

Conceincia con Compromiso: Aspirantes as Bridges for Latin@ Bilingual Learners

Linda Prieto

University of Texas - San Antonio

Abstract

The study examined the influence of culture on the desire of a group of six aspirantes (Spanish/English bilingual education teacher candidates) from Texas to become bilingual education teachers of Latin@ bilingual learners. Chicana/Latina feminist thought is utilized as a lens to understand the role teacher education programs can play in helping teacher candidates explore their cultural backgrounds and critically assess hierarchical systems of oppression. Incorporating Latina teacher candidates' cultural resources in teacher education programs can prove beneficial in preparing all teachers to meet the strengths and needs of Latin@ bilingual learners.

Introduction

The strengths and needs of Latin@ youth remain largely underserved in U.S. public schools. Given the increasing number of emerging English learners (ELs) across the nation, most of whom are Latin@, it is imperative to examine ways in which teacher education programs prepare teacher candidates to understand issues concerning these growing student populations. Due to the high number of emerging ELs enrolled in Texas elementary schools, it is important to interpret the preparation and experiences of minority group teacher candidates who are soon entrusted with their care, learning, and development (Quiocho & Rios, 2000). To do so, I analyze testimonios from six aspirantes enrolled at a four-year university in Texas (Prieto, 2009). They trustingly shared their experiences in and out of school leading to their senior year in college, and for a smaller group of them, incidents from their first year of teaching.

Chicana/Latina Feminist Thought (C/LFT)

A Chicana/Latina feminist lens suggests that aspirantes in this study draw upon cultural domains such as gender, language, class status, and race/ethnicity as they develop their interest in teaching Latin@ bilingual learners (Prieto, 2009, 2013). This framework helps me consider how the aspirantes think about and enact their cultural codes, beliefs, and practices in their roles as future teachers of Latin@ bilingual learners. Anzaldúa (1999) proposed that the new mestiza (woman of mixed indigenous and European ancestry) learns to juggle cultures. "She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else (p. 101)."

In this case, cultural codes connect to the need of Latinas to construct alternative knowledge in varied social contexts (e.g., teacher education programs, bilingual education classrooms) and can prove a helpful tool for aspirantes as they learn to live, operate, and teach within and across hybrid spaces. C/LFT embraces and challenges cultural ideas about Latinas—not all Latinas speak Spanish and English or do so fluently and not all Latin@ families are havens of love and support in isolation of pain and fear. Often, contradictory notions exist simultaneously and C/LFT helps us value the situatedness of this complexity of women's lives. In my work, mestiza consciousness is used for understanding, complicating, and being sensitive to how the aspirantes, as mestizas, navigate and make sense of their experiences in conjunction with their professional development and practice as aspirantes of Latin@ bilingual learners.

Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies reveal fruitful tensions through affirmations of collective identities and individual integrity. I attempt to mine these sites of tension to explore how we might experience transformative teaching in colleges of education and public schools by linking Anzaldúa's notion of 'mestiza consciousness' (1999) and the Chicana/Latina cultural knowledge base Delgado Bernal (2001, 2006) terms 'pedagogies of the

home' to reflect and dialogue about issues concerning Latin@ emerging ELs. This epistemological frame allows me to explore and understand the lived realities and experiences of aspirantes in their home spaces and local communities with an aim of informing pedagogy in the classroom. Such an exploration is important because as NietoGomez (2003) states,

Chicana feminist thought provides a pedagogy, in which we can discuss our political, social, economic, and cultural conditions, a forum where we can raise questions that challenge the institutions predetermining our conditions, a medium where we can discuss how to make our situations better (p. 90).

Using C/LFT in teacher education programs can encourage aspirantes to challenge mainstream understandings of teaching and learning to improve issues concerning Latin@ emerging ELs. Their lived experiences may be teeming with non-traditional knowledge and healing practices, which can help inform classroom pedagogies.

A note on terminology. The terms 'Chicana' and 'Latina' are used as explained by Villenas et al. (2006):

Chicana is often used to refer to U.S.-born women of Mexican or Latin American descent who identify with a collective history or oppression and pride connected to a political consciousness with its origin in *El Movimiento* or the Mexican American civil rights movement. Latina is used in varying ways. Authors may employ it as an umbrella term to encompass the diversity of women in their studies, including immigrant and U.S.-born women from different Latin American countries (p. 7).

In this article, the term aspirantes implies a Chican@/Latin@ identity, regardless of birthplace.

Researcher Background

My autobiographical backdrop is informed through my experiences growing up in the central San Joaquin Valley of California as the daughter of farmworker Mexican immigrants. As a result of working in the agricultural fields alongside my family, I learned early on that when faced with damaging state and federal educational policies informed by social hierarchies of difference and anti-immigrant agendas, a strong work ethic alone does *not* produce equitable results for all children and their families. Through daily routines, I learned the strategies of organization, structure, doing for others, love, survival, and accountability. These tools became scripted on my body. My lived experiences inform and shape my research agenda, which focuses on teacher formation across the teacher candidate to teacher educator continuum. I approach my work from a critical perspective using life (her)stories and testimonio (politically urgent life stories) informed by C/LFT. My role as an educator includes participating in the production of increased access to a quality Pre-K–20 education for *all* students.

Centering the Experiences of Aspirantes

Aspirantes are often overlooked in teacher education; even research in the areas of multicultural education and bilingual education fail to address the particular experiences of Latin@ teacher candidates. Aspirantes, their experiences and perceptions, remain mostly absent in the literature on teacher education, and Chican@/Latin@ educators as authors of these articles are not prevalent in the top teacher education journals. According to Sleeter (2001), most work by teacher educators examines issues related to the approaches needed in diverse contexts while continuing to center the conversation on whiteness. Although this work is valuable, we must also address the gap regarding the experiences of aspirantes, if we are to understand the hegemonic powers impacting the experiences of Latin@ emerging ELs. Critical teacher education scholars (e.g., Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) agree that preparing teachers to better address diversity in U.S. public schools is necessary and call on institutions of higher education to rethink the curriculum in their teacher education programs. Scholars in bilingual teacher education call for culturally relevant approaches that ensure aspirantes are prepared to enhance the academic achievement of emerging ELs (Dubetz & de Jong, 2011; Flores, Sheets, & Clark, 2011).

We cannot expect aspirantes to increase the achievement of emerging ELs without first providing them opportunities to learn. The acquisition of English with the use of Spanish instruction is the highest expectation placed on Spanish/English bilingual education teachers, yet Guerrero (2003) reports that bilingual education teacher candidates receive inadequate opportunities to learn academic Spanish. In my study, the aspirantes

mentioned receiving only one course instructed in Spanish as part of their teacher education program. They mentioned wanting and needing additional opportunities to speak and instruct in academic Spanish as a way to better serve Latin@ emerging ELs. If the aspirantes themselves are not fluent in academic Spanish, we cannot expect them to adequately teach Latin@ Spanish/English bilingual learners¹. If we are ever to improve bilingual education programs, I agree that language practices and policies must be fundamentally altered including formal opportunities for aspirantes to participate in a community of Spanish language users as part of their preparation.

Flores (2001) confirms that prior life experiences influence bilingual education teachers' beliefs. She associates a teacher's awareness of a child's cognition as one that stems from their personal background, teacher preparation, and professional teaching experiences. Teacher education programs must understand the background and lived experiences of aspiring teachers to inform their professional development.

Methods: Documenting Conocimientos de las Aspirantes

Across three years (2006-2008), I documented the knowledge of aspirantes and explored factors that account for their interests in bilingual education certification and teaching Latin@ bilingual learners. Specifically I examined: 1) how Latina university students narrate their lived experiences and articulate a sense of self, family, and community in their development as aspirantes; 2) how they develop their perspectives and philosophies for teaching in Spanish/English bilingual education classrooms; and 3) how their beliefs, values, and approaches to teaching are articulated, enacted, or contradicted in the classroom. Although there were ten participants in the original study only six are featured here. The qualitative study consisted of: 1) oral (her)story interviews, 2) paired (auto)biographical dialogues (P(A)BDs²), and 3) ethnographic observations. The individual oral (her) story interviews, a Chicana feminist practice of oral history, are conducted to explore how a participant comes to know and understand the role of gender, race and social class, as structural and ideological relations in their lived experiences (Pérez, 1994; Sangster, 2005). I designed P(A)BDs as a pedagogical exercise to allow the participants to openly share their life stories with one another. Participants were paired at random and encouraged to question how particular beliefs and ideologies related to race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and language within the contexts of family, home, and community informed their lived experiences and desire to teach (Prieto, 2009). Secondary data sets included: email communications and assignments completed during the participants' teacher education program. The data provided insight into the lived experiences of aspirantes and their perspectives of and desires for teaching Latin@ bilingual learners. Ethnographic observations were collected via note-taking during one of the teacher education courses, their student teaching, and their first year of teaching.

Qualitative analysis of the narratives line for line as well as across testimonios uncovered these cultural strategies:

a) sobrevivencia (survival, transcendence, and self-sufficiency), b) esperanza (hope), c) amor (love, including a pursuit for social justice), d) coraje (courage and rage), e) cariño (critical and authentic care and caring as political), and f) conocimiento (knowledge and understanding). Employing the above cultural strategies the maestras developed, what I term, una conciencia con compromiso—a process by which they understand, nurture, and develop their commitment to community. (Prieto, 2013, p. 137)

My earlier work with their testimonios unveiled four themes as the most salient factors influencing the decisions by the aspirantes to pursue degrees in bilingual education: 1) culture, 2) language, 3) familismo (familism), and 4) sobrevivencia. The first, culture, serves as an umbrella for the others and is the focus of this article. The intimate spaces between these themes are at times difficult and perhaps unnecessary to disentangle. The focus here centers on how the border experiences of the aspirantes inform their development as aspirantes. The theme of culture includes notions of what it means to be Mexican/American, Chicana, Latina, or Hispanic and the influence of such beliefs on teaching Latin@ bilingual learners (Prieto, 2009, 2013).

¹ The experiences of Indigenous Latin@ bi/trilingual learners are beyond the scope of this study but also warrant attention.

² Paired (auto)biographical dialogues are described in more detail in Prieto (2013) and the original study Prieto (2009).

Las Culturas Que Traicionan/The Cultural Traditions that Betray Us

Like me, most of the aspirants in my study were the daughters of immigrants. “The cultural values learned were a transnational blend of U.S.-Latin@ ideologies” (Prieto, 2013, p. 177). Mora (1997) describes this legacy: “We hoard what our mothers, our tías, our abuelitas [aunts, grandmothers] hoarded: our values, our culture” (p. 292) and cautions:

Much as I want us, my daughters, my niece, Chicanas of all ages, to carry the positive aspects of our culture with them for sustenance, I also want us to question and ponder what values and customs we wish to incorporate into our lives, to continue our individual and collective evolution. Such emergence, the wriggling from our past selves and experience as both women and women of Color, brings with it mixed blessings (p. 292).

The aspirantes understand, embrace, and reject the mixed blessings of which Mora (1997) warns. They learned cultural beliefs from their familias. Authoring their sense of self involves what Zentella (1997) explains as “trying on, discarding, integrating the many ways of speaking and behaving that surround them” (p. 2). A ‘theory in the flesh’ was embodied and transmitted from generation to generation—“one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (Moraga, 1983, p. 23).

Table 1. *Aspirantes*

	First Name	Ethnicity	Age¹	Linguistic Background	Hometown
1.	Cici	Mexican	26	Spanish Dominant Home	North TX
2.	Mariela	Mexican	22	Spanish Dominant Home	East TX
3.	Diana	Mexican	22	Spanish Dominant Home	South TX
4.	Jessica	Mexican	21	Spanish/English Bilingual Home	South TX
5.	Soar	Israeli/Argentinean	21	Spanish/Hebrew Bilingual Home	East TX
6.	Valentina	Mexican	21	Spanish Dominant Home	The Valley, TX

Note: Pseudonyms are used for all participants and names that appear in italics participated in both phases of the study.

Refers to their age on August 1, 2006.

Valentina: Mis Raíces

When Valentina spoke of her cultural and ethnic affiliations she mentioned her family’s connection to México and the U.S. She self-identified as Mexican-American:

... my roots stem from Mexican and American ancestry. My mother moved to the U.S. in the 1970s, and my father is third-generation Texan. I used to identify myself as ‘Hispanic,’ but I’ve become aware of new things about my culture. I have learned that Hispanic is a term given to us by the dominant class (whites) in an effort to group us without taking into consideration who we are. By saying, ‘I’m Hispanic,’ I feel that I don’t have a true identity.

In college, Valentina learned to question assigned ethnic labels. By self-identifying as Mexican American, she felt more validated in her cultural experiences and able to identify with her future Latin@ students. In their development as aspirantes, a growing awareness of their cultural backgrounds, along the lines of race, ethnicity, and nationality, and the ensuing questions or confirmation regarding how they self-identified were common experiences.

As an undergraduate student, Valentina felt others held a limited perception of her cultural and ethnic background. “In college, I’m just clumped into the masses of minorities,” she said. Back home she had family and friends with whom she identified, but in college she found it difficult to find peers with whom she shared culturally familiar experiences. Valentina grew weary of the unspoken borderlands between white and ethnic minority students. Even though her light complexion and slender build allowed her to become neutral and

sobrevivir in the mainstream, something was missing. She added proudly, “But I’m changing this. I feel like I have a newfound respect for my culture and who I am; that it’s time that I take pride in myself. If I stand out, who cares because I truly am different. I’m not part of the dominant class.” This new conocimiento allowed Valentina to embrace her diversity and differences, a new and empowering perspective. This perspective could then allow her to see and value the diversity Latin@ students have to offer. Becoming a part of the bilingual education teacher candidate cohort provided Valentina the culturally familiar support she could not find among white peers. For example, she described feeling isolated from and misunderstood by her white roommate freshman year:

When you know you don’t belong somewhere, you’re not gonna go. Like, I had a white roommate. It didn’t work out, but she’s like, “Let’s go to a sorority party,” a sorority thing, a frat party. I’m just like, “No! Don’t you know I’m Mexican! I’m not gonna go over there!” And she’s like, “I know you have dark hair, but it’s ok.” I’m just like, <voice lowers> “No, it’s not.” And I won’t have the money. I’m not gonna go.

In college, ethnic relations were complicated along the lines of class status.

Jessica: Reclaiming Cultural Identity

Growing up Jessica received mixed messages about the importance of bilingualism. Her maternal grandmother served as a constant reminder for her to speak Spanish,

When I was little all I would speak was English right, with everybody, and my grandma would be like, “¡Vete de aquí, cabrona³! ¡No me hables! Si no me vas a hablar español, no me hables!” <laughs> (“Get out of here, brat! Don’t talk to me! If you’re not going to speak Spanish to me, don’t talk to me!”) So I’d be like, “Well, I need to talk to my grandma,” so I would just speak in Spanish with her. She was the one who would tell us, “Tienes que hablar español porque si no, no vas a saber nada, y la gente va hablar de ti.” (“You have to speak Spanish because if you don’t, you won’t know anything, and people will talk about you.”) So that’s how I learned and kept my Spanish.

Jessica’s grandmother cautioned her on the importance of preserving their native tongue as a way to relate to others who speak Spanish. She also believed it was necessary to speak Spanish as a way to avoid having others ridicule you. Although her grandmother valued Jessica’s acquisition of Spanish as a way for her to maintain cultural connections, Jessica’s parents also had her removed from a Spanish/English bilingual education classroom as a young child. Jessica depicted her parents’ concern over her placement in a bilingual education classroom, “My parents didn’t want me in a bilingual class, so they fought with the school. Then in first grade they took me out of bilingual, so I was in the mainstream classes or the regular ed. classes up until I graduated.” Deficit views of bilingual education influenced Jessica’s switch to mainstream English monolingual classrooms. Then in college, Jessica, sought to improve her Spanish language skills as a way to both regain and maintain her cultural connections and identities.

Jessica’s college peer group was from a U.S.-México border town. By sharing aspects of their background with her, they helped increase her interest in her Mexican culture. She described her friends’ affiliations with a border culture:

I didn’t grow up in Mexico, but I’m very, very proud of it. So I think I can give back to that community regardless of whether I’m from there or not ‘cause I have a passion for it. I feel it in me. It’s in me ‘cause <laughs> I’m a Mexican. And that pride I think is more so from being here in the university. All my friends are from [a border town]. They’re very proud of [their home town] and *The Border*, so I think they’ve helped me a lot become familiar with my own culture.

Associating with a peer group in college that was deep-rooted in their ethnic and cultural background helped Jessica more strongly identify as Mexican even though she was born in the U.S. On her mother’s side of the family, one grandmother emigrated from México, but on her father’s side they had been present in Texas before its incorporation in the U.S.

en el tiempo antes de los gabachos

3 Cabrona directly translate to: “bitch,” but in this context, Jessica’s grandmother uses the term to imply “brat.”

cuando Tejas era México⁴ (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 222)

Exposure to peers who were transnational Mexicans and their experiences within a border culture helped Jessica learn more about her background and strengthen her commitment to helping others. She viewed teaching Latin@ bilingual learners as one way to achieve that goal.

Mariela: Mexicanidad

El Movimiento (The Chican@ Civil Rights Movement), a 1960s-initiated social movement rallied the Mexican-origin community and raised awareness regarding our experiences as a people in the United States. During this time more Mexicans proudly identified with their ethnic background. In the post-Movimiento era we no longer sought to conceal our ethnic background for social acceptance. As a result, the aspirantes in this study more easily identified with their ethnic background as well. For example, Mariela strongly identified as Mexican. Her sense of cultural pride was fostered at home:

I think I would rather be a Mexican than a Mexican-American since I grew up more with pure Mexican people all my life, and I identify with them with no problem. So I identify myself as Mexican. I think I am supposed to be considered Mexican-American since my parents are from Mexico, and I was born in the U.S., but for me, I feel that I am more engaged with the Mexican culture than anything else.

Her family's transnational life between the United States and México included a constant flux of recent Mexican immigrants living with them in their home in the United States. These networks contributed to Mariela's sense of self and positive view towards other Latin@s.

Mariela stressed how the role of family and community informed her cultural affiliations, "I also express my culture by being with my family and spending time with them. I will be at parties and do what my family does. I will dance and do all the wonderful things that Mexican families will tend to do." She identified her ability to connect with other people of Mexican descent as a resource for teaching Latin@ bilingual learners. However, there were also cultural blessings that provided Mariela with challenges:

One example, along the lines of gendered socialization, espoused the cultural belief (informed by Catholic religious ideology) that Mexican daughters remain in their parents' home until they wed. So to attend college, Mariela had to challenge her parents to allow her to pursue her undergraduate education away from home (Prieto, 2013, p. 174).

Diana: Family Identity

Like Mariela, Diana also was born in the United States and her parents were both born in México. She also grew up on both sides of the México-U.S. border. Diana's close relationship with her family played a central role in shaping her cultural beliefs. She explained her cultural identity as guiding the way she lived her life, not as a banner she wore on her sleeve:

I like the way I have balanced my culture and the culture I live in; both are very different.

One is very involved with the family. The other is very independent. I don't like to express my culture yelling, '¡Viva México!' I think that my identity and culture are reflected in my decisions in life and the way I relate to my surroundings.

Diana did not choose to portray her ethnic identity overtly. Her transnational sense of self was constructed as she attempted to balance her home culture with the mainstream U.S. culture. In the United States, mainstream college students tend to covet spring break as a time to unwind and self-indulge. Yet, Diana spent her spring breaks at home helping with the family business:

This spring break instead of going to have fun, I'm gonna go [home] and work, and I'm gonna take them money 'cause they need money for some permit stuff they have to pay for. So I'm doing that, so that's how I'm gonna help 'em.

By doing so Diana conveyed family as her number one priority. It would be considered culturally inappropriate had she shown any sign of being upset at giving up her spring break to help her family. With her response, both she and her parents saved face. Throughout her college experience Diana maintained close family ties, as she also grew more independent.

⁴ in the time before the whites; when Texas was Mexico

Soar: Half-Israeli + Half-South American = Whole American

I come from a mixed family. I am an interesting combination of three cultures: American, Israeli, and Argentinean. I consider myself a part of all three, and it has been a challenge coming to terms with the fact that I will never be just one. My parents are from Israel and Argentina, so those two cultures are the dominating ones at home, especially Israeli, and the American culture comes from my daily life outside my home.

As Soar came to terms with “the fact that I will never be just one” culture, she lived her life at transnational crossroads, borderlands created by cultures of warmth, sacrifices, and war torn histories spanning three continents across distant shores. Anzaldúa (1999) describes this “plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned” (p. 101). As a way to maintain their cultural ties to Argentina and Israel Soar’s family spoke both Spanish and Hebrew at home. They also lived in Israel and the United States as she was growing up:

I also speak three languages, one for each culture. We’re Jewish, but my dad is from Argentina, and my mom is from Israel. So I have that cultural background. So speaking a total of three languages is kind of what attracted me to a certain extent to bilingual education.

Speaking more than one language and negotiating more than one culture influenced Soar and the other aspirantes to pursue a degree in bilingual education. Soar went on to describe her multicultural and multilingual identities intricately:

I identify myself as half-Israeli and half-South American and whole American. That’s who I am. It will never stop being confusing, but I can’t pick one culture over the other without lying to myself and others. I always feel torn when I fill out my race on formal documents (white, Hispanic), because I consider myself multiracial/multicultural. I think that is one of the biggest inner struggles I had growing up.

Other aspirantes expressed a similar sense of ambiguity regarding their cultural affiliations.

Cici: Relating without Self-Identifying

Both of Cici’s parents were born in México and later immigrated to the United States where Cici was born. At the age of 11 Cici’s mother returned to México with Cici’s younger brother. This experience of abandonment informed the kind of teacher Cici sought to be for other Latin@ bilingual learners. She also perceived her experiences growing up in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood as helping her relate to the experiences of other working-class Latin@s:

I’d know about the gangs and know about the peer pressure and the drugs and stuff. So I am a little bit more aware of where these kids live, than let’s say...than another person who grew up in a middle-class neighborhood. So that would help me with them because I’d kind of know what they are dealing with in being Latina.

Cici overlaps the domains of ethnicity and class status as she speaks to her ability to connect with Latin@ families. Perhaps teachers who grow up in middle-class neighborhoods cannot easily relate to the working-class conditions Cici and other Latin@s experience day-to-day.

One way in which I observed Cici trying to be a “good” teacher included caring for the overall well-being of children. She identified with their personal and family struggles. The following entry details an emotional moment where I observed Cici connecting personally with a child in a Pre-K classroom:

Cici walks towards a little girl, Carla, and asks, “¿No tienes frio, Carla?” (“Carla, aren’t you cold?”) Carla responds, “No, maestra.” (“No, teacher.”) “Ok,” Cici does not probe further. I look at Carla and notice that one of her pant legs appears torn. It’s rolled completely above her thigh. Cici notices me looking at Carla and approaches. Standing very close to me she whispers, “She comes from a family of 13.” “Wow,” I respond and ask, “Is she the youngest?” “I don’t know,” replies Cici, “but it’s a tough environment. Sometimes she even comes dirty to school.” Cici’s eyes tear up. ... “Ay, I’m going to cry.” Looking away she dabs her eyes. ... “I wonder if she even knows,” Cici whispers. “Maybe, hopefully she’s too young to know what happens at her home,” she adds. I try to comfort Cici placing my arm on her shoulder. “Who knows, when I was 4 years old, I don’t think I knew,” I add, “but by the time I was 5, I think I knew that my dad was mean to

my mom. So school was like an escape. I loved school! So you just have to have your classroom be like a haven for her, you know?" Cici nods in agreement. (Field notes February 2007)

As a result of the painful experiences she suffered at home, Cici stated that she did not strongly identify with her Mexican background. However, the children in her classroom were all Latin@, predominantly Mexican-heritage, and she did very much relate to them. Cici and the children shared threads along class status, ethnicity, personal challenges and language.

Cici could not embrace nor feel legitimized by what she experienced as Hispanic culture. No formal academic space was provided in her teacher education program for her to express shifting and often contradictory subjectivities. She was not provided Chicana/Latina feminist insights, which Holling (2006) identifies as helping Chicana/Latina students work "through the tensions and frustrations they experience" (p. 85).

Mestiza Notions of Learning and Teaching

Since the participants played *escuelita* (school) with family members, friends, and neighbors, in reality their journeys to pursuing bilingual education began in the home. Their teacher preparation began as they helped others with homework, served as role models, took on part-time jobs, and helped their families negotiate the outside world. As they left to attend college they strengthened their *sobrevivencia* and further developed their *conceincia con compromiso* or sense of wanting to do with and for others. Their stories reflect the intricacies, adjustments, and disorientations of living at the crossroads of cultures as experienced by many Chicana/Latinas in the United States González (2001) notes this complexity in her own study writing, "I recognize their diverse and often conflicting ways of giving meaning to the world" (p. 14). The aspirantes lived complicated lives. I argue that their complexities and contradictions are at the core of their development of *conceincia con compromiso*.

Although the aspirantes were not presented with critical opportunities to discuss, understand, and complicate their cultural backgrounds in college they did become more aware of their differences from the mainstream along the lines of race, ethnicity, language, and nationality. They questioned aspects of their cultural background and upbringing. As they were exposed to various ethnic labels such as Chicana, Latina, Mexican, Mexican American, American, Hispanic, the aspirantes expressed uncertainty in their attempts to reconcile their multiple identities. Valentina initially identified as Hispanic and then via her college experience self-identified as Mexican-American. Through her college experiences Jessica also developed more pride in her cultural affiliations with her roots. Given her difficult upbringing Cici only identified as American. Not all aspirantes identified positively with their cultural background, but learning more about their heritage by associating with peer groups in college (e.g., teacher candidate cohort, college friends) that were deeply-rooted in their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds helped them more strongly identify with positive aspects of their culture. Learning to embrace their diversity and difference presented them with new and empowering perspectives.

They shared their emotional educational experiences with family, community, and schools. They spoke of the role culture, language, and family played in the development of their sense of self. The participants mentioned the role family networks had on informing their development as aspirantes. They learned to draw strength from their families while at the same time revolting against harmful family, home, and community belief systems. To draw strength from and *sobrevivir* the mixed cultural blessings inherited from their families, the aspirantes struggled to envision different realities for themselves. On their path of *sobrevivencia*, the aspirantes enacted an individual responsibility for bringing about change. Most had obligations to their families even after leaving home to attend college. They were aware of their unspoken role as surrogate parent to younger siblings and relatives, so they worked diligently to serve as positive role models. Establishing support networks in college along shared cultural domains (e.g., language, ethnicity, gender, religion) assisted the aspirantes on their tensely lived paths of *sobrevivencia*. On these admirable journeys they demonstrated sensibilities of *cariño*, *coraje*, *amor*, and *esperanza* as they expanded their *conocimiento*.

Notions of *sobrevivencia*, *amor*, and *esperanza* as influenced by culture are closely linked to the sense of self of the aspirantes. In essence, their life struggles informed their pursuit of bilingual education and the education of Latin@ students. Their authentic and vivid narratives draw attention to lived tensions that develop uneasy, even anxious feelings, build stress, provide motivation, and afford reprieve as they reveal a development of *conceincia con compromiso*.

Conclusion

The cultural backgrounds of the aspirantes influence their sense of self and inform their perspectives on teaching Latin@ bilingual learners. Through their shared critique of patriarchy, recognition of the hegemony of English, and commitment to serving as a positive role model for others, the aspirantes illustrate a sense of their mestiza consciousness. So that although some of the aspirantes were raised in home environments where patriarchy served as an oppressive mechanism, they resisted this system of oppression by negotiating their relationships with their fathers into a source of motivation. Delgado Bernal (2001) notes that the pedagogies Chicanas learn at home serve as tools of resistance and resilience, which help them navigate their educational obstacles and university experiences. These characteristics, although not always positive, serve as cultural resources for Latinas in their successful maneuvering between issues of race, capitalism, sexism, and patriarchy. Cultural sensibilities, which include resistance, resolve, and sobrevivencia become necessary when working in constraining times in U.S. public schools.

Different from other teachers of color, they recalled their individual experiences as bilingual children and children of immigration and identified such experiences as contributing to their desire to teach Latin@ bilingual learners. The politically urgent stories of these aspirantes make a call for changes in teacher education and professional development so their compromiso to teach Latin@ students is not jeopardized. The nuances of shared cultural practices in the classroom informed the sense of esperanza for the aspirantes of what is still possible for bilingual learners in today's U.S. public schools.

One of the most potentially destructive dangers of being raised in schools and trained in teacher education programs designed for both mainstream youth and teacher candidates is that aspirantes may still speak and act in ways that unintentionally perpetuate deficit approaches to teaching Latin@ students. Ongoing reflection, dialogue and action become necessary to help aspirantes situate themselves in their conciencia con compromiso. Although their stories were not fully explored by their teacher education program, they are full of emotions, human affections, weaknesses, anxieties, and transcendences and can confirm the social and cultural experiences of Latin@ bilingual learners. What we do with what we know of the cultural wealth of aspirantes will impact their sense of self and the educational access and success of generations of Latin@ bilingual learners to come.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. (1999). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books. (Original work published 1987).
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2001). Learning and living pedagogies of the home: The *mestiza* consciousness of Chicana students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(5), 623-639.
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2006). Learning and living pedagogies of the home: The *mestiza* consciousness of Chicana students. In D. Delgado Bernal, C. A. Elenes, F. E. Godinez, & S. A. Villenas (Eds.), *Chicana/Latina education in everyday life: Feminista perspectives on pedagogy and epistemology* (pp. 113-132). Albany: SUNY Press.
- Dubetz, N. E., & de Jong, E. J. (2011). Teacher advocacy in bilingual programs. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 34(3), 248-262.
- Flores, B. (2001). Bilingual education teachers' beliefs and their relation to self-reported practices. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25(3), 277-299.
- Flores, B. B., Sheets, R. H., & Clark, E. R. (2011). *Teacher preparation for bilingual student populations: Educar para transformar*. New York: Routledge.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- González, N. (2001). *I am my language: Discourses of women and children in the borderlands*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- Guerrero, M. D. (2003). Acquiring and participating in the use of academic Spanish: Four novice Latina bilingual education teachers' stories. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 2(3), 159-181.
- Holling, M. A. (2006). The critical consciousness of Chicana and Latina students: Negotiating identity amid socio-cultural beliefs and ideology. In D. Delgado Bernal, C. A. Elenes, F. E. Godinez, & S. A. Villenas (Eds.), *Chicana/Latina education in everyday life: Feminista perspectives on pedagogy and epistemology* (pp. 81-94). Albany: SUNY Press.
- Mora, P. (1997). *Nepantla: Essays from the land in the middle*. In A. M. García (Ed.), *Chicana feminist thought: The basic historical writings* (pp. 292-294). New York: Routledge.
- Moraga, C. (1983). Theory in the flesh. In C. Moraga, & G. Anzaldúa (Eds.), *This bridge called my back: Writing by radical women of color* (2nd ed.) (p. 23). New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press.
- NietoGomez, A. (2003). Response: Chicana print culture and Chicana studies: A testimony to the development of Chicana feminist culture. In G. F. Arredondo, A. Hurtado, N. Klahn, O. Nájera-Ramírez, & P. Zavella (Eds.), *Chicana feminisms: A critical reader* (pp. 90-96). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Perez, E. (1994). *The decolonial imaginary: Writing Chicanas into history*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Prieto, L. (2009). *Conceincia con compromiso: Maestra perspectives on teaching in bilingual education classrooms*. Unpublished dissertation. University of Texas, Austin.
- Prieto, L. (2013). Maestras constructing consciousness through agency within bilingual education. *Journal of Latino/Latin American Studies*, 5(3), 167-180.
- Quiocho, A., & Rios, F. (2000). The power of their presence: Minority group teachers and schooling. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(4), 485-528.
- Sangster, J. (2005). Telling our stories: Feminist debates and the use of oral history. In R. Perks & A. Thomson (Eds.), *The oral history reader* (pp. 8-100), New York: Routledge.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2001). Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools: Research and the overwhelming presence of whiteness. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 94-106.
- Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 20-32.
- Villenas, S. A., Godinez, F. E., Delgado Bernal, D., & Elenes, C. A. (Eds.). (2006). Introduction to *Chicana/Latina education in everyday life: Feminista perspectives on pedagogy and epistemology* (pp. 1-9). Albany: SUNY Press.
- Zentella, A. C. (1997). *Growing up bilingual: Puerto Rican children in New York*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.