organizer, they contacted the farmworker parents in Shoeburg who had opened a charter school two years prior. About 15 Squire Town mothers carpooled to Shoeburg and met with the parents who were instrumental in opening the Shoeburg charter school. A mother recalled, "The people from Shoeburg guided us step-by-step in what they had gone through and the steps they took" (field notes, 2010).

Another alternative the mothers explored, embodying yet again their CDL, was joining an existing charter school. They looked for elementary charter schools nearby with a good educational track record of serving rural and farmworker children. The principal of the Shoeburg charter school put the mothers in contact with the principal of the Baskin charter school. Baskin is a neighboring town only five minutes from Squire Town in an adjoining county. After the farmworker mothers visited the Baskin Charter School, 30 parents asked to send their children (55 from the town's total of 150 elementary students) to Baskin. The school at Baskin was a small charter school, where the mothers felt their children could better deal with the transition.

The mothers recalled, with smiles in their faces, how they enrolled their children in the elementary school at Baskin: "We fought until they gave us permission to decide where our children could go" (interview, 2010). Another mother explained, "Most of the parents decided to move. The district lost that money. That money went to [Baskin]" (field notes, 2010). The mothers' decision to find a school that would better serve the needs of their children demonstrates their leadership and the ways in which they challenged the dominant ideologies of the school system.

A mother whose child managed to enroll in Baskin recalled, "Our children are enjoying the art classes, music classes, sports, and other extracurricular activities. They even go on field trips. The county pays for that. Before, we used to have to pay for the only field trip our children had, to the pumpkin patch field" (field notes, 2010). Unlike the mothers of the children who attended Clearfield Elementary, the mothers whose children attended Baskin's elementary school felt that, despite not being able to keep Pitbull Elementary open, they had some control over the fate of their children's education. These mothers did not accept the terms dictated to them by the governing school board, and found an alternative that allowed them to feel a sense of control. With delight, a mother described that this school was better than Pitbull Elementary, saying:

> At [Pitbull] we were told that our children had discipline problems or behavior problems. They had a file detailing their bad behavior. By the third trimester at Baskin, the behavior of our children has completely changed: they are now angels. They changed as the teaching and methods for disciplining them changed. (field notes)

Facing continued oppression

By contrast, most of the children started the 2009–2010 school year at Clearfield Elementary School in Timberland, 16 miles away from Pitbull. The classroom buildings, the two portable toilets and bathroom used to accommodate the influx of new students to Clearfield, were not ready when the school year began. The children actually had to have classes in the hall. As one of the mothers furiously commented, "The school is not ready for the children that were forced to go [to Clearfield Elementary]. There are too many children per teacher, and to make things worse, the portables and the bathrooms are not ready!" (field notes). In addition, the cafeteria was not prepared to serve lunch for the extra children, so when the food ran out, the children were served cereal. Furthermore, the busing of Pitbull students to Clearfield Elementary School, on the far side of Timberland, was wearing out the children. The school days were almost 12-hour days, as the bus picked up the children at 7 a.m. and dropped them off at 6 p.m., after a 45-minute bus ride each way. Many farmworker parents' workdays start hours before dawn when they head to the Napa Valley vineyards or Yolo County tomato fields. Often, families had only one car, and the distance from Squire Town to Clearfield Elementary made it difficult for relatives and neighbors to drop them off, pick them up,

and make sure someone could pick them up if they got sick. As one mother complained: "We didn't like [Clearfield Elementary School]. It is in the desert. It is in a field. It is at the edge of [Timberland]. It is really far. And when you arrive there, you only find the school. It is really lonely" (interview).

Despite the children thriving at their new school in Baskin, the TJUSD decided—once again without consulting parents or asking for any community input—to open a charter school in Squire Town (The Science and Technology Academy of Squire Town). One mother noted:

> The new charter school was not opened for parents of [Squire Town]. Right now we do not have the need for an elementary school. If they had asked us, we would have told them that we have a need for a high school. We need a rural high school for when they are ready to go to high school. Our children start having problems when they arrive in middle school or high school. (interview)

To compound matters, the parents who had sent their children to Baskin had to complete and file new forms that were created just for them, in order to petition on behalf of their children to continue going to school in a different county, an additional requirement that they did not have to satisfy when the children attended school in the county in which they resided (Baskin is located in a different county than Squire Town, despite the proximity of the two towns). The original Pitbull Elementary that had been closed was now opened as a new charter school, attracting the children of predominantly White middle-class families from Timberland. In this process, school officials seemed to prove once again that all they wanted to do was force the children of farmworkers out of the school district. After the mothers had relocated the children to a new school, and the children were excelling there, the TJUSD made efforts to force these children back into their district in order to be eligible for county and state educational funds to establish a charter school for predominantly White middle-class families from Timberland.

Then the school district complicated things further. The children who attended Clearfield Elementary continued their education at that location. However, the district decided not to provide the children with bus transportation anymore. As one mother said furiously:

> They are taking their bus away. They are forcing them to come to this experimental school. There is no cafeteria, so they are going to ask parents to send the children's lunch. And, now we heard that they are going to have only two teachers, one teacher will be in charge of three grades. That is not teaching; that is babysitting. (field notes)

The mothers were thus aware of the discrepancies in educational resources for their children versus those available for more affluent families. Furthermore, they and their children expressed the sense that their town was changing, "closing down." Several families were also struggling, as fathers were losing their jobs or working fewer hours, and some were at risk of losing their homes or not being able to pay rent. With all of these changes and pressures, a mother said: "It is as if they want to close the town, shut it down.… And where will we go? What will we do? What will happen to us? To my children?" (field notes). The mothers felt that the school closure was intentionally dismantling the community they had created and where they felt a sense of belonging. Now, their children had to travel outside of their rural town to get to school and access other social resources.

Again, we note how the farmworker mothers mobilized in reaction to the closing of the elementary school. They demonstrated transformational resistance and mobilized multiple community cultural assets and resources in the process. Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) contend that people engage in many forms of resistance. One form is transformational resistance, which moves people to a "deeper level of understanding and a social-justice orientation" and encourages them to address problems of systemic injustice and to act to foster "the greatest possibility for social change" (pp. 319–20). Likewise, the mothers activated their social capital by networking to learn about charter schools and their right to enroll their children in a charter school closer to their town, even if it was in a different school district and county (navigational capital). They learned to maneuver around all of the barriers that school officials placed before them, never giving up their hopes and dreams for their children's educational opportunities (aspirational capital).

Discussion and conclusion

We define CDL as the mothers' ability to activate their social capital and their resistance capital to mobilize their limited resources and provide better educational opportunities for their children. In our case study, the mothers resisted the school district's decisions and called upon their social capital to bring in undergraduate and graduate students from the local university to tutor and mentor their children. The mothers' aspirational capital fueled the activation of their social and resistance capital by inspiring them to hold on to their goals and dreams of providing better opportunities for their children. The farmworker mothers used the knowledge and skills they had acquired to continue challenging the unequal educational opportunities their children faced after their school's closure (resistance capital) and found additional resources to provide them with better opportunities (navigational and social capitals).

Multiple expressions of CCW were observed later in the mothers' mobilization to support their children's education. The farmworker mothers partnered with students in a nearby university to implement an after-school tutoring program. After the first evaluation of the program, mothers exhibited many forms of community cultural assets when sharing the values they followed in supporting their children's education, the multiple strategies they implemented to support that trajectory, and the common concerns that showcased a profound appreciation for the value of education, all in contrast to the school district's deficit thinking practices.

Mothers refused to accept that their children were failing at school and challenged the school officials' low educational expectations for their children by seeking outside resources to bring after-school tutoring programs to their community. These efforts to find educational enhancement opportunities for their children illustrate the mothers' navigational and social capitals to seek resources outside of their community. More specifically, through their connection to the CRLAF, these mothers were able to connect with graduate and undergraduate students at the local university who were knowledgeable about the school system and able to provide tutoring and mentoring for their children. The mothers were able to navigate the hurdles to find better educational opportunities for their children by reaching out via their social networks.

The mothers' attempts to enhance their children's education also demonstrated their aspirational capital as they sought outside resources to ensure that the closure of the school or the politics involved did not hinder the academic development of their children. The farmworking mothers stressed academic achievement, nurtured a college-going culture, and highlighted the importance of education and upward social mobility (i.e., aspirational capital).

The mothers mentioned several times that it was important for their children to get the education that they did not get. Most of the mothers had the Mexican equivalent of a sixth-grade education. As one mother recalled during a Grupo de Mujeres meeting: "As a woman, I was denied the opportunity to go to school. My brothers were allowed, but if I even tried to go to school, my mother would chase me out of the school or grab me by my hair and drag me home" (field notes). Through their aspirations for their children, the mothers also demonstrated their resistance capital by encouraging their children to obtain an education to break the cycle of inequality. The mothers noted the importance of education for their children, both daughters and sons, insofar as they stated that education would "allow them to choose not to work in the fields," "not to work for minimum wages," "give them opportunities to go to college," "give them choices I never had," "be independent," and "not to have to depend on a man, or on anybody that is no good" (field notes). Ultimately, the mothers' aspirations for their children to obtain an education encouraged the mothers to resist the deficit ideologies of the school district.

The mothers' words not only reveal the hopes and dreams they have for their children, in spite of the barriers they have faced (aspirational capital), but also carry with them a sense of personal memories, community histories, and knowledge (familial capital). In addition, through their activism, the mothers demonstrate the importance of familial capital. During our interactions with them, we noted that the mothers provide moral guidance to each other and their children. More

specifically, the mothers indicated that they seek guidance from their elders, because they are respected and wise about the ways of life. Mothers often offered support and encouragement and expressed how proud they were of their children and of each other. The mothers watched out for each other and for each others' children, reinforcing the adage that "*Se necesita una aldea para criar un niño*" (it takes a village to raise a child).

The mothers also encouraged their children to listen and learn about the old ways: "…for them to learn why it is so important for them to… be dedicated students. That is a way for them to learn from what we could not do, and what we have sacrificed." The mothers indicate that these life lessons are skills important to cultivate in order to challenge inequalities (resistance capital), not to be dependent on a man, have no financial worries, and have a job outside the fields. At the behest of the mothers, local Latina/o and Chicana/o undergraduate students started a tutoring and mentoring program for the intentional pursuit of academic success to help challenge the negative stereotypes of being low achievers. The farmworking community sees high achievement as cultural agency and resistance against racism.

Overall, the mothers' *testimonios* exemplify their educational aspirations for their children and their awareness of the inequalities they face in their community. Their aspirations and their awareness of the inequalities led them to activate their social capital, which prompted them to seek outside resources. Their activism, via their aspirational, social, and resistance capital, contributed to their CDL.

We demonstrate that these farmworker mothers are agents who do not passively accept the conditions of their marginalization (Castaneda & Zavella, 2007; Hardy-Fanta, 1993, 1997; Hirsch, 2007). As Chicana/o studies theorists and U.S. Third-World feminist theorists have pointed out, women of color at the margins—using their understanding of domination and their lived experience at the intersections of racism, sexism, and classism—mobilize, respond to power, and develop political skills and strategies for change and resistance in order to "cope" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 1) and survive (Anzaldúa, 1987; Calderón & Saldívar, 1991, p. 4; Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1990; Hurtado, 1989, 2003; Sandoval, 2000). The mothers actively appropriated and accommodated, but also resisted, these structures by implementing their CDL and activating their CCW. As noted earlier, the mothers attended school board meetings to attempt to encourage the TJUSD to make informed decisions. However, these mothers' efforts to carve out "spaces for self-definition" that challenge their and their children's exclusion and categorization as "other" were greatly curtailed and impinged upon by the deficit practices promoted by the educational authorities (Peña & Frehill, 1998, p. 620; Mahler, 1999, p. 709). Our findings highlight how the farmworker mothers challenged and resisted the deficit practices of the school board. Furthermore, our study demonstrates the ways in which the mothers responded to the oppression through the activation of CCW.

Our study also highlights the deficit practices of the TJUSD. For example, the district wrongfully stated that the children were not capable of obtaining high test scores (implying that cheating was involved when their scores did improve), and indicated that, as a result, the school would need to be closed. In this case, the subordination and exclusion of the children of farmworkers showcase the deficit ideologies and racism embedded in the school administration's decision-making process. These deficit practices attempted to marginalize the students and the mothers and eliminate them from the school system. However, the mothers exercised leadership, agency, and resilience, despite conditions of social and institutional exclusion. They emerged as leaders when securing the education of their children by agitating collectively and as a community against the public education offered in their communities, thereby articulating collective demands for inclusion within the U.S. polity. Their CDL efforts focused on mobilizing the resources necessary to establish rootedness and well-being for themselves and their families.

Our findings contribute to the body of literature that demonstrates how mothers utilize their cultural assets and knowledge to become advocates for their children's education (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Dyrness, 2011; Moreno, 2016; Terriquez, 2012; Villenas, 2001). According to Briscoe and Khalifa (2013), African American and other community activists responded to the proposed closure in 2009 of the Dubois High School (in which 93% of the students were economically disadvantaged, with 57% being African American

and approximately 40% being Hispanic) in a manner quite similar to the mothers of Squire Town. The community members described the purpose of the school as "uplifting for the communities" (p. 9), viewed the "community and school as a unit" (p. 10), and "saw the school closure as part of ongoing historical system of community oppression" (p. 10). Similarly, farmworker mothers' understanding of the educational inequalities centered on their intuitive grasp of the emancipatory power of education for their children and community (Dewey, 1916; DuBois, 1903) and on identifying and alleviating the numerous instances of oppression they experienced. These included the school administrators' contempt toward the community by not informing them of their decision to close the school; administrators' deficit thinking by labeling the school as failing, and assuming that students could never get high end-of-year test scores; blaming families for the failures of the school and the students; and the administrators' lack of acknowledgement of institutionalized racism (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2013, p. 759). However, the mothers demonstrated that they could make informed decisions that would benefit their children's education.

These findings also contribute to the literature by presenting evidence of how moving away from deficit approaches and embracing community assets can mobilize parents to be active advocates of their children's education. Furthermore, the integration of Chicana feminist epistemology contributes to the methodological approaches in conducting research with immigrant women. More specifically, our Chicana feminist approach enabled us to integrate the mothers' life experiences and knowledge in the research process by redefining the ways the mothers advocated for their children's education. Together, Chicana feminist epistemology and *testimonios* provide us with the methodological tools to privilege the voices of the mothers. We were also able to theorize about the implications of the mothers' activation of CCW in their CDL.

Our article documents the lived experiences of the farmworker mothers with the local school district. As leaders, the farmworker mothers were: (1) involved in and learned from their community; (2) built a vision and direction for community-based action; (3) stood up for their community; (4) were accountable to their community; (5) worked in partnership with each other and resources outside their community; (6) participated in decision making in their town; (7) engaged their community in order to make a difference; and (8) promoted diverse partnerships between the lawmakers and community organizations, promoting a shared vision for Squire Town.

The mothers were successful in mobilizing the community resources to relocate their children to a more responsive school district. They were also instrumental in the development of a partnership with university students to develop a tutoring program for their children. Our analysis of the CDL can help expand our knowledge of different expressions of leadership. Moreover, the lessons learned also have practical implications for the much-needed development of partnerships in oppressed communities.

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