

## Teacher Education in the Borderlands

### Examining the Intersections of Being a Teacher Candidate and Essential Worker in the Age of Covid-19

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#### Abstract

Anzaldúa's borderlands loom large in the experiences of a first-year, assistant professor in a rural, predominantly working-class Mexican community near the United States/Mexico border. Tensions and dislocations, along race, class, immigrant background, and language in a transborder teacher education program, were exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. These tensions are exemplified in the written reflections of two male teacher candidates of Color who were also employed as essential workers while enrolled in a teacher education program. Examining their written reflections illuminates the ways in which physical and symbolic boundaries affected their material conditions and their pursuit of teaching credentials. Recognizing the intersectionality of teacher candidate lives and the implications for their entry into the teaching profession illuminated the role critical *fronterizo* teacher education programs can play in assuring more equitable opportunities for teacher candidates.

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## Introduction

In the Fall of 2019, I began my journey as a tenure-track assistant professor in the Teacher Education Department at San Diego State University–Imperial Valley, a satellite campus in Calexico, California, just a few blocks away from the international United States/Mexico border. As a native of Los Angeles, I came to the Imperial Valley with a deep understanding of issues of inequality. But I learned quickly that both the centrality of the border and the rural nature of the Valley allowed structural inequalities to manifest differently than those with which I was familiar. Whether acknowledged or not, the borderlands shaped every interaction inside and outside of the classroom.

Historically, the Imperial Valley satellite campus of SDSU has been well-positioned to work with and for the communities of Imperial County, California in the U.S. and Baja California in Mexico. Established in 1959, the Imperial Valley campus has focused on teacher education to reduce the shortage of credentialed elementary school teachers in California’s Imperial County, Eastern San Diego County, and Eastern Riverside County. In 1966, Raul Carrillo, councilman from the City of Calexico, wrote to John P. Sheehan, Chief Deputy Director of Finance in the State Department that the “future effectiveness and major contribution of the Imperial Valley Campus of San Diego State College in Calexico [is] tied with the higher education of bilingual persons to become teachers for the public schools of California” (Coordinating Council for Higher Education, 1966, p. 13). Carrillo estimated that the sheer population of Mexican Americans residing in the region—numbering more than 70,000 then—could meet and solve California’s pressing issue of securing and preparing qualified teachers to effectively teach English and Spanish as required by law.

For more than 60 years, the Imperial Valley satellite campus of SDSU has fulfilled this mission to draw prospective teachers from the large Mexican American community it serves. Today, our small teacher education program accepts cohorts of approximately 60 students every year, the majority of whom (over 93%) are Chicana/o, predominantly bilingual, first-generation college students from working-class backgrounds. A vast number of our teacher candidates have also been transborder students at some point in their own K-12 trajectory, crossing the border to attend school in the U.S. on a daily basis. According to U.S. Census data, our student demographics reflect Imperial County: 85% of the county’s population is Hispanic/Latina/o, and 74% of adults speak Spanish. Additionally, it is important to note, simply getting to college is an extraordinary feat; educationally, only 10% of the population in Imperial County has a

bachelor's degree. Finally, with 23.8% of its adult population living under the poverty line, Imperial County has one of the highest poverty rates in California. In essence, our campus and teacher education program serve a community that is largely Brown, Spanish-speaking, and poor. Few things could be more important than providing an education that advances a Chicana/o understanding of history, culture, and identity.

### Navigating the Chicana/o Borderlands

Chicana/o cultural studies scholars have adopted the notions of the border and the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987; Saldívar-Hull, 2000) as forms of cultural expression and as critical tools in illuminating race relations in the Southwest, namely the structural inequality and cultural hybridity that impact Latinas/os (Delgado Bernal et al., 2009). According to Bejarano (2005), borderland theories account for the specific racial, ethnic, class, gender, and geopolitical issues Latina/os confront, while also suggesting a more nuanced framework of race relations that includes history, language, immigration, residency status, phenotype, and citizenship. Specifically, a borderlands theoretical perspective allows us to examine “how physical and symbolic boundaries between groups, especially groups that are hierarchically organized, affect the material conditions, sociopolitical realities, and hybrid identities of those at the bottom of the hierarchies” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2009, p. 565). I anchor my first-year experiences as a teacher educator during the Covid-19 pandemic within borderland theories to contextualize and illuminate teacher candidates' intersectional identities, as well as how these intersections shape borderland candidates' efforts to become teachers.

One example that reveals the complexities of the borderlands occurred early on during my first semester: a teacher candidate suggested I speak English when seeking any type of service in the Valley, because in her experience, the language you spoke determined the treatment you received. English, she advised, sets the tone for quicker and more professional service. In Spanish there's a popular saying, “*Como te ven te tratan*” which translates to “How they perceive you is how they treat you,” and is often used to evoke complicated tensions around the aesthetics of race and class and their accompanying stereotypes. In essence, my student was attempting to protect me by suggesting I speak English to buffer the impact of discrimination. And she was doing so in an area in which the majority of the population are native Spanish speakers and of Mexican descent. This example highlights one way in which the borderlands construct intersectional tensions via perceptions of phenotype and language to deduce race, class, and immigration status (Bebout, 2016).

These tensions appear as processes of forced assimilation—a denial of self and culture to fit within the status quo—in borderland studies and demonstrate how particular aspects of identity are privileged over others. This example encapsulates the type of lesson I learned during my first year, while teaching in the borderlands.

### Disquisition: Challenges to Support Fronterizo Teacher Candidates

During my second semester as an assistant professor, the pandemic forced teacher educators, candidates, and students out of the classroom. With Covid-19 affecting all instruction, assignments had to be re-defined to account for shelter-in-place guidelines. For me, this historical moment was an opportunity to create assignments that centered the voices and experiences of teacher candidates. I designed a writing assignment in which teacher candidates would (a) journal their experiences through the pandemic, and (b) utilize their writing to narrate how Covid-19 was altering their life at home, school, and work. As future teachers, this was an opportunity to create primary sources that would contribute to our understanding of this historical moment in the context of the Imperial Valley. At the end of the semester, these journals would be donated to the SDSU Covid-19 Memory Project, a university archival collection documenting the Covid-19 experience of students, faculty and staff. Every week, the teacher candidates turned in a reflection, and every week I learned more about the material conditions of their lives. Ultimately, this series of journal entries helped pull back the curtain on the intersectionality of structural inequality (Crenshaw, 1989) my teacher candidates experienced during the pandemic. Specifically, their journals highlighted the tensions of what it meant to be a candidate in a teacher education program while also being a vulnerable essential worker on the frontlines of the pandemic in the rural borderlands of the Imperial Valley.

I conceptualized these weekly journals as a way to both engage and capture the global pandemic at the local level and as a contribution to the university memory project. In particular, discussions around the importance of representing multiple voices as primary sources in the archives led to richer and more diverse historical accounts. Every week, I asked teacher candidates to consider how the pandemic had altered their home, work, and school life. I wanted them to consider how the pandemic manifested in the everyday to help them illustrate the intersections of race, class, gender in the rural context of the borderlands. Teacher candidates submitted their journal entries each week, and to establish relationships with them, I followed up over email with comments.

To illustrate intersectional tensions that were exacerbated by the pandemic, the following two profiles of teacher candidates studying and working within the borderlands were derived from their weekly entries. Under-represented in the teaching profession (Bryan & Milton Williams, 2017; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Sleeter & Milner, 2011), exemplars from men of Color offer complicated and compelling portraits of the challenges and opportunities to entering the teaching profession (Gomez, Rodriguez, and Agosto, 2008). The details of their stories have been changed slightly to protect their identities, but the essence remains true to the hardships and conditions revealed in their journal entries. These stories<sup>1</sup> illustrate how gender is constructed for some working-class men in a culturally Mexican community in the borderlands, as well as the challenges teacher educators face in designing programs that best meet borderland needs.

### Antonio

Originally from Mexicali, Antonio is an aspiring history teacher. He is a dedicated full-time student, who is married and a homeowner; financial pressures are a salient theme in his journal entries. During the spring semester, in the midst of the pandemic, Antonio shared two major concerns in his journal: (a) family across the border, and (b) summer employment. For Antonio, the border posed a significant part of his concerns because his mother and siblings lived on the other side. With border-crossing restrictions limited to medical emergencies or employment needs, he worried he could not support his mother in case of an emergency. The fragmentation of his family across the border—in addition to the strict crossing stipulations and rising Covid-19 cases in Mexicali—added to his stress levels. As Antonio progressed through the semester, he wrote about his summer employment plans. Because well-paying jobs are not abundant in the Valley, he had been working every summer for the last four years at a fishery in the Pacific Northwest. He described the job as hard, but it was a source of income he could not afford to forgo (through his journal entry, I learned that recruitment for seasonal employment was not uncommon in the Imperial Valley). Although Antonio had a bachelor's degree, he was willing to board a plane in the middle of a pandemic to fly more than 3,000 miles away for work. Antonio wrote about the company-approved route, mapping every mile and city involved in his trek. He detailed the contingency plans to avoid risking infection, and the required fourteen days of quarantine at a hotel as soon as he arrived to his destination. Antonio narrated both his fear of the virus and the ever-present need for a job.

### Mario

Mario, a Calexico native, has lived in the Imperial Valley all his life. The youngest of a family of three, he lives with his mother and older brother. In the spring of 2020, Mario was beginning the process of becoming a substitute teacher, but the pandemic halted these efforts. A part-time associate at a big-box retail store, his work schedule became more demanding as the weeks went by. He described how many of his co-workers from Mexicali who feared the daily border crossings were taking entire weeks off, shortening staff severely. This often meant that Mario's manager called him to come in early for work, albeit with overtime pay. His part-time position quickly snowballed into a 40-hour work week during the pandemic. Assignment deadlines became lost in the grind of work as Mario started working five days a week, and using his two days off to catch up on schoolwork; there were times Mario was unable to join his virtual classes.

Mario explained, moreover, that his commitment to his job transcended his current position in the retail store; Mario hoped the effort demonstrated his work ethic in case "higher positions" became available in the future. His writings also detailed the challenges of living in a household where everyone was an essential worker. His mother worked in a corn distribution plant and his older brother labored as a farm worker. Because all of them worked long hours, household essentials were hard to come by, especially during March when panicked shoppers emptied shelves nearly everywhere. Exacerbating these challenges, virus outbreaks at their respective jobs brought waves of fear every day they left to work. When Mario's mother developed a lung infection that landed her in the hospital, Mario considered taking time off from work to care for her and to avoid the risk of bringing the virus home from his job. But in the end, he cared for his mother the only way he could, by working to keep the household afloat.

### How the Borderlands Track "Opportunities" on a Downward Slope

These two exemplars illustrate the intersectional ways the borderlands shape the material realities, conditions, and opportunities of male teacher candidates of Color in the Imperial Valley. Although college educated, the limited economic opportunity of the region severely slowed Antonio and Mario's academic, social, and professional mobility. Additionally, their working-class backgrounds in conjunction with culturally determined gender expectations, placed real stressors on their

sense of responsibility to maintain their family's economic well-being. These precise contexts track teacher candidates' employment trajectories into low-paying occupations. We know Covid-19 has disproportionately affected communities of Color, but what does that mean for a teacher education program that primarily serves working-class Latina/o students in a rural context? Moreover, what of the fact that many of our teacher candidates are also some of the most vulnerable populations of essential workers, without any protections? How can we better support teacher candidates, like Antonio and Mario? What are the responsibilities of teacher education programs that overwhelmingly serve marginalized student populations? These questions have led me to re-imagine how we might better serve, prepare, validate, and cultivate hybrid *fronterizo* teacher candidates.

#### Dispatch: Moving Towards a Critical *Fronterizo* Teacher Education

The stories of Antonio and Mario illuminate the unique tensions tied to the borderlands and reveal critical insights into developing teachers' rural sociopolitical contexts. Specifically, they raise issues relative to power, limited economic opportunity, and culturally gendered expectations within the context of the border.

Programmatically, there are multiple areas of possibility evident in the candidate vignettes that can help us re-envision the field of teacher education. I'd like to push programs that prepare teachers along the U.S./Mexico border to adopt the notions of the borderlands by fully embracing and becoming critical *fronterizo* teacher education (CFTE) programs. I define CFTE as a collaborative merging of border epistemologies and critical education (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Giroux, 1997) for the preparation of critically conscious teachers. This means approaching teacher education in a way that is historically grounded and inspired by both the geographical specificity of the U.S./Mexico border and Chicana/o-Latina/o populations. What would a CFTE program look like? One way I am working towards building such a program is by approaching and designing my courses differently. This fall semester I am collaborating with *Escuela Normal Fronteriza Tijuana* (ENFT), a public teacher education college in Tijuana, Mexico, in the design and instruction of a social & cultural foundations of education course with teacher candidates from both sides of the U.S./Mexico border. Grounding critical histories of Chicana/o education and anchoring the border epistemologies of our teacher candidates from Tijuana and Imperial Valley, this course leverages the benefits of remote instruction to bring

together borderland teacher candidates in a bilingual, bicultural, and binational virtual class. An imperative of this course is to prepare our teacher candidates to think about themselves in a border context, reflect on their social position in relation to power, and articulate a vision of their political commitment to teaching.

Pedagogically, the two vignettes offer rich and complex portraits of teacher candidates, and consequently point to the importance of getting to know our candidates in meaningful ways. In this spirit, I am being intentional about creating spaces in my classroom for the integration of candidates' experiential knowledge. In the case of my course, the journal assignment revealed my teacher candidates' experiences within the context of social and economic opportunities. With this in mind, this semester, I am designing prompts that focus on intersectionality in the borderlands. Teacher candidates read scholarship organized thematically around language, immigration, and education in the borderlands, such as selected chapters from Anzaldúa's (1987) seminal book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Then, to scaffold teacher candidate reading reflections, I offer three guiding questions to connect readings to experiences. First, to anchor the geography of the borderland, I ask, "How do you think the readings relate to the Imperial Valley?" Second, to prompt framing the ideological, theoretical, and pragmatic dimensions of teaching in the contexts of the borderlands, I then ask, "How do the readings relate to your future practice as a teacher in the Imperial Valley?" Finally, I engage teacher candidates in a reflexive process by asking, "How do the readings relate to your own educational experiences?" The prompts elicited fruitful and critical dialogue this semester that have centered teacher candidates' voices and lived experiences in the borderlands. For example, two candidates who were former transborder students, shared interactions with a school administrator and teacher who seemed to be trying to intimidate them by taking pictures as they crossed the U.S./Mexico border when they were in high school. They expressed a sense of fear, anger and uncertainty—anxious emotions and painful experiences that warrant recognition. These insights are, moreover, important to assuring CFTE programs become sites that can provide dialectical teaching and learning opportunities to get to know, prepare, validate, and cultivate hybrid *fronterizo* teacher candidates.

In both of their profiles, Mario and Antonio revealed their responsibilities as essential workers who were unable to afford any lost income whatsoever, risking their health to keep working in conditions conducive to virus exposure. To mitigate the financial barriers for our teacher candidates from working-class backgrounds in rural contexts, institutional partnerships can serve as a bridge into the teaching profession.

For example, one way to fund jobs for teacher candidates is by leveraging the Federal Work-Study (FWS) program, which provides part-time jobs for undergraduate and graduate students with financial need. A federal, state, or local public agency can employ teacher candidates who qualify for FWS funding; community service jobs can include reading tutors for elementary school children, mathematics tutors for middle school students, or literacy tutors in a family literacy project. Indeed, this type of support is especially important to create pathways into the teaching profession and provide economic opportunities that can make a difference in our teacher candidates' trajectories. FWS programs are one avenue CFTE programs could use to leverage their institutional capital in the creation of partnerships with individual schools, school districts, and educational programs.

As I continue to re-imagine what teacher education in the borderlands might look like, I am reminded that adopting the notions of the borderlands allows us to build bridges that deepen our connections to the teacher candidates, students, families, and communities we serve. Specifically, the teacher candidate profiles presented above point to the limited economic opportunity and material conditions of *fronterizo* Latina/o teacher candidates who double as essential workers during this pandemic. Developing a CFTE program that recognizes and builds upon the hybrid identities, histories, conditions, and epistemologies of the U.S./Mexico borderlands appears as a viable means to cultivating a critical *fronterizo* teacher identity, one that can strengthen both our teacher education programs and the teaching profession as a whole.

### Note

1 Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the teacher candidates throughout this article.

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