

“What’s in the water White students are drinking?”

A Critical Race Theory Analysis of the  
GATE-Honors Merger in the Santa Barbara School District

Alma I. Flores

Professor David G. García

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## Introduction

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010 the Santa Barbara School District voted 4-1 to restructure the GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) program to create a new rigorous Honors program in order to eliminate an unfair barrier that blocked largely the Latina/o student population from accessing the courses. This vote culminated years of hard work and *esfuerzo*<sup>1</sup> especially from the Latina/o community. In fact, when the same proposal was introduced in 2005, it was immediately voted down after outcries from White parents who felt that their own children's education would be compromised if more Latina/o children had access to these high rigor classes. The months leading up to the vote involved heated debates between the same parents, largely White, who felt that restructuring the program would compromise the rigor of the classes, and a group of educators, students, community members, and parents who wanted to see more access and equity in the program.

As a product of both the Santa Barbara School District and GATE program I can speak to the experience of being the only student of color in my GATE classes. The type of oppression I experienced in this space was more than just political and institutional but was a form of emotional and mental abuse. The feelings of alienation and disconnection from my peers and teachers in the GATE program made me question the cultural values and beliefs in my community. Although I managed to successfully graduate and enroll in a four-year institution, the experiences in this program left wounds in my psyche that I continue to heal today.

Now as a graduate student, living away from Santa Barbara, recalling my experiences in the program was both difficult and emotional. I realized that I had tried to suppress these memories. However, witnessing the involvement of my mother back in 2010 when the proposal

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<sup>1</sup> *Esfuerzo* translates to effort in English, however I choose to use the word in Spanish because in Spanish there is an underlying belief that *esfuerzo* requires sacrifices.

was presented gave me a lot of strength to remember and heal. As I tackled through school board minutes, newspaper clippings, video recorded board meetings, interviews, and letters written in support of the merger I began to make sense of what happened during the months that lead up to the final vote. This paper therefore explores and documents my sense making both as a researcher but also as a former student of Santa Barbara schools. Specifically, this paper addresses the following questions:

1. What can we learn from when the merger was first introduced in 2005 to when it was reintroduced in 2010?
2. How is the GATE-Honors merger framed from the perspective of those who opposed and supported it?
  - a. Specifically, what strategies do opponents and supporters of the merger utilize?
3. What implications does the merger have for the Latina/o community in Santa Barbara?

For organizational purposes the paper is divided by subheadings. I first begin by explaining the theoretical framework I utilized to make sense of the primary and secondary sources I analyzed for this paper. I see my methods very much intertwined with the theoretical perspectives I utilize yet in the subheading of methods I focus on explaining the primary and secondary sources that I used. For background and significance, I provide some historical background on the merger, looking at when it was first introduced in 2005 to when it was reintroduced in 2010. This subheading focuses on addressing the first research question by highlighting the significance of the merger and why it became controversial in the community. My findings focus on addressing my second research question by concentrating on strategies

used by opponents and supporters of the merger. For opponents of the merger, I argue that the concepts of differentiated instruction, quality of instruction, and giftedness were strategies used to veil the inherent racism in their arguments. For supporters of the merger, I argue that community organizing, coalition building, and storytelling were strategies that not only politicized the Latina/o community but also led to the success of the approval of the merger. Lastly, I conclude by addressing my last research question, which asks what implications this merger had for the Latina/o community. Additionally, I address future research that should be conducted.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Because a large part of this paper will focus on unveiling the racism imbedded in the opponent's strategies and the politicization of the Latina/o community I utilize critical race theory (CRT) as a framework. A CRT framework in education foregrounds race and racism by focusing on five elements a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, b) the challenge to dominant ideology, c) the commitment to social justice, d) the centrality of experiential knowledge and e) the transdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano 1997, 1998; Yosso & Solórzano 2005). This framework provides me with the lens to place social constructions of race and forms of oppression related to systemic racism as a unifying theme. When talking about racism I use Lorde's (1992) definition: "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (p. 496). Additionally, this lens of analysis allows for understanding how colorblind approaches and the downplaying of race lead to institutional malpractice, which in turn adversely impacts people of color at the expense of privileging Whites. This critique challenges the dominant narrative,

which claims that racial injustices are no longer perpetuated, except when these injustices are blatantly obvious (Yosso, 2006).

Another important and integral aspect to CRT scholarship is the use of storytelling and narrative accounts to legitimate the experiences of racism felt by people of color (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Yosso, 2006). Thus, CRT privileges the use of storytelling as a means of highlighting the experiences of people of color and also as a means of demonstrating the impact of racism through the perspective of those who encounter it most often (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

Storytelling was a strategy used by both opponents and supporters of the merger. However, opponent of the merger told stories imbedded with racism and culturally deficit beliefs about Latina/o families and students. In contrast, supporters of the merger told counter-stories by challenging dominant discourse on Latina/o families and students. Delgado (1993) argues that counter-storytelling “is both a method of telling the story of those experiences that are not often told (i.e. those on the margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse; the majoritarian story” (p. 475).

## **Methods**

To answer my research questions I utilized mainly primary resources. Secondary sources included peer reviewed journal articles on Latina/o education. My search for primary resources began by looking through the Santa Barbara School District archive online. In this archive I was able to access board minutes, presentations, and proposals presented at the board meetings. I knew from following the merger that it was first presented in 2005 so I began my search there. After locating the two central meetings where the merger is presented and discussed I proceeded to check out the videos for the meetings, which are archived and housed at the district office.

The videos allowed me to listen to the public comments that were made as the merger developed. I followed this same process when I located materials for when the merger was reintroduced in 2010. However, there were a lot more documents that I was able to use for my analysis of the reintroduction of the merger due to the larger effort that was made from the district when it was reintroduced. I was able to look at the districts proposal, presentations, and announcements made to the community. In sum, from the district archives I used board minutes, documents, videos of board meetings, and power point presentations on GATE. In addition to the Santa Barbara School District archives I looked at newspaper articles from: the Santa Barbara News Press, The Noozhawk, The Santa Barbara Independent, and El Mexicano.

My last set of data came from my two interviewees. I interviewed school board member Ana Cardenas<sup>2</sup> who played a major role in the success of the merger in 2010. Ana was the only Latina board member until recently in 2010 when Monique Limon joined her. She has been serving on the board for eight years now and was able to provide me with a unique perspective as both a board member and educational activist. Ana who has Santa Barbara roots that date back to when the Chumash were still here not only talked about the merger but gave me insight into her own personal experiences as an organizer, teacher, and activist in the Santa Barbara Latina/o community. She herself is a product of Santa Barbara schools. Besides being a school board member Ana is also an instructor at Santa Barbara City College where she teaches English. I met Ana at a local diner and her interview lasted about two hours. After transcribing Ana's interview I emailed it to her for approval and editing.

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<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym has been assigned to protect the identity of the board member.

My second interviewee was with Alexa Madison,<sup>3</sup> program manager for Just Communities, a non-profit social justice organization that looks at dismantling different forms of structural inequality. A prime focus of Just Communities is the educational system which is why they were so involved in the merger. Alexa, who took lead in organizing the campaign for Just Communities provided me with a community perspective. She was able to speak about the work parents, students, and other community members played in the success of the merger. She also provided me with documents like handouts, letters, and proposals that Just Communities created in support of the merger. The letters in particular truly illuminated the counter-story that the Latina/o community was telling in response to the racism expressed by opponents of the merger. Alexa's interview was done in two parts, and combined together it was about two hours as well. Her interview was also transcribed and emailed to her for approval and editing.

After my data was collected I went through a highly selective process of coding, starting with initial coding and followed up with focus coding (Charmaz, 2006). By coding I refer to the process of generating categories and themes. My coding process involved me selecting text or audio data, creating common categories, and labeling or naming these categories (i.e. differentiated instruction, giftedness, etc.). Throughout this process I would write notes, reflective memos, thoughts, and insights, in the end this helped further solidify themes. I finalized three codes for strategies the opponents and supporters of the merger used. For opponents of the merger I identified three codes: differentiated instruction, quality of instruction, and giftedness and for supporters of the merger I identified three codes as well: community organizing, coalition building, and storytelling. Before discussing these codes I provide some background and significance on the merger.

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym has been assigned to protect her identity.

## **Background & Significance of the Merger**

On June 2005 all of the junior high principals in the Santa Barbara School District presented a plan to the school board that focused on restructuring the GATE program. The principals outlined a plan that would essentially merge the Honors and GATE program in order to provide more access into GATE. They emphasized supporting *all* students and families to the board and called for a “desegregation” of GATE. After the plan was presented board member Robert Noel, who shared his opposition to the plan, noted that “the direction they (referring to the principals) were proposing to take was a decision that needed to be made by the board” (School Board Minutes, 6-28-05). Speaking with board member Ana Cardenas, who was present at this meeting, she shared the following about this particular board member:

“He started basically accusing them of trying to change a policy without discussing it with the board...he really kinda attacked them so then it had to come back for another meeting but we didn't do anything with it then so when it came back before the board, it came back to us in a couple of meetings, those were probably some of the most upsetting meetings in the whole time I've been on the board because of the racist comments”

Board member Ana Cardenas has been pushing for the restructuring of GATE since she became a board member eight years ago. At the time when this was first presented to the board she said she was thrilled. She said “I remember sitting at that meeting and saying this is like the most exciting change for Latino students that I just want to stand up and cheer and I remember being so excited that they were bringing this.” Unfortunately, Mrs. Cardenas’ excitement was soon subdued by the public input from parents, mostly if not entirely White, who spoke out against the plan. It is through this input where she heard some of the most racist comments about Latina/o students.

Mere discussion about the details of this plan was blocked entirely largely because of the public outcry from White parents. Mrs. Cardenas describes the boardroom being packed by



White parents who opposed the change in meetings following the introduction of the plan. She described these meetings in the next excerpt:

“Those were probably some of the most racist comments I've heard while I was on the board, they just kept insinuating that the Latino students were going to lower the standards that they didn't want their kids in the classroom with the Latino students, they kept saying with those kids, they insinuated that the Latino parents were not gonna push their students to succeed the same way they do and that their kids would suffer because the quality of instruction would go down and it was just awful it was horrible and so that just died and I was really frustrated”

Mrs. Cardenas does a good job of highlighting some of the common sentiments that were voiced at these meetings. The backlash was clearly on Latina/o students and their families. Attacks were directly made on Latina/o parents not valuing education as much as White parents or not being motivated enough to help their children succeed. Because there was no outreach made to the Latina/o community when the plan was presented, an opportunity to provide counter-stories was never offered.

Although the plan was rejected pressure was now put on the district to work on creating more access to GATE classes. According to school board minutes a recommendation was made that “Davis Hayden, director of Research & Evaluation, will work with the junior high school principals and provide the data for a future board brief” (School Board Minutes, 7-12-05). However, looking at school board minutes very little effort or progress was documented in implementing any restructuring or change to the GATE program. School board minutes do point to periods between 2005 to 2010 where concern was voiced for the underrepresentation of Latina/o students in GATE. This largely comes through Mrs. Cardenas effort to continue bringing the issue back up and through presentations on the demographics of GATE by Davis Hayden.

For example, in the fall 2007 “secondary parents, elementary parents in external feeder districts, the Santa Barbara High School District GATE Advisory Committee, and secondary principals expressed a desire to investigate an alternative approach to the secondary district’s current GATE program” (Proposed Secondary District GATE Recommendations, 05/12/2008). In response to this a secondary GATE planning committee was formed, this committee was to focus on gathering information for ways to improve the GATE program and present a reorganizational plan to the district in the fall of 2009. From board minutes and documents very little is known as to how this committee is established and how they go about gathering information.

In this same period, fall of 2007, an article comes out in *The Noozhawk*, a local Santa Barbara newspaper. The headline reads: “*School Officials: Too Many Kids in GATE, But Not Enough Latino Students.*” The article highlights two challenges that the district faces when it comes to the GATE program: over-enrollment of students and under-enrollment of Latina/o students. In other words schools are over identifying students as gifted and talented and not enough of those being identified are Latina/o students. Concern for this issue is contrasted to a case that erupted in the Tucson Unified School District early on February 2007 when “the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) accused school district administrators for enrolling too few Hispanic and black students in gifted programs” (ABC local news, 2-26-07). The ACLU planned to sue the district if the disparity was not addressed quickly. Yet, “one startling aspect of the Tucson case is how the disparities in Santa Barbara’s elementary district are larger” (Noozhawk, 10-23-07). In the Santa Barbara School District there is a larger number of Latina/o students compared to Tucson’s student population, which makes Santa Barbara look even worse when it comes to their miniscule enrollment of students in GATE.

To reduce the inflation of GATE identified students a recommendation of retesting students for GATE before they start junior high is made. The article also suggests that all students be tested for GATE in order to increase the enrollment of Latina/o students. This stems from the practice of how students are identified as potential GATE students. In order to take the GATE test, students must first be identified by a teacher, counselor, or the most popular practice in Santa Barbara parents can ask for their child to be tested. Unfortunately, very few Latina/o students are identified by their teachers or counselors, and do to language and institutional barriers few Latina/o parents know about GATE and how to navigate the system of the GATE program.

Additionally, on the same day that this article comes out on The Noozhawk another piece titled: *GATE Prep Classes Spark Controversy*, is also printed. This article deals with the controversy that GATE prep classes are causing in the district and community. It explains the practice of parents enrolling their children in privately run tutorial programs to prepare them to take the GATE exam. The GATE test is meant to be taken “cold” meaning there should be no preparation done to take it, however parents are investing a lot of money for private tutorial classes. In Santa Barbara the Dubin Learning Center, which charges 65 dollars an hour for GATE prep classes, provides students with a prep test that is exactly the same as the IQ test elementary students take to get into GATE. This unfair advantage does come under attack by the school district. The district decides that “beginning this year (2007), parents of elementary students will be required to sign a statement promising that their children have not and will not take so-called GATE prep classes” (Noozhawk, 10-23-07). This new rule is introduced as the GATE testing sessions begin. Although the district recognizes this mal practice early on in 2007 as of today the Dubin Learning Center continues to offer tutorial sessions for the GATE exam so

we can't say that this practice has been completely eliminated. How the district supervises this rule is not clear which leaves room for parents to continue using these services.

In early January of 2010 associate superintendent Robin Sawaske proposes a plan to get rid of the GATE label by merging the program with the Honors program. Sawaske writes, "After extensive discussion with staff, we believe that the GATE label on courses imposes an artificial barrier that blocks capable students from taking rigorous courses" (School Board Minutes, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010). The underrepresentation of Latina/o students in the GATE program becomes a central piece of the proposal. Although Latina/o students make up 51% of the student population in secondary schools, only 17% participate in the GATE program, whereas White students make up 83% of the program (Santa Barbara School District Focus & Goals Report, 2010-2011). Since 2003 when Latina/o students made up 20% of the GATE program this number has for the most part continued to decline each year.

It is important to point out that the plan did not call for the elimination of the GATE program but rather a restructuring of the program. A lot of the media that reported on the issue misrepresented the plan by printing articles like: *Santa Barbara School Board May Close the Door on GATE* (Noozhawk, 02-23-10) or *Parents fear for children if GATE removed* (Santa Barbara News Press, 02-23-10). The restructuring of the program entailed two basic changes; first, the GATE course label would be changed to Honors. These courses would still continue to offer the same level of advanced instruction. The second change entailed restructuring how students could gain access to GATE. As mentioned earlier a popular practice of how students got into the GATE program was through parental advocacy. Just Communities program manager Alexa Madison and supporter of the merger explains this more:

"If students didn't pass the GATE test there was a lot of parental advocacy of you have to get my student into this class and sometimes what administrators and counselors

explained is like maybe you wouldn't have enough students who had qualified as GATE to fill up a whole GATE class so you had to take in some other students so then if you got parents really advocating than those students were really more likely to get in, where you actually had a third of students in most GATE classes who didn't pass the GATE test”

This unfair practice of having students get into GATE based on parental advocacy was eliminated in the restructuring of the program by being translucent and clear about how students could get into the program, something that was ambiguous before. For students entering or in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, students could enroll in Honors courses by meeting two of the following requirements: 1) passing the GATE exam, 2) receiving a teacher recommendation and/or 3) having an appropriate score on a diagnostic placement assessment test. For students entering or in 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade, students had to meet one of the following requirements: 1) a grade of C or above in the prerequisite Honors level class, 2) a grade of A in a prerequisite college prep-level class and/or 3) a teacher recommendation (Secondary District Honors Coursework Plan, 03-23-10).

There is a lot that can be highlighted from when the merger was first introduced in 2005 to when it was reintroduced in 2010. My purpose was to illustrate the resistance it received when it was first introduced in 2005 and how this resistance manifested through covert racism expressed largely by White parents. Although the plan is dismissed it does put pressure on the district to follow up with the junior high principals concern about the GATE program. In 2007 articles on GATE appear in various local newspapers. These articles point to two major issues that the GATE program faces: the underrepresentation of Latina/o students and the over-identification of GATE students. GATE picks up more controversy as the papers also print pieces on the practice of parents paying for test preparation courses for the GATE exam. In 2010, when the plan is reintroduced to the district the misinformation that is printed in papers fuels the controversy even more. The confusion surrounding what exactly will be changed does not help in easing the opposition. Yet again, opponents of the plan are largely White GATE

parents who feel that making GATE more accessible will simultaneously take something away from them or damage their student's education.

When the plan was first introduced in 2005 it came directly from the junior high principals, there was no dialogue or strategy discussed prior to the introduction to the plan. Before the plan was reintroduced in 2010 the district conducted research in preparation and to show the disparity of Latina/o students in GATE classes. Additionally, the district worked closely with community organizations to help in presenting the plan to the community. Various meetings and workshops were held both by the district and community organizations to answer questions and explain the plan in detail. Therefore, there are multiple things we can learn from when it was introduced in 2005 to when it was reintroduced in 2010. First, there was research and work being done by the district itself on GATE, rather than just the junior high principals. Second, there was a lot of collaboration between community organizations, the GATE advisory council, parents, teachers, and administrators as well. Lastly, the second time it was presented there was already a lot of supporters organized, which unlike the first time where only the opposition was vocal this time supporters were prepared to provide counter arguments and stories.

## **Findings**

My findings will focus on addressing the following question: How is the GATE-Honors merger framed from the perspective of those who opposed and supported it? Specifically, what strategies do opponents and supporters of the merger utilize? As stated earlier for opponents of the merger, I argue that the concepts of differentiated instruction, quality of instruction, and giftedness were strategies used to veil the inherent racism in their arguments. These three concepts should not be looked at as separate since they are very interrelated, as I will show below.

I draw largely from my interviews and the two-minute public comments made at board meetings by opponents of the merger.

### *Differentiated Instruction*

The concept of differentiated instruction refers to a process of proactively modifying instruction based on students' needs. These changes are based on students' abilities, understandings, personal interests, and learning preferences. Researchers like Subban (2006) and Tomlinson & McTighe (2006) have documented the learning gains and benefits from using differentiated instruction from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Ideally all teachers receive training on how to utilize differentiated instruction in their own classrooms. Because there is no such thing as a homogenous classroom where all students are the same in terms of both life and learning experiences it is especially important that educators learn to use differentiated instruction.

Differentiated instruction was used as a way to oppose the merger. Opponents argued that merging two programs like GATE and Honors would mean teachers would struggle to teach to such a wide range of learning aptitudes. Board member Ana Cardenas explains how this concept was strategic for the opposition:

“...The term differentiated instruction kept coming up...They were insisting that teachers could not do it...They were basically trying to say that part of the reason why GATE had worked so well was because it wasn't this differentiated level because all the students were basically at one level and the teacher could teach to that level and so they were able to do really well which of course wasn't entirely true because as we've said a lot of the classes already had students in them who weren't GATE but that was kind of their strategy I felt like was to try to focus on things that looked very objective, looked like it wasn't about race, like it was really about teaching, so they would focus on the differentiated instruction...”

From Mrs. Cardenas excerpt we see how differentiated instruction was strategically used to veil the racism in the oppositions assumptions or arguments. Something I learned through my secondary sources was that many times when there weren't enough students who had passed the

GATE exam to fill up entire GATE classes, administrators would allow students who had not passed the GATE exam to enroll in these classes. And because of institutional barriers it typically ended up being students from White parents who took these spots. Therefore, what Mrs. Cardenas explained to me was that in many GATE classes about half of the students in the classes had not even passed the GATE exam but were there because of parental advocacy. What this says is that at a standardized test level, not all students were technically at the same academic aptitude because not all of them had passed the GATE exam. This challenges the belief that the reason why GATE had been so successful was because all students in these classes were at one level where the teacher could teach to just one level and not differentiate instruction.

We see the imbedded racism in this concept of differentiated instruction in the following White parents public comment made at the school board meeting for March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010. She presents two concerns she has about the GATE-Honors proposal below:

“...The first is that it will effectively eliminate GATE teaching. Teachers will simply be overwhelmed trying to bridge the very large intellectual span and pace of learning between a GATE child and a child who barely performs above proficient on a California state standards test no matter how well trained a teacher is faced with 35 to 40 students in a classroom teachers will have no choice but to teach to the lowest level, second I believe the proposal is set up to fail GATE kids I believe its set up to fail all kids but in particular GATE kids as far as I can see the only measureable goal contained in this proposal is how many more underrepresented kids get a seat in these classes...I would like to see a measurable definition of high rigor...What happens to the underrepresented kids placed in these classes who fail? Will teachers be allowed to fail these kids? Or will they simply have to lower the standards of what an A or B or C looks like?...”(School Board Meeting, 3-23-10).

In this excerpt we see again this concern for the consequences of differentiated instruction however this concern is played out through a White vs. underrepresented student dichotomy, which translates to Latina/o students since they are the largest “minority” group at the Santa Barbara School District. The concern here is largely for White students, not necessarily the underrepresented students, who are presented by this parent as bound to fail if



they are placed in these rigorous classes. Why not ask what happens to the underrepresented students who succeed instead of who fail? What is also interesting here is the way the parent sets herself up as someone who is *also* concerned for underrepresented students since she says that she believes the plan is set up to fail *all* kids. This is her process of veiling her inherent racism by coming off as someone who is worried for the underrepresented students who will enter GATE classes and fail these classes. This “White savior syndrome” was something that was not unique to this parent but a strategy that was widely used by the opposition, that is, to come off as someone who was worried for Latina/o students success. Through statements like “it isn’t fair for Latino students to be placed in a class that is going to be hard for them and where they will fail” (School Board Meeting, 3-23-10) the opposition tried to come off as concerned for *all* students not just White GATE students.

### *Quality of Instruction*

Similar to differentiated instruction, the opposition voiced a concern for the quality of instruction in GATE classes going down because new students, who in their perspective would be unprepared and not at the same level as the other students in the GATE classes, would push teachers to lower their standards and thus teach to their unpreparedness. For example, in the following excerpt from a White parent who opposed the merger we see her concern for how standards will be lowered if we let students who are not GATE identified into GATE classes:

“I am gonna start off by saying I love the Latinos ok and I love the diversity of the community and I am very happy to have them all here...I believe very strongly that if there is a student that is black, Latino, whatever race they are if they test and they qualify for GATE bring them in I think its fantastic to have them but if they are not at that level there is no reason that our GATE leveled kids who are highly motivated working their butts off everyday who are very challenged and happy should be brought down waiting for some of these children I am not saying Latino any type of children that are in a high honors group or whatever should have to be slowed down for...Everybody wants the opportunity to be at that high level as a parent we all want that opportunity but some of

them aren't at that level so don't bring them down to be there..." (School Board Meeting, 3-23-10).

In this excerpt we see another strategy that was used largely by White parents who opposed the merger. This parent begins by saying that she loves the Latinos, what I saw happen various times during public comments made by White parents was that they would begin or end statements with comments like these in order to veil or somehow excuse their racism. There was a parent who ended her public comment with "by the way my children are half Mexican because of me," another who started her comment with "I am a Hispanic mother..." It was as if being "half Mexican" or "Hispanic" or "loving the Latinos" gave them more authority to speak about race or in this case to veil the racism. The excerpt above also assumes that the GATE exam is a fair test to measure student's academic aptitude. This in itself is very problematic especially given the fact that a large amount of Latina/o students are English language learners, immigrants, and first generation college students that when faced with culturally biased exams like the GATE exam are more likely to score lower than their English speaking, middle class, White peers. Moreover, not passing this exam automatically equates to students "dumbing" the class down since they will have to be slowed down for. Other underlying assumptions imbedded in this excerpt are that if you don't pass the GATE exam you are not as highly motivated or hard working as GATE students.

There was a lot of anger expressed by opponents of the merger when it came to how this would affect the quality of instruction. Many parents threatened to take their students out of the district and place them instead in private schools in order to protect the quality of instruction for their student. Alexa does a very good job of describing where she believes this anger was coming from. She says:

“...From my perspective that anger is actually about racism and actually believing that students of color are less worthy than their students to be in those classes and that they would bring down the level of the class whether that’s a conscious belief or not because other wise why are you so angry? What are you protecting? You’re protecting your privilege, you’re protecting a belief in an exclusionary class and you must believe to some level that if its exclusionary and it’s primarily excluding students of color than it must be better for your students...”

Alexa highlights the veiled racism within concepts like differentiated instruction and quality of instruction. The belief that parents were trying to protect the quality of instruction was really a way to protect their own White privilege. Like Alexa points out there is an underlying belief that students of color are inherently “dumber” than White students or less deserving of GATE classes. These different concepts were ways in which White parents tried protect their own little domain of status and privilege. For years, Santa Barbara White parents have utilized GATE classes as a way to keep their children in a very isolated population of largely White middle to upper middle class students. In other words their children may be attending a school where half of the student population is Latina/o yet because they are in GATE classes they get a very isolated experience of classes with White students only. It has become almost like a private school system operating within a public school system where parents police who has access to these classes, how the money is used in the GATE program, and how classes are run. Unlike many other school districts where the distinction is clear as to which is the “brown and black” school and which is the majority White school, in Santa Barbara schools operate in a school within a school system with strong de facto segregation in place.

### *Giftedness*

I titled this paper, “What’s in the water White students are drinking?” which is a direct quote from Alexa. This title speaks to the idea of giftedness, which was another way White parents veiled their racism. Within the concept of giftedness was the underlying belief that

White students are more gifted than Latina/o students. It was also used as a way to justify the overrepresentation of White students in GATE classes. When GATE classes are 83% White you have to ask, “What’s in the water White students are drinking?” Where does this overrepresentation come from? As explained earlier not all students have passed the GATE exam in these classes so technically they are not all “gifted” according to the standardized exam. So is it that they are truly “gifted” or that they have parents that know the public school system well enough to maneuver it to get them into the classes? In the following excerpt Alexa explains more about how racism is imbedded in this concept of giftedness. She says:

“...A sense of specialness is part of it too like my child is different than other children and being in a GATE class that you had to pass a test to get into proofs that like oh well they're gifted, I think those that believed that that my kid took a test and now they're special and better than other kids didn't want to loose that either and so in that aspect I think there was some genuine confusion as why it is an issue about race, I just think my kid is special and better than your kid and your saying that kids who are not special can get into that class kinda ignoring like A a third of the students in those classes already aren't GATE students B we have way too many White students being identified as GATE, what's up with that?...”

Again we see this effort from parents to hold tightly to the belief and exclusivity of a student being “gifted.” How this is conceptualized though is again problematic since it is based off of a culturally biased exam. This sense of entitlement to these classes because a student has passed the GATE exam is also exemplified. Alexa problematizes these beliefs by reminding us again that many students in these GATE classes have not even passed the GATE exam. Additionally, she illustrates the racialization of intelligence that is happening through the GATE exam by favoring the body of knowledge from the experiences of White middle to upper middle class students.

Mrs. Cardenas sheds light on this fight to also keep these classes exclusive to White students only. She says:

“...Somehow a lot of the parents felt like it (referring to being in GATE) gave their students status to be in this very exclusive club and that if somehow the club became less exclusive they would have less status, it really seemed like they were trying to protect this idea that oh only a few people can do this only certain people can do this and if it seemed like anybody could do this then you don't seem as special...”

The exclusivity of being in these all White classes translated to better classes, which arguably is true given the level of rigor of the classes, money being put into the classes, and high teacher expectations however to equate having more Latina/o students in these classes to degenerating this is problematic. The concept of giftedness is only attributed to a certain and few group of people and to challenge this belief, challenges the inherent superiority of White students that opponents fought to protect. Again, something that seems objective like “giftedness” or measurable intelligence through an exam is used to veil the inherent racism in the opponents arguments.

Both board member Ana Cardenas and community organizer Alexa Madison attributed the passing of the merger to the work of the Latina/o community. Alexa shared that without the organization, work, and *esfuerzo* from the Latina/o community the merger would not have passed. I now turn to explaining what this *esfuerzo* looked like. Specifically, I argue that community organizing, coalition building, and storytelling were strategies that not only politicized the Latina/o community but also led to the success of the approval of the merger. Again these three strategies should not be looked at differently but as interrelated, meaning I cannot talk about one without talking about the other. To illustrate this I draw from two-minute public comments made at school board meetings, letters written in support of the merger, and my two interviews.

*Community Organizing*

Community organizing was a key strategy that led to the success of the merger. Alexa explains more about how this actually looked like in the following excerpt, she says:

“...We held prep meetings before each of the school board meetings where students and parents and community members who were going to give public statements came and we did like workshops on how to write a public statement and a little bit of public speaking coaching and had people give feedback to each other and one of the things that we really tried to work on was ok how might you hear that, I thought the advocates for the change were so incredibly civil but articulate and also very thoughtful about like ok how am I going to say this but a lot of people came in and they wanted to say things like it's time to bring down this racist policy and we were like yes, yes it is, but lets think about how were going to frame that so that it can be heard in a way that doesn't insult the people who were asking for the change from and doesn't basically denigrate the past that's one of the things that we worked on how do you sell the problem with out denigrating the past because if people feel like they are a part of that past the way things have been then they are going to feel insulted so how do you say it, it's tricky...”

Supporters of the plan put in a lot of their personal time to prepare for board meetings, spread awareness, galvanize their networks, and continue putting pressure on the board to pass the merger. A large part of the supporters were Latina mothers or parents with young children who had to juggle the lack of childcare at board meetings along with the language barriers presented at the meetings. The board was truly unprepared when it came to having speakers give their public comment in Spanish. There were instances where they would include the time it took to translate in the speakers two minute allotted time period, which was a disadvantage because Spanish speakers weren't able to say their entire statement. Even more marginalizing was the fact that many times the public comments or meetings in general were not translated to Spanish which meant Spanish monolingual speakers could not fully engage or participate in the meetings.

From Alexa's excerpt we learn about all of the organization that took place beyond the school board meetings. For example, she mentions they would get together to prepare people who were going to give public statements; they worked on public speaking, and created a

community where they provided each other feedback and support. Strategically, she mentions how they worked on framing their arguments so it didn't denigrate the past. While some speakers wanted to rightfully call out the blatant racism in GATE they worked as a community to still have that underlying message of the racism in GATE in their statements but in manner that the district would not be offended.

In addition to these prep meetings the Latina/o community also took it upon itself to create bilingual flyers to educate and do more outreach in the Spanish speaking community. Since district information is only posted in English, they created information packets on what exactly the proposal for the merger was in Spanish. If members of the Latina/o community could not attend the board meetings they would call, send letters, or email board members voicing their support for the merger. There was one specific incident that Alexa talked about where she was at a meeting with Latina/o parents discussing the merger and everyone at the meeting decided right then to call the school board members to leave a message in support for the merger. There were also countless Latina/o parents that were willing to give public statements at board meetings. This act of courage for Latina/o parents to give public statements in Spanish is important to point out given the hostility during board meetings, where comments like, "If you can't speak English you shouldn't even be here" were commonly expressed by White parents.

Because of the hostility and racism happening at board meetings the Latina/o community also made sure to support each other as much as possible. For example, Alexa mentioned that after every board meeting they would meet together even if it was just at the parking lot of the district building to debrief and provide emotional support and encouragement. What is unique from the organization of the Latina/o community was how this played out in families. For

example, often times a Latina/o student would give her/his statement and then the mother or father of that student would speak too. This certainly speaks to the involvement of my family. My mother gave a public statement and my siblings and I wrote letters in support. In many ways the organizing not only played out at a community level but at a familial level too. The level of encouragement between families and extended community was very powerful. Organizing therefore translated into three main tiers; Latina/o parents, students, and community members.

### *Coalition Building*

Similar to community organizing, coalition building focused on building strong communication and support across the different levels of organizers aforementioned. Alexa spoke about how organizations like *Padres Unidos*, a Latina/o parent organization that focuses on empowering parents to understand the educational system, and student group Future Leaders of America, really collaborated to make sure people were informed and ready to organize around the issue. She speaks more about this in the following excerpt:

“It was all kinda like building the ship once it’s in the water because it’s not like we got a bunch of lead time, it was like that school board meeting happened and it was like go ok we gotta develop a plan and we gotta get a media plan, we gotta get multiple people trained enough to talk about this issue to the media, so yeah students took it to their student groups, parents took it back to their parent groups and that was the idea and then afterwards we tried to do that as much as possible cause that was our other fear that this change would happen but then a change a policy is meaningless if people don't have the information you know about how the change has happened and the tools to utilize that so we did a bunch of follow up meetings ...”

Within each level of organizers; parents, students, and community members, people were getting trained to speak on the merger, to give public statements, and to spread awareness on the issue. These various organizers created the Latino Achievement Collaborative which included the following organizations: *La Casa de la Raza*, Parent Project, Just Communities, Future Leaders of America, *Padres Unidos*, PUEBLO, and UCSB Associated Students. These



organizations worked closely and gave mini presentations on the merger to the public. They also drafted proposals, letters, and information packets for the district, public, and media.

Additionally, as mentioned above their work as a coalition did not stop after the success of the merger. They held follow up meetings to make sure this information was communicated to the public as much as possible because like Alexa mentions above, a change in policy is worthless unless people know about it. Community organizing and coalition building were integral to the success of the merger, and as illustrated very interrelated. The purpose in discussing them separately is to highlight how effective community organizing led to strong coalition building.

### *Storytelling*

Storytelling was an effective method that the organizers relied on heavily during their public statements and letter writing. The success of the campaign came through the strong narrative that parents and students were able to share. Storytelling also functioned as a way to legitimate the experiences of racism, inequities, and/or institutional barriers that the students and parents witnessed or experienced. For example, in Minerva Castillo's<sup>4</sup> public statement, made at one of the board meetings, we see how she describes the inequities and institutional barriers she faced as a mother that was interested in getting her daughter into the GATE program. Minerva gave her statement in Spanish and became emotional as she spoke. This goes to illustrate how institutional discrimination can also be understood as emotional abuse, as Minerva still struggles to remember. Below is Minerva's statement in Spanish along with the translation of it below it.

“Mi nombre es Minerva Castillo tengo una hija en la escuela Dos Pueblos. Mi hija asistió a la escuela Adams ahí escuche por primera vez la palabra GATE pregunte a que se referia pero no tenian informacion disponible ni personal para que explicara y me dijeran los pasos a seguir para que yo pudiera introducir a mi hija en ese program el año pasado supe que con solo haber presentado un examen mi hija podia haber entrado en ese programa quizas si fuere tenido esa informacion disponible mi hija fuera hoy una

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<sup>4</sup> A pseudonym has been assigned to protect the parent's identity.

estudiante en clases de GATE por lo tanto les pido que consideren ampliar mas este programa y tambien hacerlo mas accessible para que todos los estudiantes que si tienen los grados necesarios para poder integrarse en esos programas tengan la gran oportunidad de hacerlo y tambien realmente lograr con esto cerrar la brecha educativa con mas rapidez que hoy nos separa.” (School Board Meeting, 3-2-10)

*My name is Minerva Castillo I have a daughter at Dos Pueblos High School. My daughter went to Adams<sup>5</sup>, which is where I first heard for the first time the word GATE. I asked what that referred to but they did not have any available information nor personal to tell me the steps needed to enroll my daughter in the program. Last year I found out that if I had my daughter tested my daughter would have been able to be part of the program perhaps if I would have had that information presented to me, my daughter would be a student in GATE classes today. For now I ask you to please consider making this program more diverse and accessible so that all those students that have the necessary grades can have the great opportunity of doing so and to also begin to close more rapidly the achievement gap that continues to separate us today.*

Delgado (1993) points out that counter-storytelling is a way of challenging the beliefs of those in power and the majoritarian story; something that Minerva does in her public statement. From Minerva’s story we see how she challenges the majoritarian story and/or belief that Latina/o parents are not involved in their child’s education. Minerva first heard about GATE when her daughter was in elementary school. Yet, we learn that when she asked for more information about the program no one was able to help her. This is difficult to understand since Adams has had a GATE program for a long time yet when Minerva asked about it no one was able to assist her. This leads me to question, in Minerva’s case, if withholding information about GATE was done on purpose.

In addition, as we learned earlier much of the material on GATE is only in English, which also leads me to question if this was why the information was not given to Minerva. This language barrier along with the lack of help from administrators and/or teachers are examples of the institutional barriers that Latina/o parents face when interested in the GATE program. Minerva was never informed about GATE yet alone the process of how to navigate the program.

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<sup>5</sup> Adams is an elementary school in Santa Barbara.

It wasn't until many years later that she became aware of how she could have helped her daughter get into the program, an unfair advantage for her daughter who is now a senior in high school.

As mentioned earlier community organizing and coalition building translated through families as well. In other words, organization took place in the family as well as building coalition or solidarity. For example, Minerva's daughter also told her story, making their family counter-story much more stronger and real, since it was now being told by two people.

Andrea's<sup>6</sup> story also highlights the institutional barriers she faced as a student. Her letter written to the board said:

“Six years ago when I was at Adams Elementary School I didn't really know what GATE meant. All I knew was that you had to be smart in order to be in that program and that there were mostly white students in GATE. I would always hear my friends talking about some test that they would have to take in order to get into GATE, but I would also hear some of my white friends saying that they never even had to take a test to be in GATE that they were somehow just in the GATE program. My mom wanted me to be in GATE but because she really didn't know English and didn't know who to talk to she didn't know what I had to do to get into GATE. When I moved on to La Cumbre Jr. High School I didn't even think there was a GATE program there, and maybe that was because there weren't that many white students at my Jr. High. During my first three years of high school I didn't even realize that GATE was at Dos Pueblos until I met new people that told me that they were in GATE classes. Those people started telling me how their grades were weighted and I didn't think that was fair. It wasn't until I joined the Triple E Committee that I found out that GATE was just an acronym. When I first heard what it stood for I was in shock; I was asking myself what are they trying to say with the name Gifted and Talented Education? Are they trying to say that not everyone is gifted and talented? This just made me feel bad because I never got offered to be in the Gifted and Talented Education program...”

Andrea's story highlights the messages an exclusionary program like GATE gives to students. For Andrea, she came to understand the program as only for smart students who were largely White. The emotional and mental abuse from these messages such as that they're not smart because they are not in GATE can have detrimental affects on student's psyches and

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<sup>6</sup> A pseudonym has been assigned to protect the student's identity.

academic success. If GATE is for gifted and talented students than why are there only White students? Does this mean students of color are just not gifted and talented? Andrea also illustrated her mothers struggle to learn about the program due to the language barrier. Through her entire schooling experience Andrea lives in the shadows of the GATE program, never quite understanding the process of how to access the program or why she can't be in the program. Lastly, Andrea's story illustrates how Latina/o students are not counseled, encouraged, or informed about GATE the program since how she learns about GATE is through her peers and student organization.

I would like to end with a piece from my mother's public statement to highlight the emotional and mental abuse I spoke about in the introduction of this paper. Storytelling can also be a process of healing and in many ways this paper has been part of that process. She shared the following:

“...They (referring to my siblings and I) were and are challenged daily, not only academically but emotionally as well. They sit in AP, Honors and GATE classrooms with all white students, they are partnered up by their teacher when working in groups because of all the clicks in these types of classrooms, they are humiliated in front of their classmates when they are signaled out almost on a daily basis when asked if they understand the material, yet they have the courage. Most of their friends unfortunately did not. They were either discouraged by the tracking system, by their peers, or in some cases, by the teachers. We are not asking for anything more than what all parents want for their children, the best education possible, and the same opportunities....” (School Board Meeting, 3-2-10)

The letter I wrote to the school board focused on highlighting just what my mother talked about above, the marginalization of being in GATE classes. Being the only Latina in all my GATE and Advanced Placement (AP) classes was emotionally overwhelming and mentally challenging. Although I was very fortunate and privileged to have had the opportunity to be in GATE classes the hostility I experienced from both teachers and students was at times very difficult to deal with. Because I was the only student of color many times I was tokenized and

called upon to speak about the experiences of people of color, as if we were not existent on my school campus. When it came to group work many of my peers did not see me as capable compared to rest of my peers and therefore I was often left out. Teachers often, like my mother mentioned, felt the need to double, triple, check that I understood assignments and material, never did they do this with my White peers. Discussions about race, class, and merit were often heated and imbedded with racism and racial microaggressions (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) directed towards myself and community. Beyond my GATE classes I struggled to fit in with my Latina/o peers since none of them were in my classes. My White peers never accepted me and my Latina/o peers struggled to understand why I was in “those” classes. The marginalization was difficult and many times I felt like giving up. Yet, it is these experiences that continue to drive my dedication to change the educational conditions of Latina/o students.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude this paper by addressing my last research question which is what implications does the merger have for the Latina/o community. The first implication is related to the strategies the Latina/o community used to successfully pass the merger. It was through these strategies that many students and parents became politicized. Although this was arguably a very conservative change on the GATE program, one thing that can be highlighted is the organization of the Latina/o community. Like Alexa said “...the best thing that came out of this was how proud the people invoked felt, like how proud the students and the parents and the community organizers I worked with felt, like we really did come together and it made a big difference in something that really needed to be changed for a long time.” The first implication I would like to highlight is the politicization it had on the Latina/o community. Although it was sometimes very painful and hard for Latina/o students and parents to sit through hostile board meetings they

came out successful and proud of the work they were able to accomplish. As mentioned earlier too, their work as a community did not stop once the merger passed, efforts continue to dismantle other forms of institutional oppression. *Esfuerzo* in Spanish has an underlying belief that it requires sacrifice and in many ways the Latina/o parents had to sacrifice a lot for the success of the merger, whether it was their personal time or courage to speak out, in the end their *esfuerzo* paid off.

I asked school board member Ana Cardenas if the district had seen any increase in numbers of Latina/o students in the GATE program and she said the impact so far has been small. However, she was quick to say that she believes that with time we will see a larger impact. One thing she highlighted is the effort to recruit groups of Latina/o students instead of individual students because very few students want to be part of a class where they will be the only student of color. Therefore, in terms of numbers so far, the impact has been minimal. However, structural changes have been implemented. Changes such as holding GATE meetings at predominately Latina/o elementary schools and providing childcare are being implemented in hopes of recruiting more Latina/o students. Therefore, the second implication of this merger can be understood as a continued emphasis and pressure on the GATE program to become more diverse and accessible.

Lastly and most recently, the Santa Barbara School District has received a lot more attention on equity issues since this merger. On November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011 KEYT aired and printed news of the district being under investigation for the discrimination of Latina/o students by the U.S. Department of Education. “There are about one thousand students in the Santa Barbara Unified District and the Latino population accounts for just over fifty percent. In 2010-2011, Latinos accounted for 68% of all male suspensions, while Latina students accounted for 82% off

all female suspensions” (KEYT, 11-30-11). Statistics like this one have caught the attention of the U.S. Department of Education who are currently conducting an investigating of the school district. Although this may not be seen as a positive implication for the district, for the Latina/o community it certainly acknowledges the racism and discrimination they have and continue to experience in Santa Barbara. At last, their voices are being acknowledged by institutions like the U.S. Department of Education.

There is much that can and should be done to address the institutional oppression that Latina/o students continue to face in Santa Barbara. Research should address the experiences of the entering Latina/o students in the new Honors classes. A change on the program name does not guarantee acceptance by peers and teachers in the new Honors program. How will Latina/o students experience the new Honors program? Will the marginalization be more visceral given how hostile White parents and students were about the merger? Lastly, it is important that Latina/o her/his-torians insert their voices into the educational history of Santa Barbara. Very little has been documented on the schooling experiences of Latina/o students in Santa Barbara. Having this her/his-tory could provide for more culturally relevant curriculum for Latina/o students in Santa Barbara. Lastly, I envision an ethnography of a Santa Barbara high school to illuminate the experiences of Latina/o students attending a school that functions in a school within a school model. How are they navigating/resisting this space?

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