

JUSTICE ORIENTED TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION IN SCHOOLS AS A RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Noah Borrero and Christine J. Yeh

School of Education, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 94117

ABSTRACT

The authors propose a justice-oriented model of transformative collaboration in schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures, and forced distance learning efforts. The inequities and injustices highlighted by this global crisis have spurred new insights into the deep need to collectivize within public schools, communities, and institutions of higher education. These new complex and overwhelming challenges in education offer a catalyst for innovation, movement building and ways to foster humanizing education. And with this vision in mind, the authors introduce the concept of transformative collaboration which is grounded in three principles that set the stage for attendant interventions, strategies, and priorities. These include: (1) fostering collectivistic identities; (2) harnessing cultural assets; and (3) collectivizing for liberation. Using examples from K-12 and university contexts in the United States, the authors present guiding questions and considerations for future collective work among educational stakeholders.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, social justice in education, cultural assets, pedagogical strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and emergent school closures and distance learning efforts have posed complex issues for public schools in the United States (U.S.) (Harris, 2020), especially the experiences of historically marginalized students. While schools are sites of hostility and silencing, many students also experience unstable or unsafe homes and are unable to access schools which they rely on for basic human needs (Harris, 2020a). School is so much more than just a place for learning. It can be a safe haven for many students, a place for regular meals, relationship building, mentorship from caring adults, human connection, and access to mental health care (National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020)).

Many students also do not have internet or a computer at home and hence are unable to receive or complete assignments that are shared online (Kumashiro, 2020). Further, many teachers are unprepared to find meaningful ways to use technology in their pedagogy (Harper, 2020; Hutchison & Woodward, 2018). The inequities and injustices illuminated by this global crisis have spurred awareness of the deep need to collectivize across communities—especially within and outside of schools. In fact, the potential for all of us as educators to meaningfully collaborate with teachers, counselors, social workers, administrators, support staff, parents/guardians, communities, and students has always been important; yet, the current pandemic only draws more attention to the possibilities for community development and for collectivizing for social justice.

In this moment of tremendous change, uncertainty, and loss, educators are finding themselves in a liminal space of questioning hegemonic structures of oppression and balancing the urgent

educational and basic needs of their students (Harper, 2020). Perhaps the pandemic is a portal into the future (Roy, 2020), as we are reminded of the potential of schools as a transformative and innovative context and are calling for a rethinking of our current problematic school systems (Kumashiro, 2020) as microcosms of larger society. It is a critical time to learn through crisis and to name the emerging tensions of power, access, and resources. Some in power proclaim that COVID-19 does not discriminate, that it impacts everyone equally; but rather, it works to exacerbate existing inequities and further harms those already in the margins, from Asian and Asian American communities who are targets of the previous U.S. government's administration's rhetoric inducing xenophobic beliefs (Liu, 2020), to students with disabilities (Preston, 2020), to the victims of domestic violence (Abramson, 2020), to undocumented families who have limited access to federal relief funds (Luna, 2020). It is through these multiple lenses of struggle, hope, and opportunity that we begin one of many conversations about creating and generating frameworks, processes, and training opportunities for transformative collaboration and collectivizing educators for the empowerment of students and their communities.

2. REIMAGINING COLLABORATION AND CONNECTION

While public health experts, politicians, and advertisers stress the need for collective action, there seems to be relatively limited critique about why such action is challenging for so many—especially in contexts of education and public schooling. In the United States, for example, the very structures and systems that rely on fierce competition, capitalism, and independence are crashing down all around us and the only way to stop the destruction—or at least slow it down for the time being—is by changing our social behavior for the good of the global community. The reality, of course, is that many of the structures and systems that are crumbling perilously are those most closely tied to a market-driven global economy that makes the rich richer and keeps the poor poor. With this urgent need for collective action and collaboration comes the many challenges of transforming a space that is historically partitioned. The dichotomies, categories, and silos that exist in educational spaces in the U.S., reinforce and remind us of the separations we see in schools and in society along racial, socioeconomic, vocational, social and neighborhood lines (Duncan, 1994). These include racialized spaces that are further defined by assimilationist notions of the “achievement gap”, failed attempts at school-home partnerships, and school staff meetings that further separate, rather than connect well-intended teachers and staff. And in the midst of a global health crisis, these gaps are further widened and include the added stressors associated with unemployment, loss, lack of childcare, and dealing with illness.

To be clear, U.S. schools have yet to realize their potential as a unionizing space of coalition building and solidarity (Ayers & Ayers, 2014; Knight-Manuel & Marciano, 2018). And yet it is not clear how—during this pandemic—the institutional context of school can dismantle structures and policies that limit authentic collaboration. With the current state of this crisis, the economic and cultural divisions we already see in schools are intensifying and worsening alongside increased discrimination against the most vulnerable, and simultaneously favoring and privileging of those already with power and access.

In our work training new K-12 teachers and school counselors in urban schools in the United States, since the schools moved to an online format, we hear their personal struggles and the challenges in navigating the disparities experienced by students and families. These urgent issues are coupled with their pleas for more comprehensive and holistic training that allows them to move beyond just teaching or counseling their students, by focusing more broadly on advocacy, support for addressing inequities, and movement building as critical skills in educational contexts (Knight et al., 2019).

For example, since U.S. schools have transitioned to distance learning, teachers have expressed their frustrations with providing support for students beyond online teaching, especially when their students are struggling with health and mental health issues pertaining to the pandemic. They see a need to offer assistance for socioemotional concerns especially when the home context may be a space for triggering trauma (Turner, 2020). For example, we hear our teachers saying, “I am not a counselor. How can I help my students who are experiencing fear and anxiety?” Similarly, for school counselors, they have shared challenges with focusing too much on students’ individual problems and not enough on larger, systemic inequities: “I am not part of the online learning with students, so I don’t know how they are doing socially in the “classroom” or with their learning.” These examples—and the myriad issues they reflect—provide insight into some of the challenges that educators (e.g. teachers, counselors, administrators, support staff) face and the need for innovation. Given the fear in response to emergent expressions of xenophobia, intolerance, and hatred in society—along with increases in domestic violence and child abuse and neglect (Agrawai, 2020)—these challenges in school roles are intensified and all the more pressing as students are dealing with more collective trauma (Turner, 2020).

As scholars committed to equity in urban public schools, we recognize the role that collective action must play during this crisis specifically, and during divisive political times more generally. More specifically—as educators who work directly with urban teachers and school counselors—we are seeking innovative ways to foster solidarity among educational advocates in school spaces (Bugarin-Jebajian, 2017; Furman & Larson, 2020). Urban youth and families and their communities are under attack and the impacts of racism, homophobia, and anti-immigrant policies are being played out daily in K-12 remote classrooms. In fact, one of our students recently shared with us, “we talk about institutionalized racism at school; but the fact is, racism seems even more prevalent since my school was shut down.”

We strive to support the real-life experiences of communities that are the most vulnerable by providing models for school-based collaboration and advocacy that extend beyond the classroom “walls” and engage more deeply with collective action and building a sense of collective identity and community. We recognize the many privileges that enable us to engage in this work (e.g. as faculty members with United States’ citizenship) and the fact that the university context is in part complicit in much of the division and deficit-based narrative that occlude new educators from acting collectively in support of historically marginalized communities (Harper, 2020; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2019). Thus, we look within by reflecting upon our own experiences and practices that maintain the status quo in our communities in an attempt to provide innovative examples of, and opportunities for, school- and research-based interventions that can provide direction for collective action and meaningful collectivizing for equity.

2.1. School Collaboration

With so many disruptions in the public school system, we are currently in a moment when teachers, school counselors, school staff, students, administrators, parents/guardians, community members, and scholars must unite and use their collective assets, resources, and skills to fight injustices and promote holistic learning and development collaboratively (Griffin & Farris, 2020; Furman & Larson, 2020; Knight et al., 2019). For many years, U.S. schools have grappled with the challenging task of building collaborative partnership within and outside of school. These efforts have included teacher-counselor-parent collaborations (Cox, 2005; Griffin & Farris, 2020), teacher instructional teams (Ronfeldt et al., 2015), counselor collaboration for educational reform and leadership (Bemak, 2000; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010), statewide collaborations (Kaffenberger, Murphy, & Bemak, 2006), teacher-school counselor-administrator collaborations to promote college readiness and access among Black and Latino male youth (Knight et al., 2019) and school-

community-home partnerships with counselors (Betters-Bubon & Schultz, 2017) to name a few. These examples of models for collaboration have included ideas for training, curriculum, community engagement, and student involvement but they have fallen short in creating a transformative and collective space.

Teaching, counseling, and other educational professions have historically been isolated roles where educators often provide instruction, administration, or counseling in silos and without active consultation and partnership (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). However, in recent years, policymakers have advocated for the development and implementation of school-based Professional Learning Communities (PLC) (National Staff Development Council, 2001) and for systemic structures to promote educational collaborations (Carroll, 2007). Despite increased efforts for educator collaboration, there have been few investigations analyzing effective leadership models.

Ronfeldt et al. (2015) collected survey and administrative data on over 9,000 teachers in 336 public schools to explore the many types of collaborations that exist in educational instructional teams and whether these collaborations fostered student academic achievement. They found that teachers and schools that engage in higher quality collaboration have higher achievement gains in math and reading in particular. Moreover, teachers improve more when they work in schools that have a higher level of collaboration quality. These findings support recent policy efforts to improve student achievement by promoting teacher collaboration in instructional support teams. However, this work did not focus on efforts on collaboration that extended beyond student academic achievement as a primary goal. In addition, this work specifically emphasized teacher instructional support teams and did not discuss the important role of other school personnel.

For example, Kaffenerger and colleagues (2006) developed and implemented a School Collaboration Leadership Team (SCLT) to conceptualize professional school counselors as partners in a larger school team. The SCLT includes school district counseling supervisors, counselor educators, and leaders of statewide school counselor organizations. This transformed view of counselors, uniquely positioned them in a systemic approach to collaboration that extended beyond the school walls and included district and statewide participants. The SCLT model, however, could benefit from the inclusion of teachers, students, and community members as relevant stakeholders in educational settings.

To address the need to involve teachers in school collaboration efforts, Cox (2005) proposed a model for Home-School Collaboration. Home-School Collaboration describes a connection between families and schools where parents/guardians and educators work together to support and promote the academic and social development of students. To further develop this construct, Cox (2005) identified and analyzed 18 empirical studies that involved home-school collaboration programs that also assessed results using a school-based outcome, which was aligned with the American Psychological Association's Division 16 Task Force on Evidence-Based Interventions in School Psychology. In this evaluation, Cox (2005) found that home-school collaboration interventions are effective in promoting specific school outcomes for students, including academic performance and school-related behaviors. However, a key finding is that the most effective interventions involve (1) parents and school personnel collaborating to execute interventions using a reciprocal exchange of information (such as parent-teacher action research teams), and (2) ongoing communication between school and the home (such as progress reports and school-to-home notes). Although this study helped to highlight the important role of collaboration, communication, and exchange of information, it did not identify a specific advocacy agenda for students.

The evolving advocacy role of counselors and other educational personnel is emphasized in several studies (e.g. Bemak, 2000; Evans et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2010; Yeh & Borrero, 2012). Specifically, Bemak (2000) discusses the need to transform the role of the school counselor to support leadership in education reform through active collaboration. With recent shifts in our national educational agenda, there have been dramatic changes in educational policy that impact public education in a way that overemphasizes high stakes testing and academic achievement, over student development and values. With these changes in public education, counselors, teachers, and other school personnel must redefine their roles and their relationships with one another for the larger purpose of student advocacy and overall education and development.

Moreover, Bemak (2000) asserts that counselors in particular must work collectively in interdisciplinary teams to serve marginalized communities and active participation of all students. A shift in the role for school counselors redefines the future school counselor as a leader who actively promotes educational reform and meets national and state educational objectives by fostering healthy safe school environments. School counselors may achieve this by playing a major role in facilitating interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration. Larger social issues such as poverty, community violence, academic challenges, substance abuse, and trauma are complex and mandate a response from an interdisciplinary team of professionals versus a limited perspective from a singular professional approach. Bemak's (2000) interdisciplinary approach to school collaboration is highly relevant and timely. However, school personnel must continue to identify how to use their skills to best support student needs.

Overall, current models of U.S. school collaboration are limited in that they tend to focus primarily on developing partnerships and educational systems for increasing student support and academic achievement as a main goal. These efforts have centered on the individual students in terms of achievement. While student academic success is certainly an important goal for schools, it cannot be the only one, especially during this global crisis when emerging and ongoing injustices are escalating and when students are struggling with multiple sociocultural issues and tensions. Previous models of collaboration also do not incorporate a holistic view of student development which has been especially critical during the pandemic when students' emotional, familial, social and educational needs have been further challenged. With a holistic perspective, we need to move beyond specific staff being designated to one aspect of the student's life (e.g. a counselor only deals with emotional needs) and have a collective accountability for students' development. With this vision in mind, ideas about collaboration and connection need to extend beyond just thinking in terms of working as a team and include an innovative approach to community building, health promotion, improving student quality of life, and addressing inequities.

3. TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION

During this prolonged period of uncertainty in education brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, we see an opportunity to reclaim the enormous possibilities in education as a movement towards liberation. We begin by proposing a guiding framework for transformative collaboration that extends beyond the hyper-focus on individual academic achievement and development. More specifically, we believe that transformative collaboration can potentially utilize educator, community, and student assets to transform school as a collectivizing space that dismantles oppressive structures and policies and seeks to reinforce an equity agenda in and out of school buildings. It is through this process of institutional transformation that we believe students (along with their families and communities) can be afforded the space and agency to be engaged leaders for change as we create our new educational reality.

As educators, we are drawn to our profession out of a deep appreciation for mentoring, collaborative relationships, and relational learning. It is jolting and incongruous at times to foster engagement and the cultural empowerment of students with the majority of teaching and learning still happening remotely. In this daily struggle to do our work and make meaningful connections with students, we are also reminded of our priorities and vision for education and how to use this pause as a time to build deeper connections and realizations. In this regard, we may view the pandemic as a portal into the future in that the work we do now, because of the forced changes in education incited by COVID-19, may offer ideas and spaces that we could not have imagined before.

We believe in learning through and in crisis and creating opportunities and imagining possibilities during instability. Our current challenges—while complex and daunting—offer a catalyst for movement building. During this time, learning does not need to be less rigorous but it must embody a more humanizing approach to education. And with this vision in mind, we view transformative collaboration in schools as initially being grounded in three main principles which set the stage for attendant interventions, training opportunities, strategies, and priorities. These include: (1) fostering collectivistic identities; (2) harnessing cultural assets; and (3) collectivizing for liberation.

3.1. Fostering Collectivistic Identities

In most parts of Asia, wearing masks has long been destigmatized and normal. It is an everyday practice that is grounded in the belief of protecting others when we are sick. However, in the United States, wearing masks is often seen as a sign of individual illness. And as the United States continues the struggle to enforce mandated face coverings in public places, this behavior has been associated with the need to protect oneself and not necessarily those around us. These simple differences in perception highlight the need for the U.S. to consider how collectivistic identities may not only serve to help us through this pandemic but also in how we approach schooling. Similarly, collective identities—the notion of belonging to a group—is related to the idea of a collectivistic identity and in the growing needs for the entire school community to have a shared sense of belonging to the school.

Similarly, social distancing policies have highlighted the vast differences between individualistic and collectivistic identities into the forefront of our consciousness. The idea that we are all socially connected and accountable for the public health and good of our country—and especially our most vulnerable—has prompted multiple reactions from discomfort and inconvenience to great protest and unrest in response to shelter in place policies. Protesters are demanding their individual rights and freedom. In many ways, looking out for the most vulnerable in our country seems intangible, almost distant when it is not part of our immediate reality. Being collectivistic in this way is something we need to pursue with intention and purpose especially in our public schools. Hence, as educators, we believe that transformative collaboration is linked to the fostering of collectivistic identities.

For the past few decades, researchers (e.g. Becker et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2010) have described collectivistic identities (also referred to as interdependent selves) as those who value and prioritize the needs and goals of the group or community over that of the individual. Collectivistic identities view the family, community, or group unit as taking precedence over the individual. They also emphasize group harmony, cohesion, and interdependence with one another. This concept is especially crucial in public school settings where the politics and priorities placed on individual achievement, scores, and performance are weighed as far more important than a shared sense of equality and cohesion and reflect the U.S. preoccupation with neoliberal reforms and competition. In the classroom, students are not expected to be concerned about the performance or learning of

others. This expectation has not changed since the need to move online. In fact, learning in isolation can fuel how individualism is encouraged and valued.

For many students from collectivistic cultures, navigating these tensions of self and other is a constant pressure and a reminder of their not belonging in schools (Borrero et al., 2010). They often feel great insistence to ignore their interdependent selves in hopes of achieving an academic identity since the two are in conflict with one another. However, we believe we have a lot to learn from students and their families from shared spaces and this learning potential has been traditionally silenced in classrooms. From caring for younger siblings or elder relatives at home to looking out for the betterment of one's community, we believe that fostering collectivistic identities offers important opportunities and avenues for student development. And in this current crisis, we cannot revert to the hyper focus on individual behaviors but rather, we must create opportunities for these interdependent strengths to emerge.

Collectivistic identities are integrally linked to intergenerational relationships and these relationships are valued for their knowledge and social and emotional connection (Yeh et al., 2014). Since the physical space of schools has closed and students are encouraged to learn at home, we have witnessed more opportunities for deepening the connection between school and home contexts. Previously, in the U.S., the home has been seen as a distinct entity—separate from students' lives at school. Parents, guardians, and students alike have struggled with the transition to learning at home, and many students do not have safe home lives. However, we have also seen many families taking more ownership of, and engaging actively and creatively in their children's learning, and perhaps there is potential in this moment of shared responsibility. It is not necessarily ideal or easy but we believe that lines between school and home do not need to be so distinct.

For teachers and counselors, fostering collectivistic identities needs to extend far beyond simply assigning group projects—although that is one traditional example of promoting some student collaboration. In recent months, we have seen many teachers and counselors try to better utilize relational resources in ways that reflect intergenerational learning and relationship building. For example, one teacher developed a district-wide student mentoring program where high school students mentor other students—across all K-12 grade levels. The purpose of these mentoring relationships is not just to help with homework or assignments but to also offer check-ins with students to see how they are managing at home and to build connection and engagement. With the younger students, their parents are invited to the mentoring sessions and as a result, may feel more involved in their child's schooling and development. Hence, student mentors feel a shared ownership in the learning and holistic development of other students and mentees feel connected and cared for. This model not only fosters all students' collectivistic identities—as interconnected and deeply tied to others—but it also sends a message that everyone should and can play a role in the success of a school.

Transformative collaboration is only possible when there is a shared vision and goals for all students—and especially those in the margins—to have equal access and resources for successful and meaningful holistic development (Knight-Manuel & Marciano, 2018). But the challenge is identifying and knowing what collaboration and relationship-building look like in a time when we are feeling more isolated physically and socially (especially for those that are unsafe). How has this moment informed the ways we think about our connectivity and our reliance and need to be with each other and be there for students? Among the many ideas emergent from social distancing is the importance of the collective good and how all school personnel need to work in solidarity with students and their families. Schools may implement this through a mission statement that reflects the need for a shared vision. Different school staff—such as teachers, administrators, and counselors—also need to have a shared identity for the school and feel a sense of belonging and ownership of that identity (Kafele, 2014).

3.2. Harnessing Cultural Assets

We define cultural assets as “learned, intergenerational, fluid ways of being that reveal meaningful relationships, historical legacies, and filial traditions. These assets are represented in communal and cultural qualities that we possess and collective actions we take” (Borrero & Yeh 2016, 117-118). In this time of mandated isolation, the role of—and the ability to rely on—cultural assets is heightened. It is in and through the tensions between the individual and the collective that bring us feelings of purpose and belonging. As we discuss above, the Western, capitalistic centering of the individual is a cultural reality—a paradigm—that is supported and reproduced in school. As such, individual reading, learning, test-taking, performance, and achievement are deemed meaningful—they are assets valued by the culture of school (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Pour-Khorshid, 2020). Now, more than ever in our lifetimes, this omnipotence of independence is being radically challenged. Put simply, we cannot continue to try to fight the spread of COVID-19 as individuals—it takes collective effort.

Our approach to cultural assets pushes against the structural indoctrination of capitalism and individualistic notions of success. We attempt to learn from and with young people and communities who value the collective over the individual. We center the lived experiences of youth, for example, growing up in multigenerational households, and see the learning that they are doing alongside family and the mentoring they are receiving from extended family and elders as essential in their learning and relationship- and community-building. It is from this perspective—as educators—that we envision possibilities for the future of our school system. We see teachers, counselors, school leaders, parents, and community members striving to learn from, build upon, and foster cultural assets as a foundation of learning.

The theoretical framing of our approach to cultural assets is particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. We build upon sociocultural learning theories (e.g. Nieto, 2002; Vygostky, 1978) that highlight the importance of cultural context and social interaction. Further, we apply an ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) to showcase the ways in which these contexts and relationships are interconnected and reliant on one another (Lee et al., 2003). Combined, these theories help us to study and experience learning as a part of the relationships we navigate and the spaces we occupy. In a sense, these foundational aspects of learning are among the most stifling challenges of the shelter-in-place orders we are experiencing. Yet, this very idea of interconnectedness is on display every day when we see the news and read about the spread of COVID-19 and how we—as a global community—are attempting to mitigate it.

From an ecological perspective, cultural assets most vibrantly emerge as shared, reciprocal, and collective actions of students and communities. They are cultivated in and through social interaction. For youth who express multi-ethnic identities and navigate cultural contexts that prioritize collective values, cultural assets are often deeply woven into family roles, cultural traditions, and community participation. Strengths are developed and displayed through caring for loved ones (extended family and beyond), sharing resources, and sustaining legacies across generations. Youth who live in multigenerational households, for example, showcase cultural assets through caring for siblings, acting as linguistic and cultural interpreters for elders, navigating divergent home and school cultural realities, and engaging acts of solidarity within and across ethnic groups (e.g. Dorner et al., 2007; Yosso, 2005). Yet, when it comes to the context of school, these ecological and collective assets are made invisible (Martinez, 2017).

As scholars and university faculty, we must honor and cultivate the cultural assets of our students—the next generation of teachers and school counselors—so they may nurture the cultural assets of their students in K-12 schools. One of the venues through which we’ve connected our conceptual

approach to cultural assets to our pedagogy during the COVID-19 school shutdown is via Ecological Asset Mapping (EAM) (Borrero & Yeh, 2016). EAM is a pedagogical strategy designed to promote self-in-relation understanding and critical consciousness among teachers and counselors, so they, in turn, can adapt the project for their K-12 students. At the core of EAM is the purposeful modeling of self-reflection and interrogation through map making of one's connection to cultural and community assets. Self-exploration cannot be viewed simply as an act of introspection and self-awareness that ends with the individual (Pour-Khorshid, 2020). Rather, we contend that self-awareness and one's positionality must be considered across intersecting and dynamic settings that shape and influence one's worldview and cultural identities (Freire, 1970). In these ways, EAM allows us (as faculty members) to work alongside teachers and counselors to explore positionality across meaningful ecologies through active self-reflection of the spaces and interactions that promote and deter the emergence of cultural assets.

Specifically, exploring assets in different and overlapping ecological contexts uncovers opportunities for interrogating oppressive forces and identifying collective strengths. Our own experiences with EAM in our classes, and through our research to date with university students (Borrero & Yeh, 2016) and K-12 youth (Borrero & Sanchez, 2017), reveal its potential to build community and showcase collective identities. More specifically, EAM is a pedagogical strategy that promotes self-love and knowledge, respect for others, and the critical examination of social and educational inequities through harnessing cultural assets (Dorner et al., 2007; Picower, 2012). It is our goal that the modeling of EAM in our classes during this time of forced distance learning will equip teachers and counselors with a specific pedagogical strategy to use as a part of the project-based learning that local school districts are implementing in response to required distance learning.

As an aspect of our vision for transformative collaboration, EAM is particularly meaningful in this moment because it centers cultural assets as a part of all of our lives. The project requires the creation of a visual map that represents the people, places, and activities that foster strengths and belonging. The maps are literal and symbolic portraits of our connectivity (Futch & Fine, 2014). The fact that the maps are focused on cultural assets counters the myriad maps and mapping that we are forced to view every day as we learn about the continued spread of COVID-19, the concentration of deaths in our urban communities, and the comparison of cases across the nation and around the globe. Further, mapping technologies are being developed and utilized to track individual cases, re-trace potential infections, and enforce required quarantines in certain nations. While such technologies are useful for helping the global community address the spread of COVID-19, mapping cannot solely be utilized for the purposes of promoting social distancing. Maps are powerful cultural guides and artifacts, and we feel that they must also be utilized to showcase our collective assets and our continued reliance on purposeful collaboration—even during this pandemic.

3.3. Collectivizing for Liberation

Our pursuit of innovation through collective, school-based advocacy for youth and communities is part of our larger vision for schools as contexts for possibility and transformation. Building upon our goal of reimagining the context of school during this pandemic, and our vision for harnessing cultural assets, we honor the foundations of teaching and education as relational, cultural, political processes that reflect and help shape the world around us. And we see classrooms—full of live, in-person interactions—as the incubators for generative, innovative, and critical thinking (Borrero et al., 2020). From this perspective, we frame and acknowledge our work as being deeply political (e.g. Love, 2017), and our goals as educators reaching beyond static notions of student academic success.

As discussed above, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this framing centers a tension that faces us every day—forced isolation in a time of necessary collective action. In an attempt to play our part in the reimagining of schools as sites of radical possibility and true community (e.g. hooks, 1994), we build upon existing theories to posit collectivizing for liberation at a moment in time when the very purpose of schooling is brought into question. So, for example, while the transition to distance learning has surfaced many of the challenges associated with access to technology; in reality, much deeper, structural inequities are at the very core of our educational system. We honor Freire's (1970) conceptions of education for liberation as tenets of our work as teachers, counselors, scholars, and activists. Education cannot rely on individualistic pursuits of pre-determined knowledge and outcomes, but rather must play a vital role in the transformation of teachers and learners in their shared cultural contexts. This reciprocity prompts the need for continued critical social analysis and self-reflection in the pursuit of critical consciousness (e.g. Kincheloe, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In the context of reimagining possibilities for urban public schools in the U.S., such political consciousness requires the interrogation of power structures that have historically and systematically oppressed students and communities of Color (e.g. Ayers & Ayers, 2014; Duncan 1994; Emdin, 2016; Spring, 2004). The legacies of inequitable, racist, and assimilationist agendas in education live on today and are easily visible through practices like the proliferation of student achievement data highlighting the gap between white students and students of Color (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 2016); the continued over-representation of students of Color in Special Education, high school “dropout” rates, and the juvenile court system (e.g. Ginwright, 2016); and the school to prison pipeline (Deckman, 2017). At the base of this—it can be argued—is a perennial focus on the supposed deficits of students and communities of Color with regard to any type of academic prowess or trajectory. Of this foundation, Yosso (2005) wrote, “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools is deficit thinking” (75).

We present our approach to collectivizing for liberation as a direct confrontation to such labeling through calling attention to the systemic hierarchies and power structures (Delpit, 1995) that define academic success and the purpose of education. Central to such analysis is the understanding that schools in large part reward and promote white, middle class, male, heterosexual values. And, as Delpit (1988) writes of this culture of power, “those with power are frequently least aware of, or least willing to acknowledge, its existence, and those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (p. 283). From this stance, we frame our work within a social justice, advocacy-oriented approach (e.g. Picower, 2012) that specifically names the systemic inequities that students face and calls upon educators to transform the system itself.

Related to the foundations of education for liberation (Freire, 1970), we prioritize the need for a continually developing critical social analysis as a part of our vision for transformative collaboration for and by educators. This analysis is grounded in understandings of the historical and systemic injustices that are inherent in the institution of schooling in our country, and the lived experiences of working-class people of Color dedicated to confronting and altering such injustices for future generations of youth through education. It is in and through the connections between day-to-day realities and larger systemic structures that new possibilities for learning, unlearning, and being are envisioned (Gruenewald, 2003). And, like never before in our lifetimes, the tensions between self and the collective are centered in such visions. Our work as educators is, cannot be, and will not be the same as a result of COVID-19, and acknowledging this involves self-reflection alongside systemic analysis and critique if we are to truly seek transformation.

For example, as educators we strive to address the privileges and biases that are embedded in the institutional foundations of higher education by engaging directly with youth and local community partners. These relationships beyond the walls of the university bring relevance, sustenance, and

vitality to theoretical understandings of schooling, curriculum, and the pursuit of justice-oriented education (Ladson-Billings, 2016; Paris, 2012). We see these relationships as part of intersecting and interacting social systems that engage our multiple and dynamic identities across contexts and are essential to the fostering of cultural assets (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Dorner et al., 2007; Nasir & Saxe, 2003; Nieto, 2002).

If there are glimmers of hope for liberatory collectivizing amidst the isolation and suffering inflicted by COVID-19, we believe they can come through truly innovative, creative, and critical attempts to reimagine our deeply flawed schooling system. We are inspired, for example, by our scholar and activist colleagues who are mobilizing to fight against the testing regime during this time when testing facilities are shut down. More specifically, in addition to all of their coursework, teachers and school counselors in our programs are required to take (and pass) state-mandated assessments as part of completing their credentials. With testing facilities shut down, these highly contentious tests (e.g. Kumashiro, 2020) are literal gatekeepers for candidates who are ready to enter the job market and begin their careers. Grassroots organizing by scholars, teachers, students, and community leaders have led to the postponement—and even cancellation of tests like the Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA) in some cities. The ability to directly connect key needs in this moment (i.e. new teachers and counselors are needed more than ever as we envision a model for supporting youth in the upcoming school year) with structural injustices that lie at the heart of our educational system is crucial in making change happen—now and into the future.

Another display of collectivizing during the COVID-19 lockdown is happening in our local K-12 school district, where scholars are uniting alongside teachers, counselors, district leaders, principals, and students to reimagine humanities curriculum for urban youth (Camangian & Cariaga, in press). Equity studies—a curriculum built upon a framework of humanization that includes knowledge and love of self, solidarity between communities and with the most marginalized, and self-determination in claiming an intellectual identity—is being developed for all district schools. With implementation slated for the start of the upcoming school year, the leaders of this initiative have worked with constituents across the district to develop a remote Professional Learning Committee (PLC) to meet during COVID school closures. This collectivizing expresses the urgency of this work at this time—students and families who are suffering the most during this pandemic are the ones who have the most to teach all of us about equity. Again, it is the convergence of the needs exposed due to our current crises with the historical, structural injustices of our larger institution of schooling that makes this type of collective action liberatory. That is, the goal of this work is not to get through this difficult moment so that we can return to normal school, classroom, and curriculum—it is to transform the system and foster student agency by reimagining very ways that young people learn about themselves, others, and struggles for justice.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Innovative approaches to rethinking the role of collaboration and connection in public schools must be ongoing processes and cannot solely be associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. As scholars, we are committed to playing a role in the reimagining of the school context, and ways that collective action can generate new opportunities for teaching and learning. This involves breaking down silos, questioning commonly-believed assumptions about the ways schools should operate, and learning from youth and communities about ways to engage collective participation. Aspects of such collaboration need to develop as a result of some of the specific challenges associated with COVID-19, while other opportunities can come through the adaptation of existing frameworks.

For example, Maloney, and colleagues (2019) produced a model for preparing and supporting teachers for creating schools and classrooms that embody equity and racial justice. They assert there needs to be the co-creation of culturally relevant, collective, and intergenerational spaces in order to transform schools. Their framework integrates systems thinking which is grounded in the indigenous assumptions that we are all connected and related. Hence, their work in preparing social justice educators requires the ability to think systemically and see interconnections as essential in disrupting disparities. Such an approach allows us to move beyond individualistic and narrow solutions to practices and actions that integrate the histories and structural complexities embedded within long standing inequities. As transformative educators, they view their collective work as embedded in the notion of community of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) which are groups with a shared concern, passion, interest, and effort to build community, relationships, and common practice.

It is this type of scholarship that we hope to build upon in our approach to transformative collaboration. This can include promoting a sense of belonging and responsibility in schools where all group members have ownership of shared identities. These identities need to be communicated across all levels from the mission statement of the school to the activities and assignments that teachers provide; to counseling interactions that reflect a commitment to belonging from every community member. Most importantly, this idea must be created and informed by everyone—not from top down. We must reimagine school spaces together; and we feel that fostering collectivistic identities, harnessing cultural assets, and collectivizing for liberation can help us in this quest.

In this moment of great tension—between the self and the collective—how can we come together to create school and classroom spaces that were previously unthinkable? Historically, we have learned—and thrived—in the face of tremendous hardship and crisis, and COVID-19 is pushing us to reimagine the very purpose of school. This is a time when schools (and education systems) are stripped down to the basics—with many of the standard expectations from testing to graduation shifting. This offers a unique time to remind ourselves of the need for humanizing connection at a basic level.

During our own struggles with isolation and disconnection as a part social distancing and shelter in place, we have been challenged to interrogate the purposes of our work—with students, colleagues, and each other as collaborators. We realize that it is a tremendous privilege to be able to continue our work as scholars and authors, and we also realize that we are writing these ideas in the midst of what will likely be a sea change in the field of education. The foundations of higher education—our immediate context—are changing and evolving around us while we scramble to teach online and rearrange our current research projects. So, as we acknowledge how fortunate we are to have jobs amidst this current pandemic, we are fearful of the push to return back to “normal” or the “way it was” without a thorough analysis of what we are returning to. In this regard, we should be willing to unlearn many of our traditional ways of knowing and be willing to accept and explore what we don’t yet understand.

We have been trained as researchers and we thrive when given opportunities to collect and analyze data in search of answering a question. Additionally, we are products of university programs and departments that further ingrained in us the beliefs from our K-12 schooling—formal education is an individual pursuit. Given these foundations of our professional identities, COVID-19 has pushed us to discomfort—about how we see ourselves in the world and about how we do our work. Amidst COVID-19, individual behaviors must be understood in the context of collective action. And as researchers, we know that we do not have answers for what will happen next for schools and schooling in the U.S. What we are attempting—through this article and through our purposeful collaboration as scholars from different educational fields—is to embrace the discomfort through reimagining our own contributions to transformative collaboration.

Unlearning our own tendencies to seek answers and work in silos is a part of this task, but so are day to day actions that this pandemic has brought out in us: starting conversations and meetings by truly asking (and listening to) “how are you?”, sharing vulnerabilities about health and safety, blurring lines between home and work, etc. Further, we embrace calls that existed long before COVID-19, but are now more relevant than ever with regard to learning from our university students in ways that the system tends to occlude. For example, scheduling joint classes with pre-service teachers, counselors, and administrators is a starting point that we will work towards in our school of education at our university. While logistically challenging, our forced move to distance learning is making such cross-disciplinary courses a reality. And while such opportunities seem commonsensical and minor, they represent the ways that this pandemic may be providing us a portal into future ways that are simply better than the ways we’ve been doing things.

Engaging in transformative collaboration can create complex dynamics and transitions around power and privilege in educational contexts. For example, fostering collectivistic identities, involves movement from the individualistic self into a collectivistic understanding of personhood and looking out for the needs of the group; harnessing cultural assets entails actively identifying and promoting others’ strengths even in the face of conflict; and collectivizing for liberation allows for the cultural empowerment of those who have been historically marginalized, shifting the unidirectional nature of authority and “expertise” in school contexts. Hence, implementing a shared vision for educational equity automatically requires giving up parts of one’s identity (for the collective) and for multiple perspectives and voices to be heard. This is an ongoing process of analysis and relationship-building and should not be limited to moments of upheaval and disruption. We cannot rely on a global crisis as an impetus to reimagine the possibilities for justice in schools. In this work we must continually ask ourselves some guiding questions such as: How do our interactions with students and all members of the school community reflect, embody, encourage collectivistic identities and cultural assets? How do our actions—in and out of the classroom—reflect and harness students’ cultural assets across multiple ecological levels? It is by creating spaces for questioning, unpacking, and contesting the norms and problematic structures of schools—which are now more exposed through this pandemic—that are we able to pursue transformative collaboration.

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