

There is space to play! Mexican American Children of Immigrants Learning With(in) Cherry Orchards

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Abstract

While some children spend their summers in camps or other recreational activities, many children of immigrants in Washington state spend them picking cherries and learning with(in) orchards. Children's experiences consist of multiple narratives demonstrating that children's lives are complicated, yet full of possibilities for teaching and learning. This article draws from the experiences of a group of Mexican American children of immigrants who spend part of their summer accompanying their parents in cherry orchards. The article documents the learning that occurs in these labor spaces of capitalist exploitation and elaborates on their status as sites of counter hegemonic learning and human dignity.

Keywords: *children of immigrants, counter-hegemonic knowledge, play, testimonio*

In the last few years, immigrant children have been at the forefront of academic conversations and political debates. The more recent conversations revolve around the fleeing of refugee children from political turmoil in Syria and how many the United States should accept. Just a year ago, news media was engaged in reporting the "crisis" of thousands of unaccompanied minors immigrating to the United States from Central America. When juxtaposing the way the media has framed these two discussions, many interesting differences arise. Unlike the labeling of children as "refugees," Latina/o children represent a "crisis" because they are "flooding" the U.S/México border. One news source even goes as far as to criminalize Central American children and their migration as "a national security threat" (Boerma, 2014). An analysis of US public discourse on immigration reveals rampant dehumanization of Latina/o peoples who are often framed as criminals or non-human (Santa Ana, 1999).

While the history of anti-immigrant sentiments in the US is as long as the history of immigration itself, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) argue that the anti-

immigrant xenophobia attitudes of today differ in that citizens openly vent racial and ethnic hostilities. Unlike more subtle manifestations of racism, anti-immigrant sentiments today are more freely indulged in public opinion, policy debates, and other social forums creating and perpetuate stereotypes that children internalize and articulate. Ignoring the powerful pull and push factors that promote cross-border migration (Varsanyi and Nevins, 2007), anti-immigrant rhetoric along with systemic educational barriers construct a complicated experience for children of Latina/o immigrants in schools and society. In a critical reflection with the racist and xenophobic dominant discourses that surround Latina/o people in the United States (especially those with recent immigrant experiences), emerges the question: Where are the children's stories within these discourses?

As Sonja Grover (2004) states, there is a need to interrogate the lack of children's own stories of their lived experiences of who they are and what it means to live the lives they do. There is a need for more "authentic research which gives power and voice to child research participants and which provides insights into their subjective world" (p. 81). This is especially urgent in a society that perpetuates xenophobic rhetoric that criminalizes Latina/o immigrant communities. Such rhetoric is "symbolic violence," that according to Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001), "has corrosive effects in the children's developing sense of self" (p. 8). If politicians, public officials, and researchers are to do work that supports children and their lives, it is critical to begin to listen to the children.

This article sheds light upon the lived experiences of a group of children who are often underrepresented: Mexican American children of immigrants. It seeks to challenge the neoliberal model of education that confines learning to institutionalized spaces through an examination of children's experiences outside of the classroom and which reflect community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) rather than imposed government values of competition and individual entrepreneurial freedoms (Giroux, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Kitchener, 2016). In short, the counter narratives offered in this study invite researchers and educators to re-imagine social democratic approaches to education which validate children's reading of word and the world (Freire, 1970; 1997). These stories open the door to alternative landscapes of learning and living (Esteva and Prakash, 2008).

The guiding theoretical framework recognizes the influence of my own lived experiences in this work with that of the children and their stories. Rooted in the decolonial imaginary that Chicana Feminist scholar Emma Pérez (1999) theorized as a tool for deconstruction of Western epistemologies, this framework weaves the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Paulo Freire with Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) to inspire

intellectual and corporeal decolonial understandings. More specifically, Gloria Anzaldúa's borderland theory, Paulo Freire's theories of critical consciousness, and LatCrit's lens of intersectionality helps illuminate a framework that disrupts the master narratives (Delgado and Stefancic, 2002) of structural inequities that Latina/o Critical Theory expose, while inviting a "more whole perspective" of Mexican children, "one that includes, rather than excludes" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 2). Lastly, this framework imagines a "borderless *concientización*" (Facio & Segura, 2011, p.177) where borders become bridges of understanding and community.

In a society affected by a lack of intimacy between communities (hooks, 2009), children, particularly brown children, are relegated to the margins. Children are borderland subjects who "dwell in a state of *conocimiento*," the knowledge that is a matter of survival, a way of knowing that is intimately connected with intuition, culture, history, and the natural world (Rebolledo, 2006, p. 281). Gloria Anzaldúa wrote children's books (*Prietita* and *El Otro Lado*) because she believed that connecting with children was an important aspect of activism; children have a pivotal role in cultural and social transformation (Rebolledo, 2006, p. 279). This article echoes the view of children as important agents in the work of social justice. It illustrates that to learn from children's stories is to engage in the path of transformation and healing of Latina/o immigrant communities.

This theoretical framework is strongly rooted in tenets of Chicana epistemologies that consider lived experiences, or *testimonios* a source of transformational knowledge (Bernal, Burciega, and Carmona, 2012; Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, and, Villenas, 2006; Fernández, 2002). Similarly, Latina/o Critical Theory provides tools to critically interrogate hegemonic ideologies and master narratives of Mexican American children and their communities—particularly those that frame these communities solely as laboring bodies in a corporate world that places market freedoms over community values. Together, these theoretical lenses help provide an in depth understanding of the experiences of children and the ways they understand and counter dominant narratives. This study is driven by the view of children of color as "creators and holders of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal, 2002) – a counter narrative that disrupts deficit theories in education and society.

Contextualizing the Study

Washington State has seen drastic demographic changes in urban, suburban and rural regions over the past few decades. In Western Washington, school districts are experiencing demographic increases exceeding statewide growth rates. In rural communities of Eastern Washington, Latina/os are already the majority. In Rio

County, located in central Washington, Hispanics or Latina/os constitute twenty-seven percent of the population compared to twelve percent in the state of Washington (U.S. Census Bureau).

In Rio County WA, agriculture is the dominant economic force, especially fruit that includes apples, cherries, pears, and peaches. During the summer season, cherry orchards are a common place of employment for (im)migrant populations (Meseck, 2013). Many Mexican Americans in central Washington State depend on agriculture and fruit orchards for survival. In many cases, working in these orchards becomes a family experience because of the short duration of the season, the lack of affordable daycare for many families, orchards are smaller (and safer), or families are housed in the orchards' traditional migrant campsites. Many parents, however, bring children with them to the orchards to teach them lessons about *educación*, family, and culture. While some children spend their summers in camps or other recreational activities, many children of immigrants in Washington state spend them picking cherries and learning with(in) orchards. From sunrise to late morning, they pick at times and at times play games with cousins and other children. They spend their time with family, an important opportunity considering that, as nine-year-old participant Clarisa believes, "there is not enough time spent with family" (Field notes, July 2015). The children's experiences consist of multiple layers of narratives that demonstrate that these children's lives are complicated, and at the same time, full of possibilities for teaching and learning. This article draws from the experiences of a group of Mexican American children of immigrants who spend part of their summer accompanying their parents in cherry orchards. It demonstrates that learning occurs in these labor spaces that are sites of capitalist exploitation, but also sites of resistance and human dignity.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative exploratory case study that draws methods from Critical Ethnography and Narrative Inquiry to provide in depth and detailed understandings of the experiences of Mexican American children of immigrants in cherry orchards over a period of a month and a few days.

Participants

My individual unit of analysis (Stake, 2008) is a small group of 12 children who identify as Mexican American and are children of immigrants. The ages of my participants range from seven to fourteen. While I was initially planning on staying within the age range of five and ten, once I was out in the field, my plan shifted because my one fourteen-year-old participant asked to be interviewed and soon

became part of the study. The variety in ages, however, provided a broader understanding of the ways children articulate and understand particular experiences from different vantages of childhood.

The “set boundaries” (Flyvbjerg, 2011) are four cherry orchards within Rio County (pseudonym) in Washington State. Orchards and participants were identified through a snowball sampling method that Glesne (2011) states: “Obtains knowledge of potential cases from people who know people who meet research interests” (p. 45). I used my understandings as an “insider” (Glesne, 2011; Groves, 2003; Villenas, 1996) to build trust and connect with each other to identify participating children and adults. Relying on these understandings allowed me to build relationships with participants (parents and children), orchard owners and supervisors (who were all Mexican themselves). I relied on these understandings, along with my previously established relationships with key employees to gain access to the orchards.

Data Collection Methods

My data collection methods were chosen to facilitate children’s sharing their experience of being in orchards with their families. Data was gathered using critical ethnographic (Thomas, 1993) and narrative inquiry-based methods (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) participant observations, interviews, and one focus group. Qualitative researchers commonly use multiple methods, or triangulation, as a useful strategy that helps reveal “new dimensions of social reality” and expose the complexity of participants’ lives (Glesne, 2011, p. 47). One focus group was conducted in order to understand the complex ways students’ position themselves in relation to each other. Field notes consist of a researcher reflection journal and an observation journal that together make up over sixty pages of notes. These field notes were a way to “take active recording” to demonstrate my own construction of events in the orchards (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990).

Interviews were conducted in order to “reach areas of reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible such as people’s subjective experiences and attitudes” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 529). The interviews were informal with open-ended questions such as “tell me about your family” and “What is it like being in the orchard?” To establish trust with participants and practice reciprocity, participant observations (Glesne, 2011) were conducted but in a unique manner. I “participated” by helping the children and families pick cherries. I picked next to children for anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour at a time before I moved on to work next to another group of children. At times, I would spend the whole work shift with one family, depending on whether they were the only children in the orchard that day. Participant observations

were conducted because it was an appropriate and ethical method in a site of work where wages depend on the amount of cherries picked. I did not want to inconvenience or take time away from the family by asking questions as they worked. This method of participant observation helped provide a more comprehensive understanding of the whole experience of picking cherries. Moreover, I chose to help families pick cherries because I understand the difficulty of this work and picking cherries was a responsible way of thanking the families for their participation in this study.

To build trust with children, I spoke with clarity and respect. As a co-creator of knowledge, I shared stories of family, my own childhood, education, and experience picking cherries. I intentionally shared stories that made them laugh. Doing this helped to establish rapport with my children participants. According to Fraser et al. (2004), when doing research with children, there are two important aspects of the research relationship that must be considered and constantly reflected upon—power and ethics. Thus, the power relation between the child and adult is one that I was constantly reflecting on in order to not silence the voices of the children participating in this study. As Christensen and James (2000) state, research is always about relationships and, relationships with children ought to be defined by respect and reciprocity. Thus, as a researcher, it was important to be conscious that “the time [children] devote to our research agendas is a gift, and one which [I] should be prepared to reciprocate” (Roberts, 2000).

The guiding methodology is strongly informed by what Grover (2004) calls a “child-centered positionality” in order to open a safe space for children to tell their own stories. This frame is important because too much work speaks about children as “our future,” rather than our present (p. 89). Within the Latina/o community and the research in this field, there is a similar need. By utilizing non-Western theoretical tools, this critical case study seeks to fill the gap in the field of Latina/o education by providing the stories told by Mexican American children in order to 1) disrupt anti-immigrant stereotypes and hegemonic deficit theories; and 2) advance social justice for immigrant communities. This study will also fill the gap in social and educational research that continues to be dominated by adult perspectives and agendas. Children’s narratives are examined but rather than focusing on the school setting as a learning environment, the focus is on cherry orchards as a place for learning and children’s lived experiences there because as Gloria Anzaldúa believed, children have a pivotal role in achieving “cultural and social transformations” (Rebolledo, 2006, p. 279).

Children Learning with(in) Cherry Orchards

After obtaining permission from the orchard owners, I finally make my way to the orchard. I walk between the trees and down the lanes. I recognize many of the people I am able to see through the leaves of the cherry trees. The faint sound of music and voices fill the space along with the accompanying fading sound of a tractor that just passed by. I am now at the end of the lane, on the other side of the orchard. I turn to my right and am immediately drawn to the three children walking in my direction. They stop in their place, sit on the grass, and continue laughing and playing. The sight of children sitting in the middle of a grassy field captures my attention in a way I cannot quite explain. All I know is that it is an image I do not often see. I approach them and my learning from seven-year-old Noely, eight-year-old Celina, and nine-year-old Ivan begins. (Field note, July 8, 2014)

Orchards are a “borderland” of contradiction, like the border that Anzaldúa describes as a “*herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first bleeds” (p. 25). The orchard is a capitalist creation and a historical site of oppression and discursive violence against Mexican people, disguised in the opportunity of work and money. It is also an example of a “cultural space” (Zentella, 2002) that immigrant communities create to resist oppression and preserve human dignity. Correspondingly, the children in this study offered powerful understanding of orchard places where counter hegemonic learning occurs. This section honors the experiences children shared throughout my time with them. I begin with a discussion of the ways children understand and internalize the always already presence of capitalism and neoliberal logics of the orchard as a site of agricultural production. I also examine the children’s understandings of dominant discourses of Latina/o peoples in the US –particularly of the discourses of Mexican people as “good workers” and paradoxically as “lazy” (Nieto, 2004; Villenas, 2002). Followed by this discussion, I illuminate children’s counter narratives of care for the collective well-being, learning through play, and their value of work and school.

So I Can Get a Good Job: Children’s Internalization of Dominant Narratives

“My least favorite is the work. It’s hard and never stops” – Osvaldo, 7 years old. As in previous ethnographic studies with working class kids (McLeod, 1995; Weis, 2013; Willis, 1977), children in the orchards learn the rules and expectations for being good workers. Having a job and making money is a goal that children understand well. Even when orchards serve as motivation to do well in school, the fact is that orchard work is hard. It is physically draining, especially for children. Nevertheless, children believe it is good to learn about the processes now “to know what it’s going to be like when [they] are older” (Interview with Gabriel). The internalization of this “good worker” discourse is both classed as well as racialized.

In response to the question: “What do you learn in the orchard?” children shared their learning in terms of work and rules of the job. In only a few cases did children speak about having “careers;” the majority of the time, they referenced the importance of having “good jobs.” This distinction between “career” and job is situated in intersectional constructions of class and race and as Bettie (2014) adds, for some Mexican communities, class involves engaged performances inextricably linked to sexuality, gender, and ethnicity.

The understandings of class as a cyclical path that is difficult to get out of was first examined in Willis' (1981) portrayal of the ways classist rules infused in schools and society (and internalized by working class kids) drive working class kids to obtain working class jobs. For students of color, these cycles of classism are complicated by the reproduction and exacerbation of racial inequality/inequity in schools that (Bettie, 2014; Sacks, 2007) push children out of school or on to technical jobs (Valenzuela, 1999). Rather than examining the structural factors that influence children of color to internalize the beliefs that they cannot obtain careers, deficit theories blame these students and their culture.

Children in the orchard demonstrated an understanding of a relationship between their parents' classed and racialized positions and the educational opportunities (or lack of) that they were offered. For instance, Gabriel describes that his family did not have the money to study and thus they are stuck in the orchard. For Anahí, the reason only Mexican people are in the orchard is "because we didn't get the chance to study and have a good career." Oftentimes, the children's responses placed Mexican people at a binary with "American" people on the other end. For instance, to the same question, Celina's response is: “Well my dad says cause American people don't like to get dirty and that they are not good cherries pickers.” For nine-year-old Ivan, the reason is different. He believes only Mexican people are in the orchards because others are not aware that these places exist.

Infused throughout the children's responses on the racialization of the orchard space are examples of ways children internalize the discourse of Mexican people as "good workers"- a narrative that defines Mexican people by their labor and that views this community as “model minorities with respect to work and civil life but not with respect to education” (Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard, 2009, p. 388). Almost in all cases, when children were asked “tell me about your families,” their responses were often in terms of the work parents did. For example, when I asked seven-year-old Noely to tell me about her family, she began with: "My dad likes to work and my mom she works night-shift." The recurrent reference to work suggests that “work” has a significant role in the children's understandings of family and community. In the

few interviews conducted with parents, I learned that as López (2006) argues, many immigrant parents use work as a medium for instilling in their children the value of education. Many parents are also motivated to bring their children to the orchards hoping that doing so teaches them the value of *el trabajo del campo* (the work of the land), as one parent participant describes it.

While the cultural and familial understandings of “hard work” are important aspects of the children’s learning in orchards, their responses reflected the role race and racism has in their world. This was reflected in the way children’s responses were often in comparison to white people, or “Americans,” as they explained. For example, after Estrella explains that Mexicans “are into picking cherries,” she states that unlike other “lazy” people, Mexicans “are not that much lazy.” Itzel believes that “some [people] work more than others,” suggesting a belief that Mexican people are harder working than others. Gabriel believed that Mexican people were the majority in the orchards because they “liked picking cherries.” Again, these beliefs reflect an internalization of the belief that Mexican people are “good workers.” While, as I argue above, this can be a positive in that children and families consider hard work as an important survival tool, it is also connected to problematic historical stereotypes that Mexican people are *only* good workers and do not value education (Valencia, 2002). This is illuminated in participant Celina’s belief that “Americans” were not in the orchard because unlike Mexicans, they “only work in offices or [are] teachers.” Celina’s account not only reflects the complexity of the role “work” has in their lives, but also illuminates what Critical Race Theory names an “internalization of the majoritarian narrative” (Luna & Revilla, 2013). Although Celina and her siblings were born and raised in the United States, she did not consider any of them to form part of the “American” identity. Such a label was exclusively for white people. Moreover, Celina and other children’s stories suggest a belief that Mexican people *belong* in agricultural sites such as the orchards because “Americans” “only work in offices.” This example connects to “normalized geographies of exclusion that assume farmworkers belong in fields and labor camps, but not in communities” (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008, p. 333).

With this said, children’s responses reveal the complexity of race and racism in their lives as children of immigrants. For example, simultaneous to the belief that Mexican people are good workers is the perception that White people are “lazy” and cannot do orchard work. This idea is encapsulated in the narrative Clarisa shares about the white man that lived in the campground but left within a few days because the work was too hard for him. She says:

We had a neighbor here. He smoked all day. Smoked all day and hardly worked. He would only be here as if it were a camp like to just spend the day. And then he left really quick. Because there were many Mexican people. The man, he didn't like to work. . . . you could tell. He did not talk with anyone and he was all alone here.

Celina also explores this complicated contradiction when she agrees with her dad in that white people are "too lazy" and "don't like to get dirty." Children's statements and stories mirror their ideas of "lazy" and "hard working," a paradox that dwells in many stereotypes of Mexican people (Nieto, 2004; Villenas, 2002; Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard, 2009). The presence of these ideas in children's stories reflects the importance of active pedagogical disruption.

Working class children internalize the power and position they hold in the social order they are part of (Willis, 1977). Like Willis' lads, the agency of children in the orchards is influenced by the economic structures in a capitalist system. For example, children understand the role and rules of *el señor* (the man) in the orchard. In one case, Itzel describes her fear of not following the rules because *el señor* would scorn her. Children understand that cutting leaves and removing stems from cherries interrupt the efficiency of the work and are, therefore, afraid to be scorned. While I did not witness or hear about children being scorned by "the boss" (as children used), that children expressed this fear reflects internalization of the power structure and profit motive. Nevertheless, contradictory to the consumerist ideal, children work and save money to use on "things that are necessary," as Julian explains.

While children have a clear understanding of the capitalist demands and norms that make the orchard into a site of hard manual labor, they also communicate that this experience has lessons about the struggle their parents endure. Thirteen-year-old Juan says: "What I learn is that this work is hard, and that it's what my dad does to buy me things. If I want something, I have to work for it." As research (López, 2001) demonstrates, Mexican immigrant parents place value on hard work as a tool to motivate children to do well in school; nevertheless, there are important discursive messages embedded in the children's beliefs that the orchard "teaches [them] how to work, so when [they are] older, [they] can get a good job." These are not only based on class, but also, in an intersecting fashion, linked to a narrative that portrays Mexican communities as belonging in agricultural sites such as orchards.

Immigrant Children Disrupt Dominant Narratives

For immigrant children, being in the orchards is an opportunity that fosters independence, awareness of surroundings, and care for self. While parents and adults watch over and ensure the safety of the children, children are more often interacting

and hanging out with other children, independent of their parents. Children are near their parents particularly because siblings and/or cousins are sleeping. Later in the work shift, children come together and leave their parents. For instance, at Johnson Orchards, Celina, Ivan, and Noely, and Zaida often hung out and played with each other throughout the orchard. Other children, particularly younger children like seven-year-old Itzel and eight-year-old Osvaldo, often played, and talked on their own. Even when children are picking cherries along with their parents, other children are often by their side talking or picking cherries as well. There is an important value to the relationships children have with other children without the restriction of adults. Moreover, there is a sense of community when the children are with their parents along with their friends. This manifestation of community counters the assumption that normal development and growth necessitates complete independence from parents (Lesko, 2012). According to research found in psychology, children have a desire for autonomy (Fulgini, 1998; Hardway and Fulgini, 2006) –an autonomy that connects to Western understandings of individualism and which children in this study interrupt with their value for the collective.

Children demonstrate a sense of independence through their understandings of the work they do in the orchard. For instance, Gabriel, Yanira, and Zaida were proud of the growth and learning they had experienced from the first summers they spent in the orchard. They were proud of being able to pick more quickly without removing the stems from the cherries as they have been instructed. This pride reflects the ways children are taught to be “good workers” through norms and expectations. In this case, the stems are not acceptable primarily because of a consumer preference that asks for aesthetically pleasing cherries. Cherries also get cut when stems are removed. While this pride of being a good worker may be problematic in some ways, there is an embedded knowledge in the children’s feelings of pride not because of their ability to produce more, but because of the lessons they have learned about themselves, work, family, and school.

Along with the critical connection to racist discourses of Mexican people and work, infused in the discussion of work pride and ethic is the understanding that children see themselves as independent individuals learning and growing from their accomplishments, particularly through challenges and mistakes. Oftentimes, children articulate learning to “not give up,” a notion that illuminates an internalized belief in the meritocratic “pull yourselves from your bootstraps” myth (Crenshaw, 1995). Their conceptualization of this notion, however, reflects a deep understanding of self-determination that is an important strand of autonomy.

While research, particularly as found in psychology, defines autonomy synonymously with individualism and as opposite of collectivism (Fuligni, 1998; Hardway and Fuligni, 2006), I agree with Helwig (2006) in that autonomy is not about being separated from others—especially the autonomy that relates to agency. Children, like adults, have a desire for and right to autonomy. As Davies (2014) argues, “each of us, adults and children, [are] constantly in search of encounters that makes us more powerful, more able to act effectively in the world, more capable of joy” (p. 8). There are pedagogical possibilities in working with children and imagining children as autonomous beings “with power and agency” constantly “*intra-active*” in the “daily doing of community” (p. 6). However, most often children are not allowed their own narratives of identity; instead they are constructed and narrated by the adults in their lives (Valentine, 1996). Neoliberal projects confine children to “authorized ways of being and knowing” (Davies, 2014). Thus, thinking about the autonomy of children is an important strand for critical and humanizing pedagogy (Huerta, 2011) – particularly a form of autonomy is intimately woven with family and community. Gabriel explains that through the challenges of learning how to pick, he came to the realization that it is important to: “Do it right ‘cause sometimes it’s going to be hard but sometimes you think you’re not going to pass it but you are eventually.” His experiences at the orchard taught him the lesson of not giving up, a lesson he believed was highly useful in situations outside of the orchard—“like in sports.” Gabriel played basketball and proudly shared that he improved as a player because of his self-determination to not give up. This notion of not giving up and “*esforzarseduro*”ⁱ, as seven-year-old Itzel describes her experiences in the orchard, embodies a complex relationship to the orchard and the lessons learned from the challenges of the work. It illustrates the similar lesson I was given growing up of “*echarle ganas*” (put your all in everything and anything you do).

While in some cases, Mexican American parents are forced to bring their children to the orchards because of unaffordable day care, according to López (2001), many other Mexican parents take their children to the fields to teach them the difficulty of the work and in turn encourage them to succeed in school. Parents in the orchard expressed this same hope and desire. What is interesting, however, is that children themselves express having an appreciation and understanding of the work their parents did in the orchard. Participant Alicia began to understand and appreciate the hard work her parents do at a very early age.

The orchard teaches children the importance of being “careful” and aware of their surroundings—particularly with respect to the snakes and animals that they knew were in the orchard. For Julian, it is important to learn to be “quick with your actions,” in

other words, to make well-informed decisions and “watch out for yourself,” a lesson he felt was easily applicable for places and situations outside of the orchard.

Individual identity, growth, and freedom to relate/engage with other children and their role in the work, are all important strands in the consideration of children as autonomous beings. Nevertheless, while children have opportunities to engage freely in the orchard, they (and all the workers in these sites) are also restricted, challenged, and oppressed by the neoliberal capitalist projects dictating the work conditions in the orchard. The reality of the conditions continues to be that of low wages and less than ideal working conditions. While important learning happens in these places, the orchards are still sites of capitalist production where the focus is efficiency. From the physical layout to the rules and regulations governing its use, every aspect of the orchard fulfills a particular purpose in the market economy. Holloway (2010) describes these norms as an abstraction that is the base of the existence of the state:

The real determinant of society is hidden behind the state and the economy: it is the way in which our everyday activity is organized, the subordination of our doing to the dictates of abstract labour, that is, of value, money, profit (p. 133)

Children speak to this in their stories. All children, for example, describe the physically demanding aspects of picking cherries exasperated by the intense heat. When I asked Osvaldo what his least favorite part of the orchard was, he explained that it was the hills and how far the one portable toilet was from the work site. Julian described the aching feeling in his arms whenever he picked for too long without giving himself a break. He followed this story by sharing how he had been learning ways to take care of himself and his health—by taking breaks and stretching his arms. In this same way, coupled with the understanding that this work is extremely difficult, they also expressed a concern for the collective well-being more so than a concern for their individual well-being.

Children’s Concern for the Collective Well-being

Everyone can get in the swimming pool [including] the man so he can get wet because it’s going to be hot in the mornings (Itzel, 7 years old)

Western knowledge systems often emphasize individualistic values over those based on community, family, and solidarity. One of the most fascinating themes uncovered from the data with children was the concern for a collective good that continuously reemerged from the narratives children shared with me. Children saw their individual identities and well-being as intimately tied to community. For instance, when asked what she would change in the orchard if she had the opportunity to, seven-year-old

Itzel would bring a swimming pool that everyone, including “*el señor*” [the man] could enjoy. “The man” Itzel speaks of refers to is the boss who was often described as a strict man with strict rules.

Similarly, when asked this same question, nine-year-old Clarisa believed that a water park in the orchard would be a “good idea and also very fun for people.” She believed that people “stress very much” during work and deserve to relax. Zaida would remove the cliff from the orchard to ensure the safety of the community in the orchard. Ivan would bring new buckets and ladders so “people could work better.” Celina would change the unfair “rule” that prohibits yelling because she believes it is the only way people have to communicate with each other.

Julian’s idea of a change for the orchard was a little different than the rest of the participants. If he had the power to, Julian would transform the orchard into “a way to make natural gas because gas gets too expensive these days and they have different chemicals in it. [He would] just probably give it to them like at the food bank every week. Just get it.” Julian demonstrated an understanding of the collective good in the orchard and an awareness of the need for its distribution to those in need through food banks.

These same community-based imaginings and desires that not only challenge the individualism that is often portrayed in narratives of children and adolescents (Lesko, 2012), but also reflects an autonomy to imagine and feel included in a community as whole beings with vital contributions to it. The children read the world as a “world where many worlds [ought to] fit,” (Marcos, 1996).

An important aspect of the conversation on community is family. According to the discussions with children and adult participants, community and family are intimately interrelated—family is community and community is family. Alicia describes one of her favorite parts of being in the orchard as the time she is able to spend with her family (both immediate and extended). This joy of being with family is illuminated often throughout participant narratives. For instance, Clarisa loved that she had time to spend with her parents, particularly her father whom she rarely saw because he worked a lot. Clarisa’s little sister, Itzel, loved her experience staying in the campground for migrant families because this gave her family the opportunity to enjoy time together. She enjoyed sharing time with the other families living in this campground, as well. Other children appreciated that the orchard gave their parents the opportunity to meet and talk with other family members and friends. For immigrant children, relationship and care are an important strand of family/community. Older siblings demonstrated care for younger siblings; children

demonstrated care for other children or parents. Celina, for instance, describes ways she and her younger sister take care of their father by reminding him to stop working and eat.

Another strand to community that emerges from the stories of children is the environment and the animals within it. While most children spoke about the animals through tales of snakes and bugs scaring children and adults, the constant mention of animals demonstrates a more holistic view of the orchard and their narratives within it. Along with the tales of fright, children appreciated the opportunity to see different animals in the orchard, animals that they often saw in books at school. For instance, about being in the orchards, Julian states “in one way, it helps you from exploring the world. Because I seen like butterflies flying by here and they were different types. And I found a ladybug in one of my cherry buckets.” He goes on to explain that it is important to care about the gas and the environment “because it can harm animals.”

While the orchard is a capitalist creation that works to reduce Mexican communities to laboring bodies, children demonstrate counter hegemonic understandings of being in and with the world. Their stories are a reminder that children learn by being in the world versus reading of the world in books (Rasmussen and Akulukjuk, 2009). While the lesson was about the meaning of “hard work,” children in orchards demonstrate a “living as learning” (Esteva & Prakash, 2005, p. 55) a counter-hegemonic practice with potential to help educators imagine a more inclusive and democratic education that does not “destroy the economy of home and community” that these children deem extremely important. The value children place on the wellbeing of the collective is a *consejo* (culturally rooted advice) for transformational praxis that resists individualist Western values. This same learning was visible in children’s play.

Children’s View of the Orchard as “Space to Play”

Children understand the function of the orchard as a work site where money is made. Nevertheless, there is an important part of their understanding of and relationship with the orchard that moves beyond this economic narrative. An important part of children’s experiences in the orchard is the play they engage in with other children. According to Stetsenko and Ho (2015), there is much that educators, scholars, and adults have to learn from the play children engage in for it is through this play that “children can discover how to act as agentive actors in the social world shared with others” (p. 224). Play also allows children to learn important tools to be unique, free, and self-determining voices in the world.

Play was an important part of conversations with children and observations of their acting in the orchard. For example, when I asked eight-year-old Celina what her favorite part of the orchard was, she states: “I like [the orchard] because there is a lot of space to play.” As discussed, the relationship between children and the freedom to engage freely throughout the orchard is a vital aspect of children’s autonomy. The notion of playing freely challenges cultural gendered norms in many Mexican families (as was in my personal experience) that girls need to be more strictly supervised than boys. It also counters dominant ideology that often frames children as incapable and always in need of adult supervision. For instance, the concern for “children’s vulnerability and stranger danger in public space” has led parents to fear leaving children alone—in fact, public spaces, as Valentine (1996) argues, have been deemed as a “natural adult-space” (p. 205). The orchard demonstrates a different conception of childhood—one which children are not strictly supervised and are given the freedom to play with each other.

Nevertheless, this conception was practiced in a very complicated way, particularly in terms of gender norms. For example, less than ideal forms of masculinity were often denigrated through hypersexual and homophobic events and remarks. Ivan (age nine) was often made fun of by several men in the orchard for not working hard enough and choosing to hang out with girls (his cousins Celina and Noely). Moreover, boys were scorned more often than girls when they were not working or if they were not working “hard enough”—referring to the pace and amount of cherries picked per day. The expectation that boys need to be held at higher standards in terms of the physical labor was a pattern across the four orchards. Interestingly, Celina made reference to these gender dynamics in an interview. She mentioned the ways her cousin Ivan was made fun of but followed with “but it doesn’t matter to us.”

For most participants, an aspect of the orchard they most enjoyed, in the words of participant Celina, is the “space to play” in the orchard. Participants play with cousins, who like them, also accompany at least one parent in the orchard. In Clarisa and Itzel’s case, the other children they engaged with, particularly after work hours, were other migrant children living in the workers’ campsite. The few children I spoke to in this campsite, like other non-migrant children, expressed the same enthusiasm for the games and playing they could do in the orchard. In fact, one child in the campsite shared not wanting to return to the city she lived in because in the orchard there was “always someone to play with.”

While children enjoyed having the opportunity to make money and save for particular purposes, they did not like being told to pick by their parents. As in the opening narrative, the freedom to choose when to pick and when to play shaped the

relationship children had with the orchard and adults. When given the autonomy to decide, children felt validated, and more often than not, chose to pick more cherries and make more money in the doing. While some parents did remind their children they needed to work, most did not. Clarisa explains that it was her decision to go to the orchard, not her parents that took her there. Children's autonomy relates to their capacity to take initiative (Paradise, 1991).

In a study examining the autonomy of children in the city, Tonucci (2006) argues for the vital importance of play and engagement between children “without the direct control of adults,” in efforts to restore cities. While the context of this study (the city) is different than the experience of children in the orchards, the underlying argument warrants critical examination within a conversation of autonomy and children. In this case study, children constantly described the joy of play and exploration, particularly with other children. The space and opportunity to play is coupled with the possibilities of imagining. For example, I witnessed one group of children constantly playing a game they called “witches and sticks,” in which they were the witches magically transforming aspects of the orchard into other things with their wands (sticks). In that space of imagination, we can see the care for the collective that I discuss above. Thus, the knowledge children create and hold is illuminated when children are allowed to be autonomous and imaginative beings.

A deficit outlook of immigrant children in the orchards might view the children as victims of the system—particularly girls who are to be saved from Mexican “machismo.” A common stereotype about Mexican communities states that parents are strict with their children to the point that children are not allowed to speak. In the orchards, however, many parents counter this belief. The image of children playing in the orchard is a critical counter-narrative that disrupts narratives that Mexican children are limited by parents’ “authoritarian” values (Station, 1972). Parents were alert of where the children were, but were not strictly supervising them. Julian, Clarisa, and Noely walked around the orchard on their own, as their parents picked in trees far from them.

Valuing Work and School by the Children's Own-making

According to scholars Molls and Ruíz (2009) and Gutierrez (1999), (im)migrant families reside in a “third space” as transnational migrants in a globalized world. In this space, (im)migrant families use a “dual frame of reference” (Suárez-Orozco, 1995) to make sense of their lives in the United States. In the stories shared by children participants, there is a connection to the experiences of that “third space”

researchers have previously examined—particularly with respect to the role school and formal education have on immigrant children’s lives.

While the goal of this research study was not intentionally to make connections to school, school was a topic that was often brought up amongst children participants, parents, and even members of the orchard community. This did not come as a surprise considering that previous research (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Luna & Revilla, 2013; Valdez, 1996; Valencia, 2002; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Yosso, 2006), has examined the value many immigrant families place on schooling. For instance, while dominant discourses often portray Mexican parents as having no or little interest in school, research demonstrates that this is not the case (Valencia, 2002); in fact, parents are much more involved in the education of children. López (2001) describes that "rather than viewing involvement as the enactment of specific scripted school activities, immigrant families, understand involvement as a means of instilling in their children the value of education through the medium of hard work" (p. 416). The adults I spoke to in the orchards have these similar counterhegemonic understandings of parental involvement in school. Thus, I suggest that cherry orchards are a “third space” where immigrant families provide their children with teachings based on counter-hegemonic cultural models of education, or, *educación* (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Elenes, Gonzalez & Bernal, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Valdez, 1996; Villenas, 2001, 2002; Villenas and Deyhle, 1999).

Educación is distinguishable from the education in the U.S school system because it means more than the education received in schools. Reese *et al* (2001) describe *educación* as a cultural model with roots in agrarian environments and an example of the dynamic and resilient presence of cultural forms in Latina/o communities (Villenas, 2002) that teaches children “respect, moral values, and loyalty to family” (p. 17).

While the model of *educación* that Latina/o (im)migrant parents hope to pass down to children includes a value for formal education, it also includes a respect for *el trabajo del campo* [the work of the land] as two parent participants name it. Parents, particularly those that take their children to the fields (López, 2001), or in this case the orchard, hope children learn the difficulty of the work and decide to pursue better opportunities through school—Mexican families often use work to motivate their children to do well in school and to teach the value of work in the fields as an important tool for surviving in society.

Children understand the importance of getting a good education and at the same time they value the work in the orchards as forms of the *educación* their parents hope to

share with them. For some children, the “hard work” in the orchard served to push them to “study hard” in school and in doing so obtain a job that is not as physically demanding. Other children express a desire to have more opportunities to help their families out. Work serves as a frame of reference for children and parents from which they both draw when speaking about “success,” and survival in society and school. Yanira shares:

I learn how money is earned like how hard you have to work like its either that or go to school learn new things. And if you don't want to go to school, there is always the orchard. It is helpful because some kids don't really like the orchards, they are more like, they just like staying home and that will teach them to don't give up on school, keep on learning and like study hard. And also it can teach you like things about nature.

In the sharing of stories, children themselves highlight similar understandings of a relationship between work in the orchards and work in school. Unlike the arguments made in research, however, the work in the orchard is more than a tool to motivate school success. While children seem to understand the hopes their parents and community members have for them—and which parents refer to in interviews—they also view orchard work as an option for those that do not do well in school.

Other ways school is brought up in the stories shared by children reflects a place-based learning model that has been often theorized (Gruenewald & Smith, 2014) and which Freire argues is a pivotal strategy for learning. For instance, some children mentioned seeing creatures in the orchards that they learned about in school. Gabriel enthusiastically shared that in the placing of picking ladders, he was able to learn about angles. He states:

Like when I go to school, show me 90-degree angles, 180, obtuse, right, and acute which help me with the ladder cause you have it straight all your weight will push it. If you lean on one side, you'll fall. . . . You have to keep it an angle, at an obtuse angle.

Unlike dominant narratives that portray children working in orchards as victims of parental negligence and lack of care for school, children demonstrate a critical engagement with the concepts learned in school by being in orchards. Children emphasize learning and valuing of school and education that is neglected in deficit theories.

While embedded within the children's remarks and stories are discursive connections to capitalism, neoliberalism, and the racist stereotypes, children's counter these narratives by a reconceptualization of what it means to be a “good worker.” Through the *consejos* learned from parents and community and the exploration of their own

identities as children, immigrant children do not view orchards as solely defined by the act of picking cherries. But even picking cherries is not (or should not be) the mechanized work that capitalist norms and *el patron* demands. Children taught me a more humanized form of being a good worker.

Discussion

The violence of an anti-immigrant atmosphere dehumanizes and devalues the work and contribution of workers in places like the orchards in Rio County. The xenophobic anxiety of a nation that sees children immigrating to the U.S as a “threat to national security,” calls for urgent critique and action. Dominant discourses have historically served to dehumanize and justify anti-immigrant policies. They have also served to perpetuate the exclusion of Mexican people from communities. Dominant society ignores the lived realities of immigrant workers who contribute greatly to the economy of our nation—particularly of the children who are shifting the discourses with their understandings of the world. Children in the orchard have stories to tell and we have a responsibility to listen. The orchard is a space that is designed to reduce them to their function within the profit-making industry, but they (re)create this space to center their cultural knowledges, agency, and dignity.

The novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) warns against the danger of a single story. When she came to the United States to study literature, she became the object of the single story of Africa, and was often told her work was not “authentically” African. During a trip to México, she learned that she too had been complicit in believing the single story of Mexicans as people who were “fleecing the healthcare system [and] sneaking across the border.” Adichie “had been so emerged in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had been one thing in [her] mind: the abject immigrant.” She had “bought into the single story of Mexicans,” or the master narratives that emanate from intersections of race, class, and gender power structures. Similarly, there is a single story of children often told through adult-centric research that rarely includes children’s voices in part because it is believed that they are not in a position to give “accurate information” (Messiou, 2006, p. 306) or because children and adolescents are viewed as developing, in transition (Lesko, 2012) and “not fully actualized” (Grover, 2004, p. 91).

After immersing myself in children’s stories, there is but one certainty: their lives are complex. Orchards are complex places where multiple contradictory layers of identity and culture and power intersect. Children spend their summers in these places, learning the rules of the orchards, and at the same time (re)creating new knowledge and ways of viewing the world. While many violent discourses are perpetuated in the

orchards, children resist through their insistence on and desire for an autonomy that pushes beyond that which Western scholars write about—an autonomy that is self with(in) community. Their "readings of the world" (Freire, 1970; 1997) involve the joy of engaging/learning with family, community, and other children. It also involves the contradictions and struggles rooted in oppressions and inequity that are lived and felt in the everyday and which are sources of transformative understandings of the work that is yet to be done (Anzaldúa, 1999; Murillo, 2010).

This study provides two major implications for educators. The first echoes Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Theory's critique of majoritarian narratives, particularly of Mexican communities. This case study revealed that while the orchard is a capitalist space that seeks to transform communities and children into laboring bodies, children, like the communities they form a part of, engage in resistant practices that disrupt deficit understandings of Mexican people. Children's experiences of working and playing in orchards is knowledge that when examined, can offer educators understandings of more inclusive and multicultural teaching practices. The second major implication based on my analysis continues this disruption of dominant narratives but more specifically, the disruption of deficit theories that continue influencing the ways students of color are perceived by educators (Valencia, 2002). These deficit mindsets are challenged by children's active participation in the communities of the orchard, and critical engagement with work, others, and themselves as "holders and creators of knowledge" (Bernal, 2002). This is particularly important to consider "in the ear of forced migration, strongly associated with the pressures of late capitalism" (Giorgos, 2012, p. 22). Children's stories invite us to "act as public, critical and transformative intellectuals seeking to politicize education" (Ibid) that draw from counter-hegemonic understandings that can be used as tools to disrupt oppressive neoliberal schooling "in order to pursue coexistence and active alliances through cultural and other differences."

The stories of children invited me to ask: What if teachers went in to orchards to understand the stories of their immigrant students? What if they went into these spaces to feel the ways families survive the violent society that reduces them to laboring bodies, that does not see the Mexican communities as integral part of the United States' culture and life?

Understanding "*comunidad*-based" (community based) knowledge can help educators deepen their awareness and appreciation of the richness of immigrant communities, their stories, and lived experiences (Urrieta, 2013, p. 320). Understanding the knowledge children hold and create especially when they are amongst other children shifts the adult-centric paradigms that often determine the research agenda. These

understandings are an important part of the relationship between children and schooling.

Immigrant workers are not “feral hogs” (Shahid, 2011) as a Grand Old Party legislator once said; we are not criminals stealing jobs. Mexican communities are not “rapists” or “bringing drugs” as some political candidates have argued (Hee Lee, 2015). Children immigrating as unaccompanied minors are not a “national security threat.” These communities seek better lives and live in this country with those strong values of community, love, and dignity that helped us survive the arduous crossing of the border. If critical educators are serious about building more democratic learning spaces, it is important to learn to “listen” to children and their lived experiences, not only as good pedagogy, but as “means [for] opening up the ongoing possibility of coming to see life, and one’s relation to it, in new and surprising ways” (Davies, 2014, p. xi). Perhaps in doing so, we can “make the world a better place, “in the wise words of eleven-year-old, Julian.

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¹*Esforzarse* comes from the term “esfuerzo” or effort but to say “esforzarse” is to strive and exert oneself to accomplish one’s goals and dreams.