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Historias Americanas: Implementing Mexican American Studies in K-12 Social Studies Curriculum in the Rio Grande Valley

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Abstract

This essay contributes to the growing literature on Mexican American Studies in K-12 within the broader field of Ethnic Studies. While most of the literature on the movement for Ethnic Studies within Texas and across the nation mainly focuses on the impact of Ethnic Studies courses on students' academic success, this essay highlights a professional development program for K-12 social studies teachers in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas entitled *Historias Americanas: Engaging History and Citizenship in the Rio Grande Valley*, funded by a federal grant. This essay provides an overview of *Historias Americanas*, the objectives and structure of the program, and the ways in which the program contributes to the discourse on Mexican American Studies in K-12. It also describes the frameworks that form the crux of the professional development process: place-based education and culturally relevant pedagogical frameworks.

Keywords: Mexican American Studies in K-12 Social Studies, Mexican American history in K-12, Culturally Relevant Education, Place-Based Education, Ethnic Studies in K-12, Teacher Professional Development, Rio Grande Valley

Introduction

This essay introduces readers to an initiative entitled *Historias Americanas: Engaging History and Citizenship in the Rio Grande Valley* (Historias Americanas), a professional development program for K-12 social studies teachers from the two largest school districts in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) of South Texas. The program provides teachers with opportunities to acquire a level of expertise in the history, culture, and geography of the region using place-based education and culturally relevant pedagogical frameworks. The objective is to provide teachers with content on Mexican American history to enhance the social studies curriculum and with pedagogical tools to provide students with culturally relevant experiences. This essay provides an overview of Historias Americanas, how it was conceptualized, and how it facilitates the integration of Mexican American Studies (MAS) content in K-12 classrooms.

Background of the Historias Americanas Professional Development Program

In the summer of 2017, 12 faculty members from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) engaged in a 10-day personal and professional development venture in Mexico City. Working under the banner of UTRGV's B3 Institute (bilingual, bicultural, biliterate)—an initiative that counted among its core components (1) the Center for Mexican American Studies, (2) the Center for Bilingual Studies, and (3) the Translation and Interpreting Office—faculty members represented multiple disciplines. One faculty member was from the Department of Organization and School Leadership, four represented Mexican American Studies (MAS), one was from Creative Writing, two were from the University College, one was from Bilingual and Literacy Studies, one was from Psychology, one was from Biology, and one was from Spanish. All the faculty had a background in MAS, were MAS faculty affiliates, and are well-published in MAS-related fields. Other participants included two recent graduates of the graduate program in MAS, the program coordinator for the Center for Mexican American Studies and Center for Bilingual Studies and some family members.¹

The curriculum for the experience included selected readings, reflective writing workshops, day-long excursions that included visiting museums and historical sites, climbing pyramids of ancient Mexican ruins, and taking long walks in historic places around Mexico City.

¹ All of the faculty selected for this trip are Latinx with eight being Mexican American, one being Mexican, one being Cuban American, one being Nicaraguan, and another being Guatemalan.

Participants shared cultural and socio-historical experiences in a part of the world where each faculty member could be inspired by the historical and cultural weight of the place. Faculty members took extensive notes on each site visit and read selected texts that guided daily dialogues. Each dialogue brought together content shaped by the experience of the day and by the readings. During the daily dialogue sessions, participants used the *plática* modality as a source of inquiry, critical self-reflection, and community building (de la Torre, 2008; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013; Saavedra & Esquierdo, 2019; Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Durán, Carruba-Rogel & Solis, 2020). The *plática* modality was used because it is a culturally specific expressive form akin to a family dialogue around the kitchen table and was guided by inquiry and aligned to both the selected reading and the tactile/cultural experience of the day. As a form of inquiry and dialogue, *plática* prompted conversations and grounded discussions in culturally relevant ways. This methodological approach culturalizes the dialogical form by framing the discourse and centering it on Mexican and Mexican American socio-historical and cultural forms (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013).

Being in Mexico City allowed the group to reflect on the history, heritage, culture, and languages of Mexico that transformed participants. It also allowed the faculty to discuss, reflect, and write about the ways in which they wanted to expand their work in Mexican American Studies and move it forward in higher education and in communities. The impact was palpable: personally, professionally, and as a collective. The faculty members made several commitments to each other: (1) faculty would work together to fortify UTRGV's B3 mission to promote bilingualism, biculturalism and biliteracy through curricular, research, and programmatic functions aligned with the history and experiences of Mexican American students that comprise 90% of the student body; (2) the team would continue to build the community of faculty and staff by generating personal and professional development opportunities; and (3) faculty would engage in resource development functions to secure grants and other resources to deepen the collective work.

Upon returning to South Texas, four of the faculty participants in the Mexico City venture wrote a grant proposal for an American History and Civics Education National Activities grant. The purpose of this grant program is to improve the teaching and learning of American history in K-12. The proposal called for a program to engage selected local public-school districts in a professional development process for social studies and history teachers to

enhance their curriculum. The grant writing team, led by two of the authors of this essay, wrote the proposal amid a movement in Texas to integrate a high school Mexican American Studies course as a humanities elective. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) was in the process of approving the course as well as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for the course. In discussions to frame the proposal, the authors saw the opportunity to create a program that reflected the history, culture, and language of the students, teachers, families, and communities in the Rio Grande Valley—the vast majority of whom are Mexican American—and to integrate Mexican American Studies in K-12 social studies and history curricula. The authors thus named the program *Historias Americanas: Engaging History and Citizenship in the Rio Grande Valley* and submitted it to the U.S. Department of Education award competition.

The program promised to provide teacher professional development experiences to 70 K-12 social studies and history teachers from the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District (ECISD) and Brownsville Independent School District (BISD) on the history, culture, and geography of the Rio Grande Valley through a Mexican American Studies lens and by using principles from place-based education (Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Sobel, 2004) and culturally relevant pedagogical frameworks (Gay, 2002, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2014). Place-based teaching and learning provides a framework from which to create innovative pedagogical and curricular workshops based on up-to-date research and practices for teacher development that places students lived experiences, sociohistorical context, and community realities at the center of the instructional process (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Smith & Sobel, 2010). *Historias Americanas* employs place-based education to deepen the connections between location and learning by encouraging teachers to create a classroom that integrates place, culture, and language and encourages students to draw on their existing funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; González et al., 2005) and their families' and communities' cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Culturally relevant pedagogies such as *plática*, oral histories, community-based research, and digital storytelling are applied in ways that are specific to the students and communities. The university won a 3-year grant in September 2018 in the amount of \$2,014,557.00 to implement *Historias Americanas: Engaging History and Citizenship in the Rio Grande Valley*.

This essay is authored by four of the faculty participants in the professional development venture in Mexico City, including two who authored the grant proposal. Maritza De La Trinidad

is a historian of the Mexican American educational experience and faculty in the Mexican American Studies program; Francisco Guajardo is a historian whose tenure resided in the Department of School and Community Leadership; Joy Esquierdo is a bilingual education teacher/scholar and faculty in the Bilingual and Literacy Studies and Director of the Center for Bilingual Studies; and Stephanie Alvarez is an Ethnic Studies scholar and faculty in the Mexican American Studies Program and Director of the Center for Mexican American Studies. The four have been in close professional and personal partnerships for the better part of the past decade, and each plays a key role in the implementation of *Historias Americanas*.

Context of the Grant

Located in deep South Texas along the Texas-Mexico border, the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) encompasses four counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy) surrounded by smaller towns, cities and *colonias* with a total population of 1.36 million residents.¹ According to Index Mundi, Cameron County is 89.8% Hispanic/Latinx, Hidalgo is 92.4%, Starr County 96.4% and Willacy, 88.4%.² The RGV is considered a borderland (Anzaldúa, 1987, 2012) rather than a metroplex, with McAllen, Brownsville and Harlingen as its principal communities on the northern side of the Rio Grande and the sister cities of Matamoros, Rio Bravo, Nuevo Progreso, and Reynosa in the state of Tamaulipas on the southern side.² Indigenous people interacted with the land and its ecology for 12,000 years, before new settlers came—a reality that engendered the idea of a borderland. This borderland is defined by a history of struggle, political contention, and an elongated search for identity by Mexican-origin people who live on

² This article uses several terms depending on the context. The U.S. Census Bureau uses the pan-ethnic terms Hispanic and Latino/a interchangeably to classify a diverse population who have origins in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, other parts of the Caribbean, Central America, South America, and Spain (<https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/texas/hispanic-or-latino-population-percentage#map>). See also: Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert (2011). In this essay we mostly use Mexican, Mexican American, or Mexican-origin to accurately portray the demographic reality of the Rio Grande Valley. Chicana/o is used in historical context for Mexican Americans who call themselves Chicanas/os. The Pew Research Center shows that the 2019 national census figures indicate that the overall Hispanic/Latino population stands at 60.6 million, comprising 18 percent of the nation's total population. 63 percent of the overall Hispanic/Latino population is Mexican origin. The Mexican origin population includes Mexican nationals, U.S.-born citizens, naturalized citizens, undocumented immigrants, and the children of recent immigrants. Texas is home to 11.5 million Hispanics/Latinos, comprising 45 percent of the state's total (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/10/hispanics-have-accounted-for-more-than-half-of-total-u-s-population-growth-since-2010/>). We also use the term ELL (English Language Learners) and LEP (Limited English Proficient) interchangeably to refer to the subpopulation of students that this program targets. These terms encompass students who speak English as a second language and/or are bilingual.

both sides of the border. To be from the border is to be both Mexican and American, but it is also to be ensconced in a place of cultural and linguistic fluidity that has changed over time. To be from this borderland is to live in two worlds, but many may also feel that they are neither from here, nor from there (ni de aquí, ni de allá). This borderland exists as an herida abierta (open wound) and a place of survival (Anzaldúa, 1987, 2012). Settlement, migration, international trade, economic development, and cross-border social relations and commerce created binational communities with families residing on both sides of the Texas-Mexico border dating back to the Spanish colonial and Mexican periods (Alonzo, 1998; Valerio-Jiménez, 2013). Social and economic interdependence between families and communities on both sides of the border were established by the early 1900s and continued into the mid-20th century (Hernández, 2014; Montejano, 1987). Social and economic ties between families, communities, and businesses were significantly strengthened in the 1990s and early 21st century due to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and increased immigration (De La Trinidad et al., 2018; Gutiérrez, 1996; Pagán, 2004). Given the historical demographic, cultural, and geographic realities of this region, the authors saw an opportunity to create a program that would enhance the K-12 social studies and history curriculum with content on Mexican American experiences and the contributions Mexican Americans have made to the social, economic, cultural, and political development of the Northeastern Mexican borderlands and Rio Grande Valley.

Since an important function of public schooling in the U.S. is to instill a sense of belonging, inclusion, and citizenship, the curriculum should reflect the diversity of the people who contributed to the making of the nation, so that all students see themselves in the content they learn. In the RGV, the school curriculum should also reflect the history, culture, and heritage of the majority Mexican descent student population served by local districts. In his book, *A Different Mirror: A Multicultural History of America*, historian Ronald Takaki used the metaphor of a “mirror” to describe the effect an incomplete historical narrative has on the student:

But what happens when historians do not “record” their stories, leaving out many of America’s peoples? What happens, to borrow the words of Adrienne Rich, “when someone with the authority of a teacher” describes our society, and “you are not in it”? Such an experience can be disorienting—“a moment of

psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.” What should we do about our invisibility? ... This truth is reflected in “a different mirror.” (Takaki, 2008, pp. 29-30)

Takaki’s “mirror” metaphor infers that learning history is akin to looking in the mirror; if students do not see themselves in the mirror, it is as if they do not exist. Thus, students should see themselves in the larger narrative to feel a sense of belonging, self-worth, and positive self-image. This is applicable in teaching social studies and history in K-12 since these are important years when students learn who they are as individuals and develop their sense of belonging and acceptance as valued members of society. Takaki’s message is also useful to describe what Mexican American/Chicana/o high school students in Los Angeles demanded after thousands walked out of their high schools in 1968 to protest discriminatory policies such as the “no-Spanish” rule, the lack of college preparatory courses, lack of bilingual education, and lack of courses in Mexican American history.

The massive Los Angeles walkouts reverberated in other parts of the Southwest and Midwest (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Muñoz, 2007; Navarro, 1995), including South Texas in San Antonio, Edcouch-Elsa, Kingsville, and Crystal City (Barrera, 2004; Echeverría, 2014; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004; Muñoz, 2007; Navarro, 1995). The activism sparked by the walkouts led to the creation of *El Plan de Santa Barbara*; the founding document for Chicana/o Studies, at the Santa Barbara Conference in 1969. Student activists designed a college program to meet the needs of Mexican American/Chicana/o students and communities with courses in history, anthropology, sociology, and literature on the Mexican American experience to celebrate their Mexican heritage and Spanish language (Muñoz, 2007). In writing *El Plan De Santa Barbara*, Chicana/o/x activists envisioned an education that “mirrored” and valued their experience as Mexican Americans/Chicanas/os/x—one that affirmed their identity and empowered them. This is reflected in the quotes below on the early development of Chicano and Mexican American Studies college programs that coincided with the creation of *El Plan de Santa Barbara*:

The present needs of the Chicano must be met in such a way as to provide relevant programs which will sustain self-confidence and provide a feeling of acceptance on the student’s terms ... to develop ... abilities to serve their communities, [and] to develop a potential for self-fulfillment in at least two cultures (quoted in Muñoz, 2007, p. 158).

This program ... is designed for students who elect to study this important minority group through the interdisciplinary approach or plan to engage in such professions as government service, education, social work, or others where knowledge of this subject would enhance professional opportunities (quoted in Muñoz, 2007, p. 159)

To study the contribution of the Mexican-American to American culture and society ... promote better understanding among all Americans...encourage Mexican-Americans to seek higher education by creating a greater feeling of pride for their heritage and acquainting them with the culture that helped form their community ... (Quoted in Muñoz, 2007, p. 160).

These statements give us insight into the type of education Chicana/o/x activists believed would improve Chicana/o/x students sense of self, academic engagement, and communities. At the time, high school and college student activists called for a curriculum that reflected their history, culture, identity, and community realities—one in which they saw themselves and their communities. In some ways, students were calling for what educational scholars refer to as culturally relevant education and place-based education, as students wanted to see their Mexican/Mexican American/Chicano culture and local communities reflected in their textbooks and the content they learned (Acuña, 2011; Barrera, 2004; Muñoz, 1989, 2007; Soldatenko, 2011).

The 1970s, 1980s and 1990s saw the growth of Mexican American/Chicana/o and Latinx Studies and other ethnic studies programs and centers in colleges and universities across the nation to facilitate the teaching and research on the Mexican American/Chicana/o/Latina/o experiences in the U.S., including the University of Texas Pan American, UTRGV's legacy institution. By the early 2000s, teachers, scholars, and educational leaders believed these programs should begin at the high school level. An example of this is the Mexican American/Raza Studies program developed by teachers at Tucson Unified School District in 2002 with the support of administrators and educational scholars, which included courses in history, government, and literature from a Mexican American/Chicana/o/x, social justice perspective (Cabrera, et al., 2014; Camarota, 2007, 2009-2010; Camarota & Romero, 2014).

In developing *Historias Americanas*, the authors of the proposal drew from established scholarship on effective practices in bilingual, bicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy,

and placed-based education to make education for students in the RGV more relevant and congruent to their culture, language, history, and location (Guajardo et al., 2016; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Sobel, 2004). They listened to the research on bicultural education by Cárdenas and Cárdenas (1977) who argued that the values and life experiences of Hispanic/Latinx children was incompatible with the values and teaching and learning approaches of U.S. public schools. Cárdenas and Cárdenas's "theory of incompatibilities" (1977) provided a relevant analytical framework to create a program that would promote an instructional process that was more congruent with the lives of students, families, and communities, including their home culture and language. Valenzuela (1999) updated this theory in her argument that historically Mexican American children have been subjected to "subtractive schooling" because schools used instructional practices negated the historical, cultural, and linguistic heritage of Mexican American children including those of recent immigrants, bilingual learners, and other Latinx student populations. Valenzuela argued that recognizing and affirming the knowledge and culture that students, families and communities bring to the educational process is effective in transforming the education of Mexican American and Latinx students from a subtractive education to an additive education to promote academic success (Valenzuela, 1999). Ladson-Billings's (1995, 2014) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, which links principles of learning to the cultural background and experiences of children, families, and communities. Moll, Amanti, Neff & González (1992) Funds of Knowledge framework holds that students bring to school knowledge from their families and communities that can be and should be tapped to help them connect to school. Yosso's (2005) concept of Community Cultural Wealth strengthens the arguments for culturally relevant and culturally congruent teaching and learning to counter the negation of culture, language, and incongruence of values in K-12 education for Mexican origin/Latinx students (Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel 2010; Sobel, 2004;) and culturally relevant pedagogical frameworks (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2014).

Historias Americanas also draws from more recent research on the impact of Mexican American and Ethnic Studies curricula on students' academic performance such as Cabrera et al., (2014) who analyzed data from the Mexican American/Raza Studies program in Tucson (2008-2014) that emphasized culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy, curricula, materials, and instructional practices at the high school level. Cabrera et al.'s (2014) study, which involved 8,400 mostly Latino/a/x students over 4 cohorts between 2008 and 2011, found that students

who took more than one high school course taught from a culturally relevant framework achieved higher grade point averages (GPAs), raised scores on the Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS), the state's mandated assessment test, and experienced a higher probability of graduating high school. The study concluded that student academic performance was increased through culturally relevant teaching and learning practices that positively affected learning and intellectual development. A similar study by Dee and Penner (2017) using data from 1,405 students from five school year cohorts in the San Francisco School District found that implementing culturally relevant curricula inspired students to "explore their individual identity, their family history, and their community history" (Dee & Penner, 2017, p. 10). These researchers argue that culturally relevant pedagogy and "instructional practices are substantially more effective when differentiated to align with the distinctive cultural experiences that individual students bring with them and affirm students' cultural identity" (Dee & Penner, 2017, p. 1). These studies demonstrate the merits of teaching culturally relevant content through culturally responsive pedagogical strategies to improve student learning, engagement in the content they learn, and academic success by connecting students' lived experiences and community realities. For example, teachers learned about Indigenous peoples of the Rio Grande Delta, how they lived their daily lives such as the mining of salt from an ancient salt lake, La Sal del Rey, north of Edinburg, to cure meat and foodstuffs, trade and commerce with Meso-American Indigenous peoples from central Mexico, through visits to La Sal del Rey and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge and from scholarly presentations by Anthropologists such as Dr. Servando Hinojosa and Archivist Martín Salinas, museum and national park staff, discussions and readings. From class observations, surveys, and digital stories we learned how many teachers are teaching the content they learn using pedagogies such as oral history, family history, and funds of knowledge to help students feel connected to the lesson.

An objective of *Historias Americanas* is to help teachers make connections between themselves and the history, culture, and geography of the RGV to make social studies curricula more relevant to their students' Mexican American cultural identities, heritage, and "cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005). At the same time, another goal is to help teachers see themselves and their families in the content they teach, so that they can help their students see themselves and their communities as significant agents in the larger historical narrative. Most of the teachers who participate in our program are Mexican American. However, helping all of the teachers

know themselves and make connections to the Rio Grande Valley through place-based education helps them connect to students and see themselves and their students in the place-based content.

The Historias Americanas Professional Development Components

The program helps teachers develop an awareness of the regions' rich Mexican American history and the role Mexican-origin people have had in shaping its history, since most people in most communities do not know their own history unless the place is Gettysburg, Williamsburg, or Jamestown (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). For this reason, *Historias Americanas* uses culturally relevant and place-based educational frameworks in providing teachers with content. Teachers learn to draw from their own lived experiences, stories, and "cultural wealth" and about the power and value of place to make the content more meaningful and culturally and geographically relevant. Participants do this through reflective writing, group discussion, culturally responsive activities, and lesson-planning sessions in the workshops. Reflection prompts such as "Today we are visiting the Hidalgo Pumphouse historical museum. As we walk through this site, think about your family history (your story). What is the historical relevance of this location and how do you connect to it?" ask teachers to see themselves and their families in the place we visit and learn about. Writing and creating their own story using digital storytelling is another way we asked teachers to engage in to understand where they fit in the history, culture, and heritage of the Rio Grande Valley.

For each institute and workshop, we collected data using reflective journal writing, pre and posttests, pre and post workshop surveys and lesson plans. After the first summer institute in June 2019, one teacher wrote, "After the presentations, I feel connected to my past through the plight of my ancestors," (Maria, post survey) and another wrote, "I feel like I have more tools in my arsenal (teaching) to better educate my students about culturally relevant ideas" (Anthony, post survey). If teachers are excited about learning their own history and seeing themselves in the larger narrative of the American U.S. history, they will stimulate students' interest to learn about their own history and local communities by encouraging students to draw from their cultural knowledge to connect to the larger narrative. This was noted by another teacher who wrote, "This has spiked interest in my own history and learning more about my ancestors, so I can in turn be a better teacher for my students" (Jennifer, post

survey). Teachers readily embraced the program and expressed the ways in which they changed personally as teachers and how they will teach their Social Studies content after their participation in the first institute. Some teachers noted the following in their reflections:

It made me reflect and re-examine the delivery of my instruction and embrace my students' cultural background to enhance instruction. (Gloria, post survey, summer 2019 Institute)

I learned so much and really re-evaluated my way of teaching. (Robert, post survey, summer 2019 Institute)

This program has created an invigorating transformation in my role as a teacher, it also built a deeper awareness of the value of the place we live in. (Sandra, post survey, summer 2019 Institute)

To integrate the place-based educational framework the initiative was designed for three-day institutes and one-day workshops to be held at different historical sites that correspond to the content theme of a given institute or workshop. Workshops have been held at the Museum of South Texas History, La Sal del Rey, Palo Alto Battlefield, the Brownsville Historic Museum, and UTRGV's and Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge. Located in different parts of the Rio Grande Valley, these sites are relevant to the region's historical, cultural, and economic development and Mexican American history in the region. The program held virtual workshops via zoom due to the shelter-in mandates by the State of Texas and UTRGV guidelines to maintain the program's momentum and continuity and have provided teachers with additional relevant content and pedagogies through workshops offered by the Museum of South Texas History and led by Dr. Francisco Guajardo.

Since June 2019, the project has provided six *Historias Americanas* institutes and workshops. The inaugural three-day summer 2019 institute was held at the Museum of South Texas History, La Sal del Rey (a salt lake), Palo Alto Battlefield, the Brownsville Historical Museum, and the UTRGV Center for Innovation and Commercialization (CIC). Scholar presenters such as Dr. Manuel Medrano and Dr. Omar Valerio-Jiménez focused on the historical and cultural relevance of the salt lake, Spanish Colonization and Vaquero Culture in the Rio Grande Valley, The U.S.-Mexico War and Cross-border relations in their presentations. Other scholar presenters such as Dr. Gregory A. Smith and Dr. Francisco Guajardo introduced

teachers to Place-Based education and Culturally Relevant frameworks. The fall 2019 one-day workshop was held at the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge with topics focusing Pre-Columbian History: People of Antiquity, Olmecs to Maya and *Visión arqueológica, lingüística, etnohistórica y de la inmigración indígena al Delta del Rio Grande o Bravo*.³ Due to the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the spring 2020 workshop was held virtually via zoom. Our scholar presenter for this workshop, Dr. Sonia Hernández, focused her content presentation on Industrialization and the Rise of Commercial Agriculture in the United States, 1880-1930. The summer 2020 institute was an intense four-day virtual workshop on Digital Storytelling, provided by StoryCenter, an organization co-founded by Joe Lambert in San Francisco, California, and his team of faculty. The fall 2020 virtual workshop was on (1) early civil rights in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the founding of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) (2) Adela Sloss-Vento's Civil Rights Activist, Public Intellectual, Feminist, and Aurora E. Orozco's Community Leader and Educator in Cuero, Texas, presented by Dr. Cynthia Orozco. In the spring 2021 workshop the content presented by the historian Armando Alonzo focused on making a living in Nuevo Santander, the ranch economy and culture and land grants in the Northeastern Mexico. Topics for the institutes and workshops content and the scholar presenters were chosen to reflect the historical development, economy, culture, and geography of the region from a Mexican American perspective. Relevant locations and sites in the RGV for the workshops corresponded to the topics and the relevant scholarship on the region that aligned with the goals of the program.

Place-based Education

Historias Americanas employs principles of place-based education to ground the teaching and learning process in the local heritage, culture, environment, and community in which students live (Anderson, 2017; Elder, 1998; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Sobel, 2004). Several realities guide the idea to include place-based education as part of this professional development initiative. The first is that the South Texas, Rio Grande Valley, region possesses a rich history and culture that has not quite made it into the social studies curriculum and history books in K-12. Building on Moll, Amanti & González's (1992) Funds of Knowledge

³ Translated as Vision of archeological, linguistic, ethnohistory and the migration of indigenous peoples to the Rio Grande or Bravo.

framework and Yosso's (2005) concept of Community Cultural Wealth, teachers engage in opportunities to think about local history, culture, and traditions in new ways. Yosso's concept of community cultural wealth affirms that students of color have linguistic capital, familial capital, aspirational capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital. At the same time, the theory of funds of knowledge allows teachers begin to view knowledge beyond that acquired beyond the classroom, but rather found in students' lived experiences, world views, and cultural ways among other funds. These frameworks are rarely tapped into to reshape schooling, yet with *Historias Americanas* we strive to connect them so that they become "a starting point" as Sobel (2004) posits, "to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum" (p. 6).

Teacher preparation programs in Texas and across the country generally omit the historical and cultural experiences of Mexican Americans and other historically excluded groups from the professional development experience of preservice teachers. *Historias Americanas* makes an intentional attempt to rehabilitate that reality by situating place-based education at the center of the professional development process. One teacher noted, "we didn't get this kind of content in our teacher preparation program, so I'm really glad we're getting this through this program. It helps me teach better" (Norma, post survey, spring 2020 workshop). Place-based education situates the lives of students and the stories of their communities at the core of curricular offerings. For example, one of the locations we chose to take teachers for the first teacher institute is La Sal del Rey, an ancient salt lake that provided an important resource integral to the daily lives of Indigenous peoples, Spanish explorers, Mexican pioneers, later the U.S. army, and White settlers. Thus, La Sal del Rey, as a place for teaching and learning, is one example of how a historical place in the community becomes an integral part of learning the history, economy, biology, colonization, and geography of the region as part of the social studies curriculum. As one teacher noted, "Most of us had never been to Sal del Rey," "and that's a shame, because it's only 10 miles from my campus. My students and I should know of its importance" (Edward, post survey, summer 2019 Institute).

Place-based education is also an easy fit for dynamic pedagogical opportunities. "It's easy to emphasize hands-on and real-world learning when you can observe and interact with the land, and with local flora and fauna," said Jorge (post survey, fall 2019 workshop). By its very nature as content situated physically and geographically in community, placed-based learning

offers relevant content, but it also offers opportunities to engage content through engaging pedagogical approaches. Sobel (2004) describes place-based learning to help students “develop stronger ties to their community and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens” (p. 6). In short, place-based education positions the lives of students, their families, and their community at the center of the teaching and learning process.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Critical to the work of *Historias Americanas* is not just providing content, but it is also important to provide an understanding of MAS pedagogy. Embedded in the workshops is a deliberate training in culturally relevant pedagogy—a theory developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings, which sets high expectations for students, helps students grow in the knowledge and understanding of their own culture in another culture, often mainstream culture (1994, 1995, 2014). Closely related to culturally relevant pedagogy and often used interchangeably, is culturally responsive pedagogy, which builds on Ladson-Billings’s framework to also include the need for teachers to assist students in developing positive ethnic and cultural identity as a means of achieving academic success (Gay, 2010). As MAS educators, the faculty purposefully incorporate models of culturally relevant pedagogy because it is critical to developing critical consciousness for students to assess social inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2014). Similarly, a key component of culturally responsive pedagogy is not only understanding how history, politics, and economics shape society, but also helping to students to develop a commitment to social justice (Gay, 2010; Gist et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2016). Where culturally responsive pedagogy differs is in not only helping students learn to critique social inequalities, but to also deliberately cultivating a commitment to promoting social justice. Gist et al. assert that “culturally responsive pedagogy reflects “a combination of knowledge, practices, and dispositions that center racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students’ cultural traditions, experiences, and perspectives to facilitate meaningful and transformative learning opportunities” (p. 3). Therefore, *Historias Americanas* focuses specifically on: (1) bringing scholars to our workshops who actively research histories of the RGV and engage in deliberate conversations with teachers on the content they have researched and have an expertise in, (2) engage teachers in reflective activities on topics of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy and

lesson-planning, and (3) deliver workshops on culturally relevant pedagogies such as oral history and digital storytelling.

Central to culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy as an anti-deficit approach is building upon the students' own linguistic and cultural wealth (González et al., 2006; Yosso, 2005). While many researchers have called upon teachers to tap into the students' linguistic and cultural wealth, *Historias Americanas* asks the teachers themselves to tap into their own linguistic and cultural wealth as well. Fundamental to the pedagogical theory and practice of *Historias Americanas* is that workshop leaders model the same pedagogies the teachers are engaging in the workshops as "students." Therefore, they experience the culturally responsive pedagogies first-hand through the lens of both teacher and student. While most of the teachers share common ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds as their students, they did not go through pre-service teacher programs that prepared them for culturally relevant/responsive teaching. It is important to engage in Mexican American history content and pedagogical development in teaching training. As Gay tells us, culturally responsive pedagogy "filters curriculum content and teaching strategies through their cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful" (2000, p. 20). This is evident in one teacher's reflection, "Being aware of my cultural background will eventually help me understand my students' backgrounds and will lead to culturally responsive teaching" (Josie, post survey, fall 2019 workshop). Thus, *Historias Americanas* has successfully implemented oral history and digital storytelling, two pedagogies that lend themselves well to culturally relevant and responsive teaching of Mexican American Studies.

Oral History and Digital Storytelling

The first of these pedagogical strategies is oral history. Oral history has long been used as a tool to democratize and decolonize the historical archive and the same can be said of the classroom (Benmayor, 1998; Flores Carmona & Delgado Bernal, 2012). The use of oral history in the classroom as a tool of culturally responsive pedagogy allows for the recovery of the voices of those left out of the official textbooks. Given the demographics of the Rio Grande Valley and the students served by the teachers of *Historias Americanas*, this is critical. When teachers incorporate an oral history assignment into their coursework, it is often the first time that students are asked to link their family or community's lived experiences to historical

events studied in class. This is critical not only because as Gay (2000) tells us, it is “culturally validating and affirming” (Gay, 2000, p. 29), but also, they are contributing to the critical need to produce knowledge about their communities—knowledge that contradicts the deficit narrative about their community. In essence, students feel cared for because their communities and their families are cared for and validated both intellectually and by the educational system itself.

Historias Americanas is aligned with Guajardo, Guajardo et al., (2016) theory of change that views the self as the most critical ecology of knowing; this is a process of self-discovery. In this professional development context, teachers undertake exercises in critical self-reflection for the purpose of personal and professional growth. The *Historias Americanas* process for growth employs several strategies that include reflective writing, dialogue, walk and talk, and a variety of storytelling activities. While the oral history is extremely powerful in the storytelling and story-collecting process, we wanted teachers to gain a better understanding of themselves; we wanted them to go deeper and take an introspective look into themselves. The Digital Story workshop was probably the most impactful on teachers because they gained an awareness and appreciation of their culture and heritage and the cultural wealth. They in turn will use this pedagogy and technology to teach their students to write their own story and know the cultural wealth and ancestral knowledge they bring to the classroom. The impact of this workshop on teachers are reflected in the quotes below from their post surveys:

It was helpful in allowing me to find my voice and understand how historical forces have shaped my life and who I am. This will help me to invite my students to also investigate who they are and start a process of discovery of self-identity. (Patricia, post survey, summer 2020 institute)

I think this form of teaching presents students with a substantial opportunity to connect with the course and their peers. It also allows for a different form of self-expression. (Andres, post survey, summer 2020 institute)

It will create a heightened level of awareness and build on the emotional learning of the classroom. By making education personal it elevates student learning to a level of deep understanding, far more than a text or curriculum framework. Students create their own text through their experience. (Dahlia, post survey, summer 2020 institute)

It was a tremendous opportunity to reconceptualize teaching as a process by adding a tool that will help students make stronger connections to who they are and how they can learn beyond a rigid, traditional classroom. (Sylvia, post survey, summer 2020 institute)

As a pedagogy we often use in teaching Mexican American Studies, storytelling allows students to explore their family histories, their place in community life, and as a search for personal identity. Stephanie Alvarez and Francisco Guajardo have many years of experience using digital storytelling in their classrooms and have found that digital storytelling is particularly powerful in ways that traditional storytelling and oral history are not (Alvarez & Martínez, 2014; Benmayor, 2012; Militello & Guajardo, 2013; Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008). Rina Bemayor (2008) describes digital storytelling as:

An assets-based pedagogy where students can bring their own cultural knowledge and experience to the fore, including their skills and comfort with technology, to transform their thinking and empower themselves. The multiple creative languages of digital storytelling – writing, voice, image, and sound – encourage historically marginalized subjects, especially younger generations, to inscribe emerging social and cultural identities and challenge unified cultural discourses in a new and exciting way. (p. 200)

As a hybrid form, digital story-telling mirrors and enables the conceptual work of constructing new understandings of identity and places of belonging. Because we wanted to provide teachers with a culturally relevant pedagogical tool that would help them be self-reflective and use in the classroom with their students, we collaborated with StoryCenter, an organization based out the California Bay Area directed by Joe Lambert, for instructional guidance and facilitation to assist us with the coordination, due to having shifted to an online platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning digital storytelling has equipped *Historias Americanas* teachers with a professional development process that, in the words of one teacher, “has transformed the way I see my personal story and the way I approach my teaching” (Lucy, post survey, summer 2020 institute). Another teacher remarked, “I did not know how emotional, evocative, or transformative storytelling could be, not until I went through this digital storytelling process” (Juan, post survey, summer 2020 institute). The process challenges teachers to explore their personal story and identity as part of their growth process. It includes crafting a narrative,

identifying family artifacts to enhance the narrative, and using digital video editing technology to bring their story together. The power of digital storytelling is encapsulated by one high school teacher's observation, "Digital storytelling is the best professional development experience I've ever had" (Marisol, post survey, summer 2020 institute).

Applying the MAS Content and Pedagogies through the Historias Americanas (HA) Lesson Planning Framework

Once educators internalize the information from the scholars' MAS content presentations through an introspective process, they begin the lesson planning development led by Joy Esquierdo. The grant team studied literature on how students, especially bilingual students, best process new information. We adopted a lesson plan framework that includes learning theories, language development approaches, and productive learning environments (California State Department of Education, 1982; Cummins, 1981; Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; National Research Council, 2000). A variety of lesson plan formats can be found to assist teachers in delivering the learning objective in the most effective way. For *Historias Americanas (HA)*, we chose to base the lesson planning practice on the Framework for Teaching Bilingual/Dual Language Learners New Content Literacy (Esquierdo, 2010). The modified framework begins with the teacher internalizing the Mexican American Studies content to strengthen the delivery of MAS lessons. The next sections of the framework integrate the three learning principles, language development theories, culturally relevant pedagogies, place-based practices within a learner-centered environment (see Figure 1). All these components, interacting and intertwined, lead to the development of Mexican American Studies content literacy. Content literacy is the acquisition and learning of MAS content at a metacognitive level of processing. This is to say that as teachers plan MAS content lessons to guide students through content literacy, they facilitate the students' metacognitive processing by asking them to reflect and connect with the content at various levels. The following sections will describe the essential components of the HA Lesson Plan Framework to support MAS Content Literacy.

Learning Theories for the Lesson Plan Framework

The National Research Council (2000) presented three learning principles that are fundamental for teachers to consider when delivering new content instruction: (1) all students

attend school with experiences of how the world functions; (2) students must acquire basic knowledge and skills and the ability to manipulate that new knowledge to make deeper inquiries; and (3) students become lifelong learners when they have an opportunity to practice their metacognitive skills. These three learning principles provide all students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of how the world works. In other words, teachers need to help students connect home knowledge to school knowledge. Additionally, students can extend those connections to the world once they have a strong understanding of the new content. Finally, students need to have time to reflect on their new understandings and connections of new content knowledge to existing knowledge. This reflection will help deepen their understanding and increase the chances of longer retention of the information. One main objective of the grant was to include effective teaching methodologies into a framework specific for bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural students.

Language Development Theories for the Lesson Plan Framework

Since the *Historias Americanas* teachers work in schools that serve a largely bilingual community, we wanted to include first (L1) and second (L2) language development approaches. Teachers are asked to consider the language standards—English Language Proficiency Skills (ELPS)—as they plan the delivery of the lesson. Hence, the team was sure to bring the dynamics of L1 and L2 proficiency into the framework through the Contextual Interactive Theory (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). The recognition of the benefits of the students' bilingualism in the HA classroom is critical to help access all the assets of the students to enhance the learning. Considering the bilingual community that surrounds the HA classroom, acknowledging that the L1 and L2 development within MAS content is a central factor in the lesson planning. The Contextual Interactive Theory is anchored on five empirically supported principles: linguistic threshold, dimensions of language proficiency, common underlying proficiency, second-language acquisition, and student status (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Krashen, 1982). The interaction of these five principles demonstrates how student experiences with language interact with instructional practice. The interaction between the context of the home and that of the school support the students' language development and MAS content understanding.

When crafting lesson plans, we guided teachers' focus on L1 and L2 development by carefully selecting the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) for each lesson. One of the

main goals of the ELPS is to provide bilingual learners (especially those learning English in school) opportunities to listen, speak, read, and write at their current stages of English development as they progress in their linguistic complexity development in English. Therefore, students are learning MAS content as they gradually increase in their English development. When MAS lessons incorporate learning theories and the contextual interaction theory in the designing phase and infuse culturally relevant pedagogies in the delivery stage, it is critical to also establish a learner-centered environment.

Learner-centered Environment for the Lesson Plan Framework

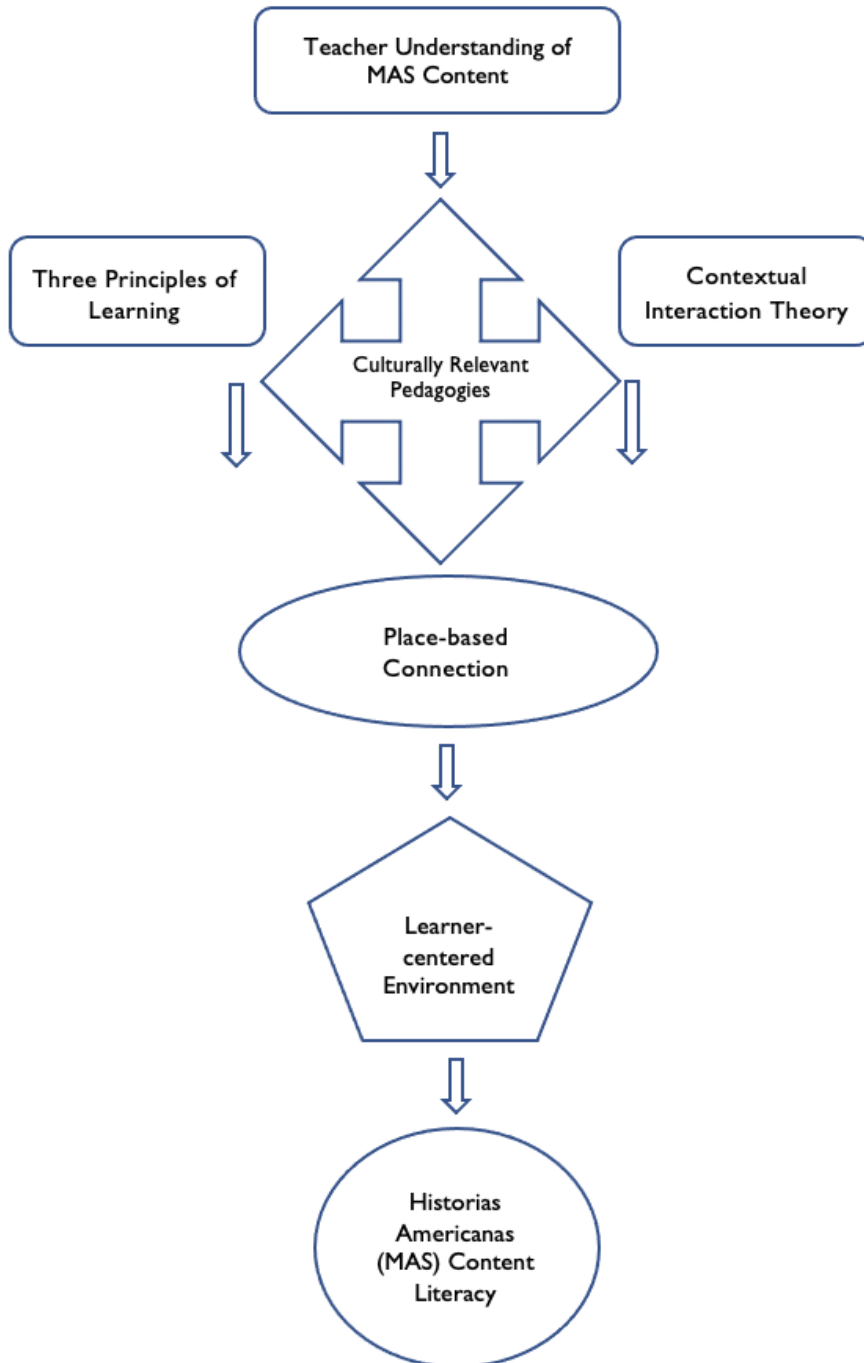
A learner-centered environment is one that focuses the lesson on the students' contribution to the learning process and learning opportunities provided by the teacher. Learner-centered environments involves students in making decisions and solving problems throughout the lesson and during the reflection process. In this framework, the lessons are designed to keep students at the center of the lesson, incorporating their funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005) and linguistic repertoire (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018), to optimize students' learning. When a teacher is not cognizant of keeping the learning environment student-centered, the lesson can evolve into a more teacher-centered one, in which the teacher may lecture more and move away from the students' funds of knowledge and cultural wealth at the center (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Yosso, 2005).

As teachers used this framework to format their lesson plans, they included the elements essential to building MAS content literacy. Additionally, this approach to teaching helped build capacity for the school district using teachers as curriculum leaders. As curriculum writers, many of the grant participants also contribute to their school district's curriculum writing sessions during the summer. During these curriculum writing sessions, teachers revamp, update, and (re)structure the social studies-related content for all teachers in that district. The role of the grant participants is to incorporate the MAS material in the district's Scope and Sequence provided to all teachers that deliver that content. Teachers also integrate a placed-based and culturally relevant practice into the district's curricula. The impact of teachers' understanding and utilizing the elements of this framework to design MAS lessons can have a significant impact on how teachers outside the grant deliver social studies-related instruction

throughout the district, since it allows for the proliferation of MAS content well beyond the initial participants of the Historias Americanas program.

Figure 1.

Framework for teaching MAS content literacy



Conclusion

Historias Americanas provides a unique example of how the expansion of Mexican American Studies in K-12 is being achieved in the Rio Grande Valley. While Historias Americanas does not create a MAS course or courses, one of its central missions is the proliferation of MAS by embedding MAS content in the social studies and history curricula in the two largest school districts in the region. Additionally, it is not just MAS content, but MAS content specific to the Rio Grande Valley, its bilingual population, and specific to the lived experiences of the students and families of the region using a place-based framework delivered in culturally relevant, responsive, and affirming ways. To date, over 110 teachers have participated in this three-year program of professional development institutes and workshops. To say that teachers and administrators have been transformed by this experience is an understatement. As authors, we have seen what such transformation looks like and have experienced it ourselves. We have also seen the transformation in teachers through their reflections, surveys, and lesson-plans that we have collected. These have helped us make modifications to adjust and improve the program to enhance teachers' experiences and achieve the goals of the grant. We have also drawn from our own cultural intuition and experience (Calderón et al., 2012; Calderón, 2014; Delgado-Bernal, 1998) to ensure that our objectives and outcomes are met.

Based on our data, teachers' growth and development as teachers, family and community members attest to the value and success of the program in meeting its goals of providing teachers with content, pedagogical strategies, and new educational frameworks that would change teaching and learning in K-12 in the RGV and beyond. This expansion is facilitated through Historias Americanas Digital Platform (HADP); a repository/archive that holds the resources, materials, lesson-plans, content, videos, scholarship and translated materials produced from the Historias Americanas institutes and workshops, workshops provided by the Museum of South Texas History and information about the school district partners. An accompanying website is also linked to the archive that provides information about the grant team, purpose of Historias Americanas, and a guide for archival materials. The HADP is housed within UTRGV's Scholarworks; a repository accessible to the public through the university's library website (<https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/historiasamericanas/>).

By using culturally relevant and place-based education frameworks in *Historias Americanas*, teachers have deepened their connections to their own funds of knowledge, cultural and linguistic heritage, and lived experiences and have changed the way they view teaching social studies, their students, and the region they live in. We have provided teachers content with innovative tools and skills such as oral history, digital storytelling, gracious space, walk-and-talk, discussion circles, and reflective writing to help them take full advantage of their lived experiences, culture, language, place, and community realities, and place them at the center of the learning and instructional process (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Smith & Sobel, 2010). In this way, *Historias Americanas* is integrating and expanding Mexican American Studies in K-12 Social Studies in the Rio Grande Valley and across the larger discipline.

Upcoming Grant Work and Publications

The main purpose of this article was to provide an overview of the work and frameworks developed through the *Historias Americanas* grant and the structure of the professional development program. The authors are writing a more in-depth article on the process of developing *Historias Americanas*, implementation of the institutes and workshops and grant work over the first three years, and author's autoethnography. Given the amount of data collected during the first three years of the grant, grant faculty are planning to write a manuscript on the K-12 *Historias Americanas* Lesson Plan Framework that further explores the essential components of the framework. The examination of the framework will describe the interactions and intersections between the various theories used to construct the framework and how those apply to integrating MAS in the *Historias Americanas* classroom. An additional manuscript will provide an analysis of the lessons that are based on the framework and descriptions of how the lessons were implemented in the *Historias Americanas* classroom at different levels. Other articles will focus on the development of a unique *Historias Americanas* framework that combines place-based and culturally relevant educational frameworks, place-based education for the MAS classroom and culturally relevant pedagogy in Mexican American Studies. The grant team recently applied for an extension to extend the grant work for two additional years. If awarded, the grant team will expand this work to include two new smaller, rural school districts to expand the program's reach in the RGV to larger number of teachers and students.

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