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Acknowledging and Affirming University Students' Linguistic and Cultural Capital in an Education Course

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Abstract

In order to effectively prepare K-12 teachers to serve linguistically and culturally diverse students, it is vital to provide opportunities for them to develop their intra- and intercultural understandings. This paper describes how a faculty member designed and delivered a teacher preparation class centered on culturally relevant approaches. Students enrolled in this course completed assignments that were designed to guide them through an intracultural reflection to then expand their understandings to an intercultural context. Considering the students' diverse linguistic and cultural experiences, assignments and projects provided opportunities for them to recognize their linguistic and cultural wealth in order to build their awareness for others' experiences. After each assignment and project, the students reflected on their journey and planned how they could use their understanding when working with K-12 students living in a bilingual, bicultural community.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogies, HSIs, teacher preparation

Acknowledging and Affirming University Students' Linguistic and Cultural Capital in an Education Course

There has been a steady increase in the population of Latinx community in the U.S. The significantly growing number of school aged Latinx students enrolled in U.S. public schools. Between 1996 and 2016, the total enrollment of Latinx students in public elementary and secondary schools increased from 14.1% to 25% and is projected to continue to increase to 29% by 2026 (Bauman & Murray, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Data suggests that approximately 75%–79% of students classified as English learners report Spanish as their home language (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). With the growth of Latinx, native Spanish speakers in schools, Spanish is noted as the most common language in Texas schools. Additionally, in the ten-year span between the 2007-2008 and 2017-2018 academic school years, the Latinx student enrollment in Texas increased by over 28%. On the other hand, the White, Non-Latinx student enrollment decreased by an estimated 7.5%, resulting in Latinx students accounting for the majority of the overall Texas student enrollment, 52.4% by the 2017-18 academic school year (Texas Education Agency, 2018). In 2020-21, Latinx students represented the largest percentage of total enrollment (52.9%), followed by White (26.5%), African American (12.7%), Asian (4.7%), and multiracial (2.7%) students in Texas public schools (Texas Education Agency, 2021)

With the increase of Latinx students in the K-12 schools, there is a greater demand for schools to hire bilingual teachers, or teachers prepared to work with bilingual learners. Bilingual Learners (BLs)¹, also commonly referred to as English language learners (ELLs), English Learners (ELs), or Emergent Bilinguals represent a steadfast growing school age population in the U.S. school system. In Texas, there was only one qualified ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher for every 46 students who need English support during the 2014-2015 school year (TEA, 2020), this is above the average class size. Additionally, in the 2017-2018 school year, Texas public schools had more than 1 million bilingual learners, that was about 10,000 more from the previous year (TEA, 2020). The challenge with such an increase is if schools want to offer a 22 to 1 student-teacher ratio in the classroom, there is a need to add over 400 bilingual/ESL certified teachers annually. Therefore, there is a substantial need for university teacher-preparation programs to focus on training education students to serve linguistic and culturally diverse students in a way that not only benefits their academic and linguistic needs, but also addresses their cultural and affective development.

The focus of this article is to describe a teaching approach that is centered on culturally relevant approaches in a teacher preparation course called Intercultural Context. This 2000 level course is designed for students to complete before they apply to their teacher preparation program of specialization. The course description from the course catalog was:

This education course introduces students to issues related to equity, diversity, and social justice for culturally and linguistically diverse students and exceptional learners as well as classroom strategies for engaging diverse learners (course syllabus for EDFR 2301).

The expanded course description that was added in the course syllabus was for this class was:

¹ The term Bilingual Learners is used in this article to acknowledge the linguistic skill sets of all bilingual students, including various levels of bilingualism, and shift to a more affirming label. BL is more inclusive and celebratory of students' bilingualism.

This course is a reading-, writing-, and research-intensive, discussion-focused seminar, where students are expected to engage critically with course texts (books, articles, films, etc.) and their classmates, in English, Spanish, and/or bilingually, to pursue real-life inquiry into educational settings and problems. Students are also expected to develop analytic and synthetic reasoning skills in speech and writing. This course will be a collaborative, learner-centered experience, where we are ALL learners and play active roles in our own and each other's learning. This course will also require all students to participate in a service-learning project with the Edinburg Housing Authority (EHA). Each student will be required to complete 1.5 hours per week at EHA to meet course requirements.

The instructional approaches used in this course aimed to offer students an opportunity to develop their inter- and intra-cultural awareness. Intercultural awareness is understanding the differences between distinct cultural groups, including religious and sexual orientation; intracultural awareness is studying cultural within the same cultural context (Deardorff, 2008). The students enrolled in this course were mainly Latinx students with bilingual linguistic skills that declared education as a major. About 85% of the students had not yet applied to their teacher preparation program. The majority of the students enrolled in the class during the collection of reflections were specializing, or intending to specialize, in bilingual education. The others varied between social studies composite (2 students), special education (2), and math (3 students) specializations. This is to say that grew up in a bilingual community and many also grew up in a Spanish-speaking home. Students enrolled in this course completed assignments that were designed to guide them through an intra- and inter-cultural reflection to then expand their experiences to their own classroom one day.

Context of the Region and University

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) is located in deep South Texas, also referred to as the Rio Grande Valley. The region has an estimated population of 1.35 million people of which around 90% are Latinx (US Census, 2012). There is much diversity within the Latinx group that resides in the area. Most are from Mexican decent; some are immigrants, and other vary from first to fifth+ generation immigrants, while others have had family reside in the region for generations and the transboundary region US-Mexico border crossed their land. Many are bilingual, with an estimated 78.05% of the population choosing Spanish as their home language (US Census, 2018). With such a unique regional cultural and linguistic richness, teachers in the schools need to be prepared to maximize their learning opportunities by using culturally relevant (CR) pedagogies in the classroom. Therefore, it is critical to model using CR pedagogies in a teacher preparation program.

UTRGV is one of the largest *Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI)* in the U.S (Excelencia in Education, 2020). The University's Vision states:

To be one of the nation's leaders in higher education, its premier Hispanic-serving institution, and a highly engaged bilingual university, with exceptional educational, research, and creative opportunities that serve as catalysts for transformation in the Rio Grande Valley and beyond (UTRGV Strategic Plan, 2015).

Part of the values that UTRGV lists in its Strategic Plan is to establish an accessible educational environment that will "cultivate and enhance the diverse, multicultural, and linguistic assets of our university" (UTRGV Strategic Plan, 2015). The multi-campus University is spread across the RGV. The University aims to influence and empower its students, and also enrich the daily lives of those in the region. It also aims to have international influence and impact on higher

education, bilingual education, health education, biomedical research, and emerging technology that motivates progressive change. One of its seven values, *Diversity, Access, and Inclusion*, centers on establishing an accessible educational environment that “cultivates and enhance the diverse, multicultural, and linguistic assets of our university and the Rio Grande Valley” (UTRGV Strategic Plan, 2015). This is a vital core value of the University and should be used as a model for other universities, especially other HSIs. Valuing the cultural and linguistic values of its students and the region they are from is critical. As UTRGV evolves and develops into the higher education institution it describes in the Strategic Plan, faculty must also find creative ways to infuse culturally relevant pedagogies in the classrooms in order to more effectively support the goals and vision of the University.

Proposed Framework for Maximizing Linguistic and Cultural Capital in the University Classroom

Aligning the instruction of a teacher education course to the University’s vision and values led to designing and delivering the instruction in a more culturally relevant approach. Thinking of ways to capitalize on the university students’ linguistic and cultural assets was a priority for me, the professor. There is much literature in the field of teaching and learning that claim connecting the students’ experiences to the new content they need to acquire is essential (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). This is true for students in K-12 classrooms as it is for those at the university. It is also very important to note that when working with education students, it is a prime opportunity to model effective instructional models that they are expected to use once they become professional educators.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogies in Higher Education

The integration of culturally relevant pedagogies is critical for all university-level students, especially those that will become professional educators. Some of the culturally relevant pedagogies used in this undergraduate course, Intercultural Context of Schooling, framework included understanding funds of knowledge (recognizing and valuing community wealth), place-based learning, tapping into linguistic assets through the use of translanguaging and allowing students in the course to select the language for the assignment, and analyzing authentic cultural-representative literature. These instructional approaches celebrate the cultural richness and linguistic diversity that the education students bring to the university classroom, just as their future K-12 students will bring to their schools.

Using Culturally Relevant (CR) Pedagogies supports the effectiveness of instruction in K-12 and university classrooms. Part of CR Pedagogies is using funds of knowledge. Students of all levels carry their experiences from home and their community that can be used to build and cultivate new knowledge in the formal setting of a classroom. These home experiences are referred to as the *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The funds of knowledge are students’ everyday life experiences (interactions with family and community members, watching parents work, going to the grocery store, cooking at home, etc.) that should be used as bridges to school practices. This helps validates the students’ home experiences at school.

Translanguaging as a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Another form of CR Pedagogies is allowing and validating translanguaging in the classroom. Translanguaging is when students use their linguistic and cognitive resources to make sense of the academic content being delivered in a formal setting (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

Translanguaging is a strategy educators can use to help students draw on all their linguistic capital as they read, write, and discuss school content in a new language. Through translanguaging, students' home language serves as a scaffold in the process of acquiring additional languages and academic content in the classroom. Therefore, students can leverage their linguistic capital to acquire the school content delivered in the classroom.

Place-based Education as a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Place-based education (PBE) is generally defined as an educational approach that actively connects schools and their local communities (Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Sobel, 2005). While this definition is broad, PBE may be explained by specific elements, such as concentrating the specificity of a place within the community, the integrated approach of the place with curriculum, and experiential and investigative learning (Gruenewald, 2003). Therefore, PBE positions the lives of students and the stories of their communities at the epicenter of curricular lessons. Additionally, PBE builds the teaching and learning process of the classroom in the local community in which students live. Sobel (2004) describes PBE as a process that helps students cultivate deeper connections to their community and amplify their commitment to serving as responsible citizens. These connections between the students' lives, their community, and school helps strengthen the effectiveness of the content lessons in the classroom.

Course Background and Specialized Assignments

The specific course was call Intercultural Context of Schooling. Education students are advised to enroll in this course before they officially apply to the education certification program of their choice. However, due to schedule conflicts, change of majors, and other factors, university students sometimes enroll in this course once they are accepted to the teacher certification program. At the time the course was offered, the University was encouraging the integration of service-learning; therefore, the course asked students to provide at least 1.5 hours weekly to the local housing authority.

A service-learning enriched course is defined by as offering opportunities for the professor to combine learning goals in the course with related service to the community. This is accomplished by finding a community service project that will have a communal benefit to both the university students and the community. This type of course supplementation offers the university students an opportunity to connect community service to the course objectives and goals. This also combines service with course content learning.

The course objectives focused on asking students to explore of what diversity means in formal educational contexts. This process begins with reflecting on, and analyzing, our own experiences as learners who have embodied (and continue to embody) different dimensions of diversity in the classrooms and schools we have attended. The goal of this course was to equip the students to become compassionate critics of educational inequality and effective advocates for the success of diverse learners. This involved: working to overcome biases and assumptions that may have led us to develop simplistic understandings of educational challenges; keeping an open mind as we read and write toward more profound understandings of those challenges; accepting that differences of opinion, priorities, and values really do exist; and taking real people's lives and struggles seriously. This can be accomplished by asking students to experience a journey of developing their intercultural and intracultural awareness through selected readings and assignments.

The specialized assignments that supported the course description, objectives and goals centered on offering education students the opportunity to have an intracultural reflection and then an intercultural application. At the beginning of the students are asked to introduce themselves by sharing their definition of culture. This helps establish a baseline of understanding the complexities of what culture means in an educational context for education majors before the selected readings and discussions are completed. As part of the overall experience, students were asked to keep a course journal that included guided notes from the readings, reflection questions based on the readings, and overall weekly reflections that asked students to connect personal experiences to the content learned that week.

The first official assignment students worked on was to create an illustration and video of their personal *Journey Line* to the university. This journey line is focused on their schooling from early childhood to post-secondary. They made a list of their educational experiences, as far back as they remember. They were then asked to include one memorable event of that point. Most students organized the Journey Line by 3-5 years sections. The last section of the Journey Line was them at the University. Students were asked to be creative with the illustration. Once they illustrated the Journey Line, they recorded themselves explaining the Journey Line in a video. They were also asked to view three classmates' videos and include that experience in their weekly reflections. They were asked to observe their classmates' video and make note of the uniqueness, without judgement or comparison. The Journey Line was designed to help students take a introspection on their own schooling experience. Then they were asked to interview at least two family members to collect information to write their *Educational Auto-ethnography*.

The Educational Auto-ethnography assignment guided students through a deep introspection of their family's educational experience. The selected course readings were related to auto-ethnographies of educators with diverse backgrounds. These readings were selected to provide students models for their own auto-ethnography. Once they gather family experiences related to schooling, wrote their educational auto-ethnography using terminology from the readings.

The third major assignment transitioned the students from the introspection to the extrospection of culture; now that they have explored their views and examined their experience of their own culture, they will study other cultures. They first read several articles on culturally relevant pedagogies, such as the funds of knowledge, the use of linguistic assets, storytelling, and incorporating translanguaging for bilingual learners. They first inventoried their own funds of knowledge by thinking of the community assets and family capital they acquired throughout their lives. Then, students selected a school community to study that they would like to teach at once they complete their teacher preparation program. They needed to first physically drive around at least a mile radius from the school campus, and make note of all the resources available, for example, types of businesses, restaurants, medical care, employment opportunities, etc. As they observed the community around the selected school, they were asked to make note of the language usage and cultural references. They then created a photovoice presentation with the information they gathered. This photovoice presentation also included a written assignment where they reflected on what they learned about the community wealth and family capital that they can use once they become teachers to enrich their lessons.

The next significant assignment was a book report on five culturally relevant (CR) literature, called *CR Book Reviews*. Before the assignment, students were asked to write down ten Latinx authors. In the five semesters I have taught this class since 2015, two students named at least three authors. Most of the time, students could not think of any Latinx authors. Then, there were asked to name any author of color. This was activity was designed to show students the need

to include authentic culturally relevant literature in the curriculum. After the pre-assignment exercise of writing a Latinx author list, I showed them several books from Latinx authors from various grade levels, ranging from early childhood to young adult. For their own book report, students could select any cultural background. Some students opted to read five books from the same author. In their book report they included a book summary, significance of the book, and a description of how they could use that book in the classroom. The books selected by the students varied by culture, language, and focus (some focused on social-emotional needs like bullying).

Once they are familiar with authentic culturally relevant literature, the education students are asked to create a children's book with the elements they have studied, like place-based learning and funds of knowledge. The *Children's Intercultural Literature Book* is the culminating project. They have the option to write the book in English, Spanish, or a mix of both. They are also required to create a short content-based activity that aligns to the story. The purpose of the children's book is to integrate the elements of culturally relevant pedagogies into one project that start their own collection of authentic children literature.

Students' Reaction to the Course

The education students in the class reflected weekly on the assigned reading, activities, and the progress on the projects. At the end of the semester, as part of their final exam, they were given the opportunity to offer a *Final Reflection*. Here the expectation was for them to write a reflective essay that elaborated on one specific historical, political, cultural, or sociological issue from the readings, and how it related to the setting, students, and/or events of their service-learning experience and other projects of the class. Some of their comments centered on three themes: deeper understanding of their own cultural experiences, the importance of learning and valuing their future students' community context and funds of knowledge, and the potential impact their understanding of cultural and linguistic assets can have on their future students.

Students that felt the course readings, assignments/projects, and discussions helped them better understand and appreciate their own cultural experiences. Overall, the feeling was that they felt more connected to their family's experiences on cultural and language use. Student 1 wrote, "*At the beginning of the course I learned more about myself and my motivations, about why I want this, what made me feel that I wanted to be a teacher and how I ended up here.*" The student went on to explain the significance of learning about her own educational experience so that when she has her own students, she will be better equipped to understand and value her students' home experiences.

Another student commented how she did not value her Spanish language and cultural experiences growing up, but after reading the course readings, participating in the discussions, and completing the service-learning project, she felt differently. Student 2 wrote, "*This course also showed me how important language and culture is in the classroom. The assigned readings, important projects and service learning at [the local housing authority] can be connected by historical, cultural, and sociological issues.*" She described how she learned about her local community wealth by talking to her family members and gaining a better understanding of how the community contributes to students' education. She stated that before the class, she had not recognized community wealth and family capital, and how that influenced her through her schooling. Student 3 elaborated this point when he wrote, "*The autoethnography assignment brought the reading together because if I don't know where I came from and how my past teachers and community have molded me to who I am today, then I can't expect to do the same for my future students.*"

The other theme found in the *Final Reflection* was the importance of learning and valuing their future students' community wealth and funds of knowledge. In general, the students described how important it was for them to learning about the school community and the resources it offers the families. Many students also commented how the community offers experiences that teachers can use to support content learning. Student 7 wrote, "*I have also learned how to be an effect teacher by using the funds of knowledge from my students to help them succeed. The family of my future students can help me understand how to connect with my students and using their experiences in the classroom.*"

The last theme that formed from the *Final Reflection* was the potential impact the university students' understanding of cultural and linguistic assets can have on their future K-12 students. Student 3 wrote in his reflection, "I could see and understand how authors are tapping into culture and familial capital so that students can enjoy and learn from literature. One of the books I used was *I like Making Tamales*, this book taught mathematical components like measuring and counting and the funds of knowledge used were making tamales, which many Latino children are familiar with." Student 5 wrote, "When students are familiar with literature or with something during the lesson, they are more likely to be engaged and understanding of the subject that is being taught. I saw this in EHA (Edinburg Housing Authority), when some students wanted me to read Spanish books to them because of the familiarity they had with it."

Implications

Using language as an asset in Intercultural Context of Schooling. Education contributed to the shift in language perception on students that is very critical in today's society, especially in a region that has a large portion of the population as native Spanish speakers and/or bilingual with English and Spanish. Developing and recognizing linguistic and cultural wealth is critical for future teachers, especially those of linguistically (bilingual) and culturally diverse students. It is essential to help future educators understand the value of community wealth and family capital by modeling how those skills sets can be treasured tools in the classroom. Course assignments can be designed within a cultural relevant context that can assist university students in better understanding their own cultural experiences and in turn respecting others' cultural diversity. Additionally, allowing students to use their language of strength while also developing both languages (indirectly) provides a more comprehensive understanding of the course content.

Conclusion

In support of the University's vision, and reaction the bilingual teacher shortage, this proposed framework will support the development of future teachers, some bilingual education teachers, that are prepared to not only address the academic needs of mostly Latinx students in the local region, but also prepared to incorporate the cultural and linguistic assets students bring to the schools. As the education field continues to develop more effective instructional methods to better equip our K-12 students for a more global society, the proposed framework offers ideas on how university faculty can guide university students through an introspective and extrospective cultural and linguistic process while learning the course content.

Providing university students an opportunity to submit coursework in their native language or English, so that they can maximize their learning outcomes, models how to value the bilingual skill sets many university students bring to the classroom. As the K-12 student population continues to become more diverse, so should the student population at the university level. This

means that university faculty may need support on how to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogies to more effectively support culturally and linguistically diverse students. Modifying a course, like tapping into students' funds of knowledge, can enhance students' understanding of the coursework at a much higher level. This becomes very critical as we look towards the future demographics of the U.S. schools.

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