

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Belinda Bustos Flores and Lorena Claeys

Bilingual teacher workforce starts with English learner students

As university bilingual educators raised in Spanish-speaking homes, we have been asked by colleagues: How did you become so successful? That question represents an all-too-common deficit perspective on students who are learning two or more languages (Lucas, Villegas, & Martin, 2015). On the contrary, our stories illustrate how bilingual and bicultural experiences are assets for students and teachers.

This counter narrative is also prominent in the careers of the Latino women and men we have recruited, prepared, and retained as bilingual teachers through the Academy for Teacher Excellence Research Center at the University of Texas at San Antonio (Flores, Clark, Claeys, & Villareal, 2007).

One effort within the research center has been a grow-your-own approach inspired by our schooling and research experiences. Teachers in this program have demonstrated a long-term commitment and retention to the profession (Quezada & Ruiz, 2017; Flores, Claeys, & Gist, 2018; Gist, Bianco, & Lynn, 2019; Valenzuela, 2016).

We have led initiatives to tap into the human capital within our Latino bilingual communities to increase the pipeline of bilingual and bicultural teachers. Bilingual education teachers are in high demand across the country, and many school districts offer their bilingual education



Belinda Bustos Flores, left, and Lorena Claeys

teachers extra incentives. Yet there is a critical shortage of bilingual educators nationally.

The lack of well-prepared bilingual educators often leaves schools unable to meet the needs of English learners. We believe the solution to this quandary lies in tapping the potential within our bilingual populations, including high school students and teacher assistants.

In our positions as university faculty, we have collaborated with area community colleges to create a seamless transition for bilingual teacher candidates from high school to community college to the university through the creation of Teacher

Academy Learning Communities.

As a result of our work, we have created a research model to address the teacher shortage areas and diversify the teacher workforce (Flores et al., 2007).

BILINGUAL TEACHERS' ASSETS

An ever-increasing linguistically diverse demographic shift demonstrates the need for well-prepared bilingual teachers (Flores, 2017). Our and others' research tells us that bilinguals who decide to become teachers make a difference in their students' lives and impact the school community.

They have firsthand knowledge of the process of becoming bilingual and

OUR STORIES, OUR STRENGTHS

BELINDA BUSTOS FLORES

I was raised in a bilingual-bicultural home in Texas, but I was more Spanish-dominant as a young child. My childhood was filled with rich cultural and linguistic experiences at home, school, and the community. I still remember all the cuentos (stories) my Mamá Julia (grandmother) shared with me, how she helped me read in Spanish, and later how those stories furthered my understanding of English stories at school.

I have always been proud of my Mexican-American history and heritage, and these experiences shaped who I am today, my commitment to bilingualism, and my view of the world. My bilingual and bicultural skills have helped me become a successful student, teacher, counselor, university professor and researcher, and now an associate dean.

LORENA CLAEYS

I grew up speaking only Spanish across the Rio Grande in a border town in Mexico. In high school, I learned to speak English with limited support from an English as a Second Language (ESL) class.

In this sink-or-swim approach, I sometimes struggled and felt invisible because I sat quietly and was excluded or just went unnoticed since teachers did not possess the knowledge and skills to work with English/bilingual learners. But because I had strong academic and language skills in Spanish, I succeeded in school and went to college. I became a bilingual/ESL teacher because I wanted to work with children like myself, and I later used these skills to become a bilingual/dual language coordinator and a university administrator and researcher.

can use that knowledge to help learners become bilingual. Also, they have a deep understanding of the culture and knowledge of the community, which they can leverage to make connections and make learning meaningful for students.

We also know that teachers who are recruited from and trained in the communities where they live are more

likely to be retained in the profession as compared to teachers who don't have ties with the community (Quezada & Ruiz, 2017; Valenzuela, 2016). Bilingual learners who become bilingual teachers can later serve in other capacities such as school counselors, principals, or superintendents, thereby making the whole system more multicultural and multilingual.

We have been inspired to develop the pipeline of bilingual teachers by our own personal experiences, as we explain at left. We believe that our assets are not unique, and we know that many bilingual students have much to offer as teachers. Here are lessons we've learned along the way.

START EARLY

Preparing future bilingual teachers begins long before students choose a career path. To strengthen your pre-K-12 bilingual learners' capacity to become future bilingual teachers, ensure they have educational opportunities to engage in reading, listening, speaking, and writing in both their native language and English.

This can be accomplished by providing courses in both languages across the pre-K-12 curriculum and engaging bilingual learners in community events in which they practice their skills. For example, students can participate in community walks or cultural events in which they listen to the different languages spoken by the people in the community and then follow up by having students research the history of these practices.

It is also important that all pre-K-12 students learn to expand their perspective and understand others' ways of thinking and acting. They should have opportunities to interact with others who are different from them, read books written by authors from

diverse cultures, and develop scripts as counternarratives to negative statements about a group of people. It is important that students understand that such stereotypes must be interrogated and interrupted, rather than simply accepting these views as truths.

Recruiting. To address bilingual teacher shortages, recruit candidates from current bilingual learners. University and school districts must work collaboratively to create a college-going culture within the school focused on a pathway to prepare bilingual teachers.

It is imperative to identify and support middle and high school students with the interest and potential to become bilingual teachers. Hold information and orientation sessions for bilingual learners and their parents about the shortage of teachers and districts' demands for bilingual teachers. Offer dual credit courses and seminars focused on a teacher preparation degree pathway through a university-school partnership. As a result, high school bilingual students can matriculate with a boost of confidence into the university having completed college coursework.

Retention. Beyond recruiting bilingual candidates, we need to provide support structures with a plan of action to counter gatekeeping mechanisms (e.g. coursework, financial, high-stakes testing). To ensure retention in college, learning communities can support candidates in coursework that is challenging and assist them in passing state-mandated teacher exams (Flores et al., 2007). School districts can provide financial support by hiring bilingual candidates as teacher assistants. These types of support structures ensure that candidates remain in college and complete their degree and certification requirements.

RECOGNIZE CULTURAL WEALTH

To become culturally efficacious



ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP AN ASSET-FOCUSED PERSPECTIVE

Community garden. Take students to a community or family garden to learn about the growing process, the environment, and how people know when to plant and harvest. To promote responsible citizenship, students can create a school garden or assist in the community or family garden and share their produce with others (e.g. food bank).

Business/industry. Have students observe the work at community businesses like bakeries, auto mechanic shops, flower shops, tailors, or dressmaking shops. Ask them to reflect on how these activities teach literacy, mathematical, and scientific concepts.

Family interviews. Have students explore their cultural identity, traditions, cultural practices, and language through interviews with parents, grandparents, and other family members. Have students trace their journey from their home country on a map to learn about geography.

Volunteering. Help learners become active in the community by volunteering for civic or religious events, collecting canned goods for the food bank, reading at the library's reading hour, visiting senior centers, or tutoring after school.

Journaling/blogging/multimedia. Activities in which learners write and reflect on their community experiences can assist them in developing critical literacy skills. These experiences make learners think about their role within the community and how they are making a difference in people's lives.

Future bilingual teachers clubs. Provide resources and support to establish a Bilingual Education Student Organization (BESO) chapter at your school. Connect with your local university's BESO members and invite them to participate in your chapter activities.

bilingual teachers, candidates and teachers must recognize the community's cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and the funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006) as potential pedagogical tools.

It might seem as if this perspective would come naturally to bilingual bicultural students, but it may not. In particular, those who have not

experienced a strengths-focused approach in their own education may need opportunities to develop critical consciousness in which they explore and interrogate their own educational experiences.

Having a deep understanding of the community's cultural wealth will help bilingual candidates and teachers acquire the efficacy to use these as

pedagogical tools that help learners connect what they learn at home with school learning. See the box on p. 14 for examples of activities and strategies that can help develop this lens.

RESEARCH MODEL

Over the past 15 years, the Academy for Teacher Excellence has been intentional in recruiting Latino bilingual teachers by tapping into school districts, community colleges, and midcareer changers.

Viewing the holistic development of teacher candidates as an iterative continuous process, the academy has used a sociocultural transformative framework to support their personal, academic, and professional needs (Flores, Claeys, & Wallis, 2006).

The Teacher Academy Learning Community serves as a support mechanism (e.g. career transition coaching, lending textbooks, mobile devices, seminars, service learning, and tutoring) to ensure candidates stay in the program, graduate, and obtain teacher certification/licensure.

As candidates transition from clinical practice into the teaching profession, they engage in a community of practice with induction mentors, participate in online forums, and read about culturally efficacious praxis (Flores et al., 2018). Thus, rather than seeing an ending point, we consider teacher development as iterative and continuous in which teachers refine their knowledge and practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the benefits of bilingualism, school districts need to strive for all learners to have the opportunity to become bilingual and bicultural. Further, by partnering with universities, school districts could work on capacity building, investing in their human capital such as bilingual learners to become bilingual teachers through

grow-your-own residency models.

Residency models offer teacher candidates clinically rich experiences, including enhanced professional development on culturally and linguistically efficacious pedagogy for candidates and practicing teachers. Within professional learning communities, bilingual teacher candidates and practicing teachers can engage in critical dialogue and reflection about the efficacy and fidelity of the school district's bilingual model, instructional practices, and impact on bilingual students.

Further, providing job-embedded learning in which district or university educators model, co-teach, and plan can enhance culturally and linguistic efficacious practices. Attending to teacher candidates' and practicing teachers' ongoing development as a continuous process ensures best practices and a commitment to the profession.

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