# The Danger of a Single Theory: Understanding Students' Voices and Social Justice in the Peruvian Andes

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**Background/Context:** Working towards social justice in education requires students' voices to be heard and understood. This is especially the case for students from marginalized popu-lations. Prior research has shown the value and importance of students' voices for school retention, academic success, school inclusivity, and student buy-in. However, more research is needed on how adults understand and interpret students' voices and implement their under-standings in school practice and policy.

**Purpose/Objective:** This paper uncovers the danger of misinterpreting students' voices due to assumptions about concepts such as success and social justice. I explore this issue by interpreting first-generation Quechua (indigenous) students' voices about success in the Peruvian Andes through four different paradigms concerned with social change, social reproduction, and social justice. The discussion places into dialogue feminist theory, critical theory, postcolonial theory, and development theory in order to highlight the implications of each interpretive framework for responsive education policy. I show how interpretations based on each theory offer divergent school policy options, the danger of a single theory for interpreting student voice.

**Participants:** The coresearchers for this paper are 14 young women from Quechua communities who are the first in their families to attend secondary school. Working with them are a woman from a Quechua community, a woman from Central Europe, and a man from the United States.

**Research Design:** A collaborative ethnographic case study utilizing student voice methods. The students developed the theme and topic for research during a student-led seminar. Based on the students' questions, the adults helped facilitate the creation of an interview protocol with the students. The group answered the questions on the protocol and used the protocol to interview the students' parents. We held three total focus group discussions to develop the protocol, discuss findings, and interrogate ideas of success.

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** The results highlight the vastly different interpretations and policy implications of students' voices based on each theory—highlighting how social justice is a complex concept that requires discussion across theoretical orientations. The findings also show points of overall congruence, and cross-theory trends. Recommendations are for educa-tional leaders and researchers (teachers, parents, administrators) to reflect and think about empirical information from multiple theoretical frameworks in order to become more aware of the influence of one's own assumptions in educational decision-making.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Peruvian Andes, as in many other Latin American regions, indigenous students continue to face substantial barriers to quality education (CEPAL, 2014; UNESCO, 2012). For girls from indigenous communities, secondary schools can be alienating and social pressure to support younger siblings, pregnancies, and the need to work (Post, 2002; Post & Pong, 2009) are the contextual underpinnings for why female students in Peru and in 49 other countries still have higher dropout rates than boys in secondary school (Levitan, 2015; Shahidul & Karim, 2015; UNESCO, 2012). Although school leaders cannot address all of these issues, indigenous students' alienation from school is one area in which many schools can improve. Student voice research (Mitra, 2009) is a promising, influential, and fairly recent line of inquiry that can help address student alienation. In student voice research adults (teachers, administrators, policy makers, or scholars) listen to students, collaborate with students to develop more responsive decision-making, or provide students opportunities to make changes on their own (Mitra, 2007). Student voice research can serve as a way to better align school practices with minority students' needs in order to increase comfort in schools and improve student retention (Brion-Meisels, 2014).

However, including students' voices in educational decision-making is a complex endeavor. Listening to and working with students requires a significant amount of interpretive skill, an area of student voice research that is still underexplored. For school policy decisions based on student voice, an educational leader's underlying theoretical lenses and cultural backgrounds influence how students are understood, leading to different policies. Since the power dynamics of most public schools still rely on adults to ultimately implement decisions, this research highlights the ways in which different lenses and theoretical assumptions affect interpretations of student voice.

In this paper, I examine how different theoretical orientations influence approaches to educational decision-making through a collaborative ethnographic case study (Lassiter, 2005; Merriam, 2014) research project I undertook with Quechua students from rural communities in the Peruvian Andes. The research project was undertaken as part of my work with an educational non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to providing secondary school access and success for Quechua girls from rural communities in the Peruvian Andes.

I examine the following questions: What are first-generation Quechua students' aspirations and understandings of success? What are the implications of students' aspirations and understandings as they relate to social justice from feminist, critical, postcolonial, and development frameworks? More specifically, this study utilizes ethnographic methods to interrogate

how adults come to understand students' voices. I examine how students' understandings of success interact with issues of gender, school, and marginalization to contextualize the role of education for underrepresented populations. A basic assumption in this research is that marginalized populations often do not have their personal, cultural, and practical needs met in public schools (Levitan, 2015). To better serve marginalized students, educational leaders and practitioners benefit from gaining an understanding of students' backgrounds and their goals and aspirations to be more responsive to their needs (Delpit, 2006; Holmes & Crossley, 2004).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Student voice research relates to a number of educational initiatives, including student outcomes and social justice literature. For example, understanding students' aspirations can support student motivation, which has been shown to have a number of benefits for learning (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010). Research indicates that students with high motivation have a higher likelihood of academic success (e.g. Martin et al., 2013; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Adelson, 2012; Osborne & Jones, 2011). Related to research in motivation is the concept of "grit," or passion and perseverance (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Higher levels of grit correlate to higher rates of success. Yet more needs to be learned about fostering motivation as a means to ensure students can find passion and persevere in school.

Another issue addressed by student voice research is student engagement. A common difficulty teachers face is engaging students from marginalized communities (Brion-Meisels, 2014; Darder & Mirón, 2006). Teacher preparation programs often do not provide beginning teachers with the knowledge and affective skills to relate to students from different cultural and community backgrounds. Darder and Mirón (2006) argue that work in critical pedagogy, an approach to overcoming oppressive societal structures, often falls flat with students, partially because teachers are poorly equipped to understand and contend with the realities of oppression and marginalization that students experience. One way to foster student engagement, motivation, and passion is to collaborate with students about issues that matter to them.

Creating educational opportunities that align with students' identities and goals is not only important for learning and engagement, but also for social justice. In Latin America and postcolonial societies in general, education has been used as a means of social and political coercion, forced assimilation, and cultural suppression (Cerron-Palomino, 1989; Cortina, 2014). Historically, education has used overt and covert methods to impose governments' political and ideological goals on students (Levinson,

2011). To work against the historical injustice of education systems that attempted to subsume Quechua culture and language, a responsive education focused on the students' culture, strengths, needs, and desires is an essential element towards socially just and inclusive schools. An appropriate understanding of students' aspirations, and a responsive education in which students are able to voice and work towards their aspirations is, I argue, a key component to fostering just and productive learning.

However, understanding students' aspirations and the ways in which educators can be responsive to those aspirations is a complex endeavor, practically, epistemologically, and ethically (Appadurai, 1988). In most schools the power dynamics between teachers and students is inherently uneven, even in the most democratic classrooms (Appadurai, 1988; Mitchell & Moore, 2012). This means that in listening to students, teachers take on an ethical responsibility to critically examine their interpretations (Rankin, 2010). If the teacher or administrator misunderstands students during collaborative work, then students are unlikely to engage with the teacher and will remain on the margins of the classroom. This misunderstanding is also likely to continue the suppression of students' voices and agency.

The issues of interpretation in student voice work speak to perennial concerns in ethnographic and critical, feminist, and postcolonial literature on voice and representation (Christensen, 2004; Lassiter, 2005, 2008; Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 2006). Scholars argue that reflexivity of the researcher and sensitivity to power, (mis)representation, and the political and social dynamics of research are critical for appropriate research and pedagogical practices. Multiple-perspectives taking (Demerath, 2002) and an understanding and interrogation of the location of the researcher—especially when the location of the "researcher" is the Global North, such as the United States, and the location of the "researched" is the Global South, such as Peru (Mohanty, 2003)—are two approaches to facilitating honesty in uncovering truths in ethnographic research. Gaining an understanding of the complexity of multiple truths still requires more work and research.

To contribute to scholarship on social justice and education through listening to and working with students, I interrogate how theories and theoretical approaches affect the understandings and framings of social justice approaches to education. In this paper, I argue that taking multiple interpretive perspectives, such as from different theoretical paradigms, is an important approach for just, appropriate, and responsive interpretations of students' voices. Theoretical approaches frame interpretive options differently. Analysis from multiple theoretical perspectives also allows for uncovering shared understandings between theories.

To examine how theories influence decision-making, this paper embarks on a discussion about the different policy and practice implications of four

theoretical frameworks concerned with education development and social justice. I perform this analysis to understand how to interpret the voices of fourteen Quechua young women who are the first in their families to attend secondary school. This article is primarily a theoretical piece based in an empirical case study. The findings demonstrate some of the complexity inherent in the concept of social justice and in interpreting participants' voices for policy making. I utilize four different perspectives, critical theory, feminist theory, development theory, and postcolonial theory to examine how theoretical orientations affect the interpretations of students' voices, and ultimately how this would affect school policy and practice for historically marginalized communities (McCarthy, Giardana, Harewood, & Park, 2003). The article is not a critique of any of the theories. Instead, it is a critique of the ways in which theories are used and can inadvertently recreate hegemonic norms that disregard the many truths in students' voices.

## CONTEXT

The study takes place in the Peruvian Andes. Peru is the third largest country in Latin America and is located on the Pacific coast, just below the equator. Peru's geography has formed three major socio-political sectors, the *costa* or coast, the *sierra* or the high Andes mountain range, and the *selva* or jungle. It has one of the fastest growing economies in Latin America (World Bank, 2015) largely based on mining, foods exports, and tourism. Peru's social history is complex. The oppression of indigenous groups during colonial times still reverberates in the stressed political situations the country faces as it works towards progress.

For example, much development and economic advancement in Peru has occurred in Lima, the capital city on the *costa*. The indigenous communities in the *sierra* and the s*elva* have been exploited and marginalized by colonial powers, and until the end of the 20th century had generally been ignored or used for cheap labor by the mainly non-indigenous national government (Adelman, 2006). These communities now see slow development, and the political and economic situation for indigenous populations has improved over the past 10 years (Cortina, 2014).

Although data in Peru is inconsistent, as of 2006—the time of the last census—indigenous heritage groups make up a significant minority of Peruvian citizens, about 48% (Political Database of the Americas, 2006). There are over 3 million first language Quechua speakers in Peru, and many millions more in neighboring countries (Cortina, 2014). While many Quechua people live in the urban centers of Puno and Cusco, about 48% live in small rural towns (Cortina, 2014). Millions of Quechua speakers and an international congress on Andean communities fight for

the rights of Quechua and other indigenous peoples of South America (CEPAL, 2014). These groups have different perspectives on what justice for indigenous peoples consists of, including and sometimes opposing, the United Nations' and the World Bank's perspectives on what indigenous peoples need. Yet, for all of the work that these notable groups have undertaken and accomplished, much of the Quechua world in the Andes still lacks political power and resources, including access to quality secondary schools that meet students' needs (UNICEF, 2015).

Economically, communities in the rural Andes are in extreme poverty, as most families are subsistence farmers (Stromquist, 2001). Many rural towns in the region are without electricity, potable water, or sewage (Adelman, 2006; CEPAL, 2014). Culturally, the dominant *criollo* gentry have historically attempted to force the indigenous population to assimilate into the Spanish language, religion, and dress (Cerron-Palomino, 1989; Ibarra, 2013; Moore, 2014). Racially, the indigenous populations have been subsumed as second class to the whiter descendants of the Spanish (Stavans, 2011). In addition to these layers of oppression, which affect both girls and boys, girls from indigenous communities are confronted with a *machista* culture that places women in limited and gendered roles (Glidden, 2011). Thus, indigenous women face multiple and entrenched barriers to opportunity, self-determination, and power.

Though the above discussion paints a stark picture of marginalization and oppression, there are complicating factors to this analysis. Indigenous communities throughout Peru have maintained many of their traditional ways through the history of attempted assimilation, and have successfully fought for their cultural and linguistic rights. Multicultural and Bilingual Education (1993), a national school policy that affords provisions for indigenous students to learn in their mother tongue and to learn about their history and culture, is one initiative that demonstrates a positive change in the dynamic between *criollo* and indigenous groups. However, my experience is that this policy lacks strong implementation on the ground.

Access to secondary school is still a challenge for girls living in rural indigenous communities in the Andes and throughout Latin America (CEPAL, 2014). The lack of opportunity for rural girls to attend secondary school is only one layer of oppression they face. When these girls overcome barriers to school access, they still confront barriers to academic success. These barriers include minimal preparation for secondary school while in primary school, bigotry from their teachers and urbanized peers, and second language issues (Levitan, 2015). Students in rural communities speak Quechua as a mother-tongue, while secondary school is taught primarily in Spanish.

Educational practitioners and leaders who are concerned with social justice need to work to ensure marginalized students' success. Currently

many researchers are working on how to increase student educational outcomes for marginalized groups around the world (Levitan & Post, 2016; Cortina, 2014). Yet, it is unclear what success means for Quechua girls in the larger Andean sociopolitical context. There are also deeper questions for educational leaders to address: What role does academic success play in the greater context of the lives of marginalized indigenous girl students around the world? Does secondary school offer indigenous girls liberation and opportunity? Who is defining liberation, opportunity, and success in the discourses of girls' educational empowerment, and how do these definitions affect what we come to understand as educational success? While this article does not address these questions directly, one powerful way to approach these issues is through research that includes the students' voices to better understand how the students make sense of their situation and construct their goals to enact policies that help facilitate their success.

*Local Context and Participants*

The research activities take place in a small town of about 5,000 residents in the Peruvian Andes, approximately 90% of who claim Quechua heritage. It sits 12,000 feet above sea level, nestled in a fertile valley for growing potatoes, corn, and pasturing livestock. The 14 students who are my collaborators for this research are from rural Quechua communities in the mountainous highlands above the town. These students are between the ages of 13 and 16. They come down the mountains to the town every week to attend secondary school and then return home on weekends. Some of the students walk as far as 7 hours to reach the school from their homes.

They are part of an educational NGO that provides access to the public secondary school, safe housing, supplementary education, nutritious meals and tutoring. The NGO is an international, collaborative, grassroots project and relies upon students and parents for much of its decision-making. The participants are from eight different rural communities. None of the fourteen students grew up with electricity or running water, although two students' communities received electricity 4 years ago. The girls' first language is Quechua. They all learned some Spanish in primary school.

Two colleagues and I are the other participants in this study. Isabella[1] is the students' teacher and housemother. She is a woman in her 30s from a Quechua community who grew up in a district down the mountain valley. My other colleague, Victoria, is a woman in her late 20s from Central Europe and is a long-term volunteer for the project. She holds a master's degree in education and focuses on women's empowerment. I serve as the director of educational programming and operations for this project, where I have been working since 2010. I am a man from the United States. I discuss my research positionality in the methods section, below.

## THEORETICAL AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

The interpretative framework for this research is a multilevel, comparative paradigm using the interrelations and tensions between critical theory, feminist theory, development theory, and postcolonial theory to situate and understand the voices of the participants in wider discourses. Very little literature is engaged in comparing diverse theoretical or interpretive approaches and their implications in practice and policy (see, e.g., Sylvester, 1999). Instead, common approaches in scholarly investigation are to find a single theoretical framework that "fits" the questions and data (Merriam, 2013). What this paper shows is that a single theoretical approach limits the possibilities for understanding empirical information.

Single interpretations also profoundly affect work in the field. In practice, educational leaders often make decisions based on implicit theoretical assumptions about the meaning of ideas such as "social justice," "success," and "empowerment" (Ellsworth, 1989). Yet, these assumptions regularly go unexplored and unquestioned. Without understanding the diversity of interpretive options, leaders risk misunderstanding information. Leaders also risk creating hegemonic structures within their organization because of their single understanding of complex social constructs.

For reflective leaders and educational practitioners, it is important to make explicit the different understandings and interpretations of empirical information that stem from influential theories relating to issues of social justice and equity. As I will show, theories that are often framed to be addressing issues of social justice and equity result in vastly different policy directions and understandings of key issues in education, such as student success. These different understandings may perhaps unwittingly marginalize students' actual voices and needs, thereby reifying and subsuming their knowledge and ideas into a hegemonic structure. For this reason, I explore four of the most influential theories concerned with social justice to tease out differences and similarities in interpreting student voice for a more comprehensive understanding of socially just educational leadership as an interpretive process that requires reflection.

In this article feminist theory (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2012; hooks, 2000) critical theory (Agger, 1991; Darder & Mirón, 2006; Freire, 2000), development theory (Heyneman, 2003), and postcolonial theory (Appiah, 1991; Said, 1979; Spivak, 2006; Sylvester, 1999) are understood as complex, interwoven, and at times competing perspectives for interpreting empirical information that relate to issues of social change, social reproduction, and social justice. Schools are spaces where both social change and reproduction occur. In the context of the Peruvian Andes, schools are historically contested and sit at the intersection of many different social and political forces (Apple,

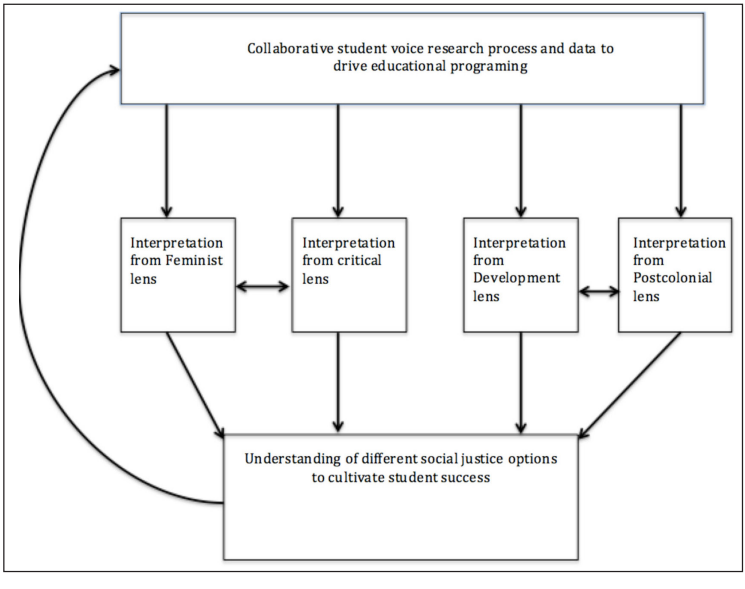
1995; Gall, 1975). In order to understand the complexities of this space, it is imperative that the theoretical framework of the research reflects this multiplicity by incorporating a sample of prominent theoretical perspectives. For this reason, I have selected four of the most influential theories concerned with education development, social reproduction, and social justice to comparatively interpret the students' voices.

There are many "feminisms" (Pasque, 2013), and many versions of critical theory. Scholars also argue amongst themselves about the tenants of postcolonial and development theories (Sylvester, 1999). Due to space, I paint these complex, multifaceted theories in broad strokes to address main arguments and orientations of each theory. For organizational purposes, I compare feminist and critical theory together, and I compare postcolonial and development theory together. Feminist and critical theories share many points of contact, and postcolonial and development theories address similar issues, even if they do not interact much in scholarship.

*Critical Theory and Feminist Theory: A Comparison*

Critical theory provides a method for analyzing overt and subtle systems of oppression that limit the agency and self-determination of individuals and groups (Freire, 2000). Critical theory specifically looks at the ways in

**Figure 1. Collaborative student voice research process and data to drive educational programming**



which power dynamics of social class and economic systems limit certain groups' and individuals' access to social goods (Agger, 1991). The core of critical theory is to uncover and understand the structures that maintain inequality and raise a consciousness of these structures for those who are oppressed by them. Through this consciousness, the oppressed (Freire, 2000) will be able to work together towards new paradigms that break down oppressive structures. Critical theory views oppression of marginalized individuals as both a material and psychological process (Apple, 1995). Thus, through a critical theory lens, the challenges that rural, poor indigenous students face in secondary school are interpreted as a result of unjust economic and class structures, and students' aspirations and self-consciousness are also affected by these structures.

Feminist theory provides a complimentary, but sometimes competing conceptual and methodological framework to critical theory. Feminist theory focuses on how a person's sex—the physical, biological characteristics that run along the continuum of male and female—and gender—the socially constructed norms that entail "being" a "man" or "woman," "boy" or "girl,"—among other classifications, affect a person's ability to make choices, as well as their access to power, knowledge, and opportunity (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; hooks, 2000). Gendered dynamics affect both boys and girls, as they frame perceptions of what are appropriate behaviors and opportunities for the sexes, regardless of individual identity. Feminist theory seeks to overcome the oppression of restrictive norms and to develop communities that value each individual, both in their role as a member of society and as a unique human being. Feminist theory at times focuses on developing the rights of women through the lens of U.S. and Eurocentric ideals and values, as opposed to the critical perspective. Critical perspectives seek to overcome systems of oppression through advancement of alternative political structures. However, new political structures may still marginalize women's voice and place in that system (Freire, 2000; hooks, 2000). This summary is a generalization of two complex and interwoven fields of theoretical literature, and it is important to note that tensions do exist among scholars within these paradigms (hooks, 2000).

*Development Theory and Postcolonial Theory: A Comparison*

In most instances, development theory and postcolonial theory broadly conceived are "two giant islands of analysis and enterprise [that] stake out a large part of the world and operate within it—or with respect to it—as if the other had a bad smell" (Sylvester, 1999, pp. 703–704). Throughout its history after World War II, development theory has focused on the

alleviation of poverty in the "third world" or Global South, such as Latin America, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. It focuses on the development of political and economic systems reliant upon the paradigms of Eurocentric and North American structures (Heyneman, 2003; Sylvester, 1999). Development theory, initiated by economists such as C. E. Ayres (1944) and W. W. Rostow (1959) saw societal "progress" as linear and best achieved through a North American model of consumerism and economic growth. Current iterations of development theory are based on human capital theory (Becker, 2008), neoliberal paradigms of economic growth (Spring, 2008), and neoinstitutional theory (LeTendre, 2006; Meyer, 2010). Development theory is operationalized through international NGOs such as the World Bank (Heyneman, 2003).

The assumption of these development models is that global aid is a positive force for economic prosperity, human rights laws, and infrastructure. It is achieved through economic reforms based on rationalistic paradigms. The goals of development are sought at the expense of (or regardless of) the heterogeneous aspects of culture and identity. Development workers often uncritically accept these underlying assumptions. Critics claim that they result in top-down policies that silence local voices and marginalize local values in the name of economic progress, homogenizing the diverse ways-of-being around the world.

Postcolonial theory works in opposition to development paradigms. Postcolonial theory began at the time of colonization pre-World War II, and continues today parallel to the development model described above (Said, 1975; Sylvester, 1999). The crux of postcolonial studies is to critically examine, problematize, and come to understand the legacies of colonialism and neocolonial development models, and work against these models by humanizing, valorizing, and finding the strengths of the "underdeveloped." The goals are to provide a means of amplifying the voice of the unheard, or at times to be a mouthpiece for the marginal. This lends itself to more "bottom-up" models of societal growth. Postcolonial theory seeks liberation from colonizing powers of the mind and body imposed by the Global North (Fanon, 1970). However, like its goals, it is a very heterogeneous field, which has many different ideas and works on different planes of analysis, both political and academic.

Scholars within the field criticize the fact that postcolonial studies do not adequately address issues of poverty, human-rights violations, or development (Rajan, 1997). Historically, development theorists have avoided engaging with postcolonial theorists. More recently, however, some postcolonial literature has impacted development models by creating policies that ensure "stakeholder voice" in development programs.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In this article I approach ethnographic research as an intersubjective relationship where what is studied reveals knowledge that is collaborative, mutually beneficial, and mutually constructed (Hesse-Biber, 2012). The initial research question and idea developed organically and collaboratively during a weekly seminar with the student researcher-participants, which I discuss in the Data Collection section. Although fundamentally ethnographic in nature (Merriam, 2014; Spradley, 1979), this methodology relies on elements of student voice research as well (Brion-Meisels, 2014; Mitra, 2006). The research design, then, is to collaborate with girl students to discuss their experiences in school, and how they define and understand success.

## RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

Reflexivity on researcher positionality is required for quality and trustworthiness in reporting findings with qualitative methods (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Tracy, 2010). To be more transparent about my potential biases within this study, I relate my own subjectivities, values, orientations, and inclinations, as well as the power I hold based on racial classifications, economic status, and social location as a researcher and practitioner (Tracy, 2010). I then discuss how I became involved in the work and research presented in this article to provide context for the arguments and interpretations I make.

In the context of United States' racial and ethnic groupings, I am a white man of mixed ethnicity who grew up in urban, mostly working-class neighborhoods. Never quite being a full member of any ready-made social group, while also passing in the dominant society as a white male, has allowed me mobility and a degree of power, while also sensitizing me to inclusion and acceptance. Because of perennial insider-outsider positionings in my life, as well as being racialized as white, I have been granted access to a variety of social and economic groups. I have been in company with individuals who would make blatantly bigoted comments about my heritage without knowing that I was a member of that group, while also not fully fitting into that same heritage group.

However, I see this insider-outsider positionality as a place of contingent power. My white male classification in conjunction with my upbringing, educational attainment and cultural knowledges has allowed me to gain mobility between socioeconomic sectors ranging from suburban and urban wealth to urban and rural poverty. I see this mobility as an important part of my identity. My many knowledges and sensitivities to different cultural spaces is a key component of my internalized sense of power—in addition to my white male classification and my economic mobility as a formally educated

individual. However, this power is not absolute, and my positionality has created many ethical and personal tensions in relation to identity and social groups. I am deeply concerned about justice because people close to me have experienced injustice—much of which I interpreted as a lack of understanding between people, in addition to issues of competing goals, indifference, and unequal power dynamics. These experiences have sensitized me to deep listening, my own privileges, and what solidarity means and looks like. I have worked to understand power dynamics as a result—including my own assumed power in many different cultural spaces. My social location was also the impetus to begin work in Peru.

I first came to Peru because a good friend asked for support facilitating access to education for Quechua young women. His goddaughter, Mariela, is from a rural Quechua community, and she wanted to go to secondary school. However, it was not feasible for her to make the two-hour walk to attend the nearest secondary school. We worked closely with Mariela's parents and others in the community to collaboratively create a grassroots educational organization and safe dormitory space for this determined young woman and other girls who wanted to go to school but who faced barriers to school access and success. As a teacher and education scholar, my friend thought I would be helpful in creating a nurturing learning space. Because of my connection to the project, I feel a sense of responsibility for the students' wellbeing and success, based on their definitions.

My political and theoretical biases are towards feminist, critical, and postcolonial orientations. I am sensitive to the assumed power I carry with me as a man, and I have struggled with understanding how to better enact power through working with marginalized groups, instead of for them. In this space, I intentionally position myself as a learner and collaborator first, and teacher and leader as contingent aspects of my identity. I only take on teacher and leader roles when appropriate and readily let go of them for others to assume.

At the time of the study, I had been traveling between Peru and the United States for over four years. I would spend three months each visit, and in 2012–2013 I spent 11 months working on the supplementary curriculum, building a dormitory, and working with staff and students to create a safe and nurturing space. Through my continued relationships in the community I continue to find myself as an insider-outsider, earning the nickname *Gringo Peruano*. My experiences with the community members and my experience in scholarship are reflected in the theoretical stance I take in this article.

My job in this context is to ensure student success. I am an outsider to the Andean communities in this study. Yet, due to years of living in the communities, as well as my friendships and close working ties with many families in the region, I am also a partial insider. This outsider-insider identity means that I will be translating my experience through my own perspective based

on my background (Denzin, 1997; Spradley, 1980), but that I also have shared knowledge and connections with the individuals I collaborate with. As a practitioner and a researcher, my positionality is multifaceted—fraught with ethical and practical dilemmas about voice, power, and representation in writing—and complex in terms of relationships (Gallagher, 2008). I wish to honor the voices of girls from rural communities who face challenges to school success, so I explicitly focus on their perspectives and on their experience, while also acknowledging the inevitable influence of the different lenses (Ames & Rojas, 2010) I carry with me.

## DATA COLLECTION

The research questions focus on the aspirations and knowledges of girls from rural indigenous communities who are attending secondary school in a larger town some distance from their homes. As a formal data collection period I spent three months (June–August 2014) working with 14 students to run focus groups, develop interview protocols, interview other participants, and reflect on students' lives in rural communities. The 14 students and I held three focus groups to discuss their aspirations and their experiences in schools, which is the basis for the analysis in this article.

Although my analysis will be mostly focused on the data from the formal collection period, it is also supplemented by the five years I have spent working in the area, designing curriculum, teaching, and discussing issues of educational access and success with parents and students while performing needs assessments. Background observations and experiences have been sporadically recorded in a field journal over four years (2010–2014).

The research paradigm for this study developed out of a weekly one-hour seminar collaboratively run by the students and teachers at the non-profit. Each week, one of the students brings a topic of conversation to the group and leads the conversation. The student-leader has usually done some research or preparation on the topic. Topics can be about any issue they want to discuss, such as friends, school, family, or current events. One week the seminar was about success and "what your dreams are for the future." The conversation sparked questions for me, as well. What was my definition of success? Was it different than the students' definition? And, did it matter whose definition of success was being used when thinking about educational programming? This was the impetus to delve into a more formal investigation of the idea of success and students' aspirations.

I discussed the idea of researching success with the students, and they thought it was a good idea. So, we held a series of focus group as collaborating researcher-participants to begin our research (Brion-Meisels, 2014; Mitra, 2006; Stringer, 2013). During our first conversation we developed open-ended

questions to explore definitions and ideas. This first conversation consisted of a 45-minute focus group that centered on a preliminary interview protocol I developed with Victoria. The questions addressed ideas of success, among other topics. We utilized the protocol as an example and asked for the students' critiques and edits. The students gave me their edits and Victoria and I wrote the second interview protocol incorporating their suggestions.

The second focus group utilized the new protocol and had the girls answer the questions on the form that they created. We made a few more small edits after this meeting and then set out to interview parents and community members in each of the students' communities. Anonymity for all who wished was promised to the researcher-participants. All parents were informed about the research project, and all researcher-participants were told that they were not obligated to participate.

The last step of the research with the student researcher-participants incorporated the themes that emerged from interviews with parents into the third focus group. From the information we gathered and our preliminary analysis, we created scenarios based on the parents' shared experiences and discussions of their aspirations. This third focus group lasted 45 minutes and was video recorded. The university institutional review board cleared the data collection and use.

## ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

Research and practice cannot be conducted without the conscious or unconscious use of underlying theoretical principles (Brodio & Manning, 2002, as cited in Pasque, 2013). As educational leaders often need to interpret and implement important decisions that affect the group (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), it is essential to understand the implications of one's decisions. To examine the underpinning theoretical assumptions that go into decision-making requires understanding theoretical orientations, their implications, and other possibilities. This reflective activity has allowed me, as a practitioner and researcher, to iteratively address the overarching question, what does social justice look like for these young women in this context? In this article I share some of that process.

The questions of contextual social justice for specific populations are an especially pressing concern when educational leaders work with students from different backgrounds than the leader. Questioning one's cultural and theoretical assumptions is vital to actually achieving social justice. Misinterpretation and problematic assumptions can lead to miscommunication and negatively affect students or create mis-educative experiences that do not connect to their learning needs and background knowledge, or the knowledge they bring with them to the classroom (Dewey, 1938). In order

to explore how the outcomes of the research can be interpreted to form different directions in educational programming and the tensions inherent in interpretation, I performed the analysis for this paper by myself, considering deeply the ideas and thoughts of the researcher-participants during our discussions. In practice, the conversation with the students is ongoing.

I first transcribed and coded the focus group text utilizing emergent coding (Creswell, 2013). This allowed me to uncover recurring trends and themes. I examined the differences among students' views as well. This allowed me to develop a partial, but rich sense of how each student understands ideas of success and the challenges they face to achieve their goals. The emergent coding scheme looked at key words and phrases that were connected to larger issues, such as the importance of school, family values, future aspirations, social challenges in school, academic challenges, and economic challenges. I then interpreted the coding from the perspectives of feminist, critical, development, and postcolonial theories.

## LIMITATIONS

There are three important limitations to this research. First, feminist and critical methodologies would normally require a deeper look into the reading and naming of the world as an educative process in order to bring about the *consientization* necessary to understand systems of oppression and work towards change (Friere, 2000). Because this article's scope is focused on interpretation and the complicated realities of educational leadership in cross-cultural spaces, I bridge the narrative of a process of learning with students and the purely analytical voice of a researcher who writes to contribute to literature on understanding how interpretation influences decision-making. This means the research is limited in terms of feminist, critical, and postcolonial methods. The methodology does not extend to a deep discussion of the continuing process of co-learning with the students about structures of marginalization. Colearning continues to happen in the nonprofit, but it cannot be reported upon in this article.

Second, there is a limitation in terms of student voice research. This research maintains some of the hierarchical power structures between "adults" and "youth." I am still the person who is doing the most significant amount of work on educational programming, so the voice students embody is limited compared to my own. However, this is the reality of most educational spaces, even those wishing to be democratic. There are individuals who are more involved in implementation than others, meaning they will have more power. Therefore, I decided to acknowledge the realities of practitioner work that engages with student voice to demonstrate some of the complexity inherent in student voice research.

Third, there are limitations from a development perspective in terms of hard data because the sample size is 14 students, so the information presented is not generalizable beyond this context. These limitations are mitigated by the fact that the purpose of this study is to examine theory in relation to empirical information. The varied and sometimes conflicting interpretations when listening to students in practice highlights these conflicts well. The process of interpretation is essential to develop understandings of student background and goals when working to collaboratively develop educational opportunities to support marginalized students' learning and work toward social justice.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The first focus group was organized to develop an interview protocol about success in Quechua communities grounded in the understandings of the students. In this first meeting we presented a very preliminary and basic protocol (see Appendix A) to give the students an example of how interview research usually worked, and we asked them about the questions: Did they make sense? What else do you want to find out about? How would you ask other questions? What more will you add? Do you want to change the wording in any of the questions? The conversation we had with the students was illuminating about the ways in which success was conceptualized. For example, in the first interview protocol we used the Spanish term *éxito*—which is directly translated as "success." However, the idea of *éxito* to the students was better understood as *ganador(a)*, "winner," or more specific to this context "earner." The distinction between being successful and being an earner is important for understanding the orientation of the students towards what their goals are. During the first focus group their idea of success seemed directly related to economic considerations.

The students made a number of changes to the first protocol, and I took their edits and typed what we had collaboratively created. For the second focus group we asked the students to write down answers to the second protocol—the one that they helped to create (see Appendix B). We asked the students to write their answers down before discussing them in order to avoid "group think." The first question we talked about related to students' aspirations: "What are your dreams for the future?" In response to this first question, all of the students except one stated that they hoped to become a professional, or to "*salir adelante*"—get ahead—which generally means to get ahead financially or professionally.

The theme of becoming a professional was an overwhelmingly common current running through the focus group and student responses, so it became the theme of our exploration. One student out of the fourteen wanted

**Figure 2: Written responses of Quechua girls to a focus group questionnaire prompt on future aspirations**

| Question | Responses verbatim | Responses English |
|---|---|---|
| *Cuales son tus suenos para el futuro?* | *a) Estudiar y salir mas adilante* | a) To study and come out ahead |
| What are your dreams for the future? | *b) Mis suenos sirian ser professional* | b) My dreams would be to be a professional |
| | *c) Mis suenos son ser profesional* | c) My dreams are to be a professional |
| | *d) Tener un profesion* | d) To have a profession |
| | *e) Ser profesional* | e) To be a professional |
| | *f) Ser una buena persona profesional y ayudar a mis familiares* | f) To be a good person, professional and help my family members |
| | *g) Mis suenos son hogar a tener dos carreras* | g) My dreams are to have a home and two careers |
| | *h) estudiar y salir profesional* | h) Study and become a professional |
| | *i) Mis suenos son ser profesional y seguir adelante* | i) My dreams are to be a professional and continue forward |
| | *j) Yo quiero ser doctora* | j) I want to be a doctor |
| | *k) Voy que me gusta estudiar* | k) I go because I like to study |
| | *l) mi sueno profesional* | l) My dream is to be a professional |
| | *m) mis suenos son para estudiar un profession y un trabajo* | m) my dreams are to study for a profession and work |
| | *n) estudiar y salir profesional* | n) to study and work |

to work as a weaver, which is a traditional job for women, and which most students considered to be not professional. What a professional looked like, and what it meant to be a professional did not seem to be clear to the students, however. During this second conversation the students mentioned lawyers, municipality workers, and doctors as professionals. We asked the students a follow up question that sought to understand their views of what a professional is and does, but the students did not know much about what those jobs entailed. One student mentioned that wearing a suit was an important part of being a professional, "*que llevan un traje*."

These responses were intriguing and went against some of my own theoretical orientations about social justice, so during this second focus group I asked the students about farming to better understand their values. The students, who all come from subsistence farming communities, are experts on farming work. The most salient information about their values was when I asked them if a farmer was a professional. The response was

a loud chorus of "*No.*" I found this sentiment interesting and troubling. This signaled, to me, that farming—a job integral to their communities—is communicated and perceived as less prestigious than other forms of contributing to society and earning a living.

My initial reaction was that the dominant discourse of professionalism could be seen as oppressive when expertise that is useful and important for society (such as farming) is communicated as less valued by the students. As most students wish to be professionals, they communicate professionalism as highly valued. This could mean that if farming is not considered to be a profession, then the students are implying that they do not value farming. From another perspective, it is also possible that farming may not be a profession, but is highly valued as integral to the Quechua community. As farming and the land are the basis for most celebrations, it could be that farming is seen as part of life and not necessarily something in the same framework as a profession. From my experience, most professionals in the town also have *chakra* (farmland) that they cultivate. Important community members, including the mayor and business owners in the town have land that they farm on the weekend. They hire people to maintain what they cannot cultivate themselves. This points to evidence that farming may have a special place in the community, which cannot be quantified or understood in the same way that being a professional can. Regardless of my interpretations, I thought that I needed to better understand students' ideas of the professional. I also want to better understand students' values surrounding professionalism in their lives.

The second focus group also included a session to make any final revisions. We discussed if the protocol was ready to be asked to the students' parents. After the focus group, the students, Victoria, and I went to each of the girls' communities to interview each parent over the course of six weeks. After collecting the parent data, Victoria and I analyzed parents' responses and developed concrete scenarios to discuss ideas of professionalism and success with the students. During the second focus group we had found that general questions about professionalism were not helpful to create meaningful discussion. It seemed that the students were very practical thinkers who had important ideas about specific instances, but who did not find generalizing to be a productive way of communicating.

The third focus group, therefore, was focused on the students' understandings of professionalism and social structures in concrete terms. We presented three different short descriptions about women who have taken different paths in life: a lawyer, a salesperson in a clothing store, and a farmer who sells her products to hotels (Appendix C). These were examples of jobs that the parents and students mentioned as work. We created these scenarios to elicit responses about students' values of these concrete situations. From our prior experience we thought this would allow us to better

understand how students thought about professionalism, their aspirations, and the purpose of education in their lives. The students read the three descriptions of different women and we then had a rich conversation.

The following is an illustrative section of the conversation:

Author: The question is: Are all three women professionals?

Loud chorus: No!

Lola: There is only one professional!

Author: There is only one?

Lola: Yes, and it is Valeria [*The lawyer*]

(*All of the students start talking at once. We ask them to start talking one at a time*)

Manuela: Valeria is the only one because she is the only that works in a profession. She is a lawyer. The other one only works in her fields. Laura only works in a store.

Mariela: Valeria is a lawyer and she has her profession . . .

Lola: Valeria is a lawyer and she is happy because she studied, she's happy because she has her career and her own clients.

Florela: Valeria has finished her studies . . . her primary, secondary and her university, and now she has a career.

Liz: Valeria is happy because she accomplished her dreams and because she went to her practice.

(*The students do not say that working at a store or selling farm goods is a dream to be accomplished*)

Victoria: What was her dream?

All: To become a lawyer.

Isabella: [What were the other women's dreams?]

*(Pause)*

Yanet: Valeria is a lawyer because she has studied her career in a university. Laura has a store. Miriam sells her products.

Author: Other opinions? Could any one else be a professional?

(*While the others are talking Yanet tells Victoria in an aside that Miriam might be a professional too, there is a long pause*).

Juana: Laura could also be a professional . . .

Isabella: What does Laura do?

Manuela: She has a store.

Victoria: What would be Laura's profession?

(*Long pause*)

Juana: She sells clothes.

Fiona: She is a salesperson.

Lola: What she likes best is to have pretty clothes.

(*This seems to be Lola's understanding of Laura's dream. Based on how she makes this statement, she seems to indicate that selling nice clothes is not as worthy an occupation as is being a lawyer.)*

Isabella: To become a sales person she might have needed to study, for example, marketing, or a technical career?

Victoria: Yanet, why do you think Miriam is professional.

Yanet: Because she produces organic products and she sells them to hotels.

Isabella: What would you call this profession? How would you describe Miriam? What is she?

Florela: Producer . . .

Isabella: But she produces and sells right?

Florela: so, a businesswoman?

(*The students did not seem not convinced that other people besides the lawyer were professionals, even as Victoria and Isabella attempted to solicit a general definition of a professional from the students. The conversation continued for a few minutes and then Victoria asked the students to boil the idea down.*)

Victoria: What I want to know is that you all mentioned a lot that you want to be professionals, no? So, it seems to me that being a professional for you all is having university career. Or is it possible that, like Valeria, you work in an office. Or, do you reinvent yourself like Miriam who makes her own products and sells, and goes to English classes to continue learning? Or, like Laura who works in a store. What is a professional for you all? Because these are the answers that came out from the questionnaires that you all filled out, many of you said that you wanted to be professionals,

and almost all of you said you wanted to go to university, so we want to know what professional means to you.

Examples of students' responses are:

| | |
|---|---|
| Lola: | To be a professional is to have your own . . . how do you say . . . your own work and you don't suffer anymore |
| Juana: | Maybe being a professional could be that she accomplished her dreams . . . and works |
| Florela: | I liked what Lola said |
| Naomi: | . . . a career would be something more than what most people study, let's see . . . |
| Luciana: | Conquer something that you like . . . to know more about what you like |
| Camila: | A career is . . . I don't know! |

(*Long Pause*)

| | |
|---|---|
| Isabella: | What is the basic concept of being a professional? |
| Maria Jose: | Achieve your dreams? |
| Martina: | Accomplish your dreams! |

The students' conceptions and understandings offer rich information for analysis and interpretation from the four frameworks.

*Analysis from Critical Theory and Feminist Perspectives*

From a critical theory framework, the idea that a farmer is not a professional is evidence of the internalization of the oppressive and dominant discourse of neo-liberal politics, which can be interpreted as a form of false consciousness (Freire, 2000). Even after the *Campesino* movement in Peru in the second half of the 20th century (Gall, 1974), the narrative of the professional who earns a salary seems to be the aspiration and idea of success for these Quechua students, the children of farmers. The narrative also seems to be limited to a very specific kind of professional—one who earns a salary for working with clients. In addition, they seem to be saying that a professional is one that has high status in neoliberal society, such as a lawyer. Other occupations, such as costumer service or an agricultural business entrepreneur were not seen as professional.

The girls did not seem to take much pride in a farmer's life, at least not during these conversations. The students in this focus group have

left their families and communities to attend secondary school, so their values, goals, and aspirations may be different than the families and the youth who have stayed in the communities. One policy choice based on this analysis would be to build a learning unit about the importance of farming, and discuss the history and pride of the *campesino* movement to provide students some alternate viewpoints and valorize a farmer's life.

Critical pedagogy interpretations would also help students see how the social structures that continue to place Quechua farmers in a marginal role in Peruvian society have been constructed by systems designed to keep the powerful in power, and those working the land without power through cultural and professional hegemony. It is easy to assume that the students are seeking to become professionals as a means to gain more power and control over their lives—to gain more power for themselves, so that they "do not suffer anymore" (as Lola mentioned). This implies that students have adopted dominant discourses of a professional mystique. Providing students with information about oppressive social structures would allow them to attain greater awareness of their social location, and the systems of oppression that they face because of their place in society. The students could then collaborate to think about ways to change systems and power dynamics and revalorize farming and question the prestige that seems to be associated with professions, and suits.

In contrast, from certain feminist perspectives, the students' responses could be seen as empowering or empowered. These young women view their lives as one of opportunity and one in which they have options. They see women in positions of status as role models (e.g., the lawyer as the only professional, and the lawyer wears a suit). These young women say that they can become a professional. It is their stated dream, and they are working to realize that dream. To be responsive and affirm the students' dreams from a feminist perspective in policy and practice, preparing students for the social realities of life in this region beyond school would be important. Professional women have explained that there is a strong *machista* culture in which women in professional roles are still seen as subservient to men, are stuck in positions of less prestige and power, and are regularly ignored when it is time to make decisions (Author, 2015). From this perspective, a learning unit about how to navigate life as a woman professional would help prepare them for life in the work world. Applauding and encouraging students to follow their dreams would also seem to be a choice that many feminist teachers would make. Supporting them to reach positions historically denied them is a core aspect of feminist solidarity.

A more radical feminist approach may see their perspective of attaining "higher levels" of professionalism as problematic because they are still working in a sexist, male-dominated system, and even though they are striving to reach a profession that requires a terminal degree, they are

devaluing other important work, like farming and entrepreneurship. More radical feminisms seek to rethink how society is structured. They might find promise in the fact that the students were least interested in the work of a clothing salesperson, as that is a traditional women's job, and is often based on male-dominated visions of beauty, which are oppressive. Feminist thought might also recognize the strength and value of the students' aspirations. A learning unit to increase the students' likelihood of achieving their goals might have students meet women lawyers and other professionals. It might also provide more tutoring for critical thinking and logic, while discussing how women in positions of power have a responsibility to change the male-dominated structures of society for greater freedom.

*Analysis from Development and Postcolonial Perspectives*

From a postcolonial perspective, the desire to become a professional is evidence of a colonizing force on these students. The drive to fit into the larger neoliberal society in order to earn money speaks to the colonization of the mind expressed by Franz Fanon (1970), in which it could be interpreted that students want to acquire masks of the professional elite, and deny their roots as Quechua farmers. This lends evidence to the legacies of colonialism, and provides evidence of the influence of neocolonialism. When youth define their values and aspirations as becoming part of the mainstream professional world and devalue their home culture, this is a relatively simple interpretation. A postcolonial learning module would delve into the history of oppression that farmers have faced, and look at the current movement to large agro-business as a neocolonial enterprise.

In practice, a postcolonial orientation would facilitate deeper learning about the students' historical position as Quechua youth to help them rethink the future of Quechua communities. Since the students express that they do not know exactly what a lawyer does, it would be important to demonstrate the parts of their cultural heritage that they would need to give up in order to work as a lawyer. For example, their common forms of speech, using the Quechua language on a daily basis, and their form of dress. They would also need to give up deeper things, like their approach to the world as a living organism. They would need to shift to a mechanistic cause-and-effect understanding of the world. These aspects of the self are still nascent in the students' understandings as they are on the verge of entering adulthood. From a postcolonial perspective there is still time to be able to reestablish the students' pride in the land as a viable and prestigious occupation, as well as the more holistic understanding of the world as a contingent, living being.

From a development lens, the students' responses are evidence that Quechua people want the material goods and opportunities that neoliberal

paradigms offer. The students are saying they want jobs that fit into the ideals of consumerism, such as wearing a suit and earning a salary. These aspirations are dependent upon the expansion of neoliberal economic models of growth and consumption. There needs to be more jobs available so that these students can compete for them. Education policy should prepare students for the competitive job market.

In development theory, the idea of being a professional represents the drive for status and social mobility for these students, as well as physical comfort. The underlying assumptions of development theory are that all people want to have material goods and live in comfort. Although this is not an oppressive assumption, what that material comfort looks like, and what people may need to give up to get the specific material comfort development theory offers can be oppressive. From a development lens the idea of giving up certain cultural norms is unimportant. Cultures change, so the bottom line of neoliberal development is economic and material prosperity, quantifiable goods. Other "factors" such as culture are secondary or nonexistent. One can worry about culture once economic prosperity is achieved. The importance of education policy is to ensure that trained workers come out of schools to productively contribute to the economic model. In development theory students' culture should only be a consideration if it affects students' performance or the outcomes of their quantifiable production and/or learning. The students' voices from a development perspective offer supporting evidence for the need of development models and education as part of economic stimulus. Arguably a development approach is the most immediate way to increase quantifiable wealth indicators.

To develop learning objectives based on this paradigm, students might create a unit on professionalism and courtesy to provide students the proper skills for the world of professional work. In practice, students would need lessons to increase essential skills for the workforce, such as formal, logical, thinking, problem-solving skills, professional language, and reading abilities (such as English and advanced Spanish skills), and advanced mathematics and computer skills.

Each of the theories discussed in this paper provides different avenues for framing the choices that education leaders and teachers might make to be responsive to the students' goals. For example, critical pedagogy would offer students the opportunity to question the systems that place farming as less-than other jobs. It would allow the students to question their place in socioeconomic hierarchy, question where their values come from, and find ways to make better lives for themselves through changing socioeconomic systems. However, critical theory actively rejects, and might miss out on, responding to the orientations of young women who think that the system will work for them. It may also miss out on the values and nature

of being a woman in a historically male-dominated society. Feminist pedagogy offers at least two avenues for empowerment: finding other professional allies such as women who have achieved professional status to share their experience and build networks and offering students opportunities to find avenues for overcoming sexist social structures. However, feminist pedagogy might miss opportunities for rethinking political structures.

Development theory policy would offer intensive academic and business skills training, which would benefit the students in the short-term, but development pedagogy would miss out on the deeper cultural issues surrounding indigenous communities and cultures that are the fabric of a just and verdant society. Postcolonial pedagogy would offer students educational opportunities to reaffirm their special, unique, and invaluable epistemologies and cultures while it may miss some of the daily issues of material poverty. Each orientation offers something unique in relation to programing, and each theory leaves out other opportunities. Understanding these differences offers ways to balance an approach to interpreting and responding to student voice. In addition, through student voice work, some findings transcend all theories.

*Cross-Theory Trends*

In discussion the students did not seem to be clear on what a professional was or what one did. Regardless of theoretical interpretation, it seems that providing opportunities for secondary school students from rural Quechua communities to interact with professionals and become aware of the variety choices available, and what each job entails, would be beneficial. Regardless of a postcolonial orientation or a development orientation, providing opportunities for students to become aware of the structures of the social and professional worlds they inhabit offers meaningful education. Regardless of a critical or feminist perspective, the students would benefit from other forms of education besides formal academics such as mathematics and reading.

This cross-theory finding has important implications for responsive educational decision-making. Based on the interviews, the students expressed that they have ideas of what professionalism represents, but not a clear understanding of what a professional does. They do not have knowledge about the jobs to which they aspire. It seems that for the students to be able to fully understand the implications of their aspirations, they would benefit from learning about the wider social and political world. Beyond a given theory, the students' goals seem to be to access a larger society than their rural communities, and learn about the world beyond academics.

Although the original impetus behind the research was to facilitate an understanding between the teachers, administrators and students, the collaborative process uncovered important areas for future exploration by the students

with the teachers. Uncovering that students need to understand professionalism and broader societal structures is perhaps a more significant finding than it first appears. Without an understanding of the wider context, the students are likely to be less able to make informed decisions. Whether their decision is about entering the job market or becoming an entrepreneur from a development lens, or rethinking societal systems and Quechua self-determination from a postcolonial lens, the students' contextual understanding needs to be a significant part of their education. In a time when students outcomes are the main focus of much educational reform, understanding students' voices offers a reminder that education is not only about academics, and although many of these students are able to calculate and read in ways that their parents are not able to, they still need a deeper education about the social world.

The analyses of different theoretical underpinnings for pedagogical choices provides an understanding of the ways in which theories often inform practice, and how theory offers useful avenues for exploration and as well as areas left unexplored. Providing students with multiple ways to understand the world will offer the students the opportunity to create new and perhaps more comprehensive theories—theories that will better speak to fostering a more just society.

Beyond issues of theory and pedagogy these findings demonstrate the importance of listening. Teachers often assume that students possess certain knowledge, such as what a professional is. However, students from different backgrounds possess very different knowledges, and students from rural, Quechua backgrounds are unlikely to have knowledge of social-structures outside of their communities. These 13–16-year-old students have not had learning opportunities to see what the different professions entail, or the structures of society. Uncovering some of the depth of the assumed understandings that we had as educators was also helpful, as we work to provide these students with learning opportunities from many different perspectives in order give them options in their thinking and their choices as they grow.

## CONCLUSION AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

For reflective educational leaders interested in understanding student voice, understanding one's own position and the influences of different theoretical assumptions are important. The different orientations in this article pull out contradictory understandings and educational decisions of what is communicated by the students. Relying on these frameworks, or others, explicitly or implicitly, can lead to vastly different ideas about what students need and want. These different understandings, in turn, lead to divergent approaches to educational decision-making. This paper makes explicit some of the processes of interpretation based on variant theoretical frameworks. Each of these frameworks can inform decision-making

and understanding about students from the perspective of an individual who takes a role as a leader—either as a teacher, facilitator, or administrator. Also noteworthy is that through this kind of approach, there are conclusions that can be uncovered across the different theories, despite their fundamentally different approaches and underpinning values.

The four theoretical paradigms examined throw into question simple or simplistic understandings of interpreting student voice in education for social justice and development. For example, the students consistently discussed the idea of the professional as their aspiration and the main metric for success. Although seemingly straightforward, the interpretations vis-à-vis each framework offered different potential actions based on these definitions. Paradigms espousing "social justice" or "empowerment" may not be functioning to achieve what a community needs and wants, given these complexities. Through collaborative work with students, it is possible to gain more understanding about their realities, but reflective leaders also need to question the interpretive stance that they take and return to the students with their interpretations. Future research that deeply examines how adults' reflection in student voice research can improve cross-cultural understandings and educational programming, and how reflective research might contribute to improvements in theories of social justice for marginalized communities would improve practice and contribute to scholarship.

Most importantly, more research is needed that places theories into dialogue with each other by utilizing interpretation in specific contexts. This will allow researchers and practitioners to better understand the implications of theoretical approaches and their strengths and shortcomings. As scholarship becomes more accessible to more people, new research that considers the implications of different theories in practice is timely. Further, theory has become "siloed" in the field. Educational research is inherently interdisciplinary and cross-theory, and educational experience is a complex multifaceted phenomenon that needs to be understood through a variety of perspectives. Scholarship that begins to bridge divides between important theories can help lead researchers to deeper understandings that improve practice, and ultimately improve the experiences of children in school.

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## NOTE

1. All names besides the author's are pseudonyms.

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## APPENDIX A

### Student Interview Protocol 1
### (Translated from Spanish)

*This protocol served as a means to generate conversation about ideas of success, seeking to better understand what the questions about success are for students, and what their aspirations are. The students were offered this basic questionnaire to critique and discuss what success means for them. The version with the student edits and additions is in Appendix 2. The conversations were held with 14 students, and were audio and video recorded.

Do you think it is important to study? Why?

Do you feel satisfied with your situation? Why?

Did your parents support you in your studies?
Do you receive any other support to study? What kind?

Do you have brothers?

Do they go to school? Why or why not?

What do you do in your spare time?

Where do you imagine yourself in five years?

What does success mean to you?

## APPENDIX B

### Second Round Student Focus Group Questions
### (Translated from Spanish)

These questions were the result of the student's collaborative efforts to create an interview protocol, which we answered individually and then discussed as a group. The conversation was audio recorded.

What are your dreams for the future?

Describe how you imagine your life in five years (working, studying, married with children, married without children, living somewhere else, etc.)

Do you think you are smart? In what ways?

How are you doing in school?

Do you think it's important to study? Why?

Do you feel that your life has changed since you started going to high school? Why?

Can you describe what your life would be like if you were not enrolled in school?

What does winning mean to you?

Do your parents push you to study? How?

Do you receive any kind of support to study? What kind?

What does learning mean to you?

Do you feel satisfied with your life? Why?

What activities do you do that makes you happy?

What would you change in your life?

## APPENDIX C

### Three Scenarios of Professionals
### (Translated from Spanish)

1. Laura works in a nice clothing store in Cusco. She has a daughter and a family. She is from a farming community outside of Calca and goes to visit her family often. She gets to wear nice clothes everyday. She is happy.

2. Valeria is a lawyer in Cusco. She has a nice office in Cusco and wears suits. She currently works in a law firm and has many clients. One day she wants to open her own law firm. She does not have any children. She is from a rural community outside of Urubamba. She does not get to go home often.

3. Miriam still lives in her home community outside of Marcuray. She grows organic vegetables and sells them to the hotels down the mountain, and makes money. She has a family. On the weekends, she goes to English classes. She is happy because she has a family and makes good money selling organic produce.

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