

## ***Testimoniando* en Nepantla: Using *Testimonio* as a Pedagogical Tool for Exploring Embodied Literacies and Bilingualism**

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**ABSTRACT:** This research study examines the use of *testimonio*, a narrative of marginalization, in a third grade language arts classroom. Through a Chicana/Latina feminist framework, which prioritizes theorizing from the body, the authors explore the process of sharing and witnessing *testimonio* as an embodied literacy practice. Data sources for this qualitative case study consist of written work, oral recordings, and interviews at the end of the data collection period. Through data analysis, students' embodied knowledge was evident in their reading and writing of *testimonio*. The findings indicate that emergent bilingual Latina/o students found themselves within a contradictory yet transformative space as they made sense of the politics of bilingualism alongside their bilingual identities. In creating a space for students to reflect and contemplate their lives between worlds, they were able to discuss painful experiences and reframe them towards transformative ends. As such, *testimoniando*, the process of sharing the narratives, became a pedagogical tool to identify *nepantla*, the in-between space, where students negotiated the productive tensions of their language learning processes.

**Key words:** Embodied Literacies, *Testimonio*, Emergent Bilinguals, Nepantla, Latina/o



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While demographic shifts and accountability requirements have resulted in an increased awareness of Latina/o students' linguistic diversity and academic development in U.S. schools, Latina/o emergent bilinguals (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008) continue to be defined by labels that devalue the skills and knowledge they possess in their home languages (García, 2009). Labels such as English language learner (ELL) and limited English proficient prioritize the English language over other forms of knowledge and categorize children solely in terms of their English proficiency (Cuero, 2009). For elementary school students, these labels and the associated measures of progress, such as standardized English language proficiency tests, often communicate to students that the linguistic knowledge they acquire outside of school is not useful for school learning and may impede their ability to perform well in school (Zacher Pandya, 2011). These perceptions influence the value that students hold for their own abilities and the knowledge of their communities.

This phenomenon also occurs in schools with bilingual programs that use students' home languages for content and literacy instruction, given that these programs also experience similar political pressures due to the accountability frameworks established through the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2003; Menken & Solorza, 2014). Regardless of the programmatic approach for using students' home languages (i.e., limited use of home language in transitional programs or primary language of instruction in two-way immersion programs), the prioritization of English and Eurocentric literacy curriculum diminishes the significance of students' home, community, and lived knowledge for learning (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Faltis, 2013; Hornberger & Link, 2012). In other words, even when the intent of the program is for students to develop bilingualism and biliteracy, the implementation of the program and curriculum may be subtractive (Valenzuela, 1999) in nature. This results in limiting students' opportunities to tap into and engage their embodied knowledge—the literacies, feelings and understandings that they carry within themselves, and are shaped by, and that inform their experiences, relationships, and identities as well as the performance of those identities (Branscombe &

Schneider, 2013; Hughes-Decatur, 2011; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012).

Scholars have found that bilingual students utilize a range of language practices outside of school, some that are co-constructed with family members and essential for navigating daily life (González et al., 1995; Orellana, 2009). These complex ways that cultural and linguistic knowledge is shared may surpass school-based expectations for literacy (Orellana, 2009). Hybrid spaces (Guitérrez et al., 1999) enable the use of multiple language varieties and languages as meditational tools for academic work and opportunities for enacting agency (García & Gaddes, 2012). Classroom instruction that promotes students' use of bilingual language practices or translanguaging (García, 2009) facilitates students' accessing of their full repertoires of knowledge for literacy learning (Hornberger & Link, 2012; Velasco & García, 2014). In this article, we discuss a qualitative project that builds on these studies to examine Latina/o emergent bilingual students' participation in a writing unit that enabled them to engage their cultural and linguistic resources.

This view of language as dynamic and responsive pushes against traditional binaries of languages, cultures, and identities as separate entities (Broomaert, 2013) allowing for reconceptualization of literacy instruction. We seek to explore deeper understandings of language and identity through *testimonio*, a narrative of marginalization, and how this genre enabled the students to access their embodied literacies and disrupt dominant ideologies (e.g., English-centered, English as superior) regarding the Spanish language and literacy learning. Dominant ideologies position the English language as the priority for emergent bilinguals (Bartolomé, 2008) and are maintained through school language policies and practices (Yosso, 2005; Fránquiz, Salazar, & DeNicolò, 2011).

*Testimonio*, a genre that emerged in Latin America, can be defined as personal accounts of struggle that are shared to inform, indicate solidarity, or to shed light on oppression (Elenes, 2000; Latina Feminist Group, 2001). For Elenes (2013), *testimonio* is an "embodied narrative" (p. 137), told or written by individuals who have experienced oppression and

seek to activate change through communicating their *testimonio* to a wider audience. *Testimoniando*, the process of sharing one's *testimonio*, can involve powerful healing through the collective identification that emerges when struggles are voiced to those with a shared understanding (Elenes, 2013; Pérez Huber, 2009). This process can also function as a call to action through bringing awareness of oppression to those who do not share a lived or experiential understanding.

In the educational research literature, Chicana/Latina<sup>1</sup> feminist scholars have employed *testimonio* as an instrument for vocalizing experiences of marginalization and injustice in higher education (Elenes, 2000, 2013; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Perez Huber, 2009) to bring forth the voices of bilingual teachers (Prieto & Villenas, 2012) and highlight transformative instructional practices that highlight the knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Fránquiz, Salazar, & DeNicolo, 2011). Additionally, the need for further research on *testimonios* in education has been expressed, particularly the need to understand the potential for language arts classrooms at the elementary level (Saavedra, 2011).

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the ways that *testimonio* functioned as a decolonial method (Carillo et al., 2010; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012) in a language arts classroom with emergent bilingual students. This study extends the work of Chicana/Latina feminist scholars by exploring the possibilities of *testimonio* to counter the ideological messages that privilege English for demonstrating knowledge and learning at the elementary level. In the following section, we discuss the frameworks that we utilized to explore *testimonios* as an instructional practice that disrupts a deficit perspective regarding language and learning and engages students' embodied literacies across their developing languages.

### Theoretical Framework

We draw on Chicana/Latina feminist theories and methodological approaches as a lens to examine the ways that *testimonio* functions as a pedagogical tool to engage students' embodied literacies. Chicana/Latina feminist scholarship has challenged the perspectives and ideologies of Eurocentric American culture by highlighting other[ed] sites and processes of knowledge production such as the brown body and the home (Cruz, 2001; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Saavedra, 2011; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). Within the institution of education, the theories and experiences of those in power have been privileged and legitimized while other[ed] epistemologies and theoretical frames have been devalued, dismissed, and silenced. As such, Chicana/Latina feminists have theorized that embodied knowledge is produced and shared among the bodies and generations of women of color to understand, critique, and intervene in the schooling of Latina/o students. Chicana/Latina feminist theoretical perspectives in education interrogate ways that Eurocentrism maintains dominant, oppressive ideologies embedded in schools and continues to position marginalized students in deficit ways (Delgado Bernal, 1998; 2002; Saavedra, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Towards transformative ends, Chicana/Latina feminist theories in education work to reposition the knowledge of Chicano/a/Latina/o students by connecting these marginalized ways of knowing to the well-developed systems of historical and community knowledge that they possess.

*Testimonio* strongly aligns with the Chicana feminist tradition of theorizing from the body, from the experiences, memories, familial history, and actions to break silences and name injustices to motivate social change (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). We understand the process of giving *testimonio*, called *testimoniando*, as an embodied literacy practice that disrupts the notion of the mind-body split, and instead engages what Lara (2002) has conceptualized as the bodymindspirit. The genre is most notably recognized for its roots in Latin America, particularly for its use in documenting and voicing experiences of

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<sup>1</sup>The term Chicana/Latina encompasses the scholarly contributions that emerged from Chicana feminist work while also recognizing the relevance and connection with Latinas (Villenas et al., 2006).

people who have faced marginalization, persecution, and oppression by governments and sociopolitical forces (Burgos-Debray, 1984). *Testimonio* continues to be framed within sociopolitical contexts fueled by urgency, resistance, and survival to address institutional forces that sustain marginalization (Beverly, 2005).

Different from traditional narrative, life stories, or autobiography, *testimonio* calls for collective action through the voicing of personal struggles situated within larger sociopolitical contexts that transcend time, place, and location (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Many Chicana feminist scholars have argued that this genre provides an opportunity to “articulate and disseminate” political positions held in response to intersecting oppressions (Elenes, 2000, p. 106). *Testimonio* becomes a vehicle to construct and share knowledge across generations, revealing the epistemological maps of Chicanas/Latinas (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). *Testimonio*, thus, is a practice of knowledge production where the individual “I” stands for the collective “we” (Elenes, 2000, p. 111).

Much of the work of Chicana/Latina feminist scholars has created a space for *testimonio* to be conceptualized both pedagogically and methodologically to bring forth the voices of Latinas, Chicanas, children, queer people, people of color, and other marginalized groups (Benmayor 2012; Cruz, 2012; Figueroa, 2013; Pérez Huber, 2009; Saavedra, 2011). For example, Figueroa (2013) used *testimonio* with undocumented, migrant mothers living in the United States to speak to the ways in which these women navigated hostile, anti-immigrant discourses related to the legal system. *Testimonios*, for these women, as mothers of mixed status families, served as a way to strategically participate in a legal system that denied them human and citizenship rights. Cruz’s (2012) work with LGBTQ youth is another example of the possibilities of *testimonio* within

education. Working with young people in community education programs within alternative schools in Los Angeles, she explains how *testimonio* became a necessary tool in the understanding of everyday experiences in relation to the sociopolitical contexts in which these students were living. Although these studies on *testimonio* focus on older youth and adults, Saavedra (2011) specifically calls for education scholars to consider *testimonio* for elementary aged children arguing that children are continuously placed at the margins, and that children of color, thus, “are the ultimate subalterns” (Saavedra, 2011, p. 267). These scholars have shown the possibilities of *testimonio* for the teaching and learning of young people, through a focus on the

narratives and voices of those who have been silenced and ignored.

## Nepantla

Central to our analysis of *testimonio* as an embodied literacy practice is Anzaldúa’s (2002; 1987/2007) conceptualization of *nepantla*—the Nahuatl word meaning “in-between space” (Keating, 2006, p. 9)—to reflect on the ways that those living in the margins shift between liminal spaces, ideologies, and cultures. *Nepantla*, thus, can be understood as a transitional and transformative space where those living on the margins are positioned and, thus, are open to experience multiple perspectives and forms of knowledge. Through this positioning, various ways of knowing come into conflict, and we begin to question the “basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from [our] family, [our] education, and [our] different cultures” (p. 558). We develop a new sense of awareness and begin to “see through” the competing ideologies that surround us (p. 559). Anzaldúa (2002) explains that here is where we are “torn between ways,” (p. 558)—stretched beyond our own epistemologies to make sense of ourselves and what we know (Burciaga, 2010). *Nepantla*, then, becomes a

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space of possibility where we transition and shift as we move towards consciousness.

Nepantla is a space that we inhabit in the process of being and becoming that allows for both self-reflection and *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2002)—a shift in consciousness; our worldviews are shattered and we are left open to make sense of competing cultures and belief systems. Keating (2006) has posited that Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of nepantla can be thought of as a site for dis-identification and transformation where “we dis-identify with existing beliefs, social structures, and models of identity; [and] by doing so we are able to transform these existing conditions” (p. 9). In other words, our deep reflections move us along through a journey towards self-awareness, enabling us to maintain what is useful and discard what is problematic. Due to this, nepantla can be a painful and messy space. For marginalized identities and bodies, it is a liminal space used to negotiate competing cultures, borders, histories, and realities—physical, lived, created, and imagined. In considering the complex experiences of Latina/o students in U.S. schools, often emergent bilinguals with immigrant familial histories, nepantla becomes a theoretical tool for examining the painful, yet often transformative tensions that provide them with a critical awareness of their schooling.

### Method

This qualitative study explored the use of *testimonio* in a third grade language arts class and was part of a collective case study (Stake, 1995) examining bilingual programs and instructional practices in the Midwestern region of the United States. The study took place in the spring of the 2010-2011 academic year at Planas Elementary (all names and locations are pseudonyms), the school that housed the only bilingual program in the mid-sized district for students who were identified as English learners and spoke Spanish. At the time of the study, 237 students were enrolled at Planas, 46.8 percent identified as Latina/o, 35.9 percent African American, 8 percent Asian, 5.1 percent European American or White, and 4.2 percent identified as representing two or more groups. The percentage of students identified as “limited English proficient” was 40.5 percent.

The transitional bilingual education (TBE) program (Torres-Guzman & Gomez, 2009) at Planas Elementary had evolved over the years and several of the bilingual teachers had helped raise awareness in the community regarding the benefits of native language instruction for students’ academic development. The (TBE) program was considered a late-exit model. This meant that beginning in kindergarten students received 80 percent of instruction in Spanish. Spanish was the language of instruction for all core content areas; art, gym, and music classes were taught in English. The bilingual teachers also provided additional English as a second language support in the classroom, most frequently by teaching one of the academic subjects in English, although this varied based on the grade level and teacher. Under this TBE program model, the percentage of English instruction was to increase each year and in the third grade, students were expected to have approximately 30 percent of their instruction in English. Due to many factors associated with the accountability framework set forth by NCLB, the program model shifted in the fall of 2010 when Lydia Perales, the third grade bilingual teacher, was directed to conduct language arts instruction solely in English.

### Participants

Lydia Perales, the third grade teacher, had taught fifth grade for several years prior to teaching third grade. She came to the United States as an adult from South America and learned English as a second language. She obtained her Master’s in Education and bilingual endorsement while teaching in the bilingual program and was very committed to ensuring that students had access to Spanish language instruction. The shift in the program model to all-English instruction was one of the reasons why Lydia was interested in identifying instructional approaches that would allow her to provide students with learning experiences that were grounded in and connected to what they knew. She felt the writing unit on memoir lent itself to exploring ways for students to reflect on their linguistic knowledge and bicultural identities.

There were 19 students in the third grade class in the 2010-2011 academic year, and most of them had been in the bilingual program since kindergarten. The majority of the students (18) were of Mexican descent and self-identified as Mexican or Mexican American,

and one student was of Guatemalan descent. Out of the 19 students, 14 participated in the research study, nine girls and five boys. All of the study participants were of Mexican descent, emergent bilinguals, with a range of English language proficiency levels and use of Spanish and English outside of school. While only 14 students participated in the study, all of the students in the third grade class received the same instruction across the writing unit.

### Researcher Positionality

Chicana/Latina feminist methodologies highlight the role of cultural intuition in research (Delgado Bernal, 1998) while also questioning positivistic approaches to data collection that position study participants as subjects understood only through the eyes of the researchers. As researchers, we brought into the research project our own subjectivities, lenses, and histories that shaped and reshaped the ways we looked at the *testimonio* unit, language acquisition, and learning in this third grade classroom. Chicana/Latina scholars continue to resist the binary of the insider/outsider, recognizing a multiplicity and complexity in identities and positions in relation to various institutions, like education (Tellez, 2005; Villenas, 1996).

While we both identify as Latinas, our histories differ in many ways from one another and from the participants in the study but inform our sense-making of language learning and schooling. As a Brazilian American and former bilingual teacher, Christina was aware of the differences between her family's immigration stories, schooling experiences, and language learning and those of the students in Lydia's third grade classroom. She had worked with the bilingual program for several years prior to conducting the study, and that provided her with insight into the complexity of teaching and learning at the school. While Mónica identifies as Chicana and shared many cultural practices with the student participants in the study, her experiences of being third generation and navigating White suburban schools with little to no cultural and linguistic diversity varied greatly from the transitional bilingual program at Planas. Our lived and professional understandings of bilingualism and on-going reflection contributed to the overall study.

### Data Sources and Analysis

To understand the ways that *testimonio* functioned as a pedagogical tool to disrupt deficit ideologies surrounding the students' linguistic and cultural knowledge, ethnographic methods were used for data collection. We documented the students' engagement across one unit of writing instruction through participant observation that took place four times a week across the four last weeks of the school year. Each of the 16 participant observation sessions lasted from one to two hours. The majority of the sessions occurred during the last hour of the morning before the students went to lunch, which was the time allotted for writing instruction. During each visit to the classroom, our roles as participant observers varied between limited participation to higher levels of participation across the span of the research project (Spradley, 1980).

As Christina had worked closely with the bilingual program over the years, she had visited the classroom many times prior to the start of the study and was often invited to attend events at the school. Lydia's interest in collaborating was a natural continuation of this relationship. Our roles in the classroom reflected the mutual respect and understanding that had developed over time. Daily informal conversations with Lydia assisted us in reflecting on and clarifying our roles, and documenting our interpretations of the students' engagement and learning.

Data were collected in the form of observational field notes of whole class, small group, and peer discussions, artifacts in the form of student writing from across the unit as well as copies of five writings assignments from across the school year, and interviews. Audio recordings were used to capture whole group discussions regarding the writing of *testimonios* and the students' oral sharing of their *testimonios*. Informal interviews with the classroom teacher occurred prior to the start of the study and weekly during the course of the project (Spradley, 1980), and one semi-structured interview (Merriam, 2009) was conducted at the end of the *testimonio* unit. Interviews were conducted with 10 students at the end of the study. The students were selected based on their interest in talking about their learning and their availability. At the end of the following school year,

seven of the 10 students who were interviewed initially were interviewed a second time to gain a sense of their recollections of the writing unit as well as their experiences in the fourth grade. All semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

### Data Analysis

We began data analysis by reflecting on the research questions that guided the study: What are the ways that students' cultural and linguistic knowledge is evident in their oral and written *testimonios*? What are the ways students' *testimonios* reflect their embodied literacies? Reflecting on these questions led us to then look at the ways the students formed self-to-text connections with the literature and *testimonios* that were read, the languages used in writing and discussing, and the ways students engaged in the activities across the *testimonio* unit.

Next, we identified patterns within the categories that emerged and compared the patterns across data sets (i.e. interview transcriptions, student work, field notes). Thus, the guiding questions for analysis became: How do the students' oral and written *testimonios* highlight their embodied literacies? What are the ways the students' *testimonios* function as a decolonial tool? What are the productive tensions and transformative nature of *nepantla*? We then reexamined the data sets to identify the ways the students' discussions and writing challenged dominant ideologies regarding language, knowledge production, and academic writing. Content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to examine the students' written *testimonios* as described above. From this cyclical reexamination, themes were identified and the data was examined once again to ensure that the themes accurately portrayed what the students were identifying through their written and oral *testimonios* and responses.

### Facilitating a Process of *Testimoniando*

Prior to the start of the study, Lydia shared her goals for student learning across the last writing unit in the school district curricular sequence, which was memoir. She was very interested in providing her students with access to literature by Latina/o authors, modeling how to draw on their bilingualism in their

writing and providing the opportunity to learn from Latina/o university students. Christina communicated her interest in examining how *testimonios* in the language arts classroom could function as an identity text (Cummins & Early, 2011) and a tool to examine the students' embodied literacies surrounding bilingualism and learning. Montero et al. (2013) write, "Identity texts showcase the intellectual, literary, and creative talents of Aboriginal youth, and in so doing, they challenge and repudiate the devaluation of student and community identities in most mainstream schools" (p.79). Lydia discussed the objectives for the curricular unit and they outlined the focus for each of the weeks of the project. Christina then invited three Latina graduate students who had all taken a course with her as their instructor the previous semester to write *testimonios* that reflected their experiences with bilingualism and schooling to be read by Lydia's third grade students.

At the onset of the unit, the class read and discussed the autobiographical picture book, *La Mariposa*, by Francisco Jiménez (1998) to help the students understand the purpose and potential of *testimonio*. *La Mariposa* [The Butterfly] recounts the narrative of Francisco, the main character's first experiences navigating the all-English context of school and trying to understand his teacher and peers. While the students did not share the migrant experiences of the main character in the text, they identified with the struggles the main character faced while learning English and trying to fit into a new school.

After responding to *La Mariposa*, the class read and listened to the *testimonios* written by the three Chicana graduate students. The *testimonios* were written with the third grade audience in mind and addressed their experiences with bilingualism and language learning. The third grade class, along with the teacher and researchers, engaged in discussions about the *testimonios*. Similar to when reading *La Mariposa*, students were invited to form connections, identify feelings, and discuss times that they were reminded of when listening to the *testimonios*. The final part of the unit focused on the students writing their own *testimonios*. Across several class sessions, the students developed ideas and recollected memories that represented the lived truths of their experiences learning language and becoming

bilingual as Latina/o students within the context of U.S. schools. They worked in small groups to share their ideas and write the drafts of their *testimonios*.

Throughout the *testimonio* unit, the students engaged in what Pérez Huber (2009) calls *testimoniando*, or the process of sharing *testimonio*. For the third grade students, this became the process of reading, writing, sharing and witnessing *testimonio*. Across the unit, the students shared pieces of themselves with each other, inviting witnesses to their narratives, and participated in a collective and powerful process that promoted unity and healing (Figueroa, 2013). Students engaged in this process through (a) responding to the various texts, (b) forming connections between texts and lived experiences, (c) discussing the sociopolitical issues surrounding bilingualism and Latina/o identity, and (d) the writing, sharing, and revising of their own *testimonios*. While this presentation is linear, the process of *testimoniando* was fluid and dynamic as students engaged in these multiple ways.

Data analysis revealed that while the type of writing the students were asked to do shifted across the unit, the dialogue and critical thinking about the issues took different directions based on the types of connections and conversations that emerged. Through *testimoniando*, the students articulated their processes of living between worlds. In the following section we will provide examples of the themes that emerged through data analysis and unveiled students' existence in nepantla.

### Findings

To understand the students' *testimonios*, we focus on nepantla to analyze the tension, including the rich yet transformative nature of navigating multiple discourses, cultures, and worlds. We argue that the process of *testimoniando* as an embodied literacy practice allowed for nepantla to become visible. Through the cyclical process of reading and discussing (as well as connecting and responding to) the students' perceptions of themselves, their worlds, and their knowledge, we understand nepantla as home (Anzaldúa, 2002; 1987/2007). Nepantla is center, a place for reflection and redefinition. The fluid and dynamic process created a space for the expression of the experiences and feelings students

held within the bodymindspirit (Lara, 2002). Together, the students recognized the collective nature of *testimonio* and were able to be in solidarity with one another as they discussed the tensions and transformative shifts of becoming bilingual Latina/o students.

Through our analysis, we have identified four ways in which students articulated their lives in nepantla:

1. Through the identification of shared struggle: In response to the *testimonios* read in the unit, students identified, through discussion and writing, the feelings and challenges surrounding learning English in school. Through forming connections across texts, they recognized these tensions as not unique to themselves.
2. Feeling ideological tensions: As students shared their process of becoming and understanding bilingualism, many noted the constant negotiation between internalized deficit ideologies and feelings of pride.
3. Challenging dominant ideologies: Across the students' writing and discussions, they identified clear ways that they enacted agency and challenged deficit perspectives of emergent bilinguals.
4. Redefining notions of bilingualism: In their recognition of deficit ideologies and dominant notions of bilingualism, students also actively redefined what bilingualism meant in a context where their linguistic knowledge was not welcomed. In the following section, we discuss each of these subthemes along with examples from the students' work.

### Identification of a Shared Struggle

Although the majority of the students had started kindergarten together in a bilingual program within an English-speaking school, they communicated the discomfort they felt entering school and other settings without knowledge of English. After hearing about the experiences of Francisco in *La Mariposa* (Jiménez, 1998) and the *testimonios* of the graduate students as emergent bilinguals navigating the subtle hostilities of English-only institutions, students identified the



similarities with their own lived experiences across contexts and generations.

Through *testimoniando*, a space was created for the students to share the painful realities associated with learning English. For example, in responding to a *testimonio* by one of the graduate students, Julia wrote, “When I was in school and I went to kindergarten, I didn’t know English and in school I need to speak English and at home I need to speak Spanish.” In this statement, Julia recollected feeling that she did not have the linguistic skills that were necessary for kindergarten. Responses such as this one surfaced as the students recalled and reflected on their experiences beginning school. Dulce also remembered the sense of loss she felt when she was not able to communicate: “When I was in kindergarten I couldn’t speak in English. I couldn’t understand my dance teacher. I was so, so, so sad.” Lorena’s response to *La Mariposa* added to the collective identification (see Figure 1). She wrote, “When I go to kinder I get in at the classroom I didn’t know what the teacher was saying I feel nervous and scare[d].”

stark difference from current perspectives that show the fluid nature of bilingualism in students’ homes and communities (Velasco & García, 2014). Throughout the process of *testimoniando*, students shared similar memories lodged in the bodymindsprit (Lara, 2002). They were not only able to identify the conflicted feelings of becoming bilingual and being pulled in various directions by the various expectations of society, but they were also able to see the commonalities across experiences (Anzaldúa, 1987/2007).

These statements by the students reveal that they experienced sadness and discomfort, feelings they could not express without the English language skills they perceived as essential to navigating school and social spaces that value English. The process of *testimoniando* revealed the students’ feelings towards the process of learning English but also opened possibilities for normalizing the feelings through shared experiences and recognizing that they were not alone.

### Feeling Ideological Tensions

Another theme that emerged through data analysis reflected the students’ understanding that the process of becoming and understanding bilingualism was a constant internal negotiation between taking on the deficit ideologies associated with their language(s) and bodies, and their embodiment of pride or *orgullo*. In a transitional bilingual program housed in a mainstream school, students were highly aware of the politics associated with bilingualism for brown bodies in particular. The students were subjected to administrative pressures to test well in English and maintain an English only classroom (Menken & Solorza, 2014). Throughout the process of *testimoniando*, students described the expectation from the dominant society for them to learn English. At the same time, they recognized the powerful implications of becoming bilingual within and beyond the school boundaries. They acknowledged the value of English but at times implied a sense of fear, nervousness, and shame regarding their younger days as monolingual Spanish speakers.

The following excerpt from Sara’s draft of her written *testimonio* illustrates this tension:

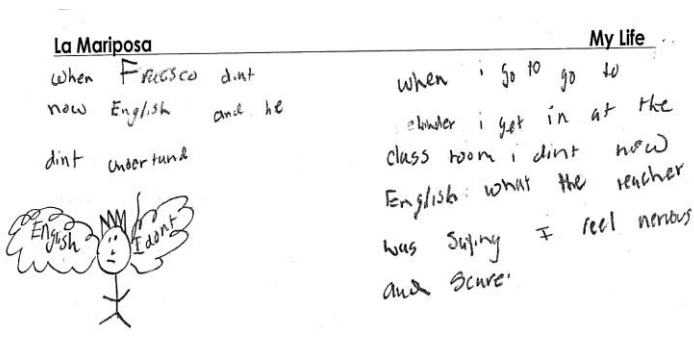


Figure 1. Lorena’s response.

Students identified commonalities across the memories and feelings they carried inside regarding their educational journey as emergent bilinguals. In her self-to-text connection to the *testimonio* written by Lucia, a graduate student who expressed a split between home and school, Ana, stated, “Lucia was divided, I talked in Spanish when I to go dinner and I talk in Spanish when I go to the park. And I talk in English when I go to school. When I go to the store.” Ana’s comments reflect the separateness she associated with her language use, which represents a

I thought at that time I didn't speak English. So I didn't feel special. Because I didn't speak English. And everyone wanted to speak English. My cousins speak English all the time. So in 2 grade I was feeling bilingual. And I was so much proud of my self.

In this excerpt, Sara expressed a sense of shame when she was a monolingual Spanish speaker due to the high value placed on English. She also wrote of developing a sense of pride when she was "feeling bilingual". Similarly, Julia shared this sense of conflict in describing the joy she experienced when being able to speak in English in the second grade and the steps she had to take to ensure her linguistic skills were adequate due to the lack of interest of other people to learn Spanish:

And in that time I was feeling so special to people. I want that people can show others that they are bilingual. And that they are special. I could not speak with them because they didn't want to speak Spanish. So I started to see movies hearing and people talking in English. And that's why now I can speak both languages.

Both Sara and Julia's *testimonios* attest to the marginalization of Latina/o students and their linguistic abilities. Working between the dominant ideas of bilingualism in the United States, Sara and Julia's reflections reveal their shifts in owning the in-between space of dominant ideologies and cultures. Through the students' writing, we are able to see the often internalized, deficit notions of monolingual Spanish speakers, and how these notions impact their learning practices as bilingual students. This identification highlights their positionality within nèpantla and the shift in self-recognition rooted in their deep reflection.

### Challenging Dominant Ideologies

As we have highlighted above, the students demonstrated their sociopolitical understanding of language, particularly how language is attached to bodies. Across the students' writing and discussions, they identified clear ways in which they enacted agency in their language learning processes. Through

our understanding of nèpantla, we see this as a transformative shift where students challenged current deficit perspectives of emergent bilingual Latina/o students. Dominant educational reform narratives position bilingualism as a threat to English language acquisition (Faltis, 2013). The students in this study asserted how important and central bilingualism was for their education, community, and families. The following excerpt is from Lorena's written *testimonio*:

I was at the park with my friend we were playing and we sit on the grass and we talked and I ask a question I said it [in] Spanish, ¿Puedes hablar inglés? [Do you speak English?] She said yes claro que si [yes, of course], I tell her [in] Spanish, ¿Puedes ayudarme [h]ablar en Ingles? [Can you help me speak English?] She said yes so everyday I go to her house to show me English so I learned both language [languages] and I said thank you for helping me speak [in] English. She said you speak perfectly in English and I said thank you.

In this example, Lorena demonstrated her active participation in becoming bilingual. In contrast to discourses that deem Latina/o students as resistant to learning English, Lorena's *testimonio* not only expresses a strong desire to learn English but also to become bilingual. This sense of agency is also apparent in Teresa's description of learning English. She described her motivation to understand her mother speaking English and began translating what she understood. Through that practice, she began to notice how much English she was learning (see Figure 2):

When I saw my mom and her boyfriend talking in English I was trying to understand but I couldn't because they talked so fast. I started translating everything they were saying into my head that's how I got better and better in English.

Here, Teresa explains how she took ownership of becoming bilingual. Her reflection also troubles the notion that parents do not possess the linguistic knowledge necessary for students to become bilingual. In addition, we began to see the students' shifts in perceptions of bilingualism in their own

conversations with each other regarding their writing and the use of both languages. Through the process of *testimoniando*, the students engaged their linguistic knowledge in supporting each other through discussions of life experiences as bilingual Latina/o students as well as in their writing and peer conferencing. As they shared and witnessed each other's *testimonios*, they provided feedback and recommendations for ways to strengthen the written narratives. In several instances, this came in the form of peers advising one another to incorporate more Spanish as they further drafted their work.

When I saw my mom and her boyfriend talking in English I was trying to understand but I couldn't because they talked so fast I started translating everything they were saying into my head that's how I got VETER and VETER in English.

Figure 2. Teresa's *testimonio*.

### Redefining Notions of Bilingualism

Through their *testimonios*, the students redefined what bilingualism meant within a context where their linguistic and cultural knowledge was not welcomed. In their written *testimonios*, they actively reclaimed bilingualism. The following excerpts were taken from the students' written *testimonios* to demonstrate the specific ways they reference their bilingualism as a positive quality that enabled them to contribute to their families and communities in their day to day lives, as well as how they envision possibilities for their future. As illustrated above, *nepantla* is a space that holds tension where these students had to make sense of conflicted and competing ideologies about bilingualism, for Latina/o students in particular. While Anzaldúa (1987/2007) has conceptualized *nepantla* as a painful space, she has argued that it is also a place for transformation and recreation. In the examples below, we argue that even while the students experienced attacks on their

mindbodyspirits, they were active in transforming what being bilingual would mean for them and their lives.

In her final *testimonio*, Isabella wrote:

Today I get to write in two languages and talk in two languages to and my life gets easy and I am proud of myself I know two languages. And if I know English I can teach people they don't how to talk in English how my teacher teach me, I can teach people too.

In this example, the sense of pride is no longer in relation to shame. Isabella recognizes the value of her linguistic knowledge and expresses her commitment to sharing it with others. Bilingualism, thus, begins to be repositioned as a strength, a resource to navigate the world she lives in. Similarly, Rafael expresses this transformative nature of *nepantla* as he positions bilingualism as a source of hope for the future. In his final written *testimonio*, he wrote (see Figure 3):

Being bilingual will help me with the Carrera [career] it is important because I can earn a lot of money *para mi familia* [for my family] maybe when I am older I can go to the university to study science and math and get money for my family and I. I will like another people to read my *testimonio* because I will be happy and maybe they will like it.

Here, Rafael connects being bilingual to his future aspirations for higher education and the benefit for his family. With that, he highlights the importance of others to recognize the powerful implications of being bilingual as he mentions that he would like other people to read his *testimonio* on being a bilingual student. This is demonstrated through his choice to use Spanish to underscore the key points he is making—his career will support his family, and his bilingual abilities will assist him in achieving that goal. Pedro, another student, also wrote about the value of being bilingual in relation to his future. He expressed how bilingualism was an essential step on the path to achieve his dream of being an artist. He ended his written *testimonio* with the following statement, "Being bilingual helps me see two worlds. The world of my parents and the world of me."

Anzaldúa (1987/2007) has conceptualized nepantla as a space for those living on the margins and between multiple worlds. In this excerpt, Pedro expresses the beauty of living between the worlds, and how bilingualism shapes his life on the margins. Nepantla shows us that the margins are not always painful but a productive space for being and becoming.

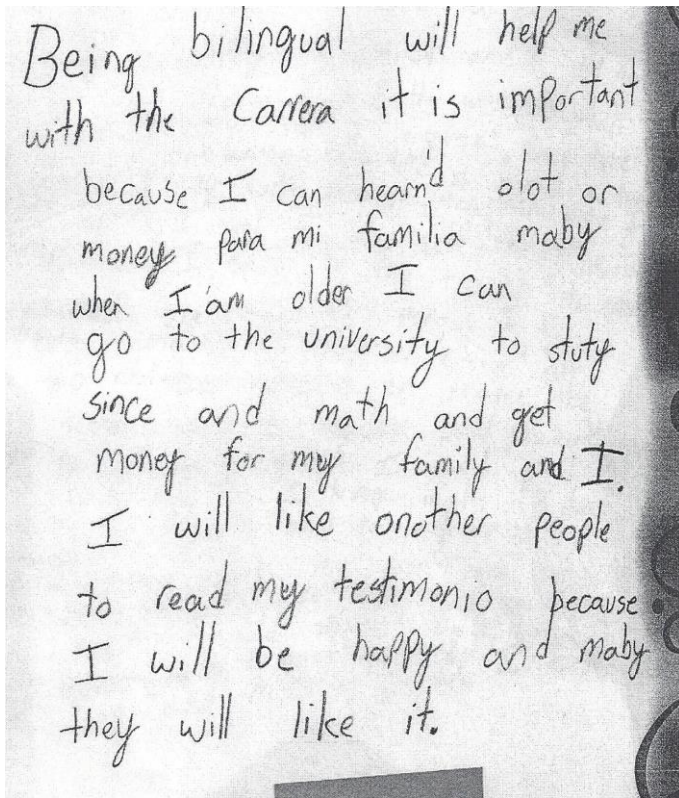


Figure 3. Rafael's testimonio.

### Discussion

Nepantla is a productive space, a place to question and notice ideological clashes. Out of that process, a transformation occurs, a redefining of being in relation to these ideologies. The process of *testimoniando* unveiled the ways that the students reflected on their lives in nepantla. Through examining student writing, discussions, and engagement in the process of *testimoniando*, we identified four themes that reflected their experiences making sense of themselves and the ideologies that surrounded them in school and out of school. *Testimonio* was a pedagogical tool that functioned as a way for students to voice the struggles associated with learning English in school and expose the

commonalities across their lives and through the various generations of Latina/o students involved in the project. The opportunity to read children's literature like *La Mariposa* and *testimonios* that reflected their lives, supported the students in sharing memories, feelings, and moments of hardship. Maintaining a focus on language and culture within language arts created a space for students to identify their own knowledge production, abilities, and agency and to engage in the process of *testimoniando*—a space where their painful experiences of marginalization could be discussed and reframed towards transformative ends.

One of the most powerful aspects of the project was seeing the high level of participation by two students whom Lydia had identified as frequently not participating in language arts lessons. In the interview with Lydia at the end of the project, she referred to both of the students as struggling readers and indicated her surprise in their contributions to the class discussions as well as their writing. The students were very engaged across the unit, and they were highly motivated to share with others their truth regarding how they learned English, and how they used both languages in their daily lives. We believe this enthusiasm was due to the opportunity to engage an alternative *forma de ser* (Cuero, 2009) through their embodied literacies and reconnect with themselves in a space that often requires a disconnect from the body (Brown, 2009). They had the schema, background knowledge, and language skills to create their own *testimonio* and be heard without judgment.

While not all the students participated with the same level of enthusiasm, a collective pride emerged regarding the students' bilingualism and their writing through the powerful process of reading and writing *testimonios*. The specific attention to language learning and bilingualism, enabled the students to recognize the complexity of developing academic skills across two or more linguistic codes. This meaningful literacy experience drew on their funds of knowledge (González et al., 1995) to create new understandings regarding their individual and collective potential. Lydia shared in this pride stating, "Another thing that came out of this project, [they] started valuing the fact that they were bilingual – they

used more Spanish.” The value they held in their *testimonios* was apparent as they read their final drafts to their peers. This was also evident in the covers many of the students made for the final draft of their *testimonios*, incorporating imagery and a title, *Mi Testimonio* (see Figure 4).

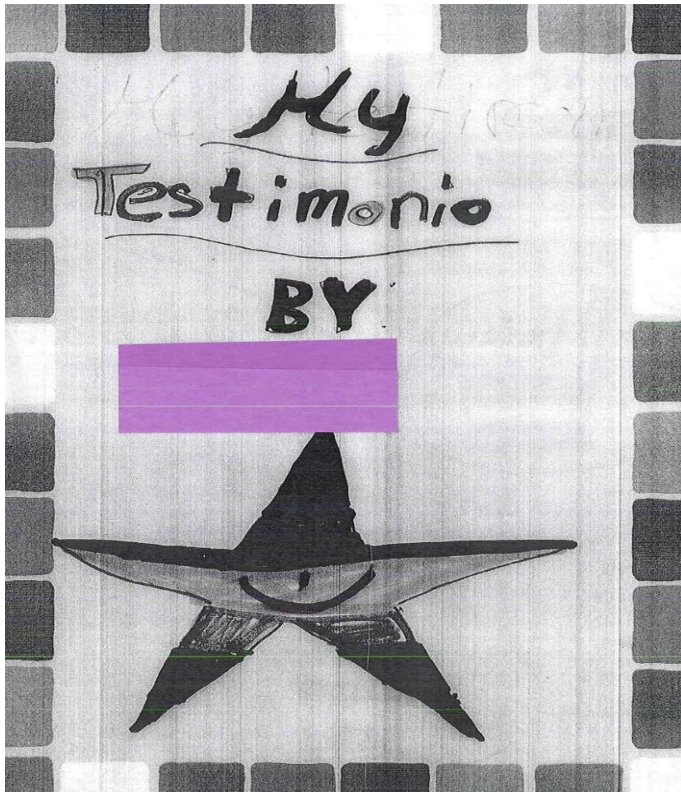


Figure 4. The cover of one student’s testimonio with imagery and a title.

*Testimonio* is an embodied narrative of individuals who have been placed at the margins and that is shared in the name of collective healing and growth. Multicultural children’s literature written by Latina/o authors that authentically represents the language use, cultural practices, and diversity within the Latina/o community can function as a model for writing *testimonios* or identity texts. Key to drawing on models for this type of reading and writing are teachers who are reflexive about their beliefs regarding language learning and bilingual students.

## Conclusions

*Testimonio* is not limited to Latinas/Chicanas, but we continue to consider the question: who can *testimoniar*? While critical, particularly considering that the U.S. teaching force continues to be made up of predominately White women (Obiakor & Green, 2014), we feel that it is most important to identify and discuss pedagogical practices that create spaces for the process of *testimoniando*. In conceptualizing critical witnessing as part of a pedagogy of the incomprehensible, Dutro (2013) argues that even in creating spaces for life stories to be witnessed, we also invite an “overwhelming sense that we can’t know or hear or tell all stories that reside in any space where people exist together” (p. 308).

In other words, as educators inviting life stories, trauma narratives, or *testimonios* into the classroom, we can always only partially understand, feel, and access what is being illuminated. While in our study the presence of Chicana graduate students involved in the process of *testimoniando* was powerful in the sense that the students were able to connect with sociopolitical themes of the *testimonios*, a powerful implication is in the reciprocity and space that was created that served as an invitation and support for vulnerability and embodied literacies to emerge. We recognize the existence of multiple pedagogical approaches for educators to reflect on their roles in creating and supporting spaces for *testimoniando*.

Embodied knowledge plays a role in learning whether it is acknowledged in the language arts classroom or not. For this reason, students need a space within the classroom and the curriculum for making sense of their experiences and understanding how their cultural and linguistic knowledge is positioned in school. These classroom spaces must be established with critical awareness and a willingness on the part of teachers to engage in reciprocal and vulnerable moments alongside students (Dutro & Bien, 2014). When marginalized students have opportunities to examine how they make sense of their identities as readers, writers, and language users, connected to

social and political systems, educators can support them in recognizing the inaccuracy of deficit interpretations of their lives and reframe their narratives to reflect the breadth of their knowledge and abilities (Dweck, 2000). For these students, having space within the language arts classroom to

redefine their identities, claim their linguistic repertoires, and stand in solidarity with others, rescripts language arts as a transformational literacy experience that challenges the normative structures and ideologies that silence and distort.

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