

Reframing Youth Wellbeing Through Community-Engaged Learning

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Abstract

In recent years, discourses about youth have been mired in narratives of learning loss and mental health crises. These cultural stories often pathologize youth, offering little in the way of generative pathways for educator practice to aid young people as they navigate the very real challenges in contemporary society. The experiences and reflections shared by a young man, Alberto, about the work he did with his peers and teacher demonstrates the power of community engagement, collaborative art, and responsive teaching to reframe the “problems” of education, offering new pathways to “do wellbeing” in learning spaces.

Introduction

The way that educators understand and frame a problem delineates the range of possible solutions (Golden & Petrone, 2021). What I mean by framing a problem involves how and where we locate it: if we decide that the “problem” in education is, or is within, the learners themselves, then our “solutions” will focus on fixing these learners through back-to-basics, skills and drill approaches, tougher discipline, and so on. But if we acknowledge that the problems to be solved are the conditions in which learners live and learn, then we have identified a wholly different set of solutions and possibilities for teaching and learning praxis. Improving these conditions include material realities like access to housing, health care, or air free of toxic pollutants. In addition to these material realities, the conditions of youth wellbeing also include the ways young people are positioned, meaning the ways they are located in a cultural story. The effects of such positionings are that identities are assigned onto others based upon broad social categories, such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Vetter, Fairbanks & Ariail, 2011; Golden, 2017). That educational policy and practice have historically positioned and framed young people within discourses, or cultural stories, of deficiency or deviancy is not in doubt. In the current moment, these discourses have intensified with narratives of student deficits like learning loss related to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges, addiction to social media, and reactions to the unfolding climate crisis, to name but a few. Young people can internalize these cultural stories, adding to the challenges they must navigate as they seek out their desired life paths.

Narratives of young people successfully challenging deficit-laden positioning practices can help educators reflect on how we can rethink wellbeing, and better create meaningful learning opportunities and humanizing pedagogies that build on young people’s strengths. I believe the story of Alberto,¹ his peers, and his teacher Ms. Santos offers one such narrative, and that the story about his work with the *Conexiones* program and the *Artes Comunitarios* project (described below) highlights the power of community care through a place-based pedagogy grounded in an ethos of trust, support, and collaboration.

People and Setting

Alberto

When I met him, Alberto was 17 years old, and a student at an alternative education secondary-level program in the small city of San Sebastián on the west coast of the United States. Alberto self-identifies as a Mexican-American who is light-skinned and gay, and had attended a traditional high school before a guidance counselor suggested the alternative high school, given that he had not yet experienced success at his first secondary-level program. This new program, *Conexiones* (“Connections” in Spanish), was reserved for one class of high school students at the larger Dolores Huerta Alternative Education School (“Huerta,” for short), and invited students to form deep relationships with their peers and teacher as they engaged in youth-led projects in the local community. “Alternative” education has no single definition, and this descriptor has often been used in conflicting ways (Golden, 2018). While alternative at Huerta meant smaller classes and greater teacher support to engender possibilities for rapid “credit recovery” (i.e., quickly earning as many credits towards the secondary diploma as possible), *Conexiones* was focused on inquiry-based and experimental pedagogies, as described below.

Researcher Identity

I am a former high school teacher in an alternative high school in a large city on the East Coast of the U.S. Despite it being 3,000 miles away from Alberto’s school, the high school at which I taught also focused on humanizing pedagogy and community collaboration. While I am familiar with some aspects of the pedagogical approach, I, a white-identified middle-class man, have not experienced the joys and challenges of the primarily Mexican-American youth living in San Sebastián. I am now a teacher educator and literacy education researcher at a large urban public university a short distance from San Sebastián, and remain curious about the practices of alternative education to provide better, more humanizing ways of educating young people. It is for this reason that I spent three years learning from people at Huerta and the *Conexiones* program, regularly sitting in on classes, field trips, and conducting focus group sessions with students and individual interviews with their teachers. My interest is in the ways that the pedagogical practices of the alternative education space support students in defining themselves as learners both within and beyond school. I am also focused on the ways the students navigate ethno-racialized, classed, and gendered dynamics about who has academic or other post-secondary potential, and how students agentively work to disrupt notions of who they are or might choose to become. My desire for this empirical work is that learning more about young people’s understandings and experiences will contribute to scholarship and teacher praxis that can counter the de-legitimizing of minoritized people’s literacies and other social practices that is sadly often prevalent in schooling.

Setting

Learners seeking a secondary diploma at this alternative high school program in San Sebastián are primarily Mexican-American and are often either working class or experiencing poverty. Students ages 16 to 20 would be recommended by guidance counselors to Huerta from traditional comprehensive

high schools, and the recommendation was most often based on the student's age and number of credits missing towards the diploma. While Huerta was focused solely on rapid credit recovery for these "over-aged/under-credited" learners, the grant-funded Conexiones pilot program offered a chance to learn beyond the walls of the classroom. Interested Huerta students were invited to speak with the Conexiones teacher and, following an assessment by their Huerta teachers, could be admitted into this new program. An attempt to re-envision high school,² the Conexiones model is based on empirical work demonstrating the importance of social capital and experiential learning (e.g., Sanchez, 2007; Darvin & Norton, 2014; Bartlett, 2007). It builds on an understanding of alternative education as a site of humanizing pedagogies that prioritize close relationships between learners and educators, connections to community issues, and critical pedagogies (e.g., McGregor & Mills, 2012; Waters, 2016). Through learning projects in the community, the high school students can develop relationships with older adults in a variety of contexts, and these relationships can foster the development of new skills, identities, and possibilities for student-desired life pathways. During the time I spent with the students and teacher of Conexiones, short-term projects included visits and conversations with a local DJ at a popular radio station, a real estate agent, and university students; longer, sustained projects included interviewing business owners and residents in the newly renovated downtown to learn about the impact of gentrification. The dialogues with the DJ, real estate agent, and university students were sparked by student desire to meet with people in professional roles that the students were considering as post-secondary options. The longer-term project around gentrification was in response to student-generated questions about the rising prices and new stores in downtown San Sebastián, and involved students learning to interview and write up data as they collected oral histories from business owners and residents of the city's downtown. In addition to practicing literacies associated with traditional academic success (e.g., extrapolating themes, writing up a report based on collected data), the Conexiones students drew on their multiple and varied knowledge bases, including different varieties of Spanish and English as they built relationships and interviewed these business owners and residents. The goal of such community-engaged learning was to foster these connections, and spark possibilities for the students' next steps beyond their secondary-level learning.

The other long-term sustained project, which I will describe in greater detail below, was the aforementioned *Artes Comunitarios* ("Community Arts" in Spanish) collaboration, a partnership between the Conexiones students and artists at a nearby arts venue. Conexiones students would often spend one or two periods a day at Huerta taking traditional classes like biology or mathematics and then leave on a field trip to make connections with adults on the community and simultaneously develop their literacies and competencies through learning projects grounded in their communities. The program can be described as a place-based pedagogy (e.g., Comber et al., 2001; Comber, 2015; Pandya & Avila, 2013), meaning that curriculum is responsive to learners in a particular place and a particular time. This is in contrast to dominant modes of schooling, which are often decontextualized, or relegated to simulations of real-world contexts and situations. In addition to its "situated-ness," place-based pedagogy can support learners in developing social capital (e.g., Stanton-Salazar, 2011) with adults in various professional fields through community-engaged learning collaborations. These collaborations were occasionally initiated by the Conexiones teacher, Ms. Santos, but were often the result of student interests and outreach, something possible only due to the flexibility of the alternative education Conexiones approach.

The idea for an alternative learning program like Conexiones is both influenced by and resistant to recent trends in education reform, which include a reductive understanding of schooling as primarily or solely about the production of human capital (i.e., schooling as preparation for workers to be competitive in a globalized economy), and elements of a worldview that sees education as a building block for active citizenship and greater participation in society. The development of such programs rarely includes the voices, desires, and experiences of the students themselves (Lo-Philip, 2010; Jimenez, 2011), which can help challenge deficit-laden narratives about learners like Alberto and his fellow Conexiones students by honing in on these young people's desires and ways they work to position themselves in cultural stories. Ideally, student voices and representation in decision-making would include dialogues about meaningful and authentic assessment practices, but Conexiones students experienced the same assessment metrics (i.e., high-stakes state tests) as their peers in either Huerta classes or the more traditional comprehensive high schools. Where student voices and representation were valued in Conexiones, though, was in the place-based pedagogy, in which the students' ideas for collaborations, projects, and field trips were regularly heard and acted upon by their teacher.

Positioning and (Re)framing

Scholars and educators have long known that access and material resources are necessary but not sufficient factors in successful post-secondary transitions (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008): the option to, say, attend college will not make a significant difference if a talented high school senior does not believe themselves to be college material. The way students are positioned, and the identity work marginalized students do as they work to be “read” in particular ways and achieve their desired outcomes (what one might think of as “[re]framing”), has significant effects on both opportunities to learn and possible pathways to enact knowledge in the service of expanded life and career opportunities (Golden, 2017; Harré and van Langenhove, 1999; Moje & Lewis, 2007). As scholars and educators, we often focus more on the potentially-negative impacts of undesirable positioning practices on student learning and outcomes than we do on learners' (re)framing efforts (Tuck, 2009). Young people in communities like San Sebastián have to navigate racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchies alongside labels positioning them as “bad” students as they work to earn their high school diplomas. Alberto's (re)framing work and understanding of himself demonstrates the power of community care, teacher and peer support, and meaningful learning projects to “do wellbeing” in learning spaces.

Alberto's (Re)framing Identity Work

Alberto is now well on his way towards his goal of becoming a marriage and family therapist—a counselor focusing on the wellbeing of individuals, couples, and families. Initially, this path was nearly derailed when he began having difficulty at Almgren High School, a large traditional comprehensive secondary school in San Sebastián. Due to what Alberto describes as “my bad grades and stuff,” he says that during these experiences at his first high school, “I just thought I was dumb.” During one focus group session with his peer Mari-Tere, Alberto's former self-perception is intermingled with his experience as

a light-skinned Mexican-American student in a society deeply mired in cultural stories of implicit white supremacy. Of his father, who he says “looks Mexican,” Alberto says that “he’s been stopped in the airport... he’s been stopped, they thought he was a terrorist, or like a narco, like a drug trafficker, they labeled him because he’s dark... it hurts because it’s like, I don’t know, it’s like, why would they label him like that?” Alberto, though, describes himself as “light-skinned,” appearing not as someone who others might say “looks Mexican.” As a person living in a society that continues to attach importance to whiteness, he says that even though he is “100% Mexican, um, I guess I just, I got lucky.” Asked what he meant, he replied “like with my genetics, like I just look white. ...Like, [my dad’s] the same as me and I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t label me as [a terrorist, narco, or drug trafficker] just because I’m white, you know?” At the close of the focus group session where Alberto shared these thoughts about his identity, I asked Alberto and Mari-Tere what pseudonyms they might prefer in future writings about Conexiones. Mari-Tere responded by saying that names couldn’t be “too Mexican,” as certain names would give people the sense that they knew everything there was to know about a person’s life.³ This “knowing everything” about a person’s life included a sense of who is smart, who has college potential, and who is suitable for what sorts of careers. In short, it positions a person as a particular kind of person in a cultural story.

With great awareness of how others see him, how he is positioned within his society as a Mexican-American man, and how his light skin tone shields him from some of the negative positioning of people like his father and his friend Mari-Tere, Alberto shares a strong pride in his Mexican identity: “I am proud of being Mexican. I’m super proud of it, my culture, I’ll never not be proud of it... I won’t let anyone bring me down because of it. Because, I think, they have their own problems maybe with their culture, and they, maybe they’re just jealous because they don’t have a culture.” As scholars have long noted (e.g., Sue, 2004), the dominant culture masks itself, making it seem as though those from the dominant culture (and those who might tarnish Mexican identities negatively due to ethnocentrism and/or racism) “don’t have a culture.” Alberto’s statements show an awareness of imposed ethnic and racial hierarchies in education as well as a desire to challenge negative positionings through his strong assertions of cultural pride. It was hard, though, as Alberto started at Almgren High School and was not experiencing academic success, and attributed his “bad grades and stuff” to the belief that he “just thought [he] was dumb.” At this time, Alberto was navigating both this sense of academic failure along with broader positioning in his society (i.e., the cultural stories about who is or can become successful in and through schooling).

Because he was not earning credits towards a high school diploma at the rate expected of students his age, his guidance counselor suggested that he move to an alternative high school in his home city of San Sebastián. It was here that he met Ms. Santos, an English Language Arts teacher at Huerta who invited Alberto to join a new pilot program for place-based pedagogy and community-based education. Ms. Santos was inviting Alberto to join the first Conexiones cohort of 25 students.

Ms. Santos is a Filipino-American teacher steeped in the practices of Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021), particularly through her focus on relationships.⁴ Relationships are at the core of her teaching; when a new student joins the Conexiones program, the first thing she does is introduce the

new member of the program to peers who she thinks might befriend and support them in the community. Classroom-based meetings always begin with all participants sitting in a circle and sharing their thoughts on the daily topic, and Ms. Santos regularly begins by talking, in appropriate ways, about her life outside of the school community (e.g., as a parent, athlete, friend, etc.). When Ms. Santos met him, Alberto believed himself to be “dumb” and a bad student, and Alberto credits her guidance and support to his successful (re)framing of his own learning identity. He shared that Ms. Santos “would always tell us that we’re all at Huerta for a reason, because we’ve been through stuff ... I went from there, like I just started tracing it back.” Alberto is drawing upon a new cultural story here, one that allows him to (re)frame his understanding of his academic identity. Based on her focus on building relationships and care about his wellbeing, Alberto trusted Ms. Santos by sharing about the personal challenges he and his family had faced in years past. Ms. Santos dialogued with Alberto in small moments: while sitting on a bus returning from a field trip, while discussing a writing project during his first period class at Huerta. Through these conversations, she suggested that while he had “been through stuff,” these experiences were things that had happened around him and were not the final word on who he is as a human being or student, or who he could choose to become. This (re)framing, supported by Ms. Santos and the community-based learning projects, helped Alberto to re-imagine who he is as a student and human being. This identity work that Alberto did while supported by his teacher and peers in his alternative learning program was significant: he remarks of his reflections on past challenges both within and beyond school that “now that I realize, that I am self-aware of it, I can grow and it doesn’t hurt anymore.” This awareness, Alberto says, is freeing: “I feel like if I didn’t have the realization I’d still be, like, a bad person.” While Alberto never was a “bad person,” it is telling that the cultural story he felt himself positioned within made him feel this way. In addition to the dialogues with Ms. Santos, the Artes Comunitarios project contributed to his emerging sense of his identity as a capable, smart young person on his way to becoming a Marriage and Family therapist. Alberto and his peers dove into this community-based project and art installation throughout the spring of his final year of high school.

The Artes Comunitarios Project

In the focus group sessions with Alberto and his peers, one thing that often emerged from the conversation was the appreciation for the freedom and possibility that came with the Conexiones program. Students shared that they loved the new experiences and regular field trips, and that they much preferred these to the decontextualized learning that characterized their previous schooling. As mentioned above, these projects were responsive to students’ interests and desires. If one of the Conexiones students expressed an interest in an activity or project in the community, Ms. Santos would create time for them to research potential contact people, plan what they would want to request, and initiate the “cold call” themselves. Alberto expressed a desire to bring the group to the Berglund Art Center, a space he had visited and liked during a field trip at his initial high school, and he reached out to share his desire and ideas for a collaboration.

Berglund primarily serves wealthy patrons in the communities surrounding San Sebastián, and while it was only a 25-minute drive away, most of the Huerta community had never attended a theater or music performance there. The center, which may have been interested in shedding its image as an arts space

for only some of the community's residents, eagerly embraced the Conexiones students and guided them in all stages of the public art installation that emerged. This was all sparked by Alberto's initiative: with Ms. Santos' guidance, Alberto started the conversation that led to the months-long Artes Comunitarios collaboration, a sustained partnership between Conexiones and Berglund. Educational grant funds were identified to pay the arts center staff to mentor the Conexiones students during twice-weekly trips in which they advanced a vision for a collective work of art to be showcased to the broader community on the center's property. The Conexiones students dialogued around their ideas for a massive, impactful installation that would announce their vision to the world, and engaged geometry, physics, visual arts, and sound engineering as they worked with mentors to bring it to fruition.

The result was the "The World Is Yours" installation, a 12-meter long by 4-meter wide (at its widest) physical, visual, and aural work of art that invited visitors to walk within it to experience the Conexiones students' vision. This vision, shared both in focus groups and conversations with attendees at its unveiling, reflected their own experiences as students before and during the Conexiones program. The physical multimedia arts installation invites the viewer to enter a narrow enclosure in which foreboding music, images associated with self-doubt, and quotes denying future possibility are heard and projected on the walls as the viewer walks through; the viewer then comes to a wider enclosure that has uplifting music, inspirational quotes, and images the Conexiones students associate with success. This student-created installation is a physical manifestation of the process many students, including Alberto, described within the teaching and learning approach of the Conexiones program: people experience challenging conditions and realities, but through collective support they can get through them, and new opportunities will arise. Together, the Artes Comunitarios collaboration and the product of it, "The World Is Yours" installation, are one site of a (re)framing, a reinterpretation by the young people, offering a new narrative of who they have been, who they are now, and who they can collectively become. While not the only facet required to build the conditions for youth well-being, the focus on young people's experiences, understandings, desires, and agency in the learning, all grounded in an ethos of community collaboration and care is, I would argue, a necessary component. Formal education in the Conexiones model is about responsive, humanizing learning that invites young people to reflect, build relationships, and center their own wellbeing as they discover and choose their next steps beyond secondary school.

Discussion

There are, of course, important critiques of the Conexiones at Huerta alternative education program, and I would be remiss if I did not mention them here. While there was a strong focus on responsiveness, youth agency, youth desires, and community connection and support, the program did not often invite the Conexiones learners to engage in critical analysis of the social arrangements that create so many opportunities for the few and so few for the many in a deeply inequitable society. There were hints of this in the oral history project around the "revitalization" work, and gentrification, of San Sebastián's downtown, but this was not sustained across community-engaged projects. As has been argued elsewhere (Golden & Bieler, 2018), critical work, advocacy, and activism are necessary for educational practice and educator collaborations at all levels if we desire education to be transformative and truly

responsive to communities' strengths and needs. But what the program gets right, in my view, is the focus on humanizing and place-based pedagogy, care for learners, and attention paid to learners' identity work in and out of classrooms. Alberto did much work to (re)frame how he sees his academic and personal past; he re-imagined (and is currently realizing) his path after high school, and he credits the support of Ms. Santos and the Conexiones program for creating a space for him to be a leader in the Artes Comunitarios collaboration.

In the current moment where schooling is too often reduced to test preparation or decontextualized skills work, this focus feels like a radical transformation of the promise of schooling. Conexiones as an alternative education program takes seriously this sense of providing an alternative to the mainstream approach: going beyond the walls of a classroom to learn from and with members of the broader community helps to reimagine what formal education might be if we educators demand youth wellbeing and engagement as the center of our work.

We need a collective re-imagining of what purposes schools serve, with youth and communal wellbeing at the center. Social conditions that shape access to health care, housing, air free of toxic pollution, and other material realities are vital areas of focus, but there must also be a focus on youth desires, meaning-making around past experiences, reflections on identity and positioning, and visioning for their futures. Alberto's Conexiones experience afforded these aspects via the place-based pedagogy and community-engaged projects, and offers one example of realizing a more humanizing pedagogy centered on youth wellbeing.

The unfortunate coda to this narrative, though, is that school district leaders in San Sebastián shut down the Conexiones program at Huerta after one year, arguing that it did not "improve test scores" enough and instead should be an enrichment program shifted to a school serving students who are already experiencing academic success. The Conexiones students and teacher were understandably deeply disappointed and frustrated; for the students this seemed one of a long list of ways their schools had failed to create or continue meaningful learning opportunities. Judging a program's success solely on a single measure when there are so many other indications of student growth and engagement suggests a distinction between educational opportunities that serve a community's desires and needs and ones that are imposed upon people who do not immediately have the means to push back to demand better opportunities. Moving the Conexiones program to a school where students were already experiencing academic success suggests a lack of faith by district leaders that alternative approaches like place-based pedagogy could engender the forms of success demanded by the state. Ultimately, the reductive framing of school as a site of test preparation sadly drives much of educational policy and practice, obscuring Conexiones' successes and foreclosing its possible future successes. To make our school communities humanizing spaces centered on youth wellbeing, it is clear that there remains much (re)framing work about the purposes of schooling for educators working at all levels.

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Notes

1. This is a pseudonym, as are all names and places related here.
2. This approach has some aspects in common with Québec's CEGEPs (Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel), though this is focused on high school and not the years after high school.
3. She suggested Mari-Tere, the pseudonym I am using here.
4. While the focus on relationships is a strength in Ms. Santos' teaching, it is important to point out that there were missed opportunities in the place-based pedagogy work, and that culturally sustaining practices that connected with Alberto's Mexican-American identity were a central missed opportunity. One place-based project (the one that included interviewing business owners and residents in the newly renovated downtown to learn about the impact of gentrification) did connect with culture and identity, but primarily focused on how these relate to class and shifting demographics. A missed opportunity is that the pedagogical work did not include explicit invitations to focus on culture and identity in a strength-based way.

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