



## STUDENT REFLECTIVE LITERACY PRACTICES AND THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATORS

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### ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The purpose of this study was to explore how the professional development of two Mexican-American women post-secondary educators was impacted by the reflective literacy practices (RLPs) of their students and themselves. RLPs were defined as verbal and written dialogue that fosters reflection of their learning.
Background	Research suggests that RLPs can be empowering for students, yet there is minimal research about the impact that RLPs may have on the post-secondary educators (PSEs) who assign or use them.
Methodology	We used critical theory, to conduct a collaborative autoethnographic study exploring how the use of RLPs influenced our professional development as Mexican-American women PSEs. Specifically, we focused on the contrasting nature of three specific concepts related to professional development: (1) voice/silence, (2) masking/expressing of emotions, and (3) empowerment/disempowerment.
Contribution	Findings suggest that RLPs help PSEs gain insight about their students and about themselves. These insights facilitate both voice/silence and expressing/masking of emotions within the classroom and during interactions with colleagues. These insights also enable PSEs to enhance their pedagogical voices and to create empowering post-secondary education settings for themselves and for their students.
Findings	Two themes emerged in our study: Developing Pedagogical Voice and Becoming Empowered. The first theme had two sub-themes: (1) empowering class discussions and (2) personal experiences that guide our pedagogical voices. The

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	second theme had four sub-themes: (1) dealing with other colleagues, (2) letting go of perfection, (3) 50:50 responsibility, and (4) vulnerability and heart.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Our research supports the use of RLPs in post-secondary education settings. However, because our findings also demonstrate how RLPs can contribute to Mexican American PSEs feeling silenced, implications for professionals who work with Mexican American PSEs indicate providing culturally empowering environments that decrease silence. Culturally empowering environments may include research mentorship for Mexican American PSEs, networking opportunities, and diversity recruitment efforts to increase the number of Mexican American women as post-secondary educators.
Future Research	Future research should focus on the use of specific types of RLPs, including how technology is changing RLPs.
Keywords	Mexican-American, voice, post-secondary, reflective literacy practices

## INTRODUCTION

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The use of reflective literacy practices (RLPs) in post-secondary education settings is a dynamic and complex process. Although many scholars view RLPs as primarily incorporating writing, these practices can also include dialogue and can have differing purposes (e.g., problem solving and cultural reflection). Moreover, RLPs can be conducted individually or collectively and can occur within or outside of the classroom (Risko, Vukelich, Roskos, & Carpenter, 2002).

Studies indicate that RLPs can be empowering for students in post-secondary education settings (Gatzke, Buck, & Akerson, 2015; Tracey, Hutchinson, & Grzebyk, 2014). However, while many studies focus on how post-secondary educators (PSEs) apply RLPs (Dinkelman, 2003), little is understood about how RLPs impact the professional development of the PSEs who assign or use them (Dinkelman, 2003; Taylor, 2009). The focus of this study was on the authors (two Mexican American women PSEs) and how the use of RLPs impacted our professional development within post-secondary education settings.

For the purpose of this study, we defined RLPs broadly, including both verbal and written practices that occur within and outside of the classroom (Risko et al., 2002). Therefore, we examined any form of verbal dialogue, which included whole class discussions, small group class discussions, self-talk we told ourselves, and conversations with students and with colleagues that occurred outside of the classroom. We also examined written exchanges that promoted students' exploration about how their personal experiences related to their educational experiences (Dirkx & Smith, 2009). Examples of these written exchanges included informal reflection papers and formal papers submitted as class assignments, and student course evaluations. Other written exchanges included e-mail exchanges with students and with colleagues. Finally, because we both have taught in a range of higher education settings (e.g., community college, master's university), the term PSE was used to encompass these diverse teaching experiences.

Using critical theory, we conducted a collaborative autoethnographic study (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010) in which we investigated our own experiences as Mexican American women PSEs and the role that RLPs played in the evolution of our professional development. Critical theory, according to Bronner (2011), is to examine the assumptions found in "existing forms of practice" (p. 1). In addition, this examination, or reflective practice, should move towards transformative learning (Liu, 2015). In our study, we examined and reflected on our assumptions about our educational practices through the use of RLPs and the shift in our professional development through transformative learning. Transformative learning, for our study, means to apply critical reflection and self-reflection in ways that lead to a "deep shift in perspective" (Kroth & Cranton, 2014, p.9).

To narrow down the concept of professional development, we reviewed the literature and three specific themes emerged that related specifically to this group of women. Therefore, our research question included these three themes: How does the use of RLPs influence our voices, our emotional expression, and our sense of empowerment as Mexican American women post-secondary educators?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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Research shows that when reflective writing is used as a pedagogical tool, there are broad benefits for students and teachers. For instance, research indicates that reflective writing assignments guide PSEs and students in higher education to new levels of learning (Cannady & Gallo, 2016) and aid in transforming their self-awareness (Gatzke et al., 2015; Tracey et al., 2014). Benefits also include reflective writing that begins to show an awareness of multiple points of view of the subject matter (Cannady and Gallo, 2016; Gatzke et al., 2015; Tracey et al., 2014). Cannady and Gallo (2016) also found in their research that students showed a deeper understanding of their learning and that their reflective writing became starting points for them to become actively engaged in class discussions. Additionally, studies demonstrate that educators who use reflective writing and dialogue about their teaching practices help guide their professional development in deeper ways (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Dinkelman, 2003). However, there is a little research that investigates PSEs use of RLPs and how the implementation of these assignments impacts their professional development. There is even less research in this area exploring the professional development of Mexican American women PSEs in particular.

### *PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN OF COLOR*

When we reviewed the literature regarding professional development for Mexican American women PSEs, we found that, unlike more mainstream ideas about professional development, many Latina scholars focused on voice, expression of emotion, and empowerment. For example, Castillo-Montoya and Torres-Guzmán (2012) used *testimonios* (i.e., first-person narratives) to explore the intellectual and emotional experiences related to their professional identities as first-generation “*academicas puertoriquenas*” (p. 540) (female academic Puerto Ricans). Their use of *testimonios* was an intentional method they selected to voice their experiences and increase awareness of marginalized women in academia. Similarly, Espino (2016) investigated how Mexican American women Ph.D’s used *consejos* (nurturing advice) from family as they navigated their academic careers, which also contributed to their sense of empowerment within the profession. These studies emphasize the focus on voice via research methods (i.e., *testimonios*, *consejos*) as well as the unique role that emotions play in Latina’s sense of empowerment within academia. However, we noticed that these three concepts incorporated contrasting characteristics. For example, studies indicate that Mexican American women often use their voice, or sense of agency, to stand up for themselves within post-secondary education settings, but also often feel their voices are silenced, or ignored, in these same environments (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

In the following section, we will further explore the contrasting nature of these three concepts: (1) voice/silence, (2) expressing/masking of emotions, and (3) empowerment/disempowerment. We will also address how Mexican American women have used these three concepts to help them navigate post-secondary education settings. However, due to the scarcity of research focused specifically on these professional development concepts of Mexican American women PSEs, we start broadly and discuss research about the professional development of doctoral students and PSEs of various marginalized ethnic backgrounds (e.g., African American, Latina, Asian).

### **Voice/Silence**

Studies suggest that women faculty of color use voice and/or silence as tools to navigate academic environments that often neglect and devalue them (Rodriguez, 2006). In the literature, voice for women of color is defined as both their literal voices (e.g., speaking up for themselves) and documentation of their experiences that have been largely neglected in the literature (Rodriguez, 2006).

For example, when women of color find their voices in academia, they may start speaking up against oppression within their institutions (González, 2006; Hinojosa & Carney 2016). Many women of color also use their teaching, research, and service as methods to express their voices and document the experiences of other women of color (Castillo-Montoya & Torres-Guzmán, 2012). Contrarily, studies indicate that women of color experience being silenced and/or use silence as a form of resistance. In the literature, silence can be defined as staying verbally silent and/or decreasing presence at events within post-secondary education settings (Boyd, Cintron, & Alexander, 2010; Sulé, 2011). For example, faculty women of color may remain silent during faculty meetings or minimize their exposure to university events as ways of resisting oppressive academic environments (Boyd et al., 2010; Rodriguez, 2006). Although this type of silence may decrease their exposure to resources, it may also help them persist within their academic careers and maintain their research agendas (Boyd et al., 2010).

Rodriguez (2006), however, noted that silence could have negative consequences, which also emerged in other studies about women of color in academia. For example, the Latina doctoral students in González's (2006) study who reported feeling fearful of using their voice sought protection by skipping classes, switching academic majors, and/or downgrading their academic career expectations. In Hinojosa's and Carney's (2016) study, Mexican American women who initially spoke up against oppression in their doctoral programs eventually reverted to using silence as a form of avoiding negative consequences (e.g., less access to research opportunities, decreased faculty support during dissertation).

### **Expressing/Masking of emotions**

Sulé (2011) and Rodriguez (2006) both explored the voices of Latina and Black women doctoral students and faculty, with a focus on emotional expression. Within their research, the importance of masking or suppressing emotional expression emerged as both a means of survival and opposition related to the professional development of women of color in academia. Specifically, masking emotions enabled Latina and Black women doctoral students and faculty to distance themselves from stereotypes regarding their race, gender, and emotional stability. Faculty participants in Sulé's study also used masking to conceal their emotional reactions during racially charged classroom discussions. Although challenging, the faculty participants noted that the benefit of masking during these types of discussions was that it seemed to help students feel more comfortable expressing divergent viewpoints.

### **Empowerment/Disempowerment**

Among Mexican American women in higher education, the concept of empowerment can be complex. For example, Espino (2016) investigated the impact that *consejos* (nurturing advice) had on 25 Mexican American women while they were pursuing their doctorates. Participants reported hearing conflicting *consejos* about the purpose of higher education. For instance, participants reported pressures to get married and to serve as primary caregivers in their homes. On the other hand, they also received messages that education was important so that they could be financially independent. Espino's study suggests that these Mexican American women found a sense of empowerment as they learned to successfully integrate both the conflicting and supportive *consejos* and find ways to excel in academia. Studies also suggest that when Latina women PSEs are able to integrate their cultural identities into their professional identities (e.g., teach about culturally relevant topics, research issues related to their cultures), they feel empowered (Castillo-Montoya & Torres-Guzmán, 2012; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). Conversely, research suggests that Latinas in post-secondary settings feel disempowered when they are silenced or neglected. Symptoms related to disempowerment include: avoiding their academic institutions and/or downgrading their academic career goals (Gonzalez, 2006; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016).

## ***REFLECTIVE LITERACY PRACTICES AND THEIR IMPACT ON LATINA PSEs***

Pittman (2010) and Reyes and Ríos (2005) conducted studies that emphasized the cultural nuances linked to using RLPs in the classroom. For example, Pittman focused exclusively on the experiences of 17 women professors of color (i.e., eight Black women, three Latinas, and six Asian women) and their interactions with White male students. Interactions included various RLPs: e-mail exchanges, large group discussions, and student evaluations. Study findings highlighted the intense classroom environment reported by faculty participants, which included white male students challenging the authority of women professors of color and using intimidating behavior toward them as well.

Reyes and Ríos (2005) used dialogic method to highlight their experiences as Latina professors. The RLPs that they used included dialogue with students, student e-mails, student journals, autobiographical writing, and student evaluations. Findings most pertinent to our study included their intrapersonal reactions to students' journals, autobiographical writing assignments, and course evaluations. However, their findings also aligned with Pittman (2010) because students often used RLPs to express both positive and negative reactions to having a Latina professor. Both of these studies demonstrate that when students used RLPs they seemed more comfortable discussing racial topics. Although the Latina faculty in both of these studies reported the benefit of learning more about their students through RLPs, they also indicated the challenges related to enduring negative student comments related to their ethnicity. Specific to course evaluations, research suggests that minority women attain poorer student evaluations as compared to their White counterparts (Navarro, Williams, & Ahmad, 2013), which underlines the unique challenges that Mexican American women PSEs may encounter.

Núñez, Ramalho, and Cuero (2010) conducted a critical performance ethnography exploring their own pedagogies as mixed-heritage Latinas and junior-faculty at Hispanic-Serving institutions. Their findings highlight various RLPs and how these RLPs impacted their professional identity. For example, one researcher noted that student large group discussions helped her examine her own biases toward students and thus challenged her to "remain open" (p. 182) to students' unique perspectives. They also noted the importance of respecting students' cultural and unique expression of knowledge. Therefore, they used bilingual discussions and creative assignments to connect with students. It seems that these Latina faculty used RLPs to gain awareness of the cultural experiences of their students, while also using their own cultural experiences as Latina faculty to guide their interactions with students. Ultimately, these studies demonstrate both the benefit and challenges for Latina faculty who use RLPs with their students. Continued research in this area is needed to gain stronger understanding about the cultural and academic implications related to RLPs.

## **METHOD**

### ***COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY***

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that incorporates researchers using their own experiences to understand the social and cultural nuances of their research topic. In this context, the researchers are also the participants. We, as research participants, sought to use our research to highlight the meaning of our experiences (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) as well as to help readers reflect on social processes and their own lives (Ellis, 2000). We also employed a systematic data collection and analysis approach that helped us gain socio-cultural understanding of our research topic and that sustained the trustworthiness of our study (Ellis et al., 2011). However, because this autoethnography included two research participants, we used a subset of autoethnography called collaborative autoethnography.

Collaborative autoethnography incorporates two or more research participants working together at different stages of the research process. For this study, we used a concurrent model of autoethnography in which we worked together at all stages of research – data collection, analysis, and reporting of findings. We both selected the research topic, independently collected autobiographic data (i.e.,

individual journals), and then met to conduct research interviews of each other and have follow-up discussions that helped us gather further data (Ngunjiri et al., 2010).

### ***RESEARCHER PARTICIPANTS***

Becky is a doctoral student in her second year of an Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching (ILT) program. She was an elementary school teacher for 10 years prior to pursuing her master's degree, which was immediately followed by acceptance and enrollment into the ILT doctoral program with a cognate in literacy. She is a middle-class Mexican-American woman in her late 50's. Although Becky has worked primarily with elementary age students, the data for this study was focused on two different post-secondary settings. First, she discussed her work with adult female learners in their first year at a community college. In this setting, although she taught the reflective writing assignment, she was a visiting instructor, and the course instructor remained in the class as she presented the lesson. Second, she currently works as an adjunct at a large urban university teaching pre-service teachers (Pre-k through 6) about both writing and reading instruction that will meet the needs of diverse elementary students. Becky also discussed her experiences as an adjunct with pre-service teachers for this study.

Tamara is an assistant professor of counseling in her fifth-year on the tenure track. Her doctorate is in Counselor Education and Supervision and she is also a Licensed Professional Counselor. Tamara has approximately 11 years teaching experience in higher education, which includes her previous experience working as an adjunct professor at a small community college and working as an adjunct at two different large universities. She currently works at a Hispanic Servicing Institution (HSI) (i.e., an institution that has an enrollment of at least 25 percent Hispanic students), a master's university in her hometown, which she views as a meaningful way to give back to her community. She reflected on all of her teaching experiences for this study with a primary focus on the following courses: Counseling Diverse Populations, Group Counseling Techniques, and Human Growth and Development across the Lifespan. She also identifies as a Mexican American, is in her late thirties, and has two young children.

### ***DATA COLLECTION***

Our goal was to use multiple data sources to obtain varying perspectives about our research topic. Therefore, we collected three sources of data: (a) reflective journal entries and research memos, (b) individual interviews, and (c) discussions between research participants.

#### **Reflective journal entries and research memos**

Both of us were teaching and using RLPs with our students and colleagues throughout this study. The specific type of RLP we used included: whole class discussions, small group class discussions, self-talk, and conversations with students and with colleagues that occurred outside of the classroom. We also examined written exchanges that included informal reflection papers, formal papers submitted as class assignments, student course evaluations, and e-mail exchanges with students and with colleagues. Therefore, we used reflective journal entries to document these experiences while also noting any personal reactions we had related to the research topic. Research memos were used to notate pertinent realizations that emerged during our research discussions and throughout data analysis (Creswell, 2013). We also used journal entries and research memos to enhance credibility of our study, which will be discussed further in the trustworthiness section.

#### **Individual interviews**

We conducted 60 minute semi-structured, in-person individual interviews of each other. Specifically, Tamara first interviewed Becky then Becky interviewed Tamara. These interviews were audio recorded and then we transcribed them verbatim. We used an interview guide to conduct interviews, which contained three main questions that were developed to help each other expand on how we implemented RLPs in our classes and how the use of these assignments impacted our professional devel-

opment. Our interview guide also contained follow-up prompts for each main question (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Our prompts focused on specific aspects related to professional development, which incorporated our interactions with students, interactions with colleagues, pedagogy, syllabi development, and development of assessment strategies.

### **Researcher participant discussion**

We had discussions at different points throughout our study, which helped us better understand the data. We used these discussions to maintain our concurrent model of autoethnography in which we worked together at all stages of the research process (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). For example, we had discussions to develop the interview guide, after listening to the recorded individual interviews, after transcribing the interviews, and throughout data analysis. As noted earlier, ideas that emerged during our research discussions were notated in our research memos.

### ***TRUSTWORTHINESS***

To enhance credibility of our research and of ourselves as researchers, we used data triangulation and reflective journal entries (Creswell, 2013). Data triangulation enabled us to use three sources of data to compare the consistency of information obtained at different times during our study and by different sources within the same research method (Patton, 2002). For the purpose of increasing our credibility as researchers, we used journal entries to promote self-awareness of our own biases that may have impacted how we approached data analysis (Patton, 2002).

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

We used a coding process as outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1999) in which we conducted several independent preliminary readings of our journal entries, research memos, and of the two interview transcripts. After these readings, we independently developed codes that we found consistent between these three data sources. Our goal was then to use an editing organizing style of data analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 167) in which codes can be refined and modified throughout the data analysis process. Therefore, after our independent code development, we met to discuss our initial codes and based on this discussion, we refined our codes and developed an initial code book. Our code book contained code titles, definition of codes, and an example of that code from our journal entries, research memos, and interview transcripts.

After the development of our initial codebook, we continued to immerse ourselves in the data and re-read journal entries, research memos, and interview transcripts. We then met several times to continue refining our code book so that each code best represented our data. We initially started with nine different codes and refined data down to seven codes.

After codes were developed, we reviewed the codes several times and aggregated the common codes together to develop themes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). We found two main themes. The first theme had two sub-themes and second theme had four sub-themes.

We then combined data from our research journals, interview transcripts, and discussions to create narrative excerpts to highlight these themes and sub-themes. We read each other's narratives and questioned each other for clarification. Narratives were then refined to best express our voices.

### **FINDINGS**

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Two themes emerged in our study: Developing Pedagogical Voice and Becoming Empowered. Within the first theme there were two sub-themes: (1) empowering class discussions and (2) personal experiences that guide our pedagogical voices. Within the second theme, there were four sub-themes: (1) dealing with other colleagues, (2) letting go of perfection, (3) 50:50 responsibility, and (4) vulnerability and heart. Narratives are used to highlight these themes. As research participants, our primary

focus was our own experiences and intrapersonal processes. Identifying information has been changed or removed to protect the confidentiality of individuals mentioned in our narratives.

## *DEVELOPING PEDAGOGICAL VOICE*

### **Empowering class discussions**

In this sub-theme, the primary RLP used was whole class discussions. Both Becky and Tamara noticed that in whole class discussions if they praised student responses, this seemed to discourage students from expressing divergent viewpoints. As a result, we altered our pedagogical strategies to include class discussions that avoided judgment and empowered students. For example, Becky explained how she decreased judgement in classroom discussions:

It's really difficult, but I try not to let my personal voice overreact positively or negatively to a student's product or their contribution to a conversation. If, for instance, I act too positively about something a student says or does, then what does that say to another student who may be going in another direction or are at a different place in their learning? If another student perceives that their answer doesn't compare to what I have reacted positively to, then I may shut them down or I may cause them to become disheartened about their product. Their thoughts and their work have to feel safe and so I have to be careful how I react. So, I try to be cognizant of keeping an appropriate look on my face, one that is encouraging yet neutral.

Similarly, Tamara explained that during whole class discussions, she paraphrases what students say and she avoids judging their responses. She believes that this helps students develop their own conclusions. However, she stated, "Sometimes students will get upset because I am not providing direct answers. There are times that I think it is important to provide answers, but I think more often it is important to facilitate dialogue about differing perspectives."

To empower students, Becky and Tamara both took steps back from giving student answers or the showing of approval of certain answers. Becky explained:

Sometimes I find that in class discussions, a student may respond by looking and talking directly at me as if trying to gauge my reaction to their answers or thoughts. So, again, I have to be careful of my responses because I don't want to give the impression, "Oh they got it!" because that means somebody else didn't get it. It also means that I am giving my approval because their thoughts align with what I think it should. This is their knowledge gathering process.

Tamara discussed how she avoided instructor-led discussions and instead empowered students to take ownership of their own discussions:

When students are learning something new, they seem to feel vulnerable. They want definitive answers and they do not want to make mistakes. However, learning something new is not comfortable and if students seemed too comfortable, then I would worry that I was not challenging them enough. Facilitating critical dialogue is very important for my pedagogy and creating a non-judgmental atmosphere is crucial to helping critical dialogue emerge. Therefore, when students ask questions, I almost always turn it back to the class, "What do you all think?" Students respond and they listen to each other.

Through the RLP of whole class discussions, Becky and Tamara saw the need to create non-judgmental and empowering classroom environments to help students develop a deeper and more personal learning experience.



### Personal experiences that guide our pedagogical voices

This sub-theme emphasizes how we critically reflected on our own personal experiences as students and as PSEs to strengthen our pedagogical voices. Our experiences also highlight varying RLPs, which included a creative course project, a form of verbal dialogue, whole class and small group class discussions, and student course evaluations.

Becky's previous learning experiences as a graduate student guided her pedagogical voice because these experiences helped her understand students' diversity of learning styles. Becky discussed a creative final project in graduate school that solidified this belief:

This project appealed to me because it allowed me to express myself in a way that was more natural for me. So, I handmade an origami mobile with eight pieces of origami hanging from the mobile. I called it *East Meets West* because it took parts of eastern thought-- represented by the origami and the gentle movement of the mobile-- and applied it to western thought-- represented by the separate pieces of origami-- each relating to genre or literacy elements.

From this experience, Becky began questioning if there were more natural ways for students to express their learning. She stated, "I think this was the first time that I realized that if you have the freedom to say something in any way that you want, then your true voice is honored."

In her experiences as a student in higher education, Tamara had difficulty speaking during class discussions. Therefore, as a professor she wanted to create safe spaces for all types of students to feel comfortable talking. She explained, "I have students discuss in pairs, in small groups, or in the large group and I rotate these styles of discussions within each class. This way, every student has a space where they may feel comfortable speaking." For students who do not feel comfortable speaking at all, Tamara uses reflective free writing assignments.

These narrative excerpts demonstrate how Becky's and Tamara's previous experiences guided their pedagogical voices so that they used different RLPs with their students. By using different RLPs, they nurtured students' diverse learning styles.

## ***BECOMING EMPOWERED***

### Dealing with colleagues

In this sub-theme, Becky discussed using silence as a strategy to preserve her authentic pedagogical voice. Conversely, Tamara reflected on how she used RLPs to challenge students to express their voices, which in turn helped her challenge herself to move from silence to voice. RLPs in this sub-theme included student written narratives, student reflections, and student evaluations of instructors as well as conversations with faculty or colleagues.

When Becky first became an adjunct faculty at the university where she was a doctoral student, she taught reading and literacy courses that were part of a teacher preparation program. Though she had a strong background in literacy, both as an elementary school teacher and a doctoral student, she found that her pedagogical expertise in this area was ignored by other literacy faculty. Becky explained:

When I first began teaching an undergraduate class for students seeking to be elementary school teachers, I needed clarification about the content and objectives. There were two adjunct faculty who had taught the class before so I usually went to one or the other for help. What I found was that they both also wanted to tell me the pedagogical methods they used to teach this class. They were so certain of their pedagogical practices and very outspoken about them, that I found it hard to voice my own differing thoughts. I was silent, but that didn't mean I was agreeing with them.... During those meetings, I felt as if my voice was unimportant, and thus silenced, even though I had been an elementary teacher for 10 years.

The RLP of conversations with faculty or colleagues caused Becky to believe that she was not really a contributing member of faculty discussions about pedagogical input.

Similarly, Tamara noticed that she was staying silent during faculty meetings. However, as a professor, she employed the RLP of reflective writing to seek out voices of all her students, including those who were silent in class. Tamara explained:

In the past, I have been quiet during faculty meetings. This experience made me think of my students who do not speak during class, but write amazing reflection papers that have powerful insights. When students share their insights in their papers, I communicate to them how the whole class would benefit from their insights and I encourage them to share their ideas. Here I am asking my students to step out of their comfort zone and participate in class discussions, yet I myself was not doing that as a professor in faculty meetings. So, I started challenging myself to speak up during faculty meetings and other interactions with my colleagues.

Tamara found that the RLP of writing reflective papers allowed those silent voices a space to be heard. As a result, she realized she had to break her own silence during the RLP of conversations with faculty or other colleagues.

Though Tamara found RLPs, such as faculty conversations and reflective writing, helpful for finding her own voice, the RLP of student evaluations presented another way PSEs can be silenced. She described an experience when a student gave her a harsh instructor evaluation that prompted her to silence her own authentic instructor voice:

As a professor I receive student evaluations of my teaching every semester. One semester, a student was angry and wrote an evaluation of me that included personal insults regarding my culture. Reading her evaluation hurt and I was no longer willing to put my heart into teaching because I feared being personally attacked again. I started silencing myself in the classroom, but I did not want to stay silent. So, I looked on-line to see how other professors handled insulting teaching evaluations. I realized that I was not alone- other professors experience personal attacks. I also knew that if I continued silencing myself because of this one student, that would not help anyone. Although I do not agree with how this student chose to personally attack me, this student chose to use her/his voice and I wanted to continue using mine as well.

The two previous examples show how Tamara was able to use RLPs to work at overcoming her own silencing situations as a faculty.

### **Letting go of perfection**

This is the second sub-theme within the theme of Becoming Empowered. RLPs in this sub-theme include verbal practices outside the classroom, along with verbal and written practices within the classroom, and e-mail exchanges with colleagues.

For Becky, she used a form of self-talk—related to the RLP of verbal practices that occur outside the classroom. In the following self-talk, she reflected on the time she put into preparing her teaching materials for the university classes she taught:

At the time of our interviews for this study, I hadn't addressed perfectionism, but since then, I have had to. I have found myself developing entirely new class session materials for class sessions I had already prepared. For instance, I created a whole new PowerPoint for a presentation I had already conducted in a previous class session. I have also cut back on creating perfect presentations with a lot of bells and whistles. I have told myself repeatedly that my PowerPoints were just to guide my presentations, yet I was putting so much time into creating them, that I was losing sight of their purpose for me. So now I make simpler presentations and reuse class session materials I have already prepared.

Through self-talk, Becky reflects on her need for perfection and how she dealt with it.

In the following example, however, Tamara uses the RLP of verbal and written practices within the classroom, through student reflective writing and her own verbal comments about her explanation about reflective writing. She explained:

In my use of RLP, I challenge my students to be creative and be willing to make mistakes so that they learn. However, if I am asking my students to let go of perfection, then I want to be willing to let go of my own perfectionism as well. For example, I used to spend hours revising my syllabi because I did not want any typos. I realized, however, if there is an error, the students will tell me and then I will fix it, but I do not have time to be perfect.

Outside of the classroom, however, she addresses perfectionism in other areas of her professional life through written and verbal communications with colleagues. Tamara stated, “My e-mails with colleagues are professional, but they are not written perfectly. Similarly, in faculty meetings, I just say what I have to say. If I’m caught up on how I might be interpreted, I’ll never say anything.” In both of these instances, Tamara concluded that she uses RLPs as a way to encourage students to let go of perfectionism only to realize she too must let go of perfectionism.

### **50:50 responsibility**

In this sub-theme, RLP includes students’ verbal and non-verbal communications with us during class as well as student self-evaluative written reflections. Through these RLPs we both released our tendency to direct students and take full responsibility for their learning; instead we began creating collaborative environments in which we were facilitating students’ critical thinking skills.

Becky, as a first-time faculty, fell back on a lecture format to make sure she was covering all the material as dictated by the syllabus. She explained:

One of the first classes I taught, I felt green. So, each day I went in following the syllabus very closely along with the pre-made PowerPoints given to me from the previous instructor. I was lecturing most of the time and reading directly from the PowerPoints. One day, about half way through the class, I stopped and said aloud, “The one doing the most talking is the one doing the most learning and I find I am doing the most talking.”

That night, Becky stated that she reflected back on the previous weeks of classes – on the quality of the products they had turned in, their lack of engagement during her lectures, their disinterested body language – and she realized, “I’m not interesting.” She knew then, that she had to put the learning back into the students’ hands.

From this experience and her own self-reflection, Becky was able to switch her lecture style pedagogy to more of a 50:50 responsibility of teaching and learning. She concluded, “From this point on, I quit lecturing so much and had the students do more interactive activities, reflective writing, and whole group sharing.”

Tamara, on the other hand, was concerned with pushing her students too much out of their learning comfort zone. She stated:

I went to a conference with fellow professors of counseling and we were talking about challenging our students. I mentioned how I often push students outside of their comfort zones by challenging them to reflect on their own biases. This type of self-reflection is critical for students who are seeking careers in the mental health profession, but I stated that maybe I push too far and I worry about that. My colleagues said, “It sounds like you’re feeling over responsible for student learning. They won’t let you push them somewhere they’re not ready to go.” I have always kept that in mind and I am more intentional now. I can’t force students somewhere they are not ready to go and I can’t take responsibility for their part of the learning.

Through the use of the RLP, which included conversations with colleagues that occurred outside of the classroom, Tamara was able to get feedback that led her to a better understanding of learning as a 50:50 endeavor.

### **Vulnerability and heart**

This theme demonstrates the intense RLP of self-reflection and evaluation that we engaged in, which in turn, enabled us to be more vulnerable and authentic as PSEs.

In the following excerpt, Becky's pedagogical strategy is to have students come up with the expectations for the grading of an assignment. However, the RLP of whole class discussion led Becky to an insight about her own teaching. She explained:

Student groups were responsible for presenting a chapter of our class text using some sort of presentation program, like PowerPoint or Prezi. I wanted the students to come up with characteristics they thought made a good chapter presentation because I wanted them to have input in how the presentations would be graded. Some of their suggestions were that the presenter should not just read the slides, should include personal connections and ideas, and come across as knowing the material well. As I wrote down their ideas, I realized that I hadn't met any of those characteristics during my own modeling of a chapter presentation.

As Becky reflected on her previous class lectures and slide presentations, she explained, "Listening to the students that day, I realized that I was reading from the slides too much and not giving enough of my own voice. I wasn't being real or authentic with them."

On the other hand, Tamara begins her semester by making herself vulnerable in ways she hopes her students will do as counselors. She stated:

At the beginning of the semester, I give this mini lecture to my students: "You're not always going to like me because I'm going to challenge you, but I'm ok with that because when you're counselors and you're pushing clients to reach their therapeutic goals, they're not always going to like you pushing them outside of their comfort zones. So, I'm going to challenge you to become comfortable with being disliked, by modeling that I'm ok if you don't like me." And half the time, I'm not. I don't want them to dislike me, but I'm not going to give into my discomfort and alter my teaching just so that they'll like me.

Tamara admits she does not want to be disliked, but she is willing to be vulnerable and teach with her heart.

## **DISCUSSION**

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The purpose of this study was to explore how the use of RLP influenced our professional development as Mexican American women PSEs by focusing on the contrasting nature of three concepts: (1) voice/silence, (2) expressing/masking of emotions, and (3) empowerment/disempowerment. Our findings indicate that through RLP we gained enriched understanding of students and of ourselves. These new understandings guided our pedagogical voices and helped us feel empowered, which is also supported in the literature (Nuñez et al., 2010; Pittman, 2010). We address each theme separately.

### ***DEVELOPING PEDAGOGICAL VOICE***

Within the first theme, voice/silence, expressing/masking of emotions, and empowerment/disempowerment emerged. In previous research voice has emerged as critical components related to the experiences of Mexican American women and other PSEs of color (González, 2006; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016; Rodriguez, 2006). In the first sub-theme, Developing Pedagogical Strategies, we found that voice and silence were also important parts of our experiences. In the second sub-theme, Personal Experiences that Guide our Pedagogical Voices, Becky noted that her own expe-

periences as a doctoral student in which she used creative RLPs to express herself, helped her encourage her own students to use creative RLPs to foster their authentic voices. In this case, Becky used her voice to create a learning environment in which students could also develop their own voices.

Similar to previous research (Boyd et al., 2010; González, 2006; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016; Sulé, 2011), our study also highlighted the role that silence played in our careers as PSEs. In the second sub-theme, Personal experiences that Guide our Pedagogical Voices, Tamara felt silenced after a harsh student evaluation, which initially hindered her ability to use her voice in the classroom. She seemed to use silence as a protective tactic to persist in her career, but also as a way of avoiding further harsh student evaluations. However, a unique finding in our study was that after initially feeling silenced, Tamara found support and returned to using her voice again.

Becky and Tamara both noted masking emotional expression with students as a way of facilitating non-judgmental classroom dialogue in which students felt comfortable expressing differing viewpoints. While masking of emotion has been indicated as an important means of survival and opposition for women of color in academia (Rodríguez 2006; Sulé, 2011), our findings align more with research by Nuñez et al. (2010) in which Latina faculty noted that class discussions helped them recognize their own biases toward students and therefore improve their pedagogy.

Related to empowerment/disempowerment, after feeling silenced from a critical student evaluation, Tamara found support and began using her voice again. This is an important finding because research indicates that silence can be related to Mexican American Women PSEs feeling disempowered and can have negative implications such as avoiding their academic institutions or downgrading their academic career goals (González, 2006; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). However, in alignment with previous studies, Tamara felt empowered again by finding ways to excel in her academic career (Espino, 2016). This included using her voice in the classroom, letting go of perfection when communicating with colleagues, and using vulnerability and heart in her teaching.

### ***BECOMING EMPOWERED***

Within the second theme voice/silence and empowerment/disempowerment emerged. Expressing/masking of emotions, however, did not emerge as prominently in this second theme. Voice and silence seemed to help both of us persist in our careers, which is supported in research as well (Boyd et al., 2010; Sulé, 2011). In the first sub-theme, Dealing with other Colleagues, Tamara discussed finding voice through her students' voices. By requesting her students to use their voices in class, she then began challenging herself to be more vocal during interactions with her colleagues. In this same sub-theme, Becky, on the other hand, reported feeling silenced during consultations with other faculty. However, her silence enabled her to maintain working relationships with her colleagues, while still preserving her pedagogy in the classroom. While expressing/masking of emotions did not emerge in this theme prominently, this example in which Becky stayed silent relates to masking of emotions. She may have masked emotions of frustration during consultations as a way of surviving and persisting with in her academic career, which aligns with previous research (Rodríguez, 2006; Sulé, 2011)

In the final sub-theme, Vulnerability and Heart, we both discussed how we reflected on our own pedagogical voices through students' RLPs. For example, Becky reflected on her students' feedback about her presentation style, which prompted her to question if she was putting enough of her own voice in her class presentations. Latina professors in Reyes and Ríos' (2005) study also discussed the challenge of reading critical student professor evaluations. However, similar to Becky, they continued reading these critiques and using them to enhance their pedagogical voices.

On a similar note, Tamara addressed her commitment to helping students feeling empowered by challenging students and accepting their discomfort. Although this is not an easy task for her, it demonstrated her own sense of empowerment and her goal of helping her students feel empowered. This is particularly relevant to Tamara who teaches at a HSI and therefore feels a sense of giving back to her community. Studies suggest that when Mexican American women PSEs are able to in-

corporate their cultural identities into their professional identities they feel a sense of empowerment (Castillo-Montoya & Torres-Guzmán, 2012; Espino, 2016; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016), which is what Tamara seems to be doing.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

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The focus of our study was on how the use of various RLPs impacted the professional development of two Mexican American women PSEs. Due to the extensive benefits that we attained through the use of RLPs, our research supports the need for implementing or continuing to use RLPs in post-secondary education settings. Additionally, studies are needed to investigate the specific impact of different types of RLPs. This could help PSEs make empirically based decisions when selecting the type of RLPs they will implement in the classroom.

However, as the definition of literacy continues to expand with the use of technology, scholars are realizing the importance of digital and web literacy, which are literacies that incorporate students' ability to navigate internet platforms and non-linear forms of information (Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013). With this in mind, we recommend that PSEs implement digital and web literacies in their students RLPs. In order to do this, devices, such as interactive white boards, iPads, and smart phones are needed (Marinagi, Skourlas, & Belsis, 2013) that enable on-line discussion forms, interactive student assessments, and decision making (Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013). For instance, Prezi, an on-line application, enables users to make presentations using non-linear formats. Students can use Prezi when designing their own research designs because it allows students to illustrate their ideas non-linearly, which may align with how they visually understand their own research. This may enable students to express understanding of a subject in ways that are more natural to the way they learn and communicate (Nuñez et al., 2010). Digital literacies, like other RLPs, can be guided by PSEs to help students use these tools to think reflectively and problem solve (Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013). Examples of these applications include Prezi, Canva, and Nearpod, but for a more extensive list of strategies and application use, see Lahaie and Mumford (2017).

Related to the cultural experiences of Mexican American PSEs, our findings align with other studies that have noted the negative impact silence can have for the professional development of Latinas in academia (González, 2006; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). To provide more context about Latina women PSEs, it is important to know the vast underrepresentation of this group within the profession. Compared to Black and Asian women, Latina women are least frequently employed as professors in higher education (American Indian and Pacific Islander women being the least employed women after Latina women). Specific to post-secondary educators, Latino, Black, and Asian compromise 18.9% of PSEs, while Non-Latino Whites compromise 81.1 % of PSEs (Ortega-Liston & Rodriguez-Soto, 2014). These statistics demonstrate the lack of Mexican American women employed as PSEs, thus increasing the need to support those currently employed as PSEs and the need to recruit Mexican American women into this profession.

For professionals who work with Mexican American PSEs (e.g., faculty, department chairs, and deans), support for Mexican American PSEs can incorporate culturally empowering professional experiences, such as research mentorship and networking opportunities with other faculty of color, which have been found to positively impact career success (Ortega-Liston & Rodriguez-Soto, 2014). While these types of resources may seem typical, studies indicate that they may not be common. In fact, Latina women seeking employment as professors, experience lack of career mentoring, disparate promotions, and inequitable salaries (Ortega-Liston & Rodriguez-Soto, 2014; Sulé 2011). These research findings highlight the need for higher education leaders and policy makers to advocate for equitable promotions and salaries as well as implement recruitment and retention programs for Mexican American women PSEs.

Our study also demonstrated how Tamara navigated from silence back to voice after reading a negative teaching evaluation. Studies indicate that negative teaching evaluations are common for minority women as compared to their White counterparts (Navarro et al., 2013). Therefore, this is an experience that many Mexican American women PSEs may encounter that can invoke feeling silenced. Due to the potential negative consequences for the professional development of Mexican American PSEs who remain silent (Gonzalez, 2006; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016), additional research is needed that explores how RLPs can help Mexican American women PSEs find their voice after feeling silenced.

## CONCLUSION

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There are few studies that have examined how the use of RLPs impacts the PSEs who assign them (Taylor, 2009). Moreover, there is a lack of research focused on the professional development of Mexican American women PSEs, in particular. Yet, interactions between PSEs and students can have significant implications for the professional development of the PSEs and for the success of their students. Our study addressed this need by focusing on the contrasting nature of three concepts: (1) voice/silence, (2) expressing/masking of emotions, and (3) empowerment/disempowerment. Findings underlined the importance of RLPs in helping Mexican American women PSEs develop their pedagogical voices and to create empowering post-secondary education settings for themselves and for their students. Moreover, research indicates that when Latina women PSEs are able to integrate their cultural identities into their professional identities, they feel empowered (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). We, as Mexican American women, have gained a sense of empowerment through this study and promote continued exploration and documentation of the experiences of Mexican American women PSEs.

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## BIOGRAPHIES



ginalize females of color.

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