A Map for Social Change: Latino Students Engage a Praxis of Ethnography

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Abstract
This article discusses how praxis and ethnography combine in a unique social science program called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP). The SJEP is implemented in a high school in Tucson, Arizona. The program centers on students implementing participatory action research that investigates how young people experience social inequalities in and beyond education. Students learn ethnographic research methods, including participant observation, interview techniques, photo documentation, and videography. Their ethnography serves as a vehicle for action that addresses the inequalities they experience in their everyday lives. The ethnography also serves as an entryway into praxis, in which students gain a clear view of the oppressive forces impeding their self-determination. They also discover new possibilities for challenging these obstacles. A praxis of ethnography expands the students’ critical consciousness and enlivens their capacities to seek changes in their environment.

Keywords: Latino youth, urban education, participatory action research, critical literacy, praxis, ethnography

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When I was studying education in graduate school, I followed what seemed like two mutually exclusive scholarly factions. The first was ethnography, and the second was critical praxis. I learned ethnography from my research mentor, who was an eminent anthropologist in her day. She and other anthropologists introduced me to ethnography and its occasional segues into education, starting with Mead (1961) and her studies of Samoan child-rearing practices. Ethnography therefore became me, and I became ethnographic in my approach to education research.

Another crowd situated in an entirely different institutional wing kept speaking of Paulo Freire (1993; 1998) and Popular Education (La Belle 1987; Kane 2001; Torres and Fischman 1994; Wanderley et al. 1993). One word they often spoke was “praxis”—the idea that education could be a site for social activism and a basis for addressing oppression, including racism, poverty, sexism, and homophobia. I entered a graduate school of education with the hope that I could improve schooling for oppressed populations. Therefore, I immediately joined that crowd and learned as much as I could about praxis.

When I wrote my dissertation, praxis and ethnography were my scholarly passions. However, my dissertation consisted mainly of ethnographic ruminations and had very little to do with praxis. I was advised to think mainly of scholarship and avoid “involvement.” It has been several years since the completion of my dissertation, and I have no disciplinary or institutional obligations to separate my ethnography from my praxis.

The “two” have met in a high school program I currently direct, called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP). The program centers on students implementing participatory action research (Selener 1997) that investigates how young people experience social inequalities in and beyond education. Students learn ethnographic research methods, including participant observation, interview techniques, photo documentation, and videography. Their ethnography serves as a vehicle for action that addresses the inequalities they experience in their everyday lives. Students meet with local, state, and national policymakers and officials to discuss their key findings along with specific recommendations for ameliorating educational policies and practices for young people. The SJEP is a praxis of ethnography, meaning that students research injustices within their social contexts and present findings to adults with power and influence so that they (students and adults) can implement improvements together.

This article shows how praxis and ethnography combine in the SJEP. Students engaged in ethnography, as an entryway into praxis, evolve through a process of subjectivity transformation in which they gain a clear view of the obstacles impeding their potential for self-determination. They also discover new possibilities for challenging these obstacles. That is, a praxis of ethnography expands the students’ critical consciousness and enlivens their capacities to seek changes in their environment.

The discussion of the students’ praxis of ethnography is based on my documentation of the SJEP. I took weekly notes to document the progress of the
program in quarterly reports. As part of my documentation process, I collected the students’ ethnographic research to assess the quality of their education. Sometimes, I include the students’ field notes as evidence of the program’s effectiveness. The objective of my documentation is to understand how the combination of praxis and ethnography influences young people’s critical perspectives and willingness to engage in social change actions.

About the SJEP
SJEP was launched in 2003 at Cholla High School in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) of Arizona. The students who enroll in the SJEP are all Latino and from working-class families from the southwest area of Tucson. Most students who attend Cholla High School are Latino, and most students are of lower socio-economic status. Two-thirds of all Cholla students receive free lunch, a rate that is more than 25 percent higher than the Tucson district-wide average of 39 percent.

Along with TUSD teachers, I reworked a required social studies program for Latino juniors and seniors into a series of classes in social justice with a focus on participatory action research. We talked with the principal and assistant district superintendent and then showed them the curriculum, which they agreed would make a wonderful civics education class by teaching students to research real social problems. The course takes the concept of praxis (critical reflection and action) and puts it into practice. In other words, their critical reflection is social justice research, and their action takes the form of presentations to influential people in their community.

The curriculum provides students with all their social sciences credits for graduation. They meet every day for one period and for four consecutive semesters. The social science program includes Chicano studies, critical race theory, and a participatory action research project for the students. To cover this amount of material, we asked the principal if we could work with a cohort of students through their junior and senior years of high school. With the approval of the principal and school district, Latino students enroll in the SJEP to handle a full load of critical theory and social science research.

Students select problems to investigate in their school and communities and then create presentations and videos based on their investigation to show to adults (teachers, administrators, city officials, school board members, district superintendent, and others) who can potentially make policy changes. We—the course instructors—help facilitate meetings with adults and students, requiring us to advocate on behalf of the students. Some of our time as educators and program directors involves building relationships with public officials, including school board members, county supervisors, and congressional representatives. For instance, we often meet with different officials to update them on the SJEP and tell them about the students’ desire to talk with them about changing their school and community. The meetings with these officials lead to the students presenting their research and making recommendations—the basis of their action.
The students choose to investigate problems and issues that affect them personally. For example, they select research topics by creating poems about the problems they face in their social worlds. We provide the youth with examples of social justice-minded poems: “I Rise” by Maya Angelou or “I Am Joaquin” by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez. The students discuss these poems and their social justice messages before creating their own. Then, they collectively identify the poignant and common themes throughout their poems. The students develop research topics from the themes they feel need urgent attention. For instance, some students select the topic of border and immigration policies because family members have died crossing the desert. Others address discrimination against Latinas because they see how schools, workplaces, and governments unfairly treat them and the women in their families.

The first SJEP class began in the spring of 2003, and students were introduced to advanced-level theory over the course of four semesters, through 2005. Simultaneously, they learned research methodologies for assessing and addressing the everyday injustices limiting their own and their peers’ potential. They learned how to conduct observations of different sites on campus, including other classrooms, the main office, and the cafeteria. Students wrote up observations in weekly field notes. They also documented their observations through photographs. They learned how to conduct taped interviews of their peers at school.

They spent the latter part of their second year analyzing the poems, notes, photos, and interviews, using Chicano studies concepts and critical race theory as their analytical lenses. Their analysis became the basis of written reports, presentations, and video documentation. Some of the findings generated from the student research include loss of language and culture through education, racist and sexist stereotypes at school, and inaccurate media representations of youth of color. The students did not learn how to take action per se (there was no “organizing 101” for these students), but they were instructed on how to present research findings. The students presented their findings to teachers, the principal, district superintendent, and school board members, with their voices being the focal point of their action strategy. We hoped that, through participatory research, students would gain the confidence to challenge the social and economic conditions impeding their life opportunities.

The presentation and video of the first cohort at Cholla High motivated TUSD to fix bathrooms, ceilings and water fountains, and to update the books in the library. Their work also established the SJEP as a permanent course offered every year at Cholla High. Although some teachers and administrators felt threatened by the students’ stark representation of educational injustice, the clear, graphic evidence was undeniable. When the presentation and video reached school board members, the principal had no choice but to make school improvements. Structural problems had been slated for repair several years earlier. As a result of the students’ efforts, problems were made public and immediate changes were finally made.
Critical Literacy, Praxis, and Culture

SJEP requires high school students to participate in the construction of knowledge, identification of social injustice, and implementation of solutions. To meet these ends, the SJEP curriculum implements Freire’s concept of critical literacy, encouraging students to adopt "an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context" (Freire 1998, 86). Critical literacy renders students “Subjects of knowledge” (they contribute to the creation of knowledge), bearing the potential for individual subjectivity transformation as well as community social change. Critical literacy involves both knowledge production and social engagement, or what Freire calls "praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (1993, 33). McLaren (2000, 149) claims that during “the process of becoming literate—a conjunctural process that Freire referred to as ‘praxis’—meaning circulates, is acted upon, and is revised, resulting in political interpretation, sense making, and will formation.”

The events of critical literacy proffer new possibilities, perspectives, and interpretations for the re-invention of one’s self and how one views his or her surroundings. A praxis of critical literacy promotes a change of subjectivity that allows the student to perceive himself or herself as capable of struggling for and promoting social justice with his or her community.

According to Freire (1993), acts of personal and social transformation are inextricably related and must be engaged simultaneously. That is, students learn to create their own sense of efficacy in the world by addressing the social conditions that impede self-determination and positive, healthy development. Learning to act upon oppressive social conditions leads to the acknowledgement of one’s ability to reshape the context of one’s life and determine a proactive and autonomous sense of self.

Freire (1998, 84-85) asserts that understanding the meanings and practices of culture should be at the forefront of a critical literacy. He states that

> the first dimension of our new program content would be the anthropological concept of culture...as the addition made by men and women to a world they did not make; culture as the result of people’s labor, of their efforts to create and re-create.... In short, the role of man and woman as Subject in the world and with the world.

This recognition of culture as a mediating tool leads to a “transformational resistance” that expands the students’ critical consciousness to an even “deeper level of understanding and a social justice orientation” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001, 319-20). They realize that culture shapes not just their experiences, but also the actions they undertake to recreate their own surroundings. Once they perceive how their existence is shaped by social structures and human constructions, students realize that they possess the agency to create culture—the ability to act upon and transform their material environment to better meet their needs and the interests of their communities.
Ultimately, the SJEP encourages students to care about themselves, their school, their communities, and the world around them, and to participate in promoting justice. Students in the SJEP draw on the practice of culture for the possibility of self and social transformation. Their engagement in research activities and dialogue leads to an awareness of the transient qualities of their social context. This awareness enlightens them to the possibilities of producing culture—acting upon and re-creating the conditions in which they live. Culture is therefore perceived as the practice by which students analyze, critique, and transform structures shaping their existence. As students participate in the practice of culture, they experience “social justice youth development” (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002), in which they recognize how political actions are necessary to determine a positive representation of identity and to engender the socio-economic conditions necessary for a healthy transition into adulthood.

Engaging Culture through Ethnography

Ethnography represents the mediating tool by which SJEP students appropriate culture for transformation. Through ethnography, students identify the experiences and structures that illuminate how human interventions construct their social world and how reality is not "fixed," but is changeable. Students observe conditions that foment social injustices and dig deep through ethnographic analysis, recognizing that the bases for these conditions are human constructs, such as policies, practices, and social structures. Ethnography therefore becomes the window through which young people view the construction of their social reality. Ethnography—based primarily in participant observation and extensive written documentation of these observations—has been described succinctly as “a way of seeing” into the world of human action (Wolcott 1999). This sight presents possibilities for new subjectivities of change, thereby motivating students to address and actively transform their social world.

This new window to the world does not always provide a view to pleasant utopian landscapes. Sometimes, the transformative ethnographic perspective is frightfully ambiguous—a view into the blank space of the unknown. SJEP student Maria described how this unknown purview can be unsettling. When she began her research project on educational inequalities at her school, she observed teachers making racist comments to students; discovered that some counselors fail to provide apposite academic information to students of color; and noticed that advanced placement courses are mostly filled with white students, even though the school is predominantly Latino. Maria’s participant observation and subsequent documentation through field notes revealed concrete evidence of racial injustice at the school. Before her documentation, she thought that Latino students failed because they “didn’t try hard enough.” After her study of racism, she became concerned that their failure seemed to be produced by the system. Acknowledging systematic injustice meant that her entire worldview would have to change—what was familiar to her would be gone and replaced by unknown ideas. This shift from her familiar worldview to the “unknown” was frightening for her. She said that she tried to hold onto the “old ways” of thinking, the familiar, conjecturing that the world was fair and equal for everyone. Maria’s trepidation reflects Freire’s analysis of the fear of liberation. Freire (1998, 48) states:
The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility.

The model of colonization is what the students know, and breaking from it means they would have to surrender what is familiar, the only way of living that they know, and thus adopt a worldview completely unfamiliar to them. Liberation implies not knowing what will happen next because new and previously unconsidered ideas about life must be formulated. Living in oppression may give one the false sense that he or she is in control of his or her life. As a character in the film The Matrix says, “Ignorance is bliss.” What one does not know cannot hurt her. Liberation induces feelings of ambiguity, that one’s fate is not determined, that one would have to move in a direction toward an uncertain destination.

Ethnographic insight helps students overcome their fear of liberation. Students mitigate the uneasiness of the unknown with their newfound critical vision, which compels them to take notice of conditions that they would have ignored or taken for granted before. Here is a field note from Ana, an SJEP student who “discovered” the racial structure at her school through mere observation:

The people in the cafeteria here are all middle-aged Mexican women or African American women. I never eat in there, but my friend Maria’s mom works in the teachers lounge, and I went to go meet her and she was nice and happy and proud to be part of the school. She gave her daughter what little money she had so that she could get a soda. Most [workers] are nice but can get very frustrated with the students with bad attitudes. Just the fact that they are all minority, all women, and I doubt that it [could] possibly be a money making job. Most of them wear aprons and hairnets. Even the ones in the snack bar. Maybe it’s not a big deal but to me even here at a mainly minority school shows that even the workers are minorities. The majority of the principals at the high school are white. Our monitors and some office workers and army people [recruiters] that come are all minorities. I think that they [schools] brainwash you to the point where you believe you can succeed. Then just only show you that the low-income jobs are the ones you can get.

Ethnographic observation provided Ana with the clarity to “see” the real implications of the social order in which she is embedded. This critical sight is analogous to Willis’ (1977) description of how youth cultural practices bear the potential for seeing through or “penetrating” the dominant ideologies that obfuscate the unevenness of social and economic reality. Willis (1977, 119) states that:

‘Penetration’ is meant to designate impulses within a cultural form towards the penetration of the conditions of existence of its members and their position in the social whole.
Ana’s “penetration” derives from the formal practice of ethnographic observation, which in turn allows her to integrate these data into reports and presentations. The students dialogue about their observations and then select the most relevant data to support changes at their school. Thus, Ana’s observations, along with those of her classmates, were used to confront the administration and school district about racism at their school.

Although the current Cholla High principal is white, the students’ action forced the school district to hire Cholla’s first African American vice principal. They presented Ana’s observations with similar findings to the principal, district superintendent, and school board. The district, made “aware” of the situation, acted quickly when an administrative position opened at the school. The SJEP most likely served as a catalyst to hire a person of color for the vice principal position.

Many students in the SJEP benefit from their newfound ethnographic insight. They report that they no longer passively absorb information in the course of ordinary activities, such as watching television or reading a newspaper, but now carefully analyze human constructions and actions to determine their social implications. The students bring their observations in for class discussion with their SJEP peers. For instance, Roberta wrote in her field notes that she was watching “American Idol,” and the judges told a contestant that she sang well but her heavy stature did not make her “American Idol” material. She needed to lose weight to succeed on the show. A male contestant who was also heavy in stature won while the judges did not mention anything about his weight. This observation led to a discussion about a double standard for women.

Susanna wrote about an MTV show that gave participants extensive makeovers. The show is called “Made,” and Susanna was concerned that the show’s content gave young people the message that they should not be happy with themselves and should find ways to enhance their appearance. This observation led to a discussion about cosmetic surgery and breast enhancements. Some female students argued that men created the “breast job” industry so that women can make themselves more appealing for them. Others argued that breast implants are for women who want to feel better about themselves. Another female student adamantly stated that male-dominated society created this need for women to feel better about themselves.

Lalo wrote about the comic strips in his Sunday paper. The newspaper translated the Spanish comics, created in Mexico, into English, but the English comics were not translated into Spanish. He felt that this lack of reciprocation was an example of monolingualism and English language dominance. This led to a discussion of the English Only movement, the passage of Proposition 203,1 and how Spanish-speaking students at their school fail to learn, owing to their incapacity to comprehend English in the classroom. I asked the students if they had primarily

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1 The state of Arizona’s Proposition 203 has followed in the footsteps of California’s Proposition 227 by rendering English the only instructional language in the public school system.
Spanish-speaking students in their classes, and asked where they sit in the classroom. They all raised their hands and said that the Spanish-speaking students sit in the back of the room. I asked them what these students do. Many responded, “Nothing.” Some said that the students try to learn, but the absence of instruction in Spanish severely hinders them. Jose mentioned that some Spanish-speaking students lean over to him and say “Que Dijo?”2 to ascertain what the teacher is saying.

Students spend considerable time reviewing both observations and classroom dialogue that they tape record and then transcribe. The dialogue transcriptions and field notes of their participant observations are studied as course “texts.” Their research leads to a collectively negotiated decision to take action. Once they decide on a course of action, the students develop presentations based on their notes and dialogue. The students select some, not all, of the issues that emerge from their observations and discussions. They tend to choose what they feel are the most pressing issues for the students as a group and not as individuals. For example, Lalo discussed problems with Spanish language oppression but his classmates felt that their presentations should focus on the oppression of women. Lalo agreed to work on developing this gender focus because he has a sister and worries about the societal pressures she experiences. Lalo and his classmates developed a presentation on the oppression of women and showed it to a TUSD school board member to ask for gender studies courses in the district.

**Critical Literacy in the SJEP**

Critical literacy lessons are structured so that students simultaneously participate in investigation and dialogue. Students identify topics through poetry and document related experiences within their own social contexts by producing field notes, photos, videos, and community maps. Each data source (such as field notes or photos) serves as a discussion topic for extensive classroom dialogue, which in turn becomes data for future discussions. The cyclical movement between investigation and dialogue exposes the contingent qualities of the students’ social world.

An example of a praxis of critical literacy is when SJEP students conduct what we call “Encuentros”3: presentations of their research to parents, friends, and family members. Because the students’ research focuses on community problems, they must share it with their close relations to gain a deeper sense of the problems than they have on their own, and to gain the awareness that they are acting on behalf of their families and community.

In one particular Encuentro, students showed a short slide presentation of project photos; each photo represented an image that evoked some aspect of the students’ research topics. We asked the students who took the picture to say something about the image and why they took it. A student named Kati presented the first picture; it was a posed group photo of the auto-shop class. She explained why she took the photo: most students were Latino males, and vocational education rarely

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2 The English translation is “What did he/she say?”
3 The English translation is “meeting.”
focuses on developing critical thinking skills. Asked Kati, “How much academic critical thinking will you do when you are learning how to fix a car?” She proceeded to say that advanced placement (AP) classes have more content that develops students’ critical thinking skills, but most students in AP classes are Anglo.

A father of one of the SJEP students was the first to speak up at the Encuentro. He said, “Well don’t these students choose to be in the auto class?” Drawing from participant observations of her school’s counseling office, she said, “Not really; you see counselors and teachers guide these students more to the vocational education track and do not help them prepare for AP classes.” She said, “This starts in middle school.” The student’s father said that it was astounding, but the auto shop class looked the same when he went to high school, some 20 years ago. He said he was in that class, and nothing has changed.

The student’s father then divulged how the construction company he works for received millions of dollars for school infrastructure repairs. He said that all the schools slated for repairs were in white communities, and he did not visit one school located in a Latino community. At the time, he thought that this was odd, but he did not think much of it. Yet, after Kati’s presentation, he put things together to understand. Clearly, he realized that there is symbolic import to all this: Whose children are expected to succeed and lead in this society and who is forgotten?

The praxis of critical literacy embedded in the Encuentros transforms the students’ subjectivity by revealing the historical roots of the social problems under investigation. Dialogues with parents about historical perspectives on the students’ research leads to a subjectivity of awareness in which students realize they can identify structural obstacles impeding their progress. The subjectivity of the father who worked for the construction company also transformed in the Encuentros. He connected to a memory of oppressive challenges in his past, and realized the deep entrenchment of these challenges through the student’s knowledge-sharing.

**Student Transformation**

Through their involvement in SJEP, the way students view, think about, and respond to their world changes drastically. SJEP student Arturo explained how the program transformed his perception of himself and the world around him. At first, the program didn’t capture his interest, but after a few weeks of social justice education, he changed his perception. He states that the SJEP

> made me realize what everything is and who I am. You know, be proud. You know, be proud of who you are. It’s the power—to know who you are and to be proud of who you are. It just, like, gives you power to do better for yourself—to keep learning, want to keep doing things.

After studying about the language, cultural, and economic oppression plaguing his Latino community, Arturo says that the SJEP “just opened my eyes. And then, I saw injustice and what it was doing with my people.” He realized that if injustice affects his family and community, he needs to do something. A change he would
like to initiate would be to develop “some sort of park out there or something for the kids to do because, you know, my homies—all my friends, you know—they are out at midnight just causing trouble.” Young people have very few public spaces or organized activities in which to participate in his community. He believes that access to higher education would help ameliorate conditions for young people, by giving them a productive goal. Through SJEP, students gain the knowledge to identify, analyze, and address social inequalities in their school and communities. This knowledge offers the personal benefit of increased confidence in their intellectual capacities, which emboldens them to strive for significant individual and social progress.

The most important outcome of the SJEP is that the program transforms young people’s lives. The SJEP moves them from seeing themselves as “victims” of oppression to advocates of social justice. For example, Kim observed and then documented in field notes the lack of resources (empty library shelves, no computers, and outdated books) in her neighborhood schools; the environmentally hazardous conditions (factories spewing waste from smoke stacks and high voltage wires located near or next to schools) around them; and the failure (few advanced educational programs for Latino students yet an abundance of remedial courses for them) to prepare her and her peers for college. In a local news report about the SJEP (Tuttle 2005), Kim stated:

Before I took this class (SJEP), it was kind of like running a race without a map. This class helped me learn how to channel my anger. You’re given a map where you can see the obstacles. I didn’t feel part of my education, but in this class, I felt connected.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I explain how praxis and ethnography combine to present an effective educational format for the development of young people’s critical consciousness and capacities for social change. Praxis compels students to reflect and engage their social world beyond the classroom. This reflective engagement leads to the recognition that the social world is not fixed or stable, but is indeed a place manipulated by human practices. The students’ realization of contingency presents the possibility that they can initiate their own practice of culture—an intervention in their own social world.

Participant observation supports praxis by formalizing the methodology for reflection and gathering the knowledge required for addressing the real obstacles of oppression. In some sense, ethnography serves as the “eyes” of praxis, revealing to students the impediments to their potential for self-determination. As Kim suggests, the ethnographic basis of the SJEP engenders a “map” for a race that is, for the most part, unfair for students of color. The important distinction for Kim is that before her ethnographic practice she did not posses a map; now she sees the obstacles ahead and can avoid them or remove them permanently. At the least, the critical ethnographic insight she has gained allows her to see that structural conditions—not their own actions—are the main reason so many of her Latino peers fail.
This ethnographic sight represents a critical literacy, in which students learn to read circumstances fomenting oppression. The ethnographic component of praxis is a method for achieving Freire’s (1998, 106) intended consequence of critical literacy:

Learning to read and write has meaning in that, by requiring men and women to reflect about themselves and about the world they are in and with, it makes them discover that the world is also theirs, that their work is not the price they pay for being citizens but rather a way of loving—and of helping the world to be a better place.

This is what a praxis of ethnography is about: it teaches students to care about oppressive conditions in their social world. This is an important lesson for them to learn, because much of what students learn today from mainstream schools, media, and society is acceptance, capitulating to the status quo and accepting that oppressive conditions are normal and immutable. A praxis of ethnography is a different lesson of caring about and loving the world enough to seek justice.

Julio Cammarota is an assistant professor in the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology and the Mexican-American Studies and Research Center at the University of Arizona. His research focuses on participatory action research with Latino youth, institutional factors in academic achievement, and liberatory pedagogy. He has published papers on family, work, and education among Latinos and on the relationship between culture and academic achievement. Cammarota has co-authored a seminal article on applying a social justice approach to youth development practices. Currently, he is the director of the Social Justice Education Project in Tucson, Arizona.

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