

## Creating a Supportive Pathway to the Teaching Profession in Texas: Perspectives of a Future Bilingual Educator on the U.S.–Mexico Border

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**Abstract:** *Current education reform in the U.S. requires teacher preparation programs to educate future teachers according to the certification standards set forth by state and national accountability systems. In this research project, we examine the experiences of Mexican-American female teacher candidates attending a predominantly Hispanic higher education institution located on the U.S.-Mexico border. This article highlights the voice of one candidate, Rosa. Drawing on Freire's (1998) praxis of social justice, we attempt to bring forward her description of the pathway to becoming a fully certified bilingual teacher and discuss implications for educators concerned with equity issues.*

*As women and men, simultaneously reflecting on themselves and on the world, increase the scope of their perception, they begin to direct their observations towards previously inconspicuous phenomena.*

(Freire, 1970, p. 82).

There are a number of unique opportunities and unprecedented challenges for Hispanic women and men preparing to become teachers in Texas today. Current education reform policy in the U.S. requires teacher preparation programs to

educate future teachers according to the certification standards set forth by state and national accountability systems. Texas has become the first state in the U.S. to establish a K-16 accountability system and Texas institutions of higher education with teacher preparation programs have been held accountable for the performance of pre-service teachers on state required certification examinations since 1998 (Pohan & Ward, 2011).

Although considerable research has been conducted with respect to the issues of standards, teaching, and teacher preparation, studies attempting to understand Hispanic university students' perspectives on bilingual teacher preparation programs are scarce (Flores, Sheets, & Clark, 2011). In this paper, we describe some of the experiences of one Mexican-American female teacher candidate, currently engaged in her journey to become a bilingual teacher. Drawing on Freire's (1998) praxis of social justice, we highlight the voice of a Hispanic female teacher candidate attending a predominantly Hispanic higher education institution located on the U.S.-Mexico border. Through this narrative, excerpted from a larger case study, we interweave her life experiences with academic discussion of some of the political and socio-economic conditions prevalent in the U.S. The significance of this study draws from the ideology that claims that border culture is rooted in the influence that literal and metaphorical boundaries (geopolitical, socioeconomic, and linguistic) exert on the lives of border crossers (Anzaldúa, 1999). As de la Piedra and Guerra (2012) assert: "In our increasingly globalized and technologized world, crossing borders is enacted for multiple purposes, in different languages, and through multiple media" (p. 627). Cross-cultural understanding helps dismiss the stereotyping and labeling that limit student success (Rippberger & Staudt, 2003). We, the authors, as border crossers, bilingual, and bicultural teacher mentors believe that giving future teachers the opportunity to reflect and dialogue can help them develop a critical consciousness which will have a powerful influence as effective teachers and advocates of social justice.

This paper is divided into four main sections: (1) context and setting, (2) methodology, (3) findings and (4) implications for policy and practice.

**Context and Setting**

Approximately 38% of the Texas population is of Hispanic origin (the terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to people of Mexican, Central and South American descent living in the U.S.). The Hispanic population in Texas increased by 41.8% from 2000 to 2010, while the non-Hispanic population in Texas increased by only 10.6% during the same period (U.S. Census, 2010). Because of its historic roots and proximity with Mexico (Romo, 2005), the Texas border region has a much larger proportion of Hispanics than the rest of the state. For example, 82% of the county residents where this study was conducted are Hispanic (U.S. Census, 2010).

School demographics have changed substantially, and the need for increasing the numbers of Hispanic teachers in public schools (particularly bilingual teachers) is significant in Texas and throughout the nation (Fránquiz, Salazar, & DeNicolò, 2011). In the US, Hispanics are the largest minority group (Fry & Lopez, 2012) but have some of the lowest educational attainment levels (Villalpando, 2010). Among all pre-K through 12th grade public school students, 23.9%, were Hispanic in 2011 (Fry & Lopez, 2012).

Given the dynamic changes of today's student population in the US and the increasing number of students of Hispanic origin, especially on the U.S.-Mexico border, the relevance of the statement Villegas (2007) makes with respect to the education of minority students becomes even more critical for educators concerned with equity issues:

Preparing teachers who are responsive to the student population that schools have historically left behind is imperative. The urgency of this task is brought into sharp focus by the increasing racial/ethnic diversity of the K-12 student population. The overriding goal of the social justice agenda in teacher education is to prepare teachers who can teach all students well, not just those traditionally well-served by the country (pp. 371-372).

In the sections that follow, the authors weave the voice of one Hispanic future bilingual teacher with statements and documents from scholars and policymakers, attempting to democratize the conversation about the experience of pre-service bilingual teachers enrolled in programs of study on the pathway to full certification.

## **Methodology**

In listening to and learning about the experience as described by this non-traditional student (i.e., a person between the ages of 25 to 65), this qualitative case study aims to help generate new understandings about the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

## **Case Study: The Voice of One Bilingual Teacher Candidate**

This research is based on a qualitative case study approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Case studies are the preferred strategy to investigate the “how or why” (Yin, 2003, p. 1) of the research problem. The case is part of a larger study involving a participatory action research (PAR) project that was developed over a 12-month period in the context of a predominantly Hispanic institution of higher education, with large numbers of undergraduate students pursuing teaching as a career.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The researchers developed an in-depth understanding of the issues underlying the research topic over a period of twelve months, working closely with Hispanic teacher candidates as they prepared for the challenges of certification testing. Data collection consisted of focus group interviews, individual interviews, and field notes from participant observation sessions in test preparation reviews and tutoring sessions. Data were analyzed using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011). The individual whose case is selected for this article, Rosa (pseudonym), is highlighted to provide a more detailed analysis of the primary themes and findings of the study. In this article, Rosa’s voice is presented to illustrate the pathway to becoming a fully certified bilingual teacher. In the next section, we present our findings.

## **Findings**

Five main themes emerged from our analysis of Rosa’s narrative, expanding understanding of the pathways followed by Hispanic future teachers. These included the importance of: affirming bicultural identity, the role of motivation in becoming a bilingual teacher, resistance to high-stakes testing, language discriminatory experiences, and social networks.

**Affirming Bicultural Identity**

Rosa, our study participant, is an example of many of today's Hispanic future educators. She is a college student who is close to achieving her dream of becoming a bilingual teacher. Like the majority of nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in the teacher education program at an officially designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) on the U.S.-Mexico border, Rosa is older than the traditional age range (18–24 years) of a U.S. college student. She is married with children and will be the first in her family to graduate from college. Rosa is determined, like many aspiring teachers residing on the U.S.-Mexico border, to make a difference in the lives of her future K-12 students. Many of them will be English Language Learners (ELLs) whose realities will be a reflection of Rosa's own life experiences. Recent immigrants, first-generation college goers from low-income family backgrounds face a number of challenges (e.g., McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vasquez Heilig, 2008) yet Rosa knows that there are great opportunities for students of color in U.S. schools today, and she is determined to lead her students to success. Like many of her future students, Rosa was born in the US, yet she identifies more deeply with the Mexican culture. Both of her parents emigrated from Mexico before she was born. Because she wants to instill in her children the family values she learned from her parents, every summer the family travels to the interior of Mexico to visit her husband's relatives. Rosa describes herself as more connected to cultural values in Mexico than with the U.S. culture:

I would say I identify more with the Mexican culture than the American culture... I live here but I don't feel I have any... My roots aren't here—not as, like maybe my children would feel it but still I don't think they will, because it's very different the way that we as a culture operate than the American culture does. We're very family oriented and we can't really be apart from our families whereas the American culture, you know, is more like searching for independence, you want to move away from your parents, and have as little to do with your family (personal communication, February 14, 2012).

**Motivation: Memories of Teachers Who Make a Difference**

Multiple studies point to persistent achievement gaps between Caucasian and Hispanic students in U.S. public schools (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). The

high school dropout rate for Latinos is 50% (Villalpando, 2010). Fortunately for Rosa, she did not become part of the dropout statistics. However, due to her limited financial resources, Rosa started her teacher preparation at the local community college where she earned an associate of arts degree in teaching and then transferred to a four-year public university. She was inspired to become a teacher by her 5th grade teacher who through her close interactions and loving connection with her students showed them that caring was one of the most relevant traits of teachers who make a difference:

I want to touch someone else's life like she did with mine. She cared about all her students. She showed us how to find what we wanted. She gave us all the opportunity to do our best. She was a positive image for us and even if you made a mistake, she said, "That's OK, you can try again, everybody makes mistakes". The most important thing is that she cared. My mom went to the classroom and talked with her after school. She did not treat anyone differently (Rosa, personal communication, March 2, 2012).

Rosa added that although her teacher had light complexion and appeared to be Caucasian, she was Hispanic and most importantly, she spoke Spanish. As a result, Rosa's mother felt welcome in the classroom because the teacher was aware of the culture and could communicate with Rosa's mother in Spanish.

This story and Rosa's memories of these school experiences highlight key elements of Freire's (1998) praxis of love and caring, which he frequently illustrated through his own questioning techniques:

What is to be thought and hoped of me as a teacher if I am not steeped in that other type of knowing that requires that I be open to caring for the well-being of my students and the educative experience in which I participate? (pp. 124-125)

Similarly, Noddings (2011) argues for the inclusion of themes of caring in the curriculum "in an age when violence among schoolchildren is at an unprecedented level" (p. 54). Rosa's narrative illustrates Noddings' assertion that we became teachers "for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for some subject and for helping people to learn" (p. 68).

**Resistance to High-Stakes Testing**

The teaching profession, from preparation through certification, is one of the career pathways that has been heavily impacted by high stakes testing and the focus on test scores to assess quality. Generally, teacher candidates in Texas are required to complete a bachelor's degree and successfully complete two certification tests, the Pedagogy and Professional Responsibilities (PPR) Examination and a content knowledge exam (TEA, 2011). The bilingual teacher candidate must also complete each of these, and additionally must successfully complete one more test. Thus, to become a bilingual teacher in Texas, students must pass three exams in order to acquire the required credentials and be hired as highly qualified teachers. In addition to the PPR and the content exams, they need to achieve success on the Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test (TEA, 2011).

Expressing her resistance towards the status quo in her description of the inequities and unfairness imposed on bilingual teacher candidates, Rosa stated:

I think it is harsh and cruel [that we, bilingual teacher candidates, are tested more]. It is easier for the students going for generalist [teaching degrees] because they just need to concentrate in the content and I have to prepare for the PPR, the content, bilingual, and dominate Spanish. If they only knew what bilingual educators have to go through in comparison to them, they would not have those negative attitudes and perceptions (personal communication, March 2, 2012).

Angrist and Guryan (2007) note the negative association between the increasing emphasis on teacher testing as the sole measure of quality, and the decreasing probability that Hispanics will be well represented among the cadres of new teachers in public schools, stating that the increased reliance on standardized tests as the primary measure of quality often raises concerns about adverse impacts on members of minority groups, who often have lower test scores. "Given that Hispanics have markedly lower Praxis scores than non-Hispanic Whites or Blacks, it is perhaps not surprising that teacher testing has a negative impact on Hispanic representation, especially among new teachers" (Angrist & Guryan, 2007, p. 24). Moreover, lower SAT scores by non-Caucasians have led some schools to put less weight on the SAT for admissions.

Rosa attends one of the universities where less weight is put on SAT scores for admissions. On the U.S.-Mexico border, with a long history of binational, bilingual, bicultural partnerships, there have been some notable improvements in providing high quality, culturally responsive education for Hispanic students. Presently, we see a continuous expansion and growth of colleges and universities on the U.S.-Mexico border. One of these is Border University (pseudonym), an officially designated HSI with a large number of undergraduate and graduate programs, resulting in a high number of qualified professionals, including Hispanic teachers who are prepared to meet the needs of Spanish speaking students. Bilingual education preparation is a large and growing program of studies in the College of Education (COE) at Border University.

### **Experiences of Language Discrimination**

With respect to the attitudes toward Mexican culture and language, progress has been made as well, yet further attention is needed. Rosa perceives there is acceptance among her classmates and professors in the bilingual education courses but laments the negative attitude of non-Spanish speakers in other teacher education fields:

On one occasion, I had to defend what some people call ‘that accent’. One time a classmate was laughing at a girl with a heavy accent, giving a presentation. I took it as a personal offense because I would not like it if they were laughing at my husband. My husband has an accent because although he was born in California, he grew up and went to school in Mexico. I was upset. After class, one of our classmates asked him why he was laughing and he said “And she wants to be a teacher with ‘that accent?’” I told him: “You know that it does not have to do anything with her mental abilities and I do not doubt that she may become a better teacher than you” (personal communication, March 2, 2012).

Clearly, further research and action are needed to breakdown these attitudes and behaviors. Faculty, staff, and students are taking such steps. For example, those who enroll in the “generalist” (i.e., non-bilingual) teacher preparation programs are now required to take two or more courses in the bilingual education track, developing

a better understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity. During the last decade, the COE at Border University has been continuously developing and implementing teacher education curricula, incorporating research-based strategies and techniques geared to reduce stereotypes and prejudice against minority groups.

### **Social Networks: Peers as Support Group**

According to Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, and Martin (2009), successful adaptation among immigrant students appears to be linked to the quality of relationships they forge in their school setting. These authors add that peers can support academic engagement by clarifying readings or lectures, exchanging information about helpful tutors, required tests, and other college pathway knowledge. At Border University, the cohort model has been in place for several years, and Rosa has found social support from her classmates who are also part of her cohort:

From my experience, as far as the degree plan, the advising center gave me a copy of it and that was it. I kind of knew what I was supposed to do and I would go every semester to check that they had not changed anything. As far as information on the test and everything else, it would just be through friends or any rumor. It would be based on what they had already gone through or what they had heard and then I would go from there. When I first started, I did not even know that I had to take qualifying exams. The advising center does send the newsletter but sometimes you do not read it. As an incoming transfer student, it was just mostly through friends (personal communication, February 14, 2012).

Additionally, Rosa attributes her success in passing the PPR test to the preparation she received in the teacher education courses she took. The COE offers review sessions in the different concentration fields of study, and she passed one of the two practice, “qualifying”, exams that all are required to take before graduation.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

High stakes accountability issues impact students in the U.S. public education system at every level and the schooling experiences of K-12 students from

immigrant and minority backgrounds mirror Rosa's higher education journey in many ways. The need to support the educational success of minority students needs to be addressed at different levels, in Texas as well as in the nation. In Texas, more than 135,000 youth are lost from the state's high schools every year and the combined dropout rate for African American and Latino students is more than 60% (McNeil et al., 2008). Numerous scholars (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012; Nieto, 2010) blame the increasing emphasis on high-stakes testing for the low academic achievement of Latinos. McNeil et al. (2008) attribute the high dropout rate specifically to the No Child Left Behind policy and to the Texas accountability system that imposed a model of standardized testing for the entire nation that has "subtracted from" instead of "adding to" the education of Mexican Americans and other ELLs enrolled in public schools (Valenzuela, 1999). According to Valenzuela (1999), schools subtract from youth in two major ways: first, by dismissing their definition of education and second, through assimilationist policies and practices that minimize their culture and language. These findings raise awareness about the need to address the educational gap between Latino and Caucasian students.

Educators are operating in an era of decreased control over curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009). Indeed, McLaren and Huerta-Charles (2010) argue that political and business leaders have been given a green light to restructure schooling for their own purposes; standardized tests are frequently depicted as the means to ensure that the educational system is aligned with U.S. economic policies and with the global economy. Furthermore, Hvolbek (2012) states:

The root of the problem is that we have absorbed the socio-economic and intellectual values of our age, an age ruled by business and science. The pragmatic values of business and science have become the values of our educational practices. Within these two orientations there is little understanding of and no place for the life enhancing studies of philosophy, history, literature, and the arts. Today we train students. A practical utility determines our thinking (para. 3).

Nothing is more likely to reinforce the uncritical and uncreative character of public education than its added emphasis on "performance standards" (Shapiro & Purpel, 1998) that disregards the value of culture, language, and history. Setting

standards is a function of political authority, bound up with the political theory and social values of that authority (Garrison, 2009). In discussing the history of standardized testing, Garrison explains that “academic examinations are connected with legitimating a political order or policy” (p. 11). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), low-scoring schools, which generally serve low-income students and students of color, are driven to focus more on preparation for high-stakes tests that emphasize basic skills and closed-ended tasks. They argue that in contrast, high performing schools, which generally serve more affluent student bodies, are able to maintain a well-rounded, open-ended, and richer curriculum.

As disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes among ethnic groups have continued to grow, the resulting achievement gap has reached critical proportions in Latino communities (Villalpando, 2010). Moreover, as Escamilla (2006) asserts, the “language-as-a-problem” (p. 2329) paradigm has become embedded in school policies and practices, particularly in districts and schools with a large number of students who are second language learners of English, and most especially with regard to students whose first language is Spanish. Such a deficit perspective “assumes that schools function well... and if students are not achieving..., schools are not at fault” (Irizarry & Nieto, 2010, p. 113).

Understanding cultural differences to help teachers, administrators, and policymakers address the needs of a diverse nation, and to increase student learning across the board and across the nation is important (Rippberger & Staudt, 2003). Children raised within the Mexican culture are not always aware of the expectations and the high levels of competition demanded of students in U.S. schools, and as a result, they are frequently marginalized. Immigrants and language minority students represent significant contributions to the vitality and strength of the U.S. public education system: “We need to reevaluate bilingual education as an instrument of enrichment for both English speakers and speakers of other languages” (Rippberger & Staudt, 2003, p. 145).

African-American, Hispanic, and Native American teachers are often leaders among those future teachers who will work successfully in schools with minority populations and low-income families. Increasing the pipeline to a teaching career for individuals from those groups is one of the changes that will lead to graduating more K-12 teachers with high levels of commitment and the respected credential guiding children from low-income backgrounds to success, helping to turn around our nation’s low-performing schools.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the mid-20th century, Freire and his followers formed literacy circles in Brazil, working with adult learners who began to read texts as a means to generate meaning about the world. These texts were illustrations of familiar settings in the Brazilian peasants' experience, such as a pictorial scene of a farm with men and women workers, a landlord, and crops. Thus, discussions built from the peasants' funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), unlocking generative themes about inequities that were latent in society. The first literate act was to learn and produce codes with which to speak these latent themes; these codes are "a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges" (Freire, 1970, p. 101) that constitute a larger critical framework about the world. Freire did not immediately provide men and women with pen and paper and solicit descriptions of inequities as a first step. Rather, engaging in authentic dialogue about people's lived experience in the world preceded writing and analysis of generative themes, leading to change (Yang, 2009). Similarly, the aim of this study has been to engage the participant and researchers in a dialogue involving a deep examination of the powerful structures that influence the educational opportunities of Hispanics residing on the U.S.-Mexico border.

The story of this bilingual Hispanic college student, Rosa, who will become a credentialed teacher in Texas, reveals important insights about her educational trajectory that mirrors the experiences of growing numbers of Latinos in the United States who have the opportunity to attend an institution of higher education. The voice of our participant, speaking of her lived experience also contributes to the literature related to closing the achievement gap between students of color and students of Caucasian origin.

Students attending this university who want to become teachers cannot have any prejudiced ideas about children who are not part of the mainstream culture, thinking that they will not be able to learn at the same level as White children (Rosa, personal communication, March 2, 2012).

We concur with Rosa and all pre-service teachers who share this conviction and commitment. These future educators, in turn, will create supportive pathways that lead to excellence for all children, including ELLs, in U.S. public schools today.

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A Guide To The Careers of the Future. Based on current technology trends, here are 10 high-paying digital careers where the demand in the next decade will outstrip the supply of people with the necessary skills and training: 1. 3D Printing. We're talking about the fate of our economy and the questionable resiliency of our Nation's critical infrastructure. I started DIY Genius in 2011 to advance self-directed learning by teaching the digital skills that make it possible to make a living doing work that you enjoy and give you the freedom to work anywhere. Related Posts. Startup Jobs: 30 Fast-Growing Tech Startups Hiring Right Now. And in teaching students a second language, we are already creating a bilingual setting to some degree. But the nuts and bolts of bringing a bilingual immersion model to life in a classroom or a school can be elusive. Is it possible to bring the glorious chaos of real life into the practical daily structures of a classroom setting? Can we make sure that students in a bilingual program will be taught the same core subjects as their peers? One of the criticisms of bilingual education is that students often do not perform as well on standardized tests. The administration and staff are supportive and knowledgeable. Ask anyone that works in your school about your initiative for immersion bilingual education, and they will be able to tell you what it is and why it is of value to the students. Eight Professions Relevant in the Next Decade. 1. Programmer / Software Developer. Programmers are engaged in the development of software for the automation of various processes (accounting, sales, security systems, production, etc.), the creation of mobile applications and websites, as well as operating systems using programming languages. Programmers are trained at universities and continue studying throughout their work activities, since the processes in IT are developing rapidly. The lack of high-quality system education in programming, coupled with the active growth of the IT sector, crea... Current Perspectives on Teaching the Four Skills. ELI HINKEL Seattle University Seattle, Washington, United States. This article presents an overview of recent developments in second language (L2) teaching and highlights the trends that began in the 1990s and the 2000s and are likely to continue to affect instruction in L2 skills at least in the immediate future. In the past 15 years or so, several crucial factors have combined to affect current perspectives on the teaching of English worldwide: (a) the decline of methods, (b) a growing emphasis on both bottom-up and top-down skills, (c) the creation of new knowledge about English, and (d) integrated and contextualized teaching of multiple language skills. Teaching is hard. Staying in the teaching profession can sometimes be even harder. There's a lack of national data about attrition, but the Queensland College of Teachers estimates anywhere between 8-50% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years. High workloads, perceived lack of support, work-life balance and the absence of recognition appear to impact new teachers' decisions to stay. 4. Creating a school community of mentors. Supporting new teachers should be a shared responsibility. Developing a community of mentors within the school culture ensures the sustainability of future mentoring support. Through reflection and evaluation, future planning can be informed and modified to better support future new teacher induction programs. Teaching.