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CRITICAL TEACHER AGENCY THROUGH RELATIONAL PIVOTS:

INSIGHTS FROM LATINA MOTHERS

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Abstract

Through the perspectives of 22 Latina mothers with young children, this article illustrates *how* teachers can enact critical teacher agency in times of heightened political and social uncertainty. The article conceptualizes agency as a social practice, and links critical teacher agency to pivots or small shifts. Findings from focus group data suggest that Latina mothers value teacher agency in small, relational practices (between teacher and parent, teacher and student, and student and student), informed by their cultural model that emphasizes teaching and learning as social and relational. While the data come from Latina mothers with young children, the insights about critical teacher agency are relevant to K-12 teachers and teacher educators.

CRITICAL TEACHER AGENCY THROUGH RELATIONAL PIVOTS: INSIGHTS FROM LATINA MOTHERS

Sentí que la conocía desde ase mucho tiempo porque me a dado la confianza cada día que la niña tiene su escuela virtual siempre habla conmigo, me textea, me a mandado mensajes dándome la gracias de todo lo que yo hago y siempre estoy a lado de Ella y sentí que la conocía desde hace mucho.	*I felt that I had known her (teacher) for a long time because she has given me so much trust, and every day that my daughter has online school, she talks to me, texts me, and sends me messages thanking me for everything that I do and always being beside her, and I felt that I had known her for a long time* (statement from a Latina mother)

I begin with a statement from a Latina mother describing how she feels like she has known her child's teacher for a long time. The mother describes how her child's teacher communicates frequently with her and sends messages of appreciation. I share this as an example of critical teacher agency because the teacher contributes to a more meaningful teacher-parent relationship and does so in ways that challenge deficit discourses surrounding Latine families and stereotypes about adversarial teacher-parent relationships.

The central question that I take up in this article is not whether teachers have or don't have agency. Instead, I illustrate *how* teachers can enact critical teacher agency, even in times of heightened political and social uncertainty. In the U.S., teachers, mainly white cisgender women, are increasingly tasked with not only educating multilingual learners but also transforming classrooms and school systems. But faced with education policies aimed at de-professionalizing teachers and the challenging conditions of their work (e.g., pressures of standardized tests, scripted curricula, limited resources, large class size), many pre- and in-service teachers I work with say they don't have agency – they feel disempowered, seemingly unable to decide what, how, and in whose interests, they educate. Moreover, teachers working towards intersectional justice (Love, 2019), which includes language and racial justice, worry that their efforts may not lead to lasting change for students, families, and communities. So, in what ways might critical teacher agency be possible?

I offer my response through the perspectives of 22 Latina mothers who described how their children's teachers exercised critical agency through cultivating transformative relationships (Ginwright, 2022). Ginwright (2022) differentiates between transactional and transformative relationships: "Transactional relationships are efficient for work and productivity but insufficient for healing. Transformative relationships … cultivate deeper human connections through vulnerability, empathy, and listening" (p. 18). Throughout the article, I refer to the mothers as Latina mothers because that is how they refer to themselves in the context of the research project. However, I refer to the children and families more generally as Latine, challenging gender binaries and using more inclusive language. Educators and teacher educators can know children differently when we understand mothers and their everyday practices in the home or their "living pedagogies" (Delgado Bernal et al., 2006, p. 5). This article suggests that we can also know teachers and teacher agency differently when we understand them through mothers' lenses. While the data come from Latina mothers with young children in early childhood education settings, the insights that I share about critical teacher agency are relevant to K-12 teachers and teacher educators.

In the next section, I write about critical teacher agency through the concept of pivots (Ginwright, 2022) – or small shifts. Then, I describe the research study from which this article is based. At the heart of the article are voices of Latina mothers who locate teacher agency in relational practices – relationships between teacher and students, between students, and between teachers and families. It is worth noting that the research study took place during COVID-19, which brought about school lockdowns and the subsequent shift to remote schooling. Against the backdrop of COVID-19, which created fear and uncertainty in many families, the Latina mothers' focus on transformative relationships is even more salient.

CONCEPTUALIZING CRITICAL TEACHER AGENCY AND PIVOTS

The ways we talk about teacher agency can make agency seem like a possession (e.g., "I have agency") or a capacity or trait (e.g., "That teacher is so agentive"). However, agency is a social practice. People perform or achieve it in specific settings and circumstances (Biesta et al., 2015). Agency is emergent, situated, and socio-historical. But what exactly is agency? While there are different definitions (see Ahearn, 2001; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), I draw upon two of them. The first defines agency as the "process through which organisms create meaning through acting into the world" (Cooper, 2011, p. 426). This emphasizes not just action but the meaning(s) that such actions create, convey, or uphold. The idea that our actions have meaning, which gets "read" by others, is particularly significant to this article. The second defines agency as an "actor-situation transaction" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626) or an actor's response to "problematic situations" (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11).

But what makes teacher agency *critical*? Critical teacher agency recognizes that agency is not just about the individual actor. Instead, agency is promoted (or hindered) by "social, political, and cultural dynamics of a specific place and time" (Desjarlais, 1997, p. 204) as well as by the actor's membership in socially and historically defined groups. Throughout the paper, I adopt this more critical view of agency, acknowledging the role of power and positionality and reject-

ing the view of the teacher as an autonomous "I" who makes choices freely (Flannery, 1991). Second, teacher agency is critical when their responses are *intended* to disrupt and transform existing structures. Teachers-as-critical agents are influenced by goals such as social justice and healing. Critical teacher agency is about challenging oppressive systems and responding in ways that lead to belonging, healing, and new systems (Ginwright, 2022).

While much has been written about agency in general, less attention has been given to teacher agency or agentic actions (Biesta et al., 2015). Even less is known about critical teacher agency during COVID-19, a global health crisis that magnified education and social inequities. The small body of work on teacher agency addresses different facets of teacher decision-making and actions (e.g., curriculum and pedagogy, classroom organization, family engagement, etc.) and mediating factors that either promote or prohibit teacher agency (see Biesta et al., 2015; Campbell, 2012; Priestley et al., 2013).

Teacher agency has also been conceptualized and investigated in scholarship on critical pedagogy. In other words, with its commitment to transforming the status quo of schooling through pedagogical practice, critical pedagogy is fertile territory to theorize and study teacher agency (Crookes, 2013). Critical pedagogy that centers multilingualism recruits students' languages, identities, and experiences as sources of knowledge; decenters English as the sole language of teaching and learning; emphasizes students' participation in meaningful intellectual and social activities; theorizes language and literacy as political and ideological constructs; and treats language and literacy as resources by which we not only read the word and world but transform them (Park, 2023). Critical pedagogy scholars have also added the central elements of love and care (Bartolomé, 1994; hooks, 2014).

However, none of these pieces have explicitly addressed questions about the scale of teacher actions. Do "small" actions constitute critical teacher agency? And if so, what are some empirical examples of such small actions? To address this gap, I draw on Shawn Ginwright's concept of a pivot – a small change in direction. The emphasis on smallness is also echoed by activist adrienne maree brown, who writes about "systems change through relatively small interactions" (2017, p.

2). By small, I do not mean insignificant or insufficient, but modest, everyday, and intimate (between two people or a small group). I argue that teachers can exercise critical agency by engaging in seemingly small practices that are relational.

LATINA MOTHERS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

This article leverages the voices of Latina mothers as a way to understand critical teacher agency. In 2020, I was fortunate to learn from 22 Latina mothers about their experiences with education and telehealth during the pandemic. With an AERA grant, our research team partnered with a local cross-sector coalition on family and early childhood education. The coalition's members include providers of early education (e.g., Head Start administrators), health and human services, parent groups, the school district, and higher education institutions.

I was part of a four-person research team. Deisy, a Latina from Texas, was studying education and community development. Gurutze, a Latina, is a mother of three children. I am a 1.5-generation Asian American woman with two young children. Laurie is a white woman and mother of two teenagers. Laurie, a long-time member of the coalition, invited me, a teacher educator and literacy researcher trained in participatory research methodologies, to join the research team. Our research team serves as a model for how teachers can recruit different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to cultivate relationships with families. What also connected us was our affiliation with the university –a predominantly white institution in a racially diverse, mid-sized city in New England. Over 21% of the city's residents were born outside of the United States, and approximately 40% speak a language other than English at home.

The coalition asked us to investigate how families in our city were experiencing remote education and telehealth services during COVID-19. As the bilingual research assistant, Deisy recruited 22 participants – all who identified as Latina, female, mothers with at least one young child, and living in the city. Seventeen mothers stated that they had experience with remote education. In an initial questionnaire, the mothers indicated they had one to four children, with at least one child under the age of five.

Our primary data collection method was focus groups. Given the toll of physical and social isolation on community members, especially poor women and women of color, we decided on focus groups to engage in dialogue about the issues we've faced during the pandemic, recognizing our similarities and differences. The focus group questions ranged from asking mothers to describe a typical day when their child attends school remotely to asking them to offer specific examples of what helps their child learn.

Deisy and Gurutze, native Spanish speakers, facilitated five separate hour-long focus groups. Because participants stated that they preferred Spanish, Deisy, and Gurutze facilitated all five focus groups in Spanish. Deisy transcribed the audio files in their entirety and provided English translations. Data generated in translingual environments need to address the fact of translation (Emmerich, 2023). Because of my rudimentary understanding of Spanish, I analyzed the transcript data in English. However, to preserve the power and complexity of the mothers' voices, I present them in Spanish and provide an English translation.

Laurie and I developed a multi-step process to analyze the data that involved coalition members (see Park et al., 2021, for a description of our data analysis process). For the purposes of this article, I was particularly interested in how mothers described teacher actions that enabled or hindered their children's learning, as well as teacher actions that supported caregivers in navigating remote education. Therefore, I identified relevant excerpts from the focus group transcripts that were analyzed for t*eacher agency* or actions. I coded what the mother said teachers did that led to engagement and learning. I coded for both the teachers' actions and the meaning that the action created and conveyed to the mothers. I also analyzed the cultural models underlying how the mothers interpreted the teacher's actions (Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Cultural models are a set of taken-for-granted assumptions that "define for us the way things are and should be" (Reese & Gallimore, 2000, p. 106). This analytic process generated a more nuanced understanding of teacher agency in small, relational practices (between teacher and parent, teacher and student, and student and student), informed by a cultural model that emphasizes teaching and learning as social and

relational. One thing became clear from the Latina mothers' descriptions of teacher actions – the importance of seemingly small pivots that teachers made to foster transformative relationships.

FINDINGS: *"WHERE THERE IS TIME, YOU CAN CREATE A DIALOGUE ABOUT EVERYTHING."*

Every mother who participated in the focus groups acknowledged that education during COVID was new and challenging, not just for them and their children, but for teachers as well. A common refrain from the mothers was, "It is not the same." A mother from the third focus group said:

Tanto los niños como los maestros en el ámbito de la educación están haciendo muy bien esfuerzo pero no es igual que cuando la profesora te lo este explicado. 'Yo no entiendo' y se va y se acercan de ti en la escuela.	Teachers and students are still doing a lot and putting in a lot of effort, but it is not the same as when the teacher is there to explain to you. 'I don't understand,' and she will go get close to you at school.

Before making this statement, this mother had been describing the teacher's use of manipulatives (e.g., blocks) while teaching on Google Classroom. Yet there is something different when a teacher can get "close" to a student, emphasizing the teacher's physical closeness to students as a pedagogical resource.

Rather than describe teachers using deficit-laden language (e.g., teachers don't care), this mother affirmed their efforts, stating that teachers are "doing a lot and putting in a lot of effort." While sitting next to their child(ren) on Zoom or Google Classroom, mothers observed what the teachers did (instead of what they didn't do). A mother in the first focus group described the teacher as "*esta cheerleader detrás de nosotros ahi*" ("the cheerleader who is behind us"), while another mother in a different group said that teachers were giving their

"101%." Even if they disagreed with the teacher's pedagogical approach to numeracy or literacy (for example, reading to the kids for a long stretch of time), the mothers named everything teachers were doing to facilitate children's learning– tracking children, preparing a sequence of activities, and even handling the microphone (e.g., muting children). Some mothers also challenged the common discourse that "teaching is easy" or "teachers have it easy."

Visto muchos memes en Facebook como ahora los profesores trabajaran al suave lo que vamos a cojer lucha son padres si - los padres estamos cojiendo lucha obviamente. Hay muchos padres que han tenido que dejar el trabajo para que los niños no pierdan la escuela. Hay padres que han tenido que recortar horas en el trabajo y no tanto que tienen - tiene que recortar horas en el trabajo pero no nos han recortado la renta no nos han recortado los biles los biles siguen llegando igualitos la renta hay que pagarla igualito pero nosotros sí tuvimos que recortar las horas para que nuestros niños no pierdan el año ósea que también no la estamos jugando pero si dicen 'los profesores se la están suave' no se la están suave - para mi no.	I have seen a lot of memes on Facebook about how now that teachers are working from home, they have it easy and that it is as parents that are going to have to put up a fight and that parents - and yes, parents are obviously picking up a fight. There are a lot of parents who have had to leave work so that their kids don't lose school. There are parents who have had to cut their hours at work, and not so much that they have to - do they have to cut hours at work but that we have had to work less, but they haven't cut down rent, they haven't cut down our bills - our bills keep coming the same, and you still have to pay rent the same, but we (parents) had to cut down on work so that our kids don't lose the school year so we're also putting a lot on the table but they say 'the teachers have it easy' and they don't have it easy - I don't see it that way.

This mother challenged the notion that teachers have it easy at the parents' expense. For her, education is not a zero-sum game in which parents' increased labor translates into less work for teachers. Instead, with remote schooling, both parents and teachers have had to take on different roles and navigate a new environment and set of challenges. Parents did this while experiencing heightened stress from structural inequities in labor, healthcare, and housing, racism and language-based discrimination, and punitive school policies.

Several mothers recognized that teachers, too, were constrained by the school and district-level administrators – for example, being given new students and class schedules without advance notice. The mothers also spoke at length about what the teachers did. They described different agentive actions by teachers, even in the face of new and intensified pressures. In examining Latina mothers' descriptions of teacher actions, one thing became clear – the importance of seemingly small pivots teachers made in fostering different relationships. When asked what helped their child to learn and what helped the parents in supporting their child to learn, the mothers described what teachers did in terms of relationships more frequently than what teachers did with their pedagogy. Below is a statement about a teacher exercising agency through a relational practice.

pues fue primera vez, en esto de la pandemia, entonces el - Ella lo visitó lejos, saludándolo y después empezó como trayéndolo cosas, poco a poco, pero siempre afuera. Ella de la ventana lo saludada, le decía lo que le traía. Entonces allí fue como un - un atracción hacia mi niño	It was the first time in the pandemic that she visited him from afar, saying hi, and then started to bring him things, bit by bit, always outside. She would come to the window and say hi, and she would tell him what she had brought him. So that was like, ah- an attraction towards my child.

In this example, the mother described the teacher's actions before the teacher even met the child in the virtual class. This teacher visited her students, greeting the child from afar and bringing different school supplies, "bit-by-bit, always outside." This created familiarity and

trust with the teacher. However, this was not a common example, with one mother questioning the feasibility of teachers doing home visits for every child. However, an impactful relational practice could be something small or modest. Another mother gave the example of her child's teacher who always began the school day by greeting each child by name:

Por ejemplo ellos este hacen el saludo y saludan a cada uno 'como estas? ¿Cómo estás Mark? ¿Cómo estás?' Y comienzan a saludar a todos los niños les dan la oportunidad a todos los niños de que ellos digan 'presente' o 'estoy bien'.	For example, they are always greeting each other and they greet everyone 'How are you? How are you, Mark? How are you?' And they start to greet all the children and they give the opportunity for every child to say 'present' or 'I'm well.'

This mother did not name classroom activities or projects. Instead, what was memorable and what supported her child's learning was this seemingly small relational practice. By greeting each child by name and asking how the child was doing, the teacher, according to the mother, valued the child. Greeting everyone by name also instilled in the children an interest in each other. In this mother's framework, learning is supported by connections between the teacher and students and between students – and is only possible when teachers prioritize children's sense of belonging and wellness.

In addition to cultivating relationships with children, some teachers even took a relational and dialogic approach with families.

Con eso creo que se pueden entender las dos personas y eso es lo que Ella a hecho, me a dado su tiempo y me a escuchado y cuando la clases a veces se terminan yo le pregunto 'mira que pasa esto, dígame esto, explíqueme…' Ella siempre tiene un tiempo para explicarme las cosas y creo que es cuando hay tiempo se puede dialogar de todas las cosas y eso tiene que ver mucho con la relación que se crea - cuando hay tiempo (y) dedicación eso eso creo que es muy importante	*I think with that two people can understand each other and that is what she [teacher] has done with me, she has given me her time and she has listened to me and when the classes sometimes finish I ask her 'Look what happens here, tell me this, explain…' she always has time to explain things to me and I think that where there is time you can create a dialogue about everything and that has a lot of impact with the relationship that you form – when there is time (and) dedication, I think that is very important.*

In this quote, the mother describes the time that her child's teacher gives to listen, understand, and explain. She used the word "dialog," which requires that each party understands the work of the other and assumes an inquiry stance over judgment. This is another example of critical teacher agency because it goes against the status quo of individualism, transactional relationships, and the binary divisions of us vs. them (teachers versus parents). It is also critical because the teacher undertakes it in the hopes of creating more humanizing and authentic connections with students and families. The teacher's action is grounded in a vision of liberation and interconnectedness rather than motivated by transactional or self-serving aims.

A dialogic and relational approach means listening to and understanding Latine's parents and acknowledging what they are doing (instead of what they are not doing). It also means explaining what the teacher is doing and what is happening in the classroom. In the context of trust-filled relationships, the language backgrounds of the teacher (English) and parent (Spanish) took on a different meaning. In other words, language differences became the norm. However, in the absence of relationships, parents' language backgrounds became a source

of exclusion and oppression. For example, several Latina mothers noted how the school district offered workshops or training tutorials in English and Spanish. However, the Spanish workshops and training tutorials felt transactional and performative, with little energy and time for establishing dialogue and understanding the parents. Therefore, even when communication was done in Spanish, the mothers noted that their language background was seen as an inconvenience or 'barrier' that needed to be eliminated.

DISCUSSION

The mothers in the study did not shy away from calling out power asymmetries and classist and racist policies (e.g., who gets labeled an essential worker, who is eligible to receive stimulus payments). As one mother (cited earlier) said: "Our bills keep coming the same." They also criticized superficial interventions during COVID-19 that did little to transform structural inequities, such as free Chromebooks for children in public schools. While not losing sight of the structures and policies, the mothers commented on the value of relationships and small actions done by their child(ren)'s teachers. For the mothers, relationships characterized by dialogue and trust were the most clear enactment of critical teacher agency.

I return to the question posed at the beginning of this article about teacher agency and the ways in which teachers can work toward greater intersectional justice (Love, 2019). Intersectional justice is possible when teachers cultivate their critical consciousness and create conditions for young people's healing and belonging. Teachers, students, and families must see themselves in interconnected relationships to co-create new systems. While access to material resources is important, Latina mothers in the research study ultimately saw them as "not enough" because they did not come from transformative relationships. That explains why they did not fully embrace district-created training videos or drop-in office hours, which neglected parents' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and did little to shift the fundamental power asymmetry between teachers, parents, and the school district.

Intersectional justice and transformative relationships. These sound like tall orders, especially in restrictive school systems

and political climates. However, the study's findings suggest that teachers can (and did) enact critical agency and work towards greater intersectional justice through transformative relationships. Furthermore, such transformative relationships were achieved in small or micro-interactions (e.g., greeting every child by name or thanking a parent for what they do instead of pointing out what the parent is not doing).

While rich and generative, the data came from mothers who participated in a single focus group conversation instead of multiple conversations *over time*, which would have yielded insights about any shifts in the mothers' experiences with teachers and in classrooms. A second limitation is connected to the study's focus on mothers with at least one young child, given the coalition's emphasis on young children. Much of the data I shared focused on how mothers described teacher actions in early childhood and elementary classrooms. This prompts questions about how middle and secondary teachers might apply the relational "pivot" concept in their daily realities with, for example, mandated curricula and book bans.

In the last part of the discussion, I offer an example from my work that speaks to the relevance of pivots in teacher education. This year, Ellen, a preservice teacher, has been observing and helping a 5th-grade literacy class in one of our partnership schools. Over 85 percent of children at this school are multilingual learners. With her critical literacy framework, which recognizes that children are always reading the word and world, Ellen struggled with the Science of Reading mandates, specifically scripted reading lessons that positioned her fifth-graders as struggling readers or readers who can only access certain "levels" of books. Instead of rejecting the lesson plans (which is not possible for her as a student teacher), Ellen has taken up the concept of relational pivots. Enacting her critical teacher agency, she positions her students as deep meaning-makers. She makes time for dialogue that reminds children that reading is an act of connection, wonder, and joy. Two months ago, she reached out to me about purchasing a book for one of her students – a young man who is an avid video gamer: "The book is about a kid who loves video games but gets sent to summer camp in the woods and learns to love nature, not just video games."

This seemingly small action – purchasing a book outside the mandated curriculum – shifted how her student understood reading and, more importantly, himself as a reader. It also shifted how his parents saw Ellen, seeing her as someone who listened to their child and began with their child's interests rather than the lesson plan.

CONCLUSION

For a while now, Ellen and her peers (undergraduate preservice teachers) have been grappling with entering school systems that are restrictive, assimilatory, and harmful, especially to multilingual students of color. They worry about the reach of their agentic actions and what might even count as agency. In their worry, I hear the question – does the "small" matter? The Latina mothers offer a compelling answer to that question. They suggest that teachers' "micro-level responses" matter to children and their families (Love & Beneke, 2021). The pivot concept suggests that the small matters in education and social change: "Through one small change in direction, over time, we can get to where we want to be" (Ginwright, 2022, p. 16). The mothers also help us answer another question – What kind of small actions matter? The micro-level responses that parents cited the most were connections based on listening and understanding. While curricular decisions and pedagogical moves are important facets of critical teacher agency, so are relationships. This is what mothers can teach teachers and teacher educators about critical agency.

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