# Cultivating Critical Resilience among Mexican American Community College Students through a Three-Way Learning Community

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**Abstract**

This qualitative case study used a critical resilience framework to explore how a three-way learning community composed of a student success course and ESL reading and writing courses aided in the transition of a group of Mexican American ESL students to mainstream college courses. The findings illustrate that this transition involved helping the participants twist fibers of struggle into resilient yarn in order to improve their lives and those of their families. The author describes many of the students' life experiences and the strategies supported by the three-way learning community that facilitated the students' transition. The strategies of validation, challenging gender and racial oppression, and building cultural capital were situated within a social cultural context and therefore helped to cultivate the participants' critical resilience.

**Keywords:** Mexican American, critical resilience, learning community, student success

## 1. Introduction

Community colleges have a broad and noble mission of helping students who would otherwise not be able to attend college attain a postsecondary education, and their open admission policy, lower costs, and convenient locations attract large numbers of students from diverse backgrounds (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2008). Community college students tend to be under-prepared, from low-income families, female, older, and are less likely to be White (Horn & Nevill, 2006). There is further widespread diversity in terms of academic preparation, economic background, social background, and age. Community college students also have varied career aspirations, interests, and goals and increasingly, community colleges play an important role in educating students who need to learn English as a second language (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005).

Even though community college enrollment is booming, in recent decades a rise in student attrition rates has generated concern among many scholars and policy makers. More troublesome is the fact that first-to second-year attrition rates are highest for minority students (Anderson, 2004). Studies of college students have shown that the first year is critical for almost all these students to succeed. They have found that the first year "is especially significant for certain populations: students of color, nontraditional students, first-generation college students, low-income students, under-prepared students, and those for whom English is a second language" (Anderson, 2004, p. 77). High attrition leads to a decrease or stagnation in graduation rates, and has resulted in an educational movement, known as the first-year experience. Influenced by this movement, personnel at community colleges and universities have instituted a variety of programs and support services to promote success among entering college students. One of these programs is the student success course, also referred to as the first-year seminar, freshman experience, and extended orientation (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; O'Gara, et al., 2008).

The organization and content varies among institutions, but the overall goals of the courses are very similar. They are aimed at new students and designed with the idea of enhancing the overall college experience (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). They offer students information about campus resources, assistance in academic and career planning, establishing relationships with peers, staff, and faculty members, and enhancing study habits and other personal skills (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; O'Gara et al., 2008; Stoval, 2000). The overarching task of this course is to provide students from diverse backgrounds a college experience that is meaningful and rich enough to help them survive and thrive in postsecondary education. Scholars have found a positive link between participation in a student success course and academic performance (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993; O'Gara, et al., 2008; Stoval,

2000). Still others have established that student success courses can be especially beneficial for minorities (Anderson, 2004; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; Stoval, 2000).

Latinos are the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, constituting 16 percent of the nation's population and are the fastest growing segment (Ennis, Rio-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Mexican Americans and people of Mexican origin comprise 63 percent of the Latino population (Ennis et al., 2011). Despite this growth, Latinos lag behind other racial and ethnic groups in educational attainment and are more likely than any other group to leave school without obtaining any degree (Fry, 2002; Melguizo, 2009). Few complete a bachelor's degree, causing them to be further under-represented in graduate and professional programs (Fry, 2002). This disproportionately young Latino population, who will comprise a substantial percentage of the workforce by 2025, are plagued by low educational achievement in a world that increasingly requires more skills and knowledge for success (Fry ,2002; Melguizo, 2009).

Latinos, and Mexican Americans in particular, overwhelmingly prefer community colleges over universities and approximately half begin their studies there (Fry 2002, Kurlaender, 2006). These institutions are now an important part of the American landscape and play a crucial role in determining the pool of Mexican Americans that will transfer to four year colleges, graduate with a bachelor's degree, and go beyond.

Latino and other minority students, particularly those from working-class backgrounds who are the first in their family to attend college, often find the transition into higher education an overwhelming experience (Rendón, García, & Person, 2004). They have already survived varying forms of poverty, racism, gender discrimination, and marginalization. When coupled with learning English as a second language, the task becomes even more challenging and, in some cases, traumatic. Many of these students have attended public schools with minimal standards, low expectations, and substandard teaching (Melguizo, 2009). In addition, they may come from homes where going to college conflicts with cultural traditions. Some scholars argue that enduring various forms of oppression has engendered in them important attributes which have allowed them to move within and between multiple worlds, and maneuver around barriers (Campa, 2010; Rendón, García, & Person, 2004). Given that these students have managed to navigate through many of these obstacles already, and work their way to community colleges and universities, it is of the utmost importance to provide them with a college experience that will help them to achieve their goals and aspirations (Rendón, García, & Person, 2004).

Another movement that has gathered momentum in community colleges and other post-secondary institutions is the use of learning communities. Like student success courses, LCs appear to be particularly beneficial at community colleges where large numbers of commuter students live and work off campus, and are only on site during their scheduled class times (Minkler, 2002). Ironically, community college students often lack a sense of community. Typically, transient students leave campus and continue with their busy lives and are seldom involved in the culture of college. Less engagement increases the risk of dropping out (Gonzalez, 2009). Studies have now found that learning communities provide students extended exposure to peers, faculty, and staff and have the potential to build a sense of community that typically does not develop in a more traditional setting (Minkler, 2002; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Learning communities can create opportunities for these students to build networks, interact with formally educated people, and have access to other benefits of campus life. An LC can create a feeling or sense of closeness and intimacy, even when institutions are very large, thus, leading to a greater coherence among students (Levine, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004). Learning communities and student success courses each provide substantial advantages for college students and therefore, when paired, can have the potential to be an academic powerhouse that can "bridge the gap between what students bring to college and what they expect to take with them when they leave" (Levine, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004, p. 9).

Research shows that when student success courses are paired with learning communities, the learning outcomes for student persistence, academic skills, study skills, and critical thinking are generally higher (Levine, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004; Swing, 2002). In addition, LCs have the potential to promote learning that is more democratic and multicultural (Rendón, 2000). Rendón (2000; 2002) notes that these types of classrooms can help validate the diverse group of students who attend community college. Learning communities can increase students' intellectual confidence and foster social interaction among faculty and peers, while reducing their self-consciousness (Smith, 2010). Student success courses and LCs are a perfect match for Latino community college students because together they strive toward equity, and can serve as a gateway to economic and professional success, especially for those who are at the margins, or inhabit multiple intersections (Smith, 2010). The combination appears to be particularly useful for ESL students by bringing them closer into mainstream society, while at the same time building on the knowledge that will help them to transition and achieve in a higher education setting. Since ESL programs are usually structured separately from academic courses, this combination of learning community can provide ESL students with the integration they lack, while scaffolding

or providing them with the necessary support (Bollati, 2006). This article examines how a three-way learning community composed of a student success course and ESL reading and writing courses aided in the transition of a group of Mexican American ESL students to mainstream college courses. The learning community encouraged the participants to twist fibers of struggles into resilient yarn through strategies such as validation, challenging gender and racial oppression, and building social capital, therefore cultivating the participants' critical resilience.

## 2. Background and Purpose

The participants in this study attended El Paso Community College (EPCC), an institution where the student body is approximately 85 percent Latino (EPCC, 2010). El Paso Community College is spread over five campuses, with more than 30,000 credit students and 10,000 continuing education students, one of the fastest growing community colleges in the country (EPCC, 2011). In 2013, El Paso Community College was cited as having the largest number of Latino faculty, and awarding the largest number of Associate degrees to Latinos, among all community colleges in the nation (Cooper, 2013). The college serves El Paso, Texas and its Mexican counterpart Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, located on the U.S.-Mexico border. During the past fifty years, this area has been an economically disadvantaged, but rapidly growing, region of the country. El Paso Community College has a large non-English speaking population that often begins by studying in non-credit English as a Second Language studies (ESL). Many of these students move through several levels of the six-level program and then seek employment in the El Paso area. Others continue by enrolling in EPCC's vocational programs. Some students, after completing the ESL program, enter academic credit classes, conducted in English, which transfer to area universities.

The author, along with two other faculty members, developed an interdisciplinary learning community in order to create more "seamless learning environments" for students in an ESL Program who wished to move into academic credit classes (Smith, 2010, p. 262). The learning community was set up as a pilot and consisted of an ESL writing course (ES0L 0311), ESL reading class (RESL 0306), and a student success course (EDUC 1300-Mastering Academic Excellence). One of the goals of the three-way learning community was to encourage students to make multiple forms of connections both inside and outside of the classroom, between subjects, and between faculty and staff. In addition, the EDUC 1300 course included students who were not in the ESL program in order to encourage more diverse connections among students. Even though each of our courses met separately, they were shaped by our shared goals and course themes. The faculty met regularly in order to discuss ideas and align the curriculum. The purpose of the ESL writing and reading courses was to support the EDUC 1300 course's overarching goal: to help diverse students transition successfully into the culture of college and thrive in higher education environments.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Traditionally, the notion of resilience is described as the "capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship and repair yourself" (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 5). Experts in this area study individuals who experience very difficult circumstances and yet achieve success, despite their adversity. This type of research has provided the framework for studying educational resilience which focuses on the success of those who experience hardship caused by environmental conditions (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1994). The Mexican American community college students in this study exhibited signs of resilience because they are in the process of obtaining a college degree and learning a second language despite multiple difficult circumstances and hardships. In examining "at risk" populations, resilience studies have found that individual characteristics, school experiences, family environment, peer interaction, and community contexts can serve as protective factors that influence the well-being of individuals (Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy, & Rutter, 1994).

Although the research on resilience has come a long way in recent years, major considerations have been ignored in its conceptualization. The traditional notion of resilience "tends to place the responsibility of achieving success primarily on the effort of the individual without considering the cultural, economical, historical, and political contexts of schooling" thus "leaving the dynamics of power embedded in the schooling systems unexamined" (Campa, 2010, p. 431). Excluding the larger systems of society from the operation of resilience attributes the blame for failure and success primarily on the individual and relieves educational institutions and society of responsibility, perpetuating the status quo. Questioning power dynamics within social and cultural contexts is crucial in order to have a deeper and complex understanding of resilience.

These limitations triggered a reconceptualization of resilience and the term c*ritical resilience* evolved as a result of using ideology from a feminist critical perspective (Anzaldúa, 1999; Campa, 2010; Collins, 2002; Delpit, 2006; Knight 2004; Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal, & Elenes, 2006). Critical resilience is underpinned by tenets from feminist critical theory and therefore adds more complexity and multiple dimensions to resilience

theory. Critical resilience provides a framework to critique the established power and knowledge in educational practices, and therefore, helps us examine in greater depth how the social systems (peers, teachers, families) in a learning community influence the success of a group of Mexican American ESL students. Critical resilience emphasizes the importance of social, cultural, economic and historical contexts in understanding the lives of Mexican American ESL students and therefore allows us to see a more nuanced and multidimensional portrait of their experiences (Campa, 2010). Community college students in general and, the participants in this study in particular, inhabit multiple intersections. For example, they tend to be older, female, Latino, and are in the process of learning a second language. Collins (2000) reminds us that intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, language, and other social identities cannot be reduced to one type of oppression because they work together to produce injustice.

## 4. Methodology

Critical resilience theory emphasizes context and knowledge. It is derived from case study research and is more contextual than formal knowledge derived from other research designs, thus making it a good match for this study. Therefore, a critical resilience case study framework was utilized to gain a deeper understanding of how a learning community aided in the transition of a group of Mexican American ESL students to mainstream college courses. Using this approach helped to address three questions that guided this study. First, how can a learning community that includes a student success course, ESL writing and ESL reading courses, help to cultivate the resilience of Mexican American students and help with the transition from an ESL program to mainstream college curriculum? Second, what experiences do these students bring to the community college classroom that promote their resilience? Third, what are the students' perceptions of their experience in the learning community?

Merriam (2009) explains that a case study "is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40). The bounded system can be a person, group, place, or activity or some combination of those units which then becomes a case of a particular phenomenon (Hass Dyson & Genishi, 2005). In this study, the five participants and their experiences in the learning community are a single bounded system. The case study design was chosen because of the researcher's interest in "insight, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing" (Merriam, 2009 p. 42).

Case studies are not only bounded systems of inquiry but can also "be defined in terms of the process of conducting the inquiry" (Merriam, 2009, p. 54). Yin (2008) adds that "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined" (p. 18). Because the questions guiding this study and the phenomenon of critical resilience are complex, it required a case study research process that would capture the uniqueness and rich details of the participants' experiences. Qualitative case studies are "particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic" and therefore appropriate for this work (Merriam, 2009, p. 54). They focus on a specific bounded system, and produce thick, rich, descriptions that can illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

### 4.1 Methods

Purposeful sampling was used to select the six participants. Patton (2002) explains that purposeful sampling involves selecting "information rich cases" or those "from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 230). The first criterion was that the participants be of Mexican origin and this was established if at least one of the parents was born in Mexico. They were also required to have completed the fifth level of ESL reading and writing because the three-way learning community included level six reading and writing courses. The third criterion included pursuing a degree plan that required the EDUC 1300 (Mastering Academic Excellence) course. The fourth criterion was that students had faced difficult circumstances because of their multiple intersections. This was important because students who experience various forms of adversity such as poverty, learning English as a second language, and gender and racial discrimination are typical at community colleges. Therefore, students with these types of backgrounds and experiences can provide insight into how community colleges can cultivate the resilience of Mexican American students in order to help them to survive and thrive in post-secondary institutions. Students were recruited by the researcher and ESL faculty from current level 5 ESL classes using this specific criteria. Six students were selected and five agreed to participate in the research study.

The five Mexican American EPCC students who participated in the study represented diverse backgrounds. Four were female and one was a male (see Table 1 and section on Description of Participants). Three came from low-income Mexican families with limited formal education and two were from the emerging Mexican middle

class. Two of the five participants were born in the United States, the other three in Mexico. Spanish was their primary language and they enrolled at EPCC's ESL Program in order to learn English. Their ages ranged from 21 to 38 years and their majors and career interests included social work, special education, mathematics, sociology, and business. Pseudonyms were used to identify the names of the students, family members, and professors who participated in this study.

The primary data collection technique was student interviews which Merriam (2009) notes as the best technique to use when "conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals" (p. 88). It can reveal "how people interpret the world around them" (p. 88). And allows us "to enter into the other person's perspective" (Patton, 2002, p. 340-341). A questionnaire was created to generate discussions and semistructured interviews were conducted using a protocol that addressed themes related to resilience, teaching and learning, academic achievement, family, culture, and language (Merriam, 2009). The five participants were interviewed at least once in a location of their choosing, the length of time varied from 1 to 3 hours, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. A second data collection strategy involved written documentation, forms or documents that were not gathered through observations or interviews (Merriam, 2009). Some examples were class assignments such as reflective papers, or summaries and analysis of the materials read and discussed in class, and notes from presentations. A third data collection technique included observation. The author taught the EDUC 1300 course in the three-way learning community. Therefore, her role as professor and researcher automatically made her a participant observer in the study. This "comingling of roles," brings to the forefront the issue of subjectivity which is "a common occurrence in anthropological fieldwork" and qualitative case studies such as this one (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 145). Becoming integrated in the study was necessary in order to enter into the participants worlds, teach them and learn from them while utilizing a critical resilience framework. I engaged in ongoing self-conscious reflection about my role in the study by documenting my observations, thoughts and reactions in a researcher's journal (Zavella, 1997). I examined how I was "situated within social and power relations" of my work with the participants, my colleagues, and the college setting (Zavella, 1997, p. 45). In addition, I engaged in an inductive process that involved working back and forth between themes and data while collaborating with the participants so that they had an opportunity to shape the themes as they emerged from the research process (Creswell, 2007). The participants were given the opportunity to read the transcripts of their interviews and to provide feedback. Analysis was on-going and the data was coded and triangulated for themes (Merriam, 2009). This was done for each participant and across all the sources of data using a critical resilience lens. These measures were set in place to ensure the study was conducted in a trustworthy manner that respected, honored, and reflected the participants' views without over-representing the researcher's personal perspectives (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002).

*4.2 Description of Participants*

The participants were individuals who faced difficult circumstances because of their multiple intersections and, collectively, their adversity mirrored the experiences of many community college students. Poverty, family tragedies, and cultural barriers were common. When Carmen, a 38-year-old Mexican American female born in the United States, lost her father to a heart attack when she was 11 years old, her mother and four children were left behind to fend for themselves in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Isabela, a 21-year-old Mexican female, was born and raised in Ciudad Juárez but when she was 2 years-old her mother also died suddenly. After her father remarried, he sent her to school in the United States. She remembered being 15 and terrified as she was "just dropped off at school" in a foreign country without speaking a word of English. In addition, she had to walk across the international bridge to come to school every day. Isabela disclosed that, "I used to cry every day and I did not want to go to school. I would tell them, 'It's too hard!'" José María faced both family tragedy and cultural pressures. He explained that growing up as a Mexican gay kid was "frickin hard." As a young child, José María knew that being homosexual was not something to be proud of in his culture because "in everything you hear, either from your family, or from your teachers, or from your friends—homosexuality is never seen as a good thing." When he finally decided to reveal his secret, José María's parents were confused, but supportive. He was able to graduate from high school and enrolled at El Paso Community College, but then his mother became very ill. His father had to work long hours to pay the mounting medical bills for treatments in far-off Mexican cities and José María took on new responsibilities such as caring for his disabled sister, cooking family meals, visiting the hospital, and working, along with going to school. He turned to his inner faith and while his mother was in a coma, he avidly read her scriptures from the bible. His mother miraculously recovered and to this day she often asks him "How do you cope with all of it?" José María replies, "!No mas no te sueltes del de arriba (Just don't let go of the Almighty)! That is why I try to see the good in everything, every problem, every bad situation, every struggle, in every moment! " As a teenager Lorena mixed with "the wrong crowd," ditched

classes, and became pregnant at the age of 16. Once married, she enrolled in a home study program sponsored by the Mexican government but was overwhelmed and dropped out. She recalled that "I had to be in charge of my home and be a good wife and a good mother and so I did not have enough time to study." After moving to the United States she got a job at a local dollar store where a friendly fellow employee noticed that she did not speak English well and therefore could not communicate adequately with the customers. She encouraged Lorena to apply for financial aid and enroll in EPCC's ESL program. Abigail's family immigrated to the United States when she was a teenager and she and her brother attended a high school in Dallas, Texas. She was distressed by the fact that they were the only students there from Mexico and even though Abigail was proud of her Mexican heritage, she was keenly aware that not speaking English was going to be a major barrier. Her family moved back and forth from Mexico to different cities in the United States. She never quite mastered the language so, at the age of 38, Abigail acquired a loan (without her husband's consent) so that she could attend the ESL program at EPCC. Even though she dreams of getting a degree, cultural and gender norms continue to be barriers. Her husband repeatedly tells her, "we don't have the money and you have to be at home with the kids and you need to help me with my business."

Table 1. Background information on the five participants included in the study

|  | Age | Family Status | Academic Field of Interest |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lorena | 37 | Married & 2 children | Social Work & Women's Studies |
| Carmen | 38 | Married & 3 children | Special Ed. Teacher |
| Isabela | 21 | Married & no children | Business |
| Jorge | 21 | Married & no children | Mathematics & Sociology |
| Abigail | 38 | Married & 2 children | Business |

## 5. Findings: Twisting Fibers of Struggle into Resilient Yarn

A critical resilience framework was used to examine how a group of Mexican American community college students maneuvered within and between many obstacles to transition from an ESL program to mainstream college courses. The findings illustrate that this complex transition involved helping the participants resist and counter the social and cultural pressures within their home and society that can hinder academic success. The three-way learning community was structured in ways that aided participants in twisting fibers of struggle into resilient yarn in order to improve their lives and the lives of their families. The learning community provided the spaces to transform the learning of English as a second language, gender and racial marginalization, and coming from lower social economic backgrounds from struggles to strengths. Validation, challenging gender and racial oppression, and building cultural capital were three strategies that helped to cultivate the participants' critical resilience. These were situated within the social and cultural contexts of the participants' lives and address how power relations impact their success. The curriculum included research projects, reflective papers, presentations of research findings, discussions, and works of literature interwoven with themes of struggle, resilience, success, and social justice. By examining, studying, and learning about other individuals, groups, and societies who experienced adverse circumstances, the participants were encouraged to create, and successfully apply, their own unique and artful approaches that built resilience. The narratives of the students' life experiences portray how these strategies and pedagogies facilitated the first-year experience for this group of students.

### 5.1 Validation

The participants experienced obstacles different than those of native-English language speakers because many institutions of higher learning do not treat ESL students as full members of the academic community (Bollati, 2006; Ignash, 1995; Smith, 2010). Typically, ESL students are separated from other academic programs leading to disintegrated curriculum, thus placing programs and students at the margins (Bollati, 2006; Ignash, 1995; Smith, 2010). Exposure to these less friendly environments often generates feelings of insecurity, lack of confidence, and even fear among the students.

At EPCC, the ESL students generally do not enroll in college credit courses until they complete the six-level program and/or take a placement exam. The learning community class was a pilot, a new opportunity for ESL students to take a credit course (EDUC 1300) while still being enrolled in the ESL program. It served as a bridge to the academic world and created validation. Rendón (1994) defines validation as "an enabling, confirming and

supportive process initiated by in-and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). Validation became imperative in enhancing the Mexican American ESL students' critical resilience and helping them to cross multiple bridges to a successful first-year experience. Even though they were somewhat isolated from the general student body, many ESL students formed cohesive bonds and regularly communicated with each other after several semesters of English instruction together. The participants shared that making the transition to credit courses was a common topic of conversation among their peers who did not enroll in the learning community.

> Lorena: You should invite the level six students because we all have that fear of entering into college classes. Everyone asked Abigail and me, "How is the class? How can you have five classes? Is it difficult?" So I would say, "You know what? You should try it! It's not that difficult because the three classes are related." You do have extra homework and extra assignments but we already know the topics. We know because we are learning similar things and topics. Those were some of the fears they had and that is why they did not enroll in the learning community.

> Interviewer: What do you think they are afraid of?

> Lorena: I think the transition. Even though we are adults we are afraid of something new. Not only is this new but we are also learning in another language. People are afraid of new things but as soon as they try it they realize it is not as terrifying as they were thinking.

The three-way LC helped her make the transition. Lorena, now a veteran of the process, is frequently sought out by her peers for advice on making the transition. She has become an advocate for learning communities and is attempting to alleviate some of the trepidation experienced by her peers.

Language was a common obstacle among the participants and their Mexican American peers. In many parts of the world, speaking more than one language is seen as an asset, an opportunity for personal and professional growth. But for many of these ESL students, learning a new language was a hair-raising, anxiety-inducing experience that could be paralyzing at times. To make matters worse, ESL students are sometimes perceived as incompetent in academic areas because they lack English language skills (Pratt-Johnson, 2006). Most of the participants internalized the belief that people who look and speak like them are "less than the intellectual norm" (Delpit, 2002, p. 46). However, through validation this did not become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Instead, the participants capitalized on this belief and used it to cultivate their resilience. The students often spoke of having to work harder and put more effort into college projects and assignments because of their "deficiencies."

> Isabela: *El curso es bien importante* (the course is very important). I liked it [EDUC 1300] because we did so many activities. I also liked it because there were several of us ESL students in class. Other students spoke English since they were little and I liked that we interacted with them. I liked it a lot because we learned so much from them. And also we always have that pressure that we need to exert ourselves double the amount than they do. So talking and interacting with them really helped. I learned new things and new ideas.

Isabela learned to overcompensate for the deficit perspective that has been imposed on her. She is interacting and acquiring as much knowledge as possible from her native-English speaking peers. In addition, Isabela finds the learning community and the EDUC 1300 course in particular, to be a validating experience for multiple reasons. Isabela laughed as she made a startling revelation:

> The projects required certain things and I noticed that many other students did not meet those requirements, but we did. That's when I thought, "We're not doing so bad!" We felt much better about ourselves. I also think that knowing that we had to over-prepare really helped us—thinking that they are more advanced and that we have to catch up to them. It was more pressure and it motivated us to work harder—¡Dale, dale, dale (go, go, go)!

Isabela is describing validation in action. Jalomo and Rendón (2004) report that "students who are validated begin to believe they can be successful; become excited about learning; feel a part of the learning community; become motivated; and feel cared about as a person, not just as a student" (p. 43). In this particular situation, Isabela is being validated by the fact that she and her ESL peers are doing academically better in a research project than the non-ESL students in the EDUC 1300 class. Because Isabela and the other students perceive themselves as inadequate or "less than," this experience contradicted these beliefs and bolstered their self-confidence as successful college learners. During the individual presentations of their research findings all the participants did outstanding work. The presentations were organized, thorough, included excellent visual aids and had strong social justice perspectives with detailed plans of action. Overall the quality was professional and much better than the presentations in typical EDUC 1300 courses. When the author expressed how impressed

she was with their performance, the participants explained that they had been practicing in their reading and writing learning community classes. In addition, they were meeting on their own time and practicing in the ESL labs. This was one more result of the participants "overcompensating" and validating each other at the same time.

These outcomes were not an accident. The faculty who taught the learning community met regularly to discuss the participants' performance and plan ways to integrate the curriculum in ways that "[found] the student's interests and buil[t] an academic program around them" (Delpit, 2002, p. 45). Validation is not about "being nice" but is instead about expanding on the brilliance of the students (Delpit, 2006). The faculty promoted integration, depth, and rigor in the learning community. Reading, writing, and research work overlapped. The faculty made sure that the participants had no choice but to learn. Although José María was partly joking, he said it best: "For example, when we read a book in one class we would discuss it in the other class, and then we would write about it in the third one. So you learn it because you learn it!" All of the participants spoke about the importance of doing research in the learning community and its positive impact on their transition. In addition, they found the topics of money management, time management, resilience, and social justice relevant and crucial in bolstering their academic ability. Providing the participants with an environment where they could learn to validate their own struggles and experiences was crucial to their success. It showed them that they were just as capable, and sometimes more productive, than their non-ESL counterparts. The participants learned that some of the coping mechanisms they had developed to overcome their adversity added to their resilience and became important tools in their future success.

### 5.2 Challenging Gender and Racial Oppression

"Moving away from the everyday realities," or the world that they are familiar with, to "the new world of college" is a complex task for Mexican Americans and other minority students who come from working class backgrounds (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004, p. 38). The lives of the participants were shaped by various cultural experiences and the learning community was structured in ways that helped students combat sociocultural forces within their home and society that could have led to failure. Instead, the students ingeniously developed strategies to twist these fibers of adversity and transform them into a resilient yarn that empowered them and their families.

Findings revealed pronounced struggles due to gender and race, particularly among the three married female participants. These women told story after story about the challenges that they faced on a daily basis to attend EPCC and achieve academic success. The greatest problems they faced in their transition to the world of college was pursuing their education, while preserving gendered cultured norms. With frustration in her voice, Lorena disclosed that:

> My husband is my number one obstacle. He is a *machista* and he told me, "As soon as you finish your English program, you are done!" That's what he told me because he believes, women should stay home—cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the kids. That made me angry! So I told him, "You know what? I need to do something else. When I am home I eat a lot. I'm getting diseases. I'm nervous. I need to do something! And it is not going to affect the family because my children are at school when I am at the college." As soon as I'm done with my classes I go home and cook my dinner, help them with their homework, and everything is okay. But this attitude is my big obstacle right now.

As married Mexican American females with children, Lorena and other participants had many responsibilities far beyond those of typical college students. They did routine housework, prepared the family meals, helped their children with their homework, and transported them to school and extracurricular activities; all while attending college, doing their homework, and learning a second language. The lack of spousal support added more strain to an already overburdened life. This was an outcome of a Latino "peer culture that values women in the role of 'girlfriend,' 'wife,' and 'mother' to such an extent that there is a high social risk involved in displacing these roles with those of 'lawyer,' 'physician," or 'professor'" (Gándara, 1995, p. 92). Even Carmen, who had more support from her husband, was overwhelmed by these societal and cultural expectations:

> Because sometimes I think, "I need to go back to work. College is not for me. When I'm driving home from school, come down my street, and I see my house that's when reality hits. I know my time is up." I try to put the house in order so I tell the kids do this and that! But then I think, "If I leave school then what?" I know I will still think that something is missing. I need to do something for myself because my kids will live their life. So even if I only take two classes, I will still feel like I am working on something for me.

At times the pressure to comply with so many imposed norms felt like a levy that was about to be breached. The female participants often contemplated dropping out of EPCC and going into the workforce. But as in the case of

Lorena and Carmen, these thoughts were quickly replaced with reflective questions. With the support of the learning community, the participants generated creative strategies to counteract the different oppressive circumstances that arose from the "intersection of their racialized and gendered experiences" (Cammarota, 2004, p. 53). The structures and spaces provided by the learning community included writing research papers related to careers and social issues, while reading and discussing works of literature intertwined with themes of struggle, resilience, success, and social justice. Some of the readings included: *The other face of America: Chronicles of the immigrants shaping our future* by Jorge Ramos*, Night* by Elsie Wiesel, and *Mindset: The new psychology of success* by Carol Dweck. The educational settings provided by the learning community allowed the participants to construct a combination of simple and elaborate strategies, depending on their circumstances, to support their efforts to withstand these forces in ways that would nurture critical resilience.

Analyzing, synthesizing, and applying the concepts in Dweck's *Mindset,* had such a profound influence on Lorena's life that she moved beyond gendered culture norms. She attempted to steer male members of the family in different directions, something quite assertive for a typical Mexican American female mother. She became the teacher, she became the advocate, and suggested readings for those in adverse circumstances, just as her professors had done for her.

> Right now I have an uncle who is in prison—here in the United States. So I told him, "I recommend that you read the book *Mindset.*" He has a son and his son is having difficulty with gangs. I think my nephew is 14 and he told his dad that he did not want anything to do with him anymore. So I told my uncle, "Read this book because it will help you a lot. Because even though you are in jail, you are still his role-model. You are still his father." He said, "You know what? I will read this book!"

Lorena's new passion for books and learning infuriated her husband. In his view, it was time taken away from the family. So Lorena artfully put her readings to work. For example, on Saturday mornings when having breakfast with her son, daughter, and husband they usually just discussed routine events that happened during the week. As a new strategy, Lorena began to interject vivid and animated stories about the characters in her latest readings. She caught their attention, got them interested in her latest book, and afterwards, "they are like, 'Wow! Really? And what happened next?'" As a result, Lorena has become quite the story teller and brought a piece of her learning community into her home. Therefore, what started out as a strategy to get around oppressive acts of gender discrimination within the home and society at large has now become a family tradition. Her husband has backed off, and now, begrudgingly, enjoys some of the stories. Lorena is circumnavigating a course that will allow her to pursue her educational goals "without alienating [herself] from all forms of social and psychological support" (Gándara, 1995, p. 92).

Like Lorena, Carmen also developed new strategies to battle sociocultural forces and succeed. The EDUC 1300 class, often seen as a frivolous or unnecessary class by many of the students who need it most, along with the experience of the two other courses in the community, gave her a chance to reflect on her goals and aspirations. She found the class to be extremely useful for goal setting and developing strategies. She also made it a vehicle for inspiring and developing her son, in a sense, integrating the family in the process and making it easier for the next generation.

> I think the education class is a good class because it made me think. It's one hour that we usually use to think and see the best part of why we should study and continue with our classes. We think about our goals and of not giving up! When the class first started I thought, "I'm too old to get all that advice" but once I got into it I thought, "Wow this is a very important class!" All students should take that class. I was really excited and I told my son, "It's great, when you take that class, pay attention!"

Carmen brought validation and motivation home, promoting education and success. Her son is now more excited about learning. She also overcame various social gender pressures by persuading her husband to enroll in EPCC. Carmen skillfully took control of the family and changed their attitudes. Both her son and husband were influenced by her studies. In essence, she was setting a new direction for her family.

Carmen and the other participants illustrate that pursuing a higher education while managing this intersected adversity can provide the motivational forces that will propel them to success. In addition, cultural traditions such as machismo and other themes discussed in the readings were threaded in some of their research projects and reflective papers. Through these and other experiences, the three-way learning community provided a scaffold that allowed some of the participants to envision a college degree as a valuable ticket "to a higher status that challenges male domination and offers greater autonomy" (Cammarota, 2004, p. 55). Their community college experience serves a broader purpose, not just a way to get a better job. Because the stakes are high, their complex and intersected struggles have become powerful transformational forces.

*5.3 Building Social and Cultural Capital*

Making connections with faculty and peers and participating in the social and academic culture of college is crucial during the first year-experience and beyond (Astin, 1985; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; Rendón, 2002). Social capital, or the connections and social networks that provide access to the resources of the social elite, has been shown to impact the academic success of students from diverse backgrounds (Stanton-Salazar, 2004). The participants had previously taken ESL courses together and were somewhat accustomed to working in community with their peers. They had bonded because of their similar struggles, culture, and language. Therefore, these students understood some of the mutual benefits of relationships. Because the participants were more socially cohesive than typical college students, they were more receptive to new ideas and better able to interact with their teachers. One of the most influential forms of social capital is derived from the relationship between a student and teacher (Brooks, 2011; Delpit, 2006; Hollins & Guzman, 2005). Students "not only learn from a teacher but also for a teacher" if the emotional connection is there (Delpit, 2006, p. 277). The three-way learning community in this study provided the opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and to build new connections. A layering of social networks created the spaces that allowed the participants to empower themselves and to foment critical resilience, thus facilitating their transition into college credit courses.

José María now attends the University of Texas at El Paso and no longer has the same support network of students and professors, and far fewer emotional connections, that he experienced in the learning community. He recalled his experiences with Ms. Gallardo, the ESL reading professor. José María described Ms. Gallardo as an impassionate, bona fide, outspoken, and idealistic teacher. He believed that like a resourceful medical practitioner, Ms. Gallardo could look straight into her students' eyes and diagnose their innermost yearnings. She then prescribed the perfect literary work that would not only alleviate their core longing, but would help transform their lives. Ms. Gallardo not only immersed the students in stimulating literary discussions and meaningful assignments to ensure in-depth understanding of the readings but also insisted that the students stayed on track with their other courses. In a firm and paternal way, Ms. Gallardo repeatedly checked in with the students and asked, "Hey! Did you have problems understanding anything? Do you have any homework? How are you doing in your other classes?" Ms. Gallardo's warm drill sergeant approach left no room for excuses. You simply had to do the work. José María enthusiastically shares the following story:

> Ms. Gallardo is great! I really trust her and so I would ask her, "Do you know what would help me out to cope with this or to understand this better?" I would ask her about everything and I kept reading and reading and reading until now—thanks to her. She made me realize that I had to make this switch in my reading because I love to read—and I usually read certain authors in Spanish. She would say, "Try this book in English and this and this." And now I have a whole shelf filled with books in English!

In doing so, Ms. Gallardo played the role of *cultural translator* (de Anda, 1984). Cultural translators are defined by de Anda (1984) as people who are from the student's native culture who help in bridging the native world with the mainstream world. As a Latina, female, and professor, Ms. Gallardo validated José María's love for Spanish literature while gently easing his passion into English books (Rendón, 2002). José María is a passionate knower, or someone who uses "the self as an instrument of understanding" and Ms. Gallardo helped to weave his "passions and intellectual life into one recognizable whole" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 141). Not only did Ms. Gallardo assist in this transfer, but she also inspired a lifelong love for learning that facilitated José María's transition into the university. Even though José María no longer had the professors' direct support that was provided by the learning community at EPCC, at least he has "[him]self, counseling, the tutoring center, and everything else!" José María was not only learning *from* Ms. Gallardo but was also learning *for* Ms. Gallardo (Delpit, 2006).

Abigail also recognizes the significance of social and cultural capital. Her experiences in the three-way pilot helped her understand the benefits of making connections with faculty and building relationships that will help her with her academic career. This type of simple engagement can make a major difference in a student's chances for success. For example, in a study of high school students, researchers found that they could predict with a high level of accuracy who was going to drop out by simply asking students about the types of relationships they have with their teachers (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, Collins, 2005). Most of those who dropped out never connected or built bridges with their teachers (Sroufe et al., 2005). The college environment often makes the connections even less attainable.

One topic that generated great discussion among students in the EDUC 1300 course was social reproduction theory and its link to success. The participants were surprised at how social structures perpetuate inequities among those with the fewest resources and were amazed at how much this theory, the readings, writing

assignments, and discussions about social capital applied to their situation. Abigail's interests were piqued and she saw the three-way LC as a unique opportunity to make connections and build capital, and break the cycle. For example, she and many of her fellow ESL students had heard horror stories about adjunct faculty who spent little time on campus and were essentially disconnected from the college, and large university lecture halls where students seldom have a chance to interact with professors. When discussing her transition from the ESL program into credit courses she shared an important lesson gained from the learning community. Abigail noted "I think it is important to take the time to talk to the teachers. Because sometimes they just come in and bye, bye, and I think we need that connection with the teacher." She cited an example of Ms. Percy, the ESL writing professor, offering students time for tutoring and advising, help that Abigail viewed as important tools in building her academic career.

> Abigail: Ms. Percy wrote the tutoring schedule on the board but nobody showed up! I know she was focusing on the ones that were getting low grades but nobody showed up. A friend and I went and were standing outside and we asked her, "Do you have room for us?" She said, "Come on in!"

> Interviewer: I'm sure she was very happy!

> Abigail: Anytime something extra is offered I will be there! During tutoring the teachers have more time and explain things differently. You have a chance to really talk to them. It is important for many reasons so I will make time to be there.

Abigail is consciously and unconsciously aware that Ms. Percy's meeting is about more than tutoring and that this encounter has the potential of providing social capital which, when invested, can create cultural capital (Stanton-Salazar, 2004). She and other participants were often amazed at how few students took advantage of, or even understood the significance of, these interactions. Parents from lower socioeconomic and minority backgrounds often lack the institutional resources, career collateral, political advantages, and the web of connections, social capital and cultural capital that are essential to the academic achievement of their children (Gándara, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Abigail began to understand the value of these encounters and now encourages her children to do the same with their teachers. She said: "I always tell my kids, 'When something extra is offered you go for it because you don't know what it could turn into!'"

In Abigail's perception of mainstream culture the "extras" have a certain value and are a form of social capital. Relationships in these professional settings are vital for this group of students because they can generate various forms of social capital not typically within reach. Social capital can later be redeemed for much needed cultural capital. For example, students may need advice on who to take classes with, or what changes are coming in a program. They may need well-written reference letters for entrance into a particular academic field or a scholarship. These new social networks with faculty provide a window into a different aspect of the college, the faculty members' perspectives, and unique opportunities for help. They can lead to other supportive contexts and institutional resources. These connections can also serve as motivational forces that can propel the students to success. The three-way learning community made these and other exchanges possible. Several of the participants visited the author for feedback on research papers required for their writing ESL learning community class. Recently, José María returned and asked the author for a letter of recommendation to enter the Social Work Program at the University of Texas at El Paso and Lorena requested feedback on a paper written for her English 1301 composition class.

Engaging with Ms. Percy was influential in fostering Abigail's critical resilience in multiple ways and building a foundation of cultural capital. Abigail was impressed with the fact that Ms. Percy was very knowledgeable about events happening around the country and around the world. She described her as a news media correspondent "who knew everything" and soon found Ms. Percy's enthusiasm for worldly knowledge, historical events, and women's issues contagious. She started to watch the news every night and made a concerted effort to learn more about current events in order to prepare for classroom discussions. After awhile, when Ms. Percy began her class by asking "so what is happening in the news today?" Abigail was ready for action. Ms. Percy captivated Abigail's interest in the world, was successful in getting her involved in learning, and whetted her appetite for more knowledge. Abigail also began to see a basic knowledge of current events as another form of social capital. The new knowledge, and the subsequent validation she received by entering the discussion, allowed her to more freely interact with her teachers. As a successful, White, middle-class female, Ms. Percy was modeling some of the behaviors of the mainstream society and was directly and indirectly assisting Abigail in understanding some of the codes and unspoken rules of the dominant culture. In essence, she was playing the role of *cultural mediator* and was paving the way for Abigail to make the transition into a very different world and build cultural capital (de Anda, 1984).

## 6. Discussion

A critical resilience paradigm provided insight on how a three-way learning community helped a group of Mexican American students transition from an ESL program to the world of college and improve their lives beyond the campus. Critical resilience examines the power dynamics in mainstream society and emphasizes the importance of social, cultural, economic and historical contexts, and therefore allows for a more nuanced understanding. Because the experiences that these Mexican American students bring with them, and the intersections they inhabit vary, their transition to the culture of college is complex. They have already navigated through barriers and hurdles (their fibers of struggle) and therefore bring rich experiences and sources of knowledge. The learning community was structured in a way that built on this knowledge, therefore cultivating the nontraditional resources, tools, and strategies that will promote their success in institutions of higher learning. This curricular project fostered critical resilience through validation, challenging gender and racial oppression, and building social and cultural capital, thus helping the participants twist fibers of struggle into resilient yarn.

The findings illustrate that learning communities and student success courses together can play an important role in helping minority students become integrated into the academic and social college environment, making their first year a positive experience, and increasing their likelihood of future success. The curricular project in this study helped to bridge a major gap between the ESL Program and the rest of the academic programs. After experiencing many of the benefits of a community, most of the participants were surprised and disappointed that so few other LCs were offered. More LCs, similar to the one in this study, need to be available to community college students.

But overemphasizing the agency of the student, with no consideration of structure or context, can attribute the causes of success and failure to the student alone and can result in a deficit view of Mexican American community college students and their families. Utilizing a critical resilience lens is necessary to guide, teach, and mentor these students. Institutional support and commitment is important in developing and supporting students of diverse backgrounds to help them build critical resilience.

Community colleges typically are not organized in ways that identify, promote, and support learning communities. College professionals need to know how to develop curriculum that builds on the students' knowledge, understand the resources that students bring with them, maintain rigorous standards, and be familiar with the complexities of the transition processes. These front-line workers must acknowledge the multiple social struggles related to race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other intersections and help their students make use of their familial, cultural, and historical contexts to transition successfully into academic environments.

Furthermore, the students aspired to enter professions geared towards helping others. They often shared the strategies and knowledge from the three-way learning community with their families, peers, and co-workers and extended social networks, thus taking the intellectual and social tools acquired beyond the college and potentially influencing many generations to come. Because community colleges play a vital role in the success and failure of Latino students they have an ethical and moral obligation to provide minority students with a first-year experience that is rich and strong enough to prepare them to succeed in higher academic settings and be contributing members of society. Educators need to cultivate the critical resilience of Mexican American students in order to bring us one step closer to social equity. They need to establish programs and curriculum that help Latino community college students spin their fibers of struggle into resilient yarn. "It is these highly prepared individuals who, along with their White counterparts, will be able to shape a world that values diversity, democracy, community, and hope for humanity" (Rendón, García, & Person, 2004, p. 14).

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