

Testimonios of (In)Justice and Communal Spaces: Four Latinas in Their First Year Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In August 2020, four Latinas began their first year teaching and entered a school system that continues to emphasize policies, measures, and curriculum that supports racism and social injustice. Their first-hand experiences included a pandemic that largely challenged modes of delivery in schools and the lack of access for students of marginalized communities that made existing disparities even more obvious. But they also entered teaching at a time when there was renewed interest in openly pushing issues of race, oppression, and violence to the forefront. This article details how these four Latina teachers connected their testimonios to the current sociopolitical realities and to their commitment to social change through monthly zoom chats. Their chats became spaces of Convivencia, a way to engage, reflect, and support each other that is centered within a Latina womanist epistemology. Cultural Intuition was used to analyze their experiences and to point out key aspects of their testimonios that reflect their ways of knowing and agency. This piece concludes by making a

case for how these types of communal spaces are necessary across various institutions and spaces for Latinas.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2020, four Latinas with a recently earned Bachelors in Elementary Education began their first year teaching. They entered a school system that continues to emphasize policies, measures, and curriculum that supports racism and social injustice. Their first-hand experiences included a pandemic that largely challenged modes of delivery in schools and the lack of access for students of marginalized communities that made existing disparities even more obvious. But they also entered teaching at a time when there was renewed interest in openly pushing issues of race, oppression, and violence to the forefront. As one of their previous literacy professors and a fellow Latina, all four agreed to begin their teaching profession with a commitment to share their experiences with each other and to allow me to document their first year teaching via monthly zoom gatherings. The teachers connected their politically urgent stories—their testimonios—to the current sociopolitical realities and to their commitment to social change through the monthly chats. This work makes a case for how the zoom monthly chats became spaces of convivencia (communalism, coming together)-

-a way to engage, reflect, learn, and support each other in a way that is deeply centered within a Latina womanist epistemology.

In this work, I first describe what encompasses Latina womanist epistemology and communal mentoring. I then describe our relationship and introduce the four teachers and provide my positionality. Cultural intuition and testimonio are then described along with making a case for how communal mentoring is inextricably connected to testimonio and how I analyzed their shared experiences through the standpoint of Cultural Intuition (Bernal, 1998). I then share some key aspects of their testimonios reflective of their ways of knowing and agency from their first year teaching (2020-2021 school year); I end this piece with our work moving toward building a communal approach to solidarity and shared commitments through expanding our communal mentoring and support and making a case for how these types of communal spaces are necessary across various institutions and spaces for Latinas.

LATINA WOMANIST EPISTEMOLOGY AND COMMUNAL MENTORING

Mentoring for women and minoritized groups does not ascribe to rigidly defined roles of mentor and mentee, rejects similarly defined positions of power (Mendez-Morse, 2004), and interrupts assumptions of hierarchical knowledge where one individual holds more or more important knowledge than others. Thus, mentorship within communal spaces is understood as learning, engagement, and reflection where all members are both mentors and mentees and for Latinas, “mentorship includes communal methods of support through testimonios, or testimonies that recognize ‘the power and empowerment of sharing our papelitos guardados [literally, guarded papers] in and out of academia with others’” (Duran, 2016, p. 114). In Latina mentoring, *convivencia*

or communalism is a central aspect of a raced-gendered epistemology that expands traditional notions of teaching, learning, and creation of knowledge (Galvan, 2001).

Latina womanist epistemology is an explicitly critical race-gendered stance grounded in lived realities of Latinas (Delgado Bernal, 2002). This epistemology has pedagogical power that is exercised in the sharing of Latinas’ testimonios and histories and serves as “a knowledge base to understand, critique, and challenge systemic oppression and theorize identity, sexuality, the body, resistance, healing, transformation, and empowerment” (Huber & Cueva, 2012, p. 395). *Convivencia* is about how to be together, the communal and relational, amid systemic racism, oppression and uncertainty (Villenas, 2005). *Convivencia* is central to Latina mentoring as it emphasizes cultural ways of knowing and giving voice to lived experiences.

The term “womanist” is central to this epistemology or way of knowing. Womanist, unlike the term feminist, addresses the racial, classed, and gendered intersections of women of color, and in this work, of Latinas specifically. A womanist orientation to the world is based on the socio-cultural and historical conditions affecting Latinas as race-gendered persons. Thus, the term womanist centers Latina’s race/culture-gender positionalities, that is, how they make sense of and navigate experiences and how they express and communicate their lived realities.

Latina womanist epistemology and pedagogies derive from Galvan’s (2001) work with Mexicanas campesinas and extend our understanding of these women’s knowledge “by situating it among groups of people traditionally unheard and spaces continually unexplored” (Bernal, 2002, p. 607). Latina womanist pedagogies have been central in research, including among a group of Latina

immigrant mothers (Delgado-Gaitan, 2012), and more recently among Chicanas/ Latinas at a Hispanic Serving Institution (Ek et al., 2010), and among Latinas at a predominantly white institution (Flores & Garcia 2009). This literature emphasizes the pedagogical value of these diverse womanist sites as they provide communal spaces for Latinas to gain confidence, provide guidance, and reassert their own power (Villenas, 2005).

I build on this work by indicating how the four Latina first year teachers that are the focus of this work exercised their womanist epistemology via zoom turned communal spaces through sharing their testimonios. Revealed through this epistemology are the human relationships and experiences that are not visible from a Eurocentric epistemological orientation. Related, this standpoint asserts that first year Latina teachers both carry the wisdom of our ancestral knowledge (Castillo, 1994) and are creators of knowledge (Bernal, 2002). Positioning teachers as knowledge holders and creators (Bernal, 2002) is intentional. Such emphasis counters current dominant deficit ideology of teachers that deskills, de-professionalizes, and deintellectualizes educators.

Delgado-Gaitan (2012) makes a case that transformation is dynamic and collective. Convivencia is central to personal and social transformation as Latinas share, learn, and account their refusals of dehumanizing relations/ encounters they experience in institutions and the larger society. For these four Latinas, the communal space served to cope with issues of the pandemic, their first year teaching, and the ever present oppression and racism in schools—both for them as Latinas as well as for their Brown and

Black students. The sharing of their testimonios within a communal womanist space allowed for connections across our Latinidades and to learn from each other, a convivio (Villenas, 2005) that encompasses pain, anger, sorrow, laughter, and love.

HOW I CAME TO KNOW THE TEACHERS

Ms. Julia Rose Raymond, Ms. Mariana Calderon, Ms. Seci Ann Gonzales, and Ms. Ruby Sanchez are all recent graduates (2019 and 2020) of the Urban Elementary Education Program at a large PWI in the Midwest where I teach. We got to know one another through a literacy methods class I was teaching as part of their teacher preparation program. We began to share our experiences with each other and they felt a connection to me and my course as it centers ways to fully engage with students and support their capacity to thrive by attending to meaningful relationships and critical pedagogy.

We connected as Latinas which is a sense of historical recognition and of shared wisdom and refusal in the face of ongoing oppression. I am one of the very few Latina teachers they had in their K-16 trajectory. Thus, the ways in which I identify, honor my language of origin, and my stance on how our experiences of being “othered” can help us to refuse such mistreatment of our students allowed us to connect through identity, ideologies, and commitment to service. Our relationship developed through shared chats before and after school, texts, meals, phone calls and other support including writing reference letters on their behalf (e.g., scholarships, job applications) and through guidance while facing difficult student-teaching

¹Latinidad describes 'any person currently living in the US of Spanish-speaking heritage from more than 30 Caribbean and Latin American countries' (Molina Guzman and Valdivia 2004, 207). Latinidades expands beyond 'nationality and ethnicity' to include cultural experiences and political commitments' and acknowledge differences across race, class, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, 'regional variations', and mixed cultural heritage (The Latina Feminist Group 2001 as cited in Flores & Garcia, 2009, p. 170).

racist-centered experiences. Their consistent support of me included constant comments of appreciation and acknowledging my strengths as a teacher educator and Ms. Raymond writing a letter on my behalf for a Diversity Scholar Award. Thus, in many ways, the testimonios are indicative of our historical and cultural circumstances and experiences as well as our present ongoing convivencia.

LAS MAESTRAS

Ms. Calderon, Ms. Gonzales, Ms. Raymond, and Ms. Sanchez (see Table 1) are the four teachers. They identify as female and all are in their 20s. In order to resist the notion of the “essentialized” Latina (Duran, 2016) and because identity is fluid and heavily contextually based (Holland et.al., 2001), I provide various ways and contexts in which teachers self-identify in Table 1 below

Table 1: First-year Latina teacher's self -identification

Name	Graduated from education program	Grade level	Subjects taught	School type	Contextually -based self-identification
Mariana Calderon	May 2019	3 rd grade Dual Language	Elementary, multiple subjects	Public	Nicaragüense, Latina, Nicaraguan, Hispanic.
Seci Ann Gonzales	May 2020	6-8 th grades	Science	University lab school, public	Mexican (to connect with her ENL students), Mexican-American (to specify to her students that her father is Mexican and her mother is white), Latina (to specify that not all Latinxs are Mexican), Person of color (when discussing cultural appropriation with students),
Julia Rose Raymond	Dec. 2019	5 th grade	Reading and Social Studies	Public	Puerto-Rican, Hispanic, Person of color (when talking about different experiences that people of color have/ had and includes herself).
Ruby Sanchez	Dec. 2019	3 rd grade Dual Language	Elementary, multiple subjects	Public	Mexicana, Latina (does not tend to use Hispanic), Person of color (with some hesitation because she can sometimes pass as white. Ruby sees herself as a person of color but recognizes her privilege due to her skin color, hair, etc.)

Our relationship as five Latina educators developed into communal mentoring and support when they began their first year teaching and all four agreed to document our monthly chats via zoom. Now in their second year as teachers, their firm commitment to this work continues as addressing pressing issues of inequality, racism, and oppression—not only for students but also for Latina educators like themselves—has become more urgent and as they look to supporting other Latina teachers entering the field.

The four teachers began their first year teaching in August, 2020 in different schools. Ms. Gonzales and Ms. Sanchez accepted their positions before they graduated and Ms. Calderón and Ms. Raymond were offered their current positions days before the school year began. Ms. Calderón and Ms. Sanchez teach 3rd grade in the same township and both are part of the Dual Language (DL)

Program at their respective schools. Ms. Raymond teaches in a different township and teaches reading and social studies to 5th graders. Ms. Gonzales teaches in a laboratory school associated with a large university in the state's capitol. She teaches science to 6th, 7th, and 8th graders (see Table 1 above).

As first-year teachers, they had to learn the practices of their specific schools and navigate the constant changes due to the pandemic. They had to adapt to being physically in the classroom with students, online, back in class, and back online. They had to figure out how to teach those physically in their classroom while engaging those attending class remotely. They had to learn to keep gradebooks, provide tests, and create curriculum and lesson plans all the while concerned about their students, trying to develop relationships with them, and navigating power struggles, microaggressions, and criticism. But they also had opportunities to build strong connections with peers, bond with mentors, feel support, and develop strength and certainty in their positions. Each also experienced first-hand what it means to be subjected to unequal distribution of power and privilege, pushback against what matters in teaching (relationships, truly listening to students, enhancing what students know and what matters to them) in favor of pragmatics of teaching, and how aims to counter inequities and racism are sidelined or reappropriated to reinscribe the colonialist project—their testimonios are indicative of this.

PROFESSOR

I am Mexicana and of Nahua descent. I was born in Mexico and Spanish is my mother tongue. I have identified as Mexican-American, Hispanic, and Latina previously. I am still comfortable with

Latina (with understandings of how Latinidad has been colonized—see Urrieta and Calderón, 2019) but no longer with Hispanic and specifically not with Mexican-American as I have come to realize it was a term I tended to use to convince others that I belonged here (multiple contexts) so I no longer use it.

As a Latina scholar, I have a longstanding commitment to working with, teaching, and providing service to youth from historically underserved and marginalized communities in urban schools. I began this commitment as a high school English teacher for Chicago Public Schools. Serving largely Mexican and Puerto

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Rican communities as a teacher and mentor for eight years provided me with rich experiences that undergird my aim to engage in work that disrupts schooling practices, policies, and structures that fail to support or engage multiply marginalized youth.

TESTIMONIO

In its fullness, testimonio aims to “bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for

²All names are pseudonyms and chosen by the participants.

action....The testimonio is intentional and political” (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012, p. 525). While its origins center testimonio towards speaking on behalf of silenced people and their histories (Yúdice, 1991), it has more recently been used as a form of sharing of one’s lived experiences, all the while maintaining the explicit goal of highlighting the voice and agency of people toward building communal struggle for justice (Reyes, & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Testimonio is a pedagogical tool, a politicized discourse that sheds light on the powerful womanist epistemologies and communal spaces that help Latinas resist oppression (Cervantes-Soon, 2012).

“Testimonio is [also] ‘a pedagogical, methodological, and activist approach to social justice that transgresses traditional paradigms in academia” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 363). As such, testimonio situates the individual within a collective experience and provides new understandings of how Latinas, as racialized/ethnicized women, conviven, come together, to build solidarity and bear witness to each other. Testimonios build bridges to Latinas’ collective power (Prieto & Villenas, 2012).

The testimonios by the four teachers act as constructions of self and contestation of power indicative in how they navigated their day-to-day experiences in their schools with their students, colleagues, and administration. To hear from their experiences is especially important as the 2020-2021 school year was a year of a pandemic and concomitant exacerbated disparities along with a demand for social justice advanced by the Black Lives Matter movement. Their work is situated in schools as focal places for the racism, oppression, dehumanization that is seen in macro spaces that sustain police brutality, racist policies, poisonings (water, land, air) and at the same time serve as places of potential reckoning to resist subjugation

and generate openings of alternate possibilities (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002). As such, their testimonios were meant to “document and inscribe into existence a social witness account reflective of collective experiences, political injustices, and human struggles that are often erased by dominant discourses” (Huber & Cueva, 2012, p. 393). Their testimonio, as a means for agency, is indicative of their profound sense of service and expands on what our elementary teacher education program focuses on—a deep understanding of the need for education that centers social/ racial justice. As such, their tellings of injustice and their response serve as testimonio; testimonio, by its definition, is a collective, political act of resistance (Anzaldúa, 1990). To those ends, their testimonios shared in our communal space serve as examples of ways they resisted oppression, created spaces for ingenuity and sabiduría or wisdom (their students’ and their own), and enacted pedagogies that challenge colonizing practices.

METHODOLOGY

Cultural Intuition as Methodology

As Bernal (1998) asserts, “cultural intuition is a complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic” (pp. 567-568). As such, cultural intuition is both a methodological process and an epistemological standpoint that strategically and purposefully centers these four Latinas as knowledge holders and creators in the teaching profession.

Cultural intuition as a methodology centers all the varied ways we know (including through the body) and what we know as central to analysis. Hence, this methodology provides nuanced ways to understand their individual and collective similarities and differences in the lived realities of women from similar political, ethnic, geographical, educational, generational, and professional backgrounds. The testimonios they shared

demonstrate “some of the ways in which their brown bodies experience the material realities of their context and whose experiences and narratives of survival, healing, and transformation embody consciousness, agency, and theory” (Cruz, 2001). Similarly, cultural intuition allows me to center who I am, my embodied experiences, and shared history with these teachers as part of the methodological process.

Cultural intuition also includes participants in the data analysis process (Malagon, et al., 2009). This helps reject research/ participant roles and their often resulting hierarchical relationship. This process also provides participants the power to determine how they want to communicate their experiences and tellings. Thus, this methodology illuminated patterns of oppressive practices and structures as the teachers recounted their experiences. It also allowed for revealing contestation of such practices and structures through actions indicative of teachers’ varied ways of knowing. I present specific, individual experiences out of many that make up the kinds of experiences, refusals, and wisdom shared by this group.

Analysis

When I realized that all four of my previous students would start teaching in August 2020, I invited them to monthly Zoom meetings to share their experiences. Our meetings had no specific questions although sometimes I would ask if they had anything in particular they wanted to share. They choose what they wanted to bring up and what to ask of each other.

I analyzed their work from a Latina epistemology that grounds their life experiences as first year Latina teachers. I focused on how and what they chose to share, how they responded to each other and the ways their reactions, responses, and support built *convivencia*. I drew on sources of

cultural intuition, including personal experience, literature on testimonio and Latina womanist epistemology, professional experience, and an analytical research process, to better understand the diversity and complexity of their experiences (Chang, 2017).

TESTIMONIOS

In this section I provide shortened versions of testimonios by each of the teachers. My intention is not to exclude their voices through these retellings but rather provide a telling from each to get at the varied and complex situations that they had to attend to as Latina first year teachers. Their testimonios are meant to illustrate the necessity of communal mentorship and deep *convivencia*. In another piece (Sosa, in press), I focus more fully on their testimonios and center their voices.

Administrative Moves that Maintain Inequity

As stated previously, Ms. Calderón and Ms. Sanchez are both part of the Dual Language (DL) program in their district. They both are third grade teachers and teach in different schools. The district requires that teachers who are part of the DL program plan their weekly lessons together by grade level. For third grade, there are six teachers in all including Ms. Calderón, Ms. Sanchez, and another Latina teacher, Ms. Flores, along with three veteran White teachers.

Both Ms. Calderón and Ms. Sanchez expressed challenges in their current position. For Ms. Calderón, the challenge has been in working with the three veteran teachers whose lack of input during planning meetings and lack of emphasis on student-centered curriculum may be outcomes of the limiting pervasive ideas some teachers seem to have about students in the DL program. For example, in exchanges with teachers in her school but who are not part of the DL program,

Ms. Calderón has come to realize these teachers often believe students in the program do not know English and that they are “low performers.”

Despite efforts by Ms. Calderón to address the lack of input from the veteran teachers regarding lessons by talking with the school principal, no changes were instituted by administration that would make the planning more equitable for the teachers and relevant to the students. In fact, when Ms. Calderón, Ms. Sanchez and Ms. Flores began planning and enacting their own lessons, the director of the DL program made it clear they could not plan on their own. As opposed to addressing the actual issue indicated in Ms. Calderón’s comment, “Collaboration is difficult. It’s hard to work with people who just want to do the bare minimum;” the focus became the procedure that the novice Latina teachers were not following, instead of the focus being on inequitable practices of leaving the planning to the novice teachers, demanding so little of students based on the curriculum developed, and inaction and nonparticipation from the White teachers.

When Ms. Sanchez shared her experience during our November meeting, she began by stating the following: “For me, this past week was kind of tough with the Dual Language team at my school because for the past few weeks we have felt very unsupported by administration. It all started from one day the second grade [monolingual] teachers complaining to our principal that they were feeling like they were not being invited [by the DL team] to do certain activities—cause the Dual Language program since it came to my school, they have always gone above and beyond like decorating and doing things for students.... So they complained to our principal and now like the Dual Language team isn’t allowed to do anything unless they invite the other teachers in our grade level.”

The history of this ongoing tension, as Ms. Sanchez tells it, is that the monolingual teachers have always been invited to partake but would push back on certain activities, especially those that required staying after school. So the DL teachers stopped asking and continued to work on activities and decorations that celebrated their students.

The directive by the principal to include the other teachers feels like a lack of support for the DL team. What is striking for Ms. Sanchez is the apparent hypocrisy in the talking up of the DL program, including prominently displaying it on the school district’s site, and the lack of support for the Dual Language team. Giving in to the monolingual teachers’ demands and the lack of support for the Dual Language teachers helps maintain inequity. The insistence by monolingual teachers that they be included as long as they provide the terms of such inclusion and the administration giving in to the pressure of this group while outwardly gaining recognition and receiving accolades for the strength of the Dual Language program serves to maintain the inequitable and racist structure that benefits White teachers.

The testimonios by Ms. Calderón and Ms. Sanchez reveal ingrained ideas about how much time and effort is enough to invest on students who are considered non-English speakers and “low performers.” It is also indicative of schools’ lack of investment in supporting their Latina teachers. To only focus on procedures, such as all DL teachers meet to create curriculum, negates the fact that the new Latina teachers are already doing most of the work as the others sit in silence or only participate if someone takes the lead. What is also telling is the exploitative dynamic constructed when a school emphasizes the importance and success of its DL program yet fails to support DL teachers in their interests, endeavors, and invites other teachers to join but on their terms, not the terms of the Latina

teachers. For Ms. Calderón and Ms. Sanchez, both action and inaction by administration supported inequitable practices that serve to maintain a racist system.

SILENCED VOICES AND TABOO TOPICS

Ms. Raymond

Ms. Raymond's testimonio was related to an experience that happened when she taught a lesson on the Second Amendment as part of her social studies curriculum. As Ms. Raymond discussed the Second Amendment, Mary, a White female student, expressed her view that Democrats wanted to take everyone's guns away and that people needed guns in their home for protection. Ms. Raymond clarified that some people want to see laws passed that would make guns less accessible. Her statement was in support of her Black and Latinx students who felt angry and were concerned about the constant messages that Whites need to protect their home and property from criminals—that is, Black and Latinx youth/men. As the lesson continued, Mary was visibly upset that there was opposition to her insistence on the freedom of owning guns.

That same day, Mary's parents reached out to Ms. Raymond and sent her their concerns via a messaging app the school uses for teachers and parents to communicate. Mary's parents claimed that Mary felt Ms. Raymond was biased against her opinions and prevented her from stating them by not calling on her. Rather than asking Ms. Raymond about what the lesson entailed, they made it clear that they did not like that schools talked about politics or racism but understood that Ms. Raymond had a job to do. However, they continued, she should allow all students to speak their opinions, even if she doesn't agree with them, which Ms. Raymond believes she does.

Mary's parents insisted Ms. Raymond no longer speak to their child individually because she felt "threatened" by Ms. Raymond. They asked that the homeroom teacher, a White male teacher, be present during any one-on-one interactions with Mary moving forward. The principal agreed that the student should be accommodated, framing it as a way to "protect" Ms. Raymond from getting into a

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"she said, she said" situation with the student.

Ms. Raymond saw the principal's decision as a move to undermine her position as a teacher. It also served to uphold the stereotype of Latinas as being loud, hot-tempered and volatile, as indicated in the suggestion that she made the student feel "threatened" and therefore the student should be protected by having a white male teacher present.

This incident highlights the inability of administration to hear Ms. Raymond's side and support her as a knowledgeable and fair teacher, thus sustaining the view of Non-White teachers as inferior and affirming the insistence by Whites to be kept comfortable. Ms. Raymond was not only deprofessionalized, but the decision also that she should be supervised by a White male teacher

clearly positioned her as someone who does not know how to behave and interact with White students.

Ms. Gonzales

Ms. Gonzales teaches 6-8th grade science. During one 6th grade science lesson that was fully online due to the pandemic, several Black girls began to comment on the hair of a White student, Amy, whose hair was braided in small cornrows with beads, seemingly in emulation of a hairstyle typically worn by Black girls. While Ms. Gonzales noticed Amy's hairstyle also and was considering how to address it, one of her Black female students asked, "Ms. Gonzales, do you think Amy is culturally appropriating right now?" Ms. Gonzales wanted time to process the event and to talk with her school team about it so she told her students that these types of conversations are important and that they would address it in the coming days.

That day, Ms. Gonzales spoke with her team and the principal. Her team and the principal concluded that it was a conversation that obviously matters to their Black female students and that it should be discussed as soon as possible. Ms. Gonzales also reached out to Amy after school. The student explained that she loved her friend's braids and wanted to style her hair the same way so she had her aunt do her hair. After watching a couple of videos and reading a book with Ms. Gonzales about Black hair, Amy came to realize how it could offend some of her Black peers. Ms. Gonzales also spoke with Amy's mother who was supportive and understood why some Black students were offended.

The following day, Ms. Gonzales hosted a homeroom Zoom meeting with all 6th graders in order to address the situation; Amy and her mother were present. The discussion centered on how to call people out when something they say

or do is offensive and how to do so with respect and kindness. The class discussed what it means to "pull people in" kindly into these kinds of conversations and not to single people out.

Ms. Gonzales also explained how Black women's hair has been discriminated against historically as well as in contemporary times. She also brought in opinions from Black friends and colleagues on how they feel about White people wearing Black hairstyles, as well as Tik Tok videos of people of color explaining whether they see it as cultural appropriation or not.

Ms. Gonzales reflected on this situation: "To be able to have those conversations and to be able to be so confident to have those conversations is huge. I actually got a lot of backlash from having that conversation with my 6 graders, not even from my team, but from other co-workers in my school. And so I had a lot of people saying that what I did was wrong and I don't agree with that so, that's hard to be told that what you did was wrong even though you know that what you did is exactly what you needed to do...."

As Ms. Gonzales sees it, these conversations are central to her role as a teacher and to social justice. She also sees how important it is to provide a space for the hurt and offensive feelings that her students of color felt. She emphasized that, "it was important me to because it was important to them."

As these four testimonios indicate, these teachers needed to navigate difficult situations that questioned their ability (Ms. Raymond), ignored their insistence on designing engaging curriculum that matters to students (Ms. Calderón), positioned them as less important than their White counterparts (Ms. Sanchez), and that forced them to deal with backlash when teaching a lesson guide by equity and anti-racism (Ms. Gonzales).

In our zoom chats, these teachers found ways to share, support, and strengthen their commitment to social justice as well as validation across such varied experiences. These communal spaces are necessary for Latinas across all institutions and contexts. To this I turn next.

EXPANDING COMMUNAL MENTORSHIP

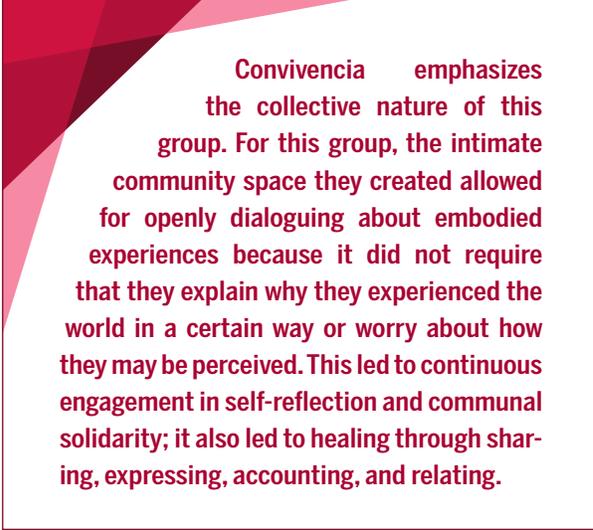
Convivencia emphasizes the collective nature of this group. For this group, the intimate community space they created allowed for openly dialoguing about embodied experiences because it did not require that they explain why they experienced the world in a certain way or worry about how they may be perceived. This led to continuous engagement in self-reflection and communal solidarity; it also led to healing through sharing, expressing, accounting, and relating.

Due to how this communal space and the process of testimonio allowed the teachers to see a more complete picture of systemic oppression Latinas experience in schools, Julia Rose, Mariana, Seci Ann, and Ruby were eager to support other Latina teachers who would be entering the field. We held an initial meeting with two Latina pre-service teachers in May 2021. In this meeting, they welcomed Ana and Lupe as kin; provided guidance, insights, and enveloped them in convivencia.

Their realization of the importance in welcoming other Latinas who are first year teachers into a communal space as necessary for their survival must be expanded by and for other Latinas as well. Communal spaces that support Latinas and nurture their womanist stance are instrumental to commitments of equity and social justice as the testimonios shared in these spaces are individual and at the same time collective. Forming new communal groups or expanding existing groups is necessary as all institutions must be challenged

to end existing damaging policies, practices, and institutional norms and all Latinas deserve mentoring, support, and spaces for convivencia.

The need to come together and collectively share experiences while establishing convivencia is strongly needed for Latinas in the teaching profession at all levels (early childhood, elementary, secondary, higher education) and at all stages of their careers (first year, novice, expert). These communal spaces and sharing of testimonios are rare in institutions and therefore this group can be viewed as one example of how to create such urgent spaces (even via zoom) as well as how to protect and sustain them. Thus, this work makes a case not only for expanding existing communal mentoring such as the one described here, but to guide and support other Latinas in starting communal mentoring in their own institutions



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and professions and with other Latinas across communities. As Sosa-Provencio and colleagues assert (2019), testimonios transcend the healing resistance for their authors. “Reverberating through their sacred narratives is a regenerative energy mending our collective histories and the fractures of invalidation which we as Latina

scholars and educators live” (p. 223). Latinas sharing their personal histories and testimonios in convivencia is transformational (Alarcon et al, 2011).

Latinas must continue to find ways to create intimate community spaces, be it via zoom chats, in person, and other means such as gathering for meals. In the constant sharing of knowledge,

approaches, and understandings, we deepen our refusal of the structures of colonization reinforced every day in institutions and in the broader society. And in full convivencia, we are able to draw from the wisdom of our ancestral knowledge (Castillo, 1994) to an awareness of the relational, communal, and community history that connects us as Latinas (raced/gendered) and to our agentic commitments to change.

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