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Empowering Students through Creative Resistance: Art-based Critical Pedagogy in the Immigrant Experience

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Abstract: This study displays the value of using art-based critical pedagogy, and the importance of developing the socio-political awareness of immigrant students. It shows the development of strong student-teacher relationships through culturally relevant curriculums through shared socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The article relates the author's personal ongoing relationship as a high school teacher with a former undocumented student as a model and key to nurturing students' identities and academic endeavors.

Key Terms: Art-based critical pedagogy; Art education; Creative resistance; Student-teacher relationships; Undocumented students; Working-class students

Scholars have detailed numerous factors affecting the academic outcomes of immigrant youth, attributing negative experiences to the systematic processes within academic, home, and social environments that may include discrimination, bullying, language exclusion, and the difficulties of acculturating to a new society (Berry, 2006; Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Carhill, 2008; Medvedeva, 2009; Méndez, 2012; Ochoa, 2013; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2007; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2004; Perez², 2011; Shor, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, subtractive schooling processes which immigrant students experience contribute to the long-term outcomes of the immigrant paradox. Subtractive schooling processes erode students' social capital or networks and divest them of their culture and language through assimilationist practices (Valenzuela, 1999). The immigrant paradox explains that despite having greater elements of disadvantage, newly-arrived immigrants have shown greater academic performance compared to immigrant students that have resided longer in the U.S. (Buriel, 2012; Crosnoe, 2012; Fuligni, 2012; Hernández, 2012; Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Over time, however, immigrant students experience academic regression as they begin to acculturate and adapt to their new environments (Fuligni, 2012). In this paper, I present the experiences of Pintor,³ an undocumented student I met during his sophomore year while I was teaching art at Eastside High School⁴ in the Los Angeles Unified School District (L.A.U.S.D.). To illustrate the impacts of subtractive schooling, I draw from his testimonies to share

the hardships that made his schooling difficult and how those experiences eroded his own identity and learning, fostering his underperformance during his first two years of high school. I argue that his schooling experiences, prior to developing his socioeconomic consciousness, reflected the long-term decline in academic achievement that is characterized as the immigrant paradox. I share the art-based critical practices that challenged the negative schooling experiences of Pintor and explore the relationship that Pintor and I developed and continued beyond his high school graduation.

Pintor's experiences are the foundation for this analysis and may shed light on much needed education practices for undocumented students, as well as students of immigrant backgrounds, or students of color. To lead my inquiry for this study, I ask the following questions: How can the use of art-based critical pedagogy improve the academic and social experiences of immigrant students? What is important for teachers to understand in order to serve students of immigrant backgrounds?⁵

A CALL FOR CRITICAL ART PEDAGOGY

This paper draws from arts education research and the benefits of arts programs. That scholarship, however, fails to suggest how to better serve immigrant populations. I also look at research on the experiences of immigrant students and the role of educators. Lastly, I refer to research on the role of critical pedagogy in enhancing working-class students' experiences in schools.

There is a need for arts education research to show how the arts can challenge negative acculturation and negative schooling processes for marginalized populations. Scholars illustrate the benefits that art education has for students (Caterall, 2009; Hutzell, 2012). For example, Caterall's (2009) twelve-year study found that students from low and high socioeconomic status (SES) that participate in the arts are more likely to go to college and be engaged in school. However, Caterall fails to acknowledge or address the disparities of arts access between low and high-income schools. Additionally, the projects presented in Hutzell's (2012) work do not address the socioeconomic and institutional limitations that exist for students of color in marginalized communities. Therefore, arts education research on improving the lives of immigrant youth through art programs in low SES areas needs to be developed. This paper suggests the use of critical pedagogy in art education to meet the needs of students from immigrant populations.⁶

One of the main approaches of critical pedagogy is to help students perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation, which they can transform (Freire, 1993). Critical educators must understand the circumstances of immigrant youth and challenge the misconceptions and socioeconomic factors they encounter. For that, I look at examples of critical pedagogy practices in classrooms (Calderón, 2004; Darder, 1995; de los Ríos, 2012; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Garcia, 2012; McLaren, 1994; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2004). For example, Duncan-Andrade and Morell (2008) focus on developing student relationships based on the special needs of a particular school, which include looking at students' well-being and their limitations at home, school, and socioeconomic environments. University and high school collaborations have also used critical methods to address community needs outside of the classroom where relationships are key to decolonizing educational approaches (de los Ríos & Ochoa, 2012). In my previous work (Garcia, 2012), I recounted how the arts can challenge the sociopolitical environments of immigrant students through a public art project that resisted racist immigration laws.

I answer the call of scholars to challenge traditional art education (Carry, 1998; Darts, 2004; Kincheloe, 1991; Siqueiros, 1975; Tavin, 2002; Yokley, 1999) by becoming critical of its approaches and using the arts as forms of resistance. Darts (2004) identifies creative resistance as a

direct attempt to transform the way meaning is produced in our society through art education. Therefore, I define creative resistance as any practical art form, visual or performing, that contests or challenges systematic-oppressive structures, actions, misconceptions, stereotypes, political agendas, or inequalities that diminish the development of a group of people or community. Rather than support the process of subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) by assimilating immigrant students through English-only classes (Delgado-Bernal, 1998; González, 1990; Shor, 1992) and traditional art education approaches, I focus my teaching on improving the academic and social experiences of immigrant youth by connecting students' knowledge into my classroom's art curriculum. Maintaining the identities of immigrant youth through the arts and other subjects can reduce generational declines (González, 2000; Fuligni, 1997; Buriel, 2012; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2007; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999). Through the concept I refer to as creative resistance, I also consider how positive schooling experiences and caring relationships foster academic resilience. Most importantly, I display how arts-based critical pedagogy improved the academic performance of Pintor who showed signs of academic regression.

METHODS: INTRODUCING PINTOR

The findings generated for this article are drawn from the unique relationship I have with Pintor. He was my art student for three years, and we've maintained a friendship beyond the high school setting. Our established trust allowed his testimony and our conversations to be unfiltered.

Pintor took my introduction class as a 10th grader, and it was where I first noticed his artistic ability. The following year, I recommended Pintor and other students to take my beginning painting class. In *Painting 1*, I introduced students to concepts of social justice, capitalism, and historical and current examples of racism. I made the arts more relevant to their lives, neighborhood, and their historical backgrounds. Likewise, rather than using a "banking" approach of instruction or information for student receptors (Freire, 1993), my art class consisted of student-led discussions and the exchange of ideas. Presenting students to the realities of their environment through the arts was the first step in challenging the limiting factors that exist in their own neighborhoods and in challenging the normalized forms of education that reduce their accessibility to equality.

The idea to interview Pintor came during a phone conversation where we talked about our schooling situations. He had informed me that he was working in Nevada for a year and that he intended to enroll in a community college, but his undocumented status made it difficult. At the time, I had an assignment in graduate school that required me to interview an undocumented student about their schooling experiences. As I explained to Pintor what my class was about, I asked if he would be willing to be interviewed about his schooling experiences and the role that the arts played in understanding his circumstances. Pintor agreed, and we set up a meeting for a later date. I interviewed Pintor because of the way he began using the arts to interpret his own socioeconomic circumstances. For data, I draw from informal conversations (recorded and unrecorded) that Pintor and I have had since he was a high school student between 2010 and 2014. I use the conversations we had on the phone, when we met for lunch, and interactions over social media. Because I wanted to maintain the same level of dialogue that we usually have, I developed an interview protocol that I used to guide three formal conversations. These conversations weren't any different from the informal conversations we usually had; we simply talked about his experiences. Most importantly, we talked about how he used the arts as a form of resistance against subtractive schooling processes.

LEARNING FROM PINTOR'S STORY

In 2012, Pintor and I had a formal interview. At the time, Pintor worked in his father's welding business seven days a week, occasionally taking days off. His mother used to work outside of the home, but after having a hard time balancing work with picking up his siblings from school and tending to home chores, she decided to focus on the home and her children. Pintor is the eldest of three siblings: himself, a sister, and a younger brother, living with both his mother and father.

Pintor first came to the U.S. when he was seven. He crossed into the U.S. with fake parents. His sister and two other boys, not related to him, pretended to be the children of a man and a woman that were driving into the U.S. through the Mexican border. He did not know anyone in the car except his sister. He explains, "I had never seen these people in my life and I never saw them again. My parents did some sort of arrangement with them. They crossed through the desert and met us in the U.S. at some point." I present this part of Pintor's story first because I

want to pay respect to the emotional and psychological stress that many immigrant students internalize and bring with them to our classrooms. Students may come into our classrooms emotionally conflicted over socioeconomic circumstances, troubled over language barriers, or having internalized negative experiences.

Pintor attended Eastside High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The community that surrounds Eastside High School is historically known for its African-American roots and its Jazz-era history. In the past two decades, the Eastside community has served as a transient community for many Latina/o immigrant families, making it home to a large population of immigrants, and where Pintor's family lived when they came to the U.S. In 2007, while Pintor was a student, 46% of the students at Eastside High School were English-language learners: 91% were Latino, 8% were African American, 1% was Asian, and 1% was white non-Hispanic. Eighty five percent of the students were classified as "socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 81% of students qualified for free lunches, making Eastside High School a Title I school."⁷

ASSIMILATING AND LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE

When Pintor started grade school in the U.S., he endured emotional struggles because he did not speak English:

I remember the first teacher I had didn't speak Spanish, and at first I was just sitting there in the classroom. I was doing nothing. I would get the papers and homework, but I wouldn't do anything. I was in that classroom where she didn't speak Spanish for half a year, then I changed to another classroom where the teacher spoke Spanish. I learned a little bit of English, and I just tried to practice it every day in school.⁸

As this quote illustrates, Pintor did not receive proper instruction for six months from the beginning of the school year. A more fitting instruction for him began when he was switched to a Spanish-speaking teacher. It wasn't until then that he started learning English with the help of this Spanish-speaking teacher. For this reason, schools need to consider hiring teachers who can attend to the students

in their communities, educators who share similar backgrounds with their students. In this case, Pintor needed a teacher that shared his language.

Pintor also felt isolated not being able to speak with his classmates:

It was kind of isolating because we were young, and they [classmates] didn't know what was going on. They try to speak to you, and then you can't answer back and they kind of see you as an outsider. That's why at first when I didn't speak English I felt alone; they didn't realize that I didn't speak their language. Once you can talk to classmates and teachers, you feel like part of the school and just communication is more important. It makes you feel welcome.

Before going to high school, Pintor had already experienced these emotional circumstances at the elementary level. Students in various age groups encounter similar experiences as they arrive in the U.S. school system, and likely absorb similar insecurities as Pintor about his lack of

understanding English. With a number of factors affecting their well-being simultaneously, in addition to adjusting academically, immigrant students may experience academic regression overtime (Buriel, 2012; Crosnoe, 2012; Fuligni, 2012; Hernández, 2012; Perez, 2011; Suárez-Orosco, 2009). The experiences of replacing a native language with a new language, feelings of isolation, and adapting to a new environment are among the processes that Valenzuela (1999) describes as “subtractive schooling.” Together, they can fuel a student's loss of identity.

When I first met Pintor, his classmates referred to him as “Miller.” Miller was his nickname throughout his four years in high school. Recently, Pintor told me why his friends called him that. During his 9th grade year, a white teacher told him he would be referring to him as Steven Miller because that's what his name (in Spanish) translated to in English. As he shared this experience, he slightly smiled and finished his story by saying, “It stuck with me ever since, but I just laughed it off and didn't think much of it.” Upon hearing this, I felt guilty for not asking him about his nickname when he was in high school. I felt worse knowing that I too called him Miller at times. This was a form of assimilation, enacted by an educator, and normalized—“laughed off” for four years—and internalized as part of his identity.



Fig. 1. Pintor working on a panel during after-school hours in 2009

During our conversations about his education, Pintor shared how his academic performance and demeanor declined during his 9th and 10th grade years, but improved after his Painting 1 class. As he explains, the art class encouraged him to think differently about his academics:

I had never painted, but I drew a lot. That's the reason why I liked the class [Painting 1], and you, the teacher, made it involved with the community and the school. It wasn't just about art; it was more about being involved, and that made it different than other classes. But the part that got me was how art affected politics. That art could be part of politics; that stayed with me because I never saw art like that. Now that I recall 9th and 10th grade, my grades were pretty low, and after that my grades started getting better. By the end of 11th and 12th, I started taking better classes, honors and AP [advanced placement], and all of that started when I started seeing things differently through art.

CREATIVE RESISTANCE

The Intro to Art and Painting 1 classes provided a social justice framework for Pintor and his classmates to understand their experiences and sociopolitical environments. The class final for Painting 1 included a service-learning project where students displayed the issues of gentrification and a broken school system (Figure 1). This project was based on students' understandings and the complications of living in a socioeconomically challenged area, something that was presented during class. Pintor shares the role that the culminating project played in his political awareness:

It gave me a different perspective on where and how we were living. Before, I would see the bad things going on, and I saw them as part of where we live, and I saw them as normal. But being involved in art and the way you taught us about the way it worked, it changed our perspective and it didn't

seem normal as before. We saw it as unfair. Our perspective changed completely.

Pintor recalls thinking about school differently after taking the art class, and he remembers improving his grades after incorporating what he learned into other classes. He also suggests that these types of classes should have been presented to him during his 9th and 10th grade year.

Figure 1 shows Pintor touching-up Part One of the double-sided mural project. The walking mural was displayed at the annual César Chávez Walk⁹ in March 2009. Although this was a collaboration between Pintor and his classmates, Pintor was a lead contributor of the aspects that reflected students' realities of the education system.

During class discussions on how to depict their schooling experiences, Pintor suggested many metaphorical representations. One idea in particular involved incorporating an image of Uncle Sam dropping loose change to a broken piggy bank with the school district's logo, while providing stacks of dollar bills to a jail cell (Figure 2). Pintor explains:

I remember I drew [an] Uncle Sam that represented the government and people in power and he was giving out money to different systems, the school and the jail system, and he was giving more money to the jails rather than school systems, and we showed how that affected us as students in classrooms and how we saw politics. He represented how we saw the people in power.

The interpretation given by Pintor suggests he is able to understand his socioeconomic circumstances and interpret them into visual representations.

Pintor recalls what impacted him the most about the class project:

I remember when we did the walking mural. We went marching to the César Chávez Walk, and we ended up in Placita Olvera and displayed the artwork. That stayed with me because it was displaying our artwork, and it was displaying our school and political

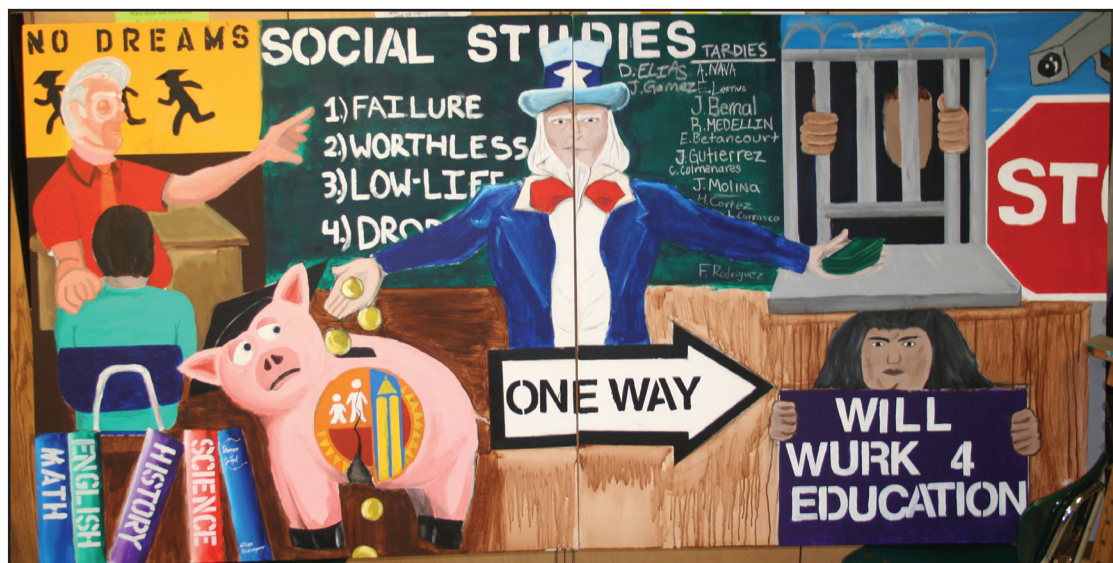


Fig. 2. *Bullying Through our Educational System*, 2009

things that were going on at the moment. It gave you a sense of pride of who you are and our school and where we were from, and those are things that made me see art differently.

Participating in the César Chávez Walk gave Pintor a sense of personal, school, and neighborhood pride, as well as civic participation. This type of activity also developed Pintor's community and school identity:

Because where we go to school is always seen as a poor school, [a] poor community. It's looked down upon from the rest of the schools because of the violence and crime and all of that. When we got to do something like [be] in a rally and go to a well known location like the Placita Olvera, and display art and the school band was there, and other students took their school jerseys, we were showing that our school wasn't just how people see it ... [W]e brought the name of the school up ... [W]e had some pride of where we were from.

Working on this project empowered Pintor and his classmates. In taking pride in their community and rejecting misappropriations of themselves, students are inspired to challenge any limitations they may experience in their schools and environments. This suggests the impact that the arts can have when taught through a critical perspective. I also identify the practice of using critical art education methods as creative resistance.

Creative resistance can challenge the processes of subtractive schooling and the long-term effects of the immigrant paradox by using the arts to understand how socioeconomic limitations exist in marginalized communities. For Pintor and students who are visual learners, learning through the arts may be the best way to understand these processes. Educators must also consider that students have diverse learning styles. A spatial-visual learner, according to Gardner (2011), learns through visual interpretations and is able to understand meanings in art and the potential effects of an environment.

Rather than teaching through banking concepts of education that only require students to listen and remember (Freire, 1993), educators, practitioners, artists, and activists need to take critical approaches in our classrooms and communities. One of the main themes of critical pedagogy is to help students see the reality of oppression as something they can change. Realizing that this

is how his environment works, Pintor and his classmates challenged the misconceptions and low expectations of students from socioeconomically challenged areas.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH CREATIVE RESISTANCE

By using critical pedagogy through the arts, students of immigrant populations can develop self-awareness and the ability to communicate politically. In Pintor's case, he is able to navigate his learning by developing ideas through dialogue and understanding. However, his new knowledge and understanding didn't just come from the teachings of political awareness, but from the relationships he developed inside and out of the classroom with classmates and other audiences. Pintor explains how the relationships we developed as a class were important in developing his thinking:

Knowing that you were a former student of the same school and community that we were from, seeing the same things that we were seeing as we were going through school, and being outspoken about it, knowing we were going through the same things you did, that kind of made a strong relationship with you and your students. The students, we caught that and because you were outspoken, we in turn were being outspoken to you, too. We get that you understand where we're at and feel that we can talk more about what we're going through than we could with other teachers because we feel that if we were to talk to other teachers, they wouldn't be able to understand.

Student empowerment cannot develop without selfless acts of love. Caring about students requires building relationships with them and falling under the "Rida paradigm" presented by Duncan-Andrade (2007), by becoming that educator that students know they can count on. Caring has major influences on student academic performance and is key to the well-being of students' environments and endeavors (Valenzuela, 1999; Duncan-Andrade, 2006). In Pintor's case, this type of support

extends beyond the classroom and into his own experiences outside of school. Teacher-student relationships amongst immigrant youth need to account for student academic and sociopolitical circumstances, and must consider students' needs beyond the school setting. Sharing my experiences as a former student¹⁰ with Pintor and his classmates allowed him to understand his own circumstances and interpret them through creative resistance.

Research on the negative schooling experiences of immigrant youth and students of color suggests that certain teacher relationships support or prevent the negative acculturation experiences of immigrant youth (Buriel, 2012; Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Hernández, 2012; Ochoa, 2007; Suárez-Orosco, 2009, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). I believe that caring for our students is something that maintains and generates their resilience and motivation. It helps immigrant students transition into a positive school culture. Valenzuela introduces us to the idea of authentic caring; caring that displays personal, academic, and social connections between student and teacher (23). Duncan-Andrade (2006) refers to *cariño* as the foundation of relationships amongst the poor working classes, "the only thing left to give in families raising children on substandard wages" (451). Hernández (2012) suggests the creation of bridges between school curriculum and the heritage of students (34). Buriel (2012) states that immigrant students can succeed when caring teachers note their engagement and cater to their needs to meet the difficulties they encounter (50). These are the actions that maintain student identity and challenge the generational schooling deterioration we often see as part of negative schooling processes.

A CALL FOR EDUCATORS: SUSTAINING A RESILIENCE OF CARING

Educators need to be conscious of their student populations and cater to their specific needs. We need to understand the identities of those unique communities and co-develop an understanding of the limiting factors that exist for certain immigrant populations and working-class populations. This text shares Pintor's story and how the process of developing creative resistance helped him develop resilience and discover a positive identity as an undocumented student. This is something that Pintor clearly recognizes as part of his world and that motivates him:

When you live in the same place for a long time, it becomes your own world, and in our community education is not the priority, I would say. It's just not as common. We go to school, and after school some people have to work; some people have to go back home, and they have to deal with taking care of their siblings and other things and just education is not the priority in our community. So when you see how education can change a person, change a community and change so many things, you start to want to become more involved in education [...].

By relating learning to students' experiences, critical arts education can encourage marginalized students to maintain their identities. We need to make our students aware of the realities in their socioeconomic structure and develop their understanding of their schooling process. In doing so, they understand what factors are against them and work alongside educators to overcome those limitations through forms of creative resistance.

De la Rocha's composition, "Know your Enemy" (1992), shows how the performing arts can be a form of creative resistance used to challenge elite power structures. The lyrics of "Know your Enemy" refer to the way schools work and identify "the enemy" as educators who teach students to compromise, to conform, to assimilate, to be submissive, to be ignorant, to be hypocritical, and to be brutal to themselves and others. Pintor experienced the colonizing process of being renamed "Steven Miller," and was expected to be obedient about it. These actions that are part of the American educational experience are justified as the historical process of assimilation; in fact, the objective of the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1923 was "to transform the Mexican community into an English-speaking community and an American-thinking community" (González, 1990, 31). Although the American dream may be a surreal illusion to immigrant students due to sociopolitical limitations, that illusion can be turned into a visual interpretation of resistance that advocates for a resilient and conscious education for students limited by our educational system.

Acts of creative resistance and authentic caring from

teachers can diminish the generational deterioration of immigrant students and students of color, nurture their identities and help them resist the limitations they encounter. We need to expose the American dream as a difficult obstacle that may be attainable but is brutal, a dream accessible only through collaborations between students and educator, and support that goes beyond graduation.

After Pintor graduated high school, he found work in Nevada painting houses. He did not have a social security number and explains what that did to him academically:

I didn't see myself as being able to go to [college]. I saw that I couldn't get a part time job, so I couldn't go to school. Since I am undocumented, I have to take a different path than everyone who isn't. And again, because I didn't start getting better grades sooner, I wasn't an outstanding student and thought that because I didn't have good grades, I couldn't compete for scholarships. And I can't get a job to go to a regular school like everyone else so I just have to work. That's what I saw afterwards. I have to work but I want to go back to school. I don't know. I guess I should have known better, but I didn't.

Despite Pintor's awareness and academic improvement during high school, the reality of his circumstance as an undocumented resident placed him in a situation where even great support in high school wasn't enough for him to progress further on his own. He was discouraged by not being able to work above the table, providing identification, and felt that furthering his education was not an option for him.

Educators cannot assume that supporting students for one to four years of high school will be enough for them to enroll in college and transition through their aspirations. For first generation students, college is like learning another language and culture. Additionally, students from working-class public schools do not receive the same quality of education and college preparedness as students in middle and high SES schools (Tierney, 2006). This is why we need to continue to maintain

our relationships with students and work with them to challenge limiting factors beyond high school graduation and outside our classroom walls.

In May of 2013, Pintor was notified that his Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) application was accepted. It has been four years since he graduated high school; he recently enrolled in Santa Monica Community College and began his first semester. He still works with his father as a welder's apprentice and is looking into career options. During our most recent conversation, Pintor thanked me for continuing to check on him: "You asking me all the time about enrolling in school kept school on my mind, so I just wanted to thank you for that."

By no means am I dismissing the privilege that I have as an educator and citizen of the U.S. However, I hope this article exposes the additional attention that we as teachers need to give immigrant students and students of color. The ongoing relationship that continued beyond Pintor's graduation has been key to his enrollment in college and represents the type of relationship that educators should consider if they truly want their students to attain their goals, even if it takes years after high school.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Author does not use an accent on his surname.
- 2 He does not use an accent on his surname.
- 3 Rather than make public his name, I use "Pintor" as a pseudonym to identify this student through his passion. Rather than calling him Painter, I chose to use the Spanish translation to maintain a connection to his primary language.
- 4 Eastside High School is used as a pseudonym to refer to the eastern region of Los Angeles schools located east of downtown Los Angeles.
- 5 The term "students of immigrant backgrounds" refers to 1st and 2nd generation students, undocumented or U.S.-born, whose working-class families have migrated to and established themselves in the U.S.
- 6 "Students of immigrant populations" refers to students that come from neighborhoods of high immigrant populations. Although not all students may be immigrants, the demographics of the school show high numbers of students from immigrant backgrounds.
- 7 Unpublished Binding. Los Angeles Unified School District. Accreditation self-study report, Eastside High School, 2007.
- 8 Los Angeles, CA.
- 9 Annual walk commemorating the work and legacy of César E. Chávez, organized by the César Chávez Foundation in collaboration with L.A.U.S.D. and sponsored by the city of Los Angeles from 2007-2009. The César Chávez Walk was highly attended by most L.A.U.S.D. schools and was halted due to the city's insufficient budget.
- 10 While introducing students to the limitations that exist within their academic and socioeconomic environments, I shared that it had taken me nine years to get through the community college education pipeline because of the inequitable circumstances I grew up with: a single parent home, academic and social inequalities, inadequate social and schooling resources, and a socioeconomic structure designed to sustain social reproduction through underfunded school systems.

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