

An Introduction to Critical Issues in Teacher Education: Building a Bridge between Teacher Education and Latino English Language Learners in K-12 Schools

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According to the United States Census, Latinos are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. By 2050, it is predicted that the population of school-age Latinos will soar to 28 million and surpass the number of non-Latino White students. As a result, this demographic shift will considerably alter population trends and needs in the K-12 educational system. Despite the fact that Latino students enter schools with rich cultural, linguistic and schooling backgrounds as well as comprise a significantly large segment of the emergent bilingual and English Language Learner (ELL) population in the K-12 public school system, Latino youth continue to be underserved in the U.S. Research reports reveal that in the past 10 years Latino ELLs have continued to underachieve in literacy and mathematics as compared to their monolingual White counterparts. Moreover, Latino ELLs represent the group with the highest high school dropout rates in the public school system. Much of the concern in the K-12 school system has been the preparation of teachers for new realities in school, and consequently, teachers' readiness to effectively address the needs of Latino ELL populations.

The relationship between Latino ELLs' academic achievement and teacher education programs that prepare pre-service teachers for working in Latino ELL contexts has not been at the forefront of the research literature to date. A review of research studies on teacher education reveals that a low percentage of teachers are well prepared to teach Latino ELLs. In fact, teacher education programs nationwide tend to gloss over the learning needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in K-12 schools settings. Studies affirm that the dearth of quality coursework and teaching practices specifically in contexts with Latino ELLs has had a lasting impact on teachers.

Those who serve in the frontline (teachers) can ultimately influence the academic trajectories of youth in the public school system. Without quality preparation, student teaching experiences and critical inquiry, new teachers entering public schools may continue to perpetuate deficit views of Latino ELL students—views which can ultimately impact the academic attainment of Latinos. Further, new teachers as well as practicing teachers who know little about ELLs and have no experience with Latino communities, families, and children may have a deleterious impact on future Latino ELL populations. A particularly relevant finding from a review of studies associated with Latino students contends that the academic achievement of Latino students is predicated on the development of caring relationships between students and their teachers, counselors and other school agents. That said, Latino youth are currently all too often confined to classrooms in which teachers cannot or will not cross cultural or linguistic boundaries to affirm students' identities or engage in pedagogy that promotes academic and personal success. Latinos are more likely to attend schools with newly prepared teachers, and teachers with little experience in culturally relevant teaching. In a related manner, schools with a high concentration of ELLs often employ teachers with provisional, emergency or temporary certification.

This special issue of the *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal* presents a series of articles that focus on issues that we believe are central to the educational success of Latino ELLs and teacher education. Further, this issue highlights and examines the various ways teachers are prepared through teacher education

to meet the sociocultural, linguistic, and academic needs of Latino ELL students in the K-12 U.S. public school system. This volume documents the manner in which teacher education programs guide teachers to engage in culturally and linguistically diverse academic contexts and conversely, sheds light on theoretical frameworks that inform teaching practices that ultimately benefit Latino ELLs.

The first part of the special issue contains seven research studies. The volume opens with an article, “*Conciencia con Compromiso: Aspirantes as Bridges for Latin@ Bilingual Learners*,” by Linda Prieto. The author draws from a Chicana/Latina feminist lens to understand the role teacher education programs can play in helping teacher candidates explore their cultural backgrounds and conversely, critically assess hierarchical systems of oppression. This qualitative study examines the role culture has in influencing *aspirantes* in becoming bilingual teachers.

The next article, “Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners: Perspectives from Arizona’s Latino/a Teachers,” authored by Irina Okhremtchouk and Taucia González, examines in-service teachers’ reflections on their experiences during pre-service preparation and in-service practices while engaged in ELL contexts in Arizona. This study reports a number of salient themes associated with instructional practices for ELLs, which include: pedagogical knowledge and strategies, effective communication with students, engagement with student families, and challenges in school contexts where ELLs are present. This article contributes to the much needed pedagogical knowledge required to enhance learning for ELL students.

The third article, “Translanguaging in a Latino/a Bilingual Community: Negotiations and Mediations in a Dual-Language Classroom,” by Armando Garza and Juliet Langman, explores the manner in which a bilingual teacher and her bilingual students utilize translanguaging as a learning and teaching tool in social studies and science classes. The authors suggest that translanguaging allows for fluidity of the teaching and learning process with bilingual learners, thus, fostering language as well as content development in youth.

In the article, “Developing Linguistically Responsive Teachers: Learning through Latino/a Student Stories,” Rosalie Rolón and Lei Chen present a qualitative study of two linguistically diverse students. The study highlights the value of linguistic and cultural elements present in students’ stories. The authors reveal that profiles of students, either presented to pre-service teachers in classes or developed as a result of field experiences, can help pre-service teachers understand linguistically diverse students and consequently, develop orientations conducive to meeting the academic needs of youth.

The following piece entitled, “Teacher Candidates and Latino/a ELs at Felton Elementary: The Role of Early Clinical Experiences,” by Ambareen Nasir and Amy J. Heineke, focuses on the influence early clinical experiences have on teacher candidates’ learning about the experiences of Latina/o English learners in a field-based program housed in an urban elementary school. This study draws from a multiple-case study design and uses discourse analysis to explore the journey of three teacher candidates. Further, this study illustrates how field-based teacher programs support candidates’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions for working with Latina/o ELs.

In “Bridging Bilingual and Special Education: Opportunities for Transformational Change in Teacher Preparation Programs,” Alberto M. Ochoa and his coauthors report on five years of data that examines the conceptual design of the ALAS program (Acquisition of Language Skills and Academic Literacy) in a two-year teacher preparation program. This study describes the manner in which the ALAS program contributed to the identification of skills necessary for teachers to be reflective practitioners, facilitators of critical inquiry, cultural mediators, and educators linked with the school community.

The final article, “Breaking the Silence: Facing Undocumented Issues in Teacher Practice,” authored by Julian Jefferies and Dafney B. Dabach, presents an ethnographic study of two teachers working with undocumented students in the educational system. The authors articulate the need for teacher education to address salient issues associated with undocumented status in school settings and consequently, advance the notion of equitable schooling for undocumented youth.

The second part of the special issue is devoted to reflective essays. The first essay, “22 Students and 22 Teachers: Socio-Cultural Mediation in the Early Childhood Classroom,” by Leticia Lozano, chronicles the experience of one dual-language kindergarten classroom through the lens of socio-cultural mediation. A community of practice theoretical framework guides and informs instructional practices in dual-language settings. Lozano identifies three significant roles associated with being a dual-language teacher: teacher, social cultural

mediator, and advocate.

Nancy L. Commins follows with her essay entitled, “Supporting Bilingual Learners and their Families: Key Understandings for Pre-Service Teachers and the Institutions that Prepare Them.” The essay provides specific examples of understandings that preparation programs can instill in new teachers; such efforts will help teacher candidates envision community outreach practices as essential to creating a positive and supportive school environment for all learners.

Finally, the special issue closes with a set of poems, “*Querido Idioma*” and “Don’t Tell Me: Ask Me!” and a book review of *Teacher Preparation for Bilingual Student Populations: Educar Para Transformar* (Bustos Flores, Hernández Sheets and Riojas Clark, 2011).

We hope the research articles and other contributions that have been included in this special issue will encourage continued conversations and scholarship regarding the intersection of teacher education and Latino ELLs in K-12 schools.