Learning and living pedagogies of the home: The mestiza consciousness of Chicana students

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This article focuses on how Chicana college students draw from what they learn in their homes and how living a mestiza consciousness may be one way by which they have navigated their way around educational obstacles and into college. More specifically, Delgado Bernal draws on the work of Anzaldúa (1987) to define the concept of a mestiza consciousness as the way a student balances, negotiates, and draws from her biculturalism, bilingualism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities in relationship to her education. Using this concept, Delgado Bernal offer a unique way to understand and analyze Chicana’s educational experiences. Her analysis of life history and focus-group interviews indicates that the communication, practices, and learning that occur in the home and community – pedagogies of the home – often serve as a cultural knowledge base that helps students survive and succeed within an educational system that often excludes and silences them.

Introduction

Many of the challenges confronted by Chicana college students and how they respond to these challenges during their educational journey have been largely ignored in traditional social science and Chicana/Chicano studies literature.1 Chicana and Chicano college students represent the second largest ethnic/racial group enrolled in postsecondary institutions in California, and the third largest in the country (Carnevale, 1999; US Department of Education, 1997a, 1997b). And, while approximately 65% of all Chicana and Chicana college students are women, very little is known about the educational journeys of Chicanas. Until recently, the educational paths of Chicanas were not even considered an important topic of research. Today, there are studies that have investigated the barriers to education experienced by Chicanas (Gándara, 1982; Seguar, 1993; Vásquez, 1982), the identity formation of young Chicanas/Mexicanas in high school (González, 1998), the marginality of Chicanas in higher education (Cuádraz, 1996; Rendón, 1992), and the college choice of Chicanas (Talavera-Bustillos, 1998).

This article focuses on the strategies that Chicanas learn in the home and successfully employ when confronted with challenges and obstacles that impede their academic achievement and college participation. My analysis of interview and focus-group data with over 30 Chicana college students points to the various ways in which Chicanas negotiate their own resistance, identities, and culture. During my interviews, Chicana students speak candidly about how their identities as Mexican women have influenced their schooling both positively and negatively, and how they have overcome patriarchal structures and cultural constraints. At other times, their silence and emotion point to the sexist, racist, and classist microaggressions (Pierce,
1974, 1978; Solorzano, 1998) they have experienced on their educational journey. My analysis indicates that Chicana college students develop tools and strategies for daily survival within an educational system that often excludes and silences them. The communication, practices and learning that occur in the home and community, what I call pedagogies of the home, often serve as a cultural knowledge base that helps Chicana college students negotiate the daily experiences of sexist, racist, and classist microaggressions. Pedagogies of the home provide strategies of resistance that challenge the educational norms of higher education and the dominant perceptions held about Chicana students. Indeed, a better understanding of these strategies will allow us to develop educational policy and practice that values and builds on household knowledge in order to enhance Chicana academic success and college participation.

Theoretical perspectives

Pedagogies of the home

Chicana feminist pedagogies refers to culturally specific ways of organizing teaching and learning in informal sites such as the home — ways that embrace Chicana and Mexicana ways of knowing and extend beyond formal schooling (Elenes, Delgado Bernal, González, Trinidad, & Villenas, 2000). The pedagogies of the home extend the existing discourse on critical pedagogies by putting cultural knowledge and language at the forefront to better understand lessons from the home space and local communities. For example, because power and politics are at the center of all teaching and learning, the application of household knowledge to situations outside of the home becomes a creative process that interrupts the transmission of “official knowledge” and dominant ideologies.

This perspective resonates with the ethnographic research that documents Mexican/Latino teaching and learning as cultural strengths and demonstrates how children draw on their diverse linguistic and cultural resources to function in schools and society (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1992, 1994; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 1995; Trueba 1988, 1991). Pedagogies of the home also connect to the anthropology of education research that defines “funds of knowledge” as those historically developed and accumulated strategies or bodies of knowledge that are vital to Mexican/Latino family survival (González et al., 1995; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Yet, similar to Andrade and González Le Denmat (1999), who direct their focus on the funds of knowledge of Chicanas/Latinas, Chicana feminist pedagogies focus on the ways Chicanas teach, learn, and live the foundations for balancing and resisting systems of oppression. In other words, the teaching and learning of the home allows Chicanas to draw upon their own cultures and sense of self to resist domination along the axes of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

Chicana feminist pedagogies are partially shaped by collective experiences and community memory. Community and family knowledge is taught to youth through such ways as legends, corridos, storytelling, and behavior. It is through culturally specific ways of teaching and learning that ancestors and elders share the knowledge of conquest, segregation, labor market stratification, patriarchy, homophobia, assimilation, and resistance. This knowledge that is passed from one generation to the next — often by mothers and other female family members — can help us survive in everyday life by providing an understanding of certain situations and explanations about why
things happen under certain conditions. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) writes of the “ancestral wisdom” that is taught from one generation to the next generation, and calls it “a powerful piece of our legacy” that is “healthy” and “necessary for survival”. Likewise, Leslie Marmon Silko (1996) writes of how the Pueblo people have depended on the collective memory of many generations “to maintain and transmit an entire culture, a worldview complete with proven strategies for survival” (p. 30). And Patricia Hill Collins (1991) articulates how Black mothers socialize their daughters to overcome systems of oppression, “Despite the dangers, mothers routinely encourage Black daughters to develop the skills to confront oppressive conditions . . . these skills are essential to their own survival” (pp. 123–124). The teaching and learning of everyday life is also key for the emotional and physical survival of Chicana students, yet it is seldom acknowledged in educational research and practice. In my study, Chicana college students demonstrate that they learn from the home how to engage in subtle acts of resistance by negotiating, struggling, or embracing their bilingualism, biculturalism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities.

Within the sociology of education literature, resistance theories demonstrate how individuals negotiate and struggle with structures and create meanings of their own from these interactions. However, traditional and progressive education scholars often ignore the positive acts of resistance, like those found in my study, to focus on a more “self-defeating” resistance in which students’ behavior implicates them even further in their own domination (e.g., Fine, 1991; Foley, 1990; MacLeod, 1987; McLaren, 1993; Willis, 1977). An example of self-defeating resistance is the high school dropout who may have a compelling critique of the schooling system, but then engages in a behavior (dropping out of school) that can often be self-defeating and ultimately does not help transform her/his oppressive status (see Fine, 1991). In addition, there is very little literature on female school resistance, and most of it examines only behaviors that can be destructive to one’s self or others, such as the aggressive sexuality of young female students (McRobbie, 1978; Ohron, 1993; Thomas 1980).

In previous research, I have defined transformational resistance as a framework to understand some of the positive strategies used by Chicana and Chicano students to successfully navigate through the educational system (Delgado Bernal, 1997). It is a resistance for liberation in which students are aware of social inequities and are motivated by emancipatory interests. The manifestations of transformational resistance can take on many forms – individual and subtle to collective and visible. Yet, when Chicana students engage in transformational resistance they are opposing those ideas and ways of being that are disempowering to self. In this study, I am most interested in an internal transformational resistance in which an individual’s behavior is subtle or even silent and might go unnamed as resistance (Delgado Bernal, 1997; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). These subtle resistance strategies that are learned in the home and community can serve as a cultural knowledge base that help Chicana students overcome the challenges and obstacles they confront on their educational journey.

Chicana feminisms & a mestiza consciousness

In a white supremacist society where emphasis is placed on assimilating to Anglo norms, practices and values, claiming an identity, maintaining one’s language, and affirming one’s culture are all individual acts of resistance . . .
understanding of the everyday forms of resistance and cooperation . . . reveals the ways that women cross boundaries and make connections with other community members. (Gilda Laura Ochoa, 1999, pp. 4–5)

My conception of resistance and pedagogies of the home clearly draw from the work of Chicana feminist scholars who have studied and learned from those everyday resistance strategies of Chicanas / Mexicanas that are often less visible, less organized, and less recognizable. By pivoting the analysis onto Chicanas, it becomes clear how the intersection of sexism, racism, and classism forms systems of subordination that create a different range of educational options for Chicanas. To fully understand Chicanas’ resistance it is necessary to view their multiple strategies within the context of these intersecting realities (Hurtado, 1996). There is a significant body of Chicana feminist literature that addresses the resistance, culture, and identities of Chicana activists, laborers, and cultural workers (e.g., de la Torre & Pesquera, 1993; Delgado Bernal, 1998a; Mora & Del Castillo, 1980; Pardo, 1998; Ruiz, 1998; Trujillo, 1998; Zavella, 1993). This scholarship challenges the historical and ideological representation of Chicanas, relocates them to a central position in the research, and asks distinctively Chicana feminist research questions, thereby creating a space for Chicana voices to speak: “Chicana feminism . . . is the move away from silence, giving voice to our experience” (Córdova, 1998, p. 38). Chicana feminisms provide me with an epistemological and theoretical lens from which to analyze the unique experiences of Chicana college students.

More specifically, Chicana scholars have developed theoretical concepts — such as mestizaje, rasquachismo, Xicanisma, and borderlands — to name dynamic identities and specific cultural/historical experiences (Anzaldúa, 1987; Castillo, 1995; Elenes, 1997; Pérez, 1993; Saldivar-Hull, 1991; Sandoval, 1998). These concepts within a Chicana feminist epistemology can be helpful to educational research and policy as we recognize how the experiences of Chicana students are intertwined with such things as immigration, generational status, language, gender, class, and even the contradictions of religion (Delgado Bernal, 1998b). My analysis draws from Anzaldúa’s (1987) groundbreaking theoretical work on Chicana identities and a mestiza consciousness. Her theoretical work offers a way to acknowledge and name the strategies of resistance that Chicana students learn in their homes and live out during their educational journeys.

Much has been written about the concept of a mestiza consciousness as defined by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) in Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza. It has been recognized, investigated, exchanged, and extended by scholars across disciplines and from various theoretical locations. A mestiza is literally a woman of mixed ancestry, especially of Native American, European, and African backgrounds. However, the term mestiza has come to mean a new Chicana consciousness that straddles cultures, races, languages, nations, sexualities, and spiritualities — that is, living with ambivalence while balancing opposing powers. Anzaldúa (1987) states that “the new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures” (p. 79). The mestiza identity is a dual identity that is located at the cross roads of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and patriarchy found in the dominant society and in Chicana/o communities. Anzaldúa chronicles these multiple forms of oppression that Chicanas suffer and proposes that a mestiza consciousness is both born out of oppression and is a conscious struggle against it. “It is
a developed subjectivity capable of transformation and relocation, movement guided by the learned capacity to read, renovate, and make signs on behalf of the dispossessed . . . ’ (Sandoval, 1998, p. 359).

The concept of a mestiza consciousness has allowed me to better understand the lives of the students I interviewed and to organize and analyze my data in ways that are uncommon in the field of education. At this stage of data analysis, I have operationalized a mestiza consciousness to include how a student balances, negotiates, and draws from her bilingualism, biculturalism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities in relationship to her education. In operationalizing the concept of a mestiza consciousness, I do not mean to simplify its complexity nor do I mean to impose a rigid or static definition that leads to dichotomous thinking. Rather, I hope to take the complex and fluid concept that Anzaldúa offers us and remain true to its flexible and inclusive core, while offering a unique way to understand and analyze educational research that focuses on the lives of Chicana students.

Methodological and participant description

I collected my data as part of a larger investigation that examines the educational trajectory of Chicana and Chicano college students at a unique state university in California (Delgado Bernal, 1999). The university’s total student body is 27% Chicana and Chicano, and it is surrounded by three counties in which almost one-half of the residents are Mexican/Mexican American. The university is currently in its sixth year of operation and was created with a distinctive mission to serve “the working class and historically under-educated and low-income populations” in the surrounding areas (University Vision Statement).

The students were selected from a list of university students who self-identified as Mexican, Mexican American, and/or Chicano, and all students were between 18 and 29 years of age. I collected surveys and semistructured life history interviews with over 50 undergraduate Chicana and Chicano students. In the interviews, students discussed their educational journey from early elementary school to college. Through various queries I explored students’ educational experiences in terms of personal, familial, and structural supports and constraints. My research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the supports and obstacles to higher education that Chicana and Chicano students experience?
2. How do Chicana and Chicano college students reflect on their identities and culture in relation to their educational engagement?
3. How do Chicanas’ and Chicanos’ educational experiences and choices interact with family backgrounds, bilingualism, school practices, sexuality, gender expectations, religion/spirituality, and political views?
4. What are the strategies employed by Chicana and Chicano students in order to obtain a higher education?

The data from my study were collected using a Chicana feminist epistemology and methodology that includes research participants’ analytical insights in interpreting the data (Delgado Bernal, 1998b). Therefore, after completing the individual interviews, I also conducted three focus-group interviews with 12 different students whom I had already interviewed. In each of the focus groups, I presented some of my preliminary
findings to the students. A primary objective in using focus groups is to include research participants in the data-analysis process to avoid claiming sole authority in the analysis of their lives. I wanted them to offer their insights on my interpretations thereby allowing them to be creators of knowledge, rather than just subjects of the research. This process allows me to go beyond a simple feedback loop, and bring meaning to the data based on an interactive process.

This article is based on the 32 interviews with female students, most of who come from working-class families. Over half of their mothers (53%) and half of their fathers (56%) had less than a ninth grade education. The majority (75%) of mothers worked as farm laborers or stay-at-home-moms. And the majority (52%) of fathers were in farm labor or other types of unskilled manual labor. A total of 27 (84%) of the young women were born in the United States, with 19 being first generation and 8 being second generation. Only 5 were born in Mexico. All the students had attended California public high schools. Twelve (38%) students attended community college as their first institution of higher education and 24 (75%) students are first-generation college students.

*The mestiza consciousness of Chicana college students*

As stated earlier, I have operationalized a mestiza consciousness to include how a student balances, negotiates, and draws from her bilingualism, biculturalism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities. With this lens, what are often perceived as deficits for Chicana students – limited English proficiency, inferior cultural/religious practices, or too many non-university-related responsibilities – can be understood as cultural assets or resources that Chicana students bring to higher education. What I am most interested in is how students draw from what they learn in their homes and how living a mestiza consciousness may be one way by which these students have navigated their way around educational obstacles and into college.

*Bilingualism*

Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. (Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 59)

... [L]anguage can add to the trauma of the Chicana’s schizophrenic-like existence. She was educated in English and learned it is the only acceptable language in society, but Spanish was the language of her childhood, family, and community ... By the same token, women may also become anxious and self-conscious in later years if they have no or little facility in Spanish. (Ana Castillo, 1995, p. 39)

All of the students experienced their language in various ways throughout their educational journey. Of the women I interviewed, 29 are bilingual (3 of these individuals are actually trilingual) and four are monolingual English speakers. Many of the bilingual speakers felt that their limited English skills early in their educational journey were a real challenge or even something of which they were ashamed. One student remembers, “I know that I would be embarrassed once in a while if I spoke Spanish.”
However, most of them also felt that their bilingualism has had a positive impact on them academically and socially, and they seem to draw strength from using both Spanish and English in academic and social settings. As one student put it, “It’s a great resource to my community, the people that I work with, the university itself.” This is particularly true since many of the students either worked on campus and interacted with bilingual students and Spanish-speaking parents, or did their service learning requirement in surrounding Mexican communities. The words of these next three students represent what was said over and over again in the interviews, that is, knowledge in Spanish helped them acquire English and their bilingualism has been an asset to their education.

I went through a bilingual education program so I was able to understand and I think communicate a lot better than some of the students. And it’s hard to say, I guess academically it’s given me a lot of privilege, in the sense that I’ve been able to learn and use it in all the requirements throughout my education. (Angela – Senior)

I guess, it really expanded my knowledge in English, knowing a lot in Spanish, because I knew basic things in Spanish … I always read the Bible in Spanish, and we had a lot of literature in Spanish at home. My mom read to us and made us read. So that really helped me I guess, knowing my basics in Spanish to really learn English. (Claudia – Junior)

As I was growing up, when I would go to school, I … would memorize certain things in English because they connected to Spanish words. So that helped me remember. (Liseth – Junior)

Many of the students also spoke matter-of-factly about the additional professional opportunities they will have in the future because of their bilingualism. And a few students spoke passionately about their bilingualism in terms of identity and the importance of maintaining their native language.

We were told not to speak English at home because of the fear that we might lose part of our culture. And my mother really emphasized that … Spanish is part of us. It’s what we are defined by somewhat, you know, our language…. And she fears that one day we’re not going to speak Spanish at all and she won’t be able to understand her granddaughters…. In order to be even more successful you have to keep your language, acquire another one, and many more if you want, but that’s part of you, part of your identity. (Josie – Sophomore)

In contrast, the four monolingual English students I interviewed felt that they were often judged by other Chicanas/os as not being authentic because they did not speak Spanish. These women struggled in different ways with their language and were sometimes emotionally hurt by the way their lack of bilingualism was perceived by others, especially by other Chicanas and Chicanos. Anzaldúa (1987) speaks to this struggle by saying, “because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other” (p. 58).

There’s one particular incidence that I haven’t been able to forget because it kind of made me really mad … I was here on campus and I had gone to one of the offices and … I handed them my ID card … they asked if I spoke Spanish
and I said no and they said that with my name I should be able to speak Spanish. That was kind of upsetting me. (Mary – Senior)

Well lately as I’m older of course, I see problems with not speaking Spanish. I think it wasn’t until I got into like colleges and stuff when I realized that there were people who would judge me for having brown skin. Or maybe not judge me, maybe it’s a harsh word, but who would think it was funny that I had dark skin, brown skin and didn’t speak Spanish. What was wrong with me? (Lucy – Senior)

Anzaldúa (1987) points out that, “A monolingual Chicana whose first language is English . . . is just as much a Chicana as one who speaks several variants of Spanish . . . And because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages” (pp. 55, 59). Indeed, all the women attempted to balance between Spanish and English, whether it was a result of their fluency or lack of fluency in each language. For example, as a result of their bilingualism a number of the students were able to test-out of the language requirement at the university thereby enhancing their own academic achievement. Yet at the same time, nearly all of the bilingual women noted that English writing was one of the areas in which they felt the least academically prepared. Certainly, for the bilingual women in this study they asserted a form of cultural and self-affirmation by embracing their Spanish language even as they strove to improve their English writing proficiency. Their use of Spanish in both academic and social settings can be seen as forms of resistance because that behavior challenges the historical and current anti-immigrant and English-only sentiments in California and throughout the Southwest.  

Biculturalism

. . . [T]he mestiza stands at the crossroads where she can choose to balance the multiple and diverse cultures which inform her daily experiences and psyche. The effort to work out a synthesis requires the ability to live in more than one culture . . . and to create a way of life which transcends opposing dualities. (Lara Medina, 1998, p. 195)

The women I interviewed balanced their biculturalism in various ways, some being less aware of it and others embracing it in a way that appears to be very empowering for themselves and others. Whether they were conscious of it or not, all the women articulated ways in which they lived and moved in and out of more than one culture. Students most commonly identified a home or “Mexicano” culture and a school or dominant “American” culture. And when I asked what their ethnic identity was the young women self-identified in different ways: 38% as Mexican American, 34% as Mexican/Mexicana, 25% as Chicana, and 3% as Biracial.

Students discuss how their biculturalism allowed them to see things in ways that students from the dominant culture might not, and how their biculturalism can help others understand things from a different perspective. For example, these two students speak of how their biculturalism has been a resource and has had a positive impact on their academic experience in college:

You know I think the way that it [my biculturalism] affected me positively is, I think you’re able to articulate the way that you’re feeling in a way that people
who might not understand, suddenly understand…. Like I’ve been able to write for the paper and things like that, and to be able to see really both sides. (Lucy – Senior)

I think it puts me in a kind of special place because I’m able to relate with two different ethnicities and so I’m able to take in each one. And I think it’s made me a stronger person because I’m able to see one side of something and also see another side and I can relate to both. So I think it’s made me… think a little bit more about whenever … in class we’re talking about racism and different issues like whiteness in America and it’s just made me, I’m able to understand things better I think. (Mary – Senior)

Many students spoke of how their “family preserves a really strong Mexican culture” and how this is part of their identity and something they are proud of. They consciously reject assimilation and attempt to hold onto different aspects of their culture while they learn from other cultures. As one student says:

I think I’m acculturated and I don’t think I’ve assimilated by the simple fact that I have decided to learn about all these other cultures … I am not giving up my own and I think when you assimilate you give something up to gain something. (Josie – Sophomore)

Similarly this student describes her biculturalism in relationship to her discomfort with being seen as just “American” – a term she seems to believe does not embrace her experience of growing up bicultural in the United States:

I don’t look at myself as American even though I was born here…. If I’m going to be calling myself something with American, it has to be with the Mexican in front of it. For some reason no me siento agosto, you know…. Being bicultural… I think that’s totally different than if I would’ve been raised here with, like if I didn’t have the Mexican background, I think that would’ve been really different. Makes it probably easier to understand otra cultura. (Maria – Freshman)

And although students seem to gain strength from their biculturalism just as they do from their bilingualism, students also spoke of the struggles and isolation of standing at the crossroads and trying to balance their diverse cultures. A student from South Central Los Angeles who had once been in a gang with her brother speaks to this dissonance.

… Now whenever I go home I can’t … like I don’t really know what’s going on at home. Like they don’t really tell me everything because they don’t want to worry me…. So they don’t tell me anything you know like in regards to like you know pleitos or arguments or whatever. So I do feel out of place sometimes and I have realized that even though Jose and Lalo are my brothers we are so different and I think it’s because I’m getting an education and I’m learning so many things and I wish we could sit down and talk. But somehow like I don’t know I guess either I don’t fit in their world or they don’t fit in my world. I feel that we cannot connect ‘cause we no longer share the same ideas. (Josie – Sophomore)

As a mestiza, standing at the crossroads and trying to balance different cultures can be challenging, exhausting, and sometimes isolating. However, the women I interviewed acknowledged how they and others benefited from their bicultural insights. As Martínez points out, “The paradox of life on the Borderlands for the mestiza is that
this place, this free space of consciousness, is the site of her worst battles with racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism, but paradoxically, it is also the place of her greatest strength” (1999, p. 47). In spite of the history of cultural repression in the United States, these students resist by embracing Mexicano culture and the Spanish language. Though not directly reflected in the previous quotes, these students also affirm Mexican culture in other ways such as enjoying Mexican music and dances, religious events, and watching novelas on Spanish-language television. Certainly, in a society that emphasizes assimilation these individual and subtle acts can be viewed as a form of resistance.

Commitment to communities

The distinctions between home, school, community, and mainstream institutions are . . . not clear cut and delineated, but are rather part of a web of multiple interacting communities . . . [F]amilies [however] are the starting point for surviving and effecting resistance to cultural assault, to valorizing and (re)creating a family education which stresses dignity and pride in language and culture. (Sofia Villenas & Donna Deyhle, 1999, pp. 425, 441)

Borderlands refers to the geographical, emotional, and/or psychological space occupied by mestizas, and it serves as a metaphor for the condition of living, between spaces, cultures, and languages (Elenes, 1997). A Chicana feminist epistemology acknowledges that Chicanas and other marginalized peoples often have a strength that comes from their borderland experiences (Delgado Bernal, 1998b). So another part of a mestiza consciousness is balancing between and within the different communities to which one belongs. The women I interviewed were involved at various levels in the campus community and other communities to which they belonged. All of them, however, voiced a very strong commitment to their families or the Mexican communities from which they came, a commitment that translated into a desire to give back and help others. Many of the women spoke of their role in being examples for their younger siblings and promoting education or ideas of social justice. One woman comments that “I’m teaching Jose and Junior [my younger brothers] to be responsive to women, to believe in them, to not be like the other machistas at home.” Moreover, students spoke of their commitment to their families and communities as a source of inspiration and motivation to overcome educational obstacles. Like many other students, these two women talk about how their education will benefit others in their community.

Well one of the things is that for me, if I get an education then that means that some other Mexican Americans are going to be able to get an education too . . . I’m going to go back and help out my community and . . . try to help out those people that can go to college and push them up. (Paula – Senior)

I am basically mujer Mexicana, a feminist, a straggler . . . Que algún día se va agraduar de aquí y va a regresar a South Central. And I’m going to teach at my high school . . . I would love to become a teacher and that is what I’m going to become. I’m going to study to teach others, be the best that I could be in my community. Be a community leader, basically support my community, where I come from. (Josie – Sophomore)
Over and over, the words of the women I interviewed parallel Villalpando’s (1996) quantitative research which finds that, in comparison with white students, Chicana and Chicano students enter college with higher levels of altruism, stronger interests in service careers, and stronger interests in “helping their communities”. In Suárez-Orozco’s (1989) ethnographic research on Latina/o cultural and linguistic resources, he too found that “dedication, loyalty, and commitment to family … served as a stimulus for school success rather than a hindrance…” (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999, p. 428). However, students in the focus group reminded me that this commitment to families and communities can be a heavy emotional burden that they carry on their shoulders. Because they are the first to go to college, they are the role models for their families and communities and are the example for younger siblings. This is confirmed by a parent who offers the following advice to younger children at home: “You have to follow your sister’s steps. You guys got to go to school.” These young women also appear to have more family responsibilities than traditional middle-class students, responsibilities that stem from their emotional and financial commitment to their families.

I mean a lot of what happens in my mother’s house ends up kind of jumping onto my plate. I mean while I’m in college, while I’m over here doing a million things, writing a paper, she’ll call me just so disturbed about something that my brother did or my sister did…. And it’s emotional, it’s really emotional, it’s very, very draining. (Angela – Senior)

It’s like there’s been times especially during … the end of the semester, it always happens to me that I have so much homework, yet I have to clean, I have to take the kids a bath, or I have to cook, or whatever. (Susana – Senior)

Sometimes it’s hard to go home and see your parents, not having enough money to go to the market, not having enough money to buy medicine. And knowing that … I’m only working part time and I have to pay my rent and I have to pay whatever financial aid doesn’t pay, knowing that I can’t help them. Even though I’ve always shared some part of my financial aid check with them…. Doesn’t matter how hard the crisis is in the family, they’re always telling me, “Don’t worry about it. Stay in school.” (Claudia – Junior)

The fact that these Chicanas are in college, have maintained an emotional and financial commitment to their families and communities, resisted damaging stereotypes, and embraced Mexicano culture and the Spanish language points to the significance of understanding a mestiza consciousness. They seem to draw from their sense of self that is based on family, community, culture, and language as a source of strength that enables them to continue on their educational journey and succeed in college. To further explore the significance of a mestiza consciousness in relationship to the education of Chicanas, the next section addresses spirituality.

**Spiritualities**

The spiritual practices of many Chicanas emerge from a purposeful integration of their creative inner resources and the diverse cultural influences that feed their souls and their psyches … Chicanas define and decide for themselves what
images, rituals, myths, and deities nourish and give expression to their deepest values. (Lara Medina, 1998, p. 189)

During the interviews, the students talked with me about the topic of spirituality and addressed issues such as how much they think religion or spirituality influences their life in college, how they describe their spirituality, and what spiritual practices they engage in. Some of the women had no difficulty at all defining their spirituality, while many of the women found the term to be somewhat mysterious and difficult to explain. One student even asked, “Writing, is that considered spiritual? It’s therapy. It calms me down. I talk to paper. I can meet myself through paper.” For all the women it was something personal and, as Medina (1998) states, “Spirituality then becomes our own individual way of connecting with the spirit within us as well as with those around us” (p. 192). These next two students talk about how religion and spirituality are separate, and how each considers herself a spiritual person who not only has a relationship with God, but with a deceased family member.

I do have a close relationship with God . . . and an even closer relationship with my sister who passed away. And I think for me that’s my spirituality . . . in a personal way. I don’t get it from you know, living and breathing a religion.

(Angela – Senior)

Oh I’m spiritual. I’m a spiritual person. Since I am not religious that’s my only source. I talk to my plants. You’ll think I’m crazy, but I talk to a star, the brightest star that I have now learned is Jupiter. I think of that as my dad even though I don’t know him. I’ve never met him…. (Josie – Senior)

Anzaldúa stresses that a mestiza consciousness means balancing between different conceptions of spirituality. For the students, this often meant incorporating very personal sources of spirituality with more formal conceptions of religion. In other words, the women’s spiritual practices were often a tapestry that wove together elements of Catholicism or another organized religion with other important rituals. And as they talked about this tapestry, students sometimes acknowledged that their different beliefs and practices were disconnected: “I mean that [belief] doesn’t fit into my religion.” Most women said they no longer went to church regularly, but a number of them talked about using candles or prayer as part of their spiritual rituals. Still others kept a picture of the Virgen de Guadalupe or an altar in their dorm room. Maria, a freshman, speaks about her spiritual practice of keeping a picture of the Virgen and a candle in her dorm room even though she does not light the candle because it is a fire hazard.

Well actually en mi room tengo un picture de La Virgen y también tengo una veladora. Pero no la prendo porque, I heard el otro día in one of the dorms they had to evacuate everybody out because it was catching on fire because of a candle. (Maria – Freshman)

González (2000) points to how young Mexicana students reflect on their spirituality. She found “a thread of spirituality woven throughout their identities and their worldviews. It emerged as a way of learning and knowing from their homespace, as energy, from mothers’ and elders’ cultural knowledge ... into practices for negotiating and navigating from day to day.” Indeed, I found a similar thread in which some of the women directly connect their spirituality to their educational journey, their learning, or their desire to help others.
Spirituality plays a role in that I want to get through school so that I can do different things, different positive things. With my dad, sometimes he thinks I have curanderera qualities. I thought that was a great compliment. And so I think that in everything I do there’s something behind it. (Lucy – Senior)

I involve myself, I give back as much as I can, and I help others, and I don’t live a selfish life. You know that’s my sense of spirituality…. (Angela – Senior)

I’ve been telling people that you know God puts you on earth for a reason … whether your purpose is putting a smile on somebody else’s face to being the creator of world peace, or ending world hunger. It could be anything as small like that or as big as that…. And I guess that’s the way I kind of see it with me being here at school…. (Liset – Junior)

For these women, their spirituality was connected to their commitment to their families and communities. They saw their educational journey as a collaborative journey not an individualistic one in which they were only interested in “making money” when they graduated. Their spiritual practices, although often in conflict with their home religion, were a source of inspiration and offered them ways to take care of themselves. Medina (1998) proposes that, “Chicanas develop [spiritual] ceremonies as tools for daily survival within a society that seeks to silence us. As tools or strategies of resistance for personal and communal healing, they challenge the norms of the dominant culture” (p. 203). Similarly, I believe that the young women drew from a mestiza consciousness in which their spiritual practices also served as tools or strategies of resistance that helped them persist towards their educational goals.

**Discussion**

The concept of mestiza consciousness – an identity that is fluid, resilient, and oppositional – allows educators to reconceptualize what are often thought of as cultural deficits into cultural resources and allows them to understand the lives of Chicana/Mexicana students in ways that are often overlooked in the field of education. My analysis reveals the way in which Chicanas negotiate a mestiza identity in relationship to their language, culture, communities, and spiritualities. When confronted with the challenges and obstacles of higher education, these women, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly, draw from their mestiza consciousness in ways that help them survive and succeed on their educational journeys. They also demonstrate that the application of household knowledge allows them to interrupt the transmission of dominant perceptions about their language and culture.

Indeed, pedagogies of the home provide strategies of resistance that challenge the educational norms of higher education and the dominant perceptions held about Chicana students. With a better understanding of these strategies, we can develop innovative curricular and pedagogical ways to include bilingualism, biculturalism, and community commitment in the curriculum. For example, Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler (1996) have found that for Latino students attending college full time, maintaining family relationships is among the most important aspects that facilitate their adjustment to college. Other studies demonstrate that when college students maintain a supportive relationship with their parents they are better adjusted and may persist to
graduation (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992). These studies support my findings and point to the need for universities to think about creative ways to help Chicana students nurture and draw from the commitment they have to their families and communities. Incorporating service learning into the curriculum might be one way in which students can give back to their communities and earn university credit at the same time.

In respect to bilingualism and biculturalism, universities that have language or diversity requirements might develop creative ways to include the bilingualism and biculturalism of Chicana students in the curriculum, in other words, acknowledge and give credit for these resources while, most importantly, helping students develop these resources even further. Rather than view students with limited English skills as a liability to the university (since the university has to provide language development classes for these students), the university should see these students as an asset. These are students who might be able to work as Spanish language tutors in the university language department and who should be able to leave the university proficient in two languages and more prepared for our growing global environment.

In educational policy and practice it is important to remember that Chicana students experience school from multiple dimensions including their skin color, gender, class, sexuality, language, and culture. Rather than focus on the failures of Chicana and Chicano students, we can ask how their cultural knowledge contributes to the educational success of some students. We then need to develop policy and practice that values and builds on pedagogies of the home in order to enhance Chicana academic success and college participation. In the future, we might also ask how a mestiza consciousness can be acknowledged and nurtured at an early age in order to promote greater academic success during students’ K–12 educational journey.

Notes

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1. “Chicana” and “Chicano” are cultural and political identities that were popularized during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. They are composed of multiple layers and are identities of resistance that are often consciously adopted later in life. The term Chicana is used specifically to discuss women of Mexican origin and/or other Latinas who share a similar political consciousness. Because terms of identification vary according to context and not all Mexican origin women embrace the cultural and political identity of Chicana, Chicana is sometimes used interchangeably with “Mexican” and “Mexicana”. “Latina” is sometimes used when referring to research that does not focus solely on Chicanas/Mexicanas.

2. To work more closely with Anzaldúa’s conception of a mestiza consciousness, in future work I am also addressing how students balance and negotiate their sexuality.

3. In order to protect the privacy of students, they are identified with a pseudonym and their actual class status at the time of the interview.

4. There is much current evidence that demonstrates the strong anti-immigrant and English-only socio-political environment of California. For example, during the same year that I started interviewing students California passed the anti-bilingual education measure, Proposition 227, that sought to eliminate all bilingual education in the state. Only a few years prior to my study, California voters passed the anti-immigrant
measure, Proposition 187, that attempted to exclude all those who were “reasonably suspected” of being an “illegal alien” from public education, health care, and social services.

References


