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"I WAS PUSHED OUT OF SCHOOL": SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL APPROACHES TO A YOUTH PROMOTION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we analyze the effects of Project GRIT (Generating Resiliency and Inspiring Transformation), a six-week intervention program that worked with a group of high school *pushouts*, students who were encouraged to leave school, in a school district in southern California. We interviewed thirty-nine former high school students who "dropped out," or were *pushed out* of school, 61.5% males (*n*=24) and 38.5% females (*n*=15). The mean age is 18.1 years and the sample consists of 27 Latino and 12 African American/Black youth. Findings indicate that an increase in healthy relationships with peers generates beneficial social and emotional skills, including increased communication, team-oriented thinking, projected self-actualization, trust, and development of self. We argue that storytelling is central to engaging and promoting at-promise students in the education system, providing them opportunities to overcome adversity, excel in academics, and expand their ability to build healthy relationships with others in their community.

Keywords: testimonios, dropout, pushouts, student voices, at-promise

Introduction

Good morning, my name is Ana Medrano. I'm excited to be here today. When I look around this room, I see myself in every single one of you. I am you! In fact, I was in this same room for the first time at seven years-old. Growing up in this neighborhood in the '90s was tough with gang violence, crime and limited resources in our community. We didn't have much growing up and my family lived in a room in my aunt's house. All five of us crammed into that small room. We didn't grow up with luxuries, but we had the basics. My parents couldn't give us many things, but they gave my siblings and I something better. They gave us a dream and told us that if we worked hard, we could accomplish that dream. -Ana Medrano, Project GRIT Volunteer (BA in Psychology, MA in School Counseling, PPS Credential & Child Welfare and Attendance Authorization)

Unlike Ana's testimony, *testimonios* such as these often do not find the light of day. These profound messages are regularly pushed to the fringes of our schools or systematically silenced in the crevices of the eurocentric curriculum. Students like Ana, once seen as "at-risk," are repeatedly robbed of promising opportunities. Interventions for "at-risk" high school students in particular have historically modeled a deficit frame of thinking by assuming that the implementation of one or more of the following mediations meaningfully compensate for what is seen as lacking in students' education: exposure to adult advocates, supplemental academic programming, curriculum designed to improve student's behavioral skills, and individualized instruction (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). As pragmatic as these practices may be, they are limited by failing to see these students as "at-promise," and thus educators fail to see the wealth of knowledge and experiences students bring to school (Yosso, 2005). Educators must attempt to harness and make sense of the rich experiences these at-promise students carry within by allowing their stories to do the healing and teaching (Gay, 2006). This paper argues that storytelling is central to engaging and promoting at-promise students in the education system by providing them opportunities to overcome adversity, excel in academics, and expand their ability to build healthy relationships with themselves and with others in their community.

The Importance of Storytelling

There is a vast body of research documenting the use of stories and storytelling in the education of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color (Archibald, 2008; Banks-Wallace, 2002; Cajete, 1994; Champion, 2003; Hurston, 1935). According to Brayboy (2005), "many indigenous people have strong oral traditions…stories remind us of our origins and serve as lessons for the younger members of our communities; they have a place in our communities and in our lives" (p. 439). Indigenous stories, ranging from those examining moral questions to life events, can serve useful functions in learning and personal growth; they can both "[promote] community and understanding" and develop a "sustainable society" (Lawrence & Paige, 2016, p. 63 & p. 70). Many Indigenous scholars undertake and promote storytelling in research and education to build knowledge that is culturally relevant (Datta, 2018; Iseke, 2013).

African and African American communities also have a strong storytelling tradition (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). Omolewa (2007) suggests that "the most significant information gathering exercise for the traditional African mode of education is the oral tradition, namely, the collective testimonies and recollections of the past inherited from earlier generations and transmitted in various forms of verbal testimonies" (p. 598). Some scholars argue these traditions extend today in the popular storytelling and educational functions of hip-hop music and hip-hop pedagogy (Chang, 2005; Emdin, 2016).

Traditionally marginalized communities such as these have not only embraced the wisdom behind storytelling but have used them to sow seeds of political consciousness and resistance. Counter-storytelling, overlapping in ways with Black and Indigenous storytelling, explicitly challenges dominant ideas in society through stories that "[open] new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live. They enrich imagination and teach that, by combining elements from the story and current reality, we may construct a new world richer than either alone" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2414). Counter-storytelling shares the stories of those on the margins to others on the margins of society; it also serves as an analytical tool to challenge dominant stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). To this end, it is also a pedagogical tool that "allows one to better understand and appreciate the unique experiences and responses of students of color through a deliberate, conscious, and open type of listening" (Delgado Bernal, 2002 p. 116). Scholars and practitioners have used counter-storytelling in a range of projects, from action research projects among facilitators and youth (Pech, Valencia, & Romero, 2019), to newspaper and documentary productions (Alemán & Alemán, 2016), and to early-career teacher reflections (Rodríguez, 2011). Sometimes it is a research methodology; and sometimes it is the data for research.

Testimonios, which can be traced to Central Americans challenging oppressive governments in the 1980s (Menchú, 1984), are specifically used as a tool for oppressed and marginalized people to center their knowledge and experiences (Huber, 2009). Similar to counter-storytelling, testimonios are methodological tools in research and education. Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona (2012) state that testimonios are also potential pedagogical tools because people use them to contextualize the "collective experiences of conditions that have contributed to oppression, as well as the agency of those who suffer under these conditions…we are able to hear and read each other's stories through voices, silences, bodies, and emotions and with the goal of achieving new *conocimientos*, or understandings" (p. 357). These cascading streams of consciousness, often oral, political reflections (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012; Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2019) are personal stories that individuals share *with* their community. In telling them, however, they "do not speak for or represent a community but rather [perform] an act of

identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective" (Yúdice, 1991, p 15). Testimonios require "deep learning, necessitating an openness to give oneself to the other" (Alarcón, et al., 2011, p. 370), they create collective struggle and push people from recognizing individual struggle to recognizing collective struggle (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Scholars and practitioners have used them in developing curriculum with youth (Cruz, 2012), engaging graduate students (Prieto & Nino, 2016), and in conducting literacy projects with Latina immigrant mothers (Christoph, 2015).

Storytelling has served as a vehicle of cultural expression and preservation for generations of communities of color in the U.S, contextualizing their rich identities and traditions. Collective stories raise consciousness amongst community members and help fortify political strength and resistance from within as well. Through the various types of storytelling and testimonios that thrive in these communities, we are able to hear the voices of the most marginalized, those of our youth that have dropped out… or as we argue, *pushed out* of the educational system. Their counter-stories and testimonies serve as reminders of the systemic failures that consistently work to oppress and expel them.

From Dropout to Pushout

An increasing number of educational scholars have shifted the conversation from terming students who have dropped out of the educational system as "dropouts" versus terming students who have been pushed out of the educational system as "pushouts" (Fine, 1991; Morris, 2016; Tuck, 2012). The use of dropout stems from a deficit framework that primarily places someone's inability to finish school as a fault of their personal actions, behaviors, and attitudes (Tuck, 2012). Common explanations for dropping out might include pointing to a student's lack of desire to go to school, participate in learning activities, or complete work assignments. There is little, if any, blame attributed to the social, pedagogical, or political conditions of schooling (Anyon, 2014). When scholars, educators, community members, and students use pushout, on the other hand, it explicitly attends to these conditions; when people use pushout, they contend that when students depart from school, these broader schooling conditions are the most crucial units of fault and analysis. Pushout frameworks do not ignore what youth might do in schools, including not going to school or not doing traditional school activities. Instead, they question why schools ask youth to leave and what might make these behaviors inevitable for youth.

Penned as the "silent epidemic" by Bridgeland, DiIulio, Jr, and Morison (2006), the driving forces behind U.S. high school dropout rates have proven to be complex and multifaceted. After conducting a series of focus groups of people aged 16-25 and that self-identified as having "dropped out" of high school, Bridgeland et al. (2006) found that "while some students drop out because of significant academic challenges, most dropouts are students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school" (p. iii). In 2019, the Institute of Education Sciences found that between the months of October 2015 and October 2016, over 532,000 15 to 24-year-olds left high school without obtaining a credential. The educational experiences and perceptions of youth that leave school, or "drop out," is materially different from those that do not (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Although 74.6 percent of continuous students felt a middle to high sense of school belonging in 9th grade, only 53.1 percent of students who dropped out felt the same. Similarly, 74.6 percent of continuous students felt a middle to a high level of school engagement in 9th grade, while only 56.7 percent of people who left felt the same. Latino youth and Black youth drop out at a higher than average rate of 8.2 and 6.5 percent respectively, with Native American youth reaching the highest dropout rate at

10.1 percent. In comparison, only 4.3 percent of White youth dropout, with Asian youth experiencing the lowest dropout rate at 2.1 percent (Institute of Education Sciences, 2018). Looking at various national studies, Doll, Eslami, and Walters (2013) found a general shift in the perception of factors contributing to these dropout rates; prior to the mid-1990s, students generally felt like they were pulled out of school by external factors such as familial and financial obligations, in contrast to more current trends identifying pushout factors as the main culprit.

Many pushouts experience hostile campus climates and overzealous disciplinary practices, often being pushed out as a result of complex processes and long-held feelings of alienation. It is never just a singular event resulting in a student's decision to leave school (Kotok, Ikoma, & Bodovski, 2016). School connectedness and school attachment are defined as "the extent students feel attached to at least one caring…adult at school" (Kotok et al., 2016, p.575). Therefore, in analyzing intervention programs that aim to close the achievement and discipline gap, Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) report that effective programs seek to increase school connectedness by fostering caring and trusting relationships between teachers and students. Without this perceived attachment to other students and teachers, pushouts are more likely to believe that their absence will go unnoticed, exacerbating feelings of isolation and alienation.

Serving as obstacles to healthy relationships, staff perceptions and school racial climates also contribute to the systematic pushout of students of color, leading to what Ladson-Billings (2006) calls the "educational debt," or the systemic inequity of opportunity between White and Black students. Additionally, "explanation for the over selection of certain students for discipline may include cultural mismatch, implicit bias, or negative expectations in classrooms and schools" (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 63). Cultural mismatch refers to a clash of cultures between an individual's ethnic identity and the culture established in the classroom by the teacher. "Cultural synchrony" within a classroom can be established with shared histories and lived experiences. Stereotypes may also contribute to teacher perceptions, which in turn influence actions propelled by implicit bias. These collectively act to impact the potential for positive relationships between teachers and students, thus, furthering school connectedness.

Teachers and staff often describe students who are pushed out as disengaged from school (Varela, Peguero, Eason, Matchbanks III, & Blake, 2018). Researchers have explored how school officials utilize harsh discipline to weed out students they consider disruptive and undisciplined (Peguero, Portillos, & González, 2015). Students who experience absenteeism are often caught up in harsh zero-tolerance policies and practices that end up suspending and expelling them for truancy (Marschall, Shah, Donato, 2012; Reyes, 2006). However, research shows that students first disengage psychologically and then behaviorally before being pushed out (Varela, Peguero, Eason, Matchbanks III, & Blake, 2018).

Theoretical Framework: Dignity Enhancement and Repossession

Eve Tuck (2012) argues that many urban youth of color who are pushed out of school experience school simultaneously as a site of dispossession and repossession. She traces the framework of dispossession to how indigenous scholars understand the roles of schools in settler-colonial societies. School is a site of dispossession to the extent that it disappears poor youth and youth of color; "their stories are not stories of mere pushout, but squeezed, kicked, punched, sliced out. Cast out. Stamped out. Erased" (Tuck, 2012, p. 61). For Tuck (2012), the youths in her study experience schooling as full of humiliating ironies, for example, being

suspended for wearing a headscarf. These experiences are ironic because youth understand there is a difference between what schools say they value and their actions. They are humiliating because they happen over and over again. Students also participate leave school as a means of asserting their dignity (85). In this way, she understands youth leaving school as a form of repossession, of youth reclaiming their dignity (85). Victor Rios (2011) discusses the systematic stripping of dignity that young Black and brown people experience when criminalized in school. He discusses how resistance and defiance become forms of dignity enhancement in the lives of these young people. Rios argues that in order to promote the well-being of at-promise young people through a *youth support complex* (2011) educator's must find ways to connect with through meaningful social-emotional approaches. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. The *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* (CASEL) is a trusted source for knowledge about high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL). CASEL supports educators and policy leaders and enhances the experiences and outcomes for all PreK-12 students. Using insights from CASEL and applying culturally responsive approaches, the focus of the study is to understand how youth promotion programs can enhance young people's dignity.

Social and Emotional Learning and Promotion

One way to understand the role of storytelling in the lives of students pushed out of school is to conduct an intervention that identifies and addresses effective ways to motivate students and to develop social and communication skills that will benefit their future aspirations. However, a missing component when talking about supporting this population is addressing the emotional development that plays an important role in motivation and belief that they can succeed. By focusing on Social and Emotional Learning, abilities (e.g. showing empathy, managing emotions, healthy relationships with others) not measured through standardized tests, we can help develop these skills over time, especially through healthy relationships (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Heckman & Rubinstein 2001; Kraft, 2019). Recent research has shown that teachers can effectively enhance students' social and emotional abilities (Kraft, 2019). There is also evidence that mentoring, motivational, and dropout prevention programs aimed toward disadvantaged students are highly effective, primarily because they initiate social and emotional learning because they see someone like them that can make it through college (Heckman and Rubinstein, 2001; Rodríguez & Conchas, 2009). Given that it is difficult to track these students, there is a paucity of research on developing the social and emotional skills in students who have been pushed out of high school. Therefore, we developed an intervention, what we re-termed a *promotion* program, to assess the impact of a culturally-responsive, *testimonio*-based curriculum on high school pushouts. "Promotion program" focuses on the assets that young people have and attempts to break away from deficit perspectives in education. Adding a storytelling component to this promotion program allowed us to examine its impact on social and emotional development.

Although many youth mentoring programs focus on building and fostering positive relationships with peers and educators, more literature is needed on the effectiveness of school intervention programs premised on relationship-building (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004). While some successful intervention models, have been implemented in a variety of urban and suburban contexts ranging from kindergarten to 12th grade, this model has consistently underscored the importance of positive and nurturing relationships to school

persistence (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004), such programs, as critical as they are, do not address students who have already been pushed out.

A study conducted in 1992, following 102 middle-class dropout youth who were enrolled in an alternative educational program, documented the need for additional social support and psychoeducational interventions in their re-entry into school (Franklin & Streeter, 1992). However, Aviles, Anderson, and Davila (2006) document that schools rarely have the resources and programs in place to meet the socioemotional needs of their students. Without community resources to aid in the development of these at-risk youth, especially for reentry into the schooling system, youth who experience an "emotional crisis" due to past and present traumas in their homes or neighborhoods, will continue to experience feelings of alienation. Furthermore, McPartland (1993) stressed the importance of implementing localized and customized intervention programs meet the specific needs of the student population.

Method

Context of the Study

The goal of this study is to analyze the effects of Project GRIT (Generating Resiliency and Inspiring Transformation), a six-week intervention program that worked with a group of former high school *pushouts*, students who were coerced to leave a school district in Southern California. Project GRIT originated from the idea that we must reframe the terming of youth from "at-risk" to "at-promise." This reframing is based on the idea that many youth engage in self-fulfilling prophecies in their lives, and that it is important for them to see examples of what they would like to become as opposed to what we don't want them to become. Rios and Mireles-Rios (2019) developed the idea of Educator Project Self-Actualization to explain how the critical-pedagogical intervention of an educator or mentor can support a young person as they pursue their aspirations and search for a thriving zone (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). A group of volunteers took to the streets of Los Angeles in the summer of 2013 to work with these young people and encourage them to return to school. Dr. Victor Rios and Dr. Rebeca Mireles-Rios, led a team of former students, altruistic friends, and caring individuals to help the youth improve well-being in mind, body, and soul through an intervention they named, Project GRIT. The project sought to challenge norms and spark a national conversation on how to motivate, educate, and prepare these youths to succeed in the 21st century. Our model sought to give each youth dignity, resiliency, respect and integrity, and most importantly, to treat them as human beings with the potential to succeed in school and the workforce. We facilitated a wide range of activities, including motivational presentations, college tours, self-reflection activities, team-building activities, a ropes challenge course, community college registration, historical presentations on the Watts community, a math and writing preparation workshop, a dress for success workshop. We knew the exercises were much needed in a community where these young people had been left behind by the conventional public school system. Watts, a 2.12-square-mile community in Los Angeles, was riddled with violence, drug abuse, and high incarceration rates among young people. The media often portrayed Watts as a no-man's-land dominated by drive-by shootings, senseless killings, and police chases. The three largest housing projects in Watts, Jordan Downs, Imperial Courts, and Nickerson Gardens, are infamous for appearing on local news, in hip-hop artists' music videos, and in movies. Our challenge was to teach participants how to strive rather than solely survive. With social and emotional support, the Project GRIT team sought to engage these youths, ages 15 to 21, to help them return to school and develop their inherent resiliency and grit to overcome adversity. We were convinced that these youths

were not violent, gang-banging thugs uninterested in continuing their education and in conventional success. We saw them not as "at-risk" but as "at-promise," and it was up to the Project GRIT team to help each youth find that promise within. Specifically, this project sought to develop a program and study its effects in order to understand the lived experiences of these students who were pushed out of high school and to understand the impact of an intervention that focused on social and emotional learning through the sharing of stories. The premise of Project GRIT was to engage in activist research by understanding the origins of inequality, working collectively with the students in the program to provide them the tools for transforming repressive conditions (Hale, 2001).

Participants

We interviewed thirty-nine former high school students who were pushed out of school. Our sample consists of 61.5% males (*n*=24) and 38.5% females (*n*=15). The mean age is 18.1 years and the sample consisted of 27 Latino and 12 African American/Black youth. All participants reported that they wanted to graduate high school, with approximately 85% wanting to graduate from some college (2-year, 4-year, or graduate school). Participants reported that 15% of their mothers completed a GED or high school diploma, and 20% of their fathers completed a GED or diploma. The remaining parents completed some high school or less, with 31% and 36% reporting that they did not know their mother and father's education level, respectively. All participants reported living below the poverty line and within the same surrounding areas; however, participants did report that they attended different high schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

We recruited participants at a community center in a low-income area in southern California. The director of the community program provided access to the center and the participants. Participants in the program had left high school and were either currently preparing for their GRE, enrolled in alternative schooling or trying to get back into a high school program. All participant interviews were approximately one hour and took place at a private office in the community center. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. A credentialed social worker was on location in the event that the interviews restimulated previous trauma. Participants received $20 for the interview. Human Subjects approval was granted for this project. Interviews took place post_participation in the six-week intervention program, and we asked all participants the following questions: "*Tell us your experiences participating in the intervention? What did you learn from the program?"* In answering these questions, participants shared their life stories and, through probing questions, followed with examples and further descriptions.

Following the protocol, research assistants transcribed each semi-structured post-interview and then a content-coding scheme was used to examine patterns in the interview data (Corbin, Strauss, & Strauss, 2014). The first three authors read through the transcripts and identified key themes. Initial interpretations were made about the data through codes and preliminary categories. We utilized "focused coding", using the qualitative software program Dedoose, to generate dominant themes and eliminate inconsistent findings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). Together we resolved any discrepancies.

Researcher Positionality

Rebeca Mireles-Rios is a biracial, Chicana-Serbian woman with roots in the working-class Mission District of San Francisco, California. She was a 6th grade teacher for seven years, working with at-promise students. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Victor Rios is a Chicano from Oakland, California,

where he grew up in poverty, then became a high school dropout and juvenile delinquent during his teenage years. He is currently a Professor of Sociology at UC Santa Barbara. He has committed his career to working with at-promise young people and finding ways to support them in their educational and civic engagement journeys. Trevor Auldridge-Reveles, is a biracial, working-class man from a rural part of California. He is a PhD student in sociology at UC Santa Barbara. He was never pushed out of school, although he has previous experience working with students who have been. He currently mentors working-class young people of color in both K-12 schooling (middle school, high school, and adult education) and postsecondary education (undergraduate and rising graduate students). Marilyn Monroy is a first-generation Latina born and raised in Oxnard, California, and is currently a PhD student in Education at UC Santa Barbara. Isaac Castro is a Mexican/Portuguese California native and a lifelong attendee of the public school system; he is also a former educational administrator and a current PhD student in Education at UC Santa Barbara.

Results

Among our key findings of the intervention, we saw increased healthy relationships with both their peers and their self-esteem. At the conclusion of the program, participating students demonstrated improvement in a number of interpersonal skills: communication and relationship development, teamwork, recognizing shared community worth and struggle, and trust.

Curating Relationships with Others

Only a few students knew each other at the onset of the program, and none of the students knew the GRIT facilitators. One of the highlights of the six weeks was witnessing Project GRIT participants build relationships with others in the program in a supportive and safe environment. Students were able to listen to each other as well as recognize the struggles and strengths of their peers.

In the entry interviews, many youths in the program reported that they were motivated to participate because they thought they would learn how to develop their communication and relationship skills. One student was drawn to the program by counselors who said it would be much different than other types of activities they had participate in when in school:

> They told me it wasn't going be none of writing or like reading books or anything, it was going to be more of a program where we all would communicate with each other and get to know and see how our lives fit together. (Ernesto)

Students understood it was not about "writing or reading" but about communicating with people, familiarizing their self with other students, and finally understanding their shared connection with each other. In their journal entries throughout the program, they mentioned how they enjoyed communicating with other students, developing friendships that challenged and motivated them, while also learning to give and take advice from their friends. They had particularly poignant reflections on working through their personal struggle to tell their story to the group during one of the activities in the program. After initially feeling nervous, students eventually felt comfortable and supported by their peers. Upon reflecting on the lessons from the program, two students specifically mentioned how they felt they were able to develop relationships and communicate with the other participants:

> I met a lot of new people in the program and they're very helpful…I also learned how to talk to people, because I'm kind of shy…you have to learn a lot of stuff if you

want to be successful and stuff. And you have to know to trust people and get to know them. (Emilio)

[Dr. Rios] started telling me that to start talking and…being talkative with everybody 'cause everybody will pay attention to me, well not just to me but to each other. (Fernando)

For these students, part of the benefit of the program was the number of new people they met. Several of the students said they had felt isolated, shy, or wanted to be "alone" when in school as well as in other social settings with their agemates. Emilio was one of the students who communicated this feeling in the interview session. He shared that several of the program activities encouraged him to communicate with other participants. He felt this program provided an opportunity for him to connect with people and work through his anxieties about talking to other people. Other students, such as Fernando, saw communication as a skill they already had. Contrary to students like Emilio, Fernando recognized he was skilled at communicating, though only as a means to "work teachers" in school--to his detriment. The situation was similar when he would "talk back" to his parents. For him, the program provided an avenue where he could communicate, building on one of the assets that he already had—communicating in a socially-constructive manner--by being encouraged by facilitators to talk as a means of creating group cohesion.

Many of the students were also grateful for the opportunity to participate in group work. Most had never been part of a formal group activity outside of regularly scheduled schooling, and at the onset of the project, they stated they wanted to learn how to work in groups. They felt that being part of teams could also teach them how to develop a shared sense of camaraderie:

I want to learn more about working in groups, and like a team. (Irene)

I feel like it's going to make a bonding between us, the teams right here…to not critique or judge each other because we're in the same position where outsiders see us the same regardless of who talks to us. (Vera)

Upon reflecting on the activities that they participated in with their fellow classmates, several students said they had built bonds with peers they knew but had never talked to before. One student, who had struggled to find uplifting relationships in their adolescence, felt they could develop supportive and validating relationships with other students as part of a team:

It was really fun because...we communicate a lot with the students even though we don't talk to them like that, but we try like to communicate. We talk like "oh hey, let's do this!" or we'd do that. Everybody'd be like "Ok, yeah, let's do this!" and "You're right!" or "They're right, and we've got to work as a team and connect and bond together. (Monique)

Several felt that they were able to develop a sense of collaboration. Apart from relationship-building, some students also reflected on something that drew them to the project and that they had learned in the course of the program: the collective struggle to change society.

One student articulated it succinctly:

One thing that attracted me to program was…the values it offers. The values of independence, the value of…collaboration…they're teaching team work basically and team work is what we need to do, to change the way the system works and to change our communities, to change it because we need team work. Because if I go by myself and I

> try to change it this community and the way it is it's just not going to happen, but if I go with every single student and we try to make a difference, then there's a different story. (Jesse)

This student, who had been very active in the Occupy L.A. demonstrations in 2011, felt that the seemingly contradictory values the program was promoting: independence and collaboration. Although he felt the lessons he learned were more of a "review," he connected them to what he had learned in his activism at Occupy. That is, the experience of unity was "amazing."

Finally, students also built healthy relationships with their peers through developing a recognition of shared struggle. They came to see shared struggle as one of their strengths. In many instances, the recognition of struggle, and people's capacity to work through their struggles, served as a framework to facilitate their pursuit of both individual and shared goals and aspirations. For some, this was an impetus to developing relationships because many times they had felt they couldn't develop health relationships with other people because of their own personal pathologies:

> I've learned…I'm not the only one with problems, I've learned other people struggle…but everyone is making an effort to actually move on with their struggles…this actually helped me like to actually like try to meet new people and make new friends. (Karen)

In other instances, youth participants demonstrated how they balanced their realization that people have similar, yet unique struggles at the same time. This was a reason for them to be comfortable in their own realities and comfortable in their identities:

> I've learned that we all go through the same things man…everybody kind of bleeds the same way…they bleed the same but differently…I learned that from being right here just be happy and be who you really are…don't be afraid to hide or show people that side of you. (David)

In other instances, they realized the shared struggle in and of itself could create an opportunity to care and be cared for among their peers. It also provided an opportunity to develop a sense of pride and confidence in themselves and in their community:

> I learned I'm not the only people that has problems and stuff and I can share about it, and there's people there that care about you and they will always have your back. (Irene)
>
> It's not only going to help me but everybody and it's going to help me be even more confident, be more proud and say hey, this is where I am from…I didn't choose the best place in the world, but it don't make me a bad person. (Valerie)

One of the struggles that all the youths shared was that they were pushed out of school. But beyond that, this experience was very much related to structural stressors that also adversely affected their mental health. This, coupled with their stigmatization in school, could potentially create a cycle of stress that could ultimately lead to a state of chronic *distress* after departure from school: exposure to repeated stressors in school and community impacts the student's performance in school and eventually leads to the student being pushed out; upon being pushed out, the student, already harmed by the distress experienced in school, is now exposed to new and different stressors that often lead to new patterns of distress. In this space, however, youth

could activate and make sense of their shared stressors, attaching it to a broader project and history of resilience and resistance within their community.

Curating Relationships with Self

Students in the program also noted a healthy development of self that manifested in different ways. This often transpired through what Rios and Mireles-Rios (2019) refer to as *educator projected self-actualization* where those adults in a role of mentoring or teaching guide young people in developing a vision of themselves as self-actualized. Educators and mentors have the power of influencing a student's perception of self and future aspirations. By projecting an image for students of themselves in an affirmative and positive light, educators create the conditions for students to take the steps towards a positive self-actualization. Although educators don't have the power of *predicting* a better future, they do have the power of *projecting* a better future for their students. In this mentor projected self-actualization, students began to imagine positive examples of themselves in the examples of the adults, and other peers, in the program. It came, in many instances, from seeing shared struggle and then being able to imagine themselves succeeding in similar positions, and being able to "take charge" of their lives. This, and the creation of relationships between adults and participants provided the opportunity to become motivated to take action in life.

Every workshop day included an autobiographical story from one from one of the facilitators, and the youth connected with them in seeing how they pushed through struggle. At times, it just meant that students could see that people were exercising agency in their lives. There were moments where these stories motivated students to discuss wanting to back to school. The stories from facilitators often engendered student reflection on their own lives, their own stories of self:

> It has helped me in realizing that…people have gone through a lot of struggles…I can relate to. And they've come out of that…they've gotten an education…a better life…they have charge over their own lives. (Amanda)
>
> This guy (Project GRIT facilitator) …came from absolutely nothing and became everything…rather than "if you don't do this, you can't be this. (Allen)
>
> Their stories are like our stories…like some of what they have lived, we have lived it…for some reason when you connect stories, you don't feel like strangers anymore. So it's like, OK, I'm gonna do it. I'm going to try it. (Dorinda)

Importantly, students saw the trajectory of the facilitators, many high school pushouts themselves, and connected their stories self-actualization, to the people around them. In seeing that "their stories are like our stories," students sensed a relational connection to the facilitators and the rest of the group. In blurring the lines between the different individuals in the group, the stories of self that people constructed often contributed to a broader, collective story of community.

Other times, they became motivated and hopeful for the future. Although many were interested in joining and participating in the program, students noted that remaining in the program served to keep them motivated.

> I've learned…to stay motivated, to do good and when you are falling down…I've learned from the stories that you guys told us that you know…it's okay to fall…I should keep living my dreams because I could accomplish the um same thing as you have…you guys are strangers to us, but you guys care about us, you don't want us to end up the way other people do…you guys bring a good vibe…that welcoming feeling…the things you

> guys went through…how you guys accomplished all that, how you guys through all that struggles makes me want to do the same (Crystal)
>
> You see them…their friendly faces talk about their stories and you're like…you just cannot believe it…that actually happened to them…I really appreciate hearing all that because it makes me motivated…similar to what they're going through and I understand. And…it really gets to me, you know. I was pushed out of school and never had these types of relationships. (Monique)

Students also talked often about the importance of trust and confidence in the context of relationship-building, whether that was for other people or themselves. In one instance, a youngster reflected on how they came to understand boundaries and the importance of maintaining healthy boundaries with people:

> I've learned…what kind of people to trust…where I should like put my walls down…and what places I should put them up. (Karen)

This was particularly important because she was able to recognize that there is nuance in trust: it may be equally harmful to trust every person just as it is to distrust every person. She exercised agency through her "walls," deciding with whom she could share intimate details and relationships and for whom she shouldn't.

Many of the comments also focused on self-confidence, and one student specifically noted how closely the notions of trust and confidence were closely linked. Because she felt she could trust project facilitators, she came to believe that she was capable, and able to accomplish what she wished for in life. In her case, she came to realize things that were already true about herself:

> I overcome things that I couldn't do in the past. And now, it's like I could finally realize…I am a successful woman, I am powerful…I'm just going to keep it real to the fullest, because you can say that you can, you can't do this but if anybody else is telling you, "no, you can do it." Like, don't put yourself down like that…I came, it's because I feel like I can trust these people. (Quinn)

From the onset of the program, self-confidence was an important piece of what students wanted to get out of it, ranging from wanting to have more self-confidence in their ability to achieve their goals and to work through different obstacles in their lives. In the quote from the Quinn, we see that the increase in their self-confidence was heavily influenced by the trust the group developed among themselves.

Usually, other goals, such as improved communication skills and being able to imagine their futures, were intertwined with their desire to increase their self-confidence, their desire for increased "self-direction" and ability to embrace difficult challenges:

> I'm learning…how to communicate with people, have a better figure of life, how to be more responsible, how to have self-direction, and to work with others, and not to be scared to take opportunities that are given. (Arnoldo)

At other times, students spoke about the importance of self-confidence when dealing with new conflicts that would arise in their lives as well as the importance of learning how to work through their different traumas. In responding to whether they felt they could respond to conflict and personal issues better, one student responded:

> Not too long ago I used to deal with my problems…um, drinking, smoking…but now it's like the other day I just went for a run. (Jasmin)

For this student, the increase in their self-confidence came through what they imagined new and constructive ways to cope with external stressors, particularly family stressors that used to make them think they could only deal with it through drugs and alcohol. For another student, this was about the ability to work through stressors experienced in different peer-groups:

> Even if you're gang-related or you messed up a lot, even though your parents couldn't be there no matter what…we have to move on. We have to make them proud and become what we want to become in life. (Monique)

Overall, students related stories that helped them to re-imagine their individual lives: how they could live their life in a better way and do so successfully. This did not come through a recognition that they had not experienced trauma or would not experience trauma in the future. It came through recognition, reflection, and action to create and share their own stories.

Discussion

The idea of promotion rather than intervention is important in social justice framing. Instead of thinking that we are intervening in a problem we should think about how to promote the young people's innate resiliency as well as the assets that they bring to the table. An example of shifting youth discourse to emphasize asset-based perspective is the recent At-Promise bill in California. In October 2019, California legislators changed the educational code to describe "at-risk youth" as "at-promise" youth (Rios & Mireles-Rios, 2019). The law represented an institutional commitment to thinking about youth and what they can become rather than as problems society needed to fix. However, in thinking about youth differently, Project GRIT also called into question how we could think differently about programming and enhancing students' dignity by helping them develop their communication skills and healthy relationships. Another set of youth programs call themselves prevention programs, therefore focusing on the things that community members do not want to become. Even intervention programming borrows its language from medicinal practices meant to improve the situation of people with "disorders." If we are to move away from pathologizing youth of color, it is also important that all program development move away from deficit-oriented labels. Indeed, instead of serving as a prevention program, Project GRIT was a promotion program.

In many grassroots organizing communities, there is a focus on storytelling, particularly the story of self and how that impacts the work one does (Ganz, 2009). In many Black, Indigenous, and communities of color, community members and scholars have advocated counter-stories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), stories that people use "to challenge, displace, or mock" harmful narratives in society, like Latinx criminality (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: p. 43). In Project GRIT, facilitators and students developed counter-stories of self, that is, stories about their life trajectories that challenged and displaced harmful narratives about youth and people of color. By doing so, they asserted their dignity, taking it back from a system that had stigmatized them and marginalized their community.

Throughout the workshops and the interviews, a common commitment had gelled among all participants to sharing their stories. When referencing what they learned from the workshop, students regularly couched their responses in relating to existing stories, that is, to see how their personal narratives already existed in their community, and to see how their lives were reflected in those stories. They consistently reflected on the impact of other people's stories, on

how they saw themselves in the stories of the workshop facilitators. They also reflected on their stories, the stories of the others, and their community's story.

The sharing of stories of one's experiences has the power to elicit feelings of fear, hope, despair, and faith. These feelings humanize narratives and fuel empathy, creating what Ganz (2009) describes as the necessary energy to inspire change. Ganz (2009) stresses the importance of sharing stories, especially for young people whom he describes as having the perfect ability to simultaneously recognize the world's injustices and the world's potential. The sharing of stories creates opportunities for youth to own their truths, trials, triumphs, and life lessons. By sharing these with one another, they realize we each "walk around with a text from which to teach, the text of our own lives" (Ganz, 2009, pp. 16-21). When youth see themselves in each other's stories, they are moved to generate hope in lieu of fear, love in place of anger, and agency instead of frustration. It is especially important to consider these forces when designing promotion programs for youth, which arguably, can harness a collective energy that can create positive feelings of belonging, purpose, and accountability. Such collective energy can fuel a sense of leadership within themselves, with each other, and within their communities. We found that storytelling was the first step in enhancing young people's dignity and in leading them down a path of civic engagement.

Students showed empathy for each other, worked on managing and communicating their emotions through written and oral storytelling and sharing, and were able to build healthy relationships with each other (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Heckman & Rubinstein 2001; Kraft, 2019). As Monique mentioned above, she was pushed out of school and never had the opportunity to build these types of relationships in school. Given that teachers can effect students social and emotional abilities (Kraft, 2019), creating safe school and classroom spaces for students to share their stories, and have these opportunities to build relationships with their peers as a way to enhance dignity, must happen in schools before students are *pushed out*.

Many of the students in the program spoke about how they could "relate" to the facilitators in the program. Furthermore, students expressed a certain kinship with facilitators, noting that they felt like "family" and that the shared space felt communal. Many of the students felt especially drawn to one of the facilitators, Ana Medrano. Ana, whose voice we heard at the beginning of the article, grew up on the very block that the program was conducted. She told students her story about domestic violence and educational disparities. For instance, she discussed how her school was so poorly funded that she was asked to buy her own textbook for an honors course. She did not have the money to purchase the book so she stole the book from a bookstore. Ana told this story to demonstrate to students how their personal choices were often tied to societal issues such as lack of educational resources.

Some research suggests that all children benefit from having educators of color because they provide a diverse array of perspectives and motivation for students (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Some researchers suggest a "role model" effect among Black students, where having a Black teacher significantly increases students' chances of finishing high school and attending college. Several programs across the country focus on pipelining educators of color into schools. For example, Call Me MISTER, an initiative in almost three dozen universities across the country, provides full tuition and board to men of color who are interested in returning to their home districts to teach in the city of Chicago. Rather than aiming to create role models, they aim to create "soul models" that return to communities in which they have spent a significant part of their lives. Similarly, in Nebraska, the Indigenous ROOTS Teacher Education Program prepares American Indian paraprofessionals for teaching credentials in reservation

schools. At the California State University (CSU) system, there are already several programs for graduate-level teaching that encourage students to pursue graduate degrees and then return to the CSU, such as the Sally Casanova Pre-Doctoral Program. Expansion of these Grow Your Own (GYO) programs has been shown to diversify the teaching pool, and it is recommended that these types of programs be expanded (Gist, Bianco, & Lynn, 2018).

What would it mean for all educators--staff, teachers, and administrators--to develop a story of self? We imagine that it would be useful for all teachers to be able to present a story of self to students. This also pushes teachers from dominant communities to reflect on their own educational experience, including how they got to where they are professionally. In healing-informed spaces (Ginwright, 2016)—those spaces designed by educators to support students who have experienced adversity-- this also produces the opportunity for young people and adults alike to care for each other in reciprocal ways, indicative of an elevated relationship between facilitators and students that fundamentally posits them in *relation* to one another. In this manner, students who are going through a difficult time can see themselves in the educators they encounter. Ana Medrano consistently shares her story with the students she encounters, allowing her to share with students the importance of taking care of their mental and physical health, the importance of academics, and of taking care of their families and communities.

Limitations

Project GRIT may not have captured every reason students left school. It is important to note that we are reporting the stories from the perspective of participating students. Future research which takes on the issues addressed can incorporate the perspectives and stories of parents, teachers, counselors and other school personnel, thus contributing to our understanding of the various social contexts and interactions that contribute to a young person's premature departure from the education system.

Conclusion

By centering the testimonial approach to a promotion program that promotes social and emotional learning, young people turn their stories into tools for personal and social transformation. Project GRIT demonstrates how engaging in indigenous and counter-storytelling methods allows young people to reclaim a sense of dignity from an oppressive schooling system. Such pedagogical methods can serve to pull students back into their education, providing empowering social and emotional learning experiences.

Sharing personal experiences in school settings is an approach that is typically left to counselors and therapists. However, personal experience and storytelling must be seen as methods of teaching, learning and community building, and not just as psychological intervention. Resilient communities like indigenous populations and other populations of color have always centered knowledge production around storytelling. It is time for our education system to value storytelling as knowledge production, healing strategies, and community and social justice approaches. The work of social justice begins with a story. The work of transformative education must begin with the stories of young people in dignified conversation with the stories of others, including their teachers.

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