

## **H.E.L.L.A.: Collective *Testimonio* that Speak to the Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action Embodied by Social Justice Educators of Color**

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### **Abstract**

This author utilizes collective *testimonio* (Sánchez, 2009) as a process for *homemade theory* making or what Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) called *conocimientos*. This collective *testimonio* brings together the stories and experiences of three educators of color within a California grassroots social justice critical study group created exclusively for people of color. In a profession dominated by more than 80% White teachers (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013), these teachers of color share stories of resiliency and the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) they possess and have utilized to thrive within an oppressive education system. Applying Critical Race Theory's tenet of counternarrative, their individual and collective *testimonio* speak back to the dominant discourses about people of color as being deficient and lacking dominant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and instead, highlights how internalized and institutionalized forms of racism serve as obstacles as well as motivation to fight against oppression. The role of collective *testimonio* among educators of color can serve as a tool for critical teacher professional development (Kohli, Picower, Martínez, & Ortiz, 2015) centered in political education, healing, empowerment, love and transformative resistance.

### **Introduction**

Recruiting and retaining teachers of color in public education has become a growing national concern across the country and has been deemed a social justice issue (Sleeter, Neal, & Kumashiro, 2014). Currently, students of color make up almost 50% of the student population in U.S. public schools, yet only 18% of all public school teachers in this country are teachers of color (Goldring, Gran, & Bitterman, 2013) and data show that they leave the field at a rate 24% higher per year than their White counterparts (Ingersoll & May, 2011). The disproportionate representation between students of color and teachers of color is an important issue in relation

to equity and diversity. Yet, we also need to move beyond simply diversifying the profession by race and think more deeply about the need for developing and supporting teachers of color committed to social justice if the goal is transformation in service of those historically marginalized. Public schools shaped by systemic discriminatory policies upholding racism, homophobia, sexism, and other systems of oppression in the U.S., are increasingly impacted by corporate interests, standardization, and high-stakes accountability (Picower, 2012). In response to these trends, teachers committed to social justice strive to combat these issues in solidarity with all stakeholders, including families, students, and community members (Picower, 2012). Considering that teachers of color are likely to have also experienced oppression as students prior to becoming educators, their stories are important to critically reflect upon and heal from (Kohli, 2008). Therefore, teacher learning and professional development approaches for supporting and sustaining anti-oppressive diverse teachers is a fundamental factor in retaining teachers who are committed to equity and racial justice in public education and in society at large.

Mandated forms of teacher professional development is often shaped by state standards and reforms in which hegemony is implicit in their resulting professional standards, as well as teaching and learning conditions. Imperatives to diversify the teaching profession cannot ignore the struggles related to discrimination and structural oppression that teachers of color have often experienced and fought through, especially in relation to the historical context of White supremacy and neoliberal capitalism (Keisch & Scott, 2015). Although diverse teachers committed to social justice are an asset to students and schools, they are commonly pushed out of the profession for enacting their commitments in restrictive school climates (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Initiatives and approaches to simply diversify the teacher workforce must take into consideration the specific needs and support for teachers of color who do not ascribe to the dominant practices of American schooling or culture.

In California, a collective of teachers within a social justice grassroots organization have organized alternative forms of professional development led by and created explicitly for teachers of color committed to social justice in education. This critical professional development space (Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015) incorporates critical dialogue, popular education (Friere, 1970), and radical healing (Ginwright, 2016) as professional support for teachers of color in the California Bay Area, who are interested in deepening their analyses of education and teaching through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural

Wealth (Yosso, 2005). This form of teacher support serves as a tool to enact a collective vision of education for liberation, which can potentially lead to creating context-specific, critical professional development frameworks such as the one described below.

### **H.E.L.L.A.: Critical Professional Development Towards Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action for Teachers of Color**



Artwork by Jose Ruiz

For over fifteen years, the grassroots *Teachers 4 Social Justice* organization in the Bay Area of California has been engaging in and facilitating critical study groups, annual conferences, events, and forums for educators and organizers committed to social justice. The organization is volunteer-based and considers the work to be a labor of love. Their mission is to provide opportunities for self-transformation, leadership development, and community building for educators in order to affect meaningful change in the classroom, school, community, and society. The H.E.L.L.A. Educators of color study group is one of several that is created by and offered to educators, the acronym stands for Healing,

Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action. The term *hella* was intentionally chosen because it is also a very popular and widely used slang term originated from the Bay Area which is defined by the Urban Dictionary as an all-purpose word:

It has its roots deep in the soul of Northern California. It means something along the lines of "very" or "really," but it's much more than that. It's not just a word, but a statement of cultural identification, of a long-standing bond of trust and respect for fellow Northern Californians, and of a mutual understanding between you and the rest of the world that you are from (or, in the case of anyone who has lived with [folks] from NorCal, that you are an honorary resident). As the subtle innuendoes of the word can only be understood by absorption, one must experience and be engulfed by it (as Northern Californians are from birth) to truly understand when its usage is appropriate. Hella is a word. It's a symbol. It's a way of life. (Urban Dictionary, n.d.)

The H.E.L.L.A. group is composed of twelve educators of color who teach in a variety of settings such as K-12 schools to juvenile halls, and in a variety of roles such as classroom teachers to English Learner specialists. In addition to the professional diversity, the group is also diverse in terms of race, sexuality, age, language and life experiences, which adds a beautiful mix of perspectives at each monthly meeting. Our overarching goal is to build on the leadership strengths, critical analyses, intersectional experiences/*testimonios*, and pedagogical creativity of social justice classroom and community based educators of color. More specifically, this critical learning space was designed to explore how Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework can be used to empower us as teachers of color to identify the strengths and assets we bring to the profession, while also planning and workshopping ideas on how to teach about and nurture these capitals in our practice and personal lives. Yosso's framework builds on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital which he argues positions the White, middle class culture as the "norm," wherein cultural capital refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society in order to be successful. Yosso uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) to argue that there are various forms of cultural capital that marginalized groups possess which are not recognized or valued within the dominant capital framework, including aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005, p. 78-81). This framework allowed us to reflect on our own cultural capital as intersectionally diverse educators of color and also work with one another to workshop lessons and strategies to incorporate this framework in our practice.

Collective *Testimonio* (Sánchez, 2009) as a methodology for Critical Professional Development (CPD) within social justice grassroots teacher networks and coalitions can be actualized in the form of teacher inquiry groups (Kohli, Picower, Martínez, & Ortiz, 2015). Some of the key attributes that make these CPD groups and learning spaces so necessary and effective is the sense of solidarity, love, community, shared experiences, political education, and critical dialogue that leads to action and agency in and out of classrooms (Kohli et al., 2015). Another important aspect is its anti-hierarchical element that resists the common model of professional development, wherein individuals who are often arbitrarily deemed as experts "train" teachers even when they might be disconnected from the communities and contexts that teachers work in (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Kohli et al., 2015). The incorporation of *testimonios* in our group has historically been used to build solidarity among women of color

(Anzaldúa, 1990) and although our group is composed of a mixture of multi-age, cis-gender, transgender, and gender nonconforming classroom and community educators, we believed that *testimonio* could also serve as a tool in our CPD space to build solidarity and unity among us. *Testimonio* as a method engages storytellers and witnesses in critical reflections about our racialized lived experiences as a means to bring about awareness and possible change through consciousness-raising about our collective struggles and resistance. When teachers of color testify and theorize our lived experiences navigating the oppressive systems that we are committed to transforming in an era of neoliberalism, neocolonialism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other inequitable relations, it serves as a tool of resistance, love, and comradery.

In *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) and, more recently, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Latina Feminist Group, 2001) written by Chicanas and Latinas, women of color have demonstrated the power behind the telling of *testimonio* as a method that exposes injustices and disrupts silence. Sánchez (2009) describes a participatory action research project she was involved in, and her group's use of collective *testimonio* as a process for *homemade theory* making or what Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) called *conocimientos*. She quotes Aurora Levins Morales in *Telling to live: Latina feminist testimonios* (2001):

My thinking grew directly out of listening to my own discomforts, finding out who shared them, who validated them, and in exchanging stories about common experiences, finding patterns, systems, explanations of how and why things happened. This is the central process of consciousness raising, of collective *testimonio*. This is how homemade theory happens (p. 87).

When educators of color come together across generations, geographic locations, and intersectional identities to listen to our *collective testimonio* and to participate in our *homemade theory* by reflecting on and sharing our own stories, we find shared meanings, patterns, and ways that we enact and embody resistance and love as radical practices of social justice. This practice also develops an ethic of collective self-care as it opens up a space for healing and love. Cruz (2012) describes her use of *testimonio* as a teacher in her classroom and names it a “methodology of travel” that positions audience members for self-reflection. She grounds her work in the theoretical work of Lugones (1987) which states that to fully become subjects to one another we must travel with playfulness and loving perception to each other's worlds. Cruz (2012) draws important connections between *testimonio*, listening with love, being wholly

“present...and vulnerable in a way that allows travel” and “profound empathy” (p. 468). She frames this combination of skills as “necessary to move forward social justice work” (Cruz, 2012, p. 468).

H.E.L.L.A. Educators of color embarked on this journey by writing our own *testimonios* and traveling to each other’s worlds with love and solidarity. We connected with one another’s stories and found collective themes among us, which validated our stories and empowered us to share them. We hope to allow readers to also travel with us as you engage in deep, reflective, and powerful storytelling that bridges our lived experiences to theory, love, healing, and transformative praxis in teacher professional development.

### **Katina Castillo’s Testimonio**

It’s hard to reflect on myself as an educator of color, particularly for system involved, system tracked, system attacked youth on the margins of society. Because they always teach me so much—about humility, about gratitude, about perseverance, about faith—and with only short-term interactions visiting their class, youth program, or controlled environment, I can only hope the glimmer in their eyes that sparks as they hear the historical overview of what brought us to this point—of social disparity, inequity, monoculturism, and mass incarceration—will stay with them far beyond our brief encounters.

I cash in on my Linguistic Capital to connect with street-organized, street-affiliated young people to share knowledge and complex analyses of the systems out to get them (from school houses to jail houses and foster care) by “*keepin it 100*,” speaking colloquially in the terms and phrases that as urban young POC we have come to utilize as a way of identifying when “*game recognizes game*.” My linguistic capital spans that of the youth I’ve trained in social justice organizing, and my own mixed-ethnic background. My mother was born and raised in the Mission of San Francisco and my father in Detroit, two U.S.-born mixed-Latinos heavily influenced by Black music and culture in the 50s, 60s and 70s. We spoke Soul in my house, and listened to jazz, funk, hip-hop, and Salsa on Saturday nights.

Their working-class parents came from Nicaragua, El Salvador, México, and Greece to root down in the belly of Empire as early as the 30s and 40s. Although my Mexican grandfather didn’t pass Spanish down to my dad after having been prohibited from speaking it in Texas public schools, I had heard enough of my mom’s phone conversations with my grandmother to apply a perfect accent to the language when I learned it in high school and college. So Black

kids, Latino immigrant youth, Native, and even poor Whites, can connect with me on a linguistic tip—it's the vernacular of struggle, of "*I ain't no square*" or no punk, of "*I feel you.*" When I review U.S. history from Native genocide and boarding schools to African slavery and Jim Crow to Operation Wetback and illegalization of Spanish to Japanese internment and Foster Care trains, all the way up to Three Strikes, gang injunctions and private prisons, young people of color and poor youth who have all in one way or another been impacted by these hostile policies, either directly or via familial experience, are able to make the connections, see the forest from the trees, and follow the arc of historic colonial oppression that has created the suffering conditions which surround them because I skip the theories and academic rhetoric and just give it to them straight. They reflect on their great grandparents struggles as intergenerational trauma, in the same way that I make sense of my family dysfunction by looking back on the conditions we were forced into 5 plus generations ago—pushed off land and into industrial centers and taught to hate everything we once were. When we close a session with Assata's chant regarding Our Duty, even if they have only just heard of who she is, they understand the depth of her urgent call to action, and they wit it.

I acknowledge our Cultural Wealth as a given, and encourage young people to look toward not those that "made it" in their families/communities in the conventional sense i.e., by smooth assimilation and nearly arriving to Whiteness in a social sense (although never, ever making it), but specifically toward those who "fell" through the cracks at some point in their lives, similarly to the ways in which they might be struggling now, and were able to pick themselves up each time the System pushed them down. Or to those who resisted the dominant narrative that told them to be ashamed of themselves—our loved ones formerly incarcerated, recovered addicts, formerly homeless, survivors of violence, undocumented, differently-abled learners, Queer and non-conforming, etc. I have found that honoring and promoting these non-traditional success stories, oftentimes the former black sheep of families and communities, as the real heroes, success stories, trusted guides and mentors, not only broaden young people's perspective of their hood/*barrio* resources who could be helpful to them in navigating a societal infrastructure never intended to serve them, but to give them full permission to love these members of their *familias*—blood or chosen—without shame or explanation, and to more deeply love themselves for all the shadow parts of themselves and their stories that they've been able to move through, constantly pushing toward the Light of a new day.

Personally, I'm not inspired by my grandmother's success in completing 20 plus years of work as cafeteria staff for San Francisco General Hospital or my grandfather's slow but steady climb in the furniture industry. I commend them for making a life for themselves, but their conformity to the AmeriKKKan way proliferated the internalized racism that had begun for them in U.S. Marine and Navy Seal-occupied Central America. They became materialistic, ruined their health with American food, and alcohol to numb the painful void of their average lives, beat and neglected their children while dressing them in the finest American fashion they could afford, and all but denied their cultural history leaving no legacy of pride for me or my sister. I'm more impressed and grateful that both my parents were rebellious hippies that supported the Black Panther Party, were artists and bicycle riders and self-taught nutritionists, that were careful to buy us brown dolls, had us watch *The Color Purple*, and reclaimed our identity as descendants of *los Maya*.

For me, Aspirational and Resistance Capital go hand in hand for people who have been wounded and are ready to heal and reclaim their dignity and value. When I help young people have a better understanding of the oppositional history in which most systems we and our families interface with have been built, and the very technical ways in which these systems continue to overtly and covertly try to negate our value, dignity, and basic human rights, they embrace this history as proof that their struggle is not their fault and yet entirely within their power to overcome, and to me this is the most aspirational and resistant response one could have. They may not necessarily aspire to graduate from a university, and they may not be moved to resist through direct action and organizing, but they do aspire to love themselves and their histories for all its laughter and tears, and to make a better way for their people—and nothing could be more resistant to the imperialist agenda than that. Like my elders have taught me, *la cultura cura*, and the shared values and traditions of our cultures prior to colonization are the greatest tools we have to take back our freedom.

### **Nick Easter's Testimonio**

Ask my mom to tell one of her favorite stories of me as a child, and she'll probably mention the time that I screamed, "Fight the Power!" at a White lady in the grocery store. Now I can't say that I was all that socially aware at the age of four but what I can tell you is that for better or worse, I was raised on the likes of Public Enemy and Tupac. So I guess the seeds to a combative spirit were planted well before I could even read. Anyhow, the lady smiled and



laughed like, “oh, how cute.” A microcosm of her people’s position. What a privilege it must be to not be the punch line of America’s sick joke. By the time I finished elementary school, I had many reminders of my place in society. It was only the beginning of the continuous attacks on my identity. From my kindergarten days when they tried to shove me in a special education class for being shy even though I could read better than most students... To my fourth grade teacher who told me not to speak out or else I’d end up like Malcolm X (shot dead). Or the time I got called *Nigger* in the 6th grade and was yelled at by a White teacher after reporting what was said to me. As a matter of fact, he reprimanded me with, “I have a problem with YOU for using that word!” I guess I should have lowered my head and said “sorry massa” and got on with my day. Then there was that time in high school at a business competition in SoCal where my bro and I presented a marketing campaign to a judge who ignored us the entire time. We’re sitting face to face with this guy, and he’s looking to the side and even turned his neck to look behind him as we presented our pitch. He did happen to leave some very valuable feedback on the evaluation: “*earrings are distracting.*” I knew we weren’t supposed to be at that conference, and they made sure that I knew it even though I mastered enough of their linguistic capital to earn various ribbons on the written exams. I mean there’s also the micro-attacks like being asked to read the Black dude’s lines in Huck Finn during class or being the only one in my group that was handed a cue card to read from instead of my own prepared slides for our group presentations because the Black dude wasn’t going to have anything prepared, right? Like, how is he even in Honor’s Lit? Best believe I read my own damn slides! So many reminders of my place in society during my K-12 years, man. I mean it even followed me to my first job at the Finish Line shoe store. I would be in full uniform with a nametag and still be asked if I really worked there or, when they would mistake me with my bro, Tyronne. Yes, we were both Black, but it was like comparing Will Smith and Idris Alba. By the time I was done with K-12 schooling, I had enough material for about twelve greatest hits albums and a couple of novels about racism. The crazy part is that as forward thinking as I thought I was, I had not yet developed the lenses to begin understanding the complexity of the attacks I had faced. But I knew I was mad.

From day one at San José State, I was introduced to higher level struggle. My classes were on lay-away, and I had a few weeks to pay before they were dropped. I had no idea what was going on with my financial aid or how it worked. Of course, when I went to the financial aid office, I left feeling lost, confused, and overwhelmed. This was not my realm and no one

seemed eager to allow me to join. By the grace of God, on the way to my dorm, I crossed paths with two older Black students who sought me out in a sea of White. They introduced themselves and then proceeded to share with me some statistics about the Black male survival rate at the school. I cannot remember the numbers but the odds were clearly against me in terms of graduating so if I were to take a semester off, forget about it, Black males hardly ever come back. But these brothas genuinely asked to see how I was doing. I told them about my financial aid situation and one of them directed me to another Black lady who worked in the financial aid office. Upon meeting her, there was an unspoken but felt truth of, *in order to survive, we have to look out for each other with whatever resources and knowledge we have*. She got me the answers I needed and allowed me to save my classes, but I still carried the feeling of, *I'm not really supposed to be here*, but it motivated me to stay in spite... In spite of the expectations of my classmates shocked to see me score high on assignments; in spite of all the times I was asked if I had just finished smoking; in spite of numerous battles with the financial aid office that shut off my meal plan and tried to starve me off campus. I was so prideful, but eventually I did fall. The final straw was being thrown off a bus for absolutely nothing. In fact, I was sleeping. I still don't know what it was that I was doing wrong, but I woke up to five police cars waiting at the Great Mall transit stop. I called my mom who repeatedly told me to calm down because she knew all too well how this could end up. After the ordeal, they finally let us go and luckily, a Black bus driver called up to the BART to have the train wait for us since it was one of the last departures. During that same time, I had the audacity to also have personal struggles with finances, an unhealthy relationship, and overall uncertainty. Things were snowballing and while sitting on BART, I painfully decided to withdraw from my second semester. Next thing I knew, I was working part-time in a warehouse when all the while my family was thinking I was in school. Some days, I would go to my empty apartment that I could barely afford even with roommates and after hours of cleaning an already spotless place with no furniture, I would just lay on my back on the carpet in silence. The hurt was deafening. I would just lay there and cry on mute. Thinking about my addition to the statistics they told me about. I reached a point through listening to Lupe Fiasco's Food and Liquor album and gravitated to the line, "Struggle... Another sign that God loves you." I won't say that the song alone brought me back, but I began to cling to artists who were hella unapologetically Black and proud. Though secular, I know God finds us where we're at and delivers messages of hope or whatever we may need. I can't say my flame was back, but I had enough of a flicker to get up and walk again. By faith, I quit my

job, enrolled back in school, changed my major to African American Studies and defied the seen and unseen enemy. I had mentors/professors who acted as second parents. Dr. Milner and Dr. Wilson did just as much “raising” as teaching. Dr. Milner literally lectured us about punctuality, attire, and how to carry ourselves. Sometimes, he made you want to cry with just the thought of disappointing him. He was like a father, and we loved him. And love is what brought me back. Anger and rage, though not absent, was not enough to allow me to sustain. Alone, it damn near killed me. I was so busy with attacks that I never really took the time to love myself. When I fell, on the way up I began to discover a new love for me and my people. I still had multiple run-ins with racial profiling from the police and the daily micro racist attacks, but I just couldn’t let them win. I do still wonder though, can we truly “fight the power” if we’re still playing by their rules?

### **Farima Pour-Khorshid’s Testimonio**

I am the daughter of a Muslim, Iranian man and a Catholic, Nicaraguan woman that both immigrated to California because of U.S. imperialism and war. My parents fell in love, in spite of the opposition from their families for dating outside of their race and religion, which led them both to be disowned for some time. Their radical love also inspired the births of three beautiful biracial children. Five months after my baby brother was born, my father was murdered and my mother was left to care for three children in a country where she was still read as “illegal” by Eurocentric standards any time she’d have the audacity to speak her broken English in her Nicaraguan-Creole accent. I grew to hate the term “broken English” I’ve always loved her accent, to this day it gives me life and makes me feel *whole* every time she speaks to me in Spanish, English, or the beautiful creative mixture of Spanglish with a touch of Creole. Growing up, however, I felt torn between multiple worlds. I can remember when people would tease me about looking middle-eastern; being read as Iranian seemed to be synonymous with alien in my surroundings. My bonds with Iranian relatives were painful because they mostly only spoke Farsi, and I constantly carried guilt for learning my mother’s language but not my father’s; I felt like I let him down. Even my Spanish felt crippled each time my teachers corrected me with their cold, stale standard Spanish accents and vocabulary in classes. The confusion drove me crazy as I tried navigating English Learner classes for most of my schooling as a child. Language, in several ways compounded my identity development. I felt that because I couldn’t speak Farsi I was not Iranian enough, and I felt disconnected to my father’s family and culture as a result.

Likewise, because I could not speak Spanish well enough, I didn't feel very Latina either. And, according to the public education system, apparently my English didn't fit their criteria to be placed in non-ELL classes, so I didn't feel very "American" either. This confusion and pain followed me throughout my K-12 academic experience. At one point, I refused to identify myself by my last name or by my parents' ethnicities because I grew tired and stressed by the labels that inevitably led to internalized racism. I can remember praying and asking God to lighten my skin, shrink my nose, and to somehow make me look and sound more "American," though I wasn't quite sure what that even meant.

I have vivid memories of my academic struggles and fears that I would not graduate high school. I never thought I would go to college. During my senior year, however, a Latina professor from a local university came to recruit seniors who might be interested in becoming bilingual teachers since there was such a severe shortage in California. Meeting her changed my life. Somehow, she convinced me that I was not only capable of becoming a bilingual teacher but that I was also desperately needed in the profession. Just like that, my multicultural and bilingual background, which had triggered deep identity struggles throughout my adolescence, were suddenly assets that would help me garner funding and support for college. Through her program I began volunteering in schools in my neighborhood. I started to understand how critical it was to serve in my own community by becoming an advocate for students like me; I was determined to become the kind of teacher I always wished I could've had, unapologetically utilizing all of my complex multicultural and Bay Area swag that I embody. Becoming an educator became my life's purpose and the belief that I could become an agent of change and potentially impact the lives of students and families in my community made me feel a sense of empowerment I had never felt before...until I was quickly caged by the bars of our education system.

My first few years of teaching felt like a *novela*, only the drama was way too real. Upon finishing my credential, I was immediately hired late into the school year because there was an overflow of ELL kindergarteners at the school, so I was given the staff lounge as a classroom. I had very few materials or books, I racked up hundreds of dollars on my credit card buying classroom materials, and I'd always stay hella late working in my classroom until the janitor would finally kick me out. I wanted so badly to make the staff lounge look somewhat like a real classroom for my babies. One day during a read-aloud I glanced at the window and realized my car was getting broken into in the school parking lot, so I quickly dialed 911 while trying to

remain calm for my kindergarteners. I remember exhaling deeply that night as tears flowed down my face, thinking that if I could make it through the rest of that year, then I knew I could make it through *any* year.

My second year teaching, I had to move into a brand new school, so while I was ecstatic that I was no longer teaching in a staff lounge, I was given a Kindergarten/First grade combination Dual Immersion classroom. I felt completely lost in terms of how to work the percentages of English/Spanish out pedagogically, especially considering that some of my students were on a kindergarten half-day schedule with a specific percentage of Spanish instruction, and the others were on a full-day first grade schedule with a different percentage. I thugged it out, because I was fearful that the administration would confuse my need for support with incompetence. I always carried the fear of being judged as a poor brown girl from the hood that wasn't smart enough to figure things out herself. I decided that instead, I would reach out to my students' parents, who for me, felt like my *tias* every time I would talk with them before and after school. One day I asked some of the mothers if they wanted to volunteer in our class since I knew many of them were not working because they were undocumented. The mothers became like honorary teachers in our class, and the love we all shared fed my spirit through the madness, well, that *and* the tamales, flan, pupusas and so many other foods from their countries of origin that they'd always bring me.

That year California's budget cuts and massive teacher layoffs resembled the evictions, displacement, and gentrification in the Bay Area today. When I received my pink slip, I felt so devalued by my school district especially because I was a product of it. I went to elementary, middle, and high school within this school district, and I even went to junior college and graduate school in my community, too, but that didn't matter. The lay-offs were based on my seniority—I was a second year teacher, so I was disposable. I wept in my classroom like someone had died. I didn't know how I was going to tell my students and families that I would not be coming back the next year. When I did finally tell them, their rage touched my heart. Some of the parents organized and brought their kids to the school board meeting and spoke out against my pink slip advocating for my rehiring. I felt so humbled and empowered by these parents and their kids, *our* kids, right by our side holding protest signs, some that had their tiny hand prints, their large shaky backward-written letters and colorful drawings of me smiling next to them. The same parents that were often silenced, disregarded, and disrespected in this country were now unapologetically advocating for me in their *vibrant* English, because their

words were far from sounding “broken”. It was their love and courage that reminded me of why I couldn’t quit. That radical love is what pushed me to get back up, wipe my tears and keep fighting. Although I didn’t get hired back at that school the next year, I’m still teaching in the community that I belong in, despite the powers that be which almost pushed me out. I’m here to stay, and I vow to inspire more students of color like me to experience the gift and power of teaching in their own communities, too.

### **Our Collective *Testimonio***

Each *testimonio* shared within our Critical Professional Development (CPD) space sparked deep emotions and created a sense of unity, support, and compassion in ways that allowed us each to travel to each other’s worlds with playfulness and loving perception (Lugones, 1987). While there were many other *testimonios* shared among our group, these three serve as examples of the deep, raw, painful, and empowering racialized experiences we carry as educators of color. Through sharing our individual *testimonios*, each of us identified the various forms of cultural capital in our collective *testimonio*. For example, each of us experienced structural racism and maintained aspirational capital to thrive within inequitable systems and institutions, despite the obstacles and barriers. From Katina’s work with, “system involved, system tracked, system attacked youth on the margins of society,” to Nick’s experiences navigating K-12 schooling and college with racist educators and peers, as well as racial profiling by police, all the while trying to survive economic and academic hardships to thrive and graduate; to Farima’s experiences being pushed out of the profession despite the bilingual teacher shortage within a predominantly Latina/o, low-income, underserved public school district in her own community. Even in the face of systemic injustices that disproportionately impact people of color, all of us aspired to overcome these obstacles by utilizing our community cultural wealth, individually and collectively. The critical dialogue that was sparked by our *testimonios* led us to the realization that as educators of color, we also possess transformative resistant capital because we embody the first-hand knowledge of the structures of racism and the motivation to transform such oppressive structures (Freire, 1970; Pizarro, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Yosso, 2005). Our lived experiences shaped by structural oppression led us to draw on our community cultural capital to take different forms of action in order to resist and transform the spaces we operate in.

Our H.E.L.L.A Educators of Color study group intentionally sought to disrupt the “professional” in professional development because as we learned about critical theories, we unapologetically brought our whole selves and all of the intersections of our identities, all of our traumas with systemic and internalized racism, and all of our dreams and aspirations that dismantle White Supremacy, to engage in collective healing while reimagining what education *can* be. As we engaged in personal storytelling and critical dialogue, we were also workshopping lessons and plans to manifest our visions and commitments to social justice in our practice. As educators of color committed to the radical notion that education can serve as a tool for liberation, we believe that we must create the spaces we need to empower ourselves, to sustain ourselves, to heal ourselves in solidarity with others through the reflexive praxis necessary to build collectively in love. We created the kind of professional development space that we needed and that we cannot get within institutions. This space allowed us to share our fears and tears, our anger and love-uncensored and in community with other people of color that we have built relationships with. Our space is anti-hierarchical and allows for each of us to share our expertise while learning that critical academic theory is just as important as our collective homemade theories (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2000). In our space, our lived experiences carry power, they inform our perspectives when we feel tensions with oppressive educational practices, curricula, standards, and reforms and they remind us of why they are poisonous to our collective spirit. Our stories remind us that we are not alone. Our stories are healing, empowering and resurrecting. Our stories matter.

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