



## Transformative Professional Development and the Promotion of Literacy Through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

This article recounts a narrative of professional transformation inspired by the works of Paulo Freire and Gloria Ladson-Billings and advanced by a participatory action research (PAR) project. The PAR team for this case study, consisting of the university teacher educator as a “coach” and a high school classroom teacher along with her students, examines the use of community-based knowledge in a form of *corrido* (ballads) studies. In this process, the ballads become the basis for learners’ engagement with literacy activities in the context of what is known as a *heritage language* Spanish class. The analysis focuses on the process of designing a culturally relevant pedagogy and ensuring its effectiveness through the examination of pre- and postwriting samples and students’ fluid identification with various ethnic labels.

### Introduction

**A**s conscientious educators, we strive to teach the whole person. We understand the value of being responsive to social, emotional, and cultural needs of our students. This understanding is essential for teachers working in underserved communities and/or schools with large immigrant populations. Since school desegregation, there have been many efforts to elicit new movements in education as a way to more effectively teach diverse students. More specifically, the use of concepts such as *culturally responsive teaching* and *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014) have been embraced as ideas that can better match the home and community cultures of students of color without previous experiences of academic success. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), the idea is to empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically

by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitude. Such concepts essentially impart a view that conceives of education as a site for social justice and classrooms as sites where social change can take place.

This article reports on a high school case study wherein we engaged with these concepts. It examines the connections between using a culturally relevant pedagogy for native Spanish-speaking students and the possibilities for improving and promoting literacy. It also examines this connection in service of fostering a sense of cultural pride and empowerment among the student population. The research strategy for the study has involved a two-pronged focus on two sets of dynamic relationships: first, a professional-development team collaboration between the teacher educator, Sara, and the high school teacher, Christina; and second, the ensuing pedagogical undertaking between Christina and her students in a *Spanish for native speakers* class (also known as a *heritage language* Spanish class).

The Spanish language, although spoken by many as a first and native language, is primarily taught as a foreign language in schools throughout the US. This has been the tradition in public education in California since about 1892 (Garcia, 2006). But in order to promote literacy, our research experimented with a model of pedagogy designed for a student-driven heritage language Spanish classroom in which the Spanish language is enhanced and practiced through culturally relevant communicative activities. We envisioned students' working collaboratively to practice their language skills through creative research into the cultural wealth of their communities, a process that would also promote a sense of agency in learners as they take charge of their own learning.

Clearly, there are challenges and barriers one needs to face in the designing task of a culturally responsive pedagogy that addresses the needs of Spanish-English bilingual students. The first consideration is that while students are all of Latino decent and learned Spanish as their first language, the population is varied in terms of literacy in their native language, previous formal education in their second language, and cultural nuances and understandings (Au, 1993; Cummins, 1986; Parodi, 2008; Valdés, 2001). Although some students continue primarily speaking the native language at home with their parents and families, without the opportunity to study Spanish in an academic setting, they have low to average academic reading and writing levels in their native language (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Valdés, González, López García, & Máquez, 2008). There is also a sizable group of students in this population who have good comprehension skills, but who are too reserved to speak the language when given the opportunity. With

minimal conversational skills, many feel intimidated to read in class or participate in a Spanish-language discussion. Students share the experience of being ridiculed by older siblings, relatives, or parents because of their low speaking proficiency in Spanish. This group is all too familiar with the term *pocho*, a label used for those of Hispanic descent who are no longer fluent in Spanish (Gonzalez, 2015; Landa, 2012). Beyond the variability in language abilities, there is also a discrepancy in the students' self-perceptions of their academic abilities. Christina, the classroom teacher, articulated a well-established axiom that "historically the majority of Latino students accept the idea that school and academics is not for them" (Attinasi, 1997; Garcia, 2008; Gonzales, 1997; Macedo, 1997; Menchaca, 1995; San Miguel, 1987).

During Christina's first year of teaching Latino students grouped together in the Spanish for native speakers class, she noted that learners seemed to have internalized a strong negative stereotype about the academic achievement of Latinos. This common scenario also played out against a few independent students who worked diligently but were often singled out by others who, despite seeking their help, did not engage with the academic assignments themselves. Christina observed that many of the students were unwilling to participate because they were "boycotting" academic engagement in the learning process.

We, as the coach/teacher team, were motivated to try different teaching methods to find what worked best for native language-speaking students. In search for a path that allowed us to move away from the mainstream grammar-heavy textbook used by countless language departments within high schools, we inquired about a more transformative way of teaching. Our deliberations and reflections on our own educational trajectories helped us craft a pedagogy driven by the connecting thread that students brought to the learning situation: their familiarity with the native language, albeit at different levels of Spanish language proficiency. We acknowledged that building acceptance and encouraging the students to learn in the native language was paramount and crucial to a native speaker's sense of belonging and the shift toward attaining literacy. But we also became cognizant of the need for students to first recognize their life realities based both on the relative gain or loss of the primary language.

In our discussions, we considered that the loss of primary language was in part the result of parents' desire for their children to succeed in an English-only environment in order to be accepted as productive citizens. We thought it was necessary to sustain an open discussion with students about the impact of Proposition 227 on native speakers of Spanish, families, and communities of Spanish-language speakers. As Weisman and Hanson (2002) and Gifford and

Valdes (2006) document, the challenges imposed by restrictive language policies have a great impact on the educational achievement of Spanish-speaking children in California public schools, within which Latinos are overrepresented. Christina observed that after gaining a deeper understanding of these language restrictions that continue to create impediments to students' academic progress (Blanton, 2014; Cummins, 1986; Krashen 1998), students were more understanding of their situations and more comfortable with speaking the language. As such, learning to appreciate the native language and developing an ambition to use it for further learning, along with the desired outcome of creating the sense of pride in being bilingual, guided the formulation of our research questions:

1. Through learning about a culturally relevant topic, will the writing and vocabulary usage improve for at least 80% of the students in the heritage language Spanish class?
2. Will Latino students demonstrate a higher level of cultural pride and a greater sense of belonging after learning more about their own culture and history?

In the next section, the article first engages with the theoretical dimensions of the study. We explore the rationale for adopting our methodology of choice, that is, participatory action research (PAR) with the use of Paulo Freire's (2007) ideas centered on the development of critical literacy, along with the concept of *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, posited by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014). The latter concept relies on Ladson-Billings's embracing of a "more dynamic view of culture" (p. 75). We will then proceed with details of methodological procedures used in Christina's classroom and discuss the findings of the study through the analysis of classroom work. We will conclude with an update and recap of the project gains over the course of three academic years and with the proposal of recommendations for classroom teachers.

### **Conceptual Framework: Culturally Responsive Teaching and a Freirian Pedagogical Model**

The framework adopted for this project conceives of all players, including the students who participate in the study, as active agents of change. It primarily considers the continual "meaning construction" generated by the processes of inquiry, learning, and practice leading to action and creation of new meanings. We used the model of participatory action research espoused by Kurt Lewin, advocating for the principle that "action research must include the active participation

by those who have to carry out the work in the exploration of problems that they identify and anticipate” (as cited in Adelman, 1997, p. 82). This collaborative approach is based on a two-way communication or dialogue framework that takes seriously the contributions of all members of the two teams of players identified at the outset of the study. Within this framework, the progress is “measured according to whether actions that arise from the process can actually solve problems (workability) and will increase participants’ control over their own situations” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 63).

Synchronized with the action research approach in our study, Paulo Freire’s ideas became the driving force behind our pedagogical design of the Spanish for Spanish speakers class. Describing a rigid comprehension of literacy, Freire (1997) posits directly in response to questions posed by educators that “literacy cannot be reduced to experiences that are only a little creative, that treat the foundations of letters and words as a purely mechanical” (p. 173). Instead, he argues for a more accurate description of literacy and defines it as a relationship of the learners to the world, mediated by the transforming force of the immediate environment of the learners within their communities. The learners, in Freirian terms, assume an active role in forging their own history by developing literacy that triggers and activates the very mechanism of active thought in order to transform society (Freire, 1997, 1998, 2007). As Freire (2007) states, “Teaching cannot be done by the top down, but only from the inside out by the illiterate himself, with the collaboration of the teacher” (p. 43). This formulation became the basis for our experimentation with a community-based pedagogy.

Related to this idea, a foundational question for this study was whether or not Latino students can demonstrate a greater sense of cultural pride and belonging through a pedagogy that acknowledges their cultural representation. This implies that classroom practices must take into account the cultural nuances of learner identities, not only in terms of their native language proficiency but also the varying cultures associated with their ethnic affiliations. To accomplish this goal, we followed the tenets purposed by Ladson-Billings (2014), who has pioneered and conducted extensive research in the area of culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogy. Culturally relevant or responsive teaching is a pedagogy grounded in teachers’ displaying of cultural competence in teaching in a cross-cultural setting in which each student is able to relate course content to his or her cultural context.

Keeping this principle in mind, Christina became keenly aware of an aspect of her own identity as a Spanish and English bilingual teacher, a factor that could prove advantageous in relating to her students.

As a child, she was schooled in a special award-winning school prized as a model two-way immersion program that targeted the development of bilingual academic skills in both English and Spanish. Initially, she was not conscious of the importance of the cultural agency she possessed until her second year of teaching in a high school setting where her students were predominantly Spanish-speaking students but were nonliterate in their native language. The following excerpts illustrate her frame of mind, explanation of these contradictions, and the initial process of reflection that helped in the design of literacy events linked to the community culture of her students:

I decided to go into teaching Spanish because of the importance in maintaining the language and its cultural importance. This cultural value was instilled in me through my education at Summerwood school. I was taught to feel important and feel pride because I was bilingual. Leaders at Summerwood, like principal Julia Reyes, fostered this cultural pride. The leaders at this school serve as an example of success and of upholding bilingualism as central to our identity, an example that we don't see too often. (Teacher's personal interview with teacher educator/collaborator, Winter 2014)

Once I got into teaching, it became difficult to hold this philosophy as part of my practice. In our department the method is to teach language by focusing on grammar principles. It isn't about teaching cultural topics, but rather can kids tell the difference in what past tense to use or can they identify when to use the subjunctive becomes the focus. As a new teacher it became easy to follow this curriculum, and so I did. (Reflection notes, Fall 2013)

However, based on the above reflections, Christina reached the conclusion very early in the process that following this curriculum was not in the best interest of her students. Informed by results of her self-reflection, her attempt to change the pedagogy in collaboration with her coach, Sara, allowed her to experiment with a more focused model of collaborative activities in which students first create projects that they research in their communities and then communicate their findings and teach the concepts to others. The projects possessed a cultural focus that made them relevant to students involved. Within this framework, the themes that students researched included *corridos* (Spanish ballads through narratives; Smithsonian Institute, 2002), *leyendas* (legends), and *días festivos* (holidays). For these units, students were given a nonfiction-based reading relevant to the cultural themes. Students were then instructed to research topics, create a newscast

in which they interviewed each other and family members, and later presented these topics to the class. The initial observation was that the students enjoyed communicating in their native language and expanding their literacies beyond the confines of the classroom and its routine curriculum.

Christina's intellectual and emotional understanding at this phase and the recognition of her strength resulted in a pedagogical design that targeted a set of desired outcomes for students (Garcia, 2015). Her trajectory collaborates Ladson-Billings's proposal in generating innovative ways that practicing teachers or those preparing to become teachers can offer through acknowledgments and appreciation for students' cultural capital. In fact, Christina's desired learner outcomes are closely in line with the goals of a culturally relevant pedagogy as outlined below:

1. Academic success: intellectual growth that students experience as a result of classroom instruction and learning experiences.
2. Cultural competence: the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their culture of origin, while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture.
3. Sociocultural consciousness: the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyse and solve real-world problems. (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75)

## **Methodology**

### ***Sample and Participant Selection***

Students for this study were recruited from two class sections of heritage language Spanish. There were a total of 61 participants, 38 females and 23 males. The majority of the students are 9th graders (22) and 10th graders (21), while 13 are in 11th and two are in 12th grade. All students placed in the heritage classes have identified Spanish as being their first language and/or their primary home language. The majority of the class is of Mexican descent, while two are from El Salvador and one is from Peru.

The high school is situated in east San Jose and is one of the 11 high schools of the East Side Union High School District (ESUHSD). The demographics of the school are 60% Hispanic or Latino, 30% Asian, and African Americans, Filipinos, and Whites each represent 3% of the student population. With such a large population of Latino students, Spanish is the most common home language. Of the students, 22% are English learners and 46% of the school's population

has been reclassified as fluent English-proficient. More than half the student population (56%) is eligible for free or reduced lunch (California Department of Education, 2013). The school is situated in an area with low-income apartments in the immediate neighborhood of the campus.

### **Measures**

The study used three different measures. First, pairs of writing samples were collected from each student at the beginning and the end of the unit of study as a set of pre- and posttests. The writing sample instructed participants to respond to the same prompt for both tests. This was a very general prompt that asked students to share their knowledge about *corridos*. The pre- and posttest writing samples were compared to check for vocabulary usage, grammar, spelling, and the overall content of the material.

The second measure was the cultural questionnaire. This survey provided information about ethnic identity. The questionnaire was adapted from a similar measure developed by Fuligni, Witkow, and Garcia (2005). Variables measured within the questionnaire were ethnic labeling and three subscales measured at the ordinal level. The three subscales include centrality, private regard, and pride.

**Ethnic Labeling.** Students were presented with a list of ethnic labels. The list included national origin (Mexican, American), hyphenated labels (Mexican-American), and pan-ethnic labels (Latino, Chicano). Students were asked to indicate all of the labels that they felt applied to them and to add others that applied to them, but that were not on the list. Next, students were asked to identify the label that best described them.

**Subscales: Strength of Ethnic Identification.** Students then completed items from three subscales adapted from the *Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity* (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). All items were modified to be more general so that members of any ethnic group could complete them. The questionnaire was also translated into Spanish. The following are the subscale categories:

- The first of the two subscales measured centrality. Using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), the centrality subscale included five items that assessed the extent to which the students' ethnic label was central to their definition of their own self-identity.
- The second subscale, private regard, measured the extent to which students had positive feelings toward their ethnic group. An example of an item from this subscale is: "I believe



that I have many strengths because I am a member of my ethnic group.” The same scale as described above was used. There were four items on this subscale.

- The third subscale measured student’s pride in their home culture. Samples from this subscale include, “I enjoy the traditions and practices of my culture,” “For the most part, I practice the same traditions as my parents,” and “I believe it’s important to keep my family’s culture alive.” There were a total of 10 items for this subscale.

Finally, the third measure consisted of interviews with 20 randomly selected students. Throughout the study, the teacher in her action-researcher role kept an observation journal as a reflective tool. The purpose of this journal was to take notes on the lessons, student reactions, and important student comments about the activities in the unit. However, at the end of the study, participants were randomly selected for individual interviews. Out of the pool of 20 students, three participants were specifically targeted for a more in-depth interview. The three students selected for in-depth interviews highlight the growth and change in their perceptions in such a small time period. These three students were selected because they are not academically strong, are shy about speaking Spanish, and yet they demonstrated the most growth throughout this unit of study. These interviews provided deeper insights into the students’ perspectives on bilingualism, their feelings toward learning about their own culture, and their growth in understanding of their culture.

### ***Procedure***

The teacher researcher, Christina, in collaboration with the teacher educator began preparing the curriculum and the apparatus for the study during the summer (2013) before the beginning of the school year. During this time the teacher researcher also completed the online training through the Santa Clara Human Subjects Committee. Upon completion of the online training modules, Christina developed a study description with the teacher educator before it was submitted as the proposed study application to the Office of Research Compliance and Integrity for anonymous review. The teacher educator encouraged the teacher researcher to keep a reflective journal from the beginning of the summer (2013) and through the final phase of the study implementation, findings, and beyond during the 2013/2014 academic year. The dialogues were based on the first 12 months of the study and are the classroom teacher’s reflections.

The study was conducted at the beginning of the school year and was presented three weeks into the new school year. At this point students felt more comfortable with one another and were more used to being back in “school mode.” Students were recruited and given background information for this research project at the beginning of the school year while we went over the class syllabus. They were briefed with a lesson about culturally relevant teaching and its significance. They were also told that the unit coinciding with the research was about *corridos*. Students were also reassured that their identity would be fully protected by being assigned a code to protect their anonymity for the study. They were also told that even if they decided not to participate in the study they would still learn about the unit and engage in the activities, but they would not have to complete the questionnaires or other measures.

Students who returned parent consent forms and provided their own consent to participate first completed the short writing sample during class time. This was done as a preassessment on their knowledge of *corridos* and also as a way to gauge their writing skills. Students were given 30 minutes to complete the writing task. Many students were confused about what to say about the musical genre and they expressed their concerns. The teacher assured them to not worry about their grade but rather to think about *corridos* as a genre, to think about their purpose, and to try to address them in their writing. Christina reports that students were frustrated initially and wanted more direction to better understand the topic.

The following day, students completed the cultural questionnaire during class time. This same questionnaire was also given at the end of the unit. The questionnaire provided information about students’ ethnic identity. Students used assigned three-digit ID codes to complete the writing sample and questionnaire. Students were given 30 minutes to respond to the questionnaire. Most students completed it within 20 minutes.

After completing the writing sample and the cultural questionnaire, Christina’s class began the unit on *corridos*. They began with an introduction to *corridos* that covered the elements of the song, the importance of a *corrido* as a literary tool, and the poetic structure. The first major assignment for students was to interview an older relative, preferably a grandparent. Students worked in groups to come up with five questions they wanted to ask their relatives about their lives and what times were like when they were growing up. The second part of the interview was focused on listening to a *corrido* with which the interviewee was familiar. Students then asked their interviewee about the *corrido*. These questions were prepared in advance and were about

the theme of the *corrido*, the message, what was occurring during the time the *corrido* was popular, and other pertinent information. Students then learned to develop an interview protocol for researching the knowledge that family members had about *corridos* and their significance in everyday life.

The next aspect of the unit consisted of learning to analyze two different *corrido* songs. The first *corrido* was “*Corrido primero de mayo*,” which was composed for Sara Garcia’s father, a rural school-teacher from Chihuahua, Mexico (Garcia, 1994). The second *corrido* analyzed was “*La maldición de la Malinche*,” which tells the story of an Aztec princess who helped the Spanish conquer the Aztec empire through her help in translating from the indigenous language to Spanish. The tool developed to help students through the analysis process was the “*Corrido Analysis*,” a handout developed by the teacher researcher for student use. This tool was developed for students to look for key information in the song, such as the date it takes place, who the protagonist and antagonist are, what type of conflict they are facing, and what were the theme and message of the song. The *corrido* lesson was also combined with a history unit about Mexico’s independence and liberation from Spain. Throughout the combination of both units, students continued to practice writing through guided activities. The guided writing prompted students with sentence frames and questions to develop topic and concluding sentences, as well as detail and description within the body of the essay.

The final assessment of the unit consisted of students’ tasks; they worked in groups to create their own *corrido*. The ballad had to be about one of the important figures we learned about in the history lesson and the song had to contain the elements of a *corrido* (rhyme, calling the audience’s attention, the date of the event, names of the important figures, the story itself, and a closing farewell). The projects had to be recorded as a group, uploaded to YouTube, and then presented to the class. Once finished with the *corrido* unit and project, students were asked to complete the writing postmeasure. The writing sample consisted of the same writing prompt students completed at the beginning of the unit. Again, students were given 30 minutes to complete it. This time they asked fewer questions when completing their writing sample. Students now had a deepened level of understanding of *corridos* and a better grasp on how to organize their writing.

Finally, at the concluding phase of the unit, students were given the cultural questionnaire to complete again. The purpose of having students complete the questionnaire again was to see whether their responses were more positive toward their sense of belonging within their culture and their understanding of it.

## Findings

### *Writing Sample*

Students' writing samples were analyzed by looking at different writing elements. These elements include: (a) the use of learned academic vocabulary, (b) opening and closing sentences, and (c) content.

Most of the writing tasks from the beginning of the unit demonstrated a very low level of language and writing skills. The majority of the essays were composed of three to four sentences, without a beginning or closing sentence. The content most students wrote about was highly subjective and mainly focused on whether they liked or listened to this music genre.

During the unit the class practiced developing "mini-essays" through guided writing activities using graphic organizers. At the end of the unit, we created an essay as a class about what we had learned about *corridos*. Considering that students now had learned more academic vocabulary and developed a better historical knowledge and appreciation for the music genre, they had a lot more to contribute in their prewrite. Other than vocabulary and content, we also looked at the elements within writing. We thought of examples for opening sentences, what a thesis is, and examples of concluding sentences.

The analysis of postwriting samples demonstrated growth in students. There were still grammatical and spelling errors, but it was clear that the content and organization had improved considerably. Students now began their essay with an "attention grabber," which for most was the newly learned fact that *corridos* originate from European ballads and were taken to Mexico with the Spanish conquistadores. The content of their writing was also deeper in analysis as they talked about the history of *corridos* and how they are a reflection of the times. The vocabulary was also more advanced in comparison to the prewriting sample. Many of the students succeeded in using words that were brought up and discussed in class. It was significant that the students were able to integrate their use in the crafting of their essays.

### *Cultural Questionnaire*

The first part of the cultural questionnaire consisted of students' selecting ethnic identity labels. They were able to select all of the labels that they thought identified them, and they were also required to select the best label they used to self-identify. Overall, the majority selected Mexican as the best label to describe them (29 students selected this as the best one). The second most-used label was the Mexican-American label, with 11 students identifying as such. As demonstrated in Figure 1, there was a small shift in label selection

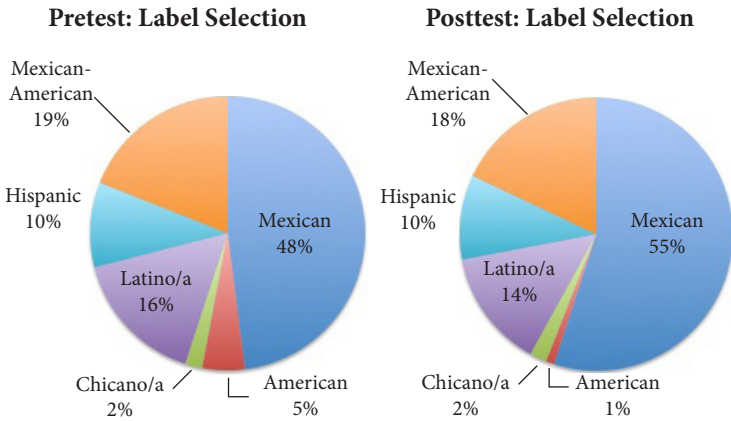


Figure 1. Selection of best ethnic label.

from the time when the questionnaire was taken as a premeasure and then as a postmeasure.

Participant responses to the cultural questionnaire were analyzed by comparing the averages of the pre- and postscales. The averages of each of the three subscales, centrality, private regard, and pride, were compared individually. The results demonstrate a positive change in attitudes during the six-week period of the unit.

Centrality measures the importance of culture to one's identity. At the beginning of the unit, students scored an average of 3.07 (5 being highest) on the subscale. At the end of the unit, the average score was 3.83. This reflected a 0.76 increase in the average scores from the pre- to the posttest. It can indeed be interpreted as an attitude change in students' views of culture as being central to their personal identity. Private regard measures student views toward others within their own ethnic group. The pretest average score was 3.34 and the posttest average was 4.1. Similar to the centrality subscale, this shows a 0.76 average change. The last subscale measured the level of students' cultural pride. This subscale also demonstrated an increase in students' positive attitude. Average scores of students' cultural pride increased by 0.85. Among all three subscales this was the one with the greatest difference in average scores between the pre- and posttest (see Figure 2).

### Interviews

Students were also randomly selected and asked for an evaluation of the unit of study. The interviews were conducted after school and during lunch. Students were asked to reflect on the unit of study and

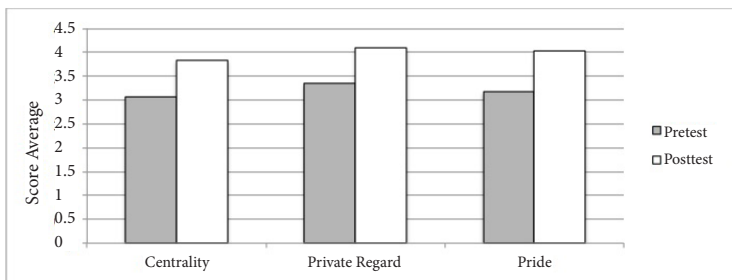


Figure 2. Cultural questionnaire subscale results.

share their thoughts on bilingualism and culture. The interviews provided Christina with an insight not only into her students' perspectives related to the unit itself, but also in relation to their individual fears and feelings of being bilingual. A few overarching themes surfaced while she conducted the interviews.

One of the common themes among all students was the agreement that being bilingual is an asset. Students were asked if maintaining their native language was a worthwhile effort and why. Students all shared similar responses that touched on availability of opportunities, ability to help and communicate with a larger population, and the opportunity to travel to other Spanish-speaking countries. Still, many students imparted feelings of apprehension linked to the act of speaking Spanish, whether in the context of the classroom or at home. This fear stems from the embarrassment of mispronouncing or saying something incorrectly, which can lead to being laughed at. An interesting comment that arose while on this topic was that students felt that they were not adequate speakers in either Spanish or English. Many of the students joked about speaking "Spanglish" as they mesh words and phrases together to communicate their message.

All of the 20 students agreed that they value speaking Spanish and that they hope that their future children can also speak it. Linked to the idea of Spanish-language fluency, one male opened up about his feeling of embarrassment for his nieces and nephews, who are unable to communicate with their grandparents because they do not understand Spanish. The group all agreed that they want to maintain their Spanish so that they can continue communicating with their parents and grandparents. This again demonstrated the value of maintaining the language and culture as a way to feel connected and prideful of one's heritage.

Judging from the content of the interviews, it became evident that there existed an identity challenge faced by these individuals. The

adolescents voiced the concern of not fully belonging to any culture. This feeling of void or incompleteness can be more generally attributed to the process of acculturation that succeeds in fading aspects of the native culture and weakens the individual's affiliation with the identity attached to it. This seems to create aspects of culture that situate students in a "gray area" where they do not fully belong to the mainstream culture but are also slowly drifting away from their home culture.

### **Poststudy Reflections**

It should be noted that although this study continues more than 10 months after the initiation of the action research project, only partial results are reported in this article. Still, we contend that the planning and development of a cultural pedagogy proved to be a transformative experience for all the study participants. The instruction was focused on engaging students through units of study that blend pedagogical approaches and community knowledge in academic learning based on learners' lived experiences. This process succeeded in transforming the classroom experiences of the teacher and the learners into empowering practices on both individual and collective levels.

The *corrido* unit was a transformative starting point in teaching that continues to generate ideas for other curricula that enhance knowledge and promote student learning. For instance, after the *corrido* unit, the class moved into language-heavy yet culturally rich works such as the works of Gabriel García Márquez.

Engaged in the execution of the action research project, Christina grew comfortable and learned to do constant reflection in collaboration with her university coach on the significance of becoming an educator charged with the task of promoting literacy through community events for Spanish speakers. It became an empowering experience for the teacher to witness learners' sense of pride in their culture and language. Through the analysis of current events, students also felt empowered as they engaged in debates wherein they began arguing for bilingualism and the importance of valuing diversity and multiculturalism. All in all, within the research site a new school culture is taking shape with the introduction of novel events and the development of an academy for the heritage language Spanish speakers that is founded and managed by the students.

Among students' learning experiences is also the understanding of family dynamics and generational change within their own community. This form of knowledge was not previously included in the school curriculum. They also gleaned from participating in the study

of *corridos* a way to include the active roles of their parents and grandparents in being the informants concerning historic events and the value of heroic figures in the history of Mexico and the US.

The teacher further imparts that through the participatory action research project, the heritage language Spanish program has expanded. She reports that the number of classes has grown in concert to the appropriate number of the students in the entire school. The school now offers five sections and plans are to open a sixth section for the next academic year. In addition, beyond the in-classroom framework, the action research project has inspired the teacher to use the curriculum to serve school-sponsored, communitywide events that promote the biculturalism and bilingualism of the school's major ethnic group and to get the entire community involved with the education of youth. In other words, the school function has expanded and improved as a result of shifting views to educate learners as agents of change and to transform lives by guiding students to consciously confront how their cultural productions are positive aspects of their education on a daily basis.

### **Conclusion**

This project started with a participatory action research project directed by the goals of nurturing academic success, cultural competence, and sociocultural awareness in learners (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2009, 2014). The adopted model of a culturally relevant pedagogy succeeded in tapping into a wealth of cultural resources of learners in the heritage language program and advanced the project goals by increasing students' academic performance, interest in their cultural resources, and their investment in them. Indeed, such investments at the research site have grown to represent a student-led "academy" within the school that encourages Spanish-speaking learners to take up the challenges of a more rigorous curriculum, resulting in improved academic outcome.

Also, as the result of this intervention, the needs of students are now inseparable from the identity politics of language education, as literacy education has reflected the creation of a sense of ownership of one's cultural resources and pride in being bilingual and bicultural. Consequently, the youth are better equipped to value their history and cultural identity in the service of the wider community. The heritage language Spanish program has been successful because students themselves are "getting the word out," not only in publicizing the class at the school site but contributing to the cultural awareness and education of underserved communities in the school's surrounding areas.

Finally, an explicit goal of this documentation was to capture as-



pects of how a high school teacher mitigates her professional growth through critical reflection. We firmly believe that critical reflection can offset the results of the restrictive language policies that were propagated through the credentialing process and the induction phase. It is in understanding teacher development beyond the university preparation and advocating for critical reflection on practice that action research promotes the notion of teacher empowerment. This takes place when teachers develop their knowledge-work skills and pedagogical capabilities through researching their own practice toward the “action” of change and agency.

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