

# Teachers' Memories of Schooling: The Sociocultural Injuries and the Mis-Education of Mexican Teachers in the Barrio

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## Abstract

Relying on life history and memory as methodology, this essay unearths the memories of schooling of five Mexican American teachers at a dual-language school in San Antonio, locating their memories of trauma within the history of language oppression and cultural exclusion in U.S. public schools. In re(membering) their schooling experiences as working-class, Spanish-speaking, racialized students in San Antonio's segregated Westside, teachers pointed to schools as the source of their miseducation and trauma and framed these experiences within a shared history of institutionalized language oppression and educational inequality. *Historias*, semi-structured life history interviews, and *conocimiento*—reflexive and dialogical focus groups—reveal that teachers' memories of racialized cultural violence in schools are central to their personal and professional identity formation. As ethnic/race teachers with embodied knowledge of racialized cultural violence, they transform the culture of schooling for Mexican origin students as they move within the dialectic of domination and empowerment in their everyday teaching practices.

## Introduction

[F]or Blacks, Chicanos/as, and Native Americans, memory allow us to resist and to heal: we know ourselves through the act of remembering. When we lose sight of who we are, when we lose touch, when we lose our minds, we find ourselves through remembering, through talking cures, which are reenactments of remembering. And memory becomes a thread that can bend, bind, and gather broken bits and pieces of ourselves (bell hooks in hooks & Mesa-Baines, 2006, p. 107-108).

This essay examines the memories of schooling by Mexican American teachers at Emma Tenayuca Elementary<sup>8</sup>, a dual-language school in San Antonio's Westside. Most teachers at Tenayuca entered elementary school as Spanish speakers during the 1950s and 1960s. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews that I call *historias* (oral histories), and a methodological process of *conocimiento* (coming to consciousness), participants shared the psychological and physical trauma of language oppression they experienced as working class, Mexican school children.<sup>9</sup> Teachers recalled their memories of schooling during the *historias* and the *conocimiento*—many of which had been suppressed.<sup>10</sup> Teachers framed these memories as part of the collective experience among Spanish-speaking Mexican barrio children in San Antonio's Westside. With that, they identified the “system,”

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8. In my study, the school is named after Emma Tenayuca, a Chicana labor organizer from San Antonio who organized numerous labor unions and defended the rights of working-class Mexican women. A member of the Communist Party, she received many death threats and as a result, left to California where she pursued a teaching degree. She returned to San Antonio where she worked as a teacher for over two

9. Montejano (1987) argues that by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mexican people became racialized as an ethnic group. Regardless of their social class, nationality, or skin color, Mexicans became incorporated into a culture of segregation in rural and urban areas in Texas. Racial separation was an indispensable component in the creation of a racialized dual-wage economy where Mexicans became relegated to low wages, little to no schooling, and segregated in separate living quarters. As Mexicans left the rural areas and migrated to cities like San Antonio, schools continued to segregate Mexicans where they had to contend with racism, including language oppression, thus directly linking language violence to racism and class oppression.

10. Grounded in Freire's (1970) notions of critical dialogue and conscientization, where the teacher-student relationship is reciprocal, as well as Chicana feminist perspectives that privilege self-reflection in the production of knowledge, *conocimiento* is a method for understanding oneself in relation to others and with others (J. Méndez-Negrete, personal communication, October 8, 2006). The *conocimiento*, or process of awareness, started with an individual *conocimiento* survey, which included demographics, open and close-ended questions, and educational and work legacies that map the generational, sociohistorical and sociocultural experiences of teachers at the school. The *conocimiento* served as the means by which I designed the questions for the *historias* and the teacher *pláticas*.

that is, the ideological practices of K-6 public education, as the source of their trauma, academic failure, and internalized language, race, and class oppression.

In his historiographic analysis of the Mexican school system, Gonzalez (1997) posits that Americanization, as an assimilationist schooling campaign, lasted until the 1930s. However, teachers in this study point to its persistence in San Antonio public schools throughout their schooling. Through these assimilationist practices that stripped Mexicans of their language and culture in public schools, the majority of the teachers in this study experienced racialized cultural violence on a daily basis as Mexican, working class, Spanish-speaking children.<sup>11</sup> Many endured physical punishment for speaking Spanish, while others were forced to Anglicize their names to go along “with the mainstream,”<sup>12</sup> as one teacher said. Still, other teachers, particularly those of the 1980s generation, lack the recollections of their early schooling experiences as English language learners. Unlike the teachers who were schooled before the Civil Rights Era, teachers of this generation did not endure corporeal punishment for speaking Spanish. Identified as Spanish-dominant speakers, these teachers were placed in early-exit transitional programs aimed at assimilating students linguistically and culturally into the dominant language and culture of the nation. Like the ideological goals of the Mexican school system throughout the Southwest, San Antonio public schools did not “abandon the objective of assimilating Mexicans into the dominant culture” (p. 170).

In this essay, I rely on the teachers' memories of schooling—memories that evoke anger and pain, as well as emotional healing, to explore the insight they carry about this kind of racialized cultural violence and how this has shaped their personal and professional lives as children, students, parents, and ultimately as teachers, illuminating the dialectic between domination and empowerment. While many experienced racialized cultural violence in their individual psyches, they spoke about this as a historical and collective trauma endured by *mexicano* children in the barrio. In this article, I unearth teachers' memories of schooling and analyze the ways in which their memories of schooling, particularly the racialized cultural violence, mis-education, and everyday microaggressions, they experienced in school, frame their personal and social identities as barrio teachers.

### **The Language Oppression and Mis-education of Mexicans in U.S. Schools**

In U.S. schools, Mexicans and Mexican Americans have endured a history of language oppression and mis-education. In *Mexicans and Anglos in the making of Texas, 1836-1986*, Chicano historian, David Montejano (1987) argues that the mis-education of Mexicans in Texas, including language oppression and segregation, is founded in the racial and class formation of the state. Following the Mexican American War (1846-1848), in which the U.S. appropriated and colonized half of Mexico's national territory, Mexican and Mexican Americans lost their lands and became segmented into a racialized dual-wage economy as landless *peones*. With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 and the territorial annexation of the Southwest, Mexicans had to learn their place as second-class citizens of the nascent nation-state. The denial of their language was the first step of exclusion.

### **The Hegemony of English in Segregated Mexican Schools**

With U.S. incorporation of the Southwest, states like Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas institutionalized “English only” policies (Montejano, 1987; Valencia, 2002). In Texas, this meant that Mexicans often endured corporal punishment, school fines, and “Spanish detention classes” for speaking Spanish

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11. I extend on Freire's (1970) concept of cultural invasion, where the “invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression” (p. 152). Within the context of colonialism and neocolonialism, this form of cultural invasion and cultural imposition, as Freire posits, is a form of violence as those who are invaded “lose their originality or face the threat of losing it.” In this article, I use the term “racialized cultural violence” to point to the ways in which members of the dominant culture racialized Mexicans as inferior to Anglos, subjecting them to physical violence, as well as cultural violence, deriding their worldview, inhibiting their way of life, and prohibiting the use of the Spanish in the public space. Language oppression is one form of cultural violence, where the dominant group prohibits, silences, or punishes those who speak a non-dominant language.

12. Past research by scholars like Concha Delgado-Gaitan (2001) and Cummins (1989) have examined language loss in the context of assimilationist educational policies and practices.

in school. These language restriction policies were often anchored in the racist and hegemonic ideology of Americanization, an ideology that was based on the assumption that immigrants and people of color had to discard their culture of origin to be recognized as authentic cultural citizens. Unlike the experience of European immigrants who were able to “melt” into dominant U.S. culture, as a racialized group, Mexicans could not assimilate. Gilbert Gonzalez (1997) describes the Americanization of Mexicans as the “political socialization and acculturation of the Mexican community, as well as, ironically, the maintenance of those social and economic relations existing between Anglos and Mexicans” (p. 158).

Americanization, Gonzalez (1997) argues, became the main goal of schooling during the era of segregation. As a pedagogical practice, Americanization projects in schools involved the “elimination of linguistic and cultural differences, but of an entire culture that assimilation advocates deemed undesirable” (Gonzalez, 1997, p. 163). According to Gonzalez, educators promoted activities that enforced white, middle-class values and ideals that would make Mexicans as “American” as possible. Moreover, proponents of Americanization programs often “reinforce[d] the stereotypes of Mexicans as dirty, shiftless, lazy, irresponsible, unambitious, shiftless, fatalistic, selfish, promiscuous, and prone to drinking, violence, and criminal behavior” (Gonzalez, 1997, p. 163). Through this ideology, Mexican children learned that their cultural customs, language, family, and community were undesirable traits and barriers to academic success. The assumption was that Mexican children were culturally inferior and came to school with limited intellectual knowledge and skills. This ideology was woven into everyday classroom learning. In sum, Americanization was an oppressive curriculum that reproduced an ideology of white supremacy and Mexican inferiority (Gonzalez, 1997; for a discussion on the intersections of race and class in Mexican and Anglo schooling, see Montejano, 1987).

In Texas, Americanization took place in the rural and urban segregated school system. In the rural areas, the Anglo power structure—which included large farm owners, local authorities, and state policymakers—created Mexican schools to maintain a subordinated, uneducated, and racialized work force. The sharp, racial separation between Mexicans and Anglos in schools was “rationalized on the grounds that it was necessary in order to provide effective remedial instruction in English to students who were ‘language handicapped’ ” (Cummins, 1989, p. 9). Many English-speaking students were placed in remedial instruction simply because of their Spanish surnames. Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) argues that these language-based segregationist policies became “a social philosophy and a political tool used by local and state officials to justify school segregation and to maintain a colonized relationship between Mexicans and the dominant society” (p. 261). Similarly, social historians like Acuña (2000) and Montejano (1987) argue that the Anglo power structure created the Mexican school system to keep Mexicans politically, socially, and economically subordinated, keeping them tied to commercial farm interests during the era of Jim Crow segregation.

Throughout the Southwest, Mexican families and communities challenged segregated schooling. In 1931, parents of 75 Chicano students in Lemon Grove, California, refused to send their children to a segregated Mexican school. The school board justified this segregation, claiming that the district was “[helping] Mexicans learn English” (Acuña, 2004, p. 234; see also Delgado Bernal, 2001). Parents organized a committee, sued the school district, and won. Chicanos continued to contest segregated schooling on the basis of language. In 1946, with *Méndez v. Westminster School District* case, the U.S. District Court in California decreed that the segregation of Mexican children was unconstitutional and that neither language nor race could be used to justify segregated schooling (Acuña, 2004; Delgado Bernal, 2001). A year later, in *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District*, the Western District of Texas also found that segregated schooling violated Mexican children’s rights under the Fourteenth Amendment, ruling that this was unconstitutional. These cases preceded *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954 (Acuña 2004), creating a movement that “would expand in later decades to include not only the desegregation of Mexican schools as a means to equal education but also the need to restructure curriculums to account for the bilingual, bicultural traditions of Mexican Americans” (Garcia, 1989, p. 83).

## **The Chicano Civil Rights Movement and the Affirmation of Cultural Rights**

While cases like *Méndez v. Westminster School District* (1946) and *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District* (1947) found segregated schooling unconstitutional, Mexicans continued to contest language oppression

and cultural exclusion in everyday curricular practices. A case in point is that of Crystal City, Texas, where Chicano activists, teachers, and families, pushed for bilingual-bicultural education as a way of dismantling the Anglo power structure that had kept Mexicans politically and economically subjugated since the Mexican American War in which the U.S. annexed Texas and other parts of the Southwest (Trujillo, 1998). Self-determination and community empowerment and the cry for Chicano political representation in the school board yielded a cultural revitalization movement to preserve the Spanish language and teach Chicano culture and history in local schools.

Although the inclusion of Mexican American history and culture never came to pass, Mexican American educators continued to call for and support the implementation of bilingual education because it “purported to use a pedagogically sound, language-based approach which led to increased educational achievement and higher self-concept among language minority children” (Cummins, 1989, p. 193). It is important to note that the bilingual education programs that were implemented during this time were couched in a deficit ideological discourse in which poverty programs were created for the “educationally disadvantaged.” Bilingual education programs were not necessarily intended to maintain students’ heritage language or to produce bilingual and biliterate students. Instead of seeing students’ home language as a resource and strength, these policies promoted notions of other-language speakers as a disability. Bilingual education policy made it clear that a student’s native language could only be used to the extent necessary for a child to achieve competence in the English language. As such, the government favored programs that transitioned students into mainstream classrooms. In practice, there were very few opportunities to incorporate students’ home language and culture in the classroom.

### **The History of Bilingual Education Policy after *El Movimiento***

With the implementation of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, the federal government encouraged local districts to incorporate native language with the purpose of transitioning students into an all-English learning classroom. While the government provided funding for incorporating native language instruction, it did not offer a specific model to promote student learning among linguistically diverse students (Crawford, 1999). In 1974, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that school districts were responsible for educating linguistically diverse students in their native language, recognizing that equal education for linguistically diverse students involved native language instruction and that “equal is not the same.” Through *Lau versus Nichols*, the U.S. Supreme Court argued that treating everyone the same did not lead to equality and ruled that schools that did not offer linguistically diverse students with an education in their own language were violating the students’ civil rights (Acuña, 2004; Nieto, 2004; Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003). The *Lau versus Nichols* thus expanded bilingual education, as the *Lau* remedies “provided guidance in identifying students with a limited proficiency in English, assessing their language abilities and providing appropriate programs” (Nieto, p. 223).

In the 1980s, bilingual education came under attack by conservative educators and government officials including Secretary of Education William Bennett who argued that “limited English proficient” students had not benefited from the Bilingual Education Act (Crawford, 1999). As such, the federal government reduced federal funding for bilingual education, even when the number of English language learners increased in states like California. The U.S. government placed a three-year limit for funding students in bilingual education programs, requiring schools to mainstream English language learners in three years as part of its assimilationist agenda (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003).

Under the administration of President Clinton, in 1994 Title VII, also known as the Bilingual Education Act, was modified to provide “educators with the flexibility to implement and expand programs that built upon the strengths of linguistically and culturally diverse students” (U.S. Department of Bilingual Education). In 2002, under Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the Bilingual Education Act “expired quietly,” replacing it with English Acquisition Act which stressed English language skills and solely funded programs that 1) rapidly mainstreamed English language learners to English language classrooms and 2) reclassified students as English dominant speakers (Crawford, 2002).

Still, despite this anti-bilingualism context, some schools, inspired by Canada’s success with its immersion bilingual education in the 1960s, have implemented two-way or dual language programs to promote academic gains and linguistic and cultural enrichment among bilingual students (Crawford, 1999; Ovando, Collier, &

Combs, 2003). This approach has an equal number of “language minority” students who speak a language other than English, and language “majority” students, who are English heritage speaker in the same classroom. In the 90-10 model of the two-way or dual-language program, 90% of the instruction is in the “minority” language (i.e. Spanish), with 10% in the “majority” language (English) beginning in kindergarten. The majority language then gradually increases with each grade level until the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, when curriculum and instruction is offered in both languages (Baker, 1997; Crawford, 1999; Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003). Based on a pluralistic ideology, this program aims to produce biliterate and bilingual students, as well as multicultural attitudes. Research studies on dual language programs show a strong correlation between bilingualism and academic achievement (Crawford, 1999).

In the mid 1990s, abolishing an early-exit “bilingual” model, Emma Tenayuca School implemented a dual-language program. This was the result of a university-community partnership that prepared the bilingual teachers within an additive language philosophy and practice. Bilingual teachers, many who completed graduate studies in dual-language education, support this program because it is “designed to eliminate the academic achievement gap for English language learners and Hispanic children. The program develops bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Spanish in classrooms, where English language learners and English speakers are integrated” (Emma Tenayuca Elementary, *Two languages...A world of opportunity*, p. 1, 2006). It is within the sociohistorical and political context of language oppression and language rights that I examine and locate teachers' memories of schooling as sources of healing and praxis, since many of the teachers experienced physical and psychological trauma from assimilationist practices in Mexican, working-class, Spanish speaking schools. I begin with Juanita Martinez, a third grade dual-language teacher who has been at Emma Tenayuca for 35 years, longer than any other teacher at the school. Interestingly, she is also one of two teachers at Tenayuca to have attended this school as a child.

### **Memories of Racialized Cultural Violence in the Barrio**

Juanita Martinez, who also goes by Janie Martinez, is a third-generation Mexican American woman in her late fifties. Her grandparents immigrated to San Antonio, Texas, from Mexico. Without formal education, her grandfathers worked as carpenters and plumbers and supplemented their wages as migrant workers, bringing along their wives and children to work the fields. Without any education, her father worked as a gas station attendant, while her mother, who had some primary education, worked as a waitress. Like her parents and grandparents, Martinez grew up on San Antonio's Westside and learned Spanish as her first language. She is the first in her family to complete primary and secondary education, pursue higher education, and obtain professional employment as a bilingual education teacher.

### **From Denial of Language and Dehumanization to Language Empowerment**

Martinez attended Tenayuca Elementary in the late 1950s when the main objective of instruction was Americanization. Like others of her generation, their memories of schooling are connected to the collective history of language oppression and cultural violence experienced by Mexicans. She entered the first grade as a Spanish dominant speaker. Martinez' first three years in elementary school were “really rough.” Speaking about her schooling experience at Tenayuca Elementary, she recalls: “I cringe when I think about elementary school...I had very, very bad experiences here...it's not something I like to think about.” She continues by describing an incident in which her teacher hit her for requesting to use the bathroom in Spanish. When she tells me about this, her voice quivers. As she attempts to hold back her tears, she adds, “Imagine being hit for wanting to go to the bathroom!” Not only was she physically punished for speaking Spanish, Martinez also had to endure the discipline and control of the body as her teacher imposed English as the language of schooling. The violence she experienced for speaking Spanish is only softened by Martinez' recollection of her mother's encouragement for her to persevere and excel in her studies despite the physical and psychological trauma. “My mom always said, *'Mijita, haz todo lo que puedas—do all you can.'*”

This type of sociocultural muting over time shaped Martinez to become “shy and reserved” as a result

of “not being able to speak English and not being allowed to speak Spanish.” After being punished so many times for speaking Spanish, before long, Martinez “refused to speak it after learning to speak English in school.” Despite these oppressive experiences, Martinez opted to teach at Emma Tenayuca Elementary where she has taught for over three decades, with the objective to create an empowering educational experience for Mexican American students in her community.

Because of the linguistic trauma she survived, Martinez became an active supporter of bilingual instruction in her school. When the school implemented the dual-language program in the mid-1990s, she supported the program’s goal of producing bilingual and biliterate children who were not ashamed of speaking Spanish or identifying as Mexicans. This was her way of giving back and redressing the damages done to her. However, this has not been an easy process. The injuries of language carried over into her daily professional life, initially establishing language boundaries to ensure she only spoke Spanish in the classroom, fearing that at any moment her colleagues would hit her over the head or criticize her language abilities.

As a working-class, Spanish-speaking, Mexican American woman, these traumatic schooling experiences shaped her personal and social identity. Describing her path, Martinez remembered how she had once rejected Spanish and racialized signifiers associated with being Mexican. As a child and adolescent, “I didn’t want to speak Spanish... I didn’t want to dress like a *mexicana*.” By the time she was in college, she had already internalized the institutional racism that forced her to shed the Spanish language. During her college years, she made every effort to shed all that marked her a Mexican, expressing that her ethnicity had become a source of shame. When she graduated with her bachelor’s degree at the age of twenty-two, Martinez demanded that the university write “Janie” on her diploma rather than “Juanita.” This is a story she had never told anyone. It was not until she participated in a *conocimiento plática* with other teachers at the school—thirty-five years after that experience—that she voiced her *papelito guardado*. In their book, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Latina Feminist Group, 2001), the authors refer to *papelitos guardados* as hidden writing pieces that speak to the multiple forms of oppression they have experienced as women of color inside and outside of the academy. I use this term metaphorically so as to speak about the personal and institutional injuries that are kept as secrets by those who survive social and cultural violence in schools. The racialized cultural violence not only led her to Anglicize her name in college, she also made the conscious decision to only speak English to her children as a way of protecting them from the trauma she experienced.

While working at Tenayuca Elementary’s early-exit bilingual program, Martinez did not teach her children to speak Spanish, a decision she regrets today. Placing the onus on her own personal loss, she offered: “I regret that there was so much that I could’ve learned, so many of the holidays I could have attended or taken part in and take for myself and taught my [children] that I didn’t. I didn’t want my kids speaking Spanish...” to protect them from “what I went through.” Through the retelling of her life history and sharing and reflecting on these memories, Martinez has come to a greater awareness of the ways in which she internalized the racialized cultural violence as a child, as adolescent, and as young adult. In retrospect, Martinez thinks about it differently. “Now, I wish I had kept my language... I forgot it because when I was younger, I didn’t want to speak [Spanish].” That is precisely the reason why, despite the language oppression and cultural loss, Martinez sought employment at Tenayuca after graduating from college—it was her desire to change the schooling experiences of Spanish-speaking barrio school children. While she taught some Spanish within the school’s early-exit bilingual program, she supported a university-community partnership to implement a dual-language program, the first of its kind in the community. Unlike the early-exit bilingual model, which aims to transition students into English language instruction, the dual-language model values students’ linguistic and cultural knowledge and promotes bilingualism and biliteracy. Like Martinez, second-grade dual-language teacher, Graciela Linares, also supported the program to create an enriched educational experience for students.

## Transnationalism as Language Validation and Language Practice

Linares, a third generation Mexican American who grew up in San Antonio’s Westside, learned Spanish as her first language. Her maternal grandparents worked as self-sustaining farmers in Mexico before immigrating to Texas, where her grandfather died unexpectedly. As a single parent during the Depression, her grandmother

sewed and cooked outside the home, and often pulled resources with other women in the family, to make a living amidst poverty. With only a third grade education, Linares' mother helped raise her siblings in the United States and made the best out of their poverty-stricken circumstances. "I think my mom had a Ph.D. in life," she adds. She emphasizes that from a very young age, these stories of survival taught Linares about her "humble beginnings" and reminded her "not to forget where [she] came from." In addition, she often traveled to her family's rancho in Mexico as a child, experiences which affirmed her cultural identity as a *mexicana*.

Even though her father spoke English, Linares grew up speaking Spanish as her first language. Like colleagues of her generation, she remembers the teachers hitting students on the hand with a ruler and pinching their cheeks for speaking Spanish. Her brother also endured language oppression, but her younger sister, who passed as a "little Anglo girl," because of lighter complexion, did not experience similar nuances of racism. Color privilege protected her sister from the injuries siblings experienced in school.

In addition to being linguistically subtracted from her first language, Linares also learned English within an Americanization model, "repeatedly reading much about Dick, Jane and their dog." Within the context of the poor, working-class, Spanish speaking schools of the Westside, the Dick and Jane readers, which portrayed the idyllic life of White, middle-class children, were intended to instruct children in English, but also to socialize them into a culture of whiteness. As Gilbert Gonzalez (1997) notes, "the objective [of Americanization] was to transform the Mexican community into an English-speaking and American-thinking community" (p. 163). While Linares does not remember exactly how she learned English, she was determined to learn it and resist school failure. She adds:

I wasn't going to let these people—the system—not let me learn. So as I started getting a little older, third, fourth, and fifth grades, I told myself, "I'm going to learn this and learn it to understand it, not just to mimic it." I actually wanted to learn and understand what we were doing.

Linares recognized the consequences of not learning the dominant language at an early age and resisted academic exclusion at a time when schools systematically failed Mexican students (Valencia, 20002). She survived the "sink" or "swim" English language approach, transitioning to English by third grade. Unlike Martinez, who refused to identify as Mexican, Linares drew from her cultural knowledge in the barrio to forge a positive ethnic identity, bridging her frequent trips to Mexico as a child to reinforce her cultural citizenship as a U.S.-born *mexicana*. As a bordercrosser, she learned to navigate multiple cultural codes in the Westside barrio and in her family's rancho. Her classroom motto, a reflection of her lived experiences: "You can't know where you're going, unless you know where you come from," evidences a philosophy she nurtures in her classroom so that her students are not ashamed of identifying as Mexican, working class, and Spanish-speaking. Despite the racialized cultural violence she and other barrio teachers experienced in barrio schools, Linares' cultural ties to Mexico provided her with the sustenance to overcome language oppression and Americanization as a student, and the epistemological foundation to bridge academic and community knowledge as a teacher in her everyday teaching at Tenayuca Elementary.

## **The Trauma of Schooling in Americanization and Language Loss**

Tomas Huerta, a first grade general education teacher in his mid-fifties, also experienced similar schooling as Janie Martinez and Graciela Linares, but unlike his bilingual education colleagues, he privileges English-language and the middle class life of Americanization in instruction, despite their collective histories of language oppression and cultural violence he has in common with his colleagues. Huerta is an immigrant from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, who came to San Antonio's Westside at the age of six. His mother was a stay-at-home mom, while his father worked as a carpenter, laborer, and steel worker until he secured a position as a manager at a fast food franchise. This provided Huerta's family with social status, which took him out of the housing projects to a small, modest home in the neighborhood. "We did move up going from the projects to our own home ... it made a big difference ... even though we were still poor, we had a bed, a TV, sofas, a refrigerator—things we didn't have before." Huerta's family and he continued to frequent Mexico every weekend, maintaining connections

with their roots. However, as a teenager, he preferred to hang out with his neighborhood friends, and his father, who had responsibilities as a manager and worked weekends and longer hours, limited his visits to Mexico. With fewer ties to Mexico, it was then that Huerta “started to become assimilated here.”

Like Martinez and Linares, Huerta’s experience at school was traumatic. Huerta attended various public schools in the Westside where he contended with the injuries of language oppression. Huerta recalls the collective experience of language oppression in elementary school, where teachers physically punished him and his peers for speaking Spanish. “We were either hit, spanked ... on the calves, on the palm of your hands, you know [shows me], behind your hands.” Also, “they would ask us to kneel down in the corner with books in our hands and I remember and I think that was really traumatic.” According to him, his schooling experiences “had a big impact psychologically” and academically (Valenzuela, 1999). Like the Latino students that Angela Valenzuela (1998) writes about, Huerta attended schools that divested him and other students of color from their cultural knowledge, marginalizing them from the school culture and the process of learning. Huerta has become aware that his subtractive schooling experiences have shaped his personal and social identity as a teacher.

As a result of the teaching practices he experienced as a student, Huerta developed anxiety towards academics—he was afraid of asking questions, he feared the consequences of not knowing, and amassed a “mental block” about learning. He adds,

I couldn’t read. I couldn’t spell. I was afraid. And it stayed with me the rest of my life. And, it’s not that I was dumb or anything. It’s just that the teachers just put this fear into me that I was afraid every time we’d go to reading . . . I was already panicking, [feeling] like ‘What’s the next page. How do I do the reading?’ I was just terrified. I was just terrified.

He still carries the trauma of those times. To this day, Huerta sees himself as a “terrible speller” because of his experiences as a second language learner of English. In addition, during our *pláticas*, he often described himself as “not very articulate” like his colleagues who readily shared their ideas and concerns at faculty meetings; he often remained quiet and rarely spoke when in a group or public situation. I was rather surprised to hear him say this. Every time I observed his classroom, he expressed himself quite eloquently and demonstrated a panaché for storytelling. However, I did notice that while he attended all of the faculty meetings, he seldom said a word, keeping to himself.

Initially, I attributed his detachment as disinterest. However, with time I understood his silence at meetings and his self-perception as “not very articulate” as sources of trauma. Given the physical and emotional repercussions of his schooling, Huerta told me that he developed a profound anger as a student. Through our interviews, he has verbalized awareness that the injuries were in his “sub-conscious mind.”

[The injuries were] Always there . . . why I did certain things, why I acted a certain way—and it was all due because of that. Because my parents didn’t know any better. *También*, they didn’t speak any English at all . . . so they really didn’t know how to handle it. They were just happy that we were in the United States and I was going to school. But they didn’t realize what I was going through.

Huerta’s schooling years gnawed at his self-concept. In Huerta’s own words, he was “emotionally and psychologically destroyed or eaten up.” Moreover, he adds that, “the teachers were really rough on us...they were really hard times and not just me, but on anyone who didn’t speak English. So that was real hard on me.”

Unlike his dual-language colleagues, Huerta promotes English-first in his personal and professional life. As a father, he became “adamant about [his] kids not being in a bilingual program, telling them, ‘you’re gonna learn English. You’re gonna go [to an English classroom] because everything you do is gonna be in English.’” At one of the faculty meetings, one of Huerta’s colleagues reflected on their schooling experiences, stating that they spoke English at the expense of Spanish because of what happened to them as children. After hearing his colleagues share their ideas he told me that,

It just clicked. And how naïve of me not to have seen all of this . . . I was kinda taken aback because I

said, 'My God . . . how simple. The answer was so simple and I never saw the forest for the tree in front of my face . . . And that's why basically, that's why I feel the way I do or felt the way I did, the way, 'Well, my kids aren't going to a bilingual classroom. They're gonna learn English. That's all they're gonna do.'

As a result of language trauma, Huerta made a conscious decision to privilege English as the language of learning. However, he only became aware of his decision, listening to other faculty members speak about the legacy of language oppression and the cultural violence that they experienced. This offered Huerta a critical lens to reflect on his own lived experiences with language oppression. Huerta's evolving consciousness emerges as he interacts with his community of practice, as he reflects on how his schooling experiences shaped his parenting and his pedagogical beliefs and practices.

The memories of schooling offered by Martinez, Linares, and Huerta give insight to the ways in which the process of remembering is more than the recollection of past experiences. As teachers like Huerta and Martinez unearth the past, they articulate an awareness of the ways in which public schools fractured their cultural identities and shaped their personal and social identities. In voicing their race, class, and language experiences in school, these teachers came to a greater awareness of how schooling, as a process of linguistic violence and cultural loss, inscribed their academic success, ethnic and racial identity formation, and self-concept as Mexican working class Spanish speaking barrio students. For example, Martinez became aware of internalizing race oppression as a result of the linguistic violence she experienced at Tenayuca Elementary School. As a result, she disassociated herself from the Spanish language and other ethnic/racial markers to conform to Anglo society because it marked her inferior as a Mexican (Montejano, 1987). As Huerta became "subtracted" of his language, he performed poorly in school. As he traveled less to Mexico, he identified less and less with Mexico, and more as an "Americanized" Mexican. Linares, who also experienced linguistic violence and a mainstream curriculum in school, embraced the Spanish language and Mexican culture. She learned English as a way of resisting academic failure and learned to navigate multiple cultural and geographic spaces inside and outside the barrio, asserting her right to learn the language of her everyday discourses as she maintained her Spanish language abilities.

### **Memories of Learning within a Culture of Low Expectations**

With the exception of Carolina Rubio, who attended a prestigious public university in the Midwest, all teachers I interviewed grew up in racially and class segregated working class barrios and attended schools that tracked Mexican students to pursue vocational employment, regardless of whether or not they excelled in their studies. All were schooled inside a culture of low expectations. For example, Huerta's teachers did not expect him or his peers to graduate from high school much less pursue a college degree. "We were expected to go to trade school. 'You're gonna be a mechanic. You're gonna be a plumber . . . a carpenter . . . that's what it was . . . but not to go to college; oh, no way!'"

Reminiscent of Jim Crow culture in rural schools, where Anglo farmers and politicians mis-educated Mexicans, urban schools relegated Mexican students to a racialized dual-wage economy, where they continued to work in low-status and low-paying employment (Montejano, 1987). In writing about the experience of urbanized Mexicans before World War II, Montejano notes, "the urban situation for the majority of Mexicans was not vastly different from that found in the rural areas, in spite of some concessions. . . . 'Urbanization' merely signified the geographic expansion of segregation" (p. 265). Like Huerta the majority of Mexican students were not expected to attain a higher education and were systematically funneled into vocational tracks to reproduce the existing race and class arrangements (Montejano, 1987; and Valencia, 2000).

### **Mis-education through the Discipline of Sports**

Huerta suffered academically throughout his primary and secondary education. In elementary school, he began to play baseball and by middle school he had decided to play semi-professionally. Still, he recalled that, "No one told me I couldn't play in college unless I did good." With regret in his voice over what could have been, he said, "No one ever pulled me aside, guided, and directed me or told me, 'Look, if you don't study, educate

yourself, all this athletic ability you have is not going to do you any good.” Even though his coach “helped [him] develop as a player,” by encouraging him to become the best player, “the academic part was never there, not from the counselors, not from the coaches, except from Dr. Valdez,” his former seventh grade teacher who encouraged him to go to college. He continues, “No one was there for *mexicanos*. There was no one to tell *mexicanos*, ‘Don’t be *pendejos* [dumb].’ Do well in school. If not, you can’t play.” Throughout our *pláticas*, Huerta criticized the school system for failing him academically. Still, while he believes that he did not become a professional baseball player because of his low academic record, Huerta offers that he was not destined to become a professional sports player. Instead, he is confident he was destined to become a teacher so that he could make a difference in the lives of Mexican American students through English language instruction.

### Scholarship *Mexicanos* and their Self-Made Trajectory

Graciela Linares also experienced low expectations in Westside schools, despite her good grades and leadership. In high school, Linares played in band, maintained satisfactory grades, and became involved in student council. However, teachers and the administration overlooked her potential to further her education. “The biggest deficit or shortcoming of the school administration was [that they held on to that] ‘I-don’t- think-you’re-going-to-college mentality.’” As she states,

There were only a few handful, a dozen [students] that counselors spoke to all the time, and said ‘You’re going to college.’ I wasn’t on that list. And, not just me, but I felt others were being oppressed and discriminated against, ignored ...

Displaying the resentment of being overlooked, she added, “No one ever talked to me about going to [college], bettering my life, being successful. I did well in school ... no one ever explained these things to me ... I just felt ignored.” Because she lacked the social capital the school values, she was treated differently from those who were identified as college bound. Linares also recalls that as a high school student, she became aware of the ways in which schooling shaped her peers’ identity, particularly those who excelled in their studies. She recalled:

The students who were the elite, were very Americanized in their mannerism. I would eat bean tacos for lunch and they were like ‘Ugh!’ So, their ways had changed ... their mannerisms and their way of thinking. And maybe because of their parents they were socialized that way. At home, we had *fideo* [vermicelli] and beans...but you could tell the difference between the elite students and those of us who were ignored because we were still eating beans.

Linares associated poverty and economic class status to her academic neglect. She adds, “I probably didn’t have those thoughts when I was in high school, but as I’ve grown, matured, and experienced, I’ve realized that.” In other words, as a more class and race conscious educator, Linares has become aware of how these “elite” students enacted their race and class privilege and sense of superiority over their working-class peers. In order to succeed, they disassociated from anything Mexican, including eating food that marked them as working class.

Attending high school in the late 1960s, Ismael Balderrama spoke about not being encouraged to pursue higher education, even though he ranked high in his graduating class and participated in his school’s band, where he developed a life long love for music. With limited possibilities of going to college, he contemplated joining the army. His high school, which had an army office to recruit young men into the Vietnam War, “made it so easy to enlist.” However, rather than follow that path, he took his family’s advice and enrolled in a community college where “there were very few *mexicanos* [Mexicans].” Telling me about the way he saw his educational preparation, he adds, “I wasn’t smart enough to have anybody tell me to apply for a scholarship. I didn’t know that. I graduated tenth out of 300, but I never applied for a scholarship. I wasn’t planning on going to college.” The education system failed Balderrama and Linares even though they excelled in school, reflecting the pervasive structural inequality that Mexicans face in public schools (Valencia, 2000).

He also remembers the 1968 walkouts, where he and other students in the Edgewood Independent

School District protested the inequitable conditions. This walkout launched the *Rodriguez versus San Antonio Independent School District* case, one of the most important school finance reform cases in the country. This lawsuit is considered a Chicano civil rights landmark case that went to the Supreme Court in 1972 (Acuña 2001; Kozol, 1992). Balderrama remembers, "I was a freshman so I didn't know what the hell was going on, but everybody walked out of the school and I said, 'Hey, get outta class!'" While he adds that, "I didn't know what the hell was going on," his narrative suggests that this is when he started to interrogate the quality of education, availing a glimpse into the educational inequality in his community.

I joined the walk out . . . we marched down to the central office . . . I didn't know what we were protesting, but we wanted the same opportunities everybody else had. And things were bad in Edgewood. The school was broken down—the windows were broken—missing equipment, not enough books. It wasn't that good. There were a lot of things that were wrong. We needed money, but we didn't have the money in the community . . . that's the way it was.

His re-telling of the story suggests that even though he claims to not have been "politically knowledgeable" and that he "didn't know what we were doing," Balderrama was aware of the structural inequalities and the ongoing struggle for educational justice in his community. He recognized that "there were a lot of things that were wrong" because he lived inside the educational inequality and poverty of his barrio.

The memories of schooling by Linares, Huerta, and Balderrama give insight to the ways in which these teachers understand the culture of schooling as a system of social reproduction in working-class, barrio schools where Mexican children were academically neglected, even when they were stellar students in their community. Their memories of schooling are inscribed in their everyday teaching as they teach within a culture of high expectations where college is an attainable, if not expected goal for their students. For example, Huerta became aware of the culture of low expectations for barrio children as a result of the lack of encouragement to do well academically. As a result, he was not able to pursue higher education right after high school, even though he was a star athlete, but instead enlisted in the army to serve in the Vietnam War. Linares and Balderrama were both in band and were ranked high in their class. However, neither were encouraged to pursue higher education, leaving them to struggle. Linares worked as a secretary after high school, while Balderrama enrolled in a community college. Their memories serve as sites of knowledge as they theorize barrio schooling, as well as sites of resistance as they create a culture of high expectations for their students at Tenayuca Elementary.

### **"Catching Up" – Speaking Out Against Educational Inequality in Barrio Schools**

Teachers' *historias* of language oppression, cultural violence, negligence, and the structural inequalities they faced in their schools (from funding to curricular materials), experienced in Mexican barrio schools evoked anger, resentment, confusion, and tension. Like the teachers, these were emotions that I had learned to carefully negotiate, if not dismiss, in my formation as a *mexicana* working class scholarship girl. As a second-generation working class Mexican female in the U.S., I was an outsider to the culture of academia. Like the teachers in this study, their narratives become a mirror for viewing our common catching up experiences. I knew what it was like to "catch up" and negotiate a new culture—its practices, ideologies, and cultural expectations—as a first-generation college educated Chicana.

With the exception of one teacher, the participants in this study are first generation college-educated. When Balderrama enrolled in a community college in San Antonio, he thought, "I can't compete with these people." But, later he found out, "Hey, these *bolillos* [Anglos] aren't that smart. I'm smarter than they. So, it was okay. Even though I didn't have the same opportunities, I learned a lot in college and I was able to catch up." College was a new cultural and psychological environment for Balderrama. Being new to the culture of academia, he asserts,

What was difficult was that I didn't have nobody to look up to that had been to college so I couldn't ask anybody any questions like 'What was it like?' or 'What's it gonna be like?' I had no idea what it was going to be like. I didn't even know if I could make it in college, but I did . . . it's a big step for me, from the Westside to

becoming a teacher because I didn't start off with a lot of opportunities that a lot of people do.

When he says that he went "from the Westside to becoming a teacher," he is not only speaking about being an outsider to academia but also to the privilege of having become part of the middle-class culture, as a first-generation college educated Mexican American from a working class background.

Huerta also learned the extent of his mis-education in college, an experience he was able to access through the support of his seventh grade teacher who continued to mentor him. Also, from the support of his college professors, and long hours of day and night school, Huerta succeeded in his coursework and earned a bachelor's in education. He was the first in his family to obtain a college degree, although Tomas Huerta had to enroll in day school, night school and summer school for four consecutive years to "catch up" and finish his degree like "the normal kids." With little academic preparation, Huerta became aware of the inequitable education he had obtained in predominantly Mexican public schools. His first year in college was very difficult. "I thought, 'I can't be any more of an idiot.' They were up here [points up to his head] and I was down here [points to the ground]" academically. He felt "very, very embarrassed" about his abilities in college. He continues,

I wanted to hide. I couldn't talk like the rest of the kids that came from Alamo Heights, the Northside, whose families were very well off. I mean my oral language was terrible. My vocabulary was at the bottom of the barrel. And I heard these people talk and I couldn't understand what they were saying.

One of his professors made the commitment to work with Huerta if he did his part, which he did by meeting with him before and after class started. This professor taught him writing skills, such as looking up words in the thesaurus and how to write essays—skills that many of his peers already had in college. Throughout the first year, Huerta worked hard at playing catch up, learning "what I didn't learn in four years in high school." His other professor offered constant motivation, always telling him, "Come on Tomas, you can do it." He describes these professors as teachers who "understood what we had gone through, coming back from Vietnam, where we came from [the community], the schools, Edgewood. They knew what was going on. They knew what it was all about." By his junior year, Huerta excelled in his studies and thrived in his education courses, completing his studies "like the normal kids" in four years.

While a message of democratic education has continued to evolve in San Antonio, through this project and my own personal experience, I have concluded that Mexicans continue to contend with educational inequality, a form of oppression that includes racialized language oppression, a culture of low expectations, and a differentiated curriculum where Mexicans are schooled within vocational tracks that promote work in San Antonio's downtown tourist industry.

In their *historias*, Huerta and Balderrama unearthed their feelings of frustration, anger, and resentment they experienced from "catching up" in college—learning what they believe they should have learned in their primary and secondary education. In doing so, they spoke against the mis-education they endured in Westside schools. Their *historias* offer knowledge about the ways in which segregated, barrio schools reproduced race and class arrangements in San Antonio where Mexicans were expected to seek vocational tracks, rather than pursue higher education. While they were never encouraged to pursue higher education, they did with little or no support, and excelled despite the legacy of educational inequality in Mexican, working-class schools.

### **Navigating Racial Microaggressions in Higher Education**

Carolina Rubio, the youngest of the teachers interviewed, did not grow up in the Mexican, working-class barrios of San Antonio's Westside. Among all the participants I observed or interviewed, Rubio was the only one whose family helped her navigate both schooling and home cultures. As a cultural bordercrosser Rubio stands out as the exception because of her status as second-generation college educated. "My family was very supportive. They were the ones who emphasized the maintenance of identity. And my parents were educated. They were proud to be Chicanos. They didn't immigrate from México so they had an understanding of both cultures and could move in and out. And they set a large example for me. So, that helped me become who I was

as far as my identity.” In other words, their cultural and schooling experiences provided Rubio with the cultural capital to navigate school and home cultures. While she credits her family for shaping her bicultural and bilingual identity, Rubio states, “I didn’t really feel like I had ownership of [my identity] until I went to [the university] because I had to present myself that way and because there were so few of us [Mexican Americans], we had to represent the people that way.” She adds, “Whenever we did something, it was assumed it was what Mexicans did.”

It was in college where Rubio experienced what Solorzano (1998) calls microaggressions, unconscious and subtle forms of racism that take place in private conversations and interactions with Whites. Rubio’s memories of microaggressions in college offer much insight about the ways in which she negotiated the collegiate racial climate at a predominantly white campus, and the ways in which these experiences now inform her teaching practices.

After high school, Rubio pursued her undergraduate studies at a prestigious university in the Midwest where she majored in biology. In a campus that was predominantly white, she and other students of color were “clearly a minority.” As she states, “There were a lot of questions about who I was. I was often asked to identify myself and my ethnicity and it was difficult for me.” This was a time of intense debates about affirmative action, which “made it very difficult, especially in classroom discussions, dorm room discussions, about whether or not I belonged there as a Hispanic and as a female.” Given the hostile environment, Rubio changed her major to Latino Studies and Spanish “because I felt I needed information to defend myself for my position [in college]. My grades didn’t seem sufficient. The social pressure that was placed on me at the time, I was very defensive and I actually became quite an activist on campus.”

Due to the limited representation of ethnic groups on campus, Rubio realized that she was not only representing herself but also Mexicans/Chicanos as a whole. She recalls the time one of her friends introduced her to a group of white students as the “Mexican” friend because many of them had never seen a Mexican before in the Midwest. She was, needless to say, angry that her friend hadn’t distinguished other people’s ethnic/racial background (‘John, he’s Jewish.’). This was one of the many times she realized “I was representing a people. I wanted to make sure I made a positive impression, that they had a clear understanding of not only my personal background, but the background of our people.” It was these experiences that led her to develop closer networks with other Chicanas/os and people of color. “I didn’t want to be with anybody else. I wanted to be with our people and for our cause. I know that a lot of my Anglo friends had a hard time with that. ‘What do you mean, ‘My people?’ Your cause?’ I wanted to ensure that the community I grew up with will be there for the children I will have. For that to happen, I need to make sure we promote the language and culture.”

To contest dominant notions of affirmative action as a form of tokenization, she and other student activists participated in multicultural student organizations to assert that she and other students of color were there on her own merit. In addition, she participated in school programs in Latina/o communities. Most of her activism focused on education, even her one-on-one experiences. Whether it was in the dorm or cafeteria or classroom, Rubio “challenged her peers for their thoughts” in an attempt to disrupt their assumptions about “Hispanics.” As she states, “I knew that education was valued and important [in my family] and when I was in [college], I realized it was the only way that people changed their mind, where people realize things.” Going to Michigan alone was “frightening, yet empowering.” She understood her parents’ insistence on going to an out-of-state university, because it gave her alternative view of the social world.

## Conclusion

Through *historias*, *conocimiento*, and *pláticas*, I have unearthed and examined teachers’ memories of schooling to better understand the ways in which schooling shapes the personal, social and professional lives of Mexican descent teachers. Naming the source of their oppression—whether teachers, administrators, or the “system”—teachers contest unequal and assimilationist practices based on their lived experience. Critical theorists, Donaldo Macedo and Ana Maria Araujo, argue that reflexive knowledge is the process of “the sharing of experiences” and that these “must always be understood within a social praxis that entails both reflection and political action. In short, it must always involve a political project with the objective of dismantling oppressive

structures and mechanisms” (in Freire, 1998, p. xiv). Teachers' memories of schooling implicate power and agency. As they made sense of their personal and social identities, ethnicity was framed through their racialized and class experiences. Moreover, these teachers link their schooling experiences to the historical legacy of mis-education, language oppression, and cultural violence, often referring to the hidden injuries experienced by working-class, Spanish speaking, and Mexican Americans in the barrio. Their *historias* suggest that they live with the memory of historical trauma, displacement, and pain associated with oppression. In this project, they are not merely sharing their stories or engaging in self-therapy (Macedo & Araujo, 1998), they are voicing their legacies of pain to document their experiences as teachers who have been mis-educated within public education, as well as voicing their commitment to creating a more transformative culture of schooling that values the knowledge students bring to their classrooms. Similarly to Juanita Martinez, who had never shared her story about anglicizing her name, teachers in this study demonstrate an awareness of their oppression, with Rubio displaying consciousness about the colonizing impact of the curriculum.

These teachers have become aware of the ways in which their own schooling experiences have prepared them to teach as evidenced in their pedagogical practices, in their communities of upbringing, having examined the subordination they survived as Mexican working-class students in the barrio, naming the cultural violence they endured as racialized students in Mexican schools. While none of the teachers use a radical discourses of domination, mis-education, and cultural violence they experienced in schools, they name the source of their oppression and come to what Donaldo Macedo calls a “cultural voice” (in Freire, 2000, p. 12). Revisiting and reflecting on these members is an emotional process that necessarily leads to personal transformation or what Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes as the “Coatlicue State.” These teachers have charted a way station or a way of life as they begin to re-create, re-piece, and re-invent their personal and social identity through reflexive memory-work. It is by reflecting on these cultural injuries that teachers move in and out of resistance, internalized oppression, decolonization, to create transformative change in their community of practice, even when it means teaching students to deal with the structural inequalities—racism, classism, and language oppression—and assimilationist ideologies that they will continue to face. As they have reflected on their schooling, these teachers have come to a greater awareness of their own subjectivity. They have learned to see themselves as teachers who are not merely servants of the state who disseminate official curricula, but as barrio teachers whose philosophical orientation is informed by their Chicana/o working class barrio ethos. As teachers who grew up in the barrio, they bring cultural wealth as Mexican people who have struggled to understand their racialized schooling experience in a dual-wage economy that did not imagine them as potential agents of change. As a result of their own schooling experiences and the injuries they survived, these teachers made the conscious decision to teach at Emma Tenayuca School to transform the culture of schooling in the barrio.

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