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Spanish language teaching and ideological tensions in the New Latino South

Enseñanza del español y tensiones ideológicas en el Nuevo Sur Latino

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the experiences of Spanish high school teachers in Tennessee, a state in the New Latino South where anti-immigrant sentiments and rejection of languages other than English are commonplace. Through a narrative inquiry approach, we explored how these contextual realities impacted teachers' perceptions of their roles and how they shaped their pedagogical goals. Participants' narratives reveal that, despite sharing similar realities at the macro level (the U.S. and the New Latino South), teachers' experiences were dependent on two factors at the meso level (their communities and schools). Teachers in urban areas and private schools worked in less challenging environments. Teachers in rural areas, especially in public institutions, had to navigate a complicated reality tinted with racism and a devaluation of Spanish. Despite teaching in difficult environments, teachers exerted agency by extending their roles as teachers to those of role models, cultural brokers, and advocates for Latinx students and communities. They adapted their pedagogical goals to promote tolerance and engagement with local Latinx communities. The article concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for systemic support and professional development initiatives to equip teachers with the tools to navigate and challenge sociopolitical hostility in their schools and communities.

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New Latino South; Spanish high school teachers; teacher identity; agency; racism; social justice teaching

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina las experiencias de los profesores de español en escuelas secundarias de Tennessee, un estado en el Nuevo Sur Latino de los EE.UU. donde son comunes los sentimientos en contra del colectivo inmigrante y el rechazo hacia otras lenguas. A través de un enfoque de investigación narrativa, exploramos cómo estas realidades contextuales impactaron las percepciones de los docentes sobre sus roles y cómo influenciaron sus objetivos pedagógicos. Las narrativas de los participantes revelan que, a pesar de compartir realidades similares a nivel macro (Estados Unidos y el Nuevo Sur Latino), las experiencias de los docentes dependían de dos factores a nivel meso (sus comunidades y escuelas). Los profesores en áreas urbanas y en escuelas privadas trabajaban en entornos menos desafiantes, mientras que

PALABRAS CLAVE
Nuevo Sur Latino; profesores de español de secundaria; identidad docente; agencia; racismo; educación para la justicia social

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aquellos en zonas rurales, especialmente en instituciones públicas, tenían que enfrentarse a una realidad compleja marcada por el racismo y la devaluación del español. A pesar de enseñar en entornos difíciles, los docentes ejercieron su agencia ampliando sus roles más allá de la enseñanza, convirtiéndose en modelos a seguir, mediadores culturales y defensores de los estudiantes y comunidades latinas. Adaptaron sus objetivos pedagógicos para promover la tolerancia y el compromiso con las comunidades latinas locales. El artículo concluye enfatizando la necesidad urgente de apoyo sistémico e iniciativas de desarrollo profesional que sirvan para dotar a los docentes de herramientas que les permitan navegar y desafiar la hostilidad sociopolítica en sus escuelas y comunidades.

1. Introduction

Latinxs are the largest minority group in the U.S. and Spanish, spoken by 13.5% of the population (41.8 million people) is the largest minority language (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). The term Latinx is commonly understood as a gender-neutral, pan-ethnic term used to describe individuals from Latin American diaspora, Latin American descent, and Spain (Salinas and Lozano 2019; Noe-Bustamante et al. 2020a). We adopt the term Latinx because It is considered a more inclusive alternative to "Latina/o" as it acknowledges the identities and experiences of nonbinary individuals while also encompassing those of Indigenous, Black, and queer people. This broader inclusivity challenges traditional gender norms and Eurocentric narratives while amplifying the voices of individuals with intersectional identities that have often been overlooked or erased (Morales 2023). Latinxs in the U.S. South constitute the fastest-growing demographic group (Noe-Bustamante et al. 2020b). They have faced significant stigmatization, often reflected in negative stereotypes, discriminatory policies, and media portrayals that depict them as problems and criminals (Rodriguez and Monreal 2017; Rodriguez 2020). While immigrants, like Latinxs, have historically been depicted as threats to the U.S., this rhetoric intensified significantly under the Trump presidency and during his re-election campaign (McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020). Anti-immigrant sentiment and Anglocentric discourses expressed by neo-nationalist and right-wing populism have been accompanied by attacks on Spanish and bilingualism in the U.S. (Torres 2019). Reports of discrimination against Spanish speakers in the news and on social media underscore the prevalence of monolingual English language ideologies and the link between English and an American identity (Meadows 2020). Anti-Spanish, anti-bilingual, and English-only rhetoric have fuelled linguistic and racial discrimination (McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020) and contributed to the creation of a racist and nativist climate toward immigrants in general (Ngo 2017). These discourses shape U.S. secondary schools, creating challenges for Spanish language teachers in regions of new immigration, such as the New Latino South (NLS)—states like Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee, where Latinx populations have rapidly grown (Kochhar et al. 2005; Noe-Bustamante et al. 2020b). Teachers' roles, identities, and instructional decisions are influenced by sociopolitical forces, which present both constraints and opportunities (Varghese et al. 2016; De Costa and Norton 2017). They must navigate macro, meso, and micro-level forces embedded in dominant ideologies and power structures (Menard-Warwick 2013). This study examines how high school Spanish teachers in Tennessee—both rural and urban—respond to these contextual realities**.** Using an ecological model of teacher agency, it explores how they exercise agency within these constraints while working toward educational justice.

2. Literature review

2.1. New Latino South

The NLS refers to six southern U.S. states (i.e., Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) considered to be nontraditional receiving contexts that have

experienced rapid growth in Latinx populations since the 1990s (Kochhar et al. 2005). Tennessee experienced the second fastest Latinx population growth between 2007 and 2014 (Stepler and Lopez 2016). Despite the growing Latinx communities, many states in the NLS have enacted restrictive and exclusionary state-level immigrant policies (Rodriguez and Monreal 2017; Commins and Wills 2020). Tennessee, the focus state of this study, ranks as one of the top five states with restrictive policies (Commins and Wills 2020). For instance, Tennessee House Bill (HB) 2315 prohibits sanctuary policies statewide, which are local policies that restrict cooperation with federal immigration authorities, such as detaining individuals based on immigration status (Chaney 2022). HB 1378 requires employers to use E-Verify, a federal government tool to confirm employees' legal authorization to work (Held et al. 2022). Meanwhile, HB 793 seeks to allow school districts to deny enrollment to immigrant students, challenging the 1982 Supreme Court ruling *Plyler v. Doe*, which mandates that public schools provide free education to all children, regardless of their immigration status (Stockard 2025). Together, these restrictive policies create significant barriers for immigrants. Combined with federal anti-immigrant policies and racist rhetoric from President Trump, they have fostered a climate of fear and hostility toward immigrant communities. In restrictive contexts like Tennessee, this climate profoundly shapes how Spanish language teachers approach their roles and instruction.

2.2. Teaching in the New Latino South

2.2.1. Latinx teachers in the New Latino South

Restrictive policies, along with local language ideologies and attitudes toward immigrants in the NLS, can create hostile school and community environments, profoundly influencing how teachers navigate their instructional contexts. Research has increasingly sought to understand the impact of the demographic shift in the NLS on teachers, administrators, and various stakeholders (Monreal 2021; Rodriguez 2021). Monreal (2021) examined Latinx K-12 teachers' experiences in South Carolina illustrating how teachers perceived, interpreted, and interacted with their spatialized and racialized relations. Similarly, Guerra and Carrillo Rodriguez (2023) examined Latinx preservice and in-service teachers in the NLS revealing the challenges they faced and how they navigated them by resisting traditional teacher roles and taking on additional roles to support Latinx communities. Okraski and Madison (2020) explored factors affecting Latinx Spanish teachers' retention and advocacy in rural schools. Their findings indicated that teachers balanced the challenges and benefits of their work in a context that had hostile views towards Spanish and Spanish-speaking people. These studies highlight the experiences of Latinx teachers in teaching in the NLS, a context which is frequently unwelcoming to Latinxs.

2.2.2. Foreign language teachers in the New Latino South

Previous research in world language teaching in the NLS has examined teacher retention, the negotiation of identity(ies), and teacher agency (Kayi-Aydar 2019; Okraski and Madison 2020; Gómez Soler and Fuentes 2021). Acheson et al. (2016) examined foreign language teacher attrition in Georgia. They reported that teachers perceived little community and institutional support when students and parents voiced negative attitudes toward learning Spanish. These attitudes were often connected to hostile views on immigration contributing to emotional burnout and attrition, underscoring the challenges of teaching foreign languages in a contentious sociopolitical climate.

Research on language teacher identity highlights the importance of identity negotiation, as well as the sociocultural and sociopolitical processes that shape teachers' professional development and practice (Menard-Warwick 2013; Yazan and Lindahl 2020). Teachers' self-perceptions and professional roles are influenced by their personal histories, sociocultural backgrounds, and the ideological climates of their schools and communities (Varghese et al. 2016).

Studies have revealed the linguistic, racial, cultural, ideological, and social backgrounds of *becoming* and *being* a language teacher (Ajayi 2011; Kayi-Aydar 2019). Wright-Fogle and Moser (2017) explored the identities and personal and professional trajectories of foreign language and ESL teachers in Mississippi, highlighting how these teachers perceived themselves, their practice, and their role in the school context. Teachers positioned themselves against dominant language ideologies and educational policies and constructed themselves as agents of change in their schools and community at large. Similarly, Kayi-Aydar (2019) examined the narratives of a Hispanic teacher demonstrating how ethnic, racial, and linguistic identities simultaneously shaped the teacher's professional identities and agency. Gómez Soler and Fuentes (2021) examined how teachers negotiated their institutions' Spanish heritage language learner policies. Their participants worked in a policy vacuum and exerted their agency by creating their own policies and taking initiatives to address issues related to identification, placement, and curriculum that were specific to their contexts and aligned with their pedagogical goals.

The aforementioned studies highlight the different realities that foreign language teachers encounter in the NLS and how their identity(ies) and teaching is impacted by various stakeholders, attitudes, and policies within and beyond the classroom. They offer in-depth contextual instantiations of how teachers navigate and position themselves within challenging contexts. While the examination of foreign language teachers in the NLS has frequently focused on retention, identity, and Latinxs, less research has focused on how foreign language teachers' school experiences intersect with an antagonistic environment and its impact on their practice and roles in rural and urban schools in the region. The way teachers understand themselves within a specific sociopolitical and sociocultural context can impact the ways they see themselves professionally. This study examines how micro, meso, and macro-level factors shape high school Spanish teachers' professional identities in Tennessee, highlighting their navigation of anti-immigrant sentiment, restrictive policies, and monolingual discourses. We draw on an ecological approach (Priestly et al. 2015) to examine how Spanish language teachers construct their professional identities in response to anti-immigration and monolingual discourses. This perspective positions teachers as reflective agents who navigate their environments through "the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors" (Biesta and Tedder 2007, 137). Rather than simply exercising agency in a context, teachers "achieve agency in their professional contexts" (Priestley et al. 2015, 29). Language teachers achieve agency to make choices, influence pedagogical practices, resist dominant discourses, or adopt particular stances, thereby, achieving different goals in diverse contexts (Fuentes and Gómez Soler 2023). This ecological model highlights how agency is both enabled and constrained by sociopolitical factors, offering insight into the challenges and possibilities for Spanish language teachers in restrictive policy environments.

Building on this ecological perspective, we adopt the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) transdisciplinary framework to explore how teacher agency is shaped across multiple intersecting layers of influence. This framework conceptualizes language learning and teacher identity formation across three interrelated levels: macro (societal ideologies and policies), meso (institutional structures, schools, and communities), and micro (classroom interactions and teacher-student relationships) (De Costa and Norton 2017). Rather than treating these levels as distinct, we recognize them as fluid and overlapping, shaping teachers' instructional decisions and identity negotiations in complex ways. This integrated approach allows us to analyze how broader sociopolitical ideologies interact with institutional and community structures, ultimately shaping classroom practices. The present study addresses the following research questions:

(a) What are Spanish high school teachers' experiences teaching Spanish in Tennessee?
(b) How do teachers' experiences in Tennessee, a state in the NLS, inform their roles as teachers and their pedagogies?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited via e-mail through three listservs: the Tennessee Foreign Language Teaching Association, the Tennessee chapter of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, and the University of Memphis Language Fair listservs. A total of 15 participants (12 female and 3 male) participated in the study. Our sample included a wide variation in terms of gender, nationality, age, Spanish-speaker status, and years of teaching experience (Table 1). Seven participants identified as native Spanish speakers, six as nonnative Spanish speakers, one as heritage Spanish speaker, and one as both heritage and native Spanish speaker. Their years of experience ranged from one to 32 years. All of the participants were teaching or had taught secondary school level Spanish during the time of the study. They taught Spanish at the high school level in 16 different schools (seven public and six private).

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen et al. 2014; Creswell and Poth 2018) was used to capture and transmit the contextual experiences that (re)shaped teachers' roles and practices in schools. This approach "is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 20). By structuring experiences through storytelling, individuals reflect on and make sense of their professional realities (Chase 2005). Narrative inquiry places participants' narratives at the forefront by providing them an opportunity to discuss their histories and experiences and make meaning of them. Like stories, participants' experiences are structured modes of conveying information (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Moreover, narrative inquiry "enables teachers to make sense of their professional worlds and to make worthwhile changes in themselves and their teaching practices—to develop as teachers (Golombek and Johnson 2004, 309). Through this narrative lens, we examine the experiences of Spanish teachers in the NLS, specifically in rural and urban Tennessee.

We collected data through approximately 30-minute, audio-recorded, semi-structured narrative interviews. Questions were designed to elicit storied accounts, allowing participants to describe key teaching experiences, reflect on their professional identities, and construct meaning around their professional roles. Participants shared specific incidents and challenges that shaped their instructional perspectives. These narratives provided insights into how

Table 1. Participant profiles.[a]

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	National Origin	NS/NNSS/HS*	Years of Experience
Pipo	M	Latino	Colombia	NS	7
Natalia	F	Latina	Colombia	NS	1
Chiquitita	F	Latina	El Salvador	NS	21
Ra	F	White	Lebanon	NNS	6
Cristina	F	Latina	Mexico	NS	12
Cathy	F	White	Peru	NS	4
Sonia	F	White	Venezuela	NS	10
Jewel	F	White	U.K.	NS	25
Mary	F	White	U.S.	NNS	6
Alba	F	White	U.S.	NNS	8
Rosa	F	Latina	U.S.	HS/NS	7
Terelu	F	White	U.S.	NNS	32
Areli	F	Black	U.S.	NNS	8
Daniel	M	White	U.S.	NNS	11
Pedro	M	Latina	U.S.	HS	12

[a]Pseudonyms are used for participants and places

high school Spanish teachers experienced and interpreted their roles, identities, and instructional practices within their sociocultural contexts—aligning with narrative inquiry's emphasis on temporality, social context, and personal meaning-making. Interviews were conducted in Spanish or English, per participants' preferences. At the beginning of each interview, participants self-reported demographic information, including ethnicity, through open-ended questions without predefined categories. Interview questions explored instructors' linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, professional experiences, and self-perceptions: "Tell me about your teaching experiences. How have they shaped you?" "How do you see yourself as a teacher?" The narrative-oriented interviews provided participants opportunities for reflection and connections between experiences and professional identity (Elliott 2005). Data clarification occurred during and after interviews, supplemented by field notes and researcher memos.

Interview recordings and researcher memos were transcribed for analysis. Drawing on a phenomenological perspective—which emphasizes in-depth understanding of individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Smith and Osborn 2015)—analysis was approached as an ongoing, cyclical, and reflexive process (Coffey and Atkinson 1996), with reflective memos produced throughout data collection, transcription, and analysis. The goal was to uncover patterns in how teachers construct and interpret their professional experiences. Comparing participants' narratives helped identify shared experiences and unique variations, ensuring that themes reflected the nuanced realities of Spanish teachers in Tennessee. This inductive approach allowed us to organize the data into salient themes related to micro, meso, and macro-level factors shaping professional identities. Themes were grouped into two main clusters: Teachers' experiences in Tennessee and their (re)alignment of roles and pedagogical goals.

To facilitate meaningful comparisons and deepen our understanding of how contextual factors shaped teacher identity, participants were grouped according to the type of school setting in which they taught: urban private schools, urban public schools, and rural schools. This classification provided insights into how teachers in different environments responded to and navigated anti-immigration and anti-bilingualism discourses. The coding process involved identifying specific themes such as "anti-immigration policies," "monolingualism," and "cultural broker," which were analyzed across macro (societal influences), meso (institutional factors), and micro (teachers' engagement with others) levels. The analysis also highlighted how teachers' agency was shaped by their sociopolitical contexts. For example, urban private school teachers often advocated for bilingualism, whereas those in rural schools faced community resistance when promoting the value of learning another language. These dynamics were reflected in codes such as "promoting bilingualism" and "navigating community opposition." These themes, drawn from participants' narratives, directly addressed our research questions and illuminated how historical and contextual experiences shaped their professional identities and instructional practices.

Our researcher positionality occupied the spaces of insider/outsider and befriender (Sarangi and Candlin 2003). As Latinxs, native Spanish speakers, and Spanish language teachers, we exchanged life histories with participants, claiming insider and befriender status, allowing us to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their experiences. Simultaneously, our roles as researchers positioned us as outsiders, enabling both rapport and analytical distance. We engaged in reflexivity (Berger 2015), critically examining how our positionality may have shaped our interpretations and interactions with participants. While these identities may have influenced how participants shared their narratives, they also fostered open and candid discussions regarding their experiences. Our positionality accounted for the broader sociopolitical and institutional forces shaping participants' experiences, recognizing the 'context of their [participants'] lives in relation to structures of power that constitute their actions' (Madison 2012, 153).

4. Results

In this section, we present the findings of our study organized around our two RQs.

4.1. High school teachers' experiences teaching Spanish in the Tennessee

Participant interviews reveal that their experiences were shaped by their unique contextual realities. To understand how Spanish teachers navigate these contextual realities, we need to consider an interplay of factors taking place at the macro, meso, and micro levels (Figure 1).

At the macro level, our participants are teaching Spanish in the U.S. and, more specifically, in Tennessee, a state in the NLS. As discussed, the U.S. is a country divided on topics such as immigration, diversity, and multiculturalism, and where anti-immigrant rhetoric and attacks against Latinxs and Spanish have become commonplace (Canizales and Vallejo 2021). Such prejudiced values and discourses are represented strongly in Tennessee, a state with restrictive and exclusionary state-level immigrant policies and where negative attitudes towards immigrants prevail (Commins and Wills 2020). These exclusionary ideologies and discourses permeate local belief systems and values, shaping the environments our participants must navigate and influencing their daily activities, both personally and professionally.

Despite having these shared factors at the macro level, teachers' experiences varied widely, something that we attribute to factors arising at the meso level. Two factors emerged as particularly relevant in the narratives at this level, the first one having to do with the local community (the rural vs. urban divide) and the second one with the school (the private and public divide) in which participants taught. The factors at the macro and meso levels interconnect in complex ways influencing how teachers engage with others (e.g., students, parents, other teachers, administrators) in their specific micro contextual realities. Figure 2 below provides a classification of participants according to community and type of school.

4.1.1. Teachers' experiences teaching Spanish in rural Tennessee

Five participants worked in rural Tennessee, four in public high schools and one in a private school. Teachers in rural areas reported that teaching in an environment that generally sustains racist and

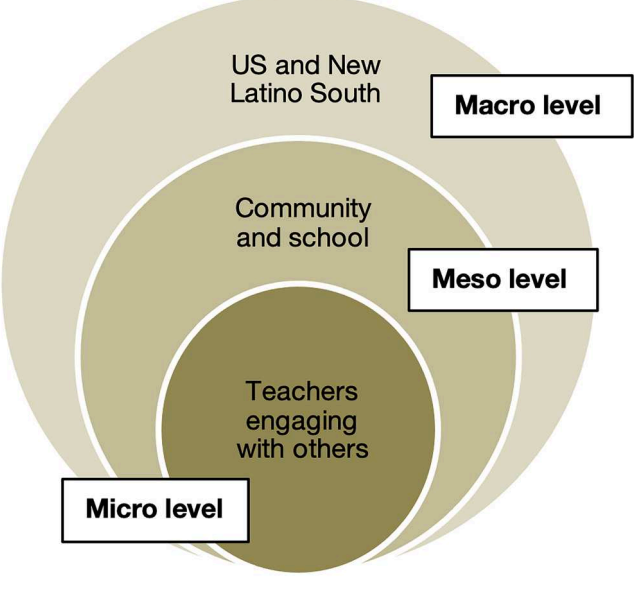

Figure 1. Macro, meso, and micro levels of teachers' contextual realities.

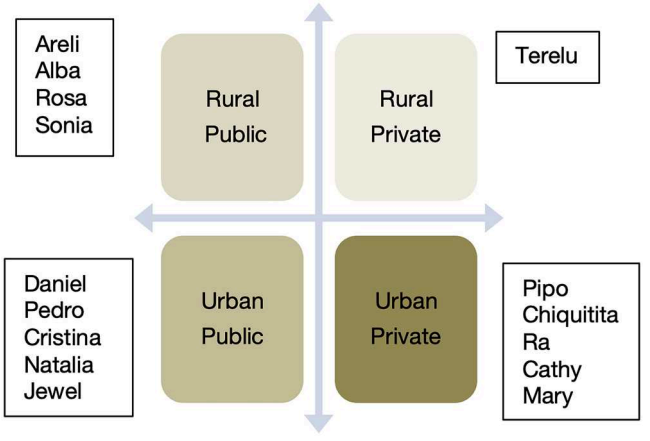

Figure 2. Participant classification according to the community and type of school in which they teach.

hostile views of the Latinx community and languages other than English negatively influenced their professional well-being and the ease with which they could conduct their teaching activities. This environment allowed the proliferation of a multiplicity of problems related to racial tensions, racist attitudes, students' lack of motivation to learn Spanish, parents' lack of support for their children learning Spanish, lack of support for Spanish teachers and, in general, the trivial position of Spanish within the school curriculum. With respect to these issues, Areli, an African American NNS, emphasized the role that politics and racial tension play in her own school and community.

> I think most of them [people in her local community] are Republicans . . . . There is some racial tension . . . if you're a racist person like my students, they all really don't see the importance of learning somebody else's language. They think everybody else should be learning English.

Areli explained how this situation had a negative impact on her own enthusiasm and motivation as a teacher:

> I get inspiration, energy from the students. When they are excited, then that gives me some ideas and I can create different things . . . I haven't had that kind of energy in my classroom for a few years. So, my own creativity has kind of just dwindled.

Mary, a white NNS, discussed her experience teaching in a small town in rural Tennessee. She explained how she tried to expose the local White community to Latinx culture and the benefits of learning Spanish by organizing cultural events at her school and even in her own home (i.e., celebrating Latinx festivities, cooking food from Spanish-speaking countries, etc.) and the resulting sense of discouragement when these attempts failed to change the community's perceptions.

> When I was in X-town . . . a very small town, mainly White population. Everyone just spoke English, so they didn't get the benefit, they said 'Why would I want to learn Spanish? Because everyone speaks English.' . . . . I was a little discouraged.

Similarly, Rosa, a Latinx HS, reported on students' lack of motivation, parents' lack of support and how these impacted her practice and her mindset. Nevertheless, she affirmed it was essential to maintain a positive attitude in the midst of these adverse circumstances.

> It's something that impacts our teaching because we have to fight against that negative viewpoint and try to encourage our students to learn. When they go home and their parents are like, 'What? You are doing Spanish homework? You don't need to worry about that stuff,' it makes it a little bit harder for us. So, it does have a little bit of negative impact, but we just try to stay positive, and try to stay encouraging, and try to teach the kids that, 'Hey, it's not just about learning another language. It is also about opening doors for you in the future. It's about strengthening your brain and that kind of thing.

She also commented on the shortage of teaching resources:

> None of us have a projector for our classroom . . . . [or] any technology . . . . We have one computer for the entire classroom . . . . I bought my own TV to bring into the classroom, so that I could show videos, and project PowerPoints. So, we feel like even though our school is supportive and wants us to have a successful language class, we are the lowest priority.

Terelu (white, NNS), the only participant teaching in a private high school in a rural area, highlighted how her school fostered respect and inclusion despite the surrounding community's intolerance. While rural teachers described an unwelcoming environment, her Christian school operated as a bubble, shielding students and staff from these views. Its ethos directly opposed the local community's values, creating a supportive environment that shaped her positive teaching experience.

> At school, I have full support. As a Christian school . . . . [it] wants us to promote seeing people as individuals, as valuable. So, my school has been wonderful. Now, my community is like the rest of the United States. They struggle with immigration, black and white issues, with Hispanics.

In sum, participants' narratives revealed how the antagonism toward multilingualism and racist attitudes held by students, parents, and the community in rural settings intersected with and mirrored the larger political discourses regarding monolingualism and exclusionary ideologies (May 2014). This, in turn, affected teachers' motivation and job satisfaction. Unlike those in public high schools, our only private school participant felt protected from these issues due to institutional support and a tolerant school environment—highlighting the crucial role of educational institutions in countering racism and bigotry.

4.1.2. Teachers' experiences teaching Spanish in urban Tennessee

Ten participants taught in Memphis, a major city in Tennessee, allowing us to compare the constraints and affordances of urban and rural contexts. Five of these participants taught in public schools and five in private ones. In general, both groups reported facing fewer challenges than their rural counterparts, which contributed to higher motivation and a stronger sense of professional purpose.

Participants' narratives revealed that, in private schools, there was a positive attitude towards languages which was seen not only at the level of school administration but also reflected in students' motivations to learn the language and the way parents supported their children's language learning efforts. Cathy, a Latinx NS, felt supported by her school, making her job more enjoyable.

> I work in an environment where foreign language is given that space of importance and that makes my job easier, because the students come with the mindset that they need it [Spanish] in life—they need it for college. And that allows me to just focus how I'm going to teach the material since I don't have students that are fighting it per se . . . As far as the school community, I would say that being bilingual is respected and encouraged . . . . And that definitely changes the way you're going to be teaching.

Participants teaching in public schools generally reported positive experiences at their institutions. For instance, Pedro, a Latinx HS, highlighted the positive attitudes towards Spanish and the Latinx community at his school, which had markedly different demographics from Cathy's private school.

> The area where my school is located is in an area where there is a large Latino population. Even though my students are majority African American, they see people that don't look like them. They see people who look stereotypically 'Latino'. They see the signs on the shops around the area. They hear Spanish in their area, in grocery stores, or in the drugstores . . . . For my students, it's just another part of life . . . . they're hearing and seeing people interacting in another language, and so they're like 'huh, I want to know what they're saying.' In my situation, there's a positive environment for learning languages.

Cristina, a Latinx NS, also described her public high school as a supportive setting for multilingualism although she noticed different levels of motivation coming from multilingual and monolingual parents.

> In my school, they have always supported that [bilingualism]. The administration supports that. However, kids whose parents don't speak another language, those parents advise them to just take the requirements, while other parents see the usefulness of studying a language.

Unlike their rural counterparts, teachers in urban settings like Memphis reported more positive experiences and felt supported by their institutions, whether private or public. This may stem from demographic shifts that have made Tennessee's urban areas, including Memphis, more diverse (Sharma 2018).

4.2. Breaking down the wall: Teachers' realignment of roles and pedagogical goals

Interviews indicated that teachers' experiences in Tennessee were heavily influenced not only by their motivation and sense of professional satisfaction but also their own perception of themselves as teachers as well as the goals they set for their students and how they tried to reach those goals. Teachers adopted roles that went beyond the traditional roles associated with Spanish teachers (i.e., instructor of language and culture, curriculum implementer, etc.) by consciously functioning as role models, cultural brokers and advocates for Latinx students and their families (Kubanyiva and Crookes 2016).

In the following quote, Rosa explained how she saw herself as a role model and how this role extended beyond her classroom as she tried to set a positive example for her community in rural Tennessee. She saw herself as the embodiment of a bilingual individual who carried the responsibility of normalizing and demystifying what it meant to be bilingual. In doing so, she adopted a role that challenged the cultural biases against Latinxs.

> I just try to do the best I can to give a positive impression of how bilingualism impacted my life and how it could impact their [students'] life. I try to give that positive impression not only to the students, but to the parents, and to the community. I try to be active in the community and with the students because I think they need to see that it [bilingualism] is a good thing, it's not something to be afraid of. And to parents to see that just because you can speak another language, it doesn't make you a three-eyed alien.

Chiquitita, a Latinx NS, like Rosa, saw herself as more than a teacher and openly positioned herself as an advocate for Latinx students and their families. She shared an incident she experienced in her previous job and how she tried to combat the injustices she saw in a system that did not have the needs of Latinx students in mind by standing up for them and their families herself.

> There were lots of Hispanic students and they identified with me because I was the only one who paid attention to them. I was the one who translated the directions and, if the kids were in trouble, I helped the parents. But there was a History teacher who gave Hispanic kids the test in English and these kids were learning English at the same time as they learned the content of the class. I told him: 'If you need help, send me the student and I can translate the exam.' And he said: 'If they are in the U.S., they need to know English'. So, also the adults were negative and there you see the fact that they have never learned a foreign language and they don't have empathy for those who are trying to learn.

One common thread among our participants was their sense of responsibility to fairly represent Spanish-speaking cultures and challenge the stereotypes often associated with them. In doing so, our participants positioned themselves as cultural brokers or mediators. Pipo, a Latinx NS, reported:

> My objective is to break stereotypes, to remove the blindfold off their eyes that doesn't allow them to see that there are 21 countries that speak Spanish and 21 different cultures, 21 countries that share traditions but that also have traditions independent from each other.

Like Pipo, Natalia, another Latinx NS, felt committed to representing her culture positively to challenge preconceived notions her students may have associated with her country.

> I love to show my culture, where I come from, because you have the bad stereotypes in Colombia. I really want to change their mentality, that we're not drug dealers and whatever you see on TV. We're more than that.

Overall, teachers' goals for their students revolved around wanting to foster an open mind in students by breaking cultural stereotypes and encouraging students to be able to interact with the local Latinx community. Teachers' goals moved away from more traditional goals such as wanting students to use the language in countries where the target language is spoken (whether on vacation or as part of study abroad trips). Instead, participants' goals focused on helping students discover the Latinx community in Memphis and being able to approach this community with respect. These goals, as seen in the following statements, were heavily influenced by Tennessee's demographic changes over recent decades, notably the significant increase in Latinx immigrants.

Daniel, a white NNS at a predominantly African American school, explained how he redefined his classroom goals to fit his school's demographics, focusing on what he considered was most valuable for his students. He considered grammar less relevant, keeping it in the background while emphasizing cultural aspects to help students connect with Spanish speakers both locally and abroad. Daniel reported:

> [Students] have very low literacy rates in English, so I don't stress out much about grammar … I talk a lot about the commonalities between Spanish-speaking cultures and African American cultures, and I really focus on Afro-Latinos. I am on a personal crusade to change the perception of what a Spanish speaker is in the United States . . . . [and] to instruct that there are Spanish speakers of every background and that they are people that look just like them [students] that speak Spanish . . . . We have a growing population of Hispanic people. And, although students may live in neighbourhoods close to Spanish-speaking people, they never interact with them. So, I really try to bridge the cultural gap versus stressing out about grammatical perfection.

Pedro also alluded to the need to encourage students to immerse themselves in the local Latinx community as he pointed again to the demographic changes experienced in Memphis: "I wanted my students to be able to go out and have a conversation with anyone in the street. Seeing how the face of Memphis has changed over the last 10 years, that's really helped my social push." This social push to which Pedro referred to was exactly the type of motivation we see in other teachers, a drive that distances them from purely linguistic goals and moves them to infuse the teaching of Spanish with a social purpose (Nieto 2010) that goes beyond the language *per se* and focuses on helping students become more familiar with and more respectful of the local Latinx community.

Chiquitita also embedded social purpose into her teaching. In her case, this was greatly influenced by her own experiences as a Latinx living in the NLS. She described some painful personal encounters, including an uncomfortable experience during a car accident.

> I have lived in the U.S. for 40 years and people still think I am illegal because I am from Latin America. I had a car accident, and I asked the other driver for his documents and he said: 'Why do you want them if you don't have legal documents?'

These racist encounters led Chiquitita to adopt a social justice approach to teaching Spanish, emphasizing the importance of raising her students' awareness of critical sociopolitical issues.

> I teach a class called Social and Political Issues and we see movies that have to do with immigration . . . I am trying to raise awareness that they [students] are privileged, and that people want to come to the U.S. not to steal someone else's job but to improve their family's lives.

Several participants discussed how they tried to navigate controversial topics such as immigration and racism in the classroom. Teachers were conscious that these topics were particularly challenging since their own views on those issues frequently clashed with those of the community in which they taught. Terelu explained how she engaged students with issues related to immigration and racism in an effort to create a more tolerant community.

> I am trying to work against what the community [believes], their belief system. In fact, the novel that we're working on right now . . . . the girl in the novel goes as an exchange student to the United States and this mean girl keeps calling her a Mexican, even though she's from Guatemala. That's what we're talking about now. We're talking about how do you talk to other people? Do you assume everyone that has dark skin is

> Mexican? We've talked about some of these issues as they come up and I think that's really important because I'm now on a mission to change what's going on in our community with racism and prejudice.

Similar to Terelu, Alba, a white NNS, discussed the issue of handling controversial issues in class. However, in her case, she felt the need to exercise caution when discussing these topics in order to prevent conflict with students' families.

> There's a conflict [between my views and the community's]. Most people here are conservative, you know "Build the Wall". In class, if we're talking about a timely topic, like immigration or the wall, then I'm definitely going to make sure that the students have the opportunity to see more than just one person's perspective. But I have to be really careful not to align myself with beliefs that contradict what their family is teaching them . . . . I can disagree with their parents, but it's not my job to tell them what to think . . . . it's my job to help them think.

Alba's heightened caution can be attributed to the fact that, although she and Terelu taught in a rural area, Alba taught in a public school. She may have felt less protected than Terelu who taught in a private institution which provided a very supportive environment for the teaching of languages.

This section highlights how participants' self-perceptions as teachers and their pedagogical practices were shaped by their experiences in both their shared contexts of the U.S. and Tennessee, a state within the NLS, as well as their unique individual realities. Teachers were highly committed to debunking myths about Spanish-speaking people and their cultures, striving to positively influence their communities by fostering tolerance in their students. They redefined their classroom goals, shifting focus from purely linguistic to social and cultural aspects, and facilitated discussions on contentious topics like immigration, racism, and privilege. In doing so, they embraced roles as advocates and role models, encouraging students to engage with the local Latinx community

5. Discussion

This study examined Spanish high school teachers' experiences in rural and urban Tennessee, and explored how those experiences shaped their professional identities and pedagogies. Using an ecological approach to teacher agency (Priestly et al. 2015), we analyzed participants' narratives through the lens of ecological factors in their realities, emphasizing how the interplay of macro, meso, and micro levels (Douglas Fir Group 2016) influenced their identity construction and pedagogical decisions. Participants taught Spanish in the U.S., specifically in Tennessee, a state in the NLS (macro). In this context, Spanish is often associated with negative stereotypes, as many view it as a low-prestige language tied to debates around illegal immigration (Torres 2019). These associations may be stronger in an area like Tennessee, where hostile attitudes towards immigrants, their languages and their cultures are more widespread than in other areas of the U.S. Despite participants having these contexts in common, we still found diverse experiences that ranged from very positive to very challenging. These different experiences are the byproduct of a double divide at the meso level —the rural-urban divide (community) and the public-private divide (school)— that directly affects teachers' daily experiences inside and outside of the classroom, specifically, how they engage with students, parents, other teachers, and administrators at the micro level.

Participants in rural settings experienced more challenges, navigating negative attitudes from students, parents, and the local community, including apathy towards Spanish and open hostility and racism. Being in this position forced them to constantly justify the value of studying Spanish while managing their professional duties with minimal support and resources. The experiences of teachers in public high schools in the urban areas, like Memphis, did not mirror the experiences of those in rural ones as they reported that the teaching of Spanish was supported by their institutions and encouraged due to the growing Latinx population. However, it's important to note that Memphis has unique sociodemographic characteristics and a history linked to racial tensions (Rushing 2009). The city's largest group is African American (62.9%) followed by White (25%) and Hispanic (10.2%) (U.S. Census 2024). Thus, teachers' experiences in Memphis are shaped by the

city's specific demographics, and these experiences may not be replicated in other Tennessee cities with different demographic profiles and histories. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to see that a generally positive environment for the study of Spanish language and culture was sustained in Memphis high schools.

With respect to school type, private schools in both rural and urban areas were described as institutions where foreign language study was valued, supported by the administration, and seen as an asset by students and their parents. In principle, this portrayal presents private schools as more progressive, tolerant, and welcoming institutions. While this may be true to some extent, participants did not delve into the specific ideological stance that these institutions represented. Generally, private schools embody *elite multilingualism*—a multilingualism linked to power and privilege that commodifies languages for social mobility. This form of multilingualism can reinforce social inequalities by devaluing certain languages or varieties, such as heritage Spanish (De Costa 2019). Although traces of elite multilingualism emerge in participants' narratives—particularly in the emphasis on language as a tool for career advancement—some teachers, like Chiquitita, counter this perspective. They promote multilingualism through a social justice lens, highlighting the experiences of underprivileged immigrants, encouraging students to recognize their own privilege, examining injustices, and fostering activism.

Teachers in rural public high schools were particularly vulnerable as their teaching environment took an emotional toll that greatly influenced their motivation and sense of professional fulfilment. While some teachers like Rosa tried to stay positive amid these difficult circumstances, others like Areli struggled to find meaning in a profession that used to be fulfilling for them. We can infer that these teachers are at a higher risk of abandoning the profession, exacerbating the generalized problem of language teacher retention (Acheson et al. 2016).

Teachers' experiences in Tennessee also shaped their perceptions of their roles, influencing their pedagogical practices. They positioned themselves as role models, cultural brokers and advocates for Latinx students and their families, taking on responsibilities beyond their designated teaching duties (Guerra and Carrillo Rodriguez 2023). Voluntarily assuming these roles out of a sense of duty, teachers sought to represent Spanish-speaking cultures and local Latinx communities positively, challenging stereotypes in an effort to foster empathy, tolerance, and openness among their students and within their communities (Okraski and Madison 2020). Their goals for their students and the way they tried to achieve these goals was intrinsically linked to this sense of cultural responsibility felt by our participants. These goals went beyond purely linguistic ones. Instead, participants embodied different levels of social justice teaching by "challeng[ing], confront[ing], and disrupt[ing] misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on social and human differences" (Nieto 2010, 46). They achieved this by designing lessons centered on cultural issues and addressing complex topics they deemed essential for discussion, such as privilege, race and immigration despite the fact that these discussions at times provoked tension, especially in rural areas. Their teaching extended beyond the classroom as they encouraged students to view Spanish-speaking cultures not as foreign or exotic, but as integral to their daily lives.

The present study contributes to understanding the challenges and tensions that foreign language teachers face both in and beyond the classroom, highlighting how they navigate these difficulties and, in turn, (re)define their roles and professional identities. Despite a broader climate of rejection toward immigrants and prevailing monolingual ideologies at the national and state levels, the environment within schools and local communities significantly shaped teachers' experiences, satisfaction and pedagogical approaches. Teachers in schools and communities that valued multilingualism and multiculturalism reported more positive experiences, greater motivation and a stronger sense of professional fulfilment. This underscores the crucial role of the learning environment in teacher retention (Monreal 2021), a factor particularly relevant for teachers of color (Cochran-Smith et al. 2011). What is clear is that participants, irrespective of context, exerted agency to resist and challenge stereotypes, nurture positive attitudes towards multilingualism, and build more tolerant communities.

6. Conclusion

Our research highlights the need to understand how language teachers navigate sociopolitical hostility in schools. Specifically, we examined how teachers construct professional identities and exercise agency within micro, meso, and macro-level influences. By exploring these complex interactions, we revealed how constraints shape teachers' experiences, decision-making, and pedagogy. Since teachers do not have equal access to all courses of action (Dunn et al. 2019), identifying these limitations can inform strategies to equip them for challenging environments. We propose both short- and long-term initiatives to support teachers in navigating sociopolitical barriers. In the short term, policy awareness guides can help teachers understand local and state policies affecting immigrant students and their families, while teacher-led workshops can provide a space for peer collaboration on strategies to counter anti-immigrant discourse and integrate sociopolitical issues into instruction. Long-term strategies require collaboration among educators, researchers, policymakers, and communities. These include integrating sociopolitical training into teacher preparation programs, fostering school-community partnerships to create shared learning spaces, and conducting longitudinal research to assess how teachers' awareness of policy contexts influences student outcomes and school climates over time. While our study draws from a small, predominantly urban sample, it offers valuable insight into how Spanish teachers navigate sociopolitical hostility in their schools and communities. Ultimately, these findings underscore the urgent need for systemic support and professional development initiatives that equip language teachers to resist exclusionary discourses and advocate for their students. Future research should expand this work to deepen our understanding of teacher agency and resilience in increasingly hostile environments.

Ethics statement

This study did not require ethical approval as it did not involve sensitive personal data or procedures that posed ethical risks to participants.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

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