



## Perspectives of American Teachers in and from the U.S. Territories

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**Abstract:** GeoCivics, a U.S. Department of Education grant-funded teacher professional development project, was designed using Yosso’s community cultural wealth framework (2005) and the TEMPL framework (Teaching Emergent Multilinguals: Professional Development and Leadership) (Guerrero & Jiménez-Silva, 2025). GeoCivics aimed to “move beyond a single story” to tell the “many stories” (Adichie, 2009) of teachers in America through a lens that honors teachers’ expertise and voices. In the context of place-based professional development (PD) held in U.S. territories, this study explored how personal and collective narratives from five teachers across the territories illuminated the profound influence of race, language, and identity on the educational experiences of K-12 educators. Using pláticas methodology (Jiménez-Silva & Lopez, 2024), this study documented how these PD experiences contributed to the formation of personal,

cultural, linguistic, and leadership identities. In addition, this research traced how these experiences were transferred to action in their classrooms through civic engagement with their students. Findings highlight the critical importance of inclusive, identity-affirming PD that values educators' voices and experiences. The study also examined connections between teacher development, civic education, and teacher retention. Researchers and teachers, as co-authors, reflect on their own journeys, illustrating how these PD experiences have shaped their professional and personal identities and deepened their commitment to equity and justice in education.

Keywords: Civic engagement, teacher professional development, U.S. Territories education, place-based learning, teacher leadership

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## Introduction

GeoCivics, a U.S. Department of Education grant-funded teacher professional development project, was designed using Yosso's community cultural wealth framework (2005) and the TEMPL framework (Teaching Emergent Multilinguals: Professional Development and Leadership) (Guerrero & Jiménez-Silva, 2025). GeoCivics aimed to 'move beyond a single story' to tell the "many stories" (Adichie, 2009) of teachers in America through a lens that honors teachers' expertise and voices. In the context of place-based professional development (PD) held in U.S. territories, this study explored how personal and collective narratives from five teachers across the territories illuminated the profound influence of race, language, and identity on the educational experiences of K-12 educators. Using pláticas methodology (Jiménez-Silva & López, 2024), this study documented how these PD experiences contributed to the formation of personal, cultural, linguistic, and leadership identities. In addition, this research traced how the educational experiences of the educators were transferred to action in their classrooms through civic engagement with their students. Findings highlight the critical importance of inclusive, identity-affirming PD that values educators' voices and experiences. The study also examined connections between teacher development, civic education, and teacher retention. Researchers and teachers, as co-authors, reflect on their own journeys, illustrating how these PD experiences have shaped their professional and personal identities and deepened their commitment to equity and justice in education.

As a nation, there are numerous misconceptions about the citizens of U.S. Territories, their citizenship status, and their contributions to the United States (Lin, 2022). The GeoCivics project integrated place-based learning in teacher professional development to build content knowledge on the U.S. Territories in which minimal information is available and taught in K-12 classrooms across the country. Another focus was to build on and collectively share the U.S. Territory educators' cultural and community knowledge by rooting teachers' learning in the local environment. Teachers from nine states and across five U.S. Territories (Guam, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Mariana Islands) participated in this

professional development opportunity. They brought together their collective knowledge to apply a critical lens to the history of the United States and U.S. Territories, regions. In addition, they investigated the physical and cultural geography of the places visited. In tandem with these goals, they also explored ways to embed civic action into teaching and learning in their classrooms. The PD promoted reflective practice, social justice, and sustainability in education by connecting teaching to lived experiences and community challenges. As education systems increasingly seek meaningful, equity-focused PD models, place-based approaches offer an effective and meaningful method for cultivating responsive, empowered, and place-conscious educators, and GeoCivics designed the PD around these key goals.

### **U.S. Territories Educational Contexts**

Understanding the unique histories and educational contexts of U.S. Territories is critical to this study because these regions remain largely invisible in national K–12 curricula and public discourse. Persistent misconceptions about the citizenship status and contributions of territorial residents perpetuate inequities in representation, resources, and civic education. By situating the GeoCivics professional development within the specific sociopolitical and educational landscapes of Guam, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands, this paper highlights the urgent need for place-based, equity-focused teacher learning that affirms local knowledge and challenges dominant narratives about U.S. Territories.

#### **Guam**

According to a recent report by the Guam Daily News, Guam's public school student population, which exceeded 30,000 a decade ago, has continued to decline, reaching 25,648 students enrolled in the 2022–2023 school year (Guam Daily News, 2023). Despite the drop in enrollment, the high school graduation rate has reached a historic high of 90.7%, a significant increase from 68% in the school year 2012–2013. The Guam Department of Education (GDOE), which manages a single, centralized public school system, is responsible for 24 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 6 high schools (GDOE, n.d.). Guam's education system broadly follows U.S. mainland norms, including curriculum structure and language of instruction (Education system in Guam, n.d.). The system continues to face several challenges. The decline in public school enrollment is partly attributed to a shift toward charter and private schooling options and families leaving the island. Moreover, ongoing budget constraints raise concerns about the sustainability and quality of public education services.

#### **American Samoa**

The American Samoa Department of Education (ASDOE) has administered public education in the territory since 1914, overseeing policies and programs aligned with both local needs and U.S. educational standards. As of 2022, the territory operated 29 public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Education is mandatory and free for all children aged 6 to 18 (StateUniversity.com, n.d.a). The focus of American Samoan education is "education for export," since the majority of young people relocate to the United States, and they wish to prepare their students for life outside of the island (StateUniversity.com, n.d.a). According to the 2020 U.S. Census, American Samoa had a total population of approximately

49,710, with 36.7% under the age of 18. Of residents aged 3 and older, 84.6% were enrolled in K–12 education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). However, public school enrollment has experienced a decline, from 10,448 students in 2019 to 10,246 in 2020, driven by migration, economic hardship, and a shortage of locally trained teachers (NCES, 2024). The territory is also struggling with aging school infrastructure in need of modernization (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2022).

### **Puerto Rico**

The Department of Education of Puerto Rico (Departamento de Educación de Puerto Rico), established in 1900, oversees public education on the island. Although its structure mirrors that of the U.S. system—offering education from kindergarten through 12th grade—Puerto Rico’s schools have faced persistent challenges, including economic constraints, natural disasters, and political shifts. Puerto Rican schools follow U.S. curriculum but with a heavier emphasis on Puerto Rican history and bilingual education (Ley de Registro y Licenciamiento de Instituciones de Educación, 2018). Between 2006 and 2021, the student population declined dramatically from 550,000 to approximately 276,000, primarily due to disasters, administrative challenges, and migration (Cardoza, 2023). Academic proficiency remains critically low, with nearly 0% of 4th and 8th graders demonstrating proficiency in mathematics in 2022 (Cardoza, 2023). Infrastructure deficits and disparities in remote learning access further worsened educational outcomes, especially following Hurricane Maria (Cardoza, 2023). More recently, in May 2023, Puerto Rico launched the Initiative for Decentralization of Education and Autonomy of Regions (IDEAR), which seeks to decentralize authority from the Department of Education and grant greater autonomy to regional entities to improve educational outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Despite these efforts, enrollment figures continue to decline. In fall 2023, approximately 241,000 students were enrolled in public K–12 schools—a drop of over 18% compared to fall 2019, when enrollment was 292,500 (the pre-pandemic baseline).

### **U.S. Virgin Islands**

The Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) acts as both the State Education Agency (SEA) and Local Education Agency (LEA), led by Commissioner Dionne Wells Hedrington, overseeing two districts: St. Thomas–St. John and St. (Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands, 2024). The St. Thomas/St. John District has two (2) high schools, seven (7) elementary schools, one (1) middle school, two (2) elementary-K8 schools, and two (2) alternative schools. The St. Croix District has two (2) high schools, one (1) junior high school, one (1) vocational school, three (3) elementary/junior schools, and four (4) elementary schools. There are 857 teachers employed in the territory, and there are currently 10,312 students enrolled in the USVI Public School system for the 2023-2024 school year. In Virgin Islands Code tit. 17, § 41 (2019), it states that the Virgin Islands Board of Education will prescribe curriculum and requirements for completing high school. Both curriculum and graduation requirements will be no less than that required by accrediting groups in the United States. In addition, all students in the Virgin Islands will be instructed in the history of the Virgin Islands and basic Caribbean history and will be provided a Virgin Islands cultural curriculum. Issues such as funding, infrastructure, and teacher retention are ongoing concerns (USVI News, n.d.). In 2023, St. Croix

teachers staged walkouts, citing unsafe and sweltering conditions, lack of drinkable water, mold, leaking ceilings, and no air conditioning (Broken Chalk, 2023).

### **Northern Mariana Islands**

The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Public School System (CNMI PSS, n.d.), established in 1977, serves as both a state and local education agency, supported by a combination of local and federal funding sources. As of the 2025 school year, the CNMI PSS operates 35 public schools, serving approximately 9,217 students, with a student–teacher ratio of 17:1 (Public School Review, 2025). The curriculum follows the U.S. K–12 educational model and utilizes the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT9), to assess student performance (StateUniversity.com, n.d.b). Curriculum and instruction efforts are centralized under CNMI PSS's Office of Curriculum and Instruction, which ensures alignment with U.S. standards while incorporating local context to meet student needs (CNMI PSS, n.d.). Current issues facing the education system in the Northern Mariana Islands include underfunding which has resulted in low teacher pay, difficulty with teacher recruitment, limited resources, and ongoing budget cuts (Lakatos, 2025). Furthermore, there are tensions regarding curriculum relevance, focused on conversations on how much emphasis should be placed on Indigenous history and culture in contrast to mainland standards (Misco, 2017).

## **Literature Review**

### **Professional Development for Teachers**

Guerrero and Jiménez-Silva (2025) developed a comprehensive teacher professional development (PD) framework (Teaching Emergent Multilinguals Professional Development and Leadership or TEMPL) after analyzing a series of PDs designed to address the academic needs of emergent multilinguals (EMs). Utilizing a professional learning communities (PLC) model (DuFour & Eaker, 2006), the Arizona Geographic Alliance has been conducting summer academies for the past thirty years to train teachers to integrate geography across the curriculum (Moll, 2023). These academies focused on increasing content knowledge, cross-curricular pedagogical practices, and teacher leadership development across a five-day academy that brings in various content and pedagogical experts through a hands-on teacher PD. As a result of Arizona's restrictions on access to bilingual education for emergent bilingual students, the academies often brought in professors from the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers' College who have expertise in language acquisition to increase knowledge and skills in teaching EMs. One of the most recent initiatives aimed to integrate Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and Social Studies (STEMSS) content with strategies for improving academic vocabulary among EMs (Guerrero & Jimenez-Silva, 2022). This initiative focused on preparing educators to use technology and specialized strategies to better support these students academically. The initiative's goals were threefold: to develop effective tools and strategies for improving academic vocabulary, to professionally develop teachers in these methods, and to engage parents in supporting language development at home. Through the development of integrated lessons and the delivery of PD to more than 120 in-services, this initiative aimed to create a sustainable model for supporting EMs.

Through the systematic review of the original STEMSS project (2017-2023) as part of a U.S. Department of Education National Professional Development (NPD) grant, findings from the research demonstrated the importance of addressing the multifaceted needs of teachers working with EMs. The project's focus on teacher agency, collaboration, and ongoing support helped educators develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to support their students' academic and linguistic development. Furthermore, the creation of a network of teacher leaders ensured that the program's impact extended beyond individual classrooms, fostering a community of practice dedicated to improving education for multilingual learners across the state. The program's success highlighted the importance of professional development that values teachers as professionals, acknowledges their expertise, and provides them with the tools and support they need to effectively teach diverse learners. The STEMSS project guided the development of the more recent GeoCivics NPD project (2021-2024), in which place-based learning and leadership development were integrated into teacher PD using the TEMPL framework (Guerrero & Jiménez-Silva, 2025).

### **Place-Based Learning**

Place-based learning (PBL) has gained traction in recent years as a powerful approach to education that connects learning to local environments, cultures, and communities (Arc et al., 2024). In the context of teacher professional development, PBL allows educators to engage deeply with the local context, making curriculum and instruction more relevant and meaningful (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Through this approach, teachers become co-learners and community investigators, often engaging in interdisciplinary, experiential learning that is directly applicable to their classrooms. Lieberman and Hoody (1998) found that PBL can increase teacher motivation, creativity, and commitment by fostering stronger connections between school, community, and environment.

Research shows that place-based PD not only supports content knowledge growth but also enhances pedagogical skills and self-efficacy. For instance, Powers (2004) reported that teachers participating in place-based PD experienced improved instructional practices and greater confidence in using their local community and environment as teaching tools. These programs often emphasize field-based experiences, collaboration with local organizations, and community-driven problem-solving, allowing teachers to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy and authentic inquiry into their practice (Sobel, 2004, 2012). Teachers become more likely to create lessons that are student-centered and grounded in their students' lived experiences, aligning well with principles of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010).

Place-based PD also addresses equity by highlighting the assets and challenges within specific communities, particularly in underserved or rural areas (Evans & Sanchez, 2024). The integration of local knowledge and student identities into professional learning encourages educators to recognize the diverse funds of knowledge students bring to the classroom (St. Clair & McNulty, 2021). In this way, PBL fosters a more inclusive teaching approach, especially critical for supporting EMs and historically marginalized populations. Moreover, PBL helps shift teachers' roles from passive recipients of top-down mandates to empowered agents of change who collaborate with students, families, and local stakeholders to enrich the learning environment (Brown et al., 2021; Theobald & Curtiss, 2000).

Effective place-based teacher PD includes sustained, collaborative learning experiences that are situated in real-world settings (Yemini et al., 2025). Desimone and Garet (2015)

emphasize that effective PD must be content-focused, incorporate active learning, be sustained over time, and involve collective participation—all characteristics that align closely with high-quality PBL initiatives. Civic action projects (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020) are projects or problem-based learning approaches for civics education that provide an opportunity for students to apply what they learn in the classroom to the real world while making an impact on issues that matter to them. Examples of the PBL initiatives designed by the teachers during the PD included collecting stories from the elderly in the community about gardening and growing plants that have historical uses within the culture, advocating for local safety concerns at city board meetings, and creating posters to promote recycling on school campuses, to name a few (GeoCivics, 2025; Civic Action Project, 2025). When grounded in strong theoretical frameworks such as experiential learning (Dewey, 1938) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), place-based PD helps teachers not only refine their teaching strategies but also develop a deeper understanding of the socio-political and ecological contexts in which they work.

Teachers from U.S. Territories offer critical, yet often overlooked, perspectives on education, democracy, and equity in the United States. Despite their full contributions to the nation, territorial communities are frequently marginalized in federal policymaking, public discourse, and curricular representation. Educators in these regions navigate unique sociopolitical conditions shaped by colonial histories, linguistic diversity, geographic isolation, and systemic underfunding. Their lived experiences provide essential insights into how national policies and dominant narratives impact local schools, students, and communities. Highlighting these teachers' voices disrupts longstanding silences, challenges misconceptions about territorial citizenship and identity, and brings to light innovative, place-based pedagogies that address the civic and cultural needs of their learners. By centering their expertise, this study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of American education that values the knowledge and leadership of teachers working in historically marginalized U.S. regions.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### **TEMPL Theoretical Framework**

The GeoCivics PD foundation drew from the TEMPL (Teaching Emergent Multilinguals Professional development and Leadership) Theoretical Framework (Guerrero & Jiménez-Silva, 2025). This model builds on four research-based pillars that collectively support educators in effectively teaching Emergent Multilinguals (EMs). Pillar 1 emphasizes building teachers' content knowledge alongside language development, encouraging teachers to see themselves as both content and language instructors which is important especially in states like Arizona that have limited K-12 bilingual education opportunities. This approach is grounded in adult learning, situated learning, and cognitive apprenticeship theories, supported by language acquisition frameworks such as Stanford's 6 Principles (2013) and Lucas & Villegas' linguistically responsive teaching (2011). Pillar 2 moves from knowledge acquisition to the development of pedagogical skills, integrating strategies like scaffolding, culturally responsive teaching, and formative assessment. Drawing on theories like Cognitive Load (Sweller, 2011), Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1956), and Constructivism (Webster-Wright, 2010), it provides hands-on, reflective PD that connects theory to practice and supports diverse student needs.

Pillar 3 focuses on fostering self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) by helping teachers develop their beliefs in their capacity to succeed in instructing linguistically and culturally diverse students. Self-efficacy has been linked to teacher effectiveness in numerous studies as documented by Hussain & Khan (2022) in their systematic literature review on the self-efficacy on teachers. This includes supporting teachers in applying culturally responsive pedagogy (Darling Hammond, 2015), differentiated instruction (Tomlinson 2017), universal design for learning (Rose, 2000), and experiential learning (Meyer & Rose, 2014)—all essential for overcoming political and systemic barriers to equity (Guerrero & Jiménez-Silva, 2025). Pillar 4 aims to develop teachers as leaders who advocate for EMs, mentor peers, and engage in shared decision-making. By incorporating leadership theories such as distributed, transformational, and social justice leadership, the framework promotes teacher agency and system-wide change. Through continuous coaching, mentoring, and reflective practice, TEMPL equips educators to lead inclusive, responsive, and equitable classrooms and schools.

### **Critical Theory in Education**

Critical Theory offers a lens for examining how power, privilege, and systemic inequities shape educational structures, policies, and practices. Critical Theory challenges the assumption that education is a neutral process, instead recognizing schools as sites where dominant ideologies are reproduced or contested (Giroux, 2023; Kellner & Gennaro, 2022). In the context of U.S. territories, where teachers and students navigate layered histories of colonization, racialization, and political marginalization, Critical Theory provides tools to interrogate how institutional decisions—from curricular mandates to language policies—sustain or disrupt inequitable power relations. By foregrounding educators’ lived experiences, this framework enables an analysis of how teachers resist deficit narratives, advocate for civic engagement, and center cultural identity in their pedagogy. It positions teachers not merely as implementers of policy but as critical actors capable of transforming educational spaces into sites of social justice and liberation (Freire, 1970; Butera et al., 2021).

### **Integrating Critical Theory and TEMPL**

The TEMPL (Teaching Emergent Multilinguals Professional development and Leadership) framework aligns closely with Critical Theory by challenging the structural inequities and dominant ideologies that shape educational opportunities for emergent multilinguals. Critical Theory emphasizes examining how power dynamics and systemic barriers impact both teaching and learning (Giroux, 2023). These systemic barriers include restrictive language policies, standardized curricula, and deficit perspectives on multilingual learners. Within TEMPL, this perspective undergirds each of its four pillars. Pillar 1 focuses on building teachers’ dual expertise in content and language instruction and situates this work as not just a pedagogical aim but a critical stance against policies that silo or devalue multilingualism. Pillar 2’s focus on culturally responsive pedagogy, scaffolding, and formative assessment reflects a commitment to disrupting inequitable instructional practices that marginalize EMs. Similarly, Pillar 3 moves beyond individual skill-building to foster teachers’ critical consciousness, encouraging them to recognize and resist systemic inequities that undermine EMs’ academic success. Finally, Pillar 4 explicitly embraces Critical Theory’s call for transformation,

positioning teachers as advocates and leaders who challenge oppressive policies and structures within their schools and communities. By integrating Critical Theory, TEMPL moves professional development beyond technical skill acquisition, framing it as a process of empowering educators to interrogate and change the sociopolitical conditions that shape EMs' educational experiences.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative design grounded in pláticas methodology to document and analyze the experiences of a subgroup of teachers who participated in the professional development. professional journeys, their approaches to civic engagement in the classroom, and their perspectives on teacher recruitment and retention. Pláticas, a culturally rooted, dialogic method widely recognized in Chicana/Latina feminist scholarship (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Jiménez-Silva & López, 2024), positions researchers and teachers as co-constructors of knowledge rather than as extractors of data. This approach provided a relational and reciprocal space where teachers could share experiences, make meaning collectively, and reflect on the sociopolitical contexts shaping their teaching and leadership identities.

## Purpose

Five educators who participated in the GeoCivics Academy were invited to engage in four pláticas in the year following the Academy. While our pláticas study investigated the three research questions below as part of a larger study, this article focuses on the second research question:

1. How do Academy teachers describe their professional journeys as educators?
2. Within the civic engagement focus of the GeoCivics project, what challenges, tensions, and opportunities did Academy teachers describe as influencing their personal experiences and instructional practices related to civic education?
3. What supports do Academy teachers identify as critical to recruiting and retaining teachers in the profession?

## Teachers and Context

Eighteen teachers participated in the GeoCivics Academy focused on U.S. Territories and Regions (one of three GeoCivics academies across a three-year time period). These teachers represented nine states, Washington, DC, and five U.S. territories. Of these, five teachers participated in the pláticas. These educators were invited to participate because they represented diverse U.S. territories, including American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto Rico. Their teaching experience ranged from five to twenty years, and each had worked with emergent multilingual learners for at least five of those years. They taught in schools where the student population predominantly reflected the primary culture of their respective territories.

The teachers identified as Latinx/Hispanic, Filipino, Samoan, and Chamorro, and all were fluent in their native languages. As part of their initial application to the Academy, teachers listed their past and current leadership roles. One year after participating in the Academy, all five participants are working towards advanced degrees and serving in leadership roles such as mentor, STEM director, social studies committee president, teacher consultant, and grade-level

lead. Additionally, all five had shared their expertise through presentations at local, national, or international conferences. Additional information about each platicador is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Plática Teacher Demographics*

Platicadores Pseudonyms	State/Territory	Ethnicity	Years Teaching	Years working with ELs	Language fluent in other than English	Type of School	School Demographics	Leadership roles	Leadership / academic aspirations
Luis	Puerto Rican now teaching in Arizona	Latinx Hispanic	17	21	Spanish	Title I, Public Charter	70% or more Latino	STEM Director	Doctorate
Tina	Guam	Filipino	12	12	Filipino	Title I, Public	30-49% Asian, 50% or more Pacific Islander/Native	2nd Masters (just let go of leadership roles for Master's work)	2nd Masters
Aria	American Samoa	Samoan	5	5	Samoan	Rural, Public	80-90% or more Pacific Islander/Native	Current SS Committee President, mentor	Doctorate
Lily	American Samoa now teaching in Arizona	Samoan	12	5	Samoan	Title I, Public	50% Latino/Asian/Pacific Islander	AZGA teacher consultant	Masters
Isa	Guam	Chamorro	8	5	Chamoran	Public Rural	80-90% or more Pacific Islander/Native	Conference presentation	Masters

**Data Collection & Analysis**

Pláticas were chosen as the primary data collection method due to their alignment with the goals of this project, which were to amplify teachers’ voices, build trust, and foster collaborative knowledge production. Rooted in Chicana/Latina feminist epistemology, pláticas are semi-structured conversations that blur the line between interviewer and participant, honoring the lived expertise of educators (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). This methodology is especially powerful in contexts where traditional interview structures risk reinforcing hierarchies between researchers and practitioners.

Four virtual pláticas were conducted over three months following the GeoCivics Academy. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was facilitated via Zoom, allowing for participation across geographic regions. The sessions centered on three guiding questions: (1) How do you describe your professional journey as an educator? (2) What challenges, tensions, and opportunities have emerged for you personally and professionally in teaching civic education? (3) What supports do you identify as critical for recruiting and retaining teachers, particularly in your context? Conversations were fluid and dialogic, with opportunities for teachers to bring forward topics of importance, share stories, and build upon one another's reflections. Although teachers were all familiar with each other following participation in the Academy, the facilitator, who was the first author and had led the Academy, ensured that, consistent with pláticas methodology, time was also dedicated to establishing trust ("la entrada") and closing each session with personal check-ins ("la despedida"), honoring relational accountability (Jiménez-Silva & López, 2024; Valle & Mendoza, 1978).

All pláticas were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and returned to Teachers for member-checking to ensure accuracy and to uphold their agency in determining what could be included in the study. This step aligned with Fierros and Delgado Bernal's (2016) principle of reciprocity, ensuring that knowledge production remained collaborative and non-extractive. In addition to the pláticas, the full research study (all who attended the Academy) consisted of pre- and post-surveys, content assessments, and focus group interviews.

Thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2015) was employed to identify patterns across the plática transcripts. Initial coding focused on *in vivo* codes that captured Teachers' exact language, particularly regarding identity, leadership, and civic engagement. These codes were then grouped into broader categories reflecting shared experiences and systemic challenges. The first and second authors met after each plática to discuss emergent insights, refine codes, and remain reflexive about their own positionalities as Latina researchers and former K-12 educators (Flores & Morales, 2021). Survey results were reported using descriptive statistics, given the small number of Teachers. Focus group data is not reported in this article. This article focuses on the plática data. A final collective plática with Teachers was used to share preliminary findings, invite further interpretation, and co-construct the thematic framework for reporting results.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

To enhance the credibility of the findings, multiple strategies were employed: triangulation with data from the larger GeoCivics project (surveys, lesson plans, and focus groups), prolonged engagement with Teachers over multiple sessions, and member-checking of transcripts and themes. Reflexive memos documented the researchers' positionalities and decision-making throughout the analytic process, acknowledging the shared cultural and professional backgrounds that informed interpretation (Jiménez-Silva & López, 2024). By situating this work within anti-colonial, equity-centered research traditions, the study sought not only to describe teacher experiences but also to honor their contributions as knowledge holders and educational change agents.

### **Findings**

The findings in this section focus on our larger study's second research question: within the civic engagement focus of the GeoCivics project, what challenges, tensions, and opportunities

did Academy teachers describe as influencing their personal experiences and instructional practices related to civic education?

The GeoCivics professional development initiative was designed to enhance teacher knowledge and leadership in American history, geography, civics, and government, with a special focus on teaching EMs. Through a combination of self-paced modules, place-based academies, continuing mentorship, and collaborative lesson design, the project aimed to increase teacher content knowledge, improve pedagogical strategies, and foster teacher leadership—particularly among underrepresented educators. With survey results collected from all three cohorts of the academy ( $n=x$ ) exceeding expectations, the project had significant gains in teacher content knowledge, pedagogy, and leadership. Post-assessment scores averaged 95% (up from 63%), with 91% of teachers scoring above 80% on all assessments. Teachers developed 117 standards-aligned, culturally responsive K–12 lessons, including civic action projects (CAPs) that connect students to their communities. These lessons are now freely available for educators nationwide.

The cohorts represented a range of backgrounds and teaching experiences. With a 93% completion rate, the project achieved broad retention and engagement, thanks to its teacher-centered, responsive design and sustained support. Leadership development was central to the project, with 96% reporting increased confidence and capability in teaching civics-related content. Opportunities were built in for teachers to mentor peers, present at conferences, help plan future academies and maintain professional networks beyond the project. Promising practices included the development of culturally relevant civic action projects, collaborative lesson design, and long-term networking among teachers, and this article is a result of these connections. GeoCivics' emphasis on valuing teacher voice, building community, and fostering reflection not only improved instructional practice but also nurtured a new generation of teacher leaders in civics education.

To augment the survey data reported above, pláticas collected additional perspectives and perceptions related to teachers' experiences as part of the Academy. Specific examples of the impact the PD had were discussed in length, illustrating how the PD enhanced teachers' content expertise and instructional strategies. The opportunity to discuss the similarities and differences in the histories and school systems of U.S. Territories had a significant impact, fostering meaningful dialogue and leading to long-lasting relationships among teachers that continued beyond the PD. Through these conversations, the transcripts analyzed also highlighted the integrated conversations between benefits gained and teachers' identities that provided life stories and narratives documenting layered identities in education, providing voices of teachers not shared in the initial data sets.

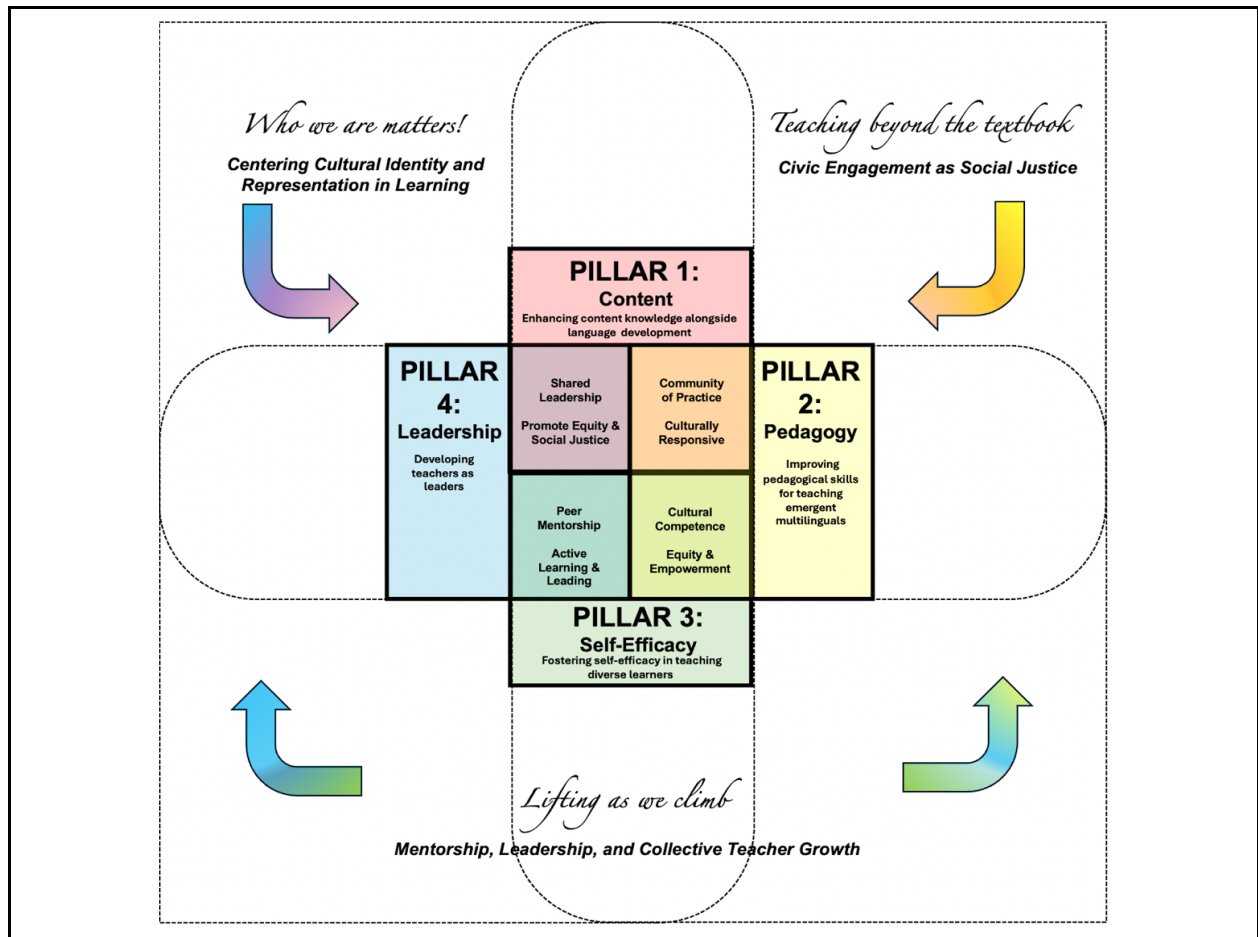
This study involved teachers from the U.S. Territories who wanted to be involved in further research and scholarly work. The teachers reported significant growth in content knowledge, especially around U.S. territories and their histories, government and school systems, and geographic understanding. Many educators uncovered misconceptions in their previous knowledge, prompting more accurate, inclusive, and engaging teaching practices. Firsthand experiences—visiting sites and connecting with local community members—transformed abstract concepts into tangible, meaningful learning. In general, the PD deeply influenced pedagogy, with teachers adopting place-based learning and strategies to support EMs, such as academic vocabulary scaffolds and culturally responsive instruction.

The program also catalyzed civic engagement, both for educators and students. Teachers embraced Civic Action Projects (CAP), realizing their classroom feasibility and impact. Students

became more civically aware and active, often initiating projects rooted in local issues. Teachers saw themselves as empowered teacher leaders—many presented at conferences, led PDs, and formed lasting networks. The Academy’s structure fostered collaboration, cross-disciplinary integration, and shared reflection. Teachers emphasized the importance of community learning and the emotional depth of the experience, which continues to shape curriculum development and student learning across subject areas, promoting informed, engaged citizenship.

The pláticas provided a space for both the researchers and teachers to reflect on their own journeys. The four discussions centered around the Academy experiences, implementation of place-based and/or civic action engagement in the classroom, collective connections to personal knowledge and experiences, and challenges the teachers can identify with. Our pláticas, conversations, highlighted cultural identity and representation, civic engagement and social justice, as well as mentorship, leadership, and professional growth, which captured the experiences and commitments of teachers from the U.S. Territories. These themes illustrate how educators navigated systemic challenges while striving to create empowering, equity-centered spaces for their students and aligned with the TEMPL framework (see Figure 1). Below, we discuss the themes that emerged from our pláticas.

**Figure 1**  
*TEMPL Framework Pillars and Theme Relationships*



## **Theme 1: Who We Are Matters: Centering Cultural Identity and Representation in Learning**

Throughout the Academy, there were both structured opportunities as well as organic conversations in which teachers shared how the content of the Academy (See Appendix A) related to their own personal and professional experiences. Focusing on the teachers who participated in the pláticas, the teachers emphasized the importance of centering cultural identity and representation in learning, specifically, in their school environments. This includes representation of diverse backgrounds, languages, and educational experiences to support students' socioemotional well-being as they learn. Furthermore, teachers emphasized that mainstream curricula often overlook or distort the histories and lived realities of students in U.S. territories. They described how this lack of representation undermines students' sense of belonging and relevance in school. As Isa shared, "Students ask me why they're learning U.S. history when it doesn't reflect their experiences in Guam... we need to bridge that gap." Aria, "Our culture is treated as an elective... but students need to know who they are in order to know where they're going." Teachers actively sought to supplement lessons with local history and cultural knowledge, underscoring the transformative impact of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Teachers also reflected on the significance of diversity and linguistic understanding within the teaching profession, as it impacts both educators and students. This perspective shaped many conversations focused on advocating for more inclusive professional development and networking opportunities, aimed at creating supportive environments and safe spaces to address equity issues in education. Luis shared how teachers often feel as if they aren't given the tools needed to perform all the tasks involved in teaching, and the PD provided those additional tools, an opportunity to network with other teachers who work with EMs, and motivation to keep making an impact in the classroom. He also shared how challenges arise, especially in an English-only state, "when limitations are placed on how to address student needs and support learning using best practices that have limitations such as allowing students to use their native language while learning English." Others felt empowered by talking with teachers from other territories. Aria mentioned:

[I]t was an inspiration to me when I got to hear the stories of other territorial teachers, how we have a few things that we really need to change, but feel encouraged that I can do more than what I'm actually doing right now. ... I came back with new goals.

While exploring the personal and collective narratives, the teachers shared cultural similarities across the various U.S. territories and celebrated wins in supporting culturally responsive teaching within their learning spaces. The two Samoan teachers shared similar reflections while one is teaching in Samoa and one now teaches in the United States. Lily reflected:

I always felt like our Samoan culture is very important. I have a newfound purpose of trying to teach the students not only their culture, but connecting it through education, and how important it is to know their identity while navigating this world and continuing your education because it's very important to understand who you are in order to know where you're going.

## **Theme 2: Teaching Beyond the Textbook: Civic Engagement as Social Justice**

The five teachers who were participants in this study Teachers were deeply engaged with civic education within the Academy. Many examples were shared both at local sites and with experts and guest speakers within the community. The teachers appreciated and connected most with using their lived experiences to foster discussions on social justice and historical awareness. The teachers shared their own expertise, interests, opportunities, and challenges with civic engagement. During the pláticas, the five teachers participating in this study each shared how they brought the concepts and practices back to their classrooms and encouraged their own students to critically examine civic issues, participate in social justice movements, and understand their role as active citizens. Others shared how they had flexibility in methods of teaching. They discussed challenges as well as ways to address them. Aria shared that “Social studies time is often diminished and sometimes is treated more like an elective rather than a subject.” She went on to mention that “although civics is only taught in 8th grade, civic engagement can be embedded in other subjects or by teaming up with the civics teacher to connect learning and personal experiences for the students.”

The teachers framed civic engagement not as an optional component of teaching but as an essential act of resistance against systemic inequities affecting their students and communities. Teachers described how they created space for advocacy and critical dialogue, even in subjects unrelated to civics. “Sometimes I take 15 minutes of math class just to tell my students they’re worthy... they need to hear that because of the messages they receive outside of school,” Lily explained.

They also looked at how civic engagement within the communities allowed a space to develop personal, cultural, linguistic, and leadership identities for both teachers and students. Professionally, the teachers discussed how they embraced the concept of civic engagement within the education system. Isa mentioned:

The PD opened my eyes to what we can do as a community. I'm teaching U.S. history according to the standards because it's part of our curriculum, but the students need to know how and why the territories are part of the USA.

Through integrating civic action projects into the learning space, this study’s five teachers shared how students were empowered to speak up for themselves and their communities. Others spoke of how utilizing civic action projects helped students see their potential for social change. Lily stated that, “They started realizing they could actually make a difference, even when the system feels stacked against them.” The teachers discussed how they first were not as comfortable including civic action projects, but once they used the method in their own classrooms, they were highly committed to embedding this pedagogical shift in civic education within their teaching practices. Isa shared that while they had often spoken about identifying potential civic action projects in the past, they had not taken steps to act on those potential project ideas. The conversations also included discussion of how civic action projects provided spaces for students to have a voice. Tina stated:

These children are often labeled as naughty students, but they are great kids; we just need to guide them because they are our future leaders. So maybe if we instill this [engaging in civic action] in them, they will be the ones doing the change for our small island.

### **Theme 3: Lifting as We Climb: Mentorship, Leadership, and Collective Teacher Growth**

Mentorship emerged as a sustaining force and catalyst for leadership development among this study's five teachers from the U.S. Territories, offering not only guidance and technical support but also a sense of belonging within a profession marked by systemic challenges. Across the pláticas, teachers highlighted how both formal and informal mentoring relationships provided emotional support and practical advice that shaped their professional journeys. Aria shared how vital mentorship is for retaining teachers, particularly novices:

A lot of [first-year teachers] want to quit [in] the first year. And it was their mentor that caused them to stay within the profession... we need time to bond with mentors; we need some way to emphasize the importance of mentorship.

Isa echoed this sentiment, recalling, "I wouldn't have survived my first year without my mentor... she walked me through every form and every challenge." In Isa's school district, after working with a mentor for three years, teachers often changed roles and became a mentor to a novice teacher, providing an opportunity to step into a leadership role.

Beyond receiving support, teachers emphasized the importance of "paying it forward," serving as thought partners and creating networks for collaboration and collective expertise. Tina stressed the need for meaningful, localized professional development opportunities: "They send a person to a conference or a teacher training and then have that person deliver the PD. We need an actual trainer from that program to come to the island and teach the teachers here in Guam." Luis described his efforts to mentor aspiring teachers and address shortages in his community: "I like the element of impacting younger people in the profession. I reach out to community colleges and offer my school as a place to complete [intern] hours." He also shared the importance of recruiting and retaining high-quality educators and supporting the connections with the local community: "It's not about teacher shortage; it's about quality teacher shortage.

Luis stated, we have a "revolving door in the profession". For him, it's "about the connections I have with the families and the students. Right? It is difficult for me to just abandon that and get rolling. So, it keeps me coming back." In addition to being a teacher, Luis also holds an administrative position. He discussed his motivation of taking on a leadership role at his school:

I like the idea of, you know, tackling the challenge of educating kids that are not necessarily afforded high quality education. So when we go recruiting, we go recruiting like at trailer parks, apartments, and the lowest socioeconomic status places, right? ....So for me, that element of challenge is intriguing ... .like, "let's tackle this challenge and prove that we could provide high quality education and get this kid to achieve at this high level.

Teachers also reflected on systemic issues affecting their professional well-being, including low pay, burnout, lack of support, and mental health challenges. Tina described the importance of administrative empathy, particularly during the pandemic: "After COVID... our administrator was very encouraging, letting us take a mental wellness day off with no questions asked... if we are going to support our students, there are times when we just need to step back and de-stress." Aria recounted a shift in cultural attitudes toward teacher mental health after a local tragedy:

The training that I am attending right now is actually about well-being. And they're all topics related to providing us with emotional and mental support and trying to lessen our

stress when the school year begins. Culturally, we don't view that as something that needs to be fixed, or something that needs to be attended to. We view it as a weakness. Culturally, that's how we are. So emotional stress, all that depression, it wasn't a topic that was often brought up here in our island, because our culture is very strong with being strong, both mentally and physically. She went to describe how post COVID, the community "had ten suicides within two weeks.

That led to mandatory suicide awareness workshops for teachers and "that is where it started, to all accept the fact that there's a change and that we have a problem that we need to address." However, a disconnect continued between the local communities and schools' efforts to address emotional and mental well-being.

The GeoCivics Academy provided a rare opportunity to counteract challenges in the profession, specifically in the context of teaching in U.S. territories, offering a supportive professional network where teachers could exchange knowledge, feel valued, and reinvigorate their commitment to the profession. Two years after the Academy, conversations and networking among Teachers have continued via various platforms, fostering ongoing collaboration and advocacy for systemic change. Through mentorship and leadership, teachers are not only sustaining one another in the profession but actively transforming education in their communities, truly "lifting as they climb."

## Discussion

This study examined the professional journeys of teachers in U.S. territories, revealing how race, language, identity, and place-based contexts shape educators' experiences and pedagogical practices. Findings highlight the transformative potential of professional development (PD) initiatives like GeoCivics that center teacher voice, cultural identity, civic engagement, and collective growth. Drawing on the TEMPL model (Guerrero & Jiménez-Silva, 2025) and Critical Theory (Giroux, 2023), this research contributes to ongoing conversations about equity-focused PD, teacher leadership, and systemic change in education.

A central finding underscores that affirming educators' and students' cultural identities is not peripheral but foundational to effective teaching, particularly in territories historically marginalized within national education systems (Lin, 2022). Participants described how dominant curricula often erased or misrepresented local histories, weakening students' sense of belonging. GeoCivics disrupted these narratives by providing space for teachers to re-engage with their cultural roots and design lessons that validated students' lived experiences. Civic Action Projects (CAPs) allowed students to investigate inequities within their communities, positioning civic education not as an isolated unit but as an act of resistance and social transformation (Freire, 1970; Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020). These findings extend work on culturally sustaining pedagogy (Gay, 2013; Paris & Alim, 2014) by illustrating how place-based PD can embed civic engagement across disciplines while fostering identity-affirming instruction.

Mentorship and professional community emerged as critical supports for teacher retention and leadership development. Structured pláticas created safe, reflective spaces where educators shared expertise, navigated challenges, and strengthened their professional identities. This relational approach addressed the emotional toll of teaching in under-resourced and often overlooked territories, mitigating burnout and mental health strain (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Many participants attributed their sustained commitment to teaching—and their transition into

leadership roles—to the collaborative networks and mentoring relationships developed through GeoCivics.

GeoCivics pláticas addressed teacher retention, burnout, and mental health. The discussions highlighted the importance of mental health and well-being in teacher retention—especially in U.S. territories where systemic support is often limited. Teachers shared how the program helped them combat burnout, feel seen and supported, and develop sustainable practices to stay in the profession. GeoCivics empowered teachers—especially from underrepresented communities—to become leaders in the education community. Teachers presented at conferences, mentored peers, and built long-lasting professional networks. Many took on formal leadership roles and developed a commitment to recruiting and mentoring the next generation of educators, especially in under-resourced areas. Utilizing pláticas to provide a space for ongoing discussions stands as a model for transformational PD rooted in teacher voice, identity, and community impact.

Overall, findings point to the need for PD models that are (1) locally grounded and experiential, (2) rooted in teachers' cultural and linguistic identities, (3) sustained over time, and (4) designed to build both pedagogical expertise and leadership capacity. Situated within Critical Theory, GeoCivics provided teachers with tools to challenge dominant narratives that marginalize U.S. territories in education while amplifying teacher and student voices. Drawing on Community Cultural Wealth, the program leveraged educators' familial, linguistic, and navigational capital to enrich professional learning and student engagement.

This research contributes to scholarship calling for transformative PD that goes beyond technical skill-building to address issues of identity, equity, and civic participation. Findings suggest that when teachers are supported to critically engage with systemic inequities and build collective capacity, they are better positioned to enact culturally sustaining, civically engaged pedagogies that empower both educators and students.

## Conclusion

The immersive, place-based learning experiences within the Academy shifted teachers' approaches, moving from merely teaching about civics to empowering students as civic agents, particularly among Emergent Multilinguals (EMs) and historically marginalized communities. Teachers began integrating local knowledge and stories of community activism into their lessons, enhancing their students' engagement and fostering a deeper understanding of their role in shaping society. The program provided U.S. Territory educators with a platform to share their knowledge and experiences, helping bridge cultural gaps and creating opportunities for cultural and professional leadership.

These experiences not only shaped educational outcomes but also revealed the challenges and opportunities inherent in creating more equitable educational practices. Teachers emphasized the importance of learning in community, sharing perspectives, and engaging in critical dialogue. Informal conversations during travel and on-site experiences proved just as impactful as formal sessions, showing the importance of reflection and processing in the development of effective teaching strategies. Ultimately, these narratives contribute to a broader understanding of how cultural wealth and linguistic diversity shape educational environments, offering valuable insights into the strategies that can transform teaching practices and support more equitable outcomes for all students.

The perspectives of American teachers in and from U.S. territories offer important insights into the challenges, tensions, and opportunities that arise when engaging in civic education in contexts that often do not provide a curriculum that is representative of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds or their lived experiences. Their professional journeys as educators are inspiring and are a testament to their commitment to serving communities of students that are often underserved. Finally, their recommendations for preparing and retaining teachers in the profession should be heeded. Together, their voices call for systemic change that honors local histories, languages, and identities as essential to equitable and transformative civic education across the United States, including U.S. Territories.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's findings are based on a small sample of five teachers from diverse U.S. territories, which limits the generalizability of results. While the use of pláticas methodology yielded rich, culturally grounded narratives, the reliance on self-reported data and the pláticas virtual settings may have limited the depth of interpersonal exchange. Additionally, the study's timeframe offers only a snapshot of teachers' professional growth following participation in the GeoCivics Academy, rather than long-term impacts on practice or retention.

Future research should build on this work through longitudinal and mixed-methods studies that examine the sustained influence of place-based, equity-focused professional development on teacher leadership, civic engagement, and student outcomes. Comparative or participatory research involving educators, policymakers, and community members across territories and the mainland could further illuminate how culturally sustaining, locally rooted approaches to professional learning foster educational equity and systemic change.

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