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# The Impact of Community Partnerships on Maya Children's Identity

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how educational partnerships can support parents and teachers of Maya children as they navigate two worlds: their Maya home culture and the culture of their adopted country. The case presented here is of Q'anjob'al Mayan immigrants to a rural Colorado valley, and their children's presence in local public schools. Treated as Hispanics because they were brown, indigenous Q'anjob'al speaking Maya students often felt neglected and marginalized by many teachers and staff. As their children adopted local cultural identities and practices, parents felt their children were becoming "unMaya". In an effort to support Maya parents and families, teachers were given firsthand experiences with Maya culture: parent-school nights, traditional festivals, even travel to the community's home region in Guatemala. These experiences fostered cultural competence and supported teacher advocacy. Finally, this partnerships among university faculty, school teachers, a local non-profit, and Maya families enabled students to develop and assert their identity in school, while assisting parents in cultivating aspects of Maya identity at home and in the community.

## Introduction

In 1979, Maya from the Huehuetenango region of Guatemala began immigrating to Colorado's San Luís Valley to work. Over the course of almost 40 years, a vibrant and powerful Maya community has developed. As is often the case, the original immigrants spent the first few years helping each other acculturate to a new country and community. With time, families and children arrived. The younger generation, especially those born in the U.S., presented parents the challenge of transmitting and maintaining enduring values endemic to Maya life in a non-traditional community. This challenge was compounded by social institutions, like public schools, that viewed Maya children as "Hispanic" because

they were brown. As a result, teachers often considered Maya students Spanish-speakers (which many were, just not as a first language) who shared the stereotypical values and behaviors of other [usually Mexican-origin] Spanish speaking students.

Alamosa, Colorado is the largest town in a sparsely populated alpine desert valley in the southeast part of the state. While Connecticut could fit inside the valley, there are only 46,000 residents scattered across 8,000 square miles, with 9,900 of them in Alamosa (San Luis Valley Development Resources Group, 2018). Depending on the year and criterion, three of the area's six counties are the poorest in the state and had the highest poverty rate (31%) in 2016 (Comen et al., 2018). Agriculture and ranching are the primary occupations, as they have been for several



Fig. 1: San Luis Valley

hundred years since early Spanish settlers encountered the Ute Indians who lived in the valley. After the United States took control, many New Mexican settlers arrived; later in the 1880s, a number of Mormon families were sent there as well. As a result, there is a mix of cultures: descendants of early Spanish settlers, descendants of primarily Caucasian immigrants, newer residents who have come to work in government, private, and tourism businesses, and more recent immigrants who have come to labor in agricultural and ranching interests (such as potato farming, sheepherding, and mushroom cultivation). The San Luis Valley is truly a valley of immigrants.

In spite of this history, Maya parents and elders have struggled to find ways of keeping their traditional culture and values alive through their children while in a foreign land. This has been particularly difficult in the isolated and insular place that is the San Luis Valley. Even so, the Maya were not interested in creating a cultural enclave, “We don’t want to assimilate ourselves and we don’t want to isolate ourselves in our culture. We want to share our culture with the cultures that are here so that we can be recognized and have our rights and not be ashamed of our culture” (Maya elder, as quoted in Schensul and LeCompte, 2016). However, the valley has a record of marked discrimination against and mistreatment of Spanish-speaking, “Hispanic” immigrants and residents (Donato, 2007). Since to most residents they look like other Latino



Fig. 2: Santa Eulalia

or “Mexican” groups, the Maya have been subject to the same treatment and prejudices applied to those ethnic groups. In the 1980s, when Maya immigrants dressed in the unique traje (native dress) of the village of Santa Eulalia, Guatemala, and spoke Qan’j’ob’al,

their Maya language, they were visibly and linguistically different from the Mexican migrants. However, as the guipiles (blouses) and corte (skirts) from Guatemala were gradually replaced with clothing from Walmart, they became invisible as Guatemalan Maya in the community.

Against this backdrop, we present the story of how some key initiatives supported the sharing of Maya culture with local communities, and how this hidden<sup>1</sup> population of hardworking Maya Americans has garnered recognition and respect from citizens of the San Luis Valley.

## A Theoretical Framework

In contrast to the more rigid dichotomy of assimilation or acculturation, recent work has exposed a more nuanced perspective on immigration. For example, one prevailing thought was that immigrants who held on to their native cultural norms and practices hindered or prevented successful adaptation to their new situation. However, careful observation has shown that immigrants with a firm grounding in their original identity and language often transition more effectively than those who simply abandon their previous selves (Spindler & Spindler, 2000). Further study suggests that immigration provokes a comparison of one's "enduring self", or natal identity, to a "situated self", or one's new circumstances. The extent to which the values, norms, and funds of knowledge comprising the enduring self will offer a basis for succeeding in the new circumstance determines in large measure whether the immigrant will adapt and thrive or become alienated and isolated (Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

Along with a strong sense of enduring self, Maya culture includes the notion of *kaxlan*, or the ability to adapt. For hundreds of years Maya have integrated cultural and technological aspects of other cultures into their own, without diminishing a strong sense of being "Maya." In this way, for example, it is perfectly congruent for a Maya woman to dress in traditional, handmade clothing yet carry a cell phone for communication (cf. Ludwig & LeCompte, 2012).

Finally, the fact is that when two or more cultures come into contact through immigration neither remains static. In the same way that a bilingual realizes that knowing two languages is more than simply adding Language A to Language B, over time immigrants often feel they are neither their original self nor entirely part of their new community. To the extent that they then forge a "new" identity and place for themselves, immigrants

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<sup>1</sup> Hidden populations are groups that are difficult to identify and understand because they have strong privacy concerns, often resulting from illegal activity (e.g., drug use) or residency status (e.g., undocumented immigrants) (Singer, 2010).

may create a “third space” (Bhabha, 1994). As with a bilingual’s two languages, this space is not simply some combination of old and new cultural components, but a new, hybrid identity that allows the immigrant to successfully adapt to new circumstances while maintaining a core sense of self.

Together, these notions of a strong self-identity (enduring self), adaptability (kaxlan), and the third space, provide useful tools for examining the changes that took place in the Alamosa Maya community over the course of just a few years.

### **Community Collaborations - Beginnings**

Adams State University (originally a state Teacher’s College) is located in Alamosa. It is considered a “Hispanic-serving institution” due to the percentage of students attending who identify themselves as Hispanic. In 2007, one of the authors (Ludwig) joined the Teacher Education faculty. Having studied a Maya women’s weaving co-op for her dissertation (Ludwig, 2006), she was intrigued with the Maya community in Alamosa. As an educator, she was curious to know how Maya children fared in local schools: to what extent were the normative practices of school (the “hidden curriculum”; Anyon, 1980) affecting children’s relationships with their families? How could schools be more culturally responsive?

At the same time, the other author (Judd) was Principal Investigator on a teacher development grant designed to support schooling for English learners (“ESL” students). Since the grant’s main goals were improving teachers’ abilities to work with diverse students, along with increasing parental participation in school, both authors collaborated to accomplish these goals in ways that would benefit both the local Maya and teacher communities.

### **Community Collaborations - Initial Partnerships**

Starting with the grant’s teacher development initiative, the authors sought local partnerships. Our view of educational “partnership” is student-focused, but includes partnerships in the home and community as well (Epstein, 2018). Ignoring students’ perspectives on and contributions to all three contexts leads to many of the most common teacher frustrations, including “disinterested” parents and disengaged pupils.

One of our first connections involved the Immigrant Resource Center, a non-profit that had been serving San Luis Valley immigrants for more than 20 years [<http://www.slvirc.org>]. Because the Center was already serving Maya immigrants, they had gained the

trust of the Maya community. This partnership allowed access to the most influential members of the community—the elders. It also facilitated communication with families of school-age children, which led to a study of community – family relationships (Ludwig et al., 2012).

In the public schools, we sought teachers who were acquainted with Maya children and were looking for better ways to reach them. When recruiting for the grant's teacher "cohorts", one criterion was the applicant's interest in collaborating with colleagues to create more culturally responsive schools. The university's working relationship with the Alamosa school district facilitated the identification of key teachers and principals who were supportive of the grant's goals and in particular improving the academic experience for Maya children.

Around this same time (2007), The Colorado Trust, a health equity foundation, facilitated an Immigrant Integration initiative in the San Luis Valley. For the first six months of the grant, the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning brought various constituent groups from Alamosa together to identify and address challenges unique to the local community. An integrated plan emerged that focused on educational, social, and immigrant services, businesses and employers, faith-based organizations, and the immigrants themselves. At the end of the four-year grant, one of the Trust's key findings was that it was "easier" to integrate Mexican immigrants than other groups (Lee et al., 2008, p.7). This no doubt stemmed from the historical presence of Mexican-American residents in Colorado and their long-term dealings with the Anglo population.

## The Issue

The experience of Maya families in Alamosa is part of a longer history of uneasy relations among the peoples of the San Luis Valley. Valley schools in particular have a history of unequal treatment of Hispanic students (Donato, 1999). As was the case in many southwest schools, Spanish-speaking students were sometimes punished for speaking their home language. They were frequently tracked into classes that did not prepare them for post-secondary education. For most of the 20th century, schools in Alamosa were effectively segregated. Children of Mexican descent were forced to attend a Prep School, better known as the "Mexican School." Notably, the first known desegregation lawsuit in the U.S. was filed in 1914 in Alamosa by Mexican parents so that their children could attend the school closest to where they lived. The District Court ruled in the parents' favor, but allowed that English language proficiency could be used as justification to send some children to the separate school. (Lobato, 2018; Donato et al., 2016).

That verdict was quickly forgotten and had little impact on the long-standing, pervasive sentiment among Anglo families that “Mexican” children did not have the language skills or academic preparation to succeed in a regular school setting. Spanish-speaking “Hispanos”<sup>2</sup> often lived in enclaves and segregated housing apart from the more well to do Anglo parts of town. They were treated as second-class citizens by the schools and the community at large. Teachers used racial epithets and corporal punishment with students. It wasn’t until mid-century that more Hispano students attended and graduated from school, and Hispano parents began to gain some political clout by serving on school boards. Even in 1960, however, there was no Hispano teacher in a neighboring school district, in spite of the presence of Adams State College in Alamosa and at least one qualified Hispano teacher graduate (Donato, 2007).

Although conditions slowly improved from the 1950’s on, Alamosa continued de facto school segregation practices for another 30 years. Not until the “Alamosa Plan” for desegregating schools did the district take definitive steps to ensure all same-age students attended classes together. The district’s solution was to house two grades in each elementary building (K-1; 2-3; 4-5), then have all students attend a single middle and high school. While this changed the demographics of the schools, it did not necessarily improve the academic experience for children of color. Hispano dropout rates were higher and high school graduate rates still lower than the Anglo population. Fewer Hispano students went on to post-secondary education.

### Maya ‘Hispanos’

With this history, it is not surprising that when Maya children began enrolling in schools in the 1980s, the initial response from educators was to treat them as Hispano children. After all, they looked and in many cases talked like children from Spanish-speaking families. When it became apparent that many of these children only spoke a Mayan language, the schools did not know how to respond. The default solution was to put them in ESL classes (when available), enroll them in “easier” academic courses and, if native language communication was attempted, to communicate in Spanish. As a result, for roughly 20 years Maya families experienced a school culture that viewed their children as Spanish-speaking Hispanos of Mexican heritage. In this milieu, the children often responded in kind: adopting the speech, dress, and mannerisms of the local Hispanic

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2        Whereas Hispanic or Latino broadly refer to peoples of Spanish language heritage, the term Hispano refers specifically to descendants of colonial Spanish families who were living in the southwest when the U.S. incorporated that region after 1848. Residents of the San Luis Valley were part of the largest Hispano group, the *nuevomexicanos*. Hispanos typically do not consider themselves “Mexican-Americans”, as they did not cross any border to live in the U.S.—the border “crossed them”. The term is not currently used by schools or the community.

population. As time went on some even married outside of the Guatemalan community. Parents of Maya children realized what was happening but were in a difficult position. Many of them immigrated without documentation, entering the U.S. from Mexico. They sometimes obtained work with false documents. Speaking up and becoming visible was risky, even if they had the political acumen to do so. Many families had mixed immigration status—children who originally came with their parents were undocumented, while children born in the U.S. were citizens. These children could grow up and enjoy all the privileges of citizenship: legal work status, driver's licenses, financial aid and resident status for college. Some of these privileges, however, required disclosing family information that could put siblings and parents at risk of discovery and deportation.

In sum, a fundamental issue for the Maya community in Alamosa became the challenge of maintaining and transmitting traditional cultural values and beliefs to the children. In their own words, parents felt their children were becoming “un-Maya”. Because the Maya community was effectively a hidden community, children faced the challenge of somehow remaining “Maya” when almost every other influence—school, the wider community, peers—pressured them to fit in. What follows describes how ongoing collaboration among local community institutions and individuals served to support Maya children in developing and asserting their identity in school while assisting parents in cultivating aspects of Maya identity at home.

### **Initial Community Support**

The first local entity to reach out to the Alamosa Maya was the Catholic diocese. This church offered shelter and assistance to newcomers. In addition, the local school district hired a “Maya community liaison”. This person mainly functioned as a help to parents getting their children enrolled in school (e.g., filling out forms). As for helping Maya families learn about U.S. school culture, or district teachers developing culturally responsive practices, there was little progress. As one Maya adult stated, “in spite of the liaison, there was no change in the interaction between (Maya) students and their teachers and counselors” (cited in Ludwig & LeCompte, 2012).

As already mentioned, another local entity with early Maya contacts was the Immigrant Resource Center (IRC). From its beginnings in 1987, the IRC evolved into a valley-wide resource for all immigrants as well as migrant and seasonal workers. Since 2003, it has functioned as an independent non-profit assisting with immigration status, victims of abuse, homeless crime victims, and English language classes.

While these two organizations helped Maya newcomers with basic necessities,

neither focused on educational issues. The school district, except for the early effort mentioned above, generally neglected Maya children and their families. Maya students became less and less distinguishable from Hispanic students. Over time, the Maya began to be viewed as Mexicans who did not speak “good” Spanish. Such was the situation in 2006, when the efforts described below commenced.

### Collaborative Efforts

Looking back, it is apparent that the Maya community’s transition from hidden to observable was not the result of one or two major events or the work of just one or two individuals. Instead, a constellation of small efforts and the cooperation of many individuals led, over a relatively short period of time, to big changes in the visibility and voice of the Alamosa Maya. Likewise, the efforts themselves were not focused on just one aspect of the community. Rather, separate activities and partnerships influenced, and were influenced by, the needs and desires of community elders and families, the attitudes of local residents, the commitment of teachers, and Maya children themselves.

In short, the efforts presented below were not one-way initiatives directed at the Maya community. Instead, the individuals and institutions discussed below joined together in a community based participatory action research<sup>3</sup> (PAR) approach to identify ways they could support what the Maya themselves saw as important. This approach, together with the student-focused partnership of the Community Integration Grant initiative, required that the voices of children and adults form the cornerstone of social relationships: trust (Schensul and LeCompte, 2016).

Maya families in Alamosa had realized what most immigrants discover: that the cultural mores of the United States differed from their Guatemalan home culture. Maya parents often spoke of the loss of their language, Q’anjob’al, respect for parents, and a loss of community pride and unity. In the words of one Maya elder, “our culture is something that identifies us. Without identity, we don’t know who we are or where we come from. That is something important for us: That we know our identity, our culture, our customs ... always carry them with us and pass them on to our children.” Another elder told Ludwig that the Maya community needs to “pay attention to how we build the children and what we put into their minds.” These sentiments guided project partners in this project as they worked to support the maintenance of Maya culture and students’ positive identities as Maya.

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<sup>3</sup> PAR is distinguished from other types of Action Research by its explicit focus on social justice and the equality of those involved in the research (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015).

## University, Immigrant Resource Center, and Community Integration Grants

In 2007, Adams State University (ASC) and the Immigrant Resource Center (IRC) each received a grant. ASC's Project EXCELL was a 5-year project designed to assist teachers in developing the skills to effectively work with linguistically and culturally diverse children. The IRC's 4-year grant was part of the Colorado Trust's statewide community integration initiative mentioned above. The intent of the Community Integration Grant was to build positive and productive relationships among communities of the San Luis Valley and between their individual immigrants and refugees. Education was identified as a target area. Specifically, educational goals included establishment of a climate that (a) valued and advocated for diverse learners and leaders, (b) improved English Language Learner (ELL) student academic achievement and high school retention, (c) established active parent groups, (d) created community engagement opportunities for students and (e) provided high quality professional development for educators in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students.

### A Baseline – Community Interviews

One of the early activities provided a “baseline” for home-school interactions. In the early months of the Colorado Trust grant, Antonio Sandoval, a former principal, and Ren Carbutt, a student at Adams State, were hired to implement some of the grant activities. While planning those activities, Ludwig and Judd taught both bilingual employees to write interview questions and conduct interviews with 10 sets of immigrant parents and 15 Guatemalan students. Analysis of this qualitative data revealed that immigrant students felt marginalized, disconnected from and voiceless in their educational experience (Ludwig et al., 2012). An eleven year-old student said, “Our parents always tell us to stay in school. My dad told us that when he was a little kid he had to work for himself to buy what he needs. Sometimes he ended up stealing.” The same boy later said that teachers needed to “hear what the students have to say because their opinions aren't being heard. The dropout rates would not increase more because the school is listening to them and most of the time they don't.” A high school student talked of being in a British literature class. “I was the only one in there who was Hispanic and . . . I felt like they misplaced me because I didn't feel included. The English teacher was only speaking to her white students and she left me out of the conversation and she forgot all about me as if I didn't exist.”

Interviews with immigrant parents revealed that they were frustrated by divisions

occurring in the home as their children increasingly identified with English and American culture and failed to practice the respect so rooted in Maya cosmology and social relations. A local priest who had worked with the Maya immigrants since their arrival in the late 1970s shared that although the parents wanted their children to have an education, they were upset by the “loss of the old ways”. As he put it, the parents wanted children to “keep the old values, especially respect for parents, for the family, and for the church. The families that functioned the best were the ones where the children maintained respect.” In addition, most parents talked of having lost their rights as parents. “According to my children, if you hit a child, they’ll take you to jail and lock you up. You will lose your children.” For many parents who spoke no English or who could not read or write, children lied about their attendance and their grades. “My children know more than I do” lamented many parents in families where the children’s education had caused tension within the family. However, many parents confided, “it is the vision of every parent that our children educate themselves. How we would love to have a child that is a lawyer, a doctor, or a judge, a high-ranking person. We have to give more time to our children.”



Fig. 3: Colorado Teachers and Guatemalan Students

### Project EXCELL Activities

After reading and coding the surveys and interview findings, Ludwig approached Judd regarding the needs of Maya schoolchildren. Although many teachers were well meaning and pedagogically adept, they lacked understanding of the Maya culture in order to become more culturally responsive to Maya students. With Ludwig’s Guatemalan contacts, the authors arranged for select teachers to travel to Guatemala. One of the conditions of the trip was that upon their return, the teachers would agree to participate in PLCs (Professional Learning Communities). The PLCs would use these teachers’ experiences and insights to develop strategies to improve the educational experience for Maya children and their families school wide, and to determine ways to involve their parents in school. Several of these teachers subsequently participated in additional cultural sensitivity training. They then served as mentors to their district colleagues.

The teachers’ insights and improved cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2002) made them eager to foster partnerships with parents. One initial effort built on an existing elementary Family Literacy Night held each spring. These nights included mini-classes on different topics for parents and literacy materials—primarily free books—for students.

The meeting was originally designed for parents of linguistically and culturally diverse students, which usually meant Mexican-heritage students. However, it became a logical extension to reach out to Maya parents. This outreach was accomplished through a combination of direct teacher-parent contact and use of community elders to encourage attendance. Within two years, each Alamosa school was sponsoring their own Family Literacy Nights.



Fig. 4: Mr. Coj in Santa Eulalia



Fig. 5: Alamosa Teachers in Sololá



Fig. 6: Women's Agency in Santa Eulalia

The Guatemala trip also initiated personal contacts with influential Maya in Guatemala. In-country travel was facilitated by Tereso Coj and the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala. At the time, Mr. Coj was a liaison between local Maya communities and the Universidad del Valle. He helped the authors arrange for school visits in the Lake Atitlán area and for the teachers to help paint a school and plant seedlings around Sololá, a town in the Maya highlands. On a subsequent trip, teachers offered educational workshops to local Maya teachers. Later Mr. Coj accompanied Judd, who was working on a Fulbright project in Esquintla, to Santa Eulalia, the native town of most of the Alamosa Maya. During the visit, Judd met with town elders and arranged for a video conference between a women's activist agency and community members in Alamosa.

After the Guatemala trips, one of the valley teachers encouraged Mr. Coj to visit Alamosa. During the visit, he spoke to faculty and community members at the University, visited local schools and talked with students, and met with families from the Maya community. Before returning to Guatemala, he also presented at the Colorado State Conference of ESL teachers. In hindsight, Mr. Coj's visit offered Maya children a different vision of who they could be: educated professionals who worked to make a difference for the community. Seeing other influential Maya became part of the impetus for students to take pride in their heritage and make themselves more "visible" at school.

### Maya Project, Pastoral Maya and the Alamosa Maya Community (Espiritu Maya)

Ludwig's initial attendance at Pastoral Maya in 2007 led to additional influential

contacts. One was Juanatano Cano, a Maya teacher and community leader teaching in the Los Angeles public school district. Another was David López, formerly a Catholic priest from Santa Eulalia, the sending community in Guatemala for many of the Alamosa immigrants. With grant money from the Catholic Bishops, Padre David traveled to the United States. The Maya community in Alamosa was the second group that he formally organized. Grant monies from the ASC Project EXCELL and the IRC's Community integration grant were used to bring these dynamic Maya leaders to Alamosa for visits with the Maya community, students, parents' nights and local teachers and administrators. These visits encouraged the teachers and adult Maya to be more actively involved with their children's teachers and schools.

Cano and López also connected the organizations then known as Pastoral Maya and The Maya Heritage Community Project of Kennesaw State University to Flora Archuleta, Immigrant Resource Center and Community Integration Grant director; Judd and Ludwig, ASC Project EXCELL; and elders of Espiritu Maya, the local Maya organization. These individuals used their respective resources in order to plan and carry out educational and community initiatives.

These partnerships also reminded the authors that schooling and parenting is a collaborative endeavor requiring both cultural understanding and respect. In this case, it was necessary to establish working relationships with Maya community elders in order to communicate effectively and work productively with Maya families. A key elder was Francisco Lucas, one of the original immigrants to the Valley. He had been instrumental in helping newer immigrants settle in the area, and had become a point of contact for both the local diocese and Immigrant Resource Center. Through him, his wife Lucía, and their extended family, inroads were made to schools in the community.

When Lucas expressed a need for the Maya community to have access to a curandero, or shaman, funds were used to bring Francisco Shapín, a school principal and shaman from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, to Alamosa. During his visit, Shapín spoke to community groups and also trained Lucas to become a shaman. In 2012, Lucas was formally consecrated as a shaman to serve the cultural and spiritual needs of the local Maya community.



Fig. 7: Francisco and Lucia Lucas

Another request from the Maya was to purchase a marimba, an instrument native to Maya communities. Funds were raised to purchase and import one. Children received lessons and the instrument was used at community events such as the Fiesta of Santa Eulalia and performances of the Espiritu Maya folklórico troop. The marimba became

a tangible way to honor and maintain part of the community's cultural heritage. It also provided a way to share that heritage with students and parents outside the Valley. In 2012, a class of fourth grade students from Denver requested a visit with the Maya community. They, along with their parents and teachers, travelled nearly four hours to meet and spend time with Alamosa students. The Maya children's marimba tunes entertained and impressed the visitors, as well as the other students and teachers in their own school (Chavez, 2012).



Fig. 8: Alamosa Marimba

As Alamosa teachers became more aware of their students' Maya heritage, they sought ways to recognize and incorporate that heritage in school and share it with the community. In addition to personally ensuring more parents were involved in the Literacy Nights, parent-teacher meetings, and other parent-school events, there was interest in additional events that would specifically showcase Maya culture. For example, a middle school teacher organized a soccer team largely consisting of Guatemalan Students. He asked for money to hold a banquet at the end of the soccer season in order to honor the players and their families. At the high



Fig. 9: High School Chapines Club

school, a science teacher sponsored a Chapines<sup>4</sup> Club for Maya students. Empowered by the recognition, the club members' first request was to share their cultural background with teachers. Students prepared and presented a dinner for the school's teachers. Eventually, students were asked to share their stories with community groups in Alamosa as well as elsewhere in Colorado. The sponsoring teacher developed such a relationship with students that they and their families came to her for help in matters such as applying to college and trying to prevent a father's deportation. In her words it "was a pleasure...to meet their families and get to know their gentle ways" (Kruse, personal communication).

## Conclusions

This essay began with a question: How can a Maya immigrant community—and the families that comprise it—maintain their cultural identity in the face of isolation and pressure to acculturate? More specifically, how can parents ensure that their children learn and carry on what it means to be "Maya"?

<sup>4</sup> 'Chapín' is a term Guatemalans often use to refer to themselves, as opposed to the more generic 'Guatemalteco'; sort of like saying one is a 'Yankee' instead of a 'New Englander.' The students chose the club name themselves. Their objective was to raise the visibility and awareness of Maya students to school personnel and their peers.

We have presented some ways various resources helped answer that question. While it would be nice to conclude that as a result of these partnerships things have permanently changed for the better, that is rarely the case with social change. Zuber-Skerritt et al. (2015) reiterate Adorno's (1973) warning about oversimplifying complicated problems:

The complex, messy, and wicked nature of the social world, including injustice in society and education, should not be simplified into neat classifications and categories, but be explored by a variety of perspectives and methods of research. (p. 25)

In addition to improving school visibility and teachers' cultural competence, one other community initiative continues to bear fruit—literally. In 2012, the K-1 elementary school was closed and the buildings razed. Initially, the land, adjacent to the Río Grande, was purchased for an RV park. After some public protest and political wrangling, funds were raised to purchase the area for a community garden. Members of the Maya community in particular were encouraged to plant crops that were part of their traditional diet. Now, six years later, the Rio Grande Farm Park is a permanent 38-acre site owned by the San Luis Valley Foods Coalition (Trust for Public Land, 2016). In addition to community farming, the property contains trails, fruit trees, and space for groups to gather for celebrations. Francisco Lucas and his wife Lucía are both on the Park Committee.



Fig. 10: Maya Community Members With Crops - Credit: TPL Archive

The authors' work with sectors of the Alamosa community, especially the Maya students and their families, demonstrates the importance of one's culture when facing adversity and its value in building an enduring identity. As one Alamosa Maya elder explained, "Our culture is not the base, it is the root." Partnering also highlighted the power of collaborating with likeminded individuals to form community supports for the changes we sought. We found, as a contributor to the Foxfire Interviews put it,

We all need community—and since community is hard to come by in this society, we need to find ways of gathering it unto ourselves...Part of our task is to search out folks who are on this journey with us and gather them in various ways, creating communities that can help us...do the best work we can (Palmer, as cited in Hatton, 2005, p. 133).

We believe the work we carried out beyond the university and situated in the domain of community participatory engagement, is critical to understanding how to provide equitable opportunities for marginalized as well as mainstream populations of learners. Witnessing the results of making Maya culture visible to the community of Alamosa and its positive impact on the Maya as well as on the community at large has made that need clear to us. While this story has a beginning, it has no end as long as Maya live in the San Luis Valley.

Perhaps the words of one of the original Maya immigrants sums it up best. Francisco Lucas has seen the ups and downs of his family and community over the past 40 years:

Something that makes us proud as Maya within our cultural and spiritual activities is that we have integrated our culture. We have brought it and shared it with many people. Perhaps not everybody knows about us as people, but the schools, the churches, the various organizations – they know and have shared it with us. We want to have our rights and be known in this country and in this valley because if we hide ourselves it is like saying when I go out into the street they could say “that dirty Indian,” and that is how they would treat us. Because we don’t let them get to know us, a lot of times people discriminate against us, but allowing them to get to know us so that they can identify us as we are is the most beautiful thing.

## Coda

Since the last author moved from the Valley in 2015, not much has changed (Lucas, personal communication). Probably the most visible aspect of the Maya community now is their cultivation of various vegetables as part of the Río Grande Farm Park, the local food Co-operative mentioned above. Several families sell what they grow in a local farmer’s market during the summer. An annual Harvest Festival also incorporates aspects of local Maya culture, such as the Espíritu Maya Marimba group.

With the retirement of the teacher sponsor, the high school Chapines Club did not continue, but there have been several academic success stories. Three students graduated from University in 2018. One, Juan Francisco, completed a music MA at UCLA on full scholarship and will now pursue a Ph.D. The local Alamosa schools have benefitted from increased involvement on the part of some mothers, who volunteer on a regular basis (High Country News, 2018). In December 2018, the daughter of one Maya couple graduated Summa Cum Laude with a major in Sociology. She completed her degree in 3 ½ years and

with no student loan debt. She works for Alamosa County and plans to stay in the Valley and serve the community (Relyea, 2018).

As is true of immigrants nationwide, the last couple of years have been characterized by increased uncertainty for the Alamosa Maya who are undocumented. The IRC receives several calls each day from individuals concerned about the threats to DACA. The Director, Flora Archuleta, says that since the last Presidential election she has fielded double the requests for Power of Attorney on the part of parents fearful that they will be deported and separated from their citizen children (Archuleta, personal communication).

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