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FINDING HOPE, HEALING AND LIBERATION BEYOND COVID-19 WITHIN A CONTEXT OF CAPTIVITY AND CARCERALITY

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Abstract:
We live in a country with a long history of settler colonialism and we understand that our educational institutions, structures, and ideologies are part of that history. Our perceptions as educators of how students learn and how we should lead can be grounded in implicit biases that may dehumanize learners and perpetuate systems of oppression. Using the *testimonio* of two site principals in New York and California within a broader practitioner research framework we explore the manifestations of captivity, carcerality, and COVID-19 in our lived realities. As educators we are in part complicit in the tracking and creating a vantage point where our students are being seen. We experience tensions. We are committed to our educational *responsibilities to love and serve our students and community* and not allow ourselves the privilege of ignoring, of acting like the racializing of our community does not affect us.

Keywords: COVID-19, Captivity, Carcerality, Testimonios, Distance Learning, Leadership

Introduction

Many of us across the United States are hurting and filled with anger as Black lives continue to be lost due to police violence and racialized bodies, especially in the Latinx community, are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Our pain continues to be heightened as we bear witness to discriminatory policies and inhumane treatment of children and families from Latin America who are placed in cages as they seek refuge from the violence and abuse that is historically linked to the same country they are looking to escape to—our United States of America. We know that, we, like our families, our students, and our colleagues are not okay even though we are not surprised, yet these developments continue to emotionally impact us as site leaders. Using the testimonio of two site principals in New York and California within a broader practitioner research framework we explore the manifestations of captivity, carcerality, and COVID-19 in our lived realities and answer the following question: *During COVID-19 distance learning, how have two bilingual Latinx principals at Title 1 schools navigated their educational responsibilities to love and serve their students and community?*

Through our years as educators, we have gained a deeper appreciation for the transformative impact education and history can have on educators, our families, and our students when instruction is centered in the experiences of those who are, have been, or continue to remain disenfranchised by institutionalized oppression and racism. We are raising the next generation of leaders and their life options need to be more than just survival, but thriving in a world that humanizes them and their experiences. Through our commitment to work on our own transformation, we have opted to adopt Bettina Love's (2019) abolitionist teaching framework as a "way of life" and "seeing the world" to take action against injustice (p. 89). An inquiry into the actualization of how bilingual Latinx site principals navigate their educational responsibilities during COVID-19 and our current racial revolution will assist in rethinking how notions of captivity, and carcerality permeate our educational landscape.

Testimonios and Epistemic Privilege

In schooling, our perceptions as educators of how students learn and how we should lead can be grounded in implicit biases that may dehumanize learners and perpetuate systems of oppression and opportunity gaps for students whose social identities are undervalued, underrepresented and marginalized (Bernal Delgado & Aleman, 2017; Freire, 1970). Learning, like life course and cognitive development, is an active and ongoing multifaceted and complex process that is influenced by cultural, socio-political, and behavioral factors (Santrok et al., 2005). The iterative process of teaching and learning is deeply connected to our cultural experiences and our interactions with each other and our environment, which influences our understanding of ourselves, our world, and those around us (Moll et al., 1992; Nieto, 1999). As socialized human beings, we construct meaning and develop perceptions of ourselves and others based on our positionality, institutional and ideological vantage points in relation to power dynamics that are influenced by the dominant culture. These perceptions may either support or hinder a students' ability to self-

realize and become the authors of their own stories (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014).

Our role as educational leaders is also to facilitate the creation and maintenance of spaces that honor all voices, especially voices that are outside dominant culture, and that build on our students' rich cultural and literacy experiences and that "celebrate the human and academic value of their stories" (Campano, 2007, p. 48). Stories can serve as powerful and transformative tools that allow diverse voices to build awareness and surface truths relevant to people's lived experiences. The stories told or written by minoritized people are particularly relevant as they provide counternarratives and counter texts that help increase self and social awareness and promote social change (Behrman, 2006).

We used our *testimonios*, a form of first-person account and narrative inquiry, to voice our own experiences as site leaders while centering the experience of a marginalized collective: our students and families (Beverley, 2005; Bernal Delgado, 1998, 2002; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Anzaldúa, 1990; Bernal Delgado et al, 2012). As Latinx educators who are positioned outside of dominance, we recognize the importance of visibility, as well as, the knowledge and perspectives we gain from our marginalized experiences, or epistemic privilege (Vasanthakumar, 2018). Our epistemic privilege as minoritized site leaders who live, witness, and lead within systems of oppression and inequity in our context allows us to make meaning and communicate complex ideas about the world (Campano, 2007; Moya, 2002; Handsfield & Valente, 2016). Through our testimonios, we explore our lived experiences and bear witness to advance our own liberation, build bridges to reclaim and produce a collective account that is told by us and that is centered on our agency to overcome oppressive barriers (El Ashmawi et al., 2018).

Data Collection

To voice our *testimonios* we engaged in *conversaciones* with each other and ourselves about our *experiencias*. We met over the course of 4 months to engage in shared conversations of our school context: reality as public school site principals during the pandemic. Conversations began during distance learning of the 2019-20 school year and continued through the beginning of distance learning of the 2020-21 school year. We connected via video conferencing from California and New York where we found healing in sharing our struggles, successes, worries, and hopes over multiple recorded sessions. We used asynchronous journaling as another way to reflect on and document our testimonios as there were aspects of our personal accounts and shared experiences that we needed more time to initially and directly state during our *conversaciones* (Maxwell, 2013). We then transcribed our recordings verbatim and asynchronous reflections, and inductively surfaced key themes and created shared definitions to inform our deductive process. Our transcript was read repeatedly before being coded using inductive and deductive approaches and subsequent dialogic engagement (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). The conversations helped us reflect on and gain insights into our role as Latinx principals during the second iteration of distance learning of 2020-21.

Findings

We work in education and dedicate our lives to it. We want better life experiences for the students at our schools and the students in our community. But at the same time, we know that in the process of helping students education harms them (Love, 2019). And so right now we are wondering—*What's the help and what's the harm?* What is our role as educators charged with supporting student learning and adhering to educational mandates driven by neoliberal policies (Russakoff, 2014; Rosen & Conner, 2019; Hill, 2010) that we know by design are putting them at a disadvantage and are hurting them in the process? The reality, however, is that we are in the system and so we are the system.

It's not always top down. It's internal and the beliefs or actions that we have, that we take, or that of colleagues within the system and school ecosystem, function in a way that also promotes captivity--distancing, isolation, seclusion--and carcerality--the criminalization, classifying who is a "problem child," policing school space, instituting punishment, surveillance, obedience, and control (Fabelo et al., 2011; Weaver & Lerman, 2010; Haney-Lopez, 2003; Foucault, 1977). Our tension is between how we might lessen the overall harm and promote more good, recognizing that the harm is going to happen by design. We are constantly trying to shield and protect. These tensions have only been exacerbated during distance learning--the tension between trying to check yourself, while also supporting others, and modeling the types of behavior that we hope everyone embraces.

Carcerality

When we began distance learning we knew that schools were closing and that we had to transition to some other form of educational reality. Throughout the over 11 weeks of distance learning during the 2019-20 school year, we attempted to create

order and systems for students, parents and staff. There was a lot we didn't know and we were figuring it out as we went. We tried things, changed practices and enhanced systems. We had conversations about the realities our community members were facing. Yet, we stood firm to the belief that we needed to make sure student learning continued and that we as a team were creating spaces for students to engage meaningfully with their peers and teachers.

As the weeks progressed, and looking back now, we wonder to what extent the systems we developed helped in creating a positive learning environment? Now instead of students being engaged in teaching and learning at the school site, we were in their home engaging with them in their realities. We evaluated them based on their actions and inactions, which all contributed to how we made meaning of them and their commitment to learning, to school. Our staff tracked online interactions and work completion. We recognized that participation was too broad and wanted to identify if there was additional hardship or need to reconsider our teaching approach based on students only completing work and not engaging with synchronous learning.

We became designers and developers of systems used to track levels of student engagement and participation, systems that ultimately colored how we and our staff thought of and evaluated students. Within our sites, teachers developed daily assignment expectations, all things students would have to do, that would be divided by day: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. A common practice was to track and color code whether or not students completed assignments. The use of these tools, however, allowed for the perpetuation of a belief that because students were not engaging and doing, they perhaps didn't care. We were also creating these shared digital charts and systems that were extremely paralyzing in a way, because they became very mechanical. If there was continued inaction or no change resulting from the multiple calls home, we would recommend making a home visit. During such visits, we sought to understand: is the family safe and ok, and how might we best support? At times, we found ourselves explaining to staff who were questioning students' commitment to school, "they are living in a garage" or "mom's in the hospital." Yet even with this intent, the experiences with parents/guardians and students influenced how we saw the students. Subconsciously, we create a judgment. We wonder how students who might not have met and might not be meeting the measures of success that we're evaluating at our school sites, how in the future those entry points and contacts with school staff will impact their educational experience. Through the multiple home visits we made, we saw our school community and students through a different lens, one that helped us to see their hopes and fears as they made themselves vulnerable and subject to judgement. As we recognized the need to immediately suspend our judgement and check our own biases, we also recognized our shared longing for human interactions that extended beyond the screen or digital devices.

In our community, we are the ones who often say, "You're not doing enough" and that's the tension for us. We are the ones who are evaluating and how we evaluate impacts the experience of students and families. But the experience of students and families exists outside of school. The structures that we developed and are developing during COVID-19 and distance learning align to the characteristics of a carceral state, which means we had to constantly reflect and revisit these structures to impede punishment and instead cultivate restoration, agency, and liberation. We as site principals and school staff were and continue to be the ones who are engaging in acts of surveillance, we are the ones who are creating and perpetuating these structures. We are the ones who were utilizing mechanisms of social control. Even if our intent as principals and educators is to support, our impact makes us in part complicit in the tracking and creating a vantage point where our students are being seen. We experienced tensions. We need to know who's engaging and who's not engaging. But in collecting that data, we are developing systems of surveillance. And it is very nuanced. We could quickly be and feel like an enforcer, which goes back to, where is the communication and follow up coming from? Is it coming from a place of, we care, we want to make sure our students are safe? Depending on who within the organization is making contact, it can easily be mechanical, "There's all these things that are due and you're not doing them."

Captivity

As we shared our experiences and later reflected on our systems and our current COVID-19-related context, another theme that emerged connected to captivity and how the suspension of many mandates such as standardized testing and teaching evaluations afforded us the freedom to be creative and focus on taking a trauma-informed approach. These efforts included establishing routines and maintaining clear communication with our students, our families, and each other. These routines included but were not limited to establishing regular virtual check-ins throughout the week to formally and informally make ourselves available to families, students and staff to provide information, offer emotional and technology support, and a space to engage in courageous conversations about race to promote healing and collective action in response to recent racist events happening around the country.

In addition to these virtual spaces, we continued to make ourselves available via cell phone and provide regular updates to the entire community via emails, texts, and phone calls in multiple languages to meet the linguistic needs of our community. Building relational trust and well-being were crucial components of teaching and learning that became embedded in our instruction and our work together over time as we recognize the need to be intentional and focus on what really matters. Connectedness through deliberate and responsive approaches to curriculum planning and delivery in teams was supported to ensure that we

are taking a trauma-informed approach.

Early on in our interactions, we realized that the inequities experienced by many of our students and families were heightened as they already existed and were being confronted by them on a daily basis. While the tools of distance learning and this pandemic made us feel captive and in some instances deepened carcerality, we also recognized the opportunities it offered us to collaborate creatively with our community to think outside the box, create new systems of support, make connections with community based organizations, and extend ourselves to our students, families, and colleagues. In our outreach to families, we recognized that “we have the power as a community to listen, acknowledge, and transform” and that “we take this opportunity to examine our current practice and educational philosophy and values.” We discussed the tensions we experienced as we checked ourselves as leaders while supporting others, and modeled the types of behavior that we hoped everyone embraces, as we strived to take a growth mindset and challenge existing ways of doing things that to us felt emotionally and physically draining.

Discussion: Hope and Legacy

Throughout our *testimonios,* we found ourselves continuously reflecting on the roles we were playing when we felt like an enforcer of education, especially in this context where we felt less captive by institutional mandates. As we strive to live our commitment to use education as a tool for liberation, we also question/ed our own actions and biases. In times were we felt we were doing right by students even visiting homes to offer support and to better understand any challenges getting in the way of a student’s engagement, we felt the need to question what could be interpreted as pervasive and policing on our part given the context of this pandemic and our student’s reality pre-COVID.

What is happening is not new. We live in a country with a long history of settler colonialism, we understand that the educational institutions are part of that history, and we understand that many of the structures and ideologies that are pervasive in educational spaces are very much part of that settler colonial legacy. We engage in our educational context as both leaders and people who are positioned as privileged and minoritized. **We are both the system and understand what the system does to people.** We are constantly navigating between these different spaces as principals and as people. It is imperative that we not remain passive or silent and we take this opportunity to use our privilege and examine our current practice and our educational philosophy and values. Part of moving forward starts with a level of acknowledgement, considerable introspection, and collective work to reassess and revisit what we do, why we do it, in the best interest of whom, and according to whom. Throughout this journey, we remain committed to the belief that public education--when instruction focuses on the experiences of those who are, have been, or continue to be disenfranchised by institutionalized oppression--is a vehicle to facilitate learning experiences that lead to disruption of the status quo and our ways of knowing, increased social awareness, and collective social action. We know that we need to continue building our own toolbox. We are committed to not allowing ourselves the privilege of ignoring, of acting like these developments do not affect us. We have the power as a community to listen, acknowledge, and transform.

Dr. Iván Rosales Montes is a California Bay Area native and proudly serves as the principal of a public school in San José, CA. Driven by his passion for cross-cultural exchanges, he spent time in classrooms throughout Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and México and as a U.S. Fulbright Fellow under the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, served as a teaching assistant to undergraduate students at the University of Bahrain’s Center for American Studies. Dr. Montes has served students at both education nonprofits and public-school districts in Florida and California. He completed his doctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education.

Laura Peynado Castro is a doctoral candidate in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania. Laura migrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic when she was 12 years old and has been proudly serving as the principal of a small public middle school in New York City since 2008. Her dissertation explores the fluid and complex interconnectedness between the literacy practices, experiences, and perceptions of transnational and bilingual Dominican youth who move in and across different cultural, social, physical, and linguistic spaces. Laura’s research interests include critical literacies and pedagogy, translanguaging, transnational feminism, student-based inquiry methodologies, and Dominican diaspora studies.

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