

Moving Beyond Slogans

Possibilities for a More Connected and Humanizing “Counter-recruitment” Pedagogy in Highly Militarized Urban Schools

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WE ARRIVED AT MADISON HIGH SCHOOL¹ EARLY, before the morning rush. There were about ten of us activists—some retired individuals, a few educators and also a few undergraduate and graduate students. Armed with pamphlets and informational materials we took our positions on the sidewalk, in front of the main entrance, waiting to catch students before they entered the campus. Our mission was to warn, inform and educate them about the realities of military service and war. Madison was an urban school in Los Angeles serving predominantly low-income Latin@ students. The school did not have a performing arts department or well-resourced sports programs but it did have a large and growing Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) program. A few days prior to this event we were warned by one of our teacher allies that the school was expecting a visit from military recruiters. We wanted to be present, on the same day, to provide a counter-perspective and make sure that students heard the other side of the story. As it approached 8:00 a.m., the rush of students overwhelmed us while we frantically passed out flyers and cautioned as many of them as we could to beware of the half truths and misinformation spread by military recruiters.

During this action, one of our leaders was confronted by the vice principal who asked her to step away from the entrance of the school. Our leader, in turn, insisted that the sidewalk was public space and it was her right to be there. This was the extent in which we were able to engage with students at Madison High School. The vice principal at this particular site had a history of denying counter-recruitment activists access to the school campus while at the same time inviting and welcoming recruiters on a regular basis. On some campuses, we encountered a warmer welcome and were allowed to be present at career fairs and set up informational booths. On rare occasions we were invited to speak in classrooms, at assemblies and other school events.

Our actions and campaigns were coordinated through a local community organization that was dedicated to the project of demilitarizing schools. Post 9/11 and with the advent of the “Global War on Terror,” schools serving predominantly low-income students of color had become increasingly militarized spaces (Ayers, 2006; Mariscal, 2005) through policies such as the section §9528 of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)² that gave military recruiters unprecedented access to these school campuses and to students’ private information (Furumoto, 2005; Holm, 2007; Schroeder, 2004). Also contributing to the militarization of urban schools was the increased funding and prevalence of Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) programs in conjunction with the lack of enrichment programs within these schools (Ayers, 2006; Berlowitz & Long, 2003; Galaviz, Palafox, Meiners, & Quinn, 2011). Although the rapid expansion of JROTC programs began in the mid 1990’s, this trend continued in the decade post 9/11. In 2012, according to the National Network Opposing the Militarization of Youth (NNOMY) website, there were “3429 JROTC units and over half a million cadets in addition to an unknown number of students in the Middle School Cadet Corps (MSCC) across the country” (Abajian, 2013, p. 26). The increased militarization of schools over the past decade was taking place within the context of an increasingly militarized culture within the United States (Giroux, 2004; Turse, 2008) where patriotism and war were constantly promoted through the aggressive advertising and public relations campaigns of the military (Saltman & Gabbard, 2003), such as the Army Strong campaign,³ and affirmed through mainstream media outlets.

As a response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the increasing militarization of schools, certain community organizations and anti-war activists began launching counter-recruitment campaigns to educate and inform students and communities about the realities of military service and “recruit” students away from the military. For example, groups such as the Coalition Against Militarism in Schools (CAMS), Project on Youth And Non-Military Opportunities (YANO), New York Core Of Radical Educators (NYCORE), American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and others began providing counter-recruitment workshops and working with communities to form action plans against military recruitment within schools around the country. Although these counter-recruitment efforts have had some successes, military recruitment in urban schools is still a persistent and growing problem particularly as the economy has taken a downward shift, unemployment has been on the rise and we continue to find ourselves in a perpetual state of war.

How we joined the movement:

It was within the context of increased militarization of schools post 9/11 that we⁴ became involved in different counter-recruitment efforts. We were drawn to counter-recruitment activism for several reasons. I, Maricela, grew up in South Central Los Angeles, attended Jefferson High School and was enlisted in the Navy after graduation. I understood the draw of the military for high school students who were promised college funding and a better future. In fact, that is the very reason why I joined the military. I wanted to fund my college education through the G.I. Bill, which proved to be more complicated than I initially thought. After serving in the military for four years I left the service before the invasion of Iraq. Eventually I returned to school, completed my Bachelor’s degree and matriculated into a Master’s program. Unable to successfully utilize my G.I. Bill benefits, I funded my education through federal and state financial aid as well as student loans.

I, Maricela, became actively involved in the counter-recruitment movement because of my experiences in the military. When I was stationed in Diego Garcia I witnessed the unjust labor practices of military contractors on the island. The military, through its private contractors, hired Filipin@ immigrants who were paid very low wages and worked under very oppressive conditions. This reminded me of my own family and the oppressive ways that they were treated within the United States as immigrant and low-wage laborers. I didn't want to be complicit with an institution that oppressed anyone in any part of the world. Furthermore, my personal experiences as a female soldier and a victim of sexual abuse within the United States military shaped my critical stance towards the practices and policies of the military and drew me into counter-recruitment activism. Hence, my commitment to the counter-recruitment movement extended beyond the anti-war movement and included a commitment to countering the oppression of labor, women and disenfranchised communities.

I, Suzie, was born in Aleppo, Syria. My elementary and a portion of my secondary education took place in a highly militarized schooling system where I took part in drill and ceremony exercises on a daily basis and wore military fatigues to school. My personal experiences as a young student in the Middle East as well as my experiences as an educator within a militarized urban school in Los Angeles shaped my interest in counter-recruitment. As a teacher, it pained me to see my students aggressively recruited into the United States military to fight and risk their lives in what I believed to be unjust wars against communities of people that I closely identified with as a Middle Easterner. My maternal grandmother as well as some of my relatives had worked and lived in Iraq for many years.

I, Suzie, came to realize that counter-recruitment was the most effective method of countering the war agenda and the militarization of schools in the United States. My commitment to counter-militarism work also shaped my dissertation research, which was a yearlong ethnographic case study of militarism and military recruitment in an urban school in Southern California. Our positionalities as individuals from different communities touched by war and militarism not only drew us to counter-recruitment work but also gave us unique perspectives and lenses through which we saw this line of activism.

What is counter-recruitment?

In our experience, counter-recruitment was a fundamentally pedagogical project that consisted of informing or teaching students and communities about the realities of military service often concealed by recruiters, the aggressive advertising campaign of the military and the corporations involved in the war industry. The primary objective of counter-recruitment campaigns in which we participated was “recruiting” students away from military careers.

Through our activism, in collaboration with several community-based organizations within the Los Angeles area, we observed that one of the most prevalent counter-recruitment actions that anti-war activists participated in was flyering or leafleting in front of school campuses. During these actions groups of volunteers would pass out flyers such as *Demilitarizing Schools and Presenting Alternatives*⁵ and *What Every Girl Should Know about the U.S. Military*⁶ to students. Other counter-recruitment activities included setting up informational booths at career fairs, making classroom or conference presentations, and occasionally having classroom showings of the film “Arlington West”⁷ followed by a question and answer session with students. Our objective for this paper was critically examining these

counter-recruitment campaigns and actions and highlighting the more humanizing approaches in which we participated.

The praxis of methodological reflection:

After several years of involvement in counter-recruitment we wanted to take a step back and reflect on our experiences within this movement by taking a critical look at the messaging, the curriculum (the explicit as well as the hidden) and the helpfulness of these efforts in shaping student decisions regarding enlistment. We wanted to engage in what Freire (1970/1993) defines as “praxis”—a thoughtful and reflective engagement in the world in order to change it. We adapted this concept of praxis in our methodology. Our reflective process began through a series of informal conversations that we had regarding our involvement in counter-recruitment activism and through the writing of reflective memos.

Additionally we had a formal conversation or mutual interview about our experiences in the movement. This interview/conversation was recorded and transcribed. We also used flyers, pamphlets, PowerPoint presentations, students’ digital story projects as well as the transcripts of two interviews from a yearlong qualitative case study on militarism in one of the schools where we had held our counter-recruitment actions. We then employed a grounded theory approach to identify and analyze the emerging themes from all these sources (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The school sites and all individuals referred to in this paper were given pseudonyms with the exception of the authors. Through this reflective process we were able to articulate and analyze the range of our experiences within the counter-recruitment movement.

Counter-recruitment falling short of a humanizing approach:

Through our counter-recruitment actions, we met dedicated and loving people who truly cared about students and the communities affected by militarism and war. However, we felt that certain counter-recruitment approaches that were employed were not the most helpful methods in veering students away from military careers and building critical consciousness regarding militarism for a number of reasons.

One of these reasons was that counter-recruitment activities often employed what Freire (1970/1993) calls the “banking” approach where the educational project becomes “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher [or the activist in this case] is the depositor” instead of dialoging and building knowledge collectively (p.72). I, Maricela, perceived that counter-recruitment activists often acted as depositors of knowledge who would go into schools and tell students: “Don’t join the service for these reasons...” In my experience flyer-ing in front of school campuses was an example of the “banking” approach to teaching because it was “unidirectional.” The teaching and the instructing was carried out by counter-recruiters and received by students. It did not draw upon students’ prior knowledge or lived experiences. Additionally, it did not create a space for students to share their questions and perspectives, engage dialogically and build knowledge collectively with the activists. As such, it wasn’t the most effective way of reaching students. In fact counter-recruitment actions employed similar approaches to that of military recruiters. As I, Maricela, stated in our mutual interview: “It was the same techniques and tactics as recruiters but a different ideology” (interview,

Maricela, February 28, 2010). Freire (1970/1993) similarly articulated: “[substituting] monologue, slogans and communiqués for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication” (p. 65).

Although the pamphlets and flyers that we distributed were informative, it was difficult to gauge whether they were relevant and useful for the students who received them. In my dissertation research, I, Suzie spoke with parents and students who similarly communicated a lack of effectiveness of the flyer method. For instance, Ms. Hernandez, an active parent volunteer, stated:

When the children are released to go home, they [the counter-recruitment activists] hand out their pamphlets and they hand out their information, you know. But a lot of the kids throw them in the trash. They don’t take the time to look at the information that’s given to them. (interview, Ms. Hernandez, June 3, 2010)

Juana, Ms. Hernandez’s daughter, who was a student within the same school, confirmed this in a separate conversation. Juana understood what the activists were promoting (i.e. problematic aspects of military service). However she did not read any of the materials that were given to her.

The flyer method was not a great way of engaging students because it did not draw upon students’ interests and concerns and it did not create a space for critical dialogue. Also, students’ lack of interest in the counter-recruitment literature could have been attributed to the wordiness of the flyers—as some of the activists had vocalized their own frustrations with this issue. Regardless of its problematic aspects, flyer was often the only action that activists were allowed to take at certain school campuses.

On rare occasions, activists were invited to make large group presentations at school events. However, these too were often “one-directional” and did not allow for sufficient dialogue and engagement with students. Also, the question and answer sessions after large group presentations were not long enough to generate real discussions and critical analysis of military service. For instance I, Maricela was invited to speak to 1,000 youth at an event within a high school. I was given only five minutes to speak and didn’t have the opportunity to interact with students. Also, I was censored with the information that I was allowed to give. The teacher who invited me to speak at the school event asked me to not mention Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that many soldiers suffer due to military sexual trauma or combat. I was asked to focus on presenting alternatives to the military rather than critiquing military service. The principal had made this the condition under which I could make my presentation. This was because there was a strong relationship that this specific school and community had with the Navy and the principal did not want to make waves. I felt disempowered through this process because I couldn’t communicate to students the whole picture of what it meant to join the military and why I was informing them of alternatives in the first place.

Although sharing about my personal experiences within the military, during large group presentations, was healing and empowering for me at first, I eventually began to feel disconnected from the students with whom I was sharing my experiences. I desired to cultivate a space where students could ask questions and share their thoughts regarding what the military meant to them. However, the large group presentations did not offer me such a space. During these types of actions, we both felt a sense of separation from the students that we were supposed to “help” and also from the communities that were the victims of U.S. military interventionism.

Informational and promotional booths set up by counter-recruitment activists from different organizations, at career fairs, allowed for more interactions with students. However, these interactions were also brief and there was little room to engage in critical conversations with students. Sometimes activists would have a follow-up meeting with individual students who had signed for early enlistment and needed assistance in getting out of their contracts. Also, follow-up meetings were requested by students who needed the assistance of adult advocates in stopping harassment by military recruiters or addressing a violation of school policies by recruiters. Activists would then take up these complaints to the appropriate school, district or military authorities on behalf of students and parents. In addition to these types of interactions, activists and students were able to connect during fundraising events for counter-recruitment projects or the “Arlington West” film-showings at community centers.

Opportunities for community building between activists and students through the aforementioned types of actions and counter-recruitment activities were limited. Even though the objective of counter-recruitment efforts was raising consciousness among communities and students, the means by which counter-recruitment was carried out did not allow for dialogue and community building and hence was not liberatory.

Also, within this framework, activists were often perceived as the “knowledgeable” outsiders who had the duty and mission of informing students about the “truth” regarding military service. I, Maricela, remember being told by different community organizations that I was “saving the lives of these students.” However, I did not feel comfortable with these complements because “saving lives” was a term that I associated with missionary endeavors. I didn’t want to save anybody. I’m not a missionary! As a counter-recruitment activist, I felt that I was a missionary going into schools to save people’s lives. Of course I didn’t want students to join the service but that wasn’t my choice to make. It was something that students had to decide for themselves.

Furthermore I, Suzie, felt that counter-recruiters often came from a different community than that of the students and hence might have lacked a deep understanding and knowledge of the communities in which they carried out their counter-recruitment actions. There was often a cultural and socio-economic disconnect between counter-recruiters and students. Many of the counter-recruitment activists that we organized with were retired individuals who were predominantly white and came from wealthy and highly educated backgrounds. The one-directional, “banking approach” often employed in counter-recruitment could not have produced a better understanding of students and the realities that they faced. Also, activists did not have the opportunity to build credibility with students. We felt the unidirectional process of asking or often telling students to not join the military was alienating for students and activists alike.

In our experience, what mattered was not only the nature of the activity in which students were involved but also the positioning and the personal experiences of the adults working with them. For instance I, Suzie, felt that some of the most effective counter-recruitment workshops were the ones where Maricela shared with students her personal experiences within the military. As a veteran and as someone who came from the same (or a similar) community I observed that Maricela had instant credibility with the students with whom she shared her story. I noticed that students would often stay after the presentations and have long conversations with her, which was not the case with the other activists. Although there were many well-meaning individuals who spoke of the ills of joining the military, their words did carry the same weight as Maricela’s words.

Another problematic aspect of counter-recruitment actions was that activists would often focus entirely on the ways in which the military was not providing soldiers with what they were promised. The discourses of counter-recruitment presentations and film discussions were United States centered and were not conducive to developing empathy for the “other.” I, Suzie, felt that counter-recruitment presentations, actions and workshops lacked something essential—a critique of militarized practices, of the United States intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan and of war itself. In my experience military service was often presented as a disembodied enterprise or affair that seemed to be a bad career move for financial or practical reasons. I recall counter-recruiters telling students to not join the military because it wasn’t a lucrative career.

Activists would often frame the problematic aspects of joining the military in terms of the inaccessibility of the G.I. Bill and the low employability of individuals after completing their tour of duty. I, Suzie, remember occasional mentions of the ways in which the military was a hostile place for women and LGBTQ soldiers and the fact that sexual abuse was rampant in the military. However, in my experience, counter-recruiters did not draw attention to what the United States military was doing in other countries. I felt that counter-recruitment actions were mostly focused on the ways in which the military wasn’t keeping its promises to the soldiers. It seemed very utilitarian, disconnected and lacking empathy. In our mutual interview I, Suzie, problematized this approach by asking:

What if the military was, in fact, paying good wages and soldiers were able to easily access the G.I. Bill benefits? Would that make it acceptable to encourage students to join the military and risk their lives to fight in an unjust war? Also, who were the people that the military was fighting? Who would the soldiers be asked to kill? (interview, Suzie, February 28, 2010)

Counter-recruitment efforts did not allow for a critique of United States interventionism in the world, even though students would often raise critical questions relating to U.S. military actions in other countries. I, Suzie, recall students asking: “Isn’t it also wrong, what we’re doing in Iraq?” In my experience, when students would raise concerns about military actions overseas, their comments were simply acknowledged but not taken up by activists and they did not lead to further discussions. When I asked one of the leaders of CAMS why she did not address students’ questions about the atrocities committed overseas by the United States military, the leader responded by stating that what was most effective and important was focusing on “the here and now.” This same leader advocated the change of the name of the organization from the Coalition Against Militarism in our Schools to the Coalition of Alternatives to Militarism in Schools (keeping the same acronym). The reason for this change was that she did not want the organization to come across as too critical of the military but rather as a more neutral organization that simply offered “alternatives”—undermining the critical and anti-war positioning of the organization.

Another limitation of counter-recruitment efforts was that students were being asked to not join the military without being offered any alternatives in terms of career counseling, job training and college funding. We felt that it wasn’t enough to ask students to not join the military—we also needed to offer them alternatives. I, Maricela, felt that it was difficult to tell students to not pursue an easily accessible career when they had financial difficulties. I felt that telling students to “not join the military” might deter them initially when they hear an inspiring talk in an auditorium or watch a movie. However, after time passes and they are faced with the

realities of their lives such as poverty, the lack of resources and the presence of violence in their neighborhoods, they might decide to join regardless of knowing the problematic aspects of a military career. Although many students were already aware of the problematic aspects of military service, at the end of the day, they were still faced with the daily challenges that drew them to military service in the first place.

As a response to this need we became involved in a project where a counter-recruitment leader was compiling an informational booklet on alternative careers through the collaboration and support of two organizations: CAMS and AFSC. Although we, activists, had a consensus about promoting “green” jobs or social justice oriented jobs in the informational booklet, there was a disagreement among us about including Transportation Security Administration (TSA) or police internships as alternatives to the military. We felt conflicted about this issue. On the one hand the TSA and the police were not the same as the military, on the other hand some of us viewed these paths as extensions of the military-industrial complex. There was a definite lack of consensus on the conceptualization of militarism. Perhaps, including the TSA and the police was the pragmatic approach to the issue of offering alternatives. After all wouldn’t it be better to have critically conscious people working within the TSA and the police force? At the same time, the lack of reflection and critical analysis of militarism, war and demonization of “others” within counter-recruitment circles did not necessarily mean that they would promote a critically conscious engagement within these highly militarized professions but rather a utilitarian approach to upward mobility. Furthermore, these militarized careers were already being promoted within low-income communities of color and they did not need more promotion and exposure by counter-recruitment activists. These were the reasons why some of us viewed this as a problematic approach for a collective of activists who purported to be against militarism in all its forms.

Also, from our reflections, we came to the conclusion that counter-recruitment was a reactionary movement rather than a proactive movement. Activists organized in reaction to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They were not as concerned with addressing the core-issues that students faced daily and the reasons why they were drawn into the military in the first place. I, Maricela, felt that counter-recruitment activists would frequent schools during times of war but they would leave once the wars ended. For me, counter-recruitment activism was something that needed to encompass more than the anti-war agenda. I wanted activists to show care for students by engaging with them about the struggles and challenges that they faced daily in their communities. I felt that addressing the needs of students was the most effective approach to diminishing the attractiveness of a military career.

Digital storytelling: A different approach to counter-recruitment

As we became more involved in the counter-recruitment movement we felt the need for a different approach that built empathy, connectedness, community, reflection and a critical analysis both on the part of students and activists. We wanted a different model where students were treated as active agents in charge of their own lives. Within this framework, activists were not the sole proprietors of knowledge but they were co-constructors of knowledge with students. As Freire (1970/1993) articulated: “Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly...To confirm this commitment but to consider oneself the proprietor of revolutionary wisdom—which must then be given to (or imposed on the

people)—is to retain the old ways”(pp. 60-61). We wanted to employ a liberatory and humanizing knowledge making, by engaging students in a reflective process about their own concrete realities. This is what Freire defined as a problem posing education which “entails at the outset that the teacher-student contradiction to be resolved” (p. 79). Through a dialogical engagement “[t]he teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [/herself] taught in dialogue with the students” (p. 80). This is the process through which teachers as well as students can gain critical consciousness that in turn could lead them to action and also further reflection.

Using this framework for critical reflection and action I, Maricela, wanted to employ a different approach to counter-recruitment. In collaboration with Mr. Vivaldi, a high school teacher, and with the assistance of the AFSC and the Women of Color Resource Center, I used the techniques of the Center for Digital Storytelling to organize a project within a classroom in Greater Los Angeles where students were engaged in producing their own digital stories. According to the Center for Digital Storytelling, digital stories are “short, first-person video-narratives created by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds” (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2011). This project took place within a continuation school and within a class that was predominantly male students.

I, Maricela, became interested in the digital storytelling project because I had participated in it myself and was inspired by the final product. Also, the making of my own digital story was a healing process for me as this was the first time that I was able to tell my story.

When I first presented my ideas to Mr. Vivaldi’s class I asked students whether they were interested in taking part in the project. I wanted students to be invested in this endeavor by deciding for themselves whether this was something in which they wanted to invest their time. During the presentation, I shared the following words with the students: “I never thought I had a voice...this helped me find my own voice, share what I was feeling and put it in words and pictures” (interview, Maricela, February 28, 2010). After a class discussion, students collectively voted and decided that they wanted to participate in the project.

From my perspective the purpose for this project was creating a space where students were able to share their stories with their peers and engage in a reflective process that would lead to critical analysis and action. I chose the medium of digital storytelling for a number of reasons. As I stated in our mutual interview:

One of the things that I’ve always been attracted to is how people tell stories in different cultures and looking back into my own indigenous roots the whole concept of storytelling is really important because it brings the community together. Digital storytelling was a way for me to hear students’ stories and voices and the ways that they processed the information we provide them. (interview, Maricela, February 28, 2010)

I was drawn to storytelling because it employed an indigenous form of knowledge-making that fostered connectedness and community building.

According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002) storytelling has had “a rich and continuing tradition in the African American (Bell, 1987, 1992, 1996; Berkeley Art Center, 1982; Lawrence, 1992), Chicana/o (Delgado, 1995, 1996); Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Olivas, 1990; Paredes, 1977), and Native American (Deloria, 1969; Williams, 1997) communities” (p.156). Drawing from these traditions Solórzano and Yosso (2002) conceptualize counterstorytelling as a pedagogical tool that serves the purposes of not only building community among those who are

at the margins and challenging normalized and privileged narratives but also imagining possibilities for a better world—beyond the confines of lived realities.

Using this framework, I employed digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool for creating counterstories within this classroom. Digital-storytelling was an alternative way to engage students with issues that were relevant to their lives—including but not limited to military enlistment. I wasn't interested in simply telling students to not join the service but rather using a more engaging and grounded approach that employed a “problem posing” pedagogy. I wanted to raise questions that made students think and decide for themselves whether or not they wanted to pursue a military career. My position was that of a facilitator and someone who provided the structure through which students were able to reflect on their own life experiences and choices and come up with their own analysis.

I felt very strongly about not imposing my own beliefs and ideas on students. As I stated in our mutual interview:

I don't think I am empowering them [students]. I am providing them with the skills and the tools to empower themselves. I think that that's something really important for me to emphasize in counter-recruitment. I think that many people who do counter-recruitment work think that their purpose is to go to classrooms and empower students. I don't want to do that! I don't feel that I have control to empower anybody. I think that I can provide students the tools to empower themselves. And not all students are going to feel empowered by this process. But I think that it's important to provide them with these skills so that later on in life they can figure out what they want to do. (interview, Maricela, February 28, 2010)

The employment of a dialogical approach was not a neutral act but a political one—as is all teaching. Enabling students to find their voices through the construction of their digital stories or digital “counter-stories” and fostering a space for critical dialogue, collaboration and artistic expression was a radically anti-militaristic approach to counter-recruitment. I, Maricela, realized this when I stated in our mutual interview that: “documenting one's story and sharing it within a caring community was an empowering act” (interview, Maricela, February 28, 2010).

Digital storytelling was a more humanizing approach than traditional counter-recruitment methods because it brought student voices to the fore and gave them the space to build community and have real and meaningful discussions about their struggles, hopes and aspirations. Although the focus of the project was not counter-recruitment it nevertheless gave students the space to reflect and question military enlistment as well as other issues that they were facing within their communities such as poverty, police brutality, racial profiling, gang injunctions that targeted men of color and other issues.

For example Jose's digital story began with a video clip where Bill O'Reilly stated that “the situation in [the inner city of] Los Angeles, California is hopeless” with a triple take of him saying the word “hopeless.” The video then progressed to a clip with white words appearing on a black screen stating: “Based on True Life Events in the Everyday Poverty Life in Los Angeles” (digital story, Jose, 2009). This clip was followed by scenes from Jose's neighborhood including fast food joints, gang graffiti, trash, the police and an old car with multiple bullet holes. However, he also interjected these scenes with those of hopeful places in his life such as his school, his house and also beautiful murals in his neighborhood. He ended his presentation with a message of “keeping hope alive.” Although Jose was aware of the issues in his neighborhood,

unlike Mr. O'Reilly, he was able to see the beauty and the hope in his community as well. He was able to portray the beauty in his life through artistic images and his own musical composition that accompanied the scenes from his neighborhood. Jose had to learn new technological skills as well as script writing and musical composition in order for him to produce his digital story. Also, he was able to engage in a critical analysis of the portrayals of his community in the media.

Another example was Steven's digital story which was entitled "Violence in the Community." Steven showed scenes of police brutality and racial profiling in his community. His analysis focused on the ways in which certain types of violence were sanctioned such as police violence and economic violence propagated by banks and corporations on different communities, while other actions were criminalized by the police. He also included domestic violence in his analysis and made a call for stopping all forms of violence. Similar to Steven, many students grounded their analysis in their everyday experiences within their communities. Using their experiences as a reference point they were able to broaden their analysis to include larger critiques that addressed societal inequalities and violence within the United States and abroad.

Luis' story began with scenes from his childhood. His story was entitled "Eyes" and his narrative began by the following words: "Every day I dream of waking up as I was before. Every day I see my father giving us a great example as a man and a hero. My mother, every morning telling us she loves us...taking my brother, my sister and also my cousins to school" (digital story, Luis, 2009). Luis employed a poetic form of narration as he walked his audience through scenes from his daily life. He showed pictures of his parents feeding him as child, walking him to school and going to work. He also included pictures of his classroom, classmates and teachers. His digital story was a tribute to his parents, his family and his school community and the ways that they had supported, nurtured and encouraged him throughout his life. His narrative, similar to Jose's was about hope as well as suffering. He touched upon issues such as youth incarceration and poverty by using images of hands in handcuffs and fences with barbwire. He also addressed the subject of spirituality and the ways in which his faith had provided him with a refuge and had brought peace and joy to his life. He ended his story by stating that he was thankful for his "Life, Pain and Happiness" because all of these things had made him into who he was.

Many of the digital stories addressed issues of poverty, police violence, gang violence and domestic violence. Some digital stories also included a discussion of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, Sergio's digital story was entitled "Violence." He conducted a survey asking his classmates about their definition of violence. Within this project, Sergio was able to make connections between issues of gang violence, police violence and also the violence of the war in Iraq. Sergio's digital story was among other stories that prompted a class discussion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For instance, Joe was an English Language Learner from Hong Kong. His digital story was primarily focused on the Iraq war and the ways that the United States media desensitized us to the violence of war. As an immigrant, Joe was particularly struck with the ways in which the United States media demonized different communities outside of the United States. Through digital storytelling, students were able to engage in critical analysis of issues such as poverty and violence in their communities and find the connections between these issues and the wars that the United States was waging in the Middle East.

The digital storytelling project not only provided a reflective space for critical analysis but also gave students the opportunity to gain technological and literacy skills. Students engaged

in a collective process of writing drafts for their narratives, listening and giving feedback to each other and producing a “mini-movie” about their lives. The process enabled students to not only gain important skills but also empowered them to make more informed decisions.

Over the course of three months of working on the production of the digital stories I, Maricela, was able to see a significant shift within the classroom and specifically in the ways that students interacted with each other. I articulated this in our mutual interview:

It was amazing to see how students communicated with each other. By the time our workshop was over there was a lot of trust within the group and the students felt comfortable to share more about themselves. I think that was the most important thing! In the end it was youth finding their own voices and the direction they wanted to go to while also gaining skills in technology. For some students this was the first time that they used PowerPoint or wrote a script. (interview, Maricela, February 28, 2010)

Digital storytelling provided a radically different approach than the ones commonly used by counter-recruitment activists. It was a more empowering approach that provided a space for reflection and community building. Also, it was a contextualized method of teaching the counter-recruitment curriculum by engaging students in issues relevant to their lives and giving them valuable technological, analytical and literacy tools.

Discussion:

This reflective process enabled us to critically analyze our own engagement in the counter-recruitment movement and highlight the more humanizing approaches in which we participated. Through our own experiences as well as through conversations with other activists, parents and students we found that what was more “successful” or meaningful was creating spaces for critical consciousness raising and community building through alternative approaches. In the hope of employing a more meaningful and humanizing approach to counter-recruitment I, Maricela, organized the digital storytelling project within Mr. Vivaldi’s class. Digital storytelling was a pedagogical tool for creating counter-stories (Yosso, 2006), raising critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/1993) and building community.

Through the digital storytelling project students were able to have open conversations about different issues concerning their lives. They were also given a space to engage critically with topics such as war, poverty, violence and immigration and at the same time develop valuable academic skills and participate in a creative process.

This project contrasted sharply with the prevalent counter-recruitment actions employed by anti-war or counter-recruitment activist, which often consisted of “one-directional” activities that involved telling students not to join the military. Also, the prevalent counter-recruitment actions utilized critiques that were solely focused on exposing the broken promises of the military in providing upward mobility and personal gain for soldiers. These approaches neglected to address the everyday realities of students in urban communities, the atrocities of U.S. military actions in the world and the demonization of “others” that is required in war. Although well-intentioned, these actions were not effective in providing a systemic analysis, building critical consciousness and empowering students to walk away from military enlistment.

As military recruiters are paid, full-time employees that have the backing of the extremely well funded advertising campaign of the military, volunteer counter-recruitment activists with meager budgets cannot and should not compete using the same approaches as recruiters. If the counter-recruitment were to be a meaningful movement, then it must not simply focus on deterring students from pursuing a specific career path but rather problematizing militarism in all its forms and manifestations and giving students the tools for critical analysis. Counter-recruitment activists need to set themselves apart from military recruiters, not only through the content of their message but also through their very approach—employing a pedagogy that produces “critical consciousness”, community building and connectedness which are in stark contrast to militarism.

As economically disadvantaged students of color are increasingly drawn into the military to not only fight “foreigners” overseas but also their own communities within and at the borders of the United States, it is imperative that counter-recruitment employ more liberatory pedagogical approaches. Moving beyond a “banking” approach, counter-recruitment activists can draw upon the personal interests, stories and experiences of students and engage in building solidarity with communities that are victims of militarism and war both locally and globally.

Notes

¹ A pseudonym given to the school that we visited.

² Section 9528 of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 states that Local Educational Agencies receiving financial assistance (such as Title I funds) are obligated to give student names, addresses and phone numbers to military recruiters upon request, unless parents “opt out.”

³ The Army Strong campaign was a key component of the Army's recruiting and advertising efforts that was launched in 2006 at the Association of the United States Army Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C.

⁴ This and all of the subsequent mentions of “we” or “our” refers to the two authors unless specified otherwise within the text.

⁵ Flyer produced by the L.A. based organization Coalition Against Militarism in our Schools (CAMS), which is now called the Coalition of Alternatives to Militarism in our Schools (CAMS).

⁶ Flyer produced by the War Resisters League and the Women of Color Resource Center.

⁷ A 2006 documentary film by Peter Duar and Sally Mar which critiqued the Iraq war by highlighting the narratives of soldiers and their families.

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