

LATINX TEACHER ADVOCATES ENGAGED IN SOCIAL JUSTICE AGENDAS: A LatCrit PERSPECTIVE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students (CLDs) has been a challenge for years as classroom teachers and certified English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers struggle to stay current with the pedagogical approaches and strategies to work with this student population. Additionally, it is especially hard to serve this student population without knowing students' background knowledge of English. In order to help CLD students succeed in the classroom, teachers may implement effective teaching strategies.

Overall, the purpose of this study was to explore how teachers who graduated from a federally funded bilingual and bicultural education program navigated educational structures while becoming teacher advocates who were engaged in justice agendas concerning their CLD students in a midwestern state. This study explored (a) how five Latinx teachers who graduated from the BESITOS program – a federally funded and bilingual and bicultural education program – engage in justice agendas for their Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students (CLDs), (b) the things these in-service teachers attribute as barriers and support systems in their social justice work, and (c), the educational strategies the in-service Latinx teachers value in their role as advocates in their social justice work.

INTRODUCTION

This research is needed because English Language Learners (ELLs) often support systems and resources required to acquire and retain the English language. Scholars must devote more time to researching effective strategies and support systems provided to CLDs, a traditionally marginalized population, so they can learn more effectively. Research must take into consideration that although many CLDs were born in the United States, about “80 percent of the parents of these CLDs were born outside of the United States” (Sousa, 2011 p. 1), and about 80 percent of CLDs speak Spanish as their first language, 8 percent speak Asian languages, and 12 percent speak other languages. Unfortunately, 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 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), there is evidence that minority teachers of similar backgrounds as their students may have higher expectations for their students than white teachers. Evidence also indicates that having a teacher of the same race/ethnicity can have positive impacts on students' attitudes, motivation, and performance (NCES, 2019). Combined with the fact that the percentage of white school teachers at the K-12 level is over 80 percent while the percentage of Latino/Hispanic teachers has only risen from 6 to 9 percent in the past twelve years (NCES, 2019), there are many barriers when it comes to serving this student population.

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METHODS

Since over 90 percent of the former BESITOS students are Latinx, it made sense to use qualitative research methods as the overarching framework for this study. For the theoretical framework, the study applied Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), a variation of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and the methodological framework that this research implemented was *Trenzas y Mestizaje*. *Trenzas* means to braid multiple strands together while *Mestizaje* is the Spanish word for

“mixture; both terms are key components of the Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) that attempts to deconstruct Eurocentric and reconstruct non-Eurocentric knowledge systems. To examine the participants’ experiences regarding social justice, this study utilized individual and

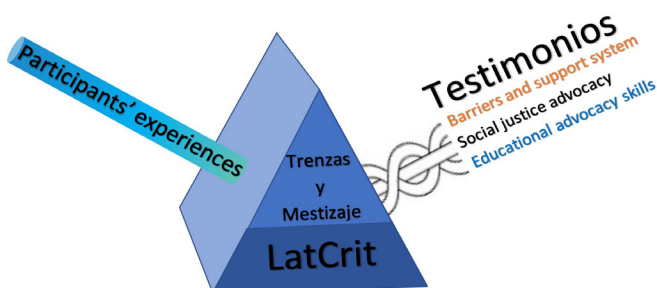
group *pláticas* (formal and/or informal conversations) elicited by the use of *tesoros* (tangible or intangible treasures of valuable artifacts) which produced *testimonios* (a critical Latin American oral tradition practice that links “the spoken word to social action and benefits the oral narrative or personal experience as a source of knowledge” (Benmayor, et al., 1997) regarding their social justice agendas working with CLDs and CLDs’ families. These elicitations/*tesoros* were pictures, videos, letters, and objects that were meaningful and had sentimental value to the participants. Through the utilization of these decolonizing methodologies, the participants could employ their language and cultural knowledge to express themselves freely and tell their stories from their perspective.

Three research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways do the participants engage in justice agendas for their students?
2. What do the participants attribute as barriers and support system(s) in their justice work?
3. What significant educational strategies do the participants value in their role as advocates in their justice work?

and seven themes emerged from these questions: (1) *tesoros*, (2) relationships, (3) Advocacy for CLD students: High Expectations of All Students, (4) Barriers as Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers: Resilience, (5) Support System as Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers: *hechale ganas/work hard*, (6) Effective Classroom Strategies, and (7) Importance of Parent and Family Involvement.

Regarding the first question, *tesoros* (Theme #1) from students and families, as well as the building of relationships (Theme #2), indicate that the participants had engaged in justice agendas that impacted their students. For one, the *tesoros* that participants brought to the *pláticas* were of great sentimental value. One participant stated that “Although this *tesoro* is intangible, I have great memories and I learned a lot from my students. This *tesoro* is food. You know that we love sharing food and one of the ways my students like to show their appreciation is by bringing food to the classroom.” After mentioning this *tesoro* in the group *pláticas*, all other participants agreed and could relate to these experiences and



"*Pláticas* are interviews that incorporate the cultural factor within the interview and modify the structure in order to gain trust.

A significant difference is that 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

underscored the importance of confianza (trust) with their students and their students' families. Beyond this finding, participants shared that "Building relationships helps you make connections with your students." Both tesoros and the building of positive relationships were the two most common themes in the individual and group pláticas.

Regarding question two, a recurring theme while discussing advocacy for students and families by all participants was the concept of having high expectations of all students (Theme #3). The saying "hechale ganas" resonated in this theme and in the support system theme. Latinx people commonly use this phrase to tell each other to work hard and not give up no matter the circumstances. On a regular basis, this is one of the best pieces of advice and/or motivational words people can provide to others. One of the participants mentioned that one of his teachers made a difference in his life just by believing in him and telling him he could do anything he put his mind to. In addition, all participants mentioned having a role model implementing social justice by providing guidance and encouraging them to stay in school and attend college.

By contrast, the participants expressed shared experiences with barriers (Theme #4) such as immigration status, being a second language learner, coming from low socioeconomic status, not getting academic support at home, and being first generation students. Three of the five participants mentioned feeling pretty discouraged by the barriers keeping them from providing support to their students. They believed they could really make a difference if they could incorporate different ideas into the curriculum and use strategies appropriate for their CLD students, but they were not supported and/or their ideas were not taken into consideration.

Despite not receiving academic support from their parents and/or families, the participants also expressed that they all received some type of support throughout their lives (Theme #5). Before entering college, they were all encouraged by their parents to attend college and study hard in order to become somebody important in their lives. In a similar vein, as pre-service teachers, all participants mentioned receiving support from faculty and staff from the BESITOS program and some professors from Kansas State University. Still, all participants continue feeling that their ethnicity and cultural background are factors for not being fully supported or seen as contributors to the education system.

Regarding question three, some effective classroom strategies (Theme #6) the participants implement in the classroom are Biography Driven Instruction and cooperative learning. Biography Driven Instruction allows the participants to get to know their students and their background knowledge. After building a good relationship with their students and getting to know their interests and needs, the participants are able to look for literature and/or books that have stories the students can relate to and connect with. For cooperative learning, students are sometimes asked to bring pictures from home that are important to them and then sharing the item in a small group or partner. The students are able to practice their listening and speaking skills with this exercise. Lastly, the participants emphasized that it is just as crucial to build relationships with parents and families as it is with students. By getting to know students' families, teachers are also able to get to know their needs and how to better provide the individual support needed by each family. Though some participants found it harder than others, all participants agreed that parent involvement (Theme #7)

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is imperative to the education of their students.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the findings were positive about the type of support the participants receive in their current schools. Although some barriers still exist, the participants have learned to manage and overcome them in order to provide support to their students and their students' families. The participants' tesoros were special items that remind the participants of the reasons why they are teaching.

Participants continue providing support to their students to help them overcome language barriers as they did themselves. They provide personal examples and tell their personal success stories to their students to inspire them and motivate them to continue attending school. The participants take into consideration the students' ethnic backgrounds and view them from the asset perspective and implement cultural and linguistically responsive teaching in their classrooms.

These perspectives allow the participants to implement effective strategies, which allow the students to make connections to their personal lives.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the recommendations for practice involves the recruitment and retention of teachers of color through the practice of discussing the support system provided to these teachers, especially in their first couple of years in the profession. In other words, explaining the recruitment and retention process of teachers of color and discussing the support system they receive in order to work with CLD students.

A second recommendation for practice is to provide opportunities for growth and professional development for teachers working with CLD students.

Achinstein et al. (2010) indicate that schools that provide opportunities for teachers to network and participate in professional development tend to have higher retention rates. The participants who left their first place of employment indicated not having any opportunities for professional development or mentors to guide them through their first years of teaching.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

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