

**Organizing Against the Neo-Liberal Privatization of Education In South Los Angeles:  
Reflections On the Transformative Potential of Grassroots Research**

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**Abstract**

*This auto/ethnographic study narrates how members of the Association of Raza Educators (ARE), a grassroots teacher-led organization, came together in undertaking action-research within what eventually became a stalled campaign to defend South Los Angeles Elementary from corporate takeover. Most of the work within the campaign involved action-research, including what I term organic popular education. In this paper I analyze the ways in which action-research functions as public pedagogy, further arguing for studies conducted from the vantage point of people immersed in grassroots organizations.*

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## Introduction

This study contributes to the emerging scholarship on public pedagogy as it takes place within collective, grassroots spaces. My attempt is to expand on the burgeoning public pedagogy research that has documented how public spaces mediate pedagogical processes that are themselves political strategies of community resistance and struggle (see Brady, 2006; O'Malley & Roseboro, 2010; Roseboro, O'Malley, and Hunt, 2006). Thus, I build upon the conception of public pedagogy as a rich, nuanced, yet contested "organizing framework" (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010) for understanding pedagogical processes outside formal educational sites, a project that de-centers cognitivist notions of "pedagogy" (Ellsworth, 2005) and problematizing "the public" and "public space" (Savage, 2010).

In their review of the literature on public pedagogy, Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick (2011) identify several tensions that are a resource for enriching, conceptually, what we mean by public pedagogy. First, a clearer articulation is needed with respect to the theories (and politics) that inform the public pedagogies we enact, document, reflect upon, and investigate. Second, existing public pedagogy scholarship can be strengthened by studies that demonstrate, theorize, and unpack how various non-institutional sites function as pedagogy. This latter concern is, as I see it, a question of pedagogical mediation. In the ensuing reflection, I invite readers to inquire how the set of experiences within the grassroots campaign against the privatization of a public elementary school in South Los Angeles are mediated and mediate a critical, political and social consciousness among its participants. Rather than define the set of practices within the campaign as instances of public pedagogy, I argue that an investigation of the pedagogical dimensions of practices such as community organizing and action-research as they take shape within grassroots organizations leads us to an investigation of the transformation of practices and participants.

Focusing on action-research as a practice and strategy within the campaign, I reflect upon the ways in which action-research is pedagogical, thus providing a closer analysis of how it functions as public pedagogy. Drawing upon a rich Latin American tradition, I make use of the concept of *educación popular* (popular education) in my analysis of action-research as organic popular education. Further, I argue that action-research within the campaign is a form of *educación política* (political education). By delineating how action-research functions as organic popular education, political education, and organizing research, I provide a working framework for thinking through how action-research as mediating praxis and political strategy functions pedagogically. This investigation, therefore, ask not just how alternative, public spaces such as grassroots organizations, are pedagogical, but how particular practices are transformed and transform its participants, thus becoming pedagogical by virtue of these transformation and public by virtue of the politics that guides such practices and the spaces that make them possible, here the spaces of progressive, grassroots organizations.

### Enacting a *Mestizaje* Methodology

By virtue of their position, the poet and the researcher (working strategically from peripheral locations) can challenge existing frameworks that are invested in maintaining the academic boundaries between discipline and knowledges. The *mestiza* scholar attends to her research with the tools of multiple sources and multiple ways of knowing.

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*Mestizaje* informs our choices as researchers and we garner our knowledges through an interrogation of the lived conditions of our communities. (Cruz, 2006, p. 73)

Enacting Cruz's (2006) *mestizaje* methodology this inquiry attempts to rupture traditional ways of "reporting" that position texts and subjects in rather restrictive ways. Rather than represent the research that transpired in the South Los Angeles Elementary Campaign in passive ways, as something fossilized in the past, excavated from ruminations, fieldnotes, and reflections, I suggest an alternative, radical strategy that asks readers to enter these spaces of struggle that come alive in their very recollection. While this study is reflexive, auto/ethnographic, and grounded in my own lived-experience as a Chicano community organizer-educator-scholar, a (contradictory) position I have assumed organizing within the Association of Raza Educators (ARE), the attempt here is to bring the reader into the experience of grassroots community organizing, guided by the question how personal and collective knowledge is generated via the transformation of practices and people undertaking such work.

### The South Los Angeles Elementary Campaign

#### Campaign Context

On August 25, 2009, outside the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) main headquarters, hundreds of students and parents wearing "My Child! My Choice!" t-shirts were celebrating the passing of a historic district motion, Public School Choice: A New Way at LAUSD. Introduced earlier in May 2009 by its main proponent, School Board vice-President Yollie Flores-Aguilar, the motion's primary resolution included key changes in district policy, thus inviting charter management organizations and outside entities to take over schools within the district. The LAUSD (2009) resolution read:

Resolved, that through the Superintendent, the Los Angeles Unified School District will invite operational and instructional plans from internal and external stakeholders...in an effort to create more schools of choice and educational options for the District's students and families.

Targeting "low performing" schools, which are identified based on school-wide standardized test scores, district Superintendent Ramon Cortines and the School Board approved de facto the charterization of at least a third of the schools within the district. Given that LAUSD is the second largest district in the nation, the magnitude and scope of this decision surpassed previous privatization efforts in other cities like Chicago. The motion was made possible through key legislation at the state and federal levels. In California, during the voucher movement, the State Legislature passed the California Charter Schools Act of 1992; at the federal level, provisions in the No Child Left Behind policy and the more recent Race to the Top Funds prompted a national stimulus to alter the face of public education across the country.

Anticipating the passing of the Public School Choice motion, on August 16, 2009, the Association of Raza Educators' Action Research Committee (ARC) initiated a grassroots campaign to defend one of the schools, South Los Angeles Elementary<sup>1</sup>, and to mobilize with the teachers and parents so as to ensure that the school would not be taken over by a charter management organization.

#### The Action Research Committee (ARC)

When introducing ARC to Association of Raza Educator (ARE) allies I often describe it as the committee that touches with the outside world, the community outside of ARE. The



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committee is structured with a chair presiding over meeting and keeping track of meeting minutes and convenes monthly to debrief and brain storm on ongoing campaign efforts and action-research projects. Initially, the committee was composed of six members, two of which were teachers at South Los Angeles Elementary, two graduate students, and the rest activists. Over the course of the campaign we gained a new member but lost one of the South Los Angeles Elementary teachers, who was also active at South Los Angeles Elementary as teacher union chapter chair.

To note, ARE was founded in 1994 and is a growing teacher-led grassroots organization with chapters in San Diego, Los Angeles, and Sacramento. Like other progressive teacher-led organizations such as Teachers 4 Social Justice in San Francisco and NYCoRE in New York, these organizations are developing as a response to the increased standardization of curriculum, privatization of public education, and attack on teachers.

### Campaign Time-Line

The South Los Angeles Elementary campaign could be characterized as having three general phases. The first phase includes the political and social contexts that lead up to the campaign. The struggle to reclaim South Los Angeles Elementary grows in response to local, state, and national policies that had been underway as early as January of 2009, with the appointment of Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education. Informed by other progressive teacher organizations through list serves, ARE members were quite aware and critical of the national landscape and movement to privatize public education. Locally, ARE teachers participated in a hunger strike in late July to stop increased budget cuts to LAUSD schools. Within the teachers union, a progressive sector known as Progressive Educators for Action (PEAC) seized the moment and organized the Multi Organization Conference on the privatization of education. The first phase culminates with the passing of Public School Choice: A New Way at LAUSD.

The second phase of the campaign begins when ARC, giving the campaign a clear direction, with set goals and strategies on how to accomplish those goals, drafts a campaign proposal. During this second phase, we conducted meta-analyses of existing studies and read extensively on the political histories of corporate charters. We also conducted interviews during this stage in an attempt to learn from other struggles both prior, such as Urban Elementary and Metropolitan Elementary, and present, such as at East Los Angeles High School.

The third phase begins with increased resistance to community forums at South Los Angeles Elementary. This was coupled with our difficulty in getting the “qualitative” research component, which would bring together the narratives of teachers and students in corporate charter schools, off the ground. After an unsuccessful ARE sponsored community forum at South Los Angeles Elementary that took place in early December, we began to lose focus. In my interview with Cristina, ARC chair, this was due in part to two reasons. First, the principal at her school was strategic in harnessing school resources and conducting his own meetings with parents as a response to ARE’s campaign. Second, because South Los Angeles Elementary wasn’t on the initial list of schools that would be open for conversion or corporate charter take over, teachers at South Los Angeles Elementary lost interest. As Cristina remarks: “So it kinda just fell apart, because there wasn’t that immediacy, they didn’t see it as a threat anymore.”

The campaign continued in to January 2010 but with only one research project on the agenda: the production of a documentary short on the privatization of education that would serve to educate parents on the issue. Based on our participation in community forums and talks with parents, we realized that the vast majority of people were either uninformed about corporate



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charter schools or were misinformed by mainstream media representations of the issue of privatization as a viable school reform solution.

### **Action-Research In Motion: Mobilizing Knowledge and Resources**

In this section, I walk the reader through the first couple of weeks of research in ARC. My aim is to provide an auto/ethnographic narrative of the planning and organizing within the committee. The narrative is not meant to be exhaustive and does not include the ways in which research is developed outside this particular committee space. For instance, much of this work gets done independently, and committee meetings serve to report, discuss, and strategize. The following narrative vignettes are taken from fieldnote observations. They include a discussion of the development of the charter schools report, a narrative of my interview with KPFK on the district's Public School Choice motion, and the presentation of our initial research to teachers at the September general body meeting.

### **Auto/ethnographic Interlude: Researching, Strategizing, Organizing**

*We met as a committee at a newfound coffee shop located in South Los Angeles. We started our meeting with a general "report back" where each committee member, tasked with a particular aspect of the report on corporate charter schools, would summarize their research and pose questions to the group. David begins with his report on the students charter schools serve and how they fair in comparison to public schools. His research centers on Green Dot charter schools within LAUSD. Two significant findings: these corporate charter schools serve a significantly smaller population of students with special needs and second language learners; in some instances, they are outperforming their public school counterparts.*

*I follow up and report on the history of charter schools and the Arne Duncan model in Chicago. I pass out a 1-page handout summary and review the major historical findings. "Maybe we need more info on the voucher movement that preceded charterization in California. Can you follow up with a second part that focuses on the history of charter schools within California?" Thus I was asked to refine the research so that it is applicable to our reality in Los Angeles.*

*Tracy brought several printouts of Green Dot charters and their performance scores. In particular, she developed a list of the interest groups and individuals that provide fiscal resources to Green Dot. "It's interesting when you look at schools like Locke, which have been taken over by charter management organizations. Some of the teachers there question whether all the surveillance has actually alleviated the violence."*

*"One of my students from a summer program actually wrote about Locke and how the violence is ever present, but in the most subtle of ways, especially how students are controlled through tests and teaching," I said.*

*Cristina then reviewed the LAUSD board document, "Public School Choice: A New Way at LAUSD," noting the major points in the motion and how they will affects teachers and public schools. "Basically, this document will allow charter management organizations to take over low performing schools. Our school is on the chopping block!"*

*Committee members questioned the district strategy in addressing the budget crisis. "Where is the money going?" "It's not clear to me how LAUSD is saving money by doing this."*



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*At this point, Sandra makes a suggestion to the group, that we look into the individuals, organizations, and non-profits supporting LAUSD charter schools, and see if we can find how much money they contribute to these schools.*

*The report back section of the meeting is concluded with Kimberly's report on the developments in PEAC, a progressive wing of the local teachers' union that has been meeting for about a month already to address the school board motion. She also shares two articles from the Los Angeles Times and La Opinión, in particular we read parts of the article "Respuesta a la Emergencia" written by Yollie Flores-Aguilar, co-author of the school board motion, critiquing how school officials frame the debate and discussion through a market logic rhetoric. "Yeah, we have to debunk the myths, do people know where those parents that came out in the news in support of the motion, what are they called, Parent Revolution, do people know these parents are paid to protest?"*

*In response to this question, I bring up the importance in documenting and researching the perspective of parents, both inside charter schools and in regular schools, and see how they perceive all of these changes in the district, and what they have heard through the media.*

*For the second part of the meeting, we work on the ARE campaign proposal form. A major goal we outline as part of this campaign is to ensure that South Los Angeles Elementary is not taken over by corporate charters. Two committee members work at the school and reported that teachers are mobilizing and adamant about a possible take over.*

*As a way of integrating ARE members, we decide that we should polish our report on corporate charter schools and use it as part of the education segment for our next general body meeting. As well, we discuss setting up a series of education/community forums at South Los Angeles Elementary. Sandra and Cristina agree on moving forward with a forum with the teachers, to see educate them on the motion, and see where they stand and what they would want to do. I was tasked with contacting KPFK radio to see if we can do an interview based on our research.*

### **Auto/ethnographic Interlude: Getting the Word Out**

*I received a call yesterday by a KPFK radio host to be a part of an interview segment on charter schools and the school choice motion. She contacted me because they were looking for teachers or community organizers to speak on the issue; one of our committee members setup the interview.*

*Before going on the air, I spoke with the 7am show director and outlined several aspects, such as the history of charter schools, the political and economic contexts behind charter schools, etc.*

*During the interview I spoke about the history of charter schools and emphasized the market logic informing debates on the efficacy of charter schools, as well as its predecessor, the private voucher movement. I also discussed Michael Apple's *Educating the 'Right' Way* and the framework he uses to help us understand the current trend to privatize education.*

*Because I was only given ten minutes to speak, I did not get to discuss the debates that charter schools have engendered with respect to the meaning of "public" and "community-based," two terms often used by charter management organizations.*

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*After the interview ended, the program director apologized for cutting me off, and said she was excited about the research in ARE. She said she would contact me for a follow up interview.*

### **Auto/ethnographic Interlude: Educating Ourselves**

*Today was the first general body meeting and it was held at East Los Angeles High School. We had a relatively good turnout, with approximately 25 folks and new faces in the room. I review here the Education Segment that is a 45-minute part of the general body meeting...*

*I was tasked with introducing the education segment on charter schools. In my notes I wrote the following: "Rationale: Why study/discuss charter schools? How to have a dialogue and not reduce the discussion to simple pros- cons-? Critical Reflection: this reflection should lead to broader discussion on the meaning of 'public' education and 'community-based'. Beyond education: historical de-funding of public education, yet over funding of prison systems, war, etc."*

*Following my introduction to the topic, Sandra proceeded with a presentation on corporate charters. Two points that stood out from Sandra's presentation were the discriminatory policies of charters through application process and the problematic definition of "public" that corporate charters use, which they define as "accessible to or shared by all members of the community."*

*Following the presentation, Cristina introduced the committee's research on charters and explained how this work started during the summer retreat, and possibly becoming a part of a campaign at her school. "After reading the 4-page report, your group will report back and answer the following question: In what ways does the charter movement promote or hinder public education?"*

*We read and discussed the report, first in small groups, then collectively. An interesting conversation followed the group summary of pros and cons. Yusef iterated, "It doesn't matter what school, private, charter, or public, we should strive to promote critical progressive pedagogies everywhere." Vilma echoed what Yusef said and added something that stood with me: "If these are truly peoples' schools, no one will shut us down. The same goes for public schools. Standards and testing right now are reforming schools and they need to be challenge, across the board. The question for us as educators is what kinds of students and people are we producing in whatever educational setting."*

### **How Grassroots Organizing Transforms Research**

The discussion now turns to the research and community organizing dialectic. That is, viewed dialectically, what does the unity of research and community organizing entail within the South Los Angeles Elementary campaign? The question of the dialectical relation between research and community organizing is a question of both the relation between these two practices, how they transform each other, but also, and in line with dialectical thinking, how their unity brings something new. In this section I outline two fundamental shifts, how research becomes action-research and the transformation of research into community organizing.

### **From Traditional Research to Action-Research**

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Action-research within ARE is mediated primarily through ARE organic structures, thus growing out of the Action Research Committee. The research was deliberately undertaken as part of a struggle at South Los Angeles Elementary to defend the teachers against a possible take over by outside charter management organization. Second, however varied the research strategies, from meta analyses of existing studies, interviews with teachers, parent organizers, a principal, the nature of the research did not alter its status as action-research.

Within the campaign, research is set in motion as a political strategy to organize attention around an issue. The framing that we gave to the research was defined in relation to our chapter's stance on corporate charters. We were adamantly opposed to them and saw them as part of a privatizing agenda. I recall, for example, the development of our first ARE report on charter schools. This report included extensive groundwork and came to fruition after a month of reviewing empirical studies. In one of our committee meetings, Cristina, then ARC committee chair, asked the group to help with two particular areas. After attending a community forum organized by the Principal at her school, Cristina made note of the types of questions that working class Latino parents were asking, questions like “¿Cómo es que están haciendo dinero con las escuelas charter?” (How are they making money from charter schools?) and “¿Es cierto que proporcionan una mejor educación que las escuelas publicas?” (Is it true that they provide a better education than public schools?)

Furthermore, research was explicitly political when it assumed a studying-up character. Cristina was responsible for studying-up the growth of non-profit and “community” based organizations such as Parents That Can, Parent Revolution, Green Dot, which are the most prominent in the district. She was able to dig up extensive information through public access records such as state tax documents, thus bringing to the table concrete information on how these charter management organizations did profit through “outside” grant funds. We recognized that the question of how they profited was not evident, yet our investigation led us to something quite interesting. The organizations that were characterized as “community” based were actually subsidiaries (and funded by) charter management organizations. What's more, a broader umbrella existed that brought many of these charter management organizations together: the New Schools Venture Fund. This part of the research felt a lot like investigative journalism and was quite exciting. To note, the New Schools Venture Fund had a pact with corporations, including the California Charter Schools Association, even the new district official responsible for charter school development within the district. If all of these people knew each other and had strong ties to board members of mainstream media outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times* and Univisión, then, we conjectured, it was not difficult to see how all these interests interlocked and why criticisms of corporate charters and the privatization of public education did not surface in mainstream media.

Finally, because research was undertaken as a political strategy to organize the attention of multiple audiences, thus framing the issue and defending our position on corporate charters, we were cautious with the kinds of studies we reviewed, included, and cited. During one of our leadership meetings, where we discussed the research in relation to the campaign, especially when looking at corporate charter schools in Los Angeles, national trends did not hold when describing the performance of Green Dot charter schools, which were doing relatively better than their neighborhood high schools. However, when digging further we found that Green Dot, one of the major charter management organizations leading the charge to privatize public education in the United States, required an application process that served to weed out special needs students, second language learners, and students with prior “discipline” issues.



### The Expansion of Research into Organizing Research

The practice of research, in particular the knowledge generated from interviews with a teacher at an alternative school, the observation of community forums, and interviews with two parent organizers who were engaged in community struggles against corporate charter take over elsewhere in urban Los Angeles, was transformed into *organizing research*. By organizing research I mean a type of research that is itself already organizing work. This kind of research is driven by the investigation of other organizing struggles, strategies, tactics, and experiences. The object of this research extends beyond knowledge of how corporate charters function, their history, etc. to include knowledge of organizing practices.

In the education literature, most discussions on action-research usually involve teachers studying up a situation or teachers reflecting on their own teaching practices. Teacher-led research is thus characterized as praxis and, therefore, “action” research by virtue of the reflexive nature of the activity itself. Examples of this type of teacher-led action-research include teachers systematically analyzing their own teaching practices as an extension of their professional development (see Altrichter & Posch, 2009; Lewis, Perry, and Friedkin, 2009) or collectives of teachers using research to address problems in the surrounding school community (see Bigum & Rowan, 2009; O’Hanlon, 2009; Rogers, Mosley, and Kramer, 2009).

A fundamental quality that has been identified within these types of action-research projects is reflexivity. That is, action-research is itself a reflexive process whereby teachers, individually or collectively, critically analyze a situation in order to transform it. I argue that in the organizing research praxis within ARE, reflexivity is a process that occurs in relation to the broader political work that guides it. Another way of putting it, reflexivity might not be inherent to the research itself, yet said practice is reflexive in relation to the campaign. To illustrate, when I interviewed Maria Salazar and Claudia Estrada, both parent organizers who had been fighting against the corporate takeover of different schools in the district, I proceeded with a set of questions that would allow us to learn from their organizing experiences. Reflexivity did not take place as part of the data collection process. However, the information they shared about organizing in other spaces was transformed into the formation of possible campaign strategies. Their knowledge was used to imagine a campaign, its different moments (not yet actualized), thus generating a creative, anticipatory politics. The knowledge gained from these interviews allowed us to reflect into the future of the emerging campaign.

Thus, organizing research is a type of action-research. Defined in relation to the broader political work, here the unfolding campaign, its object is the production of knowledge about organizing strategies and tactics. The reflexive moment of this kind of research praxis grows in relation to the anticipated campaign. Thus reflexivity is synonymous with a *political imagination*. When one looks at the negotiation and refinement of campaign goals, one sees how this political imagination was at work. There was a point in the campaign when we decided to focus less on the broader education of the South Los Angeles Elementary community and more on the formation of a parent base at the school. This reorientation of campaign goals came about from the interviews with both parent organizers and was further refined through a discussion within our local leadership. In these discussions, the experiences of others were conjoined with a political imagination that allowed us to guide the research of today with the campaign of tomorrow.

### Action-Research As Pedagogical

In this section I explore the pedagogical dimensions of research within the South Los Angeles Elementary campaign. By pedagogical I mean the ways in which practices mediate the conscientization of participants. Because the action-research is in transition and assumes a leading role in relation to other practices, I ask the following generative questions. What are the pedagogical dimensions in the campaign, as it is mediated by the action-research? How is the research undertaken pedagogical?

### Action-Research as Organic Popular Education

In the South Los Angeles Elementary campaign we see the development of what I term *organic popular education*. Much like *educación popular* (popular education), which has been used as a political strategy in grassroots struggles throughout Latin America (Torres, 1992), organic popular education is a form of public pedagogy that grows out of the action-research. In my analysis of the relation between action-research and pedagogy, I found two trajectories or directions that organic popular education assumed. On the one hand, it assumed an internal line of development, where the knowledge and experience gained by conducting the research was oriented “inward” towards the committee and the campaign itself. This is evident in the role that organizing research plays as a tool for reflection, that leads to further changes in research and political strategy. On the other hand, pedagogy assumed an external developmental line, where the knowledge gained through the research turned “outward” towards the community at South Los Angeles Elementary. In this latter case, research becomes a tool for the pedagogical mediation of an education campaign as part of the emerging South Los Angeles Elementary campaign.

The internal pedagogical function of action-research involved the education of committee members undertaking the research and the education of ARE members generally. Cristina speaks about her experience with research and what she learned through this process:

Well I do feel like I got a really good understanding of what charter schools stand for and how they're formed. I think I also gained a lot of knowledge of how to actually do credible research, not just pulling stuff out of wherever, but like being really critical of where I got my information and also being able to find, like non-profit org information online when I was putting together the piece where the money is coming from, and like Inner-City Struggle and Parent Revolution, and what their funding was and where it was coming from, being able to see their tax forms online was a trip. But really informative, you know, it really showed like you know the interests that there were behind these organizations.

As a participant, I also felt I gained a better understanding of corporate charters. Through my own research and collective work I gained clarity of the historical context leading to corporate charter schools. I remember Cristina's presentation on the economic relation among different non-profit and corporate charter organizations. It was through her research of these facts that we felt equipped to answer one of the concerns the parents had asked in the community forum at South Los Angeles Elementary, namely how charter management organizations benefited economically.

Moreover, through the experience of research, we were learning how to organize. Each research encounter afforded lessons on organizing, planning, and strategizing. I return to Cristina's comments on the question of the relation between research and campaign development.



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Author: Do you see a relation between research and what some call action-research, do you see that relation between research or action-research and campaign development?

Cristina: Definitely

Author: What's the relationship?

Cristina: I think they go hand in hand. I mean, in my opinion based on the charter school thing, and you know thinking about other possible campaigns, I think that action-research needs to happen first before any mobilization is done you know. People need to really have a good background about what the problem is and what we're doing towards... I think it's important to understand everyone of those organizing aspects, like this whole charter school thing. It could have gone a lot farther if we didn't have all these obstacles, that research component definitely needed to be there in the first place, before we even did anything you know.

Author: What would happen if we skipped that, like what do you foresee happening in campaign work, like say somebody says we don't need action-research or research we just need to move with the activism and campaign.

Cristina: I mean, I see that as a really big problem because then you're gonna have a lot of people out there and we'll say ARE has this mobilization against such and such organization, and then people come out and support us but they don't really understand what the problem is and what we're out there for. And I don't really think that's powerful in any sort of way. People need to have a solid understanding of what the problem is, what we're trying to change, and everyone needs to be on the same page. You know we all need to be educated before we go out and protest or you know do anything like that, we all need to know.

Cristina's comments need to be situated within the development of campaign work in ARE. Previously, ARE had undertaken campaigns with little or no research in the process. Campaigns were usually jump started by a situation, for example the student protest to the closure of AP courses at South Central Education Complex or the struggle by an adult education class of parents at Urban Elementary that asked ARE to assist with organizing against a corporate charter taking over school campus resources. I was a part of these and other campaigns and do not recall any formal research as political strategizing in the early stages of campaigns. In this interview excerpt, Cristina emphasizes the need to proceed with some caution: as part of campaign development, "people need to have a solid understanding of what the problem is, what we're trying to change, and everyone needs to be on the same page." Thus, campaign development, according to Cristina, necessitates an education component that raises awareness on the issue and organizes folks around it. Within the South Los Angeles Elementary campaign, that is precisely how we decided to move, by educating ourselves, ARE general members—because they would be the ones mobilizing with us—and the South Los Angeles Elementary community.

### **Action-Research as Organizing Research**

Moreover, the learning was mediated by organizing research in the campaign. My interviews with Maria Salazar, parent organizer at Metropolitan Elementary, and Claudia Estrada, parent organizer at East Los Angeles High School, exemplify this type of learning that grows out of community action-research. My interviews with both parents were neither about collecting data nor generating a research report that would educate others. Rather, I interviewed both parents on behalf of the committee to gain further insights on how to mobilize. In approaching the interviews, I asked questions about the struggles at their schools with corporate

charters, the role that parents played, and their views on successful campaign development. These questions transformed the interview experience and lead to political strategy sessions. Both parents were quite willing to assist with our campaign and were able to provide insights that would allow us to move forward in a more informed and systematic way.

### **Action-Research as *Educación Política* (Political Education)**

The question on the pedagogical dimension of the campaign as it is mediated by action-research, leads us inevitably to a discussion of political education within ARE, which has its roots in social movements throughout the developing “third world,” sprouting as a *educación política* in indigenous and socialist struggles for self-determination throughout Latin America. As part of the campaign, the committee lead a political education segment that is by design a part of ARE general monthly meetings. These segments run for approximately one hour and serve to politicize participants. Our aim was to educate ARE members and thus build a collective understanding on the issue and campaign. I return to a point in my interview with Cristina where we discuss the political education segment.

Author: Was there an education component such as curriculum or community forums to this campaign, I guess, we were developing something, no?

Cristina: I mean I consider the education the research that we brought into the meeting with the general body where we presented all the information that we got together, we broke off into small circles, we talked about it, and then when we came together as a group, I thought that was a really powerful discussion, and it really did deepen everybody's knowledge about the situation, because it didn't affect everybody, or the people that were already in charter schools, they got a different perspective of it.

Author: I'm glad you are mentioning that 'cause that's kind of the stuff that I am trying to tease out, like when you have different things like research, it's not just research, it has it's like interlaced with education, 'cause you're right, a lot of times you think education is in the community forum, but the education was happening with ARE. Because I remember at that time I, I didn't know enough about charters, I had a sense of stuff, but I thought that they were all the same. I thought they were all community based even though I knew part of it came from, well somebody told me they worked in a Green Dot charter and they said it was community based, and I'm like, now after doing all this, I'm like that's not community based, at least not the way we've been talking about community based. Which, even fundamental basic things, I didn't, I didn't know.

Cristina: Neither did I. I mean, I learned a lot through this experience.

My question about an education component or community forum lead to Cristina's discussion of the ARE education segment we organized as a committee. “I thought it was a really powerful discussion, and it really did deepen everybody's knowledge of the situation,” she said. I then shared my own learning experiences. I clearly remember teachers' responses and the discussion on the privatization of education. I also remember that day because new ARE members publicly stated that they had been teaching in corporate charter schools. It seemed, at the surface, like a contradiction, that they were members of ARE and employees of one of the biggest charter management organizations in the district. However, the discussion brought to light personal counter-narratives about working in such an environment. “What kind of people are we producing?” people asked vigorously.

I characterize the type of learning that happens in these deliberately structured spaces as *political education*, which is a type of organic popular education. What makes political

education distinct from organic popular education is its explicit goal to mentor participants into community organizing. This politicization is not, however, synonymous with conscientization or the development of a critical social consciousness. The politicization involves a critical awareness of a situation in relation to its context, yet this critical awareness should in turn lead to qualitative shifts in participation within organic spaces such as ARE. In the unfolding campaign, this type of education is designed as a medium for apprenticing teachers into grassroots organizing.

### Grassroots Research as Public Pedagogy

From my experience developing research in grassroots organizing spaces, action-research becomes inseparable from community struggles and is driven by social justice goals. In the global North, action-research has manifest within institutions, such as the university, where it has increasingly taken root since the early 1970s (Fals-Borda, 2006). Nevertheless, I often hear progressive scholars working primarily within institutional settings use the term “organic” or “organic intellectual” in quite loose ways as a signifier for an array of practices, identities, and rights to knowledge claims. In my experience a dominant metaphor is invoked in using “organic” as growing from the ground, the streets, *el barrio*. From this perspective, research is considered “organic” simply because of the marginal identity of the scholar activist undertaking or directing the research. In reflecting on my the research growing out of ARC and as a strategy for defining the boundaries of what grassroots research that functions as public pedagogy might look like, I propose a contextualist, place-based framework that situates action-research and pedagogy within the organic spaces that make it possible. *Organic base research* can be defined as research that emerges in and through grassroots structures (see Zavala, 2013). Grassroots structures are community based organizations and collectives which take shape and form “outside” the capitalist-colonialist State, often in strategic opposition to institutions. Some examples of grassroots structures include the Maori *whanau*, where families mediate and guide research (see Linda T. Smith, 1999), *comunidades de base* (base communities) that have sprouted throughout Latin America since the 1960s (see Orlando Fals-Board, 1985), and, I would argue, grassroots organizations such as ARE.

While participants and scholars of action-researcher have yet to engage deeply with public pedagogy scholarship, Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick’s (2011) point is well taken, that we enter spaces of struggle with an eye towards pedagogical mediation. I believe this question is an important one, not only for the sake of generating “case studies” and contributing to empirical scholarship on pedagogy in non-formal sites, but because it offers an opportunity for the reinvention of practices in other place-based struggles against the privatization of public education and other oppressive forces today: What lessons can we glean from the investigation of action-research and political work seeded in alternative, public spaces? Furthermore, and I hope this auto/ethnographic study demonstrates, any investigation of the pedagogical mediation of grassroots research will be greatly enriched by drawing out the analytic distinction between such practices as pedagogy, action-research, and organizing. In the concrete, practical spaces of struggle, these practices inevitably intersect and lead to transformations in activities and people. As cultural workers and social justice scholars, I believe we are in a strategic position for contributing to a grounded theory of public pedagogy via our own lived-experiences in grassroots spaces.



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<sup>i</sup> Here, as elsewhere, I use pseudonyms for the names of individual schools and participants connected to the campaign.