

## A Call for Inclusion: The Impact of Ethnic Identity Addressivity in Shaping Future Educators

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**Abstract:** We draw upon the Latino Identity Orientation and Teacher Identity frameworks to examine the critical role of affirming students' ethnic identities within classroom settings and curricula. Through a narrative inquiry approach grounded in *testimonios*, Jazmin, a co-author of the paper, shares her personal experiences in navigating the K-12 and higher education systems. Jazmin's stories highlight how the presence — or absence — of ethnic identity inclusion shaped her academic journey as a student and developed her identity as an educator. Our guiding questions are: How does erasure of inclusivity in schools, particularly regarding ethnic diversity, impact students' academic experiences and their internalization of their ethnic identity? What impact does addressivity of ethnic identity in curriculum and in classrooms have on student's identity formation and academic achievement?

Guided by the Latino Identity Orientation (LIO) and Teacher Identity (TI) frameworks our inquiry sheds light on human experience, demonstrating how identity and environment can shape one's narrative reality and everyday life (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001). We explore the importance of valuing a student's ethnic identity within the culture of the classroom and in the content of the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Utilizing a narrative inquiry approach to share personal experiences from both the K-12 educational system and higher education illustrates how the inclusion or absence of ethnic identity in the classroom can significantly guide a student's academic journey and shape an educator's emerging professional identity. Jazmin, a Latina undergraduate student currently pursuing certification in English adolescent education and a co-author of this article, shares her stories. Integrating LIO and TI frameworks to interpret her narrative, Jazmin's experience underscores how social environments, particularly educational contexts, influence the development of students' cultural identities and shape how persons see themselves and others. The central question guiding our research is: How can *testimonios*, like the ones provided by Jazmin, be utilized to describe the lived experiences of Latina educators and help explain the value of demographic and ethnographic representation in education?

We use narrative inquiry to answer our guiding question. Narrative inquiry, as described by Creswell (2014), emphasizes the relationship among biographical stories, cultural identities, and processes of finding meaning and significance in one's lived experiences. Specifically, real-life examples from Jazmin's educational experience highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of understanding one's identity as a future educator. Jazmin's story demonstrates how an inclusive curriculum can foster a sense of acceptance and belonging for students in the classroom. The impact of inclusion in education is profound, especially as the current wave of attacks on critical race theory and culturally responsive curricula threaten to marginalize students, especially those from minoritized groups like Latines. The erasure of inclusion not only undermines their interests and ideas but also disrupts students' sense of comfort and belonging in a space where they spend the majority of their day-to-day lives — schools. The absence of identity addressivity in the curriculum risks failing to prepare all students to become informed, functional members of society; and limits their ability to critically engage from multiple perspectives with complex issues. Fostering an increasingly inclusive educational environment not only broadens the scope of what education can achieve but also empowers future educators to envision and create a more equitable and diverse academic landscape.

### **Latino Identity Orientation (LIO) and Teacher Identity (TI): Two Connecting Frameworks**

There is no linear way an individual can come face-to-face with their racial/ethnic identity, and the Latino identity is no exception. Despite representing a significant portion of the U.S. population, Latinos have often lived in the shadows of American society because of their ethnicity. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (United States Census Bureau, 2022), nearly 63.6 million Hispanics/Latinos (of any race) lived in the United States in 2022, accounting for approximately 19.1% of the total population. But those 64 million Latine Americans tend to suffer marginalization in terms of access to resources and status in the U.S. Marginalization creates liminality which complicates identity formation and underscores the importance of exploring and analyzing Latino identity, especially the identity of Latine educators. Teachers are members of a profession in which one's culture deeply influences teaching practices and student engagement. When educators are prevented from reflecting on or embracing their cultural identities a disconnect in their self-understanding occurs, one that may negatively impact both how they teach and how they understand their underlying purpose in being a teacher.

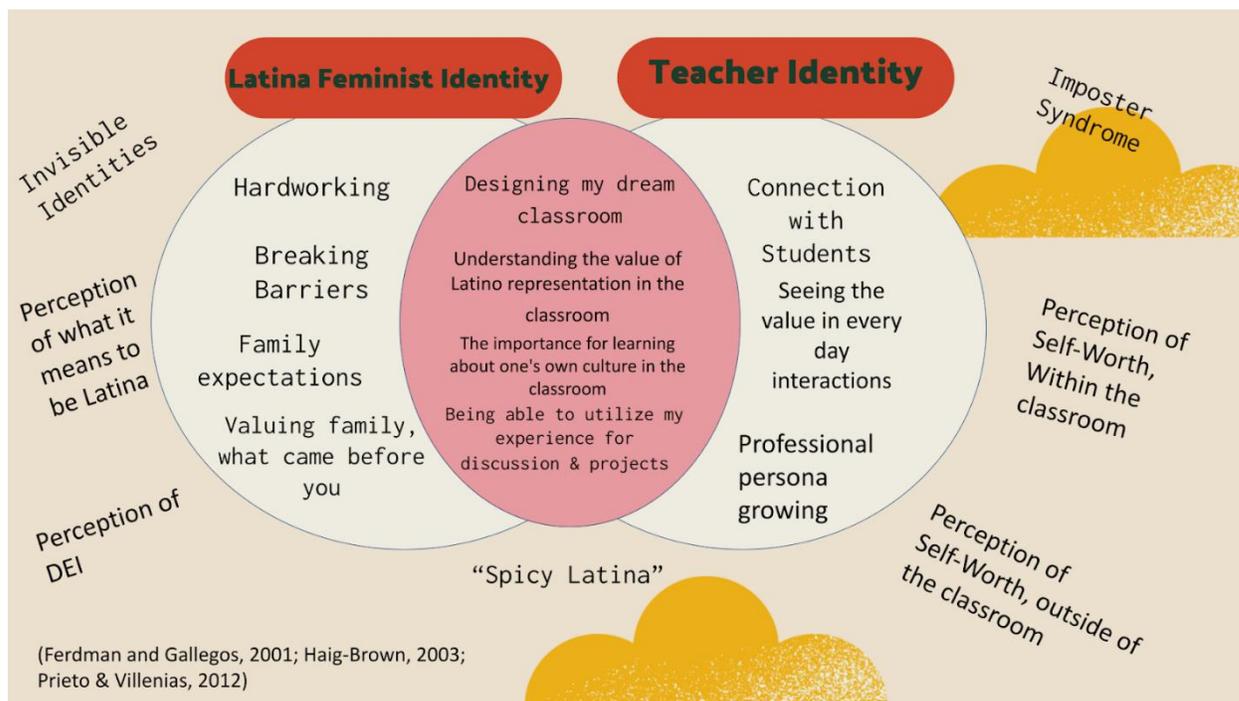
A teacher's identity develops every day through decisions made in the classroom. Every lesson plan, every interaction, and every response to students contributes to the ongoing development of a teacher's personal-professional identity. Teacher identity is aptly described as "personal-professional" because, while teachers are professionals, the work of an educator is extremely personal and often emotionally exhausting, as teachers serve as mentors, advisors, instructors, and advocates. Teachers balance delivering curriculum, maintaining discipline, and creating a comfortable space where students can thrive. Teachers' emotional labor necessitates the importance of recognizing the personal side of teacher professionalism. The combination of beliefs, values, biases, and bureaucracy constituting classroom teaching creates a space where authority, identity, and vulnerability intersect daily. The power dynamics that characterize the teacher-student relationship have been metaphorically described as mirrors of power (Pishghadam, Golzar, & Miri, 2022). Mirrors are a metaphor apt of student-teacher interaction because the teacher and the student see each other's *perceived identity* as they interact. These identities should not be erased from classroom culture but instead should be reflected upon and refined so that perceived identities align and converge with intended identities. The accuracy of identity perception between student and teacher plays an important, communication-clarifying role in the classroom. Burying one's identity in the workplace makes the mistake of assuming one's identity must be hidden for the sake of professionalism. But personalism and professionalism are not incompatible. Professional decision-making often involves personal aspects. When teachers lead by example, incorporating their own identity into their work-a-day lives, refining their identity in response to others, class becomes a safe and comforting atmosphere in which students can share their identities, too. Providing students space to connect with teachers more personally promises to initiate educational exploration inspired by a leveling of power between students and teachers, when both are considered by each other to be persons.

The development of a racial/ethnic identity happens through the metaphor of the "lens." The lens metaphor summarizes how persons with marginalized identities view their ethnicity, wider societal/political issues, other ethnic groups, and how their experiences and social circumstances shape these lenses. Examples of social circumstances developmental of identity include entering the workforce, experiencing discrimination, and navigating life transitions. Orientations to one's ethnicity include undifferentiated/denial, white-identified, Latino as other, sub-group identified, Latino-identified, and Latino-integrated. Depending on which orientation a specific person falls

under depends on how their “lens” is set. The lens may be closed completely, tinted, external, narrow, or wide (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001). The perspective provided by identity, when identity is considered to be a lens, may also influence how other Latinos and white people are perceived, impacting assumptions, expectations, and interactions across cultures. When growing up, for example, Jazmin’s orientation to Latina identity fell under the “sub-group identified” orientation. She never felt she was part of the Latino group due to seeing her Latina identity as minimized by her light-colored skin and her inability to speak Spanish. During college Jazmin’s orientation began to shift, prompting transformation in how she viewed, engaged with, and perceived the world. Given opportunity to explore her identity in- and outside classrooms, Jazmin now sees herself as Latino-identified, culturally committed to her ethnicity. Jazmin’s evolving personal-professional identity is illustrative of what it means to come to terms with one’s Latina identity as an educator. Using narrative-driven research and the LIO framework, we seek to understand the role in education of identity addressivity — respect for other persons and taking personal responsibility for how we treat others (Bakhtin, 1993) — and how Jazmin’s identity influences her worldview, her pedagogical practices, curriculum choices, and relationships with peers, instructors, and students.

**Exploring the Nexus of Latino Identity Orientation (LIO) and Teacher Identity (TI)**

Drawing on Latino Orientation and Teacher Identity frameworks, we explore how Jazmin’s life experiences shape and are shaped by identity, highlighting her simultaneous journey of discovering her Latina heritage and developing her educator persona. Jazmin’s experience illustrates how identity development is not linear, but rather episodically shaped by interactions with other people in social institutions (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001). Figure 1 describes key elements of episodes important to Jazmin’s personal-professional identity development.



**Figure 1: The Beauty and Battle of Colliding Identities**

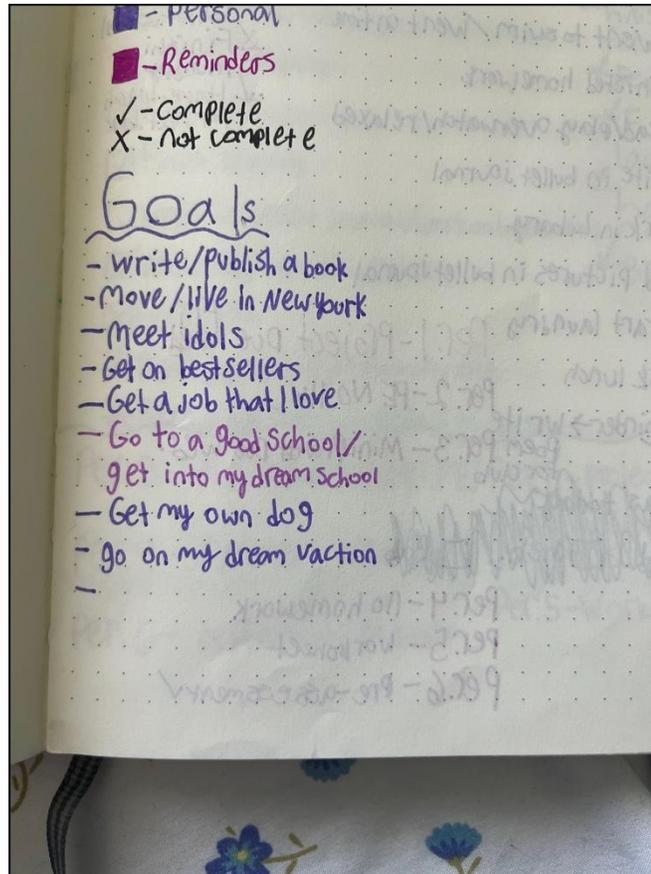
The first time I (Note: Throughout the article first person pronouns refer to Jazmin.) realized I did not look Latina enough was in the 7th grade. I was sitting with my peers, and a boy who was Latino was speaking Spanish. Excitedly, I exclaimed I was Mexican. He then proceeded to tell me that no, I was a white person. This was the first of many experiences where my own identity was told to me by another person. I was in high school when I discovered the term “white-passing.” White-passing is when a person of color is perceived as white and is often viewed as having more privilege than other individuals in the relevant community of color. Being constantly pushed into a box of not being Mexican enough because of the color of my skin, I constantly denied my Latina heritage outside of my own home. Whenever I would bring my Latina identity into the conversation outside home, I was told I was not Mexican enough. I originally played these experiences down as normal; but all the while wished I knew what “Mexican enough” meant. It wasn’t until college that I finally explored my ethnic identity as a Latina. When reclaiming my own ethnic identity within academia, reflection on past experiences made me realize that on multiple occasions I have experienced racist microaggressions through comments by peers that I was not Mexican enough.

On the other hand, my Mexican heritage was given disservice even when I was recognized as Latine. Growing up, I was told I would never be smart enough to attend any institution of higher education. When college admission season came around, I was admitted to several schools. To even be admitted into higher education was an extremely significant accomplishment for me. However, when sitting at lunch with a close friend of mine, I expressed my shock that a prestigious school had admitted me. My friend proceeded to say the only reason I was accepted was because I said I was Hispanic. If they saw a photo of me, they would have never let me in because I don’t look Mexican. After this experience, my relationship with things like diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI), and other programs to help students like me became skewed. The experience took away a significant accomplishment from me and caused me to avoid taking advantage of programs made to promote equality in education, to help people like me.

Before entering college, I came across very few Latina educators. My first-ever Spanish teacher was an exception to that rule. But her deepest uniqueness consisted in allowing me and my classmates to bring our own culture into the classroom. Before our holiday break, we had a party, and each student was assigned to bring in a dish representative of the cuisine of their culture. By doing this, the teacher allowed us to share a piece of each other’s culture that was outside the color of our skin or the language we spoke. She allowed me to bring in a cultural artifact and tell my peers and classmates, without fear of refutation, that I am part of Latina culture. It was so beautiful to be allowed that validation.

At about the same time, in the eighth grade, I was also allowed to showcase in class what I was passionate about in the world. In my second class with a History teacher, he did something none of my other teachers were doing at the time: he allowed us to express our passions. I was taking this class in school year 2016-2017 a time when the American political atmosphere, with the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, was intensifying racial hostility. Because of this atmosphere of racial animosity my passion for politics increased greatly. This fire inside me turned many of our Socratic Seminars into emotional, extremely passionate, heated rants. The teacher didn’t stop any student who went off topic, he didn’t tell any of us we were wrong, he created an atmosphere that was safe for every student to show their knowledge of and their feelings about what was happening in politics at the time. He saw that we were connecting our lives to the History concepts we were learning. Because of the motivation he inspired in us, and

because of this space he provided us to develop our thinking, this was the first time I created goals for myself. I made a checklist of goals in 8<sup>th</sup>-grade (Figure 2), the same year I was told I would never be smart enough to get into college. I ignored this claim against me because of the teacher's motivation. If it weren't for him, I doubt this article would exist. '



**Figure 2: My 8<sup>th</sup>-Grade Checklist of Goals**

Six years later, I matriculated at Marist University. While at Marist, I had to take two Spanish classes. Going into a higher-level Spanish course terrified me, but my Spanish professor relieved those fears. She cultivated a welcoming, supportive, and safe classroom environment that encouraged all students to develop confidence and proficiency in speaking Spanish. She and I developed a meaningful connection, and she provided me space to share personal things about myself regarding my own Latina heritage. She allowed me to use my background to motivate my love for Spanish. My cultural identity became an asset, not a deficit. After finishing her course and home for the holidays, I noticed a change in my ability to understand Spanish. I was able to listen with ease to what my family was saying. This was the first time a Spanish course taught me to speak and understand a language that was part of my blood and family history. All because this professor took time out of her lesson plans and teaching days to have personal connections with students. She was the one Spanish professor who shared her background with us, allowing us to become immersed not only in the language but the culture as well. This course shaped who I wanted to be as a Latina educator, integrating my own culture into my classroom and allowing

space for students to share their own culture as well, supporting a healthier atmosphere for study and better academic performance among students in the class.

The next year, that same Spanish professor asked if I would be interested in working at an after-school Spanish program, teaching Spanish to elementary schoolers for 5 weeks. I took the job. Among my class a few students had Hispanic backgrounds. One student came to the class already knowing every word in the curriculum. Whenever he had the opportunity to show off his knowledge, he jumped at the chance. It was rewarding to see his eyes light up when he had the chance to share a word of Spanish. He came in every week with the same positive and excited energy to share his culture with the class. I was able to see Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Practices at work and see the importance of this approach (something now at risk with rising anti-DEI legislation). This wonderful experience demonstrated the importance of allowing space for students to share their culture as a way to motivate their learning.

### **La Maestra Within**

Being a swim instructor for three years made me realize I was born to be a teacher. Coaching taught me many things at a time when my Latina identity and teacher identity worked hand-in-hand. Figure 3 displays some of the many gifts I received from swim students, each a reflection of meaningful connections we built. These students were not with me hours a day like in a school classroom. They were with me at most 30 minutes a day, 4 days a week, for 2 weeks.



**Figure 3: Gifts from My Students**

The teaching technique I adopted with each student was different depending on their aquatic aptitude, but the one thing that was the same for each and every student was that I provided space for the student to talk about themselves. Even though the time the student had with me was notably short, each of them and their parents expressed to me how much of a difference I made in their lives. Another commonality among these students is they all succeeded. Bringing the personal into the classroom, or the pool in this case, fosters a sense of belonging that motivates students to learn, and this is a technique that I intend to take out of the pool and into my future classroom. With these experiences, I was able to understand the importance of providing space for those students to share aspects of themselves with their teacher.

When I moved from the West Coast of the United States to its East Coast I was on my own and away from my heritage, which made me reflect on what it meant to be Latina. Through this reflection, I realized for most of my life, being Latina was an invisible identity. An identity that was considered visible for most Latines was invisible for me because of the color of my skin and because of my inability to speak my native language. The result of this reconsideration of my invisible identity made me take charge by claiming my Latina identity. I would claim this identity whenever I would get the chance... But when claiming Latina identity, I found a sense of anxiety building inside me. This sense of anxiety came from fear that someone wouldn't believe me. I was scared I would relive past experiences of being told I didn't fit the part of a Latina. A time when I wasn't allowed to claim that part of myself. But exploration of my teacher identity supported development of my Latina identity. Identifying as Latina also allowed my professional persona to grow, shaping me into the educator I am today. I am a Latina educator committed to sharing myself with my students and committed to teaching my students how to claim and share their own identities, too. Through exploration and transcendence of past fears, I now have a sense of pride when I call myself a Latina educator because *I am Latina enough!*

### **Testimonios: Cultural Identity as an Asset**

The growth of one's identity is ever-changing and, much like the process of learning, never done. My teacher identity is ever-growing. When entering higher education, I erroneously adopted the position that my identity was set in stone, that there was no growing left to be done. It never occurred to me that the development of my identity was just beginning. Upon reconsideration of the idea that my identity was unchangeable, I've realized I adopted this stance during my time in the K-12 system because there was never time nor space devoted to exploration of that identity. This made my identity and my lens seem determinately fixed by forces outside my control. Not until I was in Education courses that touched on topics of bias and identity did I realize my identity is always alterable. This made me realize that how I see elements of my ethnic identity is constantly changing based on ongoing experiences.

As of right now, 2025, in my early twenties, I am still in the process of becoming an educator, using my lived experiences to develop a theory of teaching that incorporates my core values and tells me how best to apply my *valores* in a learning environment. My take-home message from the TI (Teacher Identity) framework is mirrors of power. Any authoritarian power an educator wields too often undermines efforts to educate students by putting them off learning (Shapiro, 2001). During my limited but varied teaching experience, I have learned there is something educationally energetic about sharing power with students. Addressivity of identity within the classroom is extremely important to empowering my students to keep an open lens regarding their identity. In addition, self-reflection both in- and outside the classroom helps

teachers understand what they can do differently to improve the atmosphere of their classes. Self-reflection is especially important to understanding any bias negatively affecting teaching and recognizing what that looks like in the classroom so that it may be eliminated from classroom interaction. Identity addressivity may look like many different things in different academic and organizational contexts; but, come what may, I intend to display items in my classroom that show my students aspects of my identity. By combining the TI and LIO (Latin Identity Orientation) frameworks into a system of classroom management, I intend to have an open lens as a Latina educator and provide opportunity in my classroom for my students to follow my lead and share facets of their identity, too. Engaging in mutual identity addressivity, we will all collaboratively learn to attend to many ways of learning and knowing in our classroom community.

A useful way for teachers to engage in a process of self-reflection is to write *testimonios*. As a process, *testimoniar* (to give testimony) is the act of recovering *papelitos guardados* — previous experiences — that have been silenced or left untold. *Testimonios* bring to light experiences too long crumpled in the corners of our lives, articulating previously unspoken events into a narrative that describes perceived personal, political, and social realities (Delgado, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). According to Prieto and Villenias (2012, p. 414), “*testimonios* consist of life stories usually told by a person from a marginalized group in society to an interlocutor who can write down and disseminate them.” However, interlocutors are an ancillary feature of *testimonios*. Persons can explore their own experiences to produce an autoethnography of identity-forming experiences in their own lives (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Freeman, 2006). *Testimonios* engage a powerful process of self-revelation that carries explicitly political intent, disrupts silences, and offers a counternarrative that challenges dominant discourse. Haig-Brown (2003, p. 420) affirms that *testimonios* forge solidarity among persons with identities affected by having minoritized status in society. A *testimonio* is not simply a personal matter: “rather, it is the story of an individual who is also a part of a community. A *testimonio* presents the life of a person whose experiences, while unique, extend beyond her/him to represent the group of which she/he is a member.” *Testimonios* turn lived experiences into data that help fund, via self-analysis, a process of identity-formation.

On the next three and a half pages there are five *testimonio* letters that illuminate pivotal, identity-forming moments in Jazmin’s K-16 educational journey. Jazmin’s letters encompass the love for her younger self, the adolescent struggle to remain true to herself, and the quiet acceptance of self that followed upon explicit identity exploration. Yet the *testimonios* also extend beyond the past and the present unfurling into dreams not (yet) realized, strengths still developing, and chapters still waiting to be written. Jazmin’s *testimonios* give advice to her past selves and establish aspirations for future ones. They tell the story of her developing identity as a student and as a teacher as she’s experienced the evolution of those features of herself. The letters to future Jazmins anticipate evolutions in identity-formation for herself and for her prospective students (Lingard, 2007; Lingard & Mills, 2007). Building on Delgado, Burciaga, and Carmona (2012), Jazmin continues the legacy of (re)claiming *testimonio* as a form of writing created by and for Latinas — but equally applicable to other minoritized groups — as a means to reflect on existence, identity, resistance, and liberation; to challenge dominant cultural narratives about who holds the authority to construct knowledge and whose knowledge is deemed valuable (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). More commentary on the pathways and patterns of Jazmin’s identity development through her school experiences follow her *testimonios*.

**Te Veo**  
*I See You*  
**(Age 8-9)**

Dear Little Jazmin,

I hope you're doing okay and not facing down into every room you enter. I know you have a habit of hiding behind your frizzy hair that may seem like a lion's mane to some people, but I know you love your hair. You see it as a lion's mane, but instead of letting that mane control you, you use it to your advantage. I want you to keep on doing that. Take something that many people see as your disadvantage, as something to be ashamed of, and turn it into something new.

You are going to learn that the ability to do that is your superpower. The ability to take something negative, something that may add to the world of worries you carry on your shoulders, and mold it into a crown. Being put into the spotlight because of this ability may seem like it will never come, but it's coming. Soon, you will learn the phrase "It's a marathon, not a sprint," and unfortunately, being valued will feel like a marathon. The ribbon to this marathon may be coming farther and farther, but it's coming. Soon, your lion's mane will become a crown to everyone around you, and people will see your hair as you see your hair, something people just want to have and enjoy. Take that power to change the perception people have of you and take it to new heights.

You stay quiet because you feel no one listens to what you have to say. Reaching for a sense, any clue of familiarity within the classroom. Desperate for anything that will blanket you in the confidence needed to participate within the classroom, a curl in someone's hair, a familiar phrase, anything to create a sliver of hope to attach to, like the other students do. I know it feels impossible to obtain, but soon that family will be there. Soon you will be familiar with other students who are the same as you.

You will see what your other educators did for you, and while basking in the hope they provided you over your career, you will give that hope to the students who have your reflection in their eyes. The students who are terrified to speak, the students who share your traditions, the students who feel a warmth in your future classroom because that sense of familiarity they have reached for, for too many years, is finally right in front of them. Take the hope that those teachers gave to you and, as a thank you, let it light a fire inside you to light up your classroom. Provided the space.

**La Lucha por Ser**  
*The Fight to Be*  
**(Age 14-15)**

Dear High School Jazi,

I never know what I want to do with you. One part of me wants to hug you, one part of me screams at you for searching for something that may never exist.

I want to scream at you because you are constantly searching for something that isn't there. And that is the approval of others. Unfortunately, you still search for that, asking for permission to take the next step. You need to stop. You need to do this for you, not to be met with appreciation, but instead to be met with a version of yourself that you're proud of.

Because of you, you still struggle with that.

We can blame other people all we want, but at the end of the day, it was we who raised us to become a person who craves forgiveness.

Fight the box they place you in.

I want to hug you at the same time. Hug you for all you fight for, all the things you go through. To tell you that your identity is something that shouldn't be approved by others. That you're Mexican enough, smart enough. Simply just enough, even if others say differently.

I fear we will never get peace. I fear we will never stop fighting for our voice to be heard. For people to see and appreciate our identity, and for us to appreciate our identity. The fighting never stops; we just get stronger. And sometimes we fall. Sometimes we're on the ground in our fighting gear with our sword by our side while wiping blood on our cheeks, exhausted, wishing for the fighting to stop. But that's all we know. So we get back up and we keep fighting. We fight for our voice to be heard, for our success, and our fights have not gone unnoticed.

Your appreciation is coming.

Maybe one day our peace will too.

### **Soy Valorada y Soy Escuchada**

*I Am Valued and I Am Heard*

*(Age 18)*

Dear Freshman Year in College Jazi,

I can feel your anxiety from here. You look in the mirror that day before walking to your first ever Education course since deciding that one of your purposes in life is to teach your passion. You are thinking you are going to walk into that classroom and be looked down upon.

You enter the classroom, and one of your first assignments is to make an art project of things that make you, you. In the next class, you come in with your project, and everyone asks questions about your interests. Every class you participate in more and more. That sense of belonging you've been searching for all of your life has finally reached you. Every class is filled with information, discussions on readings, but it's also filled with laughs and personal stories. You talk about your journey, why you want to be an educator, there is still that fear that what is being spoken is not going to be heard; but that fear is squashed very quickly when your professor says, "Go on." For once, your voice is heard, when you speak, you aren't interrupted, and for once, you are truly learning.

**Arraigados en la Resiliencia, Creciendo en Fuerza**  
*Rooted in Resilience, Rising in Strength*  
 (Age 28)

Dear Future Jazi,

Do you ever feel grown? Do you ever feel like you feel like you're walking on the edge of madness, this constant state of limbo of becoming the person you hated the most, or are you finally feeling as if you are in a state of comfort and peace? I fear I will never have peace. I fear that I will never be able to have a soulmate because of my inability to give peace to myself, thus leading to the inability to give peace to another person, a person who will be by my side for our future.

This letter can be filled with questions. Questions of the person that we have become. That if we ever stop feeling as if we are running out of time. Constantly listening to being unsatisfied with what we have accomplished, even if the things we have accomplished are more than what we were expected to do. I will leave my questions unanswered, much like my future. Leaving things unplanned, unanswered are still our toughest battles. Leaving things absolutely up to the universe is something you fear, but look at all the universe has done for us so far. We've gotten this far because we are meant to be here. Even if it feels out of place and like the craziest thing we have ever done in our lives. Please, keep going far.

This letter is supposed to be filled with metaphors, poetry, and objects that may not be tangible, but I must ask: Do you ever physically like yourself? Do you look in the mirror and hate the things that make you, you? Such as the gap in your two front teeth, the way your eyes squint when you truly smile? I fear I will always be the ugly duckling in any situation I am in. I hope that you do not feel this way. That the validation you seek is not from other people but from yourself, for both tangible and intangible things. I hope I find myself, the aspects of myself that are from my heritage, not like a burden. It has taken years to find each curl within my hair, a symbol of strength, and each curl symbolizes different versions of me. When will other features start to feel like that?

Every day, I dream of you, dream of the person that you are. It took years to develop the ability to look within the mirror and like who I see; I hope you haven't lost that ability. I hope you're proud of us, because I am.

**Ser Es un Acto Político**  
*Being is a Political Act*  
 (Ageless)

Dear Other Latina Educators,

This is a letter full of questions. I wish I could get answers to guide my journey. With that being said, if there is anything the Latina woman has taught me over the years is that every journey is different. Identity is not linear, and there is something so beautiful about that. About the nonlinear way each person sees the world and sees themselves.

There was something so comforting about walking into the classroom and hearing someone who spoke like my family. Who had their native tongue sewn into each word they spoke, through an accent, through words. There was something so incredible about caring within the classroom. Caring about my family, my personal life, and letting me speak about whatever. The willingness to take time out of the school day to connect with each student was an incredible talent I wish to have, like each of you.

I hope you don't stop fighting. We shouldn't have to. I have no idea when our identity became political, but maybe it always has. Maybe our identity has always been political. Has always been a fight.

Within this series of letters, I complained so much about not having peace. Is peace a privilege we will never get to have? From the minute we label ourselves as Latinas, do we strip that feeling of peace and replace it with the political feeling of our identity?

I hope one day we all get to feel that privilege.

Jazmin's *testimonios* describe an identity originally forged in the fire of an elementary education characterized by exclusion from classroom life and resentment towards classmates already more easily accepted into school culture. Says Jazmin of her early academic life:

When I was in elementary school, I always felt like an outcast. I always academically fell behind because of an undiagnosed learning disability, and I always felt different because of my looks. When I saw students identify racially, ethnically, or culturally with the teacher or with books we were reading, jealousy grew inside me because I wished and hoped I would connect with the teacher and the curriculum the same way other students had. I would walk into the classroom, read books, or turn on the television to see no one who looked like me. Curly hair was rarely seen in the media, which made me struggle to figure out how to take care of my hair. I was already filled with dread that my body would never look like the girls in magazines. To write this letter, I stepped into the shoes of my elementary self and was grateful to tell her one day she would encounter faculty who would affirm and value her identity, and shortly, she would be the one providing that space for all kinds of students.

High school repeated the pattern of suppression of self but fanned feelings of frustration into flames of anger as attempts at self-expression constantly met with silencing from others in the school who were already committed to cultural and societal *status quo*. Teacher identity first connected with Latina identity in Jazmin's mind as teaching began to look like a good positionality from which to speak in one's own voice. Hear Jazmin on her high school experience:

When I was in high school, I struggled a lot. I was in a constant battle for my voice to be heard. My attempts to express myself were constantly being interrupted by those who already and always saw themselves represented positively in the media. During this time, I decided my place was to be an educator, and it was the first time I realized I needed to win the fight to have my voice heard. This letter was the most difficult to write because I knew when I was in high school how much I needed to hear the words I was writing. It was/is an

extremely tough challenge to love the girl who hated herself so much and to bend towards better accuracy, to clarify the lens through which she saw herself.

Not until college, specifically in an Education course taught by the co-author of this article, Christina, did Jazmin experience at school the feeling of belonging she had desired for so long. Most importantly, Jazmin found a sense of belonging on her own terms. The more she felt, thought, and acted as herself, the greater her sense of belonging in Christina's class. Acceptance dissipated anxiety. From Jazmin's point of view:

it was a time of bliss, when I was a student in Christina's classroom. This was the space where it felt like, for once, there was no fight; I could simply just exist with my identity. Christina modeled how to cultivate classroom communities where inclusion and diversity were welcomed and appreciated. Students were encouraged to share their values, beliefs, and backgrounds. Higher education, more specifically the course I am discussing in this [Age 18 *testimonio*] letter, was the first time I felt like I truly succeeded in an academic setting. I would like to highlight the final sentence of my college-aged *testimonio*, "for once you are truly learning." This was because I had space to share a piece of myself through assignments. I wanted to convey within this letter the importance of personalized assignments, and show the impact it had on me.

Contrast/comparison of her academic life prior to and during college created a conflict of feelings Jazmin needed to resolve. She had come to envision a reconciliation of her identities as a teacher and as Latina but remained unclear on how to achieve that peace of mind. Questions outnumbered answers; but college had given Jazmin the will and determination to synthesize the difficulty of seemingly dual identities into a single sense of self, a self in which she could take both personal and professional pride. In Jazmin's words:

Now turn the page to read a letter that reveals the futuristic possibilities of acceptance of every part of my identity. Building on these ideas, this [Age 28 *testimonio*] letter illuminates the love, curiosity, and admiration I have for my future self, who I know will never stop fighting for her place at the table. This letter was extremely difficult to write. How do I write a letter to my future self without a million questions? Something that stands out in this letter compared to the rest is the fact that it is emotional and raw. There is something within this letter that the other letters do not convey, and that's confusion. Confusion of the person that I have become in the future.

Jazmin's final *testimonio* helps to cut through confusion about her developing identity by invoking two important precepts of identity formation. First, we can learn about our own identities by considering other selves in circumstances similar to ours. Second, our identities are deeply rooted in the powerful questions pressed upon us by our positionalities. As Jazmin says:

This... [Ageless *testimonio*] letter takes both the educator side of myself and the Latina side of myself and combines them into one letter that navigates through both of those identities. There is something that I share with all other Latina educators, and that is the constant battle to be heard. That is highlighted through this letter. Another term I would like to highlight is "the personal is political." It is a shame that one's identity has become so political that it is a fight for that person to be heard constantly. This letter highlights shame and is a message to those who

make others' identities political. This letter ends in hope. Hope that one day the personal won't be political and that all can share a space where their identity won't be shamed through microaggressions or belittlement. I want to pose a powerful question: *Is peace a privilege we may never truly experience?* Through the exploration of my identity within these letters, the term 'privilege' comes up a lot. There are privileges that I have that my fellow Latina educators do not have. I hope one day I and other Latina educators walk into a space and have the privileges of all, and that safe space that may be a privilege now will become a right, and that starts within the classroom.

Jazmin's *testimonios* lead us to the intersection of the TI and the LIO frameworks and reinforce the importance to identity-formation of having space within the classroom for students to explore and express their ethnic identity. Equally important, the integrated frameworks create space for educators to express and explore their ethnic identity, also. The educator's job is to create a safe space for students to share their experiences, that is, express their identities. The best way to make that happen is for educators to express their identities in class, that is, for teachers to share with students stories from their professional and personal lives. If a teacher wants students to share identity-forming experiences in class then the teacher needs to share identity-forming experiences with students in class. As Milner & Tenore (2010) discovered, teacher disclosure during class discussion tends to generate student disclosure. And, as we are demonstrating here, disclosure is fundamental to a teacher's understanding of self. Finally, a teacher's understanding of self is the lens through which teachers understand their reasons for teaching and their reasons for teaching in the ways they do.

### **Final Reflections: Erased Narratives, Latino Identity, and the Educational Landscape**

Exploration of Jazmin's developing identity as a Latina educator offers a prime example of a student succeeding at school because, even if sporadically and belatedly, she was given the space to share her identity within the classroom. Recent attacks on DEI (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion) programs in education disrupt the school culture of acceptance that DEI aims to establish and diminish the possibility of success stories like Jazmin's. Absent DEI, the hopelessness and anxiety characteristic of anomie are likely to permeate the school experiences of minoritized students. Without supportive programs, many students within minoritized groups feel alienated in the classroom. Their sense of alienation from their education may even contribute to drug abuse and suicide-related behavior (Kaczkowski et. al., 2022). School is a place where children spend the majority of their time taking in their surroundings and shaping their view of both themselves and the world. The erasure of the space to share one's identity at school clouds and distorts the lens through which minoritized students view themselves and others.

But the same may be said of students from the dominant culture who are routinely given space to explore their identity, while others' identities are left out of school discourse. They, too, pay a heavy psychic cost when deprived of a culture of inclusivity. In not reading about or, more importantly, experiencing first-hand the cultures of others, students from the dominant social groups are likely to misunderstand the multicultural nature of the world in which they live. As Bishop (1990) observed, actions like book bans provide perfect examples of the process of exclusion-inclusion anti-DEI initiatives perpetrate and perpetuate. Book bans cut two ways simultaneously. They present an absence (minoritized groups) and they assert a presence (socially dominant groups). If students only see reflections of themselves in the mirrors of

power, they are likely to grow up with an exaggerated sense of their importance and value in the world. Instead of learning to appreciate diversity, they will have learned to continue the cycle of coercing others into identities not their own, of prescribing identities to others instead of letting others develop their own identities. On the other hand, providing students from dominant social classes the space to understand other cultures has the positive impact of widening the lens through which they see themselves and other people. DEI aids in shaping their lens to accurately represent the world around them and their place within it. Without inclusivity, there is no room for growth of one's identity to include an understanding of the identities of others. Promoting inclusivity within the classroom prepares every student for both higher education and everyday work life in a multicultural world.

Given the educational benefits to all students of inclusivity of identities in classroom life, Jazmin's decision is clear. Identity addressivity has become part of her identity:

Within my future classroom, understanding the importance of incorporating identities within the classroom in hopes of motivating my future students to share their own identities, I intend to incorporate my own identity within the classroom. Within my classroom, my students should be aware that they are walking into a space that is occupied by a Latina educator, in hopes that this display of my own identity will cultivate a safe space for students to share their own identity. I *will* take the time out of my lesson plan for that safe space to be provided. Within my classroom, that safe space will not be a privilege but a right for every student.

I offer you one final message — words of wisdom passed down from one of the most insightful elders I've ever known: my *bisabuela* (great-grandmother), Lupe Gonzalez. She always told me, “*Make them list, mija!!!*” And in those four words, my *abuela* passed down a legacy of courage, resilience, and the unshakeable belief that my voice matters. I encourage educators, and especially Latina educators, to make and hold space for our identities to be recognized and affirmed with education. Representation matters. You matter. Your students matter.

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