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5. RESEARCHING OUR WAY

*Latin@ Teachers' Testimonios of Oppression and
Liberation of Funds of Knowledge*

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, after 10 years as a classroom teacher I decided to return to school to pursue a doctoral degree. While going through my academic journey, I continued teaching since my primary goal was to find meaningful and innovative ways to improve my practice and student learning. Today, I still work as a classroom teacher in what my state education department categorizes as a low performing school district. This negative distinction is based on low graduation rates and standardized test scores that fall well below state guidelines. In addition, children attending my school district live in extreme poverty. City and state officials report that city household incomes, with school age children, are the fourth poorest in the nation, when compared to other U.S.A. cities of similar size. During the past decade educators, parents, politicians, business, healthcare professionals, and many other community groups have demanded the development and implementation of school improvement plans (Harris & Kiyama, 2015).

However, change is slow and inconsistent. During the past 15 years, I have worked under five different school superintendents and experienced several district wide initiatives to increase graduation rates and standardized test results, in particular for schools identified as *failing schools*. Nowadays, officials at the local, state, and federal government are using state exams to grade both students and teachers performance. Sadly in today's environment across the state keeping our jobs or our schools opened dependent on test scores. Needless to say, working and learning in the era of high stakes testing is not a choice, but I do have options.

As a critical educator and researcher, having my students defined by family income and test score is frustrating and unjust. Using standardized measuring tools designed for middle class students with dominant knowledge ignores and devalues my students' unique ways of knowing. Often those test scores are incongruent with what my students know and how they use that knowledge to understand their world. Like other nondominant scholars and classroom teachers, I recognize that Latin@¹ teachers possess insider knowledge which are valuable resources to advance teacher training, instruction design, academic research, and improving outcomes for nondominant students (Ríos-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011). In this

self-study I introduce my journey and the journey of three other teachers researching our pedagogy as Latin@ educators to showcase alternative instructional practices that improve academic performance and dismantle deficit views of nondominant students.

In the classroom, I grappled with the demands of planning instruction designed to improve standardized student test data. Like other veteran instructors, I am very familiar with the content of my subject area and the objectives at each test gate. In my subject area, the tests my students have to take and pass to graduate frequently ignore my students' ways of knowing favoring those of dominant and middle class learners.

As a Latina teacher and researcher, it is impossible for me to accept the narrative of deficit thinking about my students so prevalent in this environment where test scores drive curriculum and instruction. Tests scores are no longer one of the indicators I can use to measure how my students are doing. Instead test scores drive educational and political agendas dominated by *Whitestream* thinking in educational institutions and government (Reyes & Rios, 2005; Urrieta, 2007). Although I am just one teacher, I have the power and responsibility to legitimize my students lived experiences in this high stake test era. The normative narrative inherent in "one test for all" positions achievement and knowledge in quantitative terms, ignoring lived experiences and other qualitative information nondominant teachers gather and use in their pedagogy to legitimize nondominant students' ways of knowing and being (Busto Flores, Riojas Clark, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007; Irizarry & Raible, 2011; Irizarry & Donalson, 2012). A few years ago during a faculty meeting, I discussed my frustration planning units on family and meal-taking that match our text and state final but overlooked the cultural practices and experiences of my students. I became aware that I was not alone fighting that battle. Other teachers were also struggling to create lessons that balance test content and wealth of knowledge my students' possessed by was ignored in the tests.

After that meeting, it became clear to me that my Latin@ colleagues were as frustrated and lost as I was on how to change what we were doing. We needed empirical proof to explain to our administrators that building on students' lived experiences was a valid way to improve instruction. Therefore, as the only teacher in the group with access to academic literature, I began seeking research lead by Latin@ teachers. There I found a dearth of literature addressing how Latin@ teachers working with nondominant students acquired and cultivated roles as researchers either in pre-service or in-service training. We felt strongly that change was necessary to scaffold learning, increase student interest, and improve academic outcomes. We embarked in this research journey to understand how we as Latin@ teachers theorize and define our roles as educators when researching our practice to nurture sociocultural resources that our students possess and to find ways to build on existing sociocultural resources to improve academic outcomes.

In this chapter, I present a group self-study, where four teachers operationalize action research and testimonio research techniques to improve their practice.

More explicitly I looked at how Latin@ teachers factor in lived experiences when researching alternative practices to improve teaching when working with nondominant students in an urban setting. Telling the story of four Latin@ teachers working with existing research techniques to improve instruction and learning is important as few studies examine social and cultural capital Latin@ teachers use when eliciting and activating students' lived experiences. This group set out to gain skills on how to incorporate historical accumulated knowledge and ultimately legitimizing our roles as *Yo el investigador* [I the researcher]. This self-study journey helped us gain insight on what do nondominant teachers learn when given the opportunity to cultivate culturally cohesive research techniques that empower and position them as experts. In gathering and disseminating testimonios of nondominant students and teachers this chapter aim to help other educators to create culturally responsive instruction informed by students' historically accumulated knowledge and skills that humanize instruction in spite of normative practices such as standardized testing.

This collection of Latin@ teachers' self-study has an important story to tell as our independent and collective experiences mold the *Yo* [I] we are today not only as members of a cultural-ethnic-racial-class-gender-and linguistic group but also as teachers and budding researchers. Although I use the term Latin@ throughout this chapter, our identities and experiences as Latin@ are not homogenous. This became clear to me when a teacher approached me during the information session and said: "*I was not born in the Puerto Rico...I was born here, can I still participate? Am I still considered Latina?*" Our individual contributions to identify, name, and categorize our lived and professional experiences based on our places of birth, gender, linguistic diversity, (im)migration experiences, ethnicity, race, religion, professional histories, and socioeconomic status enhance the dialogical collaboration we wanted to foster as teachers studying our own practice. What is more, in selecting and combining researcher centered methodological approaches (McNiff, 2013) such as action research and testimonios, we linked our emerging identities of *Yo el investigador* to our histories, work sites, co-researchers, and students. Therefore, the unique ways we self represent as teachers and Latin@ deepened the dialogical and collaborative ties of our research community. By sharing our testimonios and the testimonios we collect from our students we gain new knowledge about what it means to be Latin@ teacher-researchers working to legitimize nondominant knowledge from inside.

I decided to write the following sections of this chapter using a standard research study format. The reasoning behind choosing a dominant discourse to write the rest of this chapter seems appropriate since the goal here is to follow the trajectories of teachers acquiring and applying rigorous research techniques to build rigorous instruction based on nondominant lived experiences. We set out to determine how combining the canons of qualitative research and funds of identity (Estaban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) produces viable research-based instruction that is trustworthy and organically Latin@ for World Language students studying Spanish as a second language, a heritage language, or a first language. Next I discuss the

conceptual framework of the study, explain the methodology, present findings and a discussion of what teachers learned followed by a brief conclusion.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Funds of Knowledge (F of K) is the overarching theoretical framework we pull from to guide us in our journey into becoming *Yo el investigador* [I the researcher]. This theoretical framework resonated with the Latin@ teachers since F of K refers to “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and wellbeing” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992, p. 134). Moreover teachers recognized in themselves and in their students the theoretical premise of F of K, which states that “people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, pp. ix–x).

F of K specifies that when collaborative groups of teachers use F of K approach the research is ethnographic, it positions households as the basic unit of study, participating researchers join collegial or study groups, and all work leads to building relationships of *confianza, cariño, y respeto* [trust, care, and respect]. In our study we also wanted to interrogate what nondominant teachers bring to peer groups and student-teacher interaction. Gupta (2006) proposes that nondominant teachers devise unique sets of personal funds of knowledge. These skills and knowledge, which include lived and professional experiences, are unique in nondominant pedagogy particularly when working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The notion of a unique nondominant pedagogy that emerges over time helped us to validate our individualistic constructions of *Yo el investigador*. By accepting the assumption that we possessed unique and diverse personal funds of knowledge we were able to strengthen our groups’ dynamic when collaborating with each other to gather data, develop, implement, and reflect on our separate research studies.

F of K, as an approach to improving instruction for nondominant students, advises teachers to create spaces to learn, produce, and explore innovative practices. We formed a collegial group. As a way to establish our independent roles as *Yo el investigador* we began by identifying and naming our own historically accumulated information from childhood households to professional training. Afterwards we categorized our own accumulated lived experiences to understand how they influence and form our personal and shared F of K. Once we finished recording and categorizing our lived experiences, we began to examine how our personal funds of knowledge exist in our teaching practices and the practices reported by other Latin@ educators. More specifically, we used F of K to find intersections between our historically accumulated knowledge, the professional training we received in Whiteman institutions, and ways we operationalize culturally and academically meaningful instruction.

Through the lens of F of K theoretical framework we studied the existing New York State (NYS) mandated curriculum. At every stage of the study, we were looking

for ways to validate and privilege local knowledge when using the NYS curriculum for Languages Other Than English [LOTE]. This World Languages curriculum contains 15 thematic units of study that promote teaching through topics, situations, functions, and proficiency. As experienced practitioners, we named existing conflict in the state exams we give our students, classroom materials, and our students' knowledge and skills about Spanish language and cultures.

In our state, World Language students encounter two binding test gates. The first test is given in middle school and it is a requirement for graduation. The second exam comes after completing a three-year sequence in a World Language. Successful completion of classwork and a passing score in the third year exam qualifies students for an advance diploma, recognized as a college going diploma. Students in our state take the first test, which is called Second Language Proficiency (SLP) Exam, at the end of 8th grade. The SLP exam covers 15 thematic units of instruction which most suburban school district in the area split into two years. Regrettably, middle school children in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, in my urban school district habitually get only one year of a foreign language, often only in 8th grade before taking the SLP exam.

If students want an advanced, or honor diploma, deemed as college going diplomas, they must successfully complete a three-year sequence and pass a second standardized exam also known as the Check Point B or regional Regents. During the three-year sequence, students re-visit and expand on the 15 thematic units in NYS LOTE curriculum. For instance, let's take the thematic unit on Travel. In each level or year, students revisit previously taught grammar and vocabulary involved in travel as they learn and apply new vocabulary and grammatical concepts around the topic. The curriculum also requires students to demonstrate more sophisticated communicative skills as they move from level 1 to level 3.

Unfortunately, students come to my high school Spanish classes without the one or two foundational years most students in the state get in middle school. Moreover, I find that recycling lessons from our textbooks is tedious, difficult, and incongruent with the test or the Spanish my students use at home or in their communities. For instance, Mariah a Puerto Rican student in my level 1 class uses a variation of home Spanish, which includes heritage and immigrant varieties/proficiencies. Although her listening comprehension and pronunciation are excellent, for level 1, her reading and writing are less developed. In class Mariah complained that what she learned and was tested on was unlike her vernacular and cultural practices. For Mariah, "pasteles" are banana leaf pockets stuffed with grounded Caribbean root vegetables, plantains, and pernil [slow roasted pork]. These savory pockets are boiled and served during especial gatherings or at Christmas. However, in the test, the word pasteles was used in a situation depicting desserts [pastries]. The narrative in the test made Mariah's cultural knowledge and practices invisible costing her valuable test points.

For us as Latin@ educators, recognizing that we needed to teach the curriculum differently was not enough. From our own experiences as students, we realized that our colleges and in-service training were not preparing us to plan and implement

researched based instruction that aligned with our students' ways of knowing, culturally developed practices, and socially distributed resources (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). Regardless of our personal feelings about standardized testing and the lack of formal culturally responsive training we accepted the challenge of finding ways to validate our students lived experiences as we prepared them to pass state assessments. In addition, we needed to find innovative ways to fill in the gaps our students suffered because our district neglected to offer them two years of a solid foundation in middle school while still holding them, and us, responsible for improving test scores. Since the demands for higher test scores are here to stay, it is imperative that dominant and nondominant teachers receive training to conduct culturally coherent research in their classrooms. A way to help educators understand and deliver culturally relevant and research based instruction is through participatory action research (PAR) informed by testimonios of nondominant teacher and students.

Linking Nondominant Testimonios with Participatory Action Research

Combining testimonio and participatory action research (PAR) methodologies felt natural since we set out to study how Latin@ teachers became empower by seen themselves as *Yo el investigador* (I the investigator). By definition, PAR is informed by social research and it seeks to research *with* and not *on* individuals or sites. Generally, PAR encourages individuals to research question affecting their own sites allowing them to work within the organization to answer research query and ultimately transforming conditions (McTaggart, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In PAR studies, the roles of researchers and the researched are flexible. In my case, as both a teacher and a academic researcher, I held the unique position of having insider knowledge of the site while at the same time be the group's critical friend with the academic background and university support to set up a rigorous research process as we planned, implemented, analyzed, and reflected on findings (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Similarly, testimonio is a dynamic method of narrating and recounting experiences as a way to contribute to an increasing large body of counterstories that retell lived experiences of people and serves to empower nondominant individuals as creator of knowledge. According to Delgado Bernal (2008) and Pérez Huber (2009) testimonios are tools that inform visible and invisible ways Eurocentric, racist, classist, male dominate, and normative epistemologies dehumanize nondominant individuals or groups by maintaining institutional, educational, economic, and racist inequalities in our society. In choosing testimonios as the research method, we weaved our story to a long and respected body of Latin American Literature that was familiar to us as Latin@ and Spanish teachers.

According to Aguilar (2004), the first peoples of Spanish America recognized the power of learning alphabetical writing and by the sixteen-century Spanish American literature was producing ethnographies, novels, and short stories

using testimonio narratives. This literary genre provided a way for indigenous people to self-represent themselves as well as voice their worldviews. In addition, documenting testimonios became an avenue for indigenous and new Latin Americans to denounce injustices, advocate for respect, and propose social, economic, and political changes by questioning authority and by distributing power held by Europeans (Atencio, 2006).

As a literary genre, testimonio has not escaped criticism. Critics denounce the accuracy of narratives in testimonios or social counterstories, challenging their truthfulness in documenting lived experience of underprivileged and subjugated individuals or groups. According to Aguilar (2004) critics of testimonio, as a literary genre, argue that these narratives serve to re-tell atypical experiences, to generalize a single experience as the norm or socially acceptable, or to promote one-sided views. Anthropologist David Stoll (1999) questioned the objectivity of testimonios as they are often co-written and edited by novelists and publishers who do not reveal their biases, research methodology, socio-economic, or political interests. In contrast, others contend that autobiographical testimonios in Eurocentric literature is full of one-sided truths that portrait kings, tyrants, males, and other individuals with questionable ethical and moral standing as great historical figures. Therefore, historical autobiographic are full of dominant views on issues such as social class, gender and sexuality, race, language, indigeneity, and citizenship (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012).

According to Yosso (2006), similar criticisms exist in field of education against nondominant testimonios as counterstories to normalizing the dominant experiences. However, unlike literary works, the use of testimonial or biographical counternarratives follow guiding principles of research that conceptualize a line of investigation that builds on academic literature and espouse theoretical frameworks to analyze and interpret the data and to formulate conclusions. In addition, as research methodology counterstorytelling, in the form of testimonios, rejects the portrait in a single incident or individual as the means to essentialize experiences of nondominant individuals (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013). Instead, testimonios become bodies of collective counterstories that serve to question the authority and power of institutions to exclude, alienate, and dominate individuals. In this way a collection of testimonios becomes a body of data which can be scrutinized for patterns of racialization, marginalization, and dehumanization, as well as data to document dimensions of White privilege, racism, discrimination, and social injustice embedded in the fabric of society, policies, and educational institutions (Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godines, & Villenas, 2006).

In this group self-study our testimonios unpack our journeys as teachers looking for innovative ways to improve student learning and contest oppressive practices. Our testimonios work to challenge current practice of ignoring “insider” knowledge of Latin@ teachers working with nondominant students. As a pedagogical tool, this self-study aims to contribute to resist marginalization of knowledge in the classroom and to validate nondominant ways of knowing. By making our stories visible to

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others, we want to promote understanding about the complex nuances involved in trying to improve academic outcomes for Latin@ (Harris & Kiyama, 2015) and other nondominant students.

METHOD

Participants

This was a professional training offered to all teachers of Languages Other Than English [LOTE], who self-identified as Latin@, in an urban school district in New York State (NYS). Participants volunteered and received the contractual maximum of twenty hours of professional development. The participants included three females and one male. Teachers reported 10 to 15 years of teaching experience. Three teachers completed undergraduate degrees in U.S.A universities and one from Puerto Rico. All four held one or more advance degrees from U.S.A universities.

The group met for four months and participated in two separate activities. First, they received training in qualitative research methods. Teachers read and discussed a book and scholarly articles about participatory action research (PAR) methodology and F of K theoretical framework. Theoretical work was ongoing for the duration of the study. The second activity included producing a unit of study or lesson informed by student data in accordance with NYS LOTE curriculum. Teachers used action research cycles to elicit and activated students' F of K. Each units/lessons contained four separate cycles: planning (data collection and analysis), implementing and observing (writing and delivering a F of K data driven lesson/module), and post lesson reflection (debriefing with group and in journal) stipulating elements of lesson/unit that needed to be re-design.

Teacher Data

Prior to the first meeting each teacher gave a historical interview using an open-ended protocol. For the interview teachers were required to bring pictures, documentation, or artifacts that illustrated their lives. Each interview lasted two to three hours. In addition, for four months teachers meet bi-weekly for two to three hours. The meetings were designed to promote understanding about qualitative research methodology and ways to activate and utilize F of K to build instruction on existing cultural and linguist skills, knowledge and strategies. During the meetings, teachers reported what they were seeing at each step of the process and other participants provided feedback or made recommendations. Teacher documentation included researchers notes, journal entries, and lesson plans. There was also extensive email communication among group members between meeting times. Interviews and bi-weekly meetings were recorded, transcribed, and triangulated with teacher-generated documentation.

Student Data

Data collection started at the beginning of the school year. We designed a series of “first day” of school activities, games, ice-breakers, show & tells, surveys/questionnaires, journals/class assignments, open house, and home-school communications that elicited household practices and cultural knowledge. We also examined existing student records such as report cards, student portfolios, attendance records, and discipline histories. We memoed about previous interactions we had with current students’ nuclear or extended families and anecdotal information about their lives outside the school. Student data helped us create student profiles that incorporated households’ collective skills, knowledge, and family expertise.

My Role in This Professional Development

In this professional development, I held two roles one as the primary investigator (PI) and the second as a practitioner studying her own classroom. As the PI I acted as a critical friend to the group who had access to academic literature and formal research experience. As the PI, I recorded and transcribed all the meetings, cross-referenced transcriptions with teacher generated data, analyzed it, and brought it back to the group for peer-evaluation to determine inner cohesiveness and trustworthiness of the conclusions. As a group member, I also planned, implemented-observed, and reflected on outcomes of my lesson/module as a way to improve my students’ academic achievement and my own professional practice.

Setting

As a rule, F of K theoretical framework examines household as the primary unit of analysis. In this study and other F of K studies individual and household data sources are used to construct and evaluate pedagogical practices (McIntyre, Rosebery, & González, 2001; Mercado, 2005). The data sources collected in this study included an in-depth autobiographical interview with participating teachers, recorded collegial meetings, teacher’s professional development logs with reflections on readings, and a detailed PAR lesson plans.

As the PI and as a practicing teacher, I anticipated that my co-researchers would come to the study without qualitative research training. Teachers worked in four different schools and had not received training on qualitative research methods, although some efforts were made at the school level to coach teachers to analyze quantitative test data. Therefore, as the primary investigator, *Yo* [I] conducted individual autobiographical interviews with every participant in the university campus. These in-depth interviews served two purposes. The first goal was to activate teachers’ historical memories about the implications of growing up Latin@ in practices and experiences. The second goal was to I model interviewing techniques teachers could use later in their own studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I discuss two main theoretical categories that emerged from Latin@ teachers' testimonios as they grew into their roles as *Yo el investigador* [I the researcher]. A central principle that emerged was that these educators saw nondominant households as viable resources often ignored in test-driven teaching and learning. Another significant concept was that teachers, even nondominant educators, must find ways to build trusting relationships with their students. Developing trusting relationships with students facilitates the research process of eliciting, developing, delivering, and reflecting on insider research-based instruction. The following discussing contains composite testimonios of Latin@ teachers' deconstructing and constructing their roles as researchers. I include examples of pedagogical situations and solutions highlighting ways to improve instruction and academic outcomes through culturally responsive instruction grounded on students' F of K.

Testimonios: Latin@ Teachers Rising as Researchers

Here I present our composite testimonios (Yosso, 2006) to tell a story of oppression and liberation. I use the terms oppression and liberation because until now we had been fighting oppressive practices against our students and us and our work was viewed as anecdotal, careless, or unstructured. Having the opportunity to meticulously examine why we do what we do in our practice was empowering. The following testimonios make up a collection of counterstories that allow us to theorize about the benefits of lesson planning framed by nondominant F of K.

These testimonios illustrates how our lived and professional experiences exist for our students and us. I begin by sharing our collective experiences around migration, issues of belonging, family life, use of Spanish and English, and ethos about teaching and learning. Decades ago, three of the teachers graduated from this school district. Sadly, we found that our students continued to experience some of the same obstacles and prejudices we faced in high school.

Rosa:

I came to teaching late in life. When I was sixteen, I had more than enough credit to graduate from high school so I was eager to pack my bags and take off to a nearby liberal arts college with a well-known education department. [On growing our on teachers] During my sophomore year, my Chilean-Mexican Spanish advisor asked, "Are you planning to teach?" My apprehensive expression must have said it all because she never asked again. Now when I ask my students about becoming teachers they look at me the same way. After college, I moved to Manhattan and then to Madrid. After teaching in Europe for six years I came back home and got a Masters degree in Bilingual Education and a certification to teach Spanish as a foreign language. [On feeling frustrated with school] Since then I have been teaching elementary through high school,

mostly in the same urban school district that I graduated from. A few years into my career, I detected the subtractive nature of curriculum, classes, and program for students like me Latinos users of English with rich bilingual and bicultural backgrounds. Now like then they cannot test out and learn another language. Unfortunately, foreign language curriculum and traditional teaching practices ignore the possibility that our students may also be trilingual and have a solid grasp of metacognitive language, which is undetectable in current save it all for the test programs.

[On access and social mobility] In 2010, my school district anticipated graduating less than 50% of Latin@ students. Now we are graduating less than 10% percent of the males. I think that dysfunctional educational policies, administrative practices, and poor urban teacher training have had a negative effect on teaching and learning. [On professional training] In the past fifteen years, I have attended many professional trainings, collected colorful folders with great ideas that I seldom use with my students. I tried using what I learned in those trainings but soon I was back to square one - looking for new tricks to teach the standard curriculum to nonstandard learners. Only after I began studying funds of knowledge theoretical framework by González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) did I realize that the “super-technique” I was trying to find ignored my students’ own ways of knowing. I was not working “within” what was happening with my students but instead I was imposing normative practices. I ignored my own relationships with Spanish. I was dishonoring my own household funds of knowledge. My life is more than grammatical structures printed on the textbook I had to use to teach. In my daily life, I use Spanish to interpret my world; I use it to explain my spirituality and historical sisterhood (Burciaga & Tavares, 2006). In Spanish, I dream sueños [dreams] of wellbeing and happiness for my children and husband. In Spanish, I open up, redefine borders, and protect my relationship with my mother, sisters, and friends. Through Spanish, I articulate cariño, respeto, y confianza [care, respect, and trust] to my students, their families, and my colegas [co-workers/friends]. In other words, after all that professional training I did not consider the negative effects of intuitional practices that systematically ignore nondominant funds of knowledge of teachers, students, and communities. [My goal behind developing and offering a professional training that was organically ours and coherent with our collaborative ways of learning] I don’t work alone or learn alone. I was “educated” or socialized to respect and contribute to my community. I wanted to learn from my colegas and to create a once in a lifetime opportunity to research and create lessons made from our own brand of social and cultural wealth. I wanted us to have the opportunity to transform our pedagogy from within.

In my case, having the opportunity to work with other Latin@ teachers was liberating. Teaching and researching in a collaborative group broke years of professional

isolation. For about ten years, I was the only Latina teacher working in a building that housed mostly nondominant students. During this professional development, we had the opportunity to research within ourselves and collaborate to create meaningful instruction disrupting deficit views about our nondominant household F of K. The collaborative nature of the professional development embodied the notion of “generosity”. While discussing the book *Learning from Latino Teachers* (Ochoa, 2007) and during the implementation and debriefing after the lesson the group refused to acknowledge the exchange of ideas, values, beliefs, and practices as reciprocal acts – you do for me and I do for you. Instead, they insisted in using the term ‘generosity’ as in acts of kindness without the expectation of anything in return. For three of us going back to work in the urban setting we graduated from was not an act of reciprocity instead it is a political decision to improve education for all.

Lulu:

My father is an incredibly intelligent man...and a minister. Growing up we moved to Puerto Rico, Chicago, New York and then back to Rochester. During much of that time, we lived from the kindness of people because he worked as a minister or in factory jobs. Eventually, my mom started a catering business, from home, and raised ten kids and then some. Sure, we had other people living with us... my parents will take the shirt off their backs to help someone. We learned to share with each other and with anyone else who needed help. We learned generosity from them. [On school events] They stopped coming to my graduations after the eighth grade...But when I decided to go back to school for my Masters degree I moved in and was able to pay for school that way... then for my administrative degree. I was married and they helped us by caring for our son. [On learning Spanish] at home growing up we only spoke Spanish with Mami. My dad grew up here so he spoke English to us. He also thought himself other languages for his ministry. Only as we got older [in school] did we learn to read and write Spanish. Now my siblings, my mom, and I speak Spanish to each other...especially in public places. When we are speaking Spanish we can be ourselves...a space for us... a safe space. In school, I felt that I wasn't given credit or allowed to share what I knew...feeling invisible... not respected. Even then, I thought ... it doesn't have to be like this...now I tell my students... it doesn't have to be like this. We're here as human beings. I'm learning from you, you're learning from me. I give them [students] authentic advice. I want everyone to do their part in empower our students. I'm a critical educator.

Lulu's testimonio is grounded on ethical responsibilities we have towards our students and the work we do everyday. Her lived experiences make her resist educational practices that make 'invisible' culturally developed household practices and skills as well as monolingual policies. During the study she was vigilant against acts of plundering students' privacy for the sake of doing research. Lulu consistently

questioned our methods of collecting and interpreting students' data. Her primary concern as we read, discussed, and practice qualitative research methods was to protect our students' humanity.

Neal:

My father's house was the first stop for people immigrating from his town in Puerto Rico to Chicago...he helped them get jobs, rented apartments to them in the building he owned, and encouraged them to help other newcomers. Everyone who knew him remembers his generosity. Despite having such a wonderful role model, in school I was ashamed of being Puerto Rican. Back then, it wasn't cool to be Latino or to speak Spanish...in school you had to be normal... you know like everyone else. [On circular migration] Then, when I was fifteen, my dad got sick and we moved to Puerto Rico. I didn't know any Spanish. I grew up trying to avoid discrimination... trying to be the same as the other kids in school and all of the sudden I was an outsider again. I experienced lots of reverse discrimination because I was an English dominant student...I was fifteen... in a new school, had no friends... I couldn't make friends because I couldn't communicate with other kids. Moving back was very hard. [On bilingualism] After our son was born and we were living in the United States, my wife and I consciously decided not to teach our children Spanish. We speak Spanish to each other. But we wanted them to know one language well we didn't want them to get the two languages confused. As an officer and then as a manager [in an well known international company] English was the language of power. We wanted our children to be successful. Now, after learning about second language acquisition, I regret not teaching our children Spanish... although we did teach them about our culture. I always share my experiences with my students because I don't want them to make mistakes.

Here Neal shares his experiences living with oppressive educational practices and attitudes that promote monolingualism. According to him his experiences, as the son of immigrants and as an immigrant himself, led him to embrace the English Only rhetoric and the predicated "American way of life" as his way of life.

Many of the decisions he made for his own family, which he now regrets, derive from long-standing political policies that are deeply entrenched in the fabric of society supporting English monolingualism (Salazar, 2008). The idea that English is the only way to achieve professional success is deeply ingrained in our society and in our schools. During the last century, support for English dominance has persisted in our schools and in methodologies used to teach foreign languages since the last century (Crawford, 1992; Reseigh Long, 1999). Through out his life, Neal's nondominant cultural knowledge and linguistic skills were considered a deficit. Now, in the classroom Neal is candid about his experiences and changes in perception about learning a Spanish as a second, first language, or heritage language.

He feels that being honest about why he embraced oppressive stands is important when working against perpetuating oppressive practices. Many of his students often confide in him their experiences with discrimination and their desire to hide their historical and cultural practices. Neal defines his classroom as space for students to be themselves and to feel safe from the racial microaggressions (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2014) they experience in school.

Adrienne:

I was born in New Jersey and my parents and Mami rented an apartment above my dad's mom. We moved here...we bought a house across the street from my uncle. Celebrating Christmas is my best childhood memory. All the kids played in the street until late at night. Relatives from New Jersey came to stay with us and friends...a big family. [On defining family] My brother's best friend moved in...no I wouldn't call him a friend...he is family...not related by blood but still family. [On building relationships of care and respect] A few years ago, I had a student in a real bad situation. I told my mom about it to see how we could help. Then I got a call from her, during the school day,...she just said... father killed her...we were devastated. [On not being allowed to use Spanish] Even though I was born here, I was not allowed to stay in pre-school. The teacher told my Mami that I couldn't come back because I did not speak English. I understood it when Papi and my siblings spoke to me. I couldn't speak it yet. From that day on Mami made us all, speak English. When I got to middle school I spoke Spanish again, in school...I felt free... for the first time I had like me friends ... Then when I joined the Marines, I served with different people but my friends were Hispanic like me. [On professional opportunities] After I lost my job working in the hospital, I went back for to school. I got two Masters. I wanted to teach because I am good at Spanish. My students claim that other teachers are not real Spanish teachers. Sometime my Puerto Rican identity comes under question by people even people in my family because I was born here. But I've never gotten that from my kids. After my second year [teaching] it was all about getting the kids interested coming into the classroom to actually do the work and if I have a question about a something in Spanish I call my mom... she is great.

Adrienne understands the struggles of ethnic identity. Although she was born in the United States her "cultural" legitimacy (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008) had comes into question both in her family and while attending school. According to her, students do not question her ethnic affiliation because discussions around her own experiences are weaved into her pedagogical approach to second language instruction. Her pedagogical approach provides a space where students share their experiences to make sense of them as they relate to language and cultural practices. As a heritage language learner, her teaching mediates nondominant practices and dominant curriculum. Adrienne asserts that she conscientiously helps her students negotiate

socioeconomic and cultural disparities and to embrace the process between learning Spanish as a second language in the classroom and learning Spanish at home.

New Practice: Research Must Include Bonds of Trust between Teachers and Students

This testimonio of Neal's home life exemplifies the importance of in classroom research to develop culturally sensitive pedagogy and improve learning:

I must have been ten or twelve years old. My father was running his store and mom went to work at a factory. Afterschool and sometimes during the weekend, I was responsible for my two younger sister. My parents worked late hours... until then I was responsible for them. We were young and anything could have happened. Once my sister ran into a glass door slicing her arm... Another time, I hid my younger sister in the dryer. Maybe if that was today, social services would have investigated us...

From the start of the study, teachers scrutinized the data gathering and analysis process in an organic way, "our" way. We fell into this questioning process naturally because we wanted to uphold ethical standards of other researchers we were reading about, others like "us", and also in our own classroom about 'them' – our students. We discussed way to gather information about our students' households without violating their trust. We also wanted to stay true about what we were seeing and what we were going to do with what we found about our students' lives outside school. During our meetings and in our journals we spent a lot of time deconstructing home and school relationships. We examined both in the student data and in our testimonios to understand students' household practices and the emerging conflicts with institutional expectations. For instance, a teacher may wish to give a questionnaire/survey about household practices, for homework but the homework is not done. What do you do then?

To get to the heart of that question we identified and discussed disparities between school practices and our own household responsibilities when they were growing up. From our readings and experiences it became evident that our professional training was tainted by dominant ways of knowing or middle class view. For the most part, teachers in general believe that homework and after-school academic tasks allow parents to stay involved in their children's learning. Similarly, it is said that academic readiness and success comes from the time and energy students put on their out of school assignments. In our group we did not dispute these standard views about spending time learning outside the classroom. However we did disagree about the time investment and academic value for our student population.

On one occasion, one of the teachers in the group, falling back on what her dominant professional training taught her, made the commonsensical leap that students who do not do homework do not succeed in school. This claim, ignited debates about middle class values, after school responsibilities, and adult responsibilities our

students face daily to maintain the wellbeing of their households. For instance, we noted that in general teachers believe that homework and out of school academic activities help students practice the goals of the lessons we teach. However, we agreed that it is our responsibility to make schooling activities inclusive by finding innovative ways to practice the skills we teach with out harming our student population. In our journals and group discussions we considered ways of staying vigilant against blaming our students academic progress solely on social class differences and we committed to finding ways to avoid deculturalizing (Spring, 2012) their schooling experiences.

After a great deal of conversation and reflection we established that discrepancies between nondominant households and normative practices create an environment of mistrust. Finding ways of building trust between students and the system we represent, as teachers, is important when planning, implementing, reflecting, and re-designing instruction. In this study, three of the four teachers in the group were cognizant that household needs often take precedent over after schooling practices. During the collegial meetings, we shared narratives on how our students, like us when we were growing up, have to contribute to the wellbeing of the household. We know that many of our students are responsible for doing the shopping and cooking, providing childcare, doing laundry at the Laundromat, or simply having to get a job to help pay for utilities and other bills. Teachers reported that students in their schools often do not have trusting relationships with their teachers. They indicated that students do not provide “excuses” or explanations for being out or not turning in homework. Often students accept lower grades or teachers’ refusal to give them make-up work to avoid confiding in them. In worst-case scenarios, students may fear the involvement of outside agencies, which may result in reduced financial assistance, home removals, or even incarceration due to the imposition of middle class views about normal academic behaviors, ignoring the disconnect between students’ household responsibilities and the educational system. Neal’s testimonio on having to care for younger siblings and Adrienne’s testimonio on losing a student to child abuse demonstrate that teacher’s own lived experiences, informed by their own household responsibilities makes them acutely aware of the importance of altering normative *Whitestream* teaching pedagogy (Urrieta, 2007).

Consequently, after the data analysis we came up with a list of resourceful ways to support learning goals in our culturally responsible lesson in particular, and for our course in general. For instance, we created practice packets for the unit. Students had five to seven days to turn them in and we did not penalize them for turning in late work. These practice packets were interrelated with the unit of study avoiding subtractive practices of giving students mindless “worksheets-busy work”. We also built in time in the lesson to get students started on the assignments or homework and to answer questions. We also offered after school help and during our free time [planning periods and lunches]. Additionally, we modified projects, study guides, and materials making them digitally friendly. Assignments and class

activities also ask students to perform, write about, or describe activities from their household responsibilities. For instance, I [Rosa] asked my fifth graders to write and illustrate recipes. Students described shopping for ingredients, family finances, where and when they had their meals, and sharing cooking or cleaning the kitchen covering three thematic units from NYS curriculum. For grading purposes, we adjusted percentage values assigned to homework and increased percentage values for in-class assignments as those tasks materialized from data collected on students' household funds of knowledge.

By employing nondominant household F of K, we maximized opportunities for students to contribute to the content of the curriculum and provided opportunities for students to challenge and analyze their own learning without burdening them with out of school assignments that compete with household responsibilities. We wrote new instructional material building opportunities for success fostering students' living experiences.

New Practice: Household Activities Are Fluid and Must Be Re-Conceptualized Based on Students' F of K

The goals for our lesson were to develop instruction that was coherent with students and our own cultural experiences and practices. From the beginning of the study, we weaved our lived experiences with our students. We sought respectful ways to earn their trust and develop alternative ways to deliver instruction that was both rooted in F of K and sound pedagogical practices. After collecting and analyzing our own classroom data and later while implementing our lesson, we carefully selected assignments we wanted students to complete in class or at home. In addition, during the collegial meetings we continuously discussed and helped each other avoid elements in our lessons that could violate household trust or demanded an unwarranted commitment of time and money.

From our testimonios we distilled personal funds of knowledge we call on operate in both our personal and professional lives. Our research helped us re-examine our professional practices making them culturally coherent with our students. For instance, Neal and Adrienne anticipated using photographs of relatives in the summative projects of their units. Both Neal and Adrienne plan their lessons for the end of October to incorporate culturally diverse practices in Spanish speaking countries around Halloween, the Day of Dead, All Souls Day celebrations. Neal was going to use pictures of family or friends to illustrate descriptive poems. Adrienne asked her students to write about deceased relatives then they would make memory dioramas. She wanted to include artifacts and pictures in the dioramas to honor relatives who had passed. These lessons covered two mandated topics in New York state Spanish curriculum: Giving and providing personal identification and Leisure activities/celebrations. The goals of the lessons included learning past tense conjugations, adjective – noun agreement, and learning culturally appropriate

vocabulary and regional practices. The lessons also incorporated concepts from social studies, art, and English language arts. However, during the lessons leading up to the summative project both teachers learned that some of the parents refused to allow pictures of living or late relatives to be used in school projects. The parents' objection did not stem from a negative view about school or the teacher nor did they question the merits of the academic assignments. Instead, we learned that in many student households pictures of deceased relatives were stored away as part of the mourning process. In other instances, celebrating The Day of the Dead, All Souls Day, and Halloween conflicted with the spiritual beliefs and practices of the family.

Since we had been identifying, analyzing, and documenting individual students' household F of K to create and implement culturally responsive lessons, we had enough forewarning to anticipate distinctive practices in students' household. Students trusted teachers with information about their spiritual practices, as they were familiar with our desire to identify and validate household practices in the classroom. Consequently, our research gave us enough time to write and plan alternative summative projects that incorporated unit content and goals with choices for our students.

During our collegial group meetings we collaborated to plan for these alternative summative projects. In our school district we, World Language teachers, have to work alone to develop instruction because we are isolated by the language or levels we teach or we simply do not have other language teachers in our buildings. Thus, having the opportunity to exchange professional expertise with other World Language teachers was extremely valuable. Some of the suggestions my *colegas* [co-workers/friends] made included informing students of the requirement of the assignment at the start of the unit, securing and providing alternative resources or materials so they could successfully accomplish the assignment. The group suggested encouraging students to use phones to send images to teacher so he/she could print them, to schedule computer access during class time, to download electronic images, to provide art supplies so students could draw, illustrate, or sculpt representations for loved ones, to use print media and magazines [free from public libraries], promote multi-media projects, and to make the assignment about famous people instead of a relative.

As it turned out, Adrienne's diorama project brought the entire school community closer together during a stressful time for faculty and students. Some of the students used their dioramas to remember a classmate who was run over by a police car while riding his bike. The dioramas were displayed in the high school library allowing all students the opportunity to mourn the short life of Tyrone in a respectful and caring way. Neil's project allowed him to collaborate with other teachers in his building. Students wrote and illustrated poems and they decorated two classrooms. Neil and his collaborating teacher got parent involved in the celebrations. Parents contributed foods and decorations that were culturally coherent with the celebration of the Day of the Dead.

What We Learned from Analyzing Our F of K

From individual historical interviews, I constructed an in-depth topology of accumulated F of K based on members of this group self-study. The typology changed several times throughout the study because of peer editing. The process of retrieving, elaborating, and correcting memories and understandings helped us examine our biases as researchers as well as to learn how to analyze student data on their household F of K. We discovered that our topology generated several recurring themes that also surfaced when we collected, analyzed, and discussed student data. Some of the themes that emerged for both teachers and students included growing/preparing foods, health/bátanica, recreation/hobbies, artistic/folkloric talents, and household management/responsibilities. We also found similarities in financial management and workforce skills as well as language preference and biculturalism.

In general, group members communicated in Spanish and English. However, when asked about which language teachers prefer to use, Spanish, English, or both, the answer was linked to when, where and with whom teachers interacted. Moreover, the group's topology showed how English and Spanish, and their linguistic variations, helped households mediate outcomes when interacting with English speaking institutions. It illustrated how language creates "safe spaces" and a form of resistance against isolation and discrimination.

Another thematic category in the topology was social and cultural distributed resources. Teachers often talked about needing and later becoming funds of capitals for family, non-family members, and students. We learned that our professional and social standing as well as our bilingual and bicultural skills became resources we use to help others navigate governmental, medical, higher education, and social institutions. Finally, the topology demonstrated that we all had strong ties to our community, devoting time and energy to volunteering in policymaking groups, community advocacy groups, afterschool activities, and faith groups.

The historical interview became a teaching tool to design our independent research studies. Group members acted as interviewees/researchers as the process included researching topics for questions, deciding on best data gathering approaches, data analysis, memoing [about historical interview analysis combined with reflections of what they were seeing in the literature], theoretical categorization of data and practical application. Although bias and subjectivity are part of testimonial and PAR, conducting our self-studies in a group setting encouraged critical analysis of all steps in our independent research studies increased trustworthiness in our research (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). Originally, we wanted to collect student data for a month. However, even after we concluded our original study we continued analyzing and applying findings in our subsequent lessons despite not being able to meet again to debrief on the outcome of our lessons or re-plan. Nonetheless, three months after the original study ended, we presented our research and lessons to educators at a regional World Languages conference. This event was a monumental

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step for us as researchers. We became the experts. We had the opportunity to share our brand of research and pedagogy with other practitioners. Our homegrown F of K data and the lessons we create, deliver, and reflect on were not only well received by our students but also by our peers.

CONCLUSION

In this study, Latin@ teachers validated their own brand of Latin@ pedagogy by cultivating their own identities of *Yo el investigador* [I the researcher]. This research helped educators write curriculum that validated nondominant students' household and personal funds of knowledge. From participants' testimonios, it is evident that nondominant teachers suffered lasting effects from having their personal funds of knowledge ignored as they moved through the educational system from pre-school through college. Initially teachers wanted to improve teaching and learning in the era of high stake testing. The findings demonstrate that when teachers learn from the strength of their students they also have the power to stop cycle of oppression in their pedagogy.

This was the first opportunity we had to participate in a collegial group to deconstruct and construct role of power that legitimized our F of K as instructional capital. This also was the first time, despite years in the profession, to learn and apply qualitative research skills to create culturally coherent lesson and materials that build on the strength our nondominant students. The findings show that educators can improve educational outcomes for their students by eliciting and activating students' historically and culturally developed skills and knowledge. As nondominant teachers studying our own practice, learning to plan, implement, and re-designing anti-oppressive instruction gave us hope. Together we discovered that we can change teaching and learning from the inside while meeting local and state mandates. Enacting research methodologies grounded in testimonio and PAR allows us to shift the focus from deficit rhetoric what our students lack to meet standards to a plethora of socio cultural capital our students possess and we, as educators, can draw on in our classes.

This study guided and empowered four Latin@ teachers on their journeys to critically analyze and learn from personal F of K while fostering identities as *Yo el investigador* [I the researcher]. This self-study allowed us engaged in a systematic analysis of how our historically accumulated and culturally developed skills and knowledge inform our teaching. During four months, we continuously juxtaposed our own lived skills and knowledge with the existing strengths and knowledge of our students altering and transforming what we were seeing in our own classrooms and practice. We wanted to find ways to deliver liberatory instruction that helped our students feel that they too possess knowledge and skills that are valued and honored in school. As a result, our research helped us dismantle years of normative dominance that made our Latin@ness and our language preferences invisible and meaningless.

It is evident from this journey that all teachers can benefit from practicing qualitative research to develop *within* pedagogy that complements data driven and student centered instruction. The latest shifts in population make it imperative for universities and school to offer sound culturally coherent research instruction. Especially if we consider the latest U.S. Census reports indicating that in some states non-Whites are the majority groups (Bernstein, 2012). Therefore, if we want schools to improve we also must improve professional training for pre-service and in-service teachers. Universities and school district need to be held accountable for creating culturally relevant professional training for teachers working with dominant and nondominant students.

As the faces of our schools change, focusing on lived experiences of both teachers and students is critical. Seeking, recording, and analyzing testimonios through PAR is a legitimate way to identify the wealth of personal F of K teachers and students possess allowing for trustworthy insider research. Nonetheless, more work is needed to prepare teachers as researchers, in particular nondominant educators.

NOTE

- ¹ Latin@ stands for the feminine/masculine, singular/plural forms of the term Latino, -a; -as/-os. (Mazurett & Antrop-González, 2013; Murillo, Villenas, Galván, Sánchez Muñoz, Martínez, & Machado-Casas, 2010).

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