

***Momentos de Cambio:*  
Cultivating Bilingual Students' Epistemic  
Privilege through Memoir and *Testimonio***

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article, we describe how students were invited to write and publicly read their *momentos de cambio* (moments of change) stories—memoirs in which they recount moments of significant change, both joyful and traumatic, in their lives. Drawing from elements of Latino critical theory, we conceptualize these stories in part as *testimonios*—opportunities for the students to voice their own truths and experiences in the world. We describe how the concept of *momentos de cambio* served as a rhetorical resource for claiming epistemic privilege and interpretive authority across the school year.

**KEYWORDS:** memoir, testimonio, biliteracy, epistemic privilege, interpretive authority

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As a fourth grade bilingual teacher, Patricia (second author) worked to position her students in authoritative ways—as people with powerful stories and understandings about the world. This purpose stemmed largely from her distrust of deficit discourses regarding bilingual and immigrant students and families, and the marginal positions that her students and the bilingual program held within her school district and community. Many educators agree that biliteracy development is best supported through meaningful instruction, trusting and caring relationships, and valuing of children’s culturally grounded experiences or funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Noddings, 1984; Pacheco, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999). However, this is easier said than done, particularly in school

contexts impacted by neoliberal reforms emphasizing narrow and standardized measures of student growth and teacher evaluation (Menken & Solorza, 2014).

In this praxis article, we describe how Patricia reframed a district-mandated writing unit on memoir as *momento de cambio* (moment of change) narratives to generate a curricular space in which her students could voice how significant life events altered their lives or perspectives on the world. We detail how she arranged for and carried out the unit and responded to her students' uptake of the phrase *momentos de cambio* throughout the school year to claim interpretive authority. Our examples are drawn from a collaborative research project we conducted in Patricia's classroom focusing on discursive positioning and identity during literacy instruction. Drawing from Latino critical theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Delgado Bernal, 2002), we illustrate how students recruited the concept of moments of change to construct both textual and interpersonal understandings, and in the process how Patricia recast her students' memoirs as *testimonios*, inviting them to read them publically. We end by identifying the complexities of conducting this type of work in elementary classrooms.

### **Memoir as a Potentially Democratic Genre in Bilingual Classrooms**

Every student has stories to tell, making memoir an accessible, potentially democratic (Bomer, 2005), and inviting genre to some reluctant writers (Gibney, 2012). This is particularly important for students from low income and other historically marginalized communities, whose narratives may foreground topics typically not sanctioned in school (Jones, 2004). As Stegemoller (2012/2013) argues, "Because multilingual writers' stories may be ignored or misinterpreted, it is important to pay attention to the stories writers tell about their own experiences" (pp. 5-6).

### **Legitimizing Student Experiences**

For bilingual children, rejection and misinterpretation of their experiences may center around experiences of immigration, community language practices, and racial discrimination. Indeed, Patricia's students' memoirs included some common and seemingly politically neutral topics—becoming a big brother, a best friend moving away, or parents getting divorced—as well as more politically charged events embedded in experiences of immigration, income inequality, and parental incarceration. However, the boundaries between experiences that seem neutral on the surface (e.g., getting a new pet) and politically volatile ones (e.g., immigration) became blurred in students' memoirs, as exemplified by Chicharito's<sup>1</sup> description of traveling to his uncle's *rancho* in Mexico, where he received a new pony.

Legitimizing students' stories and histories is particularly important given asymmetrical power relationships that reinforce deficit views about bilingual children (Fránquiz, Salazar, & DeNicolo, 2011; Valencia, 2010). Patricia refers to this as a "*pobrecito* [poor little kid] syndrome," wherein educators feel sorry for students and their experiences without recognizing that their experiences (ranging from the privileged to the tragic, and everything in between) are generative of learning and literacy. As Campano (2007) argues, students' experiences are locations from which to interpret and speak back to the world, offering students epistemic privilege: knowledge and understandings that may flow from experiences of injustice or inequality that enable them to understand and communicate complex ideas about the world (Moya, 2002). This is illustrated in an excerpt from Randy's memoir:

*Mientras mi mamá estaba en la cárcel mis hermanos me estaban pegando y me decían cosas malas. También ellos me quitaban mis juguetes, y cuando mi mamá salía, ella me apoyó y me defendía de mis hermanos porque ellos me pegaban.*

[While my mom was in jail, my brothers would hit me and told me bad things. They also took away my toys, and when my mom got out of jail she supported me and defended me from my brothers because they hit me]

While Randy's memoir is rough around the edges, his story is a compelling one, illuminating complexities of human experience that transcend binaries like good and bad: His mother committed a crime, but she is also his defender and a source of love and comfort to Randy. Randy's memoir serves as a counternarrative to simplistic assumptions about incarcerated individuals, particularly those from marginalized communities.

### **Testimonio, Counternarrative, and Critical Witnessing**

Patricia's instruction was guided in part by tenets of Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit theory). Like critical theory and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), LatCrit theory emphasizes humanizing practices to explicitly name and work against oppressive social structures. However, LatCrit theory, which some consider to be a sub-group or child of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1998), centers counterhegemonic work on structural inequities and experiences of injustice unique to the Latino/a experience. LatCrit theory values individual histories and storytelling as a form of counternarrative (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). LatCrit scholars in particular describe *testimonios* as "narrative[s] of marginalization" (DeNicolo & González, 2015, p. 109) that function to give voice to the experiences of the oppressed (Freire, 1970), and that construct cultural knowledge both with immediate audiences and across generations (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). The agentive act of giving testimony, or *testimoniando* (DeNicolo & González, 2015), to one's experiences and injustices challenges

dominant paradigms and power relationships. Such *testimonios* can be viewed as *papelitos guardados* or safeguarded papers (Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013). *Testimonios* are also meant to be shared with people who may not otherwise hear or attend to the experiences of the Other in order to prompt social action and change:

The word testimonio carries the connotation in Spanish of the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense. Conversely, the situation of the reader of testimonio is akin to that of a jury member in a courtroom. Something is asked of us by testimonio, in other words. (Beverley, 2000, p. 558)

The audience is considered a witness, hearing evidence that cannot be ignored. Alarcón, Cruz, Jackson, Prieto, and Rodríguez-Arroyo (2011) argue that *testimonio* requires:

a deep learning, necessitating an openness to give oneself to the other. It involves what Emmanuel Levinas (1994) described as “receiving the lesson so deeply [that] the lesson of truth is not held in one consciousness. It explodes toward the other”.... (p. 370)

This explosion toward the other leads to what has been referred to as “critical witnessing” (Dutro, 2009). Later in this article we describe students’ critical witnessing. This is quite different from typical expectations for school writing, in which the audience may be limited to the teacher, and particularly when the only response is editing advice or simply a cold numerical evaluation.

While Patricia’s feedback to her students involved emotional and qualitative responses regarding students’ writing, it wasn’t until a month after the memoir unit that she began to understand her students’ writing as *testimonios*. As Saavedra (2011) explains, *testimonios* are told to people “with access to take the testimonio narrative to a larger audience and bring awareness to conditions faced by oppressed peoples” (p. 261). Indeed, we found ourselves in this position of access.

*Testimonios* have been used among Latina/o scholars (Alarcón et al., 2011), in teacher development (González et al., 2003), and in classrooms, including at the elementary level (DeNicolo & González, 2015; Dutro, 2009; Saavedra, 2011). DeNicolo and González (2015), for example, examined Latina/o emergent bilingual students’ use of *testimonio* during a writing unit to counter deficit assumptions. Similarly, Dutro (2009) explains that critical witnessing in classrooms can facilitate both attending closely to children’s everyday testimonies while also consciously noticing and resisting deficit discourses of historically marginalized students and families. Later we describe how we and Patricia’s students made this happen and the tensions we faced along the way. First, we provide background on our research and Patricia’s school context.

## **Research Context and Methodology**

Lara (a university-based researcher and former bilingual fourth grade teacher) and Patricia (a current bilingual fourth grade teacher and classroom-based researcher) co-designed the study. Our purpose was to explore how Patricia and her students discursively positioned one another to construct and/or contest social and academic identities (Wortham, 2006) as well as textual meaning during literacy instruction.

### **Southview Elementary School**

Patricia's district moved from a skills-based reading series to a reading and writing workshop approach three years prior to the study. Aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the district curriculum emphasized higher-level comprehension, strategic reading, and text analysis, which intersected with Patricia's own inclinations toward meaning-based instruction using high quality children's literature. But while a workshop approach may offer opportunities for students to take up authorial stances (Laman, 2014), bilingual students have historically been marginalized in the district. Its transitional bilingual program privileged students' shift to English, minimizing their linguistic and cultural strengths and placing them at risk for language loss (Cummins, 1989; Valenzuela, 1999). Indeed, discourses that pathologized (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009) the languages and life experiences of bilingual and immigrant children were prevalent in district policies, curricula, and professional conversations. This inspired Patricia to work explicitly against deficit frames in her instruction.

The bilingual program also subscribed to a language separation approach (García, 2009). Patricia engaged in Spanish instruction in the mornings, during her reading and writing instruction, and used English in the afternoons for content area instruction. Despite the nominal language separation, she viewed literacy instruction as spanning all of these areas, and student writing occurred in both languages throughout the day. Students spoke both Spanish and English with one another and with her, and translanguaging (Creese & Blackledge, 2010) was commonplace. As a non-native Spanish speaker, she occasionally asked her students for assistance in articulating ideas in Spanish. She also frequently told her students during instruction that their bilingualism was a valuable resource both in school and in the world at large.

## **Classroom Participants**

Patricia's fourth graders included six boys and seven girls, all of whom were bilingual in Spanish and English to varying degrees. Most were born in the U.S. or Mexico, but a few families came to the U.S. from Guatemala or El Salvador. The year prior to our study, Patricia taught bilingual third grade, so she had seven of her students for two years. Her own familiarity and membership in the Latino community supported her strong rapport with her students' and families.

Patricia grew up in a White lower middle class household near Chicago, and spent her youth removed from bilingual and immigrant communities. However, that changed when she met and later married her husband, a Mexican man who immigrated to the U.S. as a young adult. She has walked with him through experiences of racism and racial profiling, and feels the deficit frames through which her husband and two daughters are often viewed. She continues to wrestle with her own middle class assumptions and White privilege, as well as her gatekeeping role within a system that disadvantages her students. But the fact that she is immersed with her family in the immigrant experience and the experience of being bilingual (they speak Spanish and English in the home) in an anti-immigrant political context gives her credibility in the eyes of her students' families. This position facilitated her ability to come to know her students both in and out of school. She attended the same church as many of her families, regularly texted with them, and was a frequent guest in their homes. She was aware of their achievements and struggles related to employment, economic resources, immigration status, family events and celebrations, substance abuse, students' after school activities, and so on.

While Lara was also a bilingual fourth grade teacher and fluent Spanish speaker, her upbringing in a White upper middle class community and her family life were (and continue to be) socially, culturally, and geographically more removed from bilingual and immigrant communities. As a result, she had more work to do to come to know her own students as a classroom teacher, as well as to get to know Patricia's students. Later we discuss one event in particular in which Patricia brokered Lara's connection-building with the students and how this set the stage for students' critical witnessing.

## **Data Generation and Analysis**

Upon affirmative parental permission using institutional human subjects protocols, all thirteen students assented to participation in the study, which spanned one school year. Data included two lengthy conversational interviews conducted by Lara with Patricia, and ongoing participant observations by Lara,

who visited Patricia's classroom two to three days per week. We video recorded whole and small group literacy instruction on 18 occasions between November and May, and conducted audio recorded interviews with students in fall and spring, which were designed as extended reading conferences. Finally, we documented instructional artifacts using digital photography and collected literacy assessment data, including Measures of Educational Progress (MAP) scores and Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessments.

Data analysis began with open coding, moving from initial low inference to higher inference coding (Carspecken, 1996) and theme generation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). *Momentos de cambio* was one of these themes. Themes then guided our use of microethnographic discourse analysis (Bloome et al., 2005) of audio and video data to closely analyze how Patricia and her students discursively positioned themselves and each other across the school year. These multifaceted analyses yielded two kinds of findings:

1. How at a micro-discursive level Patricia and her students used language and paralinguistic cues, such as gaze, facial expressions, gestures, and larger body movements across the classroom space to construct personal identity trajectories and interpret texts; and
2. How, at a curricular level, Patricia and her students constructed pedagogical structures that positioned students and their experiences as valuable for academic and social development.

The instruction we describe in this paper represents the latter, and draws from participant observation fieldnotes, teacher interview data, and classroom artifacts.

### **“Walk with Me”: Exploring Personal Transformation through a Memoir Unit**

The district writing curriculum included a memoir unit, which was tightly delineated. The primary goals of the unit were to build on and further develop students' narrative writing, especially with respect to detail and description, while also expanding their understandings of fiction genres. However, Patricia adapted the unit to make it more manageable and meaningful for her students. A brief description of this writing unit is presented in Handsfield (2016). Beginning in the next paragraph, Patricia describes how she approached the unit, which unfolded over six weeks in early fall 2013. This discussion draws primarily on classroom artifact data, specifically students' writing and photos of instructional supports (e.g., anchor charts). Here, written in the first person, is her explanation.

Along with other teachers at my school, I felt that students tended to keep their narratives and memoirs at a superficial level, meaning that students did not use their narratives to communicate significant social issues or even momentous or weighty life events. Some teachers even doubted that their students *could*

write about their lives or the world around them in thoughtful ways. This troubled me because I knew my students well, and I knew that they had experienced profound, even life changing moments, both positive and negative. So I explored ways to make memoir real and accessible for them. I looked for a key concept that would be concrete enough to make sense to them, but open-ended enough to allow for creative interpretation and elaboration. Upon exploring examples of memoirs, I noticed that authors often include specific events that caused transformation in their lives. This led me to the theme of *momentos de cambio*, which also became the title for the unit.

For my students to open up and write about important, and often difficult or traumatic, events in their lives, the project required a foundation of trust. I needed to become vulnerable and transparent regarding my own moments of change if I wanted them to walk with me through my retelling and to take risks in exploring their own moments. In other words, this unit had to be about more than writing; it had to be about building relationships *through* writing, which meant going on the journey of self-exploration with them. Thus, I chose the topic of my father's death to write about and to model key elements of memoir. Knowing my students' family experiences, which in some cases included losing a parent or other family member, and knowing how important family was to them, I felt that they could relate to my moment of change.

At the beginning of fourth grade, my students rarely ventured outside of the beginning-middle-end story structure, so I did several things to expand their narrative repertoires and make the genre seem manageable. I asked students to organize their memoirs into five chapters. However, instead of writing chronologically, we began in the middle, with chapter three. I first prompted them to begin by brainstorming and fully describing their *momentos de cambio*. Then, through a "write aloud," I wrote my own moment of change, seeking input from my students and modeling how to use descriptive details to "explode" the moment, similar to Oxenhorn and Calkins' (2003) small moments writing. I reasoned that by helping them generate detailed descriptions of the event, they would more easily be able to articulate how their moments of change were significant or life changing in their other chapters.

The other chapters were then written around their moments of change. With each chapter, I modeled pre-writing strategies (e.g., brainstorms, word webs, mind maps) and used write alouds to model how they might move from pre-writing into composing their first drafts of individual chapters. As students wrote their additional chapters, I used their own drafts as models for whole group instruction on revision strategies. Revision occurred in partners and in a recursive fashion as students' ideas and details for each chapter highlighted the need for clarification and additional details in other chapters. Figure 1 illustrates an overview of the unit.



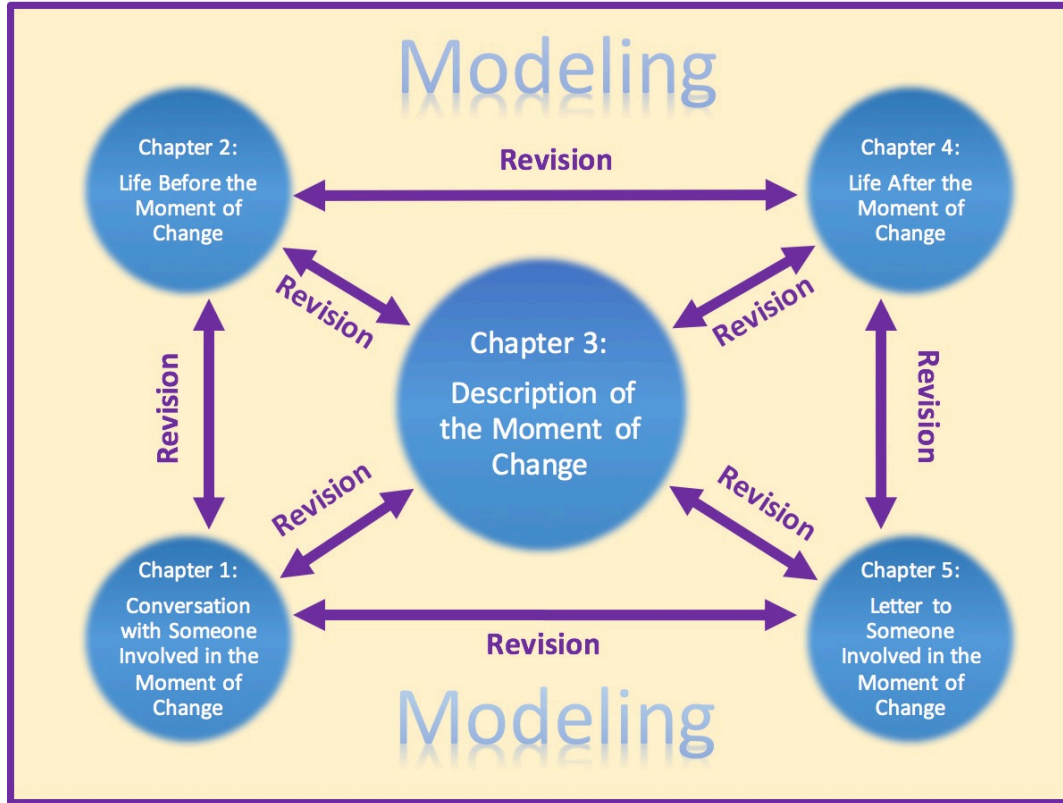


Figure 1. Visual model of the *Momentos de Cambio* memoir unit.

In chapter one, I asked them to compose or relate a conversation to invite the reader into the relationship between themselves and someone else involved in the moment of change. Jay included the following in his opening chapter:

*--Jay, ¿tu quieres una mamá?--me preguntó mi papá. Yo sentía un poquito feliz porque sabía que iba a preguntarme sobre Elena. Ellos estaban juntos por un año. Y dije que sí. Mi papá estaba por la puerta de mi casa, y yo estaba sentado en la cocina comiendo. Mi papá me preguntó por qué quería una mamá, y yo dije porque era triste y quería una mamá que estaba allí para mi y que me quería para siempre.*

["Jay, do you want a mom?" my dad asked me. I felt a bit happy because I knew he was going to ask me about Elena. They had been together for a year. I said that I did. My dad was in the doorway of our house, and I was eating at the kitchen table. My dad asked why I wanted a mom, and I told him because I had been sad and that I wanted a mom who would be there for me and that would love me forever.]

Then, in the second chapter, I asked students to describe what life was like before their moment of change. For students whose moments involved trauma and/or unwelcome change, this meant delving into positive memories as a contrast to their moments of change. For students whose moments involved positive events, it meant describing a previous sense of emptiness or longing.

Chapter four was devoted to describing life after the moment of change, and in chapter five, they wrote a letter to a person involved in the moment of change. This meant establishing a new sense of longing or reconciliation. I felt that having them work on this chapter immediately after writing chapter four would aid them in seeing and communicating the contrasts between life before and life after their moments of change. In her memoir, Fresita explains what life was like after her father went to Africa<sup>2</sup>:

*"En el momento que mi papa se fue a Africa él nos dejo todo para que nos manteniéramos la casa. Nosotros teníamos muy poquito dinero pero si nos alcanzo para que comiéramos. También nos dejo dinero para que nos compráramos ropa y zapatos para que fuéramos a la escuela. Yo me siento triste porque mi papa fue a Africa. El sí nos quería mantener por lo mientras que regresaba. Yo siento que mi papa es un hombre que sabe valorarnos."* (Fresita)

[The moment my dad went to Africa, he arranged everything so we could take care of the house. We had very little money but we made enough to eat. He also left us money so that we could buy clothes and shoes so we could go to school. I feel sad because my dad went to Africa. He did want us to be okay until he returned. I feel that my dad is a man who values us.]

They concluded by writing a letter to someone involved in their moment of change (e.g., an uncle who passed away; a distant friend). The idea was to offer personal closure or make a point about their transformation. Danny wrote a letter to his new baby sister, describing how he felt as a big brother:

*Yo sentía una emoción cuando naciste. Eres muy feliz y eres chistosa. Había sentido otra emoción cuando empezaste a hablar. Pensé que cuando puedes ir a la escuela podrás aprender más rápido.*

[I was so happy when you were born. You are very happy and you are funny. I was happy again when you began to talk. I thought, when you can go to school you'll learn more quickly.]

As students added chapters, more clarity came to their moments of change, which led to cycles of revision for content, word choice, organization, and grammar. For example, Alejandro added additional conversation into his moment of change, and also integrated present tense into his retelling. While not consistent in terms of tense, he effectively invites the reader into the moment when he found out his uncle had died:

*Entonces llego a la casa al mismo tiempo cuando entren mi papá y mi mamá. Estaban tristes. Yo siento el dolor de corazón cuando mi mamá y mi papá estaban llorando. Mi papá dijo --Mijo, Tío Julio murió.-- Yo pensaba que él no estaba feliz allí arriba en el cielo. Yo tampoco quería que él se iba porque él me quería mucho.*

[So I arrive at home at the same time that my dad and mom come in. They were sad. My heart aches when my mom and dad were crying. My dad said, "Mijo, Uncle Julio died." I thought he couldn't be happy up there in

heaven. I also didn't want him to leave because he loved me a lot.]

Although I did not explicitly require them to write about family, all of them did, perhaps because my own moment of change involved family. To be clear, at this point in the school year (early fall), I was not thinking about their memoirs as *testimonios*. Also, unlike the *testimonios* described by LatCrit theorists, students' memoirs did not focus explicitly on experiences of injustice. While we can see echoes of social and economic injustices in their memoirs, I did not ask them to focus on that aspect of their experiences. Rather, I wanted them to understand that they *all* had valuable life experiences and abilities that others could learn from, and to claim their voices through story. What I did not anticipate was the extent to which this memoir unit would become a foundation for building new knowledge and human connections throughout the school year. Through this process, we began to notice similarities between their memoirs and *testimonios* with respect to generating space for students to claim their voices.

### **A Life of Its Own: Interpretive Authority, Critical Witnessing, and Transformed Practice**

In this section we draw on participant observation data (field notes) to illustrate how *momentos de cambio* became a rhetorical tool for claiming interpretive authority and for critical witnessing. We began to view their *momento de cambio* memoirs as potential foundations for *testimonio* work. We subsequently folded them into an event in which students read their memoirs aloud to family members and educators at Lara's university. These oral performances functioned to recast their memoirs as *testimonios*.

#### **Claiming Interpretive Authority**

Patricia introduced the theme of *momentos de cambio* as a conceptual scaffold for students' memoirs. However, over the course of the year, the students consistently returned to it while interpreting other texts and to claim interpretive authority. Interpretive authority is achieved when "participants consider the viability and validity of responses made public within shared literacy events. The more valuable a group member perceives a comment to be, the greater interpretive authority exists" (Flint, 2000, p. 120). Two weeks after the memoir unit, five students participated in a small reading group with Patricia, reading Aesop's fable, *Ponle el cascabel al gato* (*Belling the Cat*), in which a group of mice devise a plan to deal with a cat that, along with its family, moves into the mice's house. Patricia had prompted students to make explicit inferences to integrate their own ideas with information in the text. Shortly into the lesson, Danny said, "¡Los ratones tuvieron un momento de cambio! [The mice had a moment of change!]" When asked to explain, he got up, and with the other

students and Patricia in tow, he walked over to the wall and showed them an anchor chart displaying the organizational structure of their memoirs. He said, “Cuando llegó el gato fue un momento de cambio para los ratones [when the cat arrived it was a moment of change for the mice],” and explained how life afterward was difficult for the mice. Patricia built on Danny’s connection, integrating the theme into a new anchor chart to further scaffold their interpretations (Figure 2).

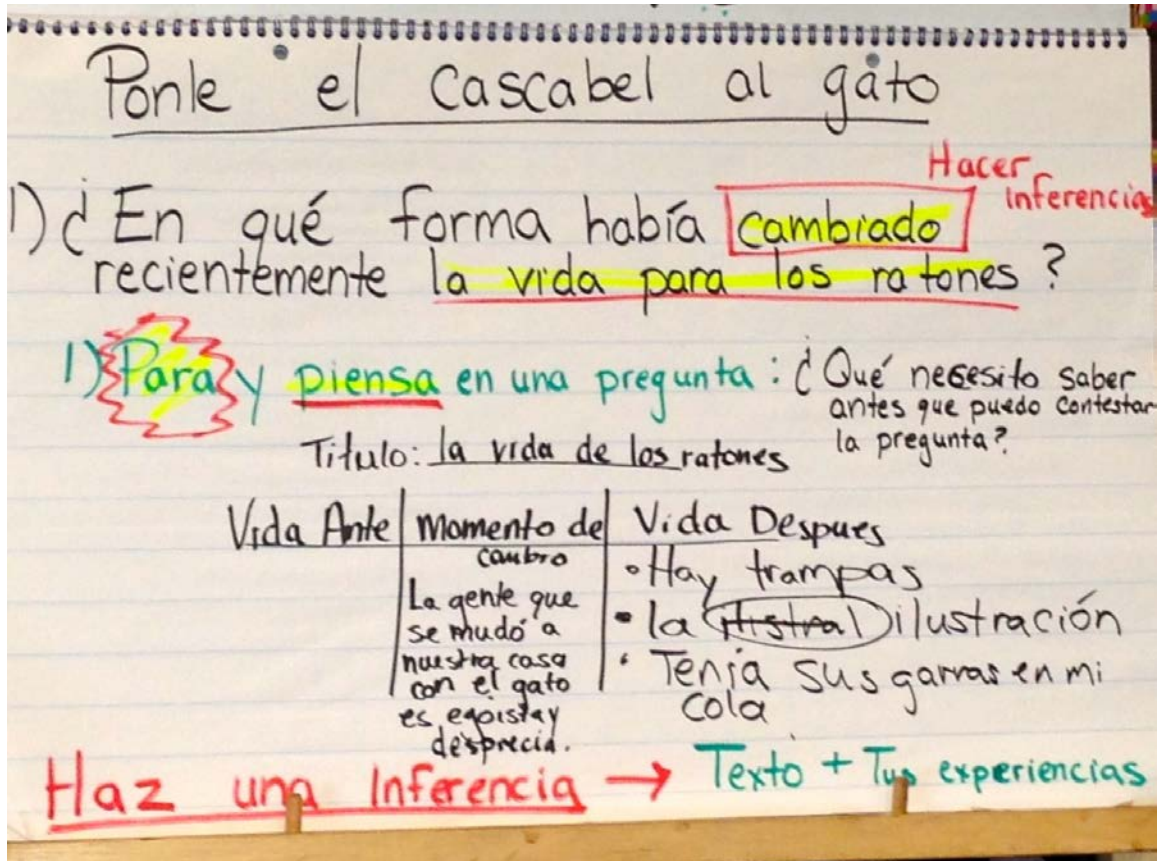


Figure 2. Spanish anchor chart using Danny’s connection to analyze a text. The question posed was, “In what way did the mice’s lives recently change?” This is followed in green ink by the strategy: “Stop and think of a question. What do I need to know before I can answer the question?” The 3-column chart prompts students to consider life before and after the moment of change. This is followed by the prompt in red to “Make an inference → Text + Your experiences.”

Several months later, Patricia used the film *Finding Nemo* to prompt them to notice when information in a text contradicts or contrasts with what they already know about a character, setting, or other narrative element. Figure 3 shows a red anchor chart for the lesson. After watching a clip from the beginning of the film, they described Marlin (Nemo’s father) as “hopeful,” “happy,” and “excited” as he prepared a home for his wife and unborn children (still in their

eggs) (left hand side of Figure 3). Next, they watched the clip when Marlin's wife and all their eggs but one (Nemo's) were eaten by a barracuda. During this discussion, Beatriz asserted that Marlin "tuvo un momento de cambio [had a moment of change]." Patricia built on Beatriz's remark and asked the class to think about how Marlin's character changed. Together they generated a new set of words to describe how Marlin had changed (right hand side of Figure 3). This then prompted them to think about the movie's resolution in light of their own memoirs and how Marlin came to terms with his new life.

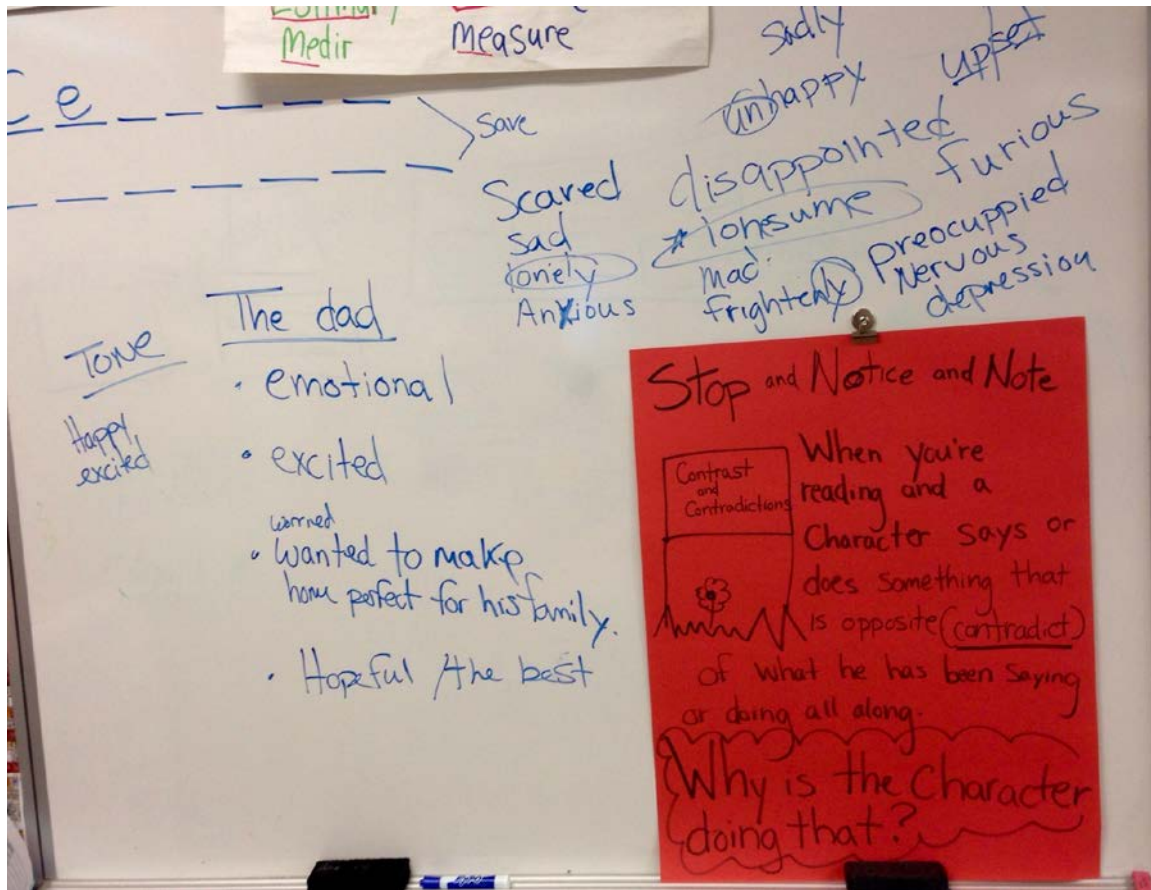


Figure 3. Character analysis anchor chart and word generation for understanding Marlin's character development after his "moment of change" in *Finding Nemo*.

Like Danny, Beatriz was able to use the concept of *momentos de cambio* to claim interpretive authority regarding character development. Students' use of the phrase for the purpose of textual interpretation happened on several occasions throughout the school year. However, what we found particularly interesting was how students also used the concept to claim interpretive authority by interpreting and naming the personal narratives and experiences of others in the classroom beyond their memoirs. For example, in mid-spring, during a whole class conversation about classroom community, the topic shifted to students'

favorite sports. Chicharito was hesitant to talk. After some encouragement from Patricia, he eventually spoke about motocross, and told the class about his cousin's recent death in a motocross accident. The other students listened closely to Chicharito's every word, and when he was done, two students suggested that he had had a moment of change. In other words, what became a tool for interpretive authority also became a tool for reciprocal and critical witnessing (Dutro, 2009; Park-Fuller, 2009; Weiglhofer, 2014).

It is easy to imagine the phrase "moment of change" being used to simply fill an uncomfortable silence when people do not know what else to say, and it is certainly possible that at times it was uttered in this vein. However, the students were typically not at a loss for questions to ask, words of sympathy, or connections to their own experiences told in expressions of empathy. Indeed, Lara experienced this firsthand. As part of our research project, Patricia's expectation was for Lara to become a part of the classroom community—to walk with them. This required that Lara share her personal experiences in the same ways that Patricia and her students shared their moments of change. In what follows, Lara draws on her field notes and her own recollections to narrate in the first person how she shared her own moment of change with Patricia's students.

### **"Maestra, You Had a Moment of Change"**

I initially resisted telling the students about my moment of change. I had already told Patricia, but I didn't know how to tell her students. Soon, however, it would be difficult to hide, as I was losing my hair due to chemotherapy. In November 2013, just two months into our research project, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. One morning in January, after a 10-day absence, I entered the classroom, and was welcomed by hugs from Patricia and her students. Then Patricia smiled, gently led me to the carpet where the students were seated, and said, "It's time to tell them."

Questions flew through my mind. Would this scare the students? Where do I start? Will I cry? How do you say "chemotherapy" *en español*? My story came slowly at first, and in retrospect, I cannot remember my exact words. But, I do remember the students' responses. Neither Patricia nor I framed my experience as a moment of change, but the students named it as such. Fresita announced, "Maestra, you had a moment of change." Isabel agreed, adding, "You should write about that." Similar comments were interspersed among difficult and honest questions: "How does the medicine work?" "Can you catch cancer from someone?" "Why do you lose your hair?" "Are you afraid you'll die?" Students made connections to their own lives ("My grandma had cancer"), and inserted matter of fact commentaries into the discussion ("So that's why you wear a hat").

Although I speak Spanish fairly fluently, the vocabulary that occupies talk around cancer was not part of my Spanish repertoire. But the students' empathy

extended into language support as they thought through translations together, predicting words for me when I was tongue tied, and smiled with understanding when my words came indelicately. As Felman and Laub (1992) suggest, particularly with respect to trauma, “Testimonies are not monologues. They cannot take place in solitude” (p. 70). As I told the students about my own trauma, they bore witness to my experience, and literally joined with me in constructing my narrative when I struggled most. In doing so, their competencies as cultural and linguistic brokers were thrown into high relief. These competencies, along with their experiences writing about their own moments of change, contributed to their epistemic privilege—their ability to draw on their own life experiences to understand and name those of others.

### Critical and Reciprocal Witnessing as a Form of Biliteracy

Park-Fuller (2009) and Weiglhofer (2014) write about reciprocal witnessing as an interrelationship between speaker and hearer that involves attention to the Other and ethical responsibility (Levinas, 1988). We would also argue that in classrooms, mutual responsibility and reciprocity involve a shift, even if partial or temporary, in traditional student-teacher power relationships. As Lara shared her story, it was the students, not the teacher, who asked the questions, bridged languages, named her moment of change, and invited her to write.

Noddings (1984) conceptualized care as building and sustaining relationships with students and a mutual willingness to reveal oneself to others. Similarly, Valenzuela (1999) argued that caring includes a “pedagogical preoccupation with questions of otherness, difference, and power” (p. 25). This means that teachers cannot just recruit students’ native languages and familial and cultural experiences as if they were neutral pedagogical tools. They must also connect with and reveal themselves to students to critically examine issues of otherness and power. By doing this, Patricia generated a space for engaging students in academic literacy tasks such as planning for writing, revising and editing, writing within different genres, considering audience and voice, and inviting readers into a narrative. In the process, both students and we as teacher-researchers experienced epistemic shift—changes in how we know each other, ourselves, and the word around us.

However, Patricia also wanted to create these spaces for her students beyond the classroom walls. This led to an event that we planned near the end of the school year in which students were invited to read aloud their memoirs and other pieces of writing to a broad audience. While memoirs and *testimonios* are not synonymous, as *testimonios* are intended to be oral texts meant to highlight or offer testimony to experiences of injustice, we used this event to recast students’ memoirs as *testimonios*.

## Saying It Out Loud: Recasting Students' Memoirs as *Testimonios*

The event, which occurred in April 2014 at Lara's university, included an audience of over 70 people, including students' immediate and extended families, prospective teachers, a handful of practicing teachers from the community, a few graduate students, and several university faculty. Because many attendees did not speak Spanish, Patricia asked her students to write summaries of their memoirs in English. The students also planned the details of the event, organizing the menu and creating invitations, getting-to-know-you games, and conversation starters for attendees to use as they ate dinner.

The event was centered on students' oral reading of their memoirs and other essays (some in English, some in Spanish). Students decided to read their writing aloud in three concurrent groups, or panels. Each panel, consisting of four to five students, created questions for audience members to prompt conversation after the readings. In one panel, when audience members did not comment or ask any questions, Andrea Jenna read one of their prepared prompts: "*Habla sobre un tiempo cuando no entendió lo que estaban diciendo otra gente* [Talk about a time when you didn't understand what other people were saying]." One preservice teacher responded, "Right now," which brought laughter followed by a string of narratives from students' parents and extended family describing their experiences learning English.

Students' oral reading of their memoirs was essential. It not only fit within Patricia's vision of the event as a time to privilege and witness students' voices, but it also enabled the participation of family members who were not able to read or who were uncomfortable reading print text. Additionally, *testimonio* is an oral tradition that challenges the privileged position of print literacy for communicating important ideas (Beverley, 2000). The emotional power of orally performed *testimonio* has the potential to spark social change (Park-Fuller, 2009) in ways that the written text may not.

### Challenges and Caveats in Doing *Testimonio* Work in Elementary Classrooms

In the memoir unit, Patricia expected her students to be honest, to take risks, and most importantly, to attend to one another within a community built on mutual trust. But although the *testimonio* work blurred some traditional boundaries and power relationships in the classroom, power relationships between us as teacher-researchers and the students still complicated this work.

Patricia's position as teacher, her pedagogical framing of memoir as a space to narrate significant life events, and her use of her father's death as a model, may have created an expectation for some students that their memoirs



needed to be dramatic and even *traumatic*. For one student, Jenny, this meant writing a fictional narrative. Jenny's *momento de cambio* story included an emotional and detailed account of her grandmother's death. Patricia only learned that her memoir was fictional after having a conversation with Jenny's mother and learning that *Abuela* was indeed still alive and healthy. Jenny's fictionalized memoir could be understood either as a testament to her desire to please her teacher with a story that fit the mold that she thought she needed to write within, or as a form of resistance to the expectation that she expose actual personal or difficult experiences.

Another student, Eddie, resisted writing his memoir at first. He named his moment of change as his parents' divorce, but wrote in stops and starts, frequently starting his narrative and later abandoning it. Patricia believes that he was not ready to face the traumatic event of his parents' divorce and his father leaving the household. While in the end he wrote a powerful memoir about his moment of change, we question whether writing about it was more painful than cathartic for Eddie, and whether he was emotionally prepared to write about it.

Also, because of our positions of power relative to Patricia's students, we recognize that we *compelled* them to share their *testimonios* in the April event. Furthermore, the memoir unit itself was (at least initially) a required assignment. The requirement that the memoirs be completed, and that they be initially written, rather than composed as spoken-word texts, sets them apart from *testimonio*, an oral genre that is initiated by a personal need to tell one's story. This effectively minimizes the liberatory or transformative potential of the compositional and performative processes these students engaged in.

These issues raise important questions. To what extent can students claim a voice within a system with fairly entrenched institutional power relationships between teachers and students? Also, might some students and families view *testimonio* as a risky genre that invites unwelcome surveillance, particularly within communities in which family members may not have legal immigration status? Moreover, might some families be put off by two White women in positions of power asking students to expose their own vulnerabilities when they already occupy marginalized positions with the school community? Although Patricia's ongoing involvement in the community and our interactions with families lead us to believe that the students and families valued these instructional and family engagements, we cannot be sure.

Finally, although the memoir unit resonated with Patricia's students, becoming a tool for claiming interpretive authority across her curriculum, it was not the specific unit or genre that promoted students' interpretive authority and epistemic privilege. Rather, it was Patricia's practice of arranging pedagogical spaces in which her students could use their personal, familial, and cultural experiences to speak with authority and critically witness one another's interpretations about their worlds. Indeed, we would encourage teachers to consider an array of written and spoken word genres that may generate spaces for bilingual students and students from immigrant families and communities to claim interpretive authority and communicate their knowledge to the world.

Campano (2007), for example, articulates how critical drama, or *teatro*, can create opportunities for multilingual students to agentively speak to the world and push back against restrictive school literacy practices. Other forms of autobiographical writing, including poetry, may also offer space for multilingual students to claim epistemic privilege (Campano, 2007; Moya, 2002) and develop a range of language and literacy skills. Teachers may also prompt their students to engage in inquiry and compose and publish expository texts on issues that impact their lives and communities.

But ultimately, our primary argument is not about method. Although teachers' pedagogical knowledge is important, as Bartolomé (2009) argued, the kind of humanizing pedagogy that initiated, permeated, and sustained the memoir unit and students' interpretive authority and epistemic privilege is built not on a set of predetermined methods or "best practices." Rather, it is based on teachers' political awareness, an understanding that teaching is a political and humanizing act. In other words, the primary teaching competency is not how to teach memoir or *testimonio*. It is *care* in the sense described by Valenzuela (1999): It is establishing human relationships, transparency, and trust, as well as advocacy with students and families and shifting control toward shared responsibility and community.

### Notes

1. All student names are self-selected pseudonyms.
2. Fresita's parents were undocumented, so Patricia believed that her father did not go to Africa. Rather, based on other conversations with Fresita and her family, Patricia believes that he was in jail. Africa was most likely a location invented by Fresita or her family to lessen the emotional blow of incarceration.

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