ART(ifacts) of Belonging: Arts-Based Explorations of Identity in Immigrant Teachers of Color in Early Childhood Education

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Authors' Notes

Abstract

Over the past four decades, early childhood education in the U.S. has faced a significant racial/ethnic mismatch between educators and students, exacerbated by insufficient systemic support for teachers of color (TOC), particularly immigrant teachers of color (ITOC). This study examines the lived experiences of two Mexican-American ITOC, Maria and Alma, through a post-foundational lens integrating Critical Race Theory (CRT), Nepantla, and LatCrit. Using methods such as FotoHistorias, pláticas, and poetic inquiry, we explore their emotional narratives, highlighting feelings of undervaluation, delegitimization, isolation, and lack of support within teacher preparation programs. Our findings challenge deficit-based narratives about TOC in early childhood education and underscore the need to incorporate ITOC voices and identities into educational frameworks. By amplifying these counter-stories, this study contributes to reimagining teacher education practices, policies, and programs to foster inclusivity and equity in early childhood education.

Over the past four decades, the field of early childhood education in the United States (U.S.) has been marked by an increasingly pronounced racial and ethnic disparity between early childhood educators and their young students, as the profession remains predominantly white while student demographics grow more diverse (Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Scholars have pointed to this racial and ethnic mismatch as a critical issue in education, emphasizing the need for teachers whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds align more closely with the students they serve. This alignment has been shown to benefit student engagement and academic achievement, as well as to support a sense of belonging for children of color (Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2021). However, despite a

recognized need for more teachers of color (TOC) in early childhood classrooms, systemic support is lacking, particularly for those who are also immigrants. Current structures in early childhood education do not adequately acknowledge or address the unique experiences and challenges faced by immigrant teachers of color (ITOC), who navigate complex intersections of race, ethnicity, language, and migration in their work (Haddix, 2017; Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016).

This study sought to amplify the voices and experiences of ITOC, exploring their paths into and through early childhood education in the United States. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) and Nepantla, our research aimed to understand the multilayered experiences of ITOC and how they navigated and resisted oppressive structures, while at the same time created spaces of resilience and belonging. LatCrit, an extension of Critical Race Theory (CRT), provided a lens through which to examine how intersecting factors like immigration status, language, and ethnicity influenced the lived experiences of Latinx and other immigrant educators (Delgado Bernal, 2002a; Delgado Bernal, 2002b). Nepantla, a Nahuatl term meaning a liminal, in-between space, further enriched this exploration by framing ITOCs' personal and professional experiences within a context of cultural hybridity and negotiation, shedding light on how they traversed borders between cultures, identities, and institutional expectations (Anzaldúa, 1987; Degollado et al., 2021).

We then utilized FotoHistorias and Poetic Testimonio as a post-foundational qualitative method that allowed the participants to reflect on and articulate their lived experiences through visual and narrative forms. FotoHistorias, which combines photography and storytelling, created a space for ITOC to capture and contextualize moments that represent their professional and personal journeys. Poetic Testimonio, meanwhile, offered a medium through which participants could share their experiences, struggles, and aspirations in ways that foreground their voices, emotionality, and subjectivities (Beverley, 2022; Cervantes-Soon, 2012). By combining and employing these methods, our study not only documented the journeys of ITOC but also recognized and honored the ITOCs' ways of knowing and being in the world, which are often rendered invisible in dominant narratives of early childhood education (Haddix, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1987).

In light of ongoing discussions around teacher diversity and representation, our study centered the voices of ITOC, highlighting the imperative for early childhood education to not only recruit more TOC but also to transform institutional practices to retain and support them. By examining the motivations, challenges, and resilience of ITOC, this study adds to the growing body of literature that calls for a fundamental rethinking of what it means to educate—and to be an educator—in a diverse society. We aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how and why "teachers of Color come to teaching and what pulls them away" (Haddix, 2017, p. 144), as well as to advocate for systemic changes that can better support and sustain these crucial educators.

Theoretical Framework

A critical aspect of this study was to examine universal truths and center the plurality of perspectives of the immigrant early educator participants. Therefore, we employed a post-foundational approach where we intertwined LatCrit and Nepantla in tandem to create a unique space that enabled us to acknowledge and contextualize the systemic inequities that impact Latinx communities, while also acknowledging the multilayered and dynamic identities and lived experiences of the individual participants of this study. It is important to note that LatCrit (Chávez-Moreno, 2024; Huber, 2010, 2023; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) and Nepantla (Anzaldúa, 1987; Degollado et al., 2021; Venegas-Weber, 2018) are frameworks that offer different but complementary perspectives on identity, culture, language, and social justice, especially when focusing

on Latinx populations and contexts. LatCrit focuses on identifying and exposing systemic inequities that impact Latinx communities, whereas Nepantla focuses more on an individual's critical reflections and journey of feeling caught in-between different identities due to social constructs.

The participants of this study, Maria and Alma, both identified as Mexican-American women of Color who immigrated to the United States after they reached adolescence and chose to pursue careers in early childhood education. Therefore, to center the historically marginalized intersectional identity experiences of both Latina participants, a LatCrit theoretical framework (Chávez-Moreno, 2024; Huber, 2010, 2023; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) was used in conjunction with Nepantla (Anzaldúa, 1987) in order to center the participant's feelings of in-betweenness and frustration over artificial boundaries that constrict how people define ethnicity, language, nationality, geography and positioning. Through this multi-layered theoretical approach, we embraced a post-foundational approach to research and sought to highlight the complexities of our participants' identities, lived experiences, and trajectories and contextualize them against the greater systemic inequities that participants faced within the United States (U.S.).

LatCrit

LatCrit grew out of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and is a theoretical framework that delves deeper into the historic marginalization and racialized experiences that Latinx people experience throughout their lives while navigating major structures of U.S. society. LatCrit allowed for the acknowledgement that: 1. racism is embedded within all facets of U.S. structures: law, economy, politics, language, education and has an impact on Latinx people (Chávez-Moreno, 2024; Huber, 2010, 2023; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), 2. Latinx people have intersectional identities race can intersect with immigration status, colonization, culture, language, and xenophobia that can influence the way U.S. structures implicitly and/or explicitly affect them (Chávez-Moreno, 2024; Huber, 2010, 2023; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), 3. counter-storytelling is a powerful way to center the voices and stories of Latinx people in order to challenge dominant narratives and resist systemic oppression (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Moreover, employing a LatCrit theoretical framework enabled us to focus on our participant's intersectional identities and "how multiple forms of oppression can intersect within the lives of people of Color and how those intersections manifest in our daily experiences to mediate our education" (Huber, 2010, p. 77). LatCrit therefore allowed us to better understand how intersectional identities impacted the personal and professional trajectories of our ITOC participants. Moreover, LatCrit helped us contextualize how Latinx people have been systemically racialized and discriminated against throughout U.S. history and how their labor has helped maintain the interests and power of white people throughout history.

Nepantla

We also infused Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of Nepantla (a Nahuatl term) which signifies an "in-between" space, where individuals negotiate and make sense of their various intersecting identities, in order to challenge, disrupt and transform static conceptions of identity and being. Nepantla disrupts assumptions about rigid borderlands around identity, politics, language use, and geography and instead validates inhabiting in-between spaces and hybrid identities (Anzaldúa, 1987; Degollado et al., 2021; Prieto & Villenas, 2012; Venegas-Weber, 2018). Nepantla acknowledges the frustration that many Latinx people face when they are forced to navigate multiple, often conflicting, identities,

spaces, or cultures due to rigid social constructions and borderlands. Nepantla, instead, urges individuals to embrace Nepantla as a transformative space where individuals can critically reflect upon their experiences and identities in order to heal. A pivotal aspect of Nepantla is healing and validating the multilayered identities of individuals in marginalized communities who often experience cultural oppression (Anzaldúa, 1987; Degollado et al., 2021).

For example, Nepantla can be used to describe the in-between space that yields possible shifts in thinking that sometimes occurs when Mexican Americans wrestle with their feelings of frustration over the artificial borderlands surrounding their intersecting identities, such as the tension between their U.S. citizenship and Mexican heritage and culture (Anzaldúa, 1987; Venegas-Weber, 2018). Nepantla is a space that enables individuals to transform their way of thinking and realize that they are capable of challenging dominant assumptions about artificial borders surrounding their identities, in order to, for example, recognize and validate the dynamic and unique intersectional identities of individuals (Anzaldúa, 1987; Degollado et al., 2021; Venegas-Weber, 2018). Intertwining LatCrit and Nepantla ultimately allowed for the participant's multilayered experiences to be authentically explored and acknowledged.

Methodology

Employing the two critical theoretical frameworks mentioned above, allowed us to de-center false and deficit based majoritarian stories about why there is a lack of TOC and ITOC within the field of ECE. To continue disrupting the assumptions made about Latinx people and to center the authentic and experiential knowledge of the participating ITOC – we blended two arts-based research methods: FotoHistorias (Gomez & Vannini, 2017) and poetic testimonios (Souto-Manning, et al., 2019; Souto-Manning, 2018).

Our chosen arts-based research methods build on our LatCrit and Nepantla theoretical frameworks by fostering spaces for diverse expressions and counter-narratives, meant to challenge foundational assumptions in traditional research. LatCrit, for example, centers the lived experiences of Latinx individuals by utilizing storytelling, art, and other creative mediums to foreground the voices and perspectives of those whose narratives are frequently silenced and marginalized (Delgado Bernal, 2002a). Moreover, arts-based methods, such as visual art, poetry, and performance, facilitate the representation of complex cultural identities, disruption of dominant narratives, and exploration of "in-between" spaces of Nepantla—which recognize the intersectional and fluid nature of identity and belonging (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Employing arts-based methods under these frameworks embodies a post-foundational approach to research. Rather than striving for universal truths or essentialized categories, our post-foundational approach embraces multiple, evolving realities, recognizing the importance of cultural, historical, and sociopolitical contexts (Murad, 2011). By fostering a non-linear, dynamic approach to knowledge creation, arts-based research methods, along with LatCrit and Nepantla theoretical frameworks shift away from positivist traditions, advocating instead for research that is socially responsive, rooted in justice, and open to the complexities of identity and power dynamics of indigenous communities (Murad, 2011; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2008). Through this alignment, arts-based research honors participants' unique ways of knowing and resists the limiting structures that often characterize traditional research methodologies.

FotoHistorias

The first arts-based research method that we utilized for this study was FotoHistorias (or Photostories), which combines Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang et al., 1996;

Luo, 2017) and Photo Elicitation (Collier, 1957; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Rose, 2016) visual research methods that enact a participatory approach (Gomez, 2020). FotoHistorias employs a participatory approach by inviting participants to generate their own photography (photovoice) and then lead the conversations around their photographs (photo elicitation) during the research interviews, in order to facilitate in-depth discussions about their lived experiences (Gomez & Vannini, 2017). Through a FotoHistorias approach, our ITOC participants were invited to select or take photographs that represented aspects of their paths into and through early childhood education in the United States and then use those photographs to spark an open-ended discussion during the research interview.

The use of FotoHistorias enabled the promotion of participant agency, by encouraging participants to present their own stories visually and verbally to counter majoritarian narratives of Latinx people. FotoHistorias embodies a post-foundational approach by disrupting the typical researcher and participant dynamic during interviews, by engaging a participatory approach that leverages the rich tradition of oral storytelling present in the Latinx community (Gomez & Vannini, 2017). The narratives and photographs generated through the use of FotoHistorias were then analyzed and woven into Poetic Testimonios to reveal our participating ITOCs' personal and professional trajectories into early childhood education in the United States. Poetic Testimonios disrupt notions of objectivity and instead highlight the participant's emotive and symbolic language use, in an effort to express personal and collective trauma, resilience, and identity in a form that is authentic and accessible.

Poetic Testimonio

The second arts-based method that we utilized for this study was Poetic Testimonios, which were generated from the FotoHiostorias that included the participants' narratives and photographs. Poetic Testimonios integrate poetic inquiry and analysis that accentuates *emotional hotpoints* of the participants narratives (Cahnmann-Taylor et al., 2009), similarly testimonios highlight the emotionality of the participants' experiences in order to speak up and speak out against how historically marginalized communities have been positioned (Valenzuela et al., 2021). In Chicana feminist research, testimonio is a narrative method rooted in Latin American social justice traditions that allows marginalized individuals to share personal stories as acts of resistance against systemic injustice (Beverley, 2022; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Pérez Huber & Aguilar-Tinajero, 2024; Prieto & Villenas, 2012). By bearing witness to oppression through shared personal experiences, testimonio challenges dominant narratives and brings visibility to issues like racism, sexism, and immigration (Cervantes-Soon, 2012). This approach validates experiential knowledge and emphasizes the collective struggles of marginalized communities, making it central to Chicana feminist efforts for social change.

Utilizing Poetic Testimonios entailed merging our ITOC participants' photographs and narratives into distinct poems in order to articulate the participants' shared and individual experiences that exemplified their personal and professional trajectories into early childhood education in the United States. Poetic Testimonios purposefully incorporate patterns and symbolism to display and evoke emotions. Poetic testimonios, therefore, align with a post-foundational approach, by capturing the lived experiences of the participants in a way that challenges conventional, linear, and static storytelling (Murad, 2011; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2008). Utilizing poetic testimonios as our methodology allowed us to highlight the systemic inequities that impact our Latinx participants while maintaining an ethical consideration to authentically portray their voices and experiences.

Blending FotoHistorias and Poetic Testimonios allowed us to leverage our ITOC participants' experiences and cultural familiarity with oral storytelling, to create unique poems that captured the participant's individual and collective testimonios against majoritarian narratives. The combination of FotoHistorias and Poetic Testimonios generated and synthesized the ITOC's powerful narratives of resistance, survival, and social justice (Beverley, 2022; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Pérez Huber & Aguilar-Tinajero, 2024; Prieto & Villenas, 2012). In the next section, we present the Poetic Testimonios of our ITOC participants, which portray their emotionality and lived experiences as they navigated various oppressive U.S. structures on their way to becoming early childhood educators. By uplifting personal experience through photographs and narratives, the following Poetic Testimonios challenge hegemonic narratives, democratizes storytelling, and creates a space where marginalized voices can resonate authentically.

Multi-Voiced Poetic Testimonio

In this study, we employed Poetic Testimonios as an arts-based method, developed from FotoHistorias that combined participants' photographs and narratives. This approach integrates poetic inquiry to highlight emotional focal points within participants' stories, resonating with the testimonio tradition in Chicana feminist research, which uses personal narratives as acts of resistance against systemic injustice (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Pérez Huber & Aguilar-Tinajero, 2024; Prieto & Villenas, 2012). Poetic Testimonios draw on rhythm, metaphor, and imagery to authentically convey the lived experiences of historically marginalized communities, particularly in challenging dominant narratives around issues like racism, sexism, and immigration. By transforming ITOC participants' narratives and photographs into distinct poems, In this study, we transformed narratives from participant interview transcripts and photographs into distinct poems by employing a methodological approach combining FotoHistorias and Poetic Inquiry to evoke emotional resonance. Participant interviews were audio-recorded and analyzed collaboratively by the co-authors, who highlighted emotionally charged excerpts that reflected the participants' lived experiences. For example, one participant's nervous laughter while recounting experiences of inequity and discrimination, coupled with the pressure to communicate in English when alone, culminated in her poignant reflection, "Oh my God, what did I do? I'm empty." These evocative moments were carefully reconstructed into poetic verses that convey the depth and complexity of their experiences. The resulting multi-voiced poetic testimonio merges visual and narrative elements to amplify the participants' voices, fostering a deeper understanding of their experiences. This method bridges qualitative research and artistic expression, offering a powerful lens for exploring lived experiences. We were able to capture both shared and individual journeys into early childhood education in the U.S., revealing systemic inequities and honoring the participants' voices.

The combination of FotoHistorias and Poetic Testimonios aligns with a post-foundational approach to storytelling, empowering our participants' testimonios to resonate against majoritarian narratives with authenticity and depth. In this section, we present these Poetic Testimonios, which portray the ITOC participants' resilience and emotionality as they navigated oppressive structures in pursuit of becoming early childhood educators.

Figure 1

Joining a Folklorico Group in High School

When we were in Mexico
A lot of the things that are traditionally Mexican,
That people here assume are representations of what Mexican culture is
I didn't get to do that
Our economic situation was very hard
We were criticizing everything that was happening in Mexico
My family's quite colonized, so we don't discuss any indigenous parts of us
They talked a lot about our Spanish ancestry
The Spanish is really emphasized
Language has power
When we moved here, it was kind of a culture shock I didn't really know anything about anything
Being really, really poor, and not understanding why
Nobody talked to us about it
Reconnecting with what it's like to be Mexican
Exploring that part of my identity here, as opposed to in Mexico
I was changing Surviving

Figure 2

Family
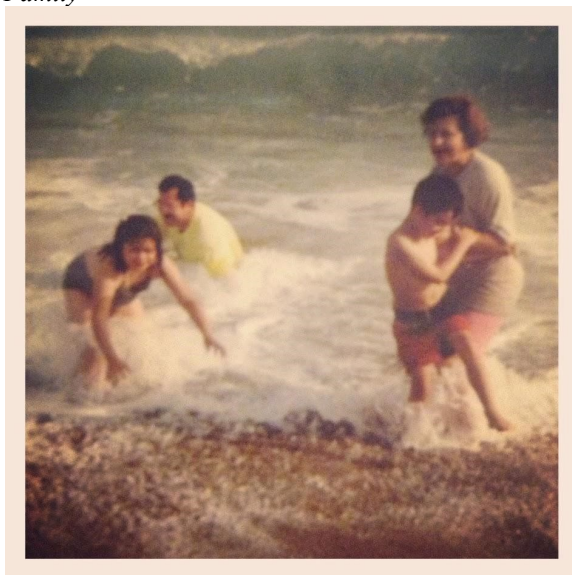
Immigrating to *Disneyland*
When we moved here they said I was too young
All I knew about living here was going to Disneyland
When they asked, "Do you want to stay here?" If living here means going to Disneyland
Of course we want to be here!
Our papers were gonna come through really fast
But our papers didn't come until much later
I've only been to Disneyland one time, maybe twice as a grown up
The children in that town in Hidalgo said, "When I grow up I want to get out of here!"
They are growing up thinking about immigrating
We are like this in Mexico
In a country that doesn't have a good educational system
It is going to be in a lot of trouble
It's all connected
If the educational system doesn't improve, this will stay, Everything is going to be worse
It wasn't in my plans to come to United States
To leave everything and come here
I have learned how the system works here so I can compare and contrast
I always say, "Where or how do I *stick to my roots*?"
I started all over again when I came here
The cultural crash, and how vulnerable I was at that time
I came here alone *without any family*
Nobody, I didn't know anybody
The pressure to communicate when I was alone I started to feel like, "Oh my God, what did I do?" I'm empty!

Figure 3

Early Literacy in a Preschool Classroom

Language
When I came here, they had me not just in ESL, but also, bilingual education
Everything was taught in Spanish, not in English
I wanted out of those classes
Because I felt lost and I wanted to learn English
I was not only struggling with just being a teenager in a brand new place
I was lost all the time at school
I wanted to assimilate

If I said something wrong, they would say, "Mira esta ni con papeles, sin papeles, y no puede hablar en espanol? Ay, que verguenza!" [Look at her, not even with papers, without papers, and she can't speak Spanish? How embarrassing!"]
It makes it really hard to even try; to be made fun of
I learned English, forcing myself to learn
I needed to understand how the world was in here and in the news
But I hated the Spanish news
The video is always yellowish
They always communicate murders, they focus on that
I noticed that in English the news was different
So I started *educating my ear*
In Mexico
If you speak Spanish it means you are educated
That you are dominant
Only Spanish; no other language
Here only English is dominant
Language has power

Figure 4

Graduation Day, Next To My Fairy Godmother

Teaching and Learning with Cariño
It was very hard to be a teacher here
All the tests are in English
Even if you want to be a bilingual or Spanish teacher
It don't make no sense
I thought, there is no point in me going to get a BA
If this is all I'm going to be making; to be in debt
But then, one of my professors from community college, and her husband said,
"If you want to continue your BA we could give you an interest free loan."
That was the biggest blessing
I believe, when my mom died, she sent me these people
To come in, and help me
Thanks to them I finished my BA
On graduation day they told me
They didn't want me to pay them back
So I call her my fairy godmother That's Cariño
I wasn't sure that I was going to be a teacher
I knew that I wanted to do something that could
Change how things are
My role as a teacher was as a facilitator
Someone who was caring with children
Cariño is a feeling

I noticed that kids like to do something
With their hands, with their heart
I was doing it with my heart I felt that I was changing something I felt that I was helping them to...
Giving them some tools to survive
When you teach someone, you change their lives
Or you, your life changes, or both

Analysis and Findings

This section explores the analysis and findings and is structured to highlight key themes that emerged from participants' narratives, including the undervaluation and delegitimization they face, the cultural and linguistic in-betweenness they navigate, and the resilience they demonstrate in their roles as educators. First, the framework of LatCrit is used to examine the systemic barriers, such as language-based discrimination and economic hardships, that participants encounter. Next, Nepantla is employed to illuminate the transformative potential of cultural hybridity and in-between spaces. Finally, the section discusses how participants draw on culturally responsive practices, particularly through the concept of "Cariño", to create affirming educational environments. Together, these insights underscore the importance of community, cultural identity, and structural change within the educational system.

Fusing together FotoHistorias and Poetic Testimonio brought into focus the nuanced individual and shared experiences of inequities that the participants experienced and navigated as ITOC. Furthermore, the poetic testimonio revealed how our participants experienced undervaluation, delegitimization, and isolation in the U.S., while still finding strength in their cultural identities to impact young children positively. The theoretical frameworks of LatCrit and Nepantla illuminate these experiences, providing a lens to understand both structural barriers and the in-between spaces that shaped the participants' identities and pedagogies.

LatCrit and Systemic Barriers

Undervaluation and delegitimization. The employment of LatCrit (Latina/o Critical Theory), an extension of Critical Race Theory, emphasized the unique racial and social injustices faced by Latinx communities, especially within U.S. educational institutions (Delgado Bernal, 2002b; Yosso, 2005). The framework highlighted how Latinx educators often face a lack of respect, economic hardship, and insufficient institutional support, as seen in the testimonio's reflection on low pay and education-related debt ("If this is all I'm going to be making; to be in debt"). LatCrit also stressed how bilingual educators often encounter further delegitimization when their Spanish language skills are undervalued or restricted within predominantly English-speaking systems (Darder, 2012). For example, one ITOC participant shared how she struggled to transition out of ESL and bilingual classes reflects the exclusionary effects of English-dominant policies and practices (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Counter-Narrative through FotoHistorias. By integrating FotoHistorias, this study reinforced the LatCrit principle of counter-storytelling, which uses personal narratives to challenge dominant discourses and give voice to marginalized perspectives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through their photographs and accompanying stories, the ITOC participants reflected on the structural inequities that delegitimize their cultural identities and devalue their contributions to education. As they captured aspects of their heritage, community, and classroom practices, they provided powerful counter-narratives that exposed the shortcomings of an educational system that often marginalizes bilingual educators. This aligns with the LatCrit emphasis on using storytelling to validate cultural

knowledge and resist the homogenization of Latinx experiences (Delgado Bernal, 2002a).

Language and Power. Language is a potent marker of power and dominance, as noted in this poetic testimonio ("Language has power"). LatCrit scholars argue that language-based discrimination—such as the devaluation of bilingualism in education—perpetuates racial and cultural hierarchies that disadvantage Latinx communities (Yosso, 2005; Flores & Rosa, 2015). In the testimonio, participants recalled being shamed for their Spanish proficiency in different ways, underscoring how language policies can create additional social barriers. As Yosso (2005) explained, these barriers often stem from "linguistic capital" being ignored or invalidated within Eurocentric educational systems.

Nepantla and Cultural In-Betweenness

In-Betweenness of Identity and Cultural Hybridity. Nepantla, a concept articulated by Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, explores the "in-between" spaces where individuals negotiate multiple, often conflicting identities and cultural expectations (Anzaldúa, 1987). Nepantla highlights how participants grapple with the process of cultural adaptation and transformation in the U.S., where they feel both disconnected from Mexican culture and pressured to assimilate into American norms. This liminal experience is illustrated in the poem's line, "I was changing / Surviving," which captures the struggle of cultural dislocation and the resilience required to adapt to life in the U.S. (Anzaldúa, 1987).

FotoHistorias also supports critical reflection by encouraging participants to engage with their stories in a multi-layered manner—visually, emotionally, and intellectually. The use of photos prompts deeper self-examination, helping educators connect their personal journeys with broader social and cultural dynamics, such as the effects of language-based discrimination and cultural resilience (Gallo & Link, 2015). For instance, participants described the impact of language dominance on their self-perception and teaching experiences, which FotoHistorias helped to contextualize within the broader framework of systemic inequities (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Transformation and Resilience. Nepantla also focuses on the transformative and healing aspects of these cultural spaces, viewing them as opportunities for introspection and growth (Keating, 2006). For the participants, this transformation includes "reconnecting with what it's like to be Mexican," underscoring their journey to reclaim and celebrate their cultural identities in an environment that often devalues them. Their resilience is evident in their attempts to educate themselves about both Mexican and U.S. culture, exemplified by one participant's decision to "educate my ear" by listening to English news in the U.S. As Keating (2006) suggests, Nepantla encourages individuals to draw strength from this in-between state, allowing for new forms of understanding and self-empowerment.

Through FotoHistorias, this study provided participants with a transformative space to articulate their experiences of immigration, cultural hybridity, and professional identity. These visual narratives thus serve as a powerful methodological tool that amplifies marginalized voices and fosters critical dialogue around identity, resilience, and agency within and beyond the educational system.

Resilience and Strength in Teaching with Cariño

Cariño as Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Cariño, a concept that translates to "caring" in Spanish, is central to the educators' teaching philosophy. By embracing Cariño, they create emotionally supportive and culturally affirming learning spaces that

honor their students' cultural backgrounds (Curry, 2021; Lewis et al., 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). Participants' commitment to teaching "with their heart" and providing "tools to survive" resonates with LatCrit's emphasis on community cultural wealth—valuing the collective resources Latinx individuals bring to education (Yosso, 2005). Their narratives reflect the culturally responsive and relational approach they use to foster resilience and agency among young children.

Community Support and Mentorship. LatCrit emphasizes the importance of collective support and mentorship, particularly for individuals navigating the oppressive structures within predominantly white educational settings (Delgado Bernal, 2002a; Delgado Bernal, 2002b). In the poetic testimonio, one participant describes the transformative impact of receiving financial and emotional support from her "fairy godmother," showing how mentorship and community support provide essential resilience and affirmation in the face of systemic challenges (Valenzuela, 1999). This type of support not only reinforces their resolve to succeed but also inspires them to adopt similar approaches in their own teaching.

This poetic testimonio illustrates the dual challenge and empowerment Mexican immigrant educators find in their roles. Through LatCrit, we see how structural inequities impact their experiences in U.S. schools, while Nepantla helps us understand the cultural tensions and personal transformations involved in navigating an in-between identity. The practice of Cariño—teaching with a culturally rooted sense of care—emerges as a powerful means for these immigrant early educators of color (ITOC) to assert their cultural identities and positively influence young children's development. These narratives highlight the ongoing importance of culturally responsive and community-based support in achieving equitable and meaningful educational experiences for both teachers and students.

These themes, which resonate with the broader findings of this study, reflect the ongoing challenges faced by Mexican and Latinx immigrants as they navigate cultural, linguistic, and educational systems that often fail to provide adequate recognition and support. This analysis highlights the need for more inclusive and culturally responsive practices within educational institutions to address these systemic barriers and foster environments where immigrant individuals and communities feel valued, supported, and empowered.

Implications & Discussion

The findings from this study reveal essential implications for early childhood educational practices, institutional policies, and teacher support systems, especially in addressing the unique experiences of immigrant early childhood educators of color (ITOC). Recognizing how culture, identity, and bilingualism shape their professional journeys offers insights into creating inclusive, equitable early learning environments for young children from minoritized backgrounds.

This study emphasizes cultural competence and affirming pedagogy, highlighting the significance of culturally responsive pedagogy, particularly through the practice of Cariño—a concept that reflects emotionally supportive and culturally affirming approaches to teaching that our participants used to nurture a positive learning environment (Curry, 2021; Lewis et al., 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). By integrating such approaches, educational systems can better support the diverse cultural needs of students from minoritized backgrounds (Gay, 2018). Training that emphasizes relational and culturally grounded practices can empower educators to connect meaningfully with students, using empathy, understanding, and cultural knowledge as essential components of teaching (Paris & Alim, 2017). Furthermore, professional development focused on

Cariño can help educators foster a classroom culture that honors students' unique cultural experiences and family backgrounds.

Bilingualism is a vital asset for immigrant educators; however, as demonstrated in this study, it is often undervalued in an English-dominant educational landscape. Recognizing bilingualism as a form of "linguistic capital" and an act of altruism enables educators to integrate language as a valuable cultural asset rather than a deficit (Soto, 2002; Yosso, 2005). In particular, advocating for bilingualism as a resource through educational policies and curriculum approaches that incorporate multiple languages can validate teachers' linguistic skills and provide a more inclusive experience for bilingual children (Garcia & Wei, 2014). By supporting bilingualism in both pedagogy and policy, educational systems can ensure that bilingual educators are valued, which in turn benefits the cognitive and social development of bilingual students (Bialystok, 2017; Flores & Rosa, 2015). Promoting bilingualism aligns with Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LatCrit perspectives, which underscore the need for affirming minoritized linguistic identities within educational settings (Delgado Bernal, 2002a; Delgado Bernal, 2002b; Soto, 2002).

Nepantla, a term developed by Anzaldúa (1987) to describe the "in-between" space of negotiating conflicting cultural identities, serves as a framework for understanding how immigrant educators navigate complex personal and professional identities. Professional development programs that acknowledge Nepantla can provide educators with the necessary tools to explore and incorporate dual cultural identities into their teaching practices, creating a bridge between personal experience and pedagogical approach (Keating, 2006). Supporting educators in this process allows them to better connect with students facing similar identity negotiations, thus creating a culturally congruent learning environment (Au & Kawakami, 1994). Identity-affirming professional development offers educators not only validation of their complex cultural backgrounds but also resilience strategies that can strengthen both personal and professional growth (Anzaldúa, 1987; Paris, 2012).

The use of FotoHistorias in this study underscores the effectiveness of participatory visual storytelling methods as a means for educators to explore, express, and share their experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). FotoHistorias allowed participants to visually represent aspects of their identity, cultural heritage, and experiences with systemic inequities, adding depth to the narrative representation of their lived experiences (Gallo & Hornberger, 2017). When applied to professional development, visual storytelling methods like FotoHistorias encourage self-reflection and provide educators with a space to connect their personal and professional identities, fostering resilience and a stronger sense of purpose (Gallo & Link, 2015).

Furthermore, incorporating such methods into teacher education programs can facilitate a better understanding of immigrant educators' perspectives, offering administrators and colleagues insights into the cultural and professional challenges they face (Cruz, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

This study's LatCrit framework brings attention to systemic issues that impact the experiences of immigrant educators within U.S. educational institutions. These educators often experience economic hardship, undervaluation, and marginalization in their roles (Darder, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Policies aimed at addressing economic inequities, such as fair compensation and accessible professional development, are essential for supporting bilingual and immigrant educators (Delgado Bernal, 2002b). Mentorship programs are equally valuable; they provide immigrant educators with guidance, validation, and a supportive community that reinforces resilience and professional growth (Valenzuela, 1999). By implementing structural changes and fostering environments where immigrant educators feel recognized and supported, educational institutions can positively impact

their sense of agency and, by extension, their effectiveness in the classroom (Cervantes-Soon, 2012).

This study calls for a reimagining and reconceptualization of early childhood education practices that acknowledge and embrace the cultural, linguistic, and identity-based contributions of immigrant early childhood educators. Integrating affirming practices like Cariño, advocating for bilingualism, supporting Nepantla as an identity framework, and employing visual storytelling methods like FotoHistorias can help educators navigate systemic barriers and build inclusive, supportive learning environments for young children from diverse backgrounds.

Aligning with Post-Foundational Perspectives

Adopting a post-foundational stance in early childhood education and teacher education involves critically examining the foundational assumptions that shape educational practices and policies (Murad, 2011; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2008; Dahlberg et al., 2007). By moving beyond traditional developmental theories that assume universal pathways of learning and development, this stance encourages educators to consider how individual cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds impact educational experiences. For immigrant educators, a post-foundational perspective is particularly valuable as it legitimizes their lived experiences and cultural knowledge, recognizing these as essential components of their professional practice (Cannella, 2002).

In teacher education, a post-foundational stance supports professional development that is not only focused on best practices but also attuned to educators' unique identities and the systemic challenges they encounter. This perspective values the local, relational, and emergent knowledge that educators bring to their roles, as seen in the application of Cariño and Nepantla as pedagogical approaches. Such frameworks, rooted in specific cultural and identity-based experiences, align well with post-foundational principles that call for a situated, dynamic understanding of educational practices (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). By integrating these perspectives, teacher education programs can foster more responsive and equity-driven practices that respect the multiplicity of experiences and identities among early childhood educators.

In a post-foundational framework, "normal" developmental milestones are viewed critically, allowing for broader, culturally valid interpretations of child development and educational achievement (Cannella, 2002). For bilingual educators and their students, this stance is particularly important, as it resists deficit views of language diversity and instead affirms bilingualism as a valuable form of knowledge (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Educational programs embracing a post-foundational stance thus advocate for culturally situated understandings of child development and learning, supporting policies that honor linguistic diversity and affirm diverse pathways to development.

A post-foundational approach to policy and structural change calls for reforms that prioritize inclusive practices, teacher autonomy, and recognition of diverse knowledges within educational institutions (Murad, 2011; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2008; Dahlberg et al., 2007). For immigrant educators, policies that acknowledge the legitimacy of varied teaching approaches and linguistic skills align with post-foundational perspectives, emphasizing the importance of creating systems that support rather than constrain diversity. By applying this stance, educational institutions can promote a more inclusive and equitable environment for educators and students alike.

This study makes a compelling case for the urgent need to adopt post-foundational approaches that prioritize equity and inclusion in educational institutions. By centering the cultural knowledge, culturally informed practices, and contributions of immigrant

educators of color, it demonstrates how systemic change can create environments where both educators and students thrive. These findings call for immediate action to implement policies that value linguistic and cultural diversity, affirm the legitimacy of varied teaching approaches, and dismantle exclusionary structures within education. It is a call to reconceptualize educational systems that truly reflect and serve the richness of their communities.

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