



Building confidence through culturally sustaining spaces for teachers and students

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DOI : 10.25965/trahs.2744

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Abstract: We share the testimonio of Linda, a Mexican American teacher that participates in and creates culturally sustaining schooling spaces. Linda describes these spaces as learning environments where her Mexican American students can safely share their cultural identities. Basing her knowledge on her own experience growing up as a Mexican American in the United States school system, she shares how culturally sustaining spaces build student and teacher confidence. The authors describe her testimonio as a decolonial Chicana theory that integrates culturally sustaining embodied and academic learning.

Keywords: cultural identity, culturally sustaining pedagogy, Mexican American schools, testimonio

Resumen: Compartimos el testimonio de Linda, una maestra mexicoamericana que participa en y crea espacios para sustentar cultura. Linda describe estos espacios como ambientes donde sus estudiantes mexicoamericanos pueden compartir su identidad cultural sin riesgo. Basando su conocimiento en su propia experiencia como mexicoamericana educada en el sistema escolar de los Estados Unidos, comparte cómo estos espacios fomentan la confianza en sus estudiantes y en si misma. Los autores describen el testimonio de Linda como una teoría chicana descolonial que integra el aprendizaje académico en lo culturalmente duradero.

Palabras clave: escuelas mexicano estadounidenses, identidad cultural, pedagogía de sustento cultural, testimonio

Résumé : Nous partageons dans cet article, le témoignage de Linda, une enseignante américano-mexicaine qui participe et crée des espaces scolaires culturellement durables. Linda décrit ces espaces comme des environnements d'apprentissage où ses élèves mexicains américains peuvent partager en toute sérénité leurs identités culturelles. En basant ses connaissances sur sa propre expérience en tant que Mexicaine- Américaine ayant grandi dans le système scolaire nord-américain, elle explique comment des espaces culturellement durables renforcent la confiance des élèves et des enseignants. Les auteurs décrivent son témoignage comme une théorie de décolonisation *chicana* qui intègre l'apprentissage académique dans le culturellement durable.

Mots clés : identité culturelle, pédagogie culturellement durable, écoles mexicano-américaines, témoignage

Resumo: Compartilhamos o testemunho de Linda, uma professora americana descendente de mexicanos, que cria e atua em espaços escolares culturalmente sustentáveis. Ela descreve esses espaços como ambientes de aprendizagem nos quais os alunos americanos descendentes de mexicanos podem compartilhar suas identidades culturais com segurança. Usando sua própria experiência como aluna americana descendente de mexicanos no sistema escolar dos Estados Unidos, ela explica como os espaços culturalmente sustentáveis desenvolvem a confiança dos alunos e professores. Os autores descrevem o *testimonio* de Linda como uma teoria chicana de descolonização que integra o aprendizado acadêmico e o irrefutável aprendizado culturalmente sustentável.

Palavras chave: identidade cultural, pedagogia culturalmente sustentável, escolas México-americanas, testemunho

Culturally sustaining pedagogy exists wherever education sustains the lifeways of communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling (Paris & Alim, 2014)

In our lives as educators, we have attended multiple professional development courses focused on identity and diversity in the classroom. In talking with fellow educators of color, it is a frequent theme that through their schooling they felt unseen, their home language was undervalued, and their home experiences went unacknowledged. We can think of many instances in which teachers of color state that it was not until college that they felt their identity was recognized or valued. It is no surprise that this is the case, given that US schooling has embedded oppressive structures in place, such as scripted curriculum and standardized testing (Tondreau & Rumberger, 2016), that frequently require students to leave their identity at the door as they walk into classrooms (Urrieta, 2009).

Such was the case for Linda (pseudonym used to protect her identity), a Mexican American teacher, who went through schooling in Texas and California, and who frequently struggled to affirm her cultural identity in school. It wasn't until she enrolled in her teacher preparation program that she was able to value her cultural identity in an academic space which would further influence her decision to become a bilingual educator. Her lived experiences of exclusion and the struggle to find spaces in which she could be her true authentic self, influence the pedagogical choices she makes in creating a classroom space that is culturally sustaining and affirming (Jimenez-Silva & Luevanos, 2017). As a result of this, Linda makes a conscious effort to value the identity and home knowledge of the students in her classroom as a key element of her praxis. We describe these efforts as her ability to create a culturally sustaining space in her classroom.

Through this article, we explore how Linda's experiences as a Mexican American in school influenced her decision to pursue a career in bilingual education. We delve into her personal and family history in order to connect how her lived experiences have translated into the choices she makes as an educator. Through her story, we gain insight on the struggles faced by many teachers of color and Mexican American students today. Linda recalls instances of exclusions and microaggressions that devalued her identity in school which in turn fuel her desire to create culturally inclusive spaces in her classroom. The way she describes her life and teaching reminds us of Anzaldúa's (1987) description of exhibiting and living a *mestiza consciousness*, or having the ability to live, thrive and teach intentionally in two contrasting social worlds. Linda applies this consciousness to culturally sustaining instruction (Jimenez-Silva & Luevanos, 2017), with her life a bridge between how she teaches and why she is culturally inclusive. We explore how her experiences have led her to seek similar spaces as an educator and have led her to collaborative work within a culturally sustaining out-of-school program for Mexican American students in Austin, Texas. Finally, we delve into the ways her teacher's story has impacted the relationships she has cultivated with preservice teachers and how it continues to impact the relationships she builds with her students and families. Linda's story reminds us of ways that teachers' past experiences shape the personal and professional decisions made in everyday classrooms and the impact they have on Mexican American students today.

Integrating our life experiences into our teaching

In this article, we use decolonial, Chicana and culturally sustaining theory to describe how Linda's life experience-based teaching is an important approach to challenge colonial pedagogies. Decolonial theorists Maldonado-Torres (2017a) and

Mignolo (2018) describe life experience-based thinking as an important decolonial step in integrating one's own lived experiences with how one lives in this world. For both theorists, Western colonial thought has harmed colonial subjects in advocating for a separation of thought from one's lived experiences. For Maldonado-Torres (2017b), this separation comes in the form of the separation of the concepts of 'consciousness' and 'human' - a perspective that forces people to separate their abstract thoughts about what it means to be human from their experiences with the material human condition. Thus, if we are to decolonize our thinking from this mindset, it is important to teach a humanizing pedagogy which reinscribes human lived experiences in one's work with people.

Mignolo (2018) describes this mind-body separation as an ability to separate one's thoughts from the horrors of colonization. For inspiration in recombining mind and body, he draws from border thinkers like Anzaldúa (1987) who describe ways to promote embodied knowledge. Embodied knowledge is knowledge that is connected to the body and to the oppression that the body is experiencing. Viewed from this perspective, when Linda grounds her teaching in her life experiences of being colonized in schools as a Mexican American, she is reinscribing her embodied knowledge of this oppression into her teaching to imagine decolonial approaches to teaching her own Mexican American students.

Chicana feminist argue that Mexican American women embrace embodied knowledge because social forces put them in a position where they are forced to think about their material conditions in order to survive. For instance, Anzaldúa (1987) argues that Mexican American women have learned to live in multiple, contradictory social worlds because they have to. On one hand, they are raised in home cultures in which families teach them the importance of valuing Mexican American family traditions, languages and knowledge, but when they go to a US school, they are forced to learn a White culture that not only teaches them competing values, but often devalues and subjugates home languages, cultures and knowledge. As *mestiza* women, a Mexican term that denotes someone who is from mixed indigenous and European ancestry, they not only learn to live and thrive in both worlds, they learn to live with competing values, traditions and perspectives on the world. In order to do this, women develop what Anzaldúa terms a *mestiza* consciousness, an identity which allows them to unite two different social identities which are oppositional in nature. These consciousnesses are in opposition because dominant, whitestream identities displace other identities, languages and perspectives by imposing a hegemonic monocultural and monolingual perspective of the world on students who go through the US school system.

Mexican American teachers in US schools thus face a dilemma in which they are mandated to impose whitestream schooling on other Mexican American children, a cultural imposition which did them socioemotional and academic harm (Abril-Gonzalez, 2018). The problem is that US teacher preparatory schools do not teach *mestiza* perspectives in schools nor offer educational alternatives that help students develop culturally pluralistic identities. *Mestiza* teacher educators have started to address this issue by calling for teacher preparation systems and approaches to teacher education that address these multiple identities (Palmer, Cervantes-Soon, Dorner, & Heiman, 2019; Prieto, 2013).

Specifically, *mestiza* perspectives on bilingual teacher education center on two important concepts. First, that teachers teach a subjugated community in a US school system (Dolores Delgado Bernal, 2001). Second, that schools impose a monocultural identity on all students instead of supporting students affectively and academically to have confidence in themselves, their diverse families and their individual abilities

(Jackson, 2006). *Mestiza* teacher preparation approaches include discussing the importance of pedagogies of the home with teachers and how to include home funds of knowledge in the classroom (Dolores Delgado Bernal, 2001). They also call for critical reflection of pre-service teachers' own lived experiences of US schooling that offer a safe emotional and academic space for students to make connections between their home knowledge, school efforts to displace or value this knowledge and the impact this had on their own identities, self-confidence and academic motivation (Prieto, 2013). In order to combat colonial cultural displacement, *mestiza* teacher educators emphasize the need for Mexican American teachers to make connections with their own lived experiences as Mexican American students in schools, especially when it comes to promoting home cultures, languages and identities.

In order to specifically address pedagogical methods that integrate home cultures and schooling, we draw from culturally sustaining pedagogical theory to describe Linda's work in the classroom. Paris and Alim (2014) have described culturally sustaining pedagogy as an approach to teaching that explicitly promotes cultural pluralism by sustaining students' home cultures. This includes instructional approaches that help students make connections between what they learn at home and what they learn at school and building student-teacher relationships that support students' socioemotional, cultural and academic development (Jimenez-Silva & Luevanos, 2017).

At the same time, researchers underline the importance of supporting teachers both to unlearn what has been imposed on them by prior schooling and support emotional and cultural healing as they work through the pain of reliving how they survived US schooling (Coulter & Jimenez-Silva, 2017). As a *mestiza* with oppositional identities, Linda describes how she uses the contradictory experiences she has lived to heal from her own colonial schooling and build culturally sustaining relationships, pedagogies and spaces with her Mexican American students.

Educator Testimonios

This research was conducted using *testimonio* research methods (Ashmawi, Sanchez, & Carmona, 2018; D Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). As a method that privileges the lives of the marginalized, *testimonio* research asks participants to share their story as a political act that validates marginalized life experience and knowledge. As researchers, we developed a three-year collaborative relationship with Linda in Academia Cuauhtli before we asked a group of eight teachers, including Linda, to go through the *tesimonio* process of reflecting and sharing about their lived experiences as part of our research.

The authors (Chris, Brenda and Luz) met Linda as university coordinators of Academia Cuauhtli. Academia Cuauhtli is a Saturday out-of-school education program in which Austin public school teachers use critical arts-based pedagogies to help Mexican American 9 and 10-year old children to explore their cultural identities, home cultures and civic activism. We are critical participant researchers whose aim is to collectively construct knowledge with community and educator partners to work together to facilitate the education of the students. Central to our relational research approach is getting to know program participants and to work collaboratively to use our collective knowledge and life experience in our work (Torres & Reyes, 2011). Thus, it is important to share all our life stories and find ways to integrate this knowledge into our work with the students and into our research.

With this in mind, we used *testimonios* with our staff, teachers, families and community members to capture both their motivations for their work in Academia Cuauhtli and as a platform to discuss how we should educate the students. *Testimonios* (Ashmawi et al., 2018) are a culturally responsive oral history research method which encourages participants to share their life experiences both privately and in focus groups as a way to respond to salient issues, in this case facilitating Mexican American cultural identity exploration with bilingual/bicultural students. As a form of knowledge production, *testimonios* are seen as an important method in which individuals from oppressed communities speak back to oppressive social systems by sharing their stories with people they trust (Kolar, 2015). Within Chicana (D Delgado Bernal et al., 2012) and indigenous research (Wise, 1995), *testimonios* have a history of addressing coloniality and colonial institutions. At a local level (Abril-Gonzalez, 2018), they are used to share with other oppressed individuals that they are not alone and that there exists a shared lived experience of oppression. When *testimonios* are published, they are used as a method to speak to dominant communities in order to share about oppressive conditions that is either unknown or ignored by the dominant population (Kolar, 2015). Either way, *testimonios* are political texts whose aim is to fight colonial lived conditions.

Brenda, Chris and Luz have personal stakes in participating in knowledge construction about educating Mexican American children in the United States. Brenda's perspective as a critical educational researcher grew from her personal experiences as a Mexican, immigrant woman raised along the U.S.-Mexico border and experiencing the coloniality of Mexican American schooling in the United States first-hand and as an educational program evaluator. Brenda is an assistant professor in educational leadership with a background in program evaluation and development. Chris' perspective is based on his life histories growing up as an Ecuadorean American in the United States and the son of a bilingual educator. He has experienced US colonial schooling as a student, bilingual teacher of primary school and the father of bilingual/bicultural teenage children. Chris is an adjunct professor in a teacher's college and teaches university students preparing to be teachers. Luz's perspective is based on her experiences growing up as a Mexican American in US schools, is the daughter of a bilingual educator, and has twelve years' experience as a bilingual teacher serving diverse students in K-8th grade. She is currently an elementary bilingual educator in Texas, serves as a cooperating teacher for pre-service teachers, and focuses on creating and implementing a culturally sustaining curriculum.

We conducted Linda's initial *testimonios* between October 2016 through February 2017. The purpose of the *testimonios* were to capture her personal and professional experiences as a bilingual/bicultural educator as well as any perceived impact Academia Cuauhtli had on her praxis. The findings from these interviews pointed to life experiences as a primary source of critical consciousness and teacher development. The data was analyzed using qualitative data analysis software using codes generated from *testimonios*, including community rootedness, schooling and identity. Linda then gave critical feedback to these findings during the summer of 2020. For instance, during her initial interviews, she described the importance of safe spaces in her teaching, but as we discussed this article, she clarified and defined these spaces as culturally sustainable spaces. Based on a combination of written drafts and shared conversations, we then collaboratively wrote this article.

Linda's Childhood: Learning the Importance of Inclusion on the Border

Linda was born and lived her early years in a United States-Mexico border town and grew up with a Mexican American identity. Currently, as a teacher of Mexican American children, her reflections on the different ways in which her family, city culture and schools either supported her in her bilingual identity or made her feel excluded as a Mexican American in the United States drive how she integrates cultural identity in her classroom. Her sense of social inclusion or exclusion in different social spaces had a tremendous impact on her sense of belonging, self-confidence and academic ability. This in turn motivated her to make sure that in her own classroom space, her students felt included and supported in their own identity formation as Mexican Americans in the United States so that they know and are confident that they can learn.

Linda is a first-generation, Mexican American, born in a border town in West Texas. Her father obtained a university degree in Mexico and began working as a sales representative for a company that relocated him and his wife to the United States side of the border. She shared fond memories of regularly crossing the border to visit extended family and to spend time with her cousins and maternal grandmother, who was an elementary school teacher.

Linda pointed out that both literal and figurative border-crossing (Anzaldúa, 1987) were a common occurrence. Within her family, it was common for her to speak both languages, visit family on both sides of the border and to discuss events that took place in both countries. She credits her parents as being her first and most important teachers. She is thankful to them for making her proud of being both bilingual and bicultural.

She, however, was not always aware of it, "I don't know that I ever realized that I was speaking two languages." This was first brought to her attention after a friend's father asked her a question in Spanish and corrected her for responding in English. This made her more cognizant of her language use. She did not see this as a negative. Rather, she felt it important that, from an early age her family discussed injustices with her and made her think about the nuances of growing up with two cultures. Her father, for instance, would remind her that the fact that she was a lighter-skinned member of the family, or *güera*, gave her certain privileges that darker-skinned members like him did not experience.

For instance, she remembers one particular moment when her dad highlighted pointed out how much more courteous a waiter was to her than to him. At first, she didn't want to believe this was due to skin tone, but as she started to pay attention to how people treated each other and learned about colorism, she became more aware of her privilege as a light-skinned Mexican American in both U.S. and Mexican society. She gives her parents credit for teaching her to be sensitive to these kinds of discriminations. At the same time, this insight fueled her desire to be inclusive of others as she saw the impact of this exclusion on people close to her.

She was not immune to this feeling of exclusion. She herself often felt excluded. For instance, when she visited her family in Mexico, she remembers the pain of not feeling Mexican. It wasn't that anyone ever said she wasn't Mexican, but a subconscious sense of not belonging that no one ever talked about. "I felt I had to prove my Mexicanness. *No naci en Mexico, pero soy mexicana, mis raíces vienen de allí* (I was not born in Mexico, but I am Mexican. My roots are from there.)."

In schools, the social stigma of being Mexican in the U.S. was particularly strong. Linda was enrolled in English-only classrooms but remembers the excitement she felt after seeing an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom when she was in third-grade:

Just the fact that they were speaking Spanish [in an ESL class], I thought that that was so awesome! And it was so exciting, and I remember going to recess that day and telling my friends, ‘Oh did you know that in that class they get to talk Spanish! Isn’t that so cool?’ And they said, ‘Oh you don’t want to be in that class. That class is for the Mexicans.’ [I thought], ‘Oh, well, I am Mexican...’ I was so proud and excited about it and then I felt like I had to hide [who I was].

This is a moment that Linda admits had a lasting impact on her identity. She internalized the idea that being Mexican and speaking Spanish was ‘bad’ and increasingly focused on fitting in by assimilating. She shared another time when was asked in an assignment to name her favorite artists and favorite food. Instead of answering ‘Luis Miguel and *tamales*,’ Mexican icons, she responded with ‘Boyz II Men and pizza’, the dominant stereotype of what White, middle-class children should answer at that point in time.

She also felt contention when it came to her name. Linda shares her mother’s name, Linda, so her family would call her by her middle name, Jenifer, to avoid confusion. In school, however, her first name just did seem quite right. For instance, most of her teachers were white and commonly mispronounced ‘Linda’. But it was more than that. “There was just something about the name that didn’t fit me in that space because I would look around and I would see different [girls with my middle name] and they were blonde-haired, blue-eyed... I don’t know, it felt different.” She often felt so excluded in US schools that not even her name felt appropriate in that space.

Her name was just the tip of the iceberg though. She rarely mentioned her family at school and often felt she had to leave her family at the door of the classroom. Her teachers rarely asked her about her family, and if they did, they were expecting a different answer than the one she could give them. For instance, when teachers asked students at the beginning of the year what they did over summer vacation, the students who raised their hands shared about going to the beach, going to New York or going to Europe. The only summer stories she felt she could share were staying home and going to Mexico now and then to play with her cousins. This did not feel like the right answer. “Everything as a kid guided you towards being mainstream white.”

She remembers her parents telling her: “Venimos a este país para darles a nuestros hijos una oportunidad, pero no quiero que se lo olviden de dónde vienen [We came to this country to give our children an opportunity, but I don’t want them to forget where they came from].” She continues to hear versions of this when talking to her own students’ families. Yet Linda feels that when Mexican American students enter the classroom the subconscious message they receive is to forget who they are, what their families taught them and become mainstream white.

As a Mexican American growing up in White schools, Linda failed to receive an education which encouraged her to examine or accept her cultural roots. In particular, she remembers the sense of never fitting in and not feeling like schools were a place for her. There were moments where this led to a crisis in academic confidence and a feeling of being lost in US schools. She does not want her own students to feel like this.

With this in mind, Linda has focused on cultural inclusion in her classroom by building positive relationships with her students and intentionally including the family and cultural knowledge of all her students in her teaching. Linda spends extra time with students during recess or in small groups to get to know them and promote positive relationships partly because she remembers all those times that teachers failed to build a relationship with her.

For Linda, the key to building this relationship is getting to know about her students' families and letting them know how much their familial and cultural knowledge is valued in her classroom. She asks students to do family homework in which students have to learn about their families and share this knowledge with their peers in the class. She then often uses this family knowledge to teach social studies or language arts, explicitly letting her students know how important this family knowledge is.

She feels that these assignments not only communicate the importance of this knowledge, but help the student learn about him/herself and develop a strong personal identity that is based on a sense of valuing where they come from. None of this is possible unless Linda has a strong relationship with the student so they feel they are safe in the classroom and can comfortably share about themselves. For this reason, inclusive relationships are cornerstones for the culturally sustaining spaces she builds in her classroom.

Culturally sustaining schooling spaces to explore cultural identity

One of the main reasons that Linda entered the teaching profession was because in teaching she found a safe space to be herself. Linda described these safe spaces as places where you can be your true authentic self without feeling you have to assimilate to a specific culture. Having experienced US education as a child, and adolescent, she realized that there were few areas within schooling institutions that allow Mexican Americans to explore their diverse identities and that encouraged them to be self-assured and risk-free learners. In her own schooling experience, it wasn't until she entered a school of teacher preparation that she found a space that supported her own cultural exploration. As she has reflected on these schooling spaces, she has found that they describe culturally sustaining pedagogies (Jimenez-Silva & Luevanos, 2017). Thus, she has made sure to provide culturally sustaining spaces for her students and made sure to find safe spaces for herself as a teacher as well.

She learned the importance of having culturally sustaining schooling spaces by experiencing a variety of unsafe spaces. Around the time that Linda was entering middle school, her father's job was relocated to California. She described middle school as a difficult time in her life, another instance where she felt overly concerned about fitting in. In school, she was placed in a remedial track, known by the students as the "Mexican track." This track consisted of a group of courses in which teachers partnered poor curriculum and teaching with low expectations for the students. For example, her math teacher gave her the 'least likely to work in McDonald's award.' Today, she can't help but wonder what that teacher thought of the rest of the students.

Once she moved into high school, she was able to move up into the advanced placement, or pre-college track, courses that were academically more rigorous and more engaging. Most of her peers in her advanced placement courses were usually white, with the Mexican American students still segregated in a remedial track. There weren't any particular moments in high school that stood out. For the most

part, she described her teachers as nice, though she could not recall the names of any who played a crucial role in her development during this time.

College would prove more difficult, though she eventually found her home in the education department. Her initial experiences though, were more trying. Throughout most of her life, her father had stated that Linda would be attending the 'best college' and become a doctor. This was the expectation that helped her push through to try and figure out the college and financial aid application process in high school. With a career as doctor in mind, Linda attended a state college in California a few hours away from her home where she majored in pre-medicine. This was a difficult experience partly because she felt homesick. On top of this, the singular focus on academics with little student support or relationship-building made her question her fit as a university student.

In her second year, Linda was struggling with her pre-med courses so she began considering alternatives. She also started helping out in the classroom of her mother, who had just become a bilingual dual language elementary teacher. Linda had not grown up with dual language programs so she was amazed by her mother's work in which she prioritized students' Spanish language development and inclusion of Mexican culture in her classroom. "I saw myself in my mother's students and thought how awesome it was that these programs existed... that was an important moment for me because I realized I wanted to be in these programs, I wanted to do this work."

Soon after, Linda transferred to a four-year university, California State University Sacramento (CSUS) and decided to obtain a teaching degree. This was also a difficult move for her and Linda gives a lot of credit to her successful transition to the equity coordinator at CSUS, who Linda speaks of as her mentor. An equity coordinator is the person at the university whose job it was to ensure that students of color and other first-time university students had the tools to succeed at their institution.

Linda's mentor at CSUS was the first educator she spoke of with great excitement and admiration. Linda explained that in addition to making her feel welcomed, the coordinator introduced her to the Bilingual-Multicultural Education Department, provided the resources and supports she needed to complete the application requirements, guided her through the enrollment process, helped her secure both financial assistance and job placement, and provided ongoing mentorship throughout the entirety of her teacher preparation. "I just remember really clinging onto her that first year there."

She was also pleasantly surprised by the student demographics in the program, "I loved it. People of color everywhere; Oh my gosh this is beautiful, my people!" Furthermore, Linda declared that she was relieved that she did not need to take any of the basic teacher preparation courses. Instead, she took bilingual education courses which forced her to examine her own identity, her multilinguistic background and their impact on her schooling. Linda felt that these classes validated her culturally isolated experience in schools growing up by helping her realize that she was not alone in this experience. Most of the Mexican Americans in her classes shared a similar experience. "It was like being told that you are not crazy for having felt excluded."

But these classes were more than just sharing schooling experiences. "CSUS built safe spaces for me to learn how to teach and then I was asked 'How are you going to build that for your students?'" Thus, CSUS bilingual education classes were centered on her exploring her identity, allowed her to explore instructional approaches to teaching bilingually and biculturally and then motivated her to create her own approaches to support the academic and affective cultural development of her future

students. It was this experience of both being accepted for who she was and learning how to accept others that convinced her that teaching was the job for her.

This approach to instruction was further strengthened by Linda's early teaching experiences. When she began teaching in California, she was hired at a dual language middle school where she joined a group of teachers that shared a commitment to create safe cultural spaces for their students. "While teachers taught academic objectives, we aligned in our desire to not be focused on the standards. We were focused on the students." On top of that, she felt supported as a teacher and was motivated to explore her professional, academic and cultural identities through professional developments, collaborative teaching and supportive administration. After four years of teaching at this school, she knew that schools could provide both safe spaces for students and their bilingual teachers.

When she moved to Texas, she realized that this disposition among teacher wasn't the norm. At her new school, "It was packet, packet, packet (pre-packaged groups of worksheets). We had to teach the same curriculum and make sure the students were able to answer the right way. I didn't feel I had that safe space to challenge and bring in the curriculum I was used to." Despite this environment, she created a safe space for her students behind closed doors and taught the packets when observed or assessed. She then sought a new campus where she felt more welcome to push her teaching and create positive spaces for her students.

At her new school, she was given the freedom to create her own curriculum and teach the children in a way that centered their cultural experiences. Furthermore, she was encouraged to find resources and spaces off campus which supported her in her efforts. One of these spaces is Academia Cuauhtli, the Saturday Academy that focused on creating spaces for Mexican American students to explore different aspects of their culture. She has also joined writing instructional academies and university graduate programs that shared a similar approach to teaching. They all find different ways to create learning spaces for students that support students' cultural and academic identities. "I'm always looking for those spaces. I had Cuauhtli and that allowed me that cultural space. Other spaces give me other kinds of freedom to explore other ways to support my students in their academic journeys."

She does this work highly cognizant that schooling institutions are still not set up to support Mexican American students. US schools, including schools she has worked in, are highly segregated and more often than not push Mexican American into schooling programs that are focused on narrow white-dominant objectives with low academic expectations (Valenzuela, 1999). There is a constant push for a standardized curriculum that might meet the needs of certain segments of a white, middle-class population, but leaves anyone who learns differently or who does not have access to this curriculum outside of school with a significant disadvantage (Tondreau & Rumberger, 2016). The advantage of her current school is that when she suggests more culturally inclusive curriculum and instructional approaches, other teachers generally are willing to get on board with her and she thus feels supported to create these spaces and challenge oppressive district policies when necessary.

Another activity that she finds particularly fulfilling is hosting students who are learning to be bilingual teachers, or pre-service teachers. On one hand, she sees hope as they learn to create safe culturally sustaining spaces of their own. She finds that they are eager to explore their own teacher identity and create spaces for the students to explore their identity. She finds it also gives her wiggle room to try new teaching practices that the pre-service teachers themselves either bring up or are eager to explore. She tells her other teachers at her school "This is what I'm working

on with them, so let's try this too." As she reflects on the joy of working with pre-service teachers, she feels she is honoring her university mentor who did such a great job of making her feel welcomed at the university while at the same time showing her how to be successful in that environment. "It feels like I'm passing on the torch."

Ultimately, she appreciates both the space her current school gives her to teach and the other spaces she finds off the school campus. She says that thanks to this combination of spaces, "I feel supported so I can breathe and go back to what I know in the classroom." She has experienced other schools and wonders what would happen without her safe spaces. "If I was in another space, I don't know if I would still be teaching."

Linda has found that by facilitating her students' cultural explorations, she is able to address the lessons that her life history has taught her. For these reasons, in her teaching she focuses on creating a learning environment where her students feel included and helps them develop a sense of confidence in their own personal and cultural sense of self.

Thus, during the first few weeks of school every year, she teaches an identity unit to her fourth graders in which they read books that highlight different Mexican American identities. She then asks them to both emotionally respond to the stories and share their own experiences. Through this thematic unit, she emphasizes the diversity of their identities and the importance of accepting and learning to appreciate each other.

This culturally sustaining approach to her instruction is based on her own experience growing up as a *mestiza* on the border and rarely being accepted in schools for who she is. She credits her first and most important teachers, her parents, for giving her the confidence and the space to explore and accept her own identity. She also credits her university mentor as showing her how an educator can create a space within schooling that allows bicultural students to flourish. By having her own students explore their own identity, she makes sure that they have this space too.

Exploring Mexican American Cultural Identity in Culturally Sustaining Spaces

Linda describes her pedagogy as creating a culturally sustaining space for her Mexican American students to explore their own cultural identities as a central part of their learning. Her perspective aligns with both Chicana (Prieto, 2013) and decolonial (Maldonado-Torres, 2017b) theorists in that she thinks of her teaching as integrating both academic aspects of student development and the affective, embodied, cultural knowledge that students bring into the classroom. She is intentionally drawing from the human lived experiences of her students in order to engage with and promote a holistic, humanizing education.

Linda's perspectives engage with decolonial projects (Maldonado-Torres, 2017a) in that she draws from her own decolonial lived position to promote a decolonial attitude in her pedagogy. For both Maldonado-Torres (2017a) and Mignolo (2018), decoloniality is not a method, but rather an attitude that intentionally takes a social position within society. This contrasts to on-going colonial projects which continue to take a European position that divide humans into 'developed' humans and 'developing' humans. Whether these European positions are geopolitical regions or racialized populations in an urban environment, White Europeans and their epistemic practices continue to be the standard for what is human and non-

Europeans are populations that need to be developed in order for them to embrace their humanity (Maldonado-Torres, 2017b). In embracing a Chicana position with *mestiza* epistemologies, Linda is intentionally taking a decolonial pedagogical attitude whose aim is to embrace all children's humanity by centering her teaching in her own experiences as a non-European 'other' growing up in the United States.

Linda adds to these decolonial discussions on knowledge production by intentionally creating a form of teaching that centers Chicana epistemologies while reflexively relating it to decolonial examinations of knowledge production. As Mignolo and Walsh (2018) elucidate, decolonial knowledge production centers relationality - that is it recognizes that the relationships through which knowledge is produced is just as important as the process itself. Chicana (Torres & Reyes, 2011) and indigenous (Wilson, 2008) researchers have emphasized the important relationship between positionality, axiology, epistemology and methodology. In other words, researchers and educators must recognize that their approach to producing knowledge is made in relation to their position in the world, how they produce knowledge and how they value that knowledge.

As Maldonado-Torres (2017b) points out, coloniality intentionally disrupts these connections in the search for objectivity and secularism. Decolonial knowledge production on the other hand must reexamine the relationship between position and how one values and produces knowledge. Linda, in reflectively examining the role of knowledge production in her own life, examines how her position has changed throughout life and how that has impacted how she has viewed the importance and production of Mexican American knowledge. In response, she has centered a form of teaching which integrates students' own lived experiences and a reflective and discursive approach to producing knowledge with her students.

For instance, Linda does extensive pedagogic work to help her students explore and be proud of their personal and cultural identities through her teaching. She begins the school year by having the students talk and explore their identities by sharing about family traditions and histories. These lessons teach writing skills, critical thinking skills and build affective relationships within the classroom. "You can create curriculum with super-structured anchor charts that teaches children how to write a particular kind of essay but the students aren't going to remember that. They are going to remember when you invited their parent to participate in an activity with them. They are going to remember the relationships and *ambiente* (learning environment) you are creating."

These are not just academic lessons for Linda, but rather civics lessons that integrate careful discussions about supporting everyone's affective development. While she and her students are engaged in these lessons, she intentionally works on students' socioemotional and critical thinking skills so that students can learn the importance of valuing everyone's cultural identities in her classroom and develop the affective skills to support each other and build one's own academic and social confidence. This includes team-building games, learning to express one's emotions and making explicit connections between different families' cultural traditions and histories and the way students feel about themselves and each other as students and members of cultural communities.

It is particularly important for her students to share thoughts and feelings about the languages they speak at home. Since she has both monolingual English and bilingual Spanish students, she spends extra time discussing and exploring the connection between one's language and one's cultural identity, and the importance of respecting and valuing both Spanish and English. When Linda teaches about language and identity in her classroom, she is helping her students reflect and engage with their

own family's knowledge as well as make connections between who they are and the knowledge they produce.

She recognizes that the relational and cultural sustaining support that she provides to her 9-year-olds is just as important for adults who are preparing to be teachers. She finds it difficult to imagine adults guiding students in their cultural identity development if they have not been exposed to and gone through their own process of cultural identity exploration. "You have to know yourself to teach others – be proud of who you are in order to help students build confidence and to be inclusive of all their identities."

Having grown up in a society and school system in which cultural identity displacement can lead to a disengagement from schools and learning, Linda prioritizes cultural identity development in her teaching. Yet she also knows that identity exploration is an on-going process for herself as a teacher and actively seeks out culturally sustaining spaces to explore her own Mexican American identity and her other professional and personal identities. Most teacher professional development spaces emphasize teacher technique or pedagogical theory in isolation. Instead, Linda actively seeks to integrate her own affective understandings of what is needed to teach her students with academic conversations about pedagogy. She concludes:

I started this process through a teacher preparation program that acknowledged who I was, that really solidified my sense of self... but it is a continual process that unfortunately does not happen in most educational spaces... I am constantly looking for those spaces where you are valued and the issues that matter to your community are valued... that support teachers on a reflection piece that integrates your educational experience and who you are.

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