Bilingual in Boulder: The cultural knowledge of transnational Mexican and Latinx children

By Andrea Dyrness, Jackquelin Bristol, and Daniel Garzón

Directly across the street from the University of Colorado-Boulder, framed by the picturesque Flatiron peaks, sits one of Boulder's oldest elementary schools and one of three dual language schools in the Boulder Valley School District, University Hill Elementary. In a County that is predominantly white (90%) and wealthy, Uni Hill serves a population that is 68% Latinx, 51% English Language Learners, and 56% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Uni Hill's Latinx families belong to a community that is largely invisible to visitors to Boulder and most students on CU's campus. Many are mixed-status families with one or more immigrant parents of undocumented status, working in the informal and service economies. In a city whose median home price reached $1,557,500 in March 2021, up from $1 million a year ago[1], many Uni Hill Latinx families reside in mobile home communities and subsidized housing in Census tracts with high rates of poverty. As low-income, Latinx English Language Learners, they belong to a community that is underrepresented on campus and face multiple barriers to higher education. Behind these simple descriptors, however, are complex sociocultural, political and economic realities and lived experiences that offer unique cultural resources for surviving and transcending inequality. The cultural mentoring program at Uni Hill aims to excavate these resources and make them available to support students' educational journeys.

Program objectives

In Fall 2019, we began a cultural mentoring program as part of a new partnership between the School of Education and Uni Hill intended to bridge the gap between Uni Hill's Spanish-speaking families and CU-Boulder. The cultural mentoring program was conceived not as an outreach program of the university, but as a partnership between underrepresented students at CU, who would be mentors, and minoritized students in fifth grade at Uni Hill, the mentees, to collectively explore their cultural identities and find common ground. We approached the partnership from a "community cultural wealth" perspective (Yosso 2005), holding that communities of color possess unique forms of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities that are often unrecognized by mainstream educational institutions. The founding faculty member, Andrea Dyrness, is a scholar of transnational Latinx communities and a parent whose daughter had just graduated from the dual language program at Uni Hill. The CU-Boulder mentors are undergraduate and graduate students in Education and Ethnic Studies who come from similar backgrounds as the students at Uni Hill (Latinx, mixed-race students and/or immigrant backgrounds) and are committed to developing their own and their mentees' critical consciousness. Through a weekly after-school program led by the mentors, we aimed to: 1) build community among Uni Hill students and underrepresented students at CU and promote a sense of belonging to CU and the Boulder community, 2) reflect on and strengthen cultural identity, and 3) explore issues of common concern in our communities and cultural resources for education, or

[1] https://www.dailycamera.com/2021/04/12/regional-cities-set-records-for-median-home-price-boulder-tops-1-55m-median-housing-price/

community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005). In addition to the after-school program, mentors interacted with their mentees for two hours a week at Uni Hill; or, during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtually in their homes using Zoom or Google Meets.

How it worked

In the first year of the program in 2019-2020, weekly after-school mentoring sessions took place in the School of Education on CU-Boulder's campus from September 2019 until mid-March 2020, when in-person programming was abruptly stopped due to COVID-19. We had twenty fifth-graders participating in the program. After a several-month hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we resumed the program in a virtual format in Spring 2021, with 18 new fifth-graders. Our weekly after-school sessions took place on Zoom, using a variety of activities, platforms, and media to engage the students. Because mentors could no longer volunteer in their mentees' classrooms, they met with mentees in small groups online, each connecting from their home. Across both modalities, activities in the after-school program were designed to provoke reflection and dialogue around issues of cultural identity, family histories and migration, language, and experiences in education. We obtained IRB to conduct research on the program, and the faculty director and graduate student researchers who were also mentors documented all activities through fieldnotes and digital recordings. While activities varied greatly between the in-person after-school program and online programming, in each case, sustained conversations between mentors and mentees over time built strong relationships and produced a rich picture of students' lives in transnational social fields.

This report

In this report, we highlight students' cultural knowledge around four salient themes: transnational belongings, surveillance and criminalization of immigrants in Boulder, economic understanding, and shared cultural values and practices. Children are keen observers of their own sociocultural, political, and economic realities and often shared insightful commentary with their mentors and peers. We did not conduct ethnographic research with their families, in their homes or communities, so we could not "verify" the information we learned from them; nor do we claim to offer a comprehensive cultural portrait of this community. Instead, we elevate children's perspectives on their lives and realities, which are significant in their own right, along with some parent perspectives based on the parent engagement in our program. We hope to offer a feel for what it's like to be young and Latinx—Mexican, Chilean, Colombian, or Central American—in Boulder at this moment in time. We also try not to overly interpret the children's meaning. We did not always have the chance to explore what the children shared; in this sense we barely scratched the surface of students' transnational cultural knowledge. We offer these sketches here to suggest the broad contours of this knowledge and to invite those who work with, teach, and interact with these children and families regularly to explore this knowledge further. We hope to make visible some of the hidden cultural knowledge and struggles of these families to encourage allies and advocates to continue to press for the changes that will make Boulder a better home for everyone.

Transnational belongings

The Latinx students in our program, while most of them were U.S.-born, are transnational: their lives and identities are forged in connection to other places in other countries, family ties extending across borders to hometown communities in central Mexico and other countries of Latin America. While these 10- and 11-year-olds are often not immediately forthcoming about their transnational ties and parents' origins (though some are), over time, through trusting, reciprocal relationships with their mentors and multiple methods of engaging lived experience, a rich picture emerges of their transnational experience and its formative role in their cultural identities. We learned about students' transnational experiences and parents' communities of origin through family tree activities, I Am From poems, family surveys, small group discussions with mentors prompted by activities around identity and migration, and activities with parents in the family showcase. Across both modalities, in-person and online, sustained conversations between mentors and mentees over time produced rich knowledge of transnational connections. During the online program, for example, we showed an excerpt of the film Abrazos, about a group of Guatemalan-origin children in Minnesota who travel to Guatemala to meet their grandparents for the first time. During small group discussions with their mentors afterwards, many students shared that they identified with the children in the movie because they also traveled to visit their grandparents, and were sad when they had to say good-bye. Activities with parents during the final showcase provided more opportunities to learn about their communities of origin.

In each of our cohorts, the vast majority of students were Mexican-origin, with a few from other countries in Latin America (Honduras, Colombia, and Chile). Several of the families in each cohort came from the states of Zacatecas and Durango in central Mexico, reflecting long-established migration routes from Mexico to Boulder County going back to the 1910s (McIntosh 2016). What's more, many of the families were from the same hometowns in Zacatecas (Rancho Grande and Rio de Medina), and students often named these towns and felt connected to them. For example, one student explained, "Even though I wasn't born there, I feel connected to it, because my parents were born there." Another student explained her preference for speaking Spanish this way: "I was born in the United States, but my parents are from Mexico, and I feel like I'm Mexican, so I want to speak Spanish." In this case, although she was U.S. born, she said "*I feel like I'm Mexican*," showing the affective dimension of transnational attachment. Another student described herself as "kind of American and Chilean because I was born here [in the U.S.], but I represent myself as Chilean," because "my soul is from Chile."

Transnational identities

It is clear that ties to family in other places shaped students' sense of identity and belonging in ways that transcend national borders, leading to complex, ambivalent, and fluid expressions of identity that are characteristic of transnational youth (Dyrness & Sepúlveda 2020). For example, one student wrote in her I Am From poem, "I am from Colorado and Mexican roots." In small groups, mentors engaged mentees in conversations about identity and modeled transnational attachments by explaining their own connections to their parents' hometowns and their own complex identities. One mentor who

identified as Chicano asked a group of Mexican-origin mentees if they knew what Chicano meant. They suggested: "When you're half Mexican and half American," and, "When you're from here and from there." When asked to explain his definition of Chicano, the mentor said, "It is when you are born here in the US, but you practice the culture and history of Mexico because that is where your people are from." His mentee responded, "That's cool, I think I am Chicano." In another discussion around identity, another student who identified as Mexican explained what it meant to be Mexican: "If you were born in Mexico or your parents were born in Mexico, like my parents were born in Mexico but I was born in Chicago so I'm Mexican."

This student explained to her mentor that she could never fully belong in the United States, because so much of her family was in Mexico.

Mentor: Do you feel like you belong in this country [the United States]?

Student: Sometimes

Mentor: Can you explain more?

Student: No, [laughing] sometimes I miss my grandma and my dad's sisters and brothers [in Mexico] and my mom's mom is in Chicago and all of my family is over there [in Mexico], and there is more space to play in, I can see more of my family.

Transnational experience and family separation/reunification

Students often traveled to their parents' hometowns during summer vacations and enjoyed spending time with grandparents and cousins who lived there. In conversations with mentors, they eagerly anticipated upcoming trips to Mexico (or Chile, for example) and/or described past trips. Students described using Spanish with relatives in Mexico, teaching English words to their cousins, playing outside, learning new games, spending time with animals, and "lots of music." One student said her family visited her dad's hometown of Rancho Grande, Zacatecas every summer. She liked being there because there was a ranch with cows and horses and she got to see a lot of cousins, and she said her dad was happier there. One mentor said that his two mentees, in anticipation of visiting their mothers' hometowns in Zacatecas and Durango, seemed to be excited about the prospect of playing in la plaza, staying up late and reliving the experiences their mothers had. After watching the film Abrazos, many students talked about the sad scene when the children had to say good-bye to their grandparents in Guatemala to return to the United States, recounting many similar tearful goodbyes in their own lives, and how much they missed their grandparents when they were not with them. Family separation, sometimes from grandparents and cousins, other times from a parent, shapes the lives of these students as transnationals, along with the keen awareness of the legal status that prevents some family members from crossing borders to visit others. Discussing the film, in which those without papers could not travel, one student expressed, "I think that it's sad and unfair because everyone deserves to meet their family members and if they don't have that choice then it's sad, frustrating. And overall... not fair."

We discuss students' awareness of immigration enforcement in another section, but for purposes of transnational belonging, students expressed sadness at the legal barriers that prevented

some family members from being together, and great excitement when a family member finally "got papers" or anticipated getting papers so that they would be able to travel across borders to be together. For example, during one "roses and thorns" check-in, one student shared this "rose" from her week: "my grandfather came to stay with us from Mexico, because he got his visa." She had a big smile on her face, and we all clapped for her. Another student explained that she and her mother were happy about [President] Biden because "Biden said that everyone who came in not in 2021 but [before]…those are the persons that they can like get papers…Yeah that's so awesome because I can go visit my grandparents, my friends, and my grandma and grandpa [in Mexico. BIG smiles]." These examples show how much faraway family members meant to students, a key aspect of transnational lives; joyful reunions or anticipation of reunions and family visits were among their happiest moments.

Communication and gift exchanges across borders

Patricia Sánchez (2007) defines transnationalism as encompassing "various systems or relationships that span two or more nations, including sustained and meaningful flows of people, money, labor, goods, information, advice, care and love" (p. 493). Students in our program communicated often with family members in their parents' hometowns through WhatsApp and FaceTime, and sent and received gifts. These conversations and exchanges strengthened relationships with grandparents, aunts and uncles, their awareness of family dynamics, and their knowledge of the conditions of life in Mexico. One student described sending gift boxes home to family in Mexico and watching their family open them on FaceTime, then walking them through the process of setting up the Airpods, also on FaceTime. Another student anticipated a visit from grandparents in Mexico and said they would be bringing them grapes from their vineyard in Mexico (it's not clear how the grapes would get through customs, but it is significant that the student shared this information as exciting). One student's uncle sent her candy from Mexico that she sold in Boulder. It is clear that students' ties to communities in Mexico and other countries were many and varied, and contributed to their transnational belonging.

Family stories about life in Mexico (or other countries)

Many students learned about life in Mexico or other countries of origin and about family members they never met through stories their parents told them. Storytelling was a primary way cultural heritage was transmitted and a key aspect of transnational identity formation. These stories came out in a number of ways. Following a guest speaker in Spring 2020 in which the students were shown the design for Nobel Laureate Plaza honoring Boulder's Nobel Laureates, we led an activity asking the students who they would like to memorialize if they could make their own monuments. Many of the students wanted to memorialize friends or family members in their parents' home countries. With their mentors' help, they began designs for their own memorial, which we planned to make using 3D printers. One student wrote the following inscription, "*Abuelita Francisca, te extraño mucho. Cómo quisiera abrazarte y conocerte por primera vez*" (Grandma Francisca, I miss you so much. How I wish I could hug you and meet you for the first time.) This student told us that although he never met his Abuelita, his mom told him stories about her: that she was really nice and she always helped the poor people in her town. His mentor shared the following reflection, "I don't know too much about [student's] family, but this was incredibly insightful…He proudly shared all of this information with

me, and was happy to do so. He, seemingly like his mother, is proud of who Abuelita Francisca was. The idea of memorializing his abuela was the most excited I had ever seen [him], be it in the classroom, on the playground, or in the [weekly after-school] meetings."

At the parent showcase at the end of our first year, we engaged parents in a discussion of favorite childhood memories, and then had them work with their children on "mapping our memories." Parents drew pictures or maps of the place they grew up and its important features. Among the drawings were pictures of Rancho Grande and Rio de Medina, Zacatecas; San Pedro Del Gallo and San Lucas de Ocampo, Durango; and Pachuca, Hidalgo. During the discussion, many shared memories of their hometowns, taking *paseos* (excursions), playing in the river, going to the hot springs. One mom shared about when she got to spend five days with her mother, who she never got to see, and they went to the hot springs together. She seemed melancholic when she said that she never got to see her mother as a child; stories become a way to bring faraway family members near. One mentor in Spring 2021 described asking his mentees how they imagined life in Mexico, and how their answers drew on their mothers' stories. One said, "My mom tells me that all the kids play games in the streets and that there are a lot of dogs everywhere. You know the movie Coco? Well I think it's kinda like that." Both mothers had emphasized positive aspects of their childhood in their stories to their children about growing up in Mexico.

Yet students were aware of economic hardship that had caused family members to migrate. For those who filled out family surveys, all of them said their family had moved to Colorado for better jobs, or "to find a better future." It could be that parents' stories about positive aspects of their childhood were intended to counteract dominant images of their hometowns in Mexico as places of violence, deprivation, and poverty. Instead, parents' stories emphasized places of natural beauty, the freedom to play, and the kindness of relatives who looked out for the poor.

Not all stories were positive. In a family survey from fall 2019, one student whose parents were from Zacatecas, Mexico, wrote that they moved to Colorado *"para buscar un mejor futuro porque en nuestro pais de origen no habia mucho futuro"* (to look for a better future because in our country of origin there was not much of a future). Asked to provide "an old family story", the student shared the following (not edited):

> *En la familia de mis bisabuelos a las muchachas desde la edad de 11 años cuando empezaban a crecer les buscaban sus papas un esposo. A beses los esposos eran unos ansianos hasta de 70 años este fue el caso de la abuela de mi mama, a ella la casaron a los 14 años con un señor de 64 años eran tiempos de guerras y los hombres buscaban las niñas y señoritas para raptarlas por eso sus papas las casaba para protegerlas.*
>
> In my great-grandparents' family when girls were 11 and started to grow up, their parents looked for a husband for them. Sometimes the husbands were old, even 70 years old, this was the case of the grandmother of my mom, they married her at 14 years old to a man who was 64 years old, they were times of war and the men looked for girls and young women to [rape or abduct] that's why their parents married them to protect them.

This family story locates their ancestral history within the upheaval of central Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. The "times of war" referred to could be the Mexican Revolution or the Cristero War, a counter-revolution led by conservatives who objected to the post-Revolutionary government (McIntosh 2016, p. 30). As McIntosh (2016) explains in Latinos of Boulder County, "Zacatecas had for centuries been famed for its extremely profitable mines, especially silver. By around 1900, however, production had decreased. During the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s, its capital city was the scene of a major battle between government forces and the troops of Pancho Villa, a popular rebel leader, which resulted in Villa's victory but at the cost of thousands of lives on both sides" (p. 28). Like many other Boulder County Latinos whose ancestors fled Zacatecas during the Revolution, our student in this example traces their migration history to political violence.

Violence was a reality in families' present lives as well. Another student shared that while she would like to visit Mexico, her mother had told her that she was never allowed to go. When her mentor asked why, the student shared that her mother's younger sister, the student's aunt, was kidnapped in Mexico and "never to be seen again." This highlights the two worlds that students live in, one in Boulder where their lives and struggles are hidden amongst the wealth and the privilege, and another reality in which struggle and violence are real, painful, and present in their experiences.

Surveillance and Criminalization of Immigrants

Lives in Boulder had a different set of fears and anxieties, related to families' immigration status and positioning as cultural outsiders. While most of the students in our program were U.S.-born, they described the lived experience of being surveilled and criminalized in their own community and the larger context of the United States. Over time, as trusting relationships formed, students opened up about their own experiences with racism, fear of the police in their own community, and their understandings of the ways Latinx people are portrayed across the nation. We learned about students' experiences with racism and surveillance through a 'privilege bead' activity, small group discussions with mentors prompted by activities related to social justice, as well as in personal conversations between mentors and students. The data presented here were collected during the end of the Trump presidency and the beginning of the Biden presidency. The Trump Administration promoted negative views of immigrants, Latinx immigrants in particular, and students were highly aware of these views. This data was also collected around the time of the murder of George Floyd, the insurrection of the capital, as well as a mass shooting at a grocery store in Boulder. Students were aware of the context in which they found themselves, both locally and nationally. The students demonstrated knowledge (and fear) about police, their belonging, and surveillance of their Spanish speaking in their local context of Boulder as well as an understanding of the national politics around these issues in the broader context of the U.S.

Surveillance and Criminalization of Immigrants in Boulder

In terms of their local context, students expressed being afraid of police, even in their own homes and neighborhoods. For example, during one online session, mentors and mentees were in small groups

having a conversation about an unrelated topic when one of the students became alarmed because a police car had driven past her house. In fear, the student moved from sitting up in her bed, to the farthest corner of her bed from the window, all while saying "it's the cops, there's a cop, there's a cop, there's a police outside!...Oh gosh, they are parked in front of my house." her hand covered her mouth again, "I'm scared." After getting settled, the student shared that, "Mexicans are scared of the police because they can send them back to Mexico so sometimes I'm a bit scared." Neighbors' surveillance and threats to call the police showed students that their belonging was in question, and shaped their understanding of who had the right to belong in Boulder. In one mentor's fieldnotes, all three of their mentees shared about their experience where neighbors had called the police to report loud music during gatherings with family.

One student explained her sadness, frustration and confusion over a neighbor who made her feel like she did not belong in this country. "If they had the music too noisy they would be 'I'm calling the police because you can't do this, this is America, you go back to your state.' And I really didn't like understand why they would say that and my cousins were trying to tell them that we just wanted to have fun and we just turned the music off but they were still like, you can't have parties, you're not allowed to have parties, go home and I didn't like the way they were like doing that and me and my cousins were trying to tell them it's just our family because they had already discovered COVID but we just wanted to have a last party with our, all our family."

Another student shared a time when their neighbors called the police on them as well. She remembered that "all the people were saying to stop the music, go back to your state and you're being annoying." Both students expressed that while the neighbors appeared to be upset about the music, the resulting insult was to question whether they belonged in the community at all. Another student also shared about her experience with police during COVID. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Boulder County was under a stay-at-home order which meant people were not supposed to gather with others outside of their "bubble" (a group of families or friends that decided to stick together through the pandemic). Through our time with this particular student, we learned that she and her family were bubbling together and were always cautious. This student shared that when they came, "The police was like very, very mad." She explained that everyone had a Covid test and they were all negative and it was only their family, but the neighbors still called the police, and the police were still mad. Students also expressed knowledge and fear about other aspects of their lived experiences in Boulder. During one session a student asked if she could share a secret to her mentor. She shared that her dad "worked under the table" at a local restaurant. The student was scared about others finding out about this, and knew that there could be consequences.

Students articulated their fear of police as well as their nascent understanding of the ways they are racialized as young people of color. During one session when we took students to an art exhibit on campus, many students were particularly interested in a graffiti media piece. While one of the mentors was sharing about the piece and its picture of a spray paint can, his mentee recognized the spray paint can as a way to create graffiti. The student spoke up and commented that while in this place it is art, if he were to use spray paint to create art, "bang bang, the cops at the door." With this statement, the

student revealed his understanding that what was considered artistic expression in one context, might be viewed as criminal activity if undertaken by young people of color.

Boulder is a predominantly white, wealthy community. Although students attend a bilingual school where their language is valued and respected, they sometimes have a different experience outside the walls of their home and school. Students expressed ambivalent feelings about speaking Spanish in Boulder. They expressed embarrassment at the looks or comments they had received. One particular student spoke twice about her experiences speaking Spanish in Boulder. When asked if she helps her parents translate, she responded, "sometimes I have to translate, but I get really shy and embarrassed." This same student also shared that she has been teased for her Spanish as well in Boulder from a friend: "I have been a bit embarrassed talking Spanish around Boulder because one of my friends I had back then I talked Spanish and they were like 'oh my god you sound like a little kid' and I really got sad about that." The student that teased her was also from Mexico, which raises questions about internalized racism in students' beliefs about Spanish and Mexican culture within the U.S.

During one session a parent of one of the students participated as a guest speaker, sharing her own lived experience as a Latina in Boulder. She talked about how it can be hard to be bilingual in Boulder, because sometimes people look at you strangely for speaking Spanish in public spaces (*nos ven un poquito raro, se siente feo*). This excerpt shows that 10 and 11-year-olds are not the only ones experiencing racism in Boulder, but their families are as well.

Surveillance and Criminalization of Immigrants in the United States

Students also demonstrated an acute understanding of the larger politics that affected their family and friends in the US and across the border. This knowledge of national-level politics reflects their transnational ties and their understanding of their place in the U.S. Students talked about police brutality in the larger context of the U.S., Trump-era politics regarding the wall and family separation, as well as immigration laws.

We learned that many students worried about their parents' immigration status and had real fears of deportation and family separation. During one in-person session students were doing an activity called privilege beads. Each student had a piece of string and students were asked to place a bead on their string for each statement they agreed with. There were multiple stations, each with a different statement relating to privilege and each station had a different color bead. At the citizenship privilege station the statement was, "I am not worried on a daily basis about being 'discovered' and deported along with, or away from my family; I don't have to worry that a small misstep could lead to my deportation, even if I currently have legal papers to be in the U.S." Multiple students at this station were not able to place a bead on their string, because they did worry about family being deported. While some of the students were themselves born in the US, they had family members who were not.

Student 1: I'm worried about my parents.

Student 2: Yo sí.

Student 3: I worry, too.

Student 4: I worry, about my dad and my mom.

In our debriefing of this activity afterwards, one mentor remarked that the term "papers" came up a lot during this session, as well as her own mentee worrying about her mom being deported regularly.

During another session, students examined an exhibit of Native American protest art in the Visual Arts Complex. One piece of art was a mural which read, "Your luxury is our displacement." One student asked what the word displacement meant. His mentor answered, "It's when you're removed from the place where you live." The student then responded, "like what Trump is doing now?" Students also used their own experiences and knowledge to see through the rhetoric that politicians used. For example, one student said the following during a session, "Trump's ad in the Superbowl was a lie. He said he would not separate families, that he would reunite families."

While students critiqued the Trump Administration's immigration policies, they also stayed up to date with the new administration. During one session a student mentioned that while her family does not watch the news a lot, they do when it has to do with immigration policies, "I think Donald Trump was, um I don't know, it was kinda bad like he was bad with the Mexicans persons and yeah and Biden is better than Donald Trump because Biden said that everyone who came in not in 2021 but in the last year, December 30th, those are the persons that they can like get papers... Yesterday my mom was watching las noticias [the news], we don't normally do, and then yeah we saw that Biden that put that rule." Students and their families keep up with this type of news because it deeply affects their lives and transnational connections to loved ones.

Students were constantly making sense of how people in the United States think about Mexicans and what that means for their sense of belonging here. During one conversation in the lunchroom, students articulated their sense of belonging in the United States. While talking to one student in the program other students who were not in the program, but were interested in our conversation, were frequently chiming in.

Mentor: Do you feel that Mexican people are liked in the United States?

Student: In the middle.

Mentor: In the middle? Why?

Student: Because there is some people that really like Mexicans, like people from our program and then there are people that are really really racist.

Another student yelled, "the people who don't like Mexicans is Donald Trump I hate Donald Trump orange face!" Students were not blind to the national leaders who portray ideas of their "otherness."

While students could articulate their own experiences with police in their neighborhoods, they also showed an awareness of larger national racial reckoning happening in the country during the time of the program, and the persistence of racism. One student expressed, "I care about equally [equality]- everybody has to be treated equally because what happened last year about life, Black Lives Matter, and everything, I just feel that people are still being racist just because the color of their skin." Another

student shared her feelings about the police in light of the murder of George Floyd: "Well police, now police, have killed George Floyd and other people.... I feel like they are using their, some power that they have to kill people who haven't done anything other than just protested non-violence and just kill them. It doesn't make sense." While the national discussion of police violence has focused on Black Americans, Latinos are killed by police at nearly double the rate of White Americans.[2] Latinx students' awareness of Black Lives Matter and police harassment in their own neighborhoods shows they are eager to have conversations about racially motivated police violence.

Students also demonstrated their understanding of the militarization of the border and the criminalization of migrants that made crossing the border dangerous. In a meeting with her mentor, a student shared that her father had gone to *"la frontera"* to get her uncle. The trip was successful, however the student shared that other attempts to reunite with family and friends had not been: in one instance, the student shared, her dad's friend had also gone to *"la frontera"* but was shot by police. In another session, mentors asked students if they saw themselves portrayed on TV. The students responded that they saw themselves on the news when talking about immigration and that they saw people who looked like them at the border. In this way, media images of "people who looked like them" portrayed them as outsiders, people seeking to cross the border to enter the country, thus also throwing into question their belonging as members of this nation.

From these excerpts we see that students demonstrated a budding awareness of state violence against people of color in the United States, which shaped their understanding of what it means to be Latinx in both Boulder and the U.S. Their sense of place, as well as the events taking place in their local and national community are deeply understood and felt in their everyday, embodied experiences.

Economic Understandings

Despite their young age, students had a rich understanding of their family's economic situation in Boulder, and of their families who lived across borders. This section is divided into three themes, Family Economics, Transnational Awareness, and Students as Entrepreneurs. These themes appeared in various ways throughout the mentoring program, both in person and online. Students' experiences with money came out in structured activities, such as the 'privilege bead' activity, or in conversations between mentors and students about weekend plans.

Family Economics

Students in the program are aware of their economic status as members of a minoritized community, in Boulder and in the larger U.S. context. It is important to acknowledge that not all Latinx students at Uni Hill are low-income; some are children of professors, researchers, social workers, and teachers. Both the experiences of these children and those of low-income Latinx students challenge prevalent

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/police-killings-latinos/2021/05/31/657bb7be-b4d4-11eb-a980-a60af976ed44_story.html

stereotypes and deficit views about Latinx learners. Here, we focus on the stories of students whose parents occupied service sector jobs in the local economy. In both cohorts, several students' parents worked in local restaurants, and we learned about students' awareness of their parents' jobs in small group conversations with mentors. During the privilege bead activity, each student had a piece of string and they were asked to place a bead on their string for each statement they agreed with. At the class station there were two statements: 1. When I watch TV or read the news, I can see people of my own class represented well. 2. I feel comfortable asking my parents for toys or things I need. One student responded, "No, I don't see people like my parents on TV," referring to people who work in restaurants. Another student talked about not feeling comfortable asking parents for toys or even a new binder for school. While students understand their economic class as maybe lower than other students in Boulder, they also recognize and appreciate how hard their parents work. For example, during a session one student said her mom inspires her, because "she works really hard", and even though she doesn't have a lot of money to buy them things they ask for "we're OK with that." In another session a student also talked about their parents' hard work, which a mentor reflected on in his journal. In the journal, the mentor describes that the student was very proud of his parents saying, "My parents work really, really hard all because they love us." The mentor reflected: "The resiliency of their [the parents] work, their dedication in forging a better life for their children is something that the students recognized and were proud of."

Students also recognized how their families made money in the informal economy, outside of a traditional workplace setting: in landscaping/yard maintenance, housecleaning, informal vending, and dishwashing or other under-the-table restaurant jobs. Several students' grandmothers and mothers sold tamales or gorditas. One student's parents had a food truck, a snow cone cart, and her mom sold tamales. She always recognized that that was how they had money. This student was excited because she just got some money from her mom, "I have money because my mom yesterday sold tamales and then I just get money." Students talked about how they wished they had money for things like Starbucks, which was popular among their peers in Boulder.

Going to college was another topic where the theme of money and economic hardship came up for students. For some students, going to college was something they were already thinking about and planning ways to make their dreams a reality. One student talked about how she planned to apply for scholarships to go to college, but shared, "Si no agarro una beca, tengo que trabajar para mis estudios cuando ya esté (*If I don't get a scholarship when I grow up, I have to work for my studies*)." When asked where she plans to work if she has to she replied, "No sé. Creo que voy a trabajar como en McDonalds o un lugar así. (*I don't know. I think that I will work like in McDonalds or a place like that*)." Students understand that college is expensive and are already thinking of ways to support their parents in taking on that financial burden or taking it on themselves.

Transnational Awareness

Along with understanding their economic situation here in the U.S., students are also aware of how their transnational family sees them. Their transnational awareness gave them a critical consciousness of disparities in material conditions between and across their multiple communities (Dyrness & Abu

El-Haj 2019). During one session a student shared how her family here in the U.S. sends things back to Mexico. The student shared that her family in Mexico thinks that she and her family here are rich, explaining, "I saw this Tik Tok and it was like 'How my Mexican family thinks I live' and it was like walking in Guccis and all that. But we are not billionaires. They just think we have a lot of money." When asked if they send a lot of things she said, sometimes. She said that her cousins ask for air pods and iPads that her mom can't afford that so she doesn't send it to them. At one point the student looked down and while shaking her head slowly said, "They just need to start working, because right now everyone is struggling." When asked why she thinks they think her family is rich, she said, "They see Tik Tok, and they think that's how we actually live! I mean I do have a phone and fake airpods but..." She told us that she has two cousins that "get it. They know that money doesn't grow on trees and I can't just go collect it!" When asked if *she* thought she was rich, she said, "Well I do have an iPhone and fake airpods so I can fake being rich!" She explained that she bought her fake airpods for $20 at Walmart. She was so happy with how cheap they were that she bought a pair for her grandma in Mexico.

Exchanges like this reveal how families are staying connected across borders and how these students see themselves through the eyes of their family across the border. This same student also shared about sending things to sell in Mexico: "My grandma, she lives in Mexico and we have a lot of phones that throughout the years didn't work and like before we moved to this house we had a whole drawer of those phones that didn't work so my mom said that they can still use them for something. I don't know and we just sent them one phone last month and my grandma already selled it. She didn't even turn it on or save our photos she just selled it to a random person and I remember, it was my iPod touch, and she just didn't care, just "here you go!" Without a charger, without nothing!"

Sending gifts to family in Mexico was not only a way to make family members happy, but also gave students a critical perspective on US consumerism and privilege, recognizing that discarded items in the US still have use value in their communities in Mexico. Students also learned about creative and collective ways of overcoming poverty in their parents' hometowns. One other student talked about family financial trouble in Mexico when a family member got sick and how they went about helping. In a small group discussion on the topic of 'helping people in need', the student said, "My mom's aunt in Mexico needed an operation, so she had a raffle to raise money."

Students as Entrepreneurs

Students also demonstrated in many ways that they were entrepreneurs themselves, learning from their parents to find ways to work hard and make money even at a young age. Students sold things like Caramel apples, bracelets, candy from Mexico, homemade slime and lemonade.

During one session about going to college the mentors shared where we worked while in school. One student told us about her job that she had at the time. She said that she helped her dad, and she explained that she gets money for doing chores. She listed off the chores and how much she was paid for each task. Another student also shared that during the summer she and her cousin sell lemonade to make money. In another session a student shared that she had recently stopped her slime

making business, "I really liked slime and I decided to start a slime business and it went very well. It was [sold] to my neighborhood. But almost everybody wanted to buy it and then I decided just to stop because it was too much." Another student was making and selling bracelets to earn money to redecorate her room.

Some student businesses drew on transnational ties, as in the case mentioned earlier of the student whose uncle from Mexico sent her candy that she then sold at a stand outside her house. When asked what she does and why she said, “I decided to put a little store in my house because my, well my family comes from they seller persons (audio unclear) and I decided to put my little store at the house and the kids come to my house to buy candies and they're also Mexican candies so they are from Mexico...Also, on Sunday I am going to take my candies to my dad’s lunch car and I am going to sell them on there.”

As these examples show, Latinx students understand how money works, where it comes from and how to use what they have to get it. While these students may be situated within a lower-income bracket within the context of Boulder, they learn from their families and find creative ways to push through and keep going.

Shared Cultural Practices and Values

This section introduces the cultural practices and values shared among Latinx students in our program that emerge from the distinct and varied life experiences of their families. The values and language practices among Latinx students in US public schools are largely ignored or considered deficient for the academic system. However, we find language, particularly the maintenance of Spanish and bilingualism, as a practice that is not only shared by students, but unites them and connects them to their extended, transnational families. Students were growing up amidst extended family networks and spent their free time with aunts and uncles and cousins; many cousins also attended Uni Hill. Spanish is the language of many shared cultural practices among Latinx students, especially food, games, religious customs, and community gatherings; these cultural practices are a rich source of cultural knowledge for students. Mentors, mostly coming from Mexican-American families, were quick to relate to these cultural practices and values, as they have grown up with them, or similar practices and values, as well.

During both years of the program, we were able to observe students’ language practices with each other and with mentors, which lent insight to the cultural practices and values of the students and their families. Mentors and mentees also gathered through online focus groups where mentors virtually visited the students’ homes and engaged with family and cultural elements. During the online program, we held a session on bilingualism in which a guest speaker, a parent of one of the students, shared her reflections on growing up bilingually, which served as a grounding framework for students to then reflect on their own experiences with bilingualism. Parents also participated and shared cultural practices during parent showcase events in both years of the program. While not all mentors

were of Mexican-American origin, mentors and mentees were able to find connections around similar practices and themes from their communities.

Language

Regarding language practices and beliefs, students recognize bilingualism as a positive aspect of their identity (they are proud to be bilingual in English/Spanish), and they don't necessarily hold a binary view on bilingualism (c.f. Translanguaging theories, Garcia & Kleifgen 2018). That is, they don't practice strict language separation of their two languages in daily life, but demonstrate translanguaging as a natural process. Bilingualism is perceived by students as an asset, meaning that they can use one language or the other depending on context, and this enables them to take part in multiple spaces and worlds at the same time. Students can also shift from one language to another to express concepts that may differ between languages and cultures. Students regard this as a benefit for their language practices.

From one viewpoint, bilingualism is viewed as beneficial to help their parents in spaces where only English is spoken, and students are language brokers for their parents. In a focus group, one student shared that she does "translate, like, when we were, *cuando vamos a un lado, yo les ayudo, sino como cuando una persona está hablando en inglés que mi mamá no sabe, o mi papá, yo les ayudo*." (when we go to someplace, I help them, like when one person is speaking in English and my mom doesn't understand, or my dad, I help them). Other students shared similar experiences of helping their parents with their bilingual skills. Some students did not view their own language brokering abilities as a superpower, but mentors and other students reinforced the notion that the students are truly talented for being able to switch from one language to another and help their parents. One student echoed the notion that bilingualism was a talent, like "a treasure and I am glad that I am because because like I said if I don't know something in Spanish I can say it in English, and if I don't know something in English, I can say it in Spanish, its really convenient and I am just glad I'm bilingual." Language brokering is not often thought of as an important skill in school spaces, but in community spaces it is a life-saving skill (Orellana et. al. 2003).

Students also view drawing from all corners of their linguistic repertoire as something natural, as opposed to drawing from two completely different codes or two different worlds. The practice of switching from English to Spanish is not necessarily viewed as switching from one language to another, but rather speaking differently, as one student shared: "it's like the same language but talking different, talking more different." This alludes to the perception of the two languages being of equal importance to each other, which students find to be true, since they do school in two languages, relate to each other in both languages, and connect with family members in Spanish, a minoritized language in their community.

Students shared that they were glad they were able to retain their home language in the US, as Spanish is vital for keeping in touch with family, both in the US and abroad. One student shared their language story: "pretty much when I grew up, my parents were making me speak Spanish, and then I started growing up watching a lot of videos and stuff like that, and because United States is not the

same language as Mexico, and Mexico is Spanish, I started learning more English than Spanish, and I started losing it. It was easy to say, it was hard to write. And when I went to Uni Hill, since it's a bilingual school, I started learning more Spanish and learning more how to write in both languages and pretty much started to get a lot more better in Spanish." The student recognized how their English skills, especially in writing, had improved while their Spanish was perceived as lost, but that their Spanish skills had greatly improved while attending the bilingual program. Both parents and students valued Spanish and maintaining Spanish while developing bilingualism; Spanish was important to maintain connections with extended family in Mexico and in Boulder. When one mentor asked whether students preferred Spanish or English, her mentee answered Spanish, because: "I was born in the United States, but my parents are from Mexico, and I feel like I'm Mexican, so I want to speak Spanish." Several students talked about going to Mexico and using Spanish with their relatives there. Mentors and mentees also connected over the shared Latin American tradition of keeping both last names: the mother's family name and father's family name, another shared cultural practice that marked them as different from their English-speaking Anglo peers.

We also observed that students found solidarity through their bilingualism and bilingual identities against oppressive forces. In the first year of the program, mentors visited their mentees at the school every week. During one visit, a mentor accompanied their students to a music class, where they had a substitute teacher. During the lesson, the substitute music teacher regularly belittled the students as she attempted to discipline them. On one occasion, when one student, a recent arrival from Honduras, was being chastised for apparently not playing his flute correctly, students quickly defended him saying that he didn't speak English (used as a defense, not a true statement). The substitute learned that he was from Honduras, acknowledged that fact, and repeated and pronounced Honduras using English phonology. The students quickly responded in unison and corrected the substitute with the pronunciation of Honduras in Spanish: "it's not Han-doo-res, it's HONDURAS!" The substitute seemingly was not pleased with the correction. This is a way that students leverage their bilingual and bicultural identities in supporting fellow minoritized students. Here, language is not only a shared cultural practice, but a form of resilience.

Education

Countering stereotypes that Mexican parents do not value education for their children, students recognized that their parents want them to have a good education, and part of that is attending college. Students were aware of the barriers that prevented their parents from accessing higher education in their home countries or the U.S. As first/second generation immigrants, the students' parents have mostly working-class jobs and limited English skills. Students highly valued their parents' skills and hard work, even though they may not be recognized beyond their family, as one student shared: "My dad knows like a lot of things but like he didn't went to college because they didn't have a lot of money in Mexico." Students are also aware of their economic status as minoritized families in Boulder (c.f. Economic Understandings), and that their status will improve if they attend college, which in turn would help out their family in the future. They may also be aware that the United States may offer the

opportunity to go to college, which might be more opportunity than their parents had, as the quote above shows their awareness of the limited education that their parents received in Mexico.

Many students shared that their parents wanted them to go to college in order to have good jobs in the future and achieve their dreams. The same student added that, "My dad tells me like, like, to pay attention at school everyday and then I can like maybe go to the school like the one that I want [referring to CU]... so I really really want to go to that one because I already know that school." The familiarity with the university the mentors attended gave students a better picture of what college looks like. Mentors were able to share their experiences with their mentees in order to provide a Latinx college student perspective.

Religion

Catholic traditions unite many of the Latinx families at Uni Hill, often bringing students together outside of school. Many of the mentors also grew up with these traditions, and connected with their mentees over shared experiences.

On one occasion during recess, students talked with a mentor about their upcoming confirmation, a sacrament in the Catholic church and coming of age tradition in the Catholic community. They spoke to each other in English, but referred to the actual event in Spanish "la confirmación". This provides insight to the practice that is based on a deep family connection in Spanish with religion, and possibly through a Spanish-speaking church, that students may attend together with their families. During this conversation, some students expressed surprise in learning how late the mentor completed his own confirmation. In this particular mentor's community, children were usually confirmed in 8th grade, and in the students' community, it was 5th grade. These practices show how religion is a way for students to form community.

Mentors also connected with their mentees and their families through artifacts that they shared during video calls. When asked to share an artifact that was meaningful to them and their family, several mentees shared a replica of La Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron saint of the Americas, for example. One mentor reflected, "When I shared my Virgen de Guadalupe artifact at that moment, I was vulnerable about where I am, currently in my journey, and the significance that La Virgen de Guadalupe holds in my life and culture. After I shared, I was very happy to see that not only [mentee 1], but also [mentees 2 and 3] shared their artifact and turned on their cameras...[Mentees 2 and 3] both shared an artifact of La Virgen the Guadalupe, which is how we connected. [They both] shared their ties to La Virgen that led back to their family and culture." Another mentee shared a rosary, explaining that "it reminds me of Mexico, we pray like to Jesus and we have them all around my house so it like reminds me of my house and of Mexico."

Many parents and mentors had prints, votive candles, and figurines of la Virgen de Guadalupe in their homes. These artifacts were also shared during online showcases and scavenger hunts when families were asked to share artifacts "that give you comfort". These exchanges highlight the significance of spiritual rituals and practices as "pedagogies of the home" that are a key source of sustenance, inspiration, and cultural knowledge for Latinx students (Delgado-Bernal 2006).

Food and Games

Students recognize the cultural tradition of passing traditional recipes down generations of family. During both family showcases (2019 and 2021), students and parents (and mentors) shared traditional Mexican dishes (and games). When invited to share something from their kitchen that they couldn't be without (in the parent showcase), parents shared salsa, mole, different kinds of chile, and *cafeteras* (coffee makers). Parents also expressed that they made traditional foods, such as mole, from scratch, with kitchen utensils that have been kept in the family for generations. Food has more significance than a shared linguistic and cultural practice, it is a family tradition that is passed down generations, as students and parents have shared with mentors.

Students share their food experiences in many different spaces, especially school, where they may bring food from home and eat it in the cafeteria with their friends. Students usually refer to traditional Mexican dishes in the Spanish pronunciation, as they have grown up with them in their family. In their I Am From poems, students wrote about pozole, enchiladas, gorditas, tamales and mole as food items that represent their family. In informal conversations, they told of mothers and grandmothers making (and sometimes selling) gorditas and tamales. One student shared their conundrum about how tamales were high in demand in their family: "Yea!! We have like a freezer over there like in the garage and then I always used to put the tamales over there because I love the red ones so and my cousins were always eating [them]!!" Students shared stories about making tamales and other dishes with their families as a family tradition, and how parents taught them how to cook. During the online portion of the program, mentors were also able to see students eating traditional Mexican dishes in their homes, such as menudo, as several students ate during the meetings. During the in-person program, mentors hosted a family night at school and shared tamales with all the mentees and their families.

Mentees and mentors also bonded over traditional games that form a shared cultural practice in their communities. Lotería, Mexican bingo, is a shared cultural practice among students and their families, who have large family gatherings centered on Lotería. Mentees shared that some of their families liked to play Lotería every Saturday, for example, when their tios and primos would go over their house. During the in-person family showcase, mentees and their families led a game of lotería with the mentors. The students enjoyed leading the game, passing out the pinto beans to all the families, drawing the cards, and calling out the different names written on the cards in Spanish. The mentors and mentees shared a special time over the beloved game.

During the online family showcase, a scavenger hunt asked parents and their children to find something that reminds you of home; something that reminds you of your childhood; something in your kitchen that you couldn't cook without; something that provides you with comfort; and something that you like to do for fun at home. Parents eagerly shared artifacts from their home and explained their meaning. Families shared traditions that took place with games, some of which they resuscitated during the pandemic. One parent shared: "*Y este es un juguete, el tradicional que yo jugaba cuando yo era chica. Y ahora que están mis hijos cuando como era el año pasado de la pandemia que no sabíamos, jugábamos a la tradicional lotería*." (And this is a toy, a traditional toy that I played when I

was little. And now that my kids are at home as they were during the pandemic, we played traditional Lotería.) Just like traditional foods, students inherit knowledge from traditional games passed down through generations, and understand the importance of family bonding over the traditional games.

One mentor who was Chilean and Mexican was excited to see the Chilean father of her mentee share "el Trompo", a spinning game with a wooden spinning top with a white string attached to it, which she recognized from her own childhood: "And I was like, oh my God. Like my grandpa has that in his house!" The mentor reflected that seeing the father and daughter sharing together and connecting with their Chilean identity was one of the most meaningful moments of the program. "[My mentee] was never shy to share things about herself and Chile, and seeing what her home life is like with her family explains why. Chile is still present in their Broomfield home, that's who they are and where their family is."

At the end of the family showcase, parents were invited to share any advice they had for the fifth graders as they move on to middle school. Several parents shared advice in Spanish that reflected strong moral and cultural values: don't judge your peers for not having the best clothes--clothes don't make a person better. Give and get help when you need it, find community. And most importantly, "Never forget your roots; don't forget who you are."

Conclusion

Transnational Latinx families in Colorado harbor a wealth of cultural knowledge that is often hidden beneath the surface of their interactions in educational institutions. The students in our program were lucky to attend a school that values their bilingualism and their cultural identities; many of our mentors did not have that opportunity in their own K-12 schooling. However, students told us that they did not often get to talk about the things we talked about in our program, even in their school. Their enthusiasm in sharing and exploring their own family histories, cultures and identities with their mentors suggests that this knowledge constitutes a largely untapped resource for their educations. By making visible some of the invisible knowledge, skills, abilities and networks these students have, we aim not only to push back against mainstream deficit views of Latinx children that focus on what they lack, but also to suggest possible areas of collaboration and further exploration that could enlist these children as agents of change and problem-solvers. As we have detailed here, Latinx children in Boulder are concerned about police violence, racism, xenophobia, the economic struggles of their families in Mexico, and the legal barriers that separate families; and they are also steeped in traditions of resilience, community, and spirituality that have enabled their families to survive and thrive across borders and generations. Finding ways to connect these concerns to their schooling will be key to their own academic success and to equipping the next generation of leaders with the skills to advance the struggle for social justice.

Acknowledgments

The School of Education-Uni Hill Partnership for Equity was funded by a School of Education Place-Based Partnership Grant in 2019-2020 and a CU Boulder Outreach Award in 2020-2021. We are

grateful to these programs for their support, and to the incredible staff at Uni Hill for making this program possible.

References

Delgado-Bernal, Dolores (2006). "Learning and Living Pedagogies of the Home: The Mestiza Consciousness of Chicana Students" in Delgado-Bernal et. al. (Eds) *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press (pp. 113-128).

Dyrness, A. and E. Sepúlveda. (2020). *Border Thinking: Latinx Youth Decolonizing Citizenship*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Dyrness, A. and T. R. Abu El-Haj. (2019). 'The Democratic Citizenship Formation of Transnational Youth.' *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 51(2), published online April 2019: doi.10.1111/aeq.12294.

García, O. & Kleifgen, J. A. (2018). *Educating Emergent Bilinguals: Policies, programs, and practices for English Learners*. Teachers College Press.

McIntosh, M. (2016). 'Latinos of Boulder County, Colorado, 1900-1980.' Palm Springs, CA: Old Johns Publishing.

Orellana, M. F., Reynolds, J., Dorner, L., & Meza, M. (2003). In Other Words: Translating or "Para-Phrasing" as a Family Literacy Practice in Immigrant Households. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38(1), 12–34.

Sánchez, P. (2007). 'Urban Immigrant Students: How Transnationalism Shapes Their World Learning.' *The Urban Review,* 39(5): 489-517.

Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8:1, 69-91.