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# Latinx Teachers Advocating and Providing Support to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students and Their Families

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# **Latinx Teachers Advocating and Providing Support to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students and Their Families**

*Pedro Espinoza and Kay Ann Taylor*

## **Introduction**

Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students has been a challenge for many years. Classroom teachers and certified English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers struggle staying current with the pedagogical approaches and strategies to work with this student population (Gándara et al., 2005). In order to help CLD students succeed in the classroom, there are effective teaching strategies teachers may implement. Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) mention teacher education programs in the past have combined their efforts with national organizations such as the National Association for Multicultural Education, the Urban Network to Improve Teacher Education, The National Network for Educational Renewal, and several committees and special interest groups. By challenging the inequities of school and society through social justice education, teaching becomes about enhancing students' learning and their life chances (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, teaching without knowing the students' background knowledge can be problematic for all students.

We use the Kansas City public schools as a statistical example to demonstrate the need for teachers of color, from different cultural backgrounds, and who speak different languages. In the 2017-2018 school year, the Kansas City Public School District reported having 2% Asian teachers and 3% Asian students, 31% Black teachers and 57% Black students, 5% Hispanic teachers and 27% Hispanic students, 61% White teachers and 10% White students, 1% other teachers and 3% other students (Kansas City Public Schools, 2019). The most noticeable representation gap is the one between Hispanic students and Hispanic teachers. On the other hand, White students comprised only 10 percent of all public school students while White teachers constituted 61% of the teaching force.

Getting to know students of color is a step forward toward effective implementation of classroom strategies and activities. Gay (2014) states cultural congruency between home and school leads to cultural respect, personal validation, and academic success for students of color. In other words, teachers can provide support to these students by valuing their background and ethnicity and seeing them from an asset perspective instead of a deficit perspective.

In a study conducted in Tennessee, Black students randomly assigned to a Black teacher in the lower elementary grades K-3 were 7% more likely to graduate from high school and 13% more likely to enroll in college than their peers who were not assigned to Black teachers. A similar study in North Carolina found that by having a teacher from the same background as students, every 10-percentage point increase in Black male drop-out rate decreased by almost 5% and the intention to go to college increased by 2% (Gershenson et al., 2018).

Many students of color are not performing as well as they could in school settings where teaching and learning are approached solely from the “perspective of Eurocentric values,

assumptions, beliefs and methodologies” (Gay, 2014, p. 354). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (McFarland et al., 2019), evidence demonstrates teachers of color with backgrounds similar to their students may have higher expectations of their students than nonminority teachers. Evidence also shows having a teacher of the same race/ethnicity can have positive impacts on students’ attitudes, motivation, and performance (McFarland et al., 2019). This still remains a main concern since the percentage of white school teachers at the K-12 level remain over 80 percent and the percentage of Latino/Hispanic teachers has increased only from 6 to 9 percent in the past twelve years (McFarland et al., 2019).

An initiative mentioned in Delgado Bernal’s study, the national movement to dismantle race-based admissions policies, ignores current societal inequalities and the admissions process is based on a very “Eurocentric measure of knowledge” (2002, p. 117). One recommendation made in Delgado Bernal’s study is that if race or ethnicity are not part of the admissions process, then educators need to think of creative and original ways to move away from a solely Eurocentric measure of knowledge to one that considers and values knowledge prominent from communities of color (2002).

## **Methods**

**Context and Participants.** We were interested in how the participants at each school engaged in justice agendas with students, particularly with CLDs, staff, and community members in their specific locations. Participants who could offer valuable information regarding advocacy for CLDs and their families were sought. Purposeful selection of participants allowed for the most meaningful and insightful study (Merriam, 1998). Gaining an in-depth understanding of the experience teachers have implementing strategies guiding CLDs was best served by selecting participants who are familiar with implementing specific strategies and serving CLDs. With that in mind, the participants for this study were three graduates from a federally funded bilingual/bicultural program who received teacher preparation and education certification from a four-year institution.

**Data Collection and Analysis.** Looking at the participants’ experiences through the Latino/a Critical Theory (LatCrit) lens as our methodological framework led us to use testimonios as our methodology. Testimonios allowed us to collect the data elicited by the use of tesoros during the individual pláticas and group pláticas. These shared experiences are considered the participants’ testimonios regarding system barriers and support, social justice advocacy, and educational strategies implemented with their CLD students and families.

In this study, we refer to pláticas as an interview/conversation that can be from semi-structured to unstructured. A significant difference is the role of the interviewer/researcher and the interviewee/participant can be switched during the conversation in order to provide an environment of *confianza y respeto* (trust and respect), but with the researcher always guiding the conversation. Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) identify la plática as a suitable form of engaging with the Latino/a population. In other words, pláticas are interviews that incorporate the cultural factor within the interview and modify the structure in order to gain trust.

According to Valle and Mendoza (1978) the most important component in a *plática* is trust. We used individual and group *pláticas* as data collection methods instead of interviews for the following reasons: (1) *pláticas* are more personal than an interview and they allow the participant to be creative and tell their own stories without much guidance from the interviewer, (2) *pláticas* allow the participants to ask questions of their own and make it seem more like a conversation than an interview.

This study consisted of three teacher participants from three different K-12 school districts in a midwestern state. The teacher participants received their formal teacher education through a federally funded program in a predominantly White (PWI) midwestern state university. Through the process of *testimonios*, we examined the ways in which they engaged in justice agendas for their CLD students. Furthermore, through *testimonios*, we identified what these teachers attributed as barriers and support systems in their justice work and the educational strategies they valued in their role in this work. Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) agree that through the process of *pláticas*, *testimonios* about topics such as educational successes and challenges, migration and immigration, among other topics, can be shared, which is appropriate for this study regarding the use of *pláticas* as a method to share *testimonios*.

We conducted two individual *pláticas* with one participant working at the elementary level, another participant from the middle school level, and the third participant from the high school level. After conducting the individual *pláticas*, which provided an in-depth understanding of the teachers' experiences, we invited all three participants and two additional participants to have two group *pláticas*. All five *plática* participants were former graduates from the federally funded program teaching at different grade levels in different schools. The group *pláticas* consisted of five participants total. All of the participants met the selection criteria. During the individual *pláticas*, the participants were asked to bring five *tesoros* with them to elicit the *pláticas*, and during the group *pláticas* the participants were asked to bring three *tesoros*.

Through the process of individual and group *pláticas*, participants' *testimonios* were collected. The individual and group *pláticas*, were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researchers. *Testimonio* is a critical Latin American oral tradition practice that links "the spoken word to social action and benefits the oral narrative of personal experience as a source of knowledge, empowerment, and political strategy for claiming rights and bringing about social change" (Flores & Benmayor, 1997, p. 153). *Testimonios* were first used to convey the enduring struggles of people who have experienced persecution by governments and other socio-political forces in Latin American countries (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). As a process, collecting *testimonios* is the act of recovering and collecting silenced or untold stories through the use of *tesoros* during individual and group *pláticas* (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). A key contribution of *testimonios* is to unfold the experiences into a narrative that conveys personal, political, and social realities (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Furthermore, *testimonios* are part of shared experiences of a group of people (Delgado Bernal, 2017).

Scholars have used *testimonios* in education in concert with Chicana/Latina feminist theories. For example, Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) provide some specific examples of how a number of scholars present their own *testimonios* in education. They mention teachers providing their *testimonios* as educators committed to compassionate pedagogy and transformative teaching.

Furthermore, Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) state: “They shared how their experiences as child translators, young activists, children of caring immigrant parents, college students in predominately White universities, and racialized, gendered, and classed Chicanas inform their pedagogy of nepantla in teacher education classrooms” (p. 366).

In Prieto and Villenas’ 2012 study, testimonios illuminated how reductive and ineffective policies and classroom practices negatively impacted the Latino/a educational pipeline, Latinas’ teachers work, and relationship in the classroom. The use of testimonios allowed the two teacher educators to share their compelling stories and commitment to pedagogy and transformative teaching in their work as college students and later as teacher educators at a PWI (Prieto & Villenas, 2012).

The participants’ testimonios were transcribed, coded, and manually analyzed. Common themes were identified regarding participants’ experiences toward social justice. Participants’ testimonios were collected through the methods of individual pláticas and group pláticas (formal and/or informal conversations) elicited by the use of tesoros (treasures). All individual pláticas and group pláticas were digitally recorded. Each individual plática lasted from 75-90 minutes, and each group plática consisted of 90-120 minutes.

## **Findings**

Throughout this research, the focus was to examine the experiences of bilingual Latinx teachers working with CLD students. The following three themes emerged from the data collected (a) Tesoros from students and families, (b) Advocacy for CLD students: High expectations of all students, and (c) Support system as pre-service and in-service teachers: Hechale ganas/work hard.

These themes illustrate the type of support the participants currently receive and have received from their colleagues and administrators. Additionally, these themes depict the type of support the participants provide for their CLD students and families and explain different ways the participants personally relate to their students. Individually, all three themes are outlined and discussed in relation to the germane literature.

All five participants encountered barriers in their careers, thought of ways to overcome these barriers, and indicated they did so with the support of their families. Four of the five participants also mentioned receiving some type of support from their colleagues and administrators regarding their justice work. Although three of the participants did not receive any support the first two years teaching at a different school, they now receive support from colleagues and administrators. Since one of the participants did not receive support from colleagues or administration, he left his first place of employment and expressed feeling lonely, unwelcomed, and unappreciated. He left this school in order to continue teaching and providing support to his students.

**Tesoros from Students and Families.** Participants exhibited all their tesoros (gifts received from students and/or families). Four of the participants had kept these tesoros for 7-8 years. One of the participants had been teaching for 17.5 years and had at least one tesoro from her first year

of teaching. Strauss (2015) states one of the teachers in her study received a letter from one of her high school students. The teacher states, “By the end of the letter I was sobbing. The impact of this thank-you note has reverberated throughout my career. He is who I recall when I have a student exhibiting some or all of his antics – and his thank-you note is what helps me take the next step on a rough day” (p. 3). All participants have one tesoro or more they refer to when they need to be reminded of the reasons they teach. One of the participants keeps all her annual pictures. Carmen stated, “When I look at my tesoros, I also like to look back at my students’ pictures and put that face to my Tesoro. Even though my students may not look like that anymore, I still like to look at them when they were first graders.”

Yadira has thank-you notes since her first year of teaching in the spring of 2003. She stated, “Sometimes, I wish our administrators would take all of these tesoros into consideration during our evaluation process, but even if they don’t, these tesoros mean so much more to me.” Similarly, one of Strauss’ (2015) participants expressed her vision of discussing gifts/regalos during her yearly evaluations. Strauss’ participant stated, “My administration and I could extend discussion during my yearly evaluation to include the number of gifts I’ve received in my teaching career, which stretches back some 16 years now” (p. 1). All participants agreed with Yadira and currently remember and treasure these tesoros more than any evidence a simple database could provide during their annual teacher evaluations.

All participants indicated having boxes full of tesoros from their students and families. They have kept them for many years, and now they share the stories behind each tesoro with their children and/or significant other. Carmen indicated she goes through these boxes and shares her tesoros with her husband and parents. Yadira stated, “When I find these boxes in my garage or in my house, I spend hours remembering my many years of teaching and great moments spent in the classroom and how much I loved these students and how much they loved me.” Palmer (2018) states, “Like every teacher, I have a box crammed full of students notes and various trinkets. Recently, I sat on the carpet with my daughter and sifted through these mementos, pausing to share the story of each item with her” (p. 11). Additionally, findings show the importance, value, and meaning these tesoros have in the participants’ lives. Palmer (2018) asserts how much her students meant to her and vice versa. Furthermore, Palmer (2018), states,

Interestingly, few of the artifacts connect strongly to the curriculum. Instead, the majority of the treasures that fill my feel-good box are from students who were grateful that I saw and accepted them. They represent the importance of relationships and a positive classroom culture. (p. 11)

Although all participants were evaluated on an annual basis by their supervisors regarding their effectiveness as teachers, these tesoros had much more value to them than a formal teacher evaluation. Tesoros had a tremendous amount of significance in the participants’ lives and professional growth. Throughout the years of collecting tesoros, the participants established good relationships with their students. Additionally, the participants connected with their students and built trust/confianza.

**Advocacy for CLD Students: High Expectations of All Students.** The findings demonstrated all participants provided support to CLD students, all students, and their families. All participants went above and beyond their teacher responsibilities to make accommodations, modifications,

and to advocate for their students and families. One specific way to advocate for their students was having high expectations for every student. Rojas and Liou (2016) claim teacher expectations for student learning are a powerful predictor of student educational achievement. All participants stated that getting to know their students, listening to them, and caring about them is important to earn their trust. All participants stated that after earning their students' trust, they would do anything for them, and teaching becomes much easier after they have their trust and attention. Jesús claimed that he had many students who just wanted someone to listen to them and needed moral and academic support. Rojas and Liou (2016) indicate one of the key elements of high-expectation practices is teacher caring, which contributes to students' awareness of the trustworthiness of the teacher. Caring was discussed as a key element to obtain trust/confianza. After trust was obtained, the participants got to know their students personally and academically. They learned about their background knowledge and education level obtained in their home countries and in the United States. According to Rojas and Liou (2016), teacher caring also refers to providing students with the resources that utilize the prior knowledge and existing social capital as the foundation of education. Yuan (2017) adds that teachers need to recognize that students of color have and bring rich funds of knowledge to their educational learning experiences; therefore, teachers should modify their approaches to instruction in order to meet their students' linguistic and cultural needs. These participants viewed their students through an asset perspective lens.

All participants indicated they had high expectations for all students and they viewed the CLDs' culture and language as an asset instead of a deficit. They got to know their students' background knowledge by implementing certain strategies and allowing them to share their stories in their classrooms. On the other hand, the participants mentioned contrasting ideas from some of their colleagues and schools. They indicated some of their colleagues did not believe CLDs were capable of completing some classroom activities and strategies because they were too challenging and required critical thinking. Torff (2011) indicates that when challenged with students who appear disadvantaged, teachers often view them as unready for critical thinking activities. Therefore, teachers instead administer easier and lower-level activities such as fill in the blank worksheets and perpetuate a deficit perspective.

Teacher expectations, either high or low, are related to students' performance. The participants stated their students performed well in their classrooms and were receiving good grades. The students were motivated and eager to learn. According to Carmen, some of her students would tell her that her classroom reminded them of home because they felt safe, and they could speak in their first language. All participants allowed their students to use their first language in their classrooms to communicate with each other and/or with them and to complete their activities. Although these students were performing well in the participants' classrooms, some of them were not obtaining good grades in other classes. Williams et al. (2020) state, "teacher expectations of high or average performance were connected to higher student self-perception of ability" (p. 1063). Additionally, Williams et al. (2020) indicate prior research has found teachers may consider student behavior and achievement differently based on "race/ethnicity" and gender of the student (p. 1065). Furthermore, studies have typically confirmed teachers rate minority students more harshly regarding behavioral and academic performance (Williams et al., 2020).

All the participants described themselves as being Latinx and bilingual in English and Spanish. The participants stated having students from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, but the majority of them were Latinx students. Having a similar cultural background and being able to relate to the students through stories made it easier for the participants to create positive relationships and make connections with their students. Williams et al. (2020) claim making connections with academic education has been identified as an important factor for minority students. In addition, Williams et al. (2020) indicate there is evidence to suggest that ethnic matching of students and teachers results in more beneficial perceptions of and for the students. Furthermore, Cherng and Halpin (2016) state students perform better academically and are more favorable of teachers of similar race or ethnic background than White teachers. Additionally, a diverse teacher workforce benefits students of color through compatibility in teacher-student relationships (Plachowski, 2019). All participants indicated they related to many of the issues, situations, and barriers their students encountered, which enabled them to provide support. Garza (2019) indicates that Latinx students who are assigned to teachers who reflect their cultural, racial, and linguistic background experience substantial benefits. In addition, Kohli et al. (2018) indicate that research demonstrates teachers of color seem to have higher academic expectations for students of color. Unfortunately, teachers of color account for less than 20% of the teacher population in the United States. Plachowski (2019) indicates that public school students of color make up more than 50% of school enrollment and more than 80% of the teacher workforce consists of White females. Additionally, DiMaria (2013) indicates by the year 2020, the population of teachers of color will hit an all-time low of 5 percent, and the percentage of students of color will exceed 50 percent.

**Support System as Pre-service and In-service Teachers: Hechale Ganas/Work Hard.** The findings revealed four out of the five participants received considerable academic, financial, and emotional support from the federally funded program during their undergraduate years. They indicated receiving tutoring support from program faculty and staff members. They also mentioned learning many strategies in the required English as a Second Language courses. As in-service teachers, the participants continue to implement many of the culturally and linguistically relevant strategies with their CLD students. One of the participants indicated being grateful for the financial support she received from the program, although she stated not receiving much academic or emotional support from faculty and staff. Similar projects/programs exist and have existed in universities across the United States, such the Platte River Corridor Project at the University of Nebraska (Hof et al., 2007). This project consisted of a partnership between the university and surrounding public schools. Similar to the federally funded program, the Platte River Corridor Project provided financial and social support to their participants (Hof et al., 2007). One of the differences between the programs was that one served pre-service teachers and the other was guided more toward in-service teachers. Both programs provided preparation to educators serving CLD students.

As in-service teachers, three participants stated not receiving much support from their colleagues or administration. Jesús, Pablo, and Carmen indicated they did not receive much support and felt alienated and unwanted in their schools. Jesús mentioned not wanting to go to the teachers' lounge because the environment was unfriendly. He added that his administrator did not come to his classroom on a regular basis. The only time he would meet with his administrator was during the annual observations and evaluations. Jesús loved working with the students in his school. The



school's student population was over 50% Hispanic/Latinx. Although he loved his students and knew they needed his support, the issues with his colleagues and administrators forced him to leave after his second year there. Achinstein, Ogawa, and Sexton (2010) state that financial, human, and social capital are some of the reasons for teachers leaving the classroom or switching schools. Additionally, Achinstein et al., (2010) indicate schools that provide opportunities for teachers to network and participate in professional development activities tend to have higher retention rates. On the other hand, within the past eight years, Yadira and Sara expressed they have positive relationships with colleagues and administrators. Furthermore, they indicated having opportunities for professional development and opportunities to attend conferences at least every two years. These two participants felt valued in their schools by their colleagues, administrators, and students.

All participants indicated having their parents' support as pre-service and in-service teachers. If they felt alienated, lonely, and not supported while in college, they always knew they could count on their parents' moral support. All parents have high expectations for their children and value education, but show it in different ways. For example, some parents from low social economic status or working class may not be able to help their children with their homework, but can provide moral support by encouraging them and believing in them. Since some of these parents may not give their children "tangible guidance," these students may lack a sense of direction (Nieto, 1996). Although the participants' parents could not provide academic support or advise them on which classes to take, they always encouraged the participants by telling them "hechale ganas" or "work hard." As in-service teachers, when the participants were going through difficult times and not feeling supported by colleagues or administrators, they knew they could always count on their parents to provide them with the advice and encouragement to continue *hechandle ganas/working hard*.

## **Conclusion**

The participants' testimonios within this study illuminate the need for teacher parity with students of color in order to provide social justice in education. The number of Latinx teachers needs to increase to match the Latinx student population. Latinx teachers and teachers of color tend to have higher expectations of students of color. Rojas and Liou (2016) state students' educational journey is shaped by the way teachers view them. Additionally, through caring relationships, teachers are capable of perceiving students as assets (Rojas & Liou, 2016). Teachers from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds tend to have higher expectations of CLD students. Unfortunately, less than 20% of the teacher population are teachers of color (Plachowski, 2019).

It is imperative for all teachers to get to know their students, build trust, and create healthy relationships with their students. After knowing and valuing the students' cultural background, teachers will be better informed to meet their students' needs by implementing strategies the students can relate to and that will help them make connections to the real world. Additionally, trust is a factor that must be obtained by different means. In some instances, teachers can share personal stories and provide support to CLD students to demonstrate they care about their learning. Furthermore, when possible, the teacher should provide native language support.

Teachers and administrators should work collectively to create an inclusive environment for all students and teachers. Social capital is a concept highly recommended for retention of teachers, especially retention of teachers of color. When teachers are provided with opportunities to collaborate with other colleagues, they feel as if they belong and are more likely to remain in that school (Achinstein et al., 2010).

In order to implement effective strategies with CLD students, teachers need to understand and value their cultural and linguistic background. Only then can teachers see the students from an asset perspective and not from a deficit perspective. The research and participants agree that CLD students possess knowledge in their first language, and sometimes they just need language support to transfer their knowledge from their first language to English. Additionally, in order to implement effective strategies for CLD students, teachers must be familiar with foundational components of instruction for CLD students. Haynes and Zacarian (2010) indicate that after teachers become knowledgeable of the foundational concepts, they can concentrate on creating, motivating, and engaging strategies with the appropriate accommodations and modifications for CLD students. To help students understand the content and academic words, it is recommended to provide students with interesting texts they can relate to and make connections from the text to the real world (Krashen, 1999).

Using gestures, visual cues, and providing students with opportunities to practice language skills are effective strategies to implement with CLDs (Facella et al., 2005). In order for some strategies to be effective, the following have to take place in the classroom: (1) using different grouping configurations, (2) implementing and using hands-on materials and activities, (3) activating students' background knowledge, (4) using cooperative learning strategies, (5) allowing students to share personal stories, and (6) allowing students to use their first language when completing difficult tasks. Furthermore, families of CLD students should feel welcome, and opportunities for participation in their children's education should be provided. Ultimately, everyone benefits (i.e., teachers, students, families, administrators, society) when caring and socially just methods are implemented in our classrooms.

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