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# Beginning with *El Barrio*: Learning from Exemplary Teachers of Latino Students

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## Abstract

This study draws from data collected through phenomenological interviews with a group of urban teachers identified as “exemplary” by Latino students, parents, and community members. The authors critically examine the participants’ biographies and document factors they cited as most germane and influential to informing their practice with Latino students. The article concludes with a discussion of *barrio*-based epistemologies and ontologies, or ways of being and knowing that are informed by extended immersion in and connection to Latino cultural and linguistic communities, particularly as they are developed explicitly and leveraged to improve educational experiences and outcomes for Latino youth.

**Keywords:** Latino students, teacher education, culturally responsive pedagogy, urban education

As educators and others search for remedies to address the problem of Latino student underachievement, they are often constrained by short-sighted interventions such as scripted curricula, rigid interpretations of the curriculum standards, and testing regimens to measure student performance over time (Giroux & Schmidt,

2004; Lipman, 2004; Valli & Buese, 2007). Such school-focused (rather than community-centered) interventions miss the mark when it comes to meaningfully improving the academic achievement of Latino students. The funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) present in students' *barrios*, or neighborhoods, to use the Spanish phraseology for ethnic enclaves with large concentrations of Latinos, have the potential to positively inform teachers' work yet often remain untapped by schools. Consequently, the educational status of Latinos remains dire, as measured by traditional indicators of achievement such as high school completion, grade point average, and college attendance, suggesting that schools have grossly underserved this group of students.

This article documents the findings of an empirical study that examined the biographies of teachers who were identified by Latino students, parents, and community members as exemplary teachers. Our goal is to document and share the ways that the teachers developed the knowledge base that informs their practice with Latino students, thus making it more culturally responsive. In addition, we explore the implications that teachers' experiences present for the way in which institutions of higher education prepare teachers. The study was guided by two broad, overarching questions: (a) What are the experiences that exemplary teachers cite as central to their preparation to work with Latino students? and (b) How can the experiences of exemplary teachers inform teacher education efforts aimed at preparing teachers to work more effectively with Latino students?

### **Beginning in *El Barrio***

This study situates the academic performance of Latino students in broader discourses that go far beyond more typical deficit perspectives that tend to focus on decontextualized and oversimplified explanations of Latino underachievement, such as poverty or a lack of parental involvement, by considering additional sociocultural influences, such as the significance of family, neighborhood, race, language, and personal interactions. Moreover, rather than constructing students as the problem, we investigated the factors that contributed to the professional development of their *teachers*, and specifically those practices that allowed Latino community members to recognize certain teachers as particularly effective with their children.

Despite decades of school reform efforts aimed at improving academic outcomes for Latino youth, Latinos as a group still have alarmingly high dropout rates, and their college attendance and completion rates lag behind those of White and African American students. A number of reasons have been offered to explain the underachievement of Latinos in schools, including poverty, language barriers, cultural discontinuities between home and school, racism, and classism, among others. Based on our research with exemplary teachers, we suggest that school

reform efforts will have only a minimal impact if the majority of teachers and administrators attempting to implement these programs remain culturally disconnected from the communities they serve.

The disconnect between a largely Anglo (i.e., White, U.S.-born, and monolingual English-speaking) teaching force and increasingly diverse and multilingual students can result in an interruption in the flow of accurate information from students' families and communities to their teachers. As a result, many teachers do not understand the sociocultural realities of their students' lives or the ways that schooling can help or hinder the realization of students' aspirations. In spite of this lack of information, this study points to ways in which some teachers were able to connect effectively with their Latino students despite huge obstacles.

Omnipresent structural inequalities that plague *barrio* schools that serve large percentages of students of color, including many English learners and students from lower socioeconomic strata, result often in the subsequent alienation and exclusion of students in droves. Nevertheless, some Latino students do experience academic success (Antróp-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2005; Conchas, 2006; Gándara, 1995; Irizarry & Antróp-González, 2007). Research with Latino students suggests that academic achievement is predicated on the development of caring relationships between students and their teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school agents, which allows for more positive experiences in schools (De Jesús & Antróp-González, 2006; Flores-González, 2002; Irvine, 2003; Noddings, 1992; Rolón, 2000; Rolón-Dow, 2005). Unfortunately, Latino students are all too often confined to classrooms in which teachers cannot or will not cross cultural and linguistic boundaries to affirm their identities, implement modified teaching strategies that promote academic and personal success, or ally with diverse students and families. Although a body of literature regarding the characteristics of academically successful Latino students is emerging, there is relatively little empirical research regarding *teachers* who are especially effective with this group.

Our goal is not to overlook or ignore the powerful impact of structural factors that contribute to the suppressed performance of many Latino students and others traditionally underserved by schools. Rather, this study highlights the work of 10 exemplary teachers in the hope that their experiences may demonstrate to other educators ways in which pedagogy may become enhanced by more meaningful and sustained engagement with Latino communities. The implications of the teacher perspectives presented here suggest that it is through culturally responsive and critical pedagogical approaches that Latino students can become empowered to successfully navigate school and dismantle barriers to their success that exist in school and beyond. We call these approaches *barrio-based* because they intentionally draw on the funds of knowledge that become available when teachers immerse themselves in the social and cultural networks of their Latino students and their students' families.

We begin by offering a brief overview of the need for culturally responsive pedagogy with Latino students by presenting data regarding the demographics and characteristics of the current teaching force and the burgeoning student population, particularly in U.S. city schools. Next we provide a synopsis of the present study of exemplary teachers, including a description of the participants, the school and community settings, and the methods used in the study. Grounded in the analysis of the data, we forward and unpack the concept of *barrio-based epistemologies and ontologies*, which we define as ways of being and knowing that are informed by extended immersion in and connection to Latino cultural and linguistic communities, particularly as they are developed explicitly and leveraged to improve the education of Latino students. Finally, we discuss the implications of the findings for multicultural teacher education.

### ***Who Will Teach Latino Children?***

More than 11 million Latino children are currently enrolled in K–12 schools, representing approximately 20% of all public school students in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). This population is expected to continue to grow at an unprecedented rate. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2050 the population of school-age Latinos will soar to 28 million and surpass the number of non-Latino White students (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). It is significant that the demographics of the U.S. teaching force are not keeping pace with the “Latinization” of the school-age population. For example, 83% of all teachers are White Euro-Americans, and Latino teachers account for less than 7% of the teachers in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Judging by the characteristics of preservice teacher education programs, which typically attract primarily White, monocultural, English-speaking women, the demographics of the U.S. teaching force will not change significantly in the near future. Although recruiting greater numbers of Latinos into teacher education programs (and into the teaching profession more generally) is imperative, we also argue for the necessity and even desirability of *non*-Latino teachers embracing greater responsibility for the education of Latino students. In our view, teacher education can play a significant role in transforming the teaching force in ways that become more responsive to the needs of Latino communities and students. The challenges for multicultural teacher education are daunting but not insurmountable.

Preservice teacher candidates often enter teacher education programs with little experience with or knowledge of cultural differences. Research with preservice students indicates that many enter the profession believing negative stereotypes about urban children and their schools and having scant knowledge of structural barriers to student achievement such as racism and classism (Sleeter, 2001). In response, teacher education provides multicultural education courses and field experiences in diverse settings that begin to help preservice teachers to acquire the

skills they will need to be successful in working with culturally diverse students. However, studies have shown that when not accompanied by an infusion of social justice perspectives throughout the teacher preparation curriculum, such diversity experiences can undermine the goals of multicultural education by reinforcing stereotypes, specifically among White preservice teachers (McDiarmid, 1990; Vavrus, 2002). Many teacher preparation programs still prepare teachers "from a monocultural perspective that eschews the pervasive impact of race, class, linguistic background, culture, gender, and ability and emphasizes instead a universal knowledge base for teaching" (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004, p. 933). This knowledge base often excludes the cultural histories, "repertoires of practice" (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003), and frames of reference of Latinos and other diverse communities.

Teacher preparation programs as well as district-based professional development efforts have been slow to respond to the needs of the burgeoning Latino population. Teacher educators in universities have not effectively made the case that comprehensive, culturally relevant pedagogy is an essential component of quality teacher education programs. Instead, many departments require that students enroll in only one course in multicultural education, or perhaps a single course in teaching English learners, effectively relegating multicultural education to the margins of teacher preparation programs (Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 2001). Nearly 90% of teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse students have not taken 8 or more hours of professional development aimed at preparing them to work effectively with this population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), and approximately one third of all English learner high school students nationwide had teachers who had not earned a major, minor, or certification in bilingual education or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (Seastrom, Gruber, Henke, McGrath, & Cohen, 2002).

This under-preparation of teachers presents a significant challenge for Latino students, the largest group of English learners in P-12 schools. The question remains: If teacher education and professional development efforts are not able to adequately prepare teachers, and if so few teachers share or value the cultural heritages of Latino students, how then do teachers learn to become effective and culturally responsive to students from the largest and fastest growing yet most undereducated minority group in the United States?

### **Community and District Context of the Study**

The urban community in which the study was conducted we refer to pseudonymously as Hoop City. The city has approximately 155,000 residents, making it the third largest city in its state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 50% of the residents identify as White, 28% as Latino

(including 24% as Puerto Rican), and 20% as Black or African American. Like many other postindustrial cities, Hoop City faces a tough economic situation. The unemployment rate in this community is significantly higher than state and national averages, and those residents who do have jobs make on average \$11,000 less than the national median household income. A local comparison of per capita income levels among Hoop City residents revealed racialized disparities that adversely impact Latino students and families. Latinos in Hoop City earn on average approximately \$10,000 less than Whites and \$5,000 less than African American residents.

### ***Hoop City School District***

The Hoop City Public Schools serve approximately 26,000 students. Latinos account for half of all of the students enrolled in the city's public schools. African Americans and Whites compose 28% and 20% of the school population, respectively. During the time of the study, the \$6,692 average per-pupil expenditure for students in Hoop City fell far below the state average of \$8,273. Approximately 1 in every 5 students spoke a language other than English as their primary language, and almost 3 out of every 4 students were eligible for free or reduced-fee lunch.

The high school dropout rate for the district is reported as 8%, a figure that is approximately 5% higher than the state average, and Latinos account for the largest percentage of dropouts. Although the reported district rate is alarmingly high, that figure only begins to tell a fraction of the story. The disparities between the reported dropout rate and the raw data regarding student enrollment paint contrasting pictures. An analysis of 5 years of enrollment data in Hoop City high schools suggested that more than 75% of Latino students enrolling in the ninth grade fail to progress to graduation in 4 years. It can be assumed that without any appreciable decline in the Latino population in Hoop City over this time, this alarming statistic represents casualties of the system who became dropouts or, in our view, push-outs.

### **Methods and Participants**

This article draws on data collected as part of a larger study of exceptional teachers of Latino students (Irizarry, 2009; Irizarry & Antróp-González, 2007). The 10 participants in the study were identified as "exemplary" by members of the Hoop City Latino community using the community nomination method (Foster, 1991), an approach to sampling that entails "relying upon community members and community-sanctioned vehicles (for example, community newspapers and organizations) in order to judge people, places, and things within their own settings" (Foster, 1991, p. 147). The principal investigator (Jason G. Irizarry) approached students, parents, community-based organizations, and Latino employees of the

local school district in order to solicit nominations for individuals they believed were exceptional teachers of Latino students. Teachers identified by more than one nominator were invited to participate.

This sampling method yielded a population of 10 potential participants, all of whom agreed to participate in the study. Five participants identified themselves as White, three as Latino, and two as African American. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 56, and the sample was split evenly between men and women. At the time of the study, the participants had completed anywhere from 2 to 36 years in the teaching profession. Three of the participants were elementary educators, whereas four taught in middle schools. One was an early childhood educator, and two participants had recently transitioned into positions as administrators. It is interesting that 8 of the 10 exemplary teachers lived in Hoop City in spite of the widespread poverty and related big city problems, a topic we return to later.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The participants' experiences were documented using in-depth interviewing methods (Seidman, 1998). After transcribing the interviews, we analyzed the interview data by drawing on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A thematic analysis was conducted by coding the interview data. Transcripts were analyzed for recurring themes, and theoretical implications were noted as they emerged. Data analysis was supported by additional archival research about community demographics, student achievement as reported by education reports, and other sources. In addition, in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the data, we systematically reviewed the findings for accuracy through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with the study participants.

### ***The Nominated Exemplary Teachers***

Half of the teachers in the study could be described as "home grown," in that they were teaching in the same community in which they had been born and/or raised. The other five were "transplants," having originally come from communities other than Hoop City. In this section, we present brief profiles of the home-grown participants followed by the transplants.

#### ***Home-Grown Teachers***

1. Jessica Helmsley is a White, 22-year-old middle school teacher. She grew up in Hoop City and attended public junior high and high schools in the city. Jessica worked as a substitute teacher while in college and has been teaching full time for 2 years. She is fluent in Spanish and English and teaches in the English Language Learner Program.



2. Edward Black is a 25-year-old African American who was born and raised in Hoop City. He is a graduate of the Hoop City Public Schools and a local college in the city. Edward is currently an English teacher at a middle school in the district.
3. William Soto is a 31-year-old Puerto Rican social studies teacher in a local middle school. A product of the Hoop City Public Schools, he has been teaching for 10 years and was the department head of the bilingual program before recently accepting a position as a vice principal in his school.
4. James Talbert is 35 years old and identifies as African American. He was a teacher at a local high school for 6 years and has recently assumed an administrative position in the district. James attended Hoop City Public Schools and received his bachelor's and master's degrees from colleges in Hoop City.
5. Geraldo Peña, age 34, is a middle school teacher who identifies as Puerto Rican. He was born in the Midwest but was raised in Hoop City. He attended Hoop City Public Schools, receiving his undergraduate and graduate degrees from public institutions of higher education in the state.

### *Transplanted Teachers*

6. Mario Cummings, age 39, is a White man who moved to Hoop City with his family in 2000. Born, raised, and educated in the Midwest, Mario taught in Colorado and Kansas before working in Hoop City Public Schools. He is a teacher at an elementary school in the Latino Northeast neighborhood.
7. Adelaide Morales was born in Puerto Rico and has been living in the contiguous United States for 15 years. She left Puerto Rico to teach in Hoop City and has been teaching in the city for 10 out of her 36 years in the profession. She is 56 years old. Adelaide is an early childhood educator in a 1-year sheltered immersion program for English learners.
8. Crystal Castro is a 30-year-old middle school teacher in the district. She identifies as Irish American. Crystal was born and raised in eastern Massachusetts and attended a state college. She is fluent in Spanish and English and has been teaching in Hoop City Public Schools for 6 years. She is married to a Puerto Rican man, hence her Spanish surname.
9. Sara Silver identifies as a White Eastern European Jew. She is 53 years old. She has been teaching for 26 years and currently works as a Collaborative Professional Development Teacher of Language Arts in an elementary school in the city.
10. June Hamilton is a 51-year-old woman who identifies as a White American. She has been teaching for 30 years and currently works with English learners in an elementary school in Hoop City. She is fluent in English and Spanish.

## Findings

When we asked the teachers to identify the experiences that were most influential in preparing them to teach in urban schools, a pattern emerged to account for each teacher's effectiveness in working with Latino youth. It is significant that not one of the participants cited teacher education coursework. In fact, most teachers pointed out the shortcomings of teacher education relative to working with Latino youth. Throughout the interviews, a few teachers did acknowledge the importance of the foundation that teacher education established, equipping them, for example, with a general set of methods and important content knowledge. However, they also criticized their programs' lack of attention to working in specific contexts, such as in urban schools, or with students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. William Soto commented, "My teacher education program had one or two good courses, but most of that was generic, you know." James Talbert offered a similar critique, noting, "[In my program] we never talked about having a clue about the kids you work with. We just never talked about it."

Given the reported lack of attention to diversity in their teacher education programs, how did these teachers learn to become effective with Latino students? The consistent thread that emerged from the grounded theory analysis of the data was a pattern of sustained involvement with Latino communities both in the United States and abroad. This pattern signifies the important role played by *el barrio* in their personal and professional development. Three main findings have been organized into interrelated categories: (a) immersion experiences, (b) *barrio*-classroom connections, and (c) language and other assets. Each finding is discussed below, supported by examples from the interview data.

### ***Finding 1: Immersion Experiences***

The participants as a group centered the community in their teaching practice and cited their experiences pertaining to living with and learning from Latino families as some of the most influential factors in their development as teachers. For home-grown teachers, the process of learning about Latino culture was aided considerably by living in close proximity to Latinos in Hoop City. James Talbert, a life-long resident of Hoop City, put it succinctly: "The experience that helped the most for my work in the public schools was living in Hoop City. Working with young people, not in the classroom, but in general, doing different things to relate to the kids."

Growing up in Hoop City and attending its schools provided the home-grown teachers with a lifetime of experiences from which to draw. Despite the fact that Jessica Helmsley grew up in what she described as a "mostly White" neighborhood in Hoop City, she has learned more about the students she now serves and has refined her skills for crossing lines of cultural and linguistic difference, mainly

through her participation in a religious community in which the congregation is largely Latino and the services are conducted in Spanish. Similarly, Ed Black credited growing up in a racially/ethnically mixed community with a large concentration of Latinos for shaping his perspectives about the education of Latino students and his work in Hoop City School District:

One of the things that really helped prepare me for my work here was being a student in the Hoop City Public Schools. If I hadn't spent so much time here or in another urban city, I'd be lost. I was prepared by my life experience. I was prepared by all of the personal relationships that I had already formed prior to becoming a teacher. I grew up in housing projects across the city. My neighbors were mostly Latino and Black. We shared space and we shared culture.

James Talbert further underscored the importance of relationships with Latinos as a formidable influence on teacher preparation:

My best friend growing up was Chico, who is Puerto Rican. I used to be at his house all the time, talking with his family, eating there, going to family functions and what have you. That was the best teacher, quite frankly. I was immersed in it; that was life for me. Since then, I have also read a lot about Latinos and specifically Puerto Ricans. I have a better understanding of their history and experiences in the United States. My teacher certification program didn't teach me any of that.

The community relationships they developed shaped the teachers as individuals. Like Ed and Jessica, William Soto continues to live in a Hoop City *barrio*. He cited the relationships he has developed over his years of living in that community as key to his work as a teacher:

I teach and I live in the [Northeast Section]. It is a predominantly Puerto Rican community. I make enough money to live somewhere else, but I like living here. I run into my kids all the time. I am a stone's throw from the school. I live right next to the school. I see all of my kids. I know a lot of my kids' parents; we grew up together. We are friends. It's almost like I am an extension of their families when they come here.

Although not all home-grown teachers identified as Latino, some, such as Gerardo Peña, felt that their cultural identity added an important dimension:

I'm Puerto Rican, and grew up and attended school in the city, so their culture is my culture. I live here and attend a predominantly Hispanic church. I am still very much connected to my culture and to the community.

Home-grown teachers, through their extended immersion in the community, all expressed feeling more familiar with the sociocultural and sociopolitical realities

of *el barrio*. Even so, most teachers working with Latino students in urban communities like Hoop City do not live in the same communities as their students. Nevertheless, the transplanted teachers in this study have learned to be effective with Latino students. These participants explained the deliberate steps they took to seek experiences that enhanced their personal and professional development in relation to Latino students.

Some of the transplanted teachers in the study immersed themselves in the local Latino community, as did the home-grown teachers. Others found immersion experiences abroad. Transplanted teacher Mario Cummings spoke to the importance of teachers immersing themselves in their students' community, especially when the teachers themselves are not from that community:

It's important to try to tap into the students and figure out who they were and talk to their parents and visit them in positive ways, not "your son or daughter is in trouble." Then you get kind of invited to social events, *quinceñeras* and things in the community . . . A large part is just listening to them and asking questions and talking with them, going into the neighborhood and visiting, and talking with people at [a local community-based organization].

All of the non-Latino teachers in the study made a conscious decision to cross lines of racial/ethnic and linguistic differences, and they cited these experiences as indispensable to their work with Latino students. Adelaide Morales, the only transplanted Latina teacher in the study, described the necessary work she undertook to familiarize herself with the particular sociocultural contexts of her new community and how these shaped her approaches to teaching and learning:

I was born, raised, and educated in a rural part of Puerto Rico. Now I live in [Hoop City] right near the school. Even though most of my students are Puerto Rican, I was not prepared to work in an urban school district when I came here, but I made connections with the parents and the community, and that helped me a lot.

All of the transplanted teachers, whether they identified as Latino or not, referenced personal experiences in Latino communities as pivotal in their preparation to work with Latino youth and families. That is, they saw learning with and from the community as integral to their work in the classroom. Their dialectical relationships with students and families and their ongoing experiences in the community contributed to a knowledge base that informed their practice.

### ***Finding 2: Barrio-Classroom Connections***

Teachers' own immersion in the community of their students had a powerful influence on their professional preparation, as noted previously. However,

perhaps even more significant is when teachers then brought that knowledge base into the classroom to make their practice more culturally responsive to the academic and personal needs of their students. The teachers all referenced examples of how they brought *el barrio* into their classrooms. For Ed Black, this involved drawing on his own personal biography to connect emotionally with his students, thus ensuring that community culture was reflected in his classroom:

So many of my kids are so angry with their situation, with their lives in general. What I try to do is I constantly tell them about things that I had to fight through in my life. I tell them about being in a single family house, my mother not really being there the way I wanted her to be there, being on welfare, wearing the same clothes all the time. I try to show them that you can live that lifestyle and still come out relatively on top.

William Soto and Geraldo Peña described other approaches to using knowledge of the community in their classrooms. William Soto noted,

Because of the nature of it, the classroom culture is representative of a lot of the kids. We constantly make analogies with our environments in class, and I think that connects pretty well with the culture of the students . . . Even within the city, we actually have a day where we raise the Puerto Rican flag at city hall. We talk about that and that becomes a part of the curriculum.

Reflecting on how, as a student, he had not seen his own experience mirrored in the curriculum, Geraldo Peña described the modifications he made to his teaching: "I teach history from the disenfranchised side, which includes the histories and perspectives of Latinos." Other teachers built on the human resources available in Hoop City, for example, by bringing in parents and other community members, not just to tell them about the performance of their children but to make vital contributions to the learning experiences of students. As Sara Silver noted, "Where we might be failing is in really finding ways to bring parents in." Instead of placing the blame for limited parental involvement completely on families, however, she implicated schools for their shortcomings in attracting parents and other stakeholders. Again, without exception, the teachers provided concrete examples of instances when they brought *el barrio* into the classroom. Crystal Castro explained,

We had a high-ranking city official who is Puerto Rican come in and talk about his experience. . . . My kids need to hear about successful people. It is rare that Puerto Rican students have Puerto Ricans as teachers. It is important to address that, but until we get more, I have to make sure my students see successful people of color.

Similarly, Adelaide Morales described her strategic use of parental involvement:

This morning I had parents from Guatemala that came here and shared. This only happens because I have this initiative. If it depends on the principal, they never would have families in the classroom. That is not promoted. Love your students and try to get acquainted with the families, and tap into the richness that they are bringing to our school everyday.

Adelaide was willing to maintain this caring stance, even though the administration might not understand or approve.

### ***Finding 3: Language and Other Assets***

A number of originally monolingual English speakers described as highly significant their efforts to learn the language spoken by their students. June Hamilton noted,

Studying abroad in Madrid helped me with my language acquisition. What really helped me with the Latino kids is just coming to the community and being there full time and forcing myself to speak Spanish, no matter what I sounded like. I didn't sound Puerto Rican with my college Spanish, so their lending an ear really helped me along. I have to attribute a lot to the parents and the kids; they helped me a lot.

Similarly, Sara Silver, who also spoke English as her first language, stressed the importance of learning Spanish for the impact it had on her practice:

I thought that having a second language would be very beneficial. I used to save enough money, and every year I would take two to three weeks in a Latin American country. I still study it now to this day. I still try and get myself a little bit better . . . because I want to be able to talk with the kids . . . It was something that I knew would make me a better teacher and a better communicator with the parents, which was very valuable. I *love* the Spanish language.

Crystal Castro and Jessica Helmsley both described how they refined their Spanish language skills and expanded their knowledge of Latino cultures through work and volunteer experiences in Latin America. Crystal Castro had worked in an orphanage in the Dominican Republic for three consecutive summers, whereas Jessica Helmsley used her vacation time to participate in church-led mission trips to various countries in South America.

## Implications and Limitations

The experiences of exemplary teachers presented here, although certainly limited in terms of generalizability in part because of the study's small sample size, nevertheless stand as an important reminder of the extent to which teacher knowledge may be enriched through personal involvement in and relationships with students' families and communities. Because of the rigors of the methodology used, we remain reasonably confident that the study has adequately captured the factors that enabled this particular group of teachers to become effective with Latino students.

One limitation of the study may be the community nomination process itself. We chose not to problematize the definition of *exemplary*, making the strategic decision to trust the community's definitions instead. Although it could be argued that community members might favor bilingual teachers over monolingual English speakers (whom others could still deem "effective" based on supposedly objective measures such as student test scores or evaluations by their principals), this study intentionally privileged the assessment of Latino community members and, in effect, literally began in *el barrio*. Future research might address the community nomination process and tease out variables that could skew results in particular ways.

A related limitation is the study's sole use of qualitative methods. A mixed methods approach, which future research again could incorporate, might provide "harder" quantitative data on the students of these exemplary teachers, tracing, for instance, their attendance rates, tracing their academic progress toward graduation and college, and documenting how many may have left school when they moved on from these exemplary teachers' classrooms. Still another limitation is the study's reliance on self-disclosure, whereby it documented teachers' subjective reporting of what they believed made them effective teachers.

Having noted several research limitations, we maintain that there is much to be learned from the collective experiences that were empirically documented here. Here we present the major implications for effective pedagogy with Latino students. We highlight the emergence of what we refer to as *barrio-based epistemologies and ontologies* as particularly salient for culturally relevant pedagogy.

Eight of the 10 exemplary teachers in the study identified themselves as bilingual English-Spanish speakers. This statistic strikes us as remarkable, given that half of the cohort spoke English as their first language. These participants understood teaching as a linguistic act and therefore believed that their ability to communicate with students and families would be significantly enhanced by learning another language.

Beyond learning language in a college classroom, Sara, June, and Crystal, as well as several other participants, immersed themselves in Spanish-speaking communities, welcoming the opportunity to be taught by members of the community.

Their experiences with learning and using their second language facilitated the development of new understandings about their students and families, contributing to their knowledge base and their practice in the classroom. In addition, teachers placed value on the information networks and resources in the *barrios* from which their students came.

Both the transplanted and home-grown teachers suggested that their ability to create relationships, demonstrate care, and engage students in the teaching and learning process was strongly influenced by what they learned through their significant interactions with Latino students and families. Crystal Castro summed up this perspective, noting, "The kids taught me a lot. Parents and kids here can be great teachers."

The grounded analysis of the pattern of the ways in which *el barrio* came to be centered in exemplary teachers' professional development and classroom practice has led us to theorize a notion of *barrio-based epistemologies and ontologies*. In contrast to the external depiction of urban *barrios* as pathological, crime-ridden spaces that are devoid of educative resources, effective teachers of Latino students honor the knowledge and resources that do exist there and credit the community with significantly influencing their personal and professional development as teachers. As teachers, teacher educators, and district personnel search for ways to improve the academic achievement of Latino students, it is imperative that they include Latino communities as part of the process.

In our view, it is highly significant that the teachers nominated by community members as exceptional all described processes of becoming better teachers through close contact with the Latino community. Although the teachers in the study each had distinct experiences and unique pathways into the teaching profession, their collective experience reflects new ways of knowing and being that were shaped, in large part, by their sustained immersion in and connections to Latino communities. We refer to these as *barrio-based epistemologies and ontologies*.

*Barrio-based epistemologies and ontologies* are defined by several noteworthy characteristics. First, they are fundamentally *rooted in respect for students' cultures and identities*. Although the cultures and climates of many schools serving Latino students may be assimilationist, requiring that students shed aspects of their identities and adopt identities that are viewed more positively by those in power (see Valenzuela, 1999) for a chance at school success, effective teachers of Latinos in this study honored the cultures of their students and encouraged students to develop a positive sense of self, including a proud cultural self. They viewed students' cultures as worthy of inclusion in the classroom, not only as a bridge to master the mandated curriculum but also meriting their own space within the classroom. Moreover, teachers valued their students' home languages and rejected deficit perspectives and did *not* place the blame for Latino students' underachievement primarily on students and families. Effective teachers' respect for their students' cultures was further evidenced by



the teachers' desire to remain connected to the Latino communities in which their students lived.

Second, *barrio*-based epistemologies are *based on the historical and contemporary sociopolitical context of the Latino community*. Latino students come from communities with distinct histories and experiences that have a direct impact on their relationships with social institutions such as schools. Teachers recognized the use of schooling as a vehicle to assimilate and subjugate Latinos (see Solís-Jordán, 1994; Spring, 2004). Effective teachers did not eschew the historical legacies of these communities and the struggles they have endured to gain access to equitable public education. Moreover, exemplary teachers did not see those struggles as part of an antiquated movement but rather as an unfinished struggle for social justice and educational equity that affected their students' lives in the present. Teachers understood their own work as part of this ongoing struggle.

Third, and related to the second characteristic, *barrio*-based epistemologies and ontologies *acknowledge the pervasiveness of race and racialization on teachers' lives and the lives of their Latino students*. Effective teachers of Latino students did not make futile attempts to become "color blind" or "culture blind" and instead acknowledged the impact of race and ethnicity on the lives of their students. Moreover, they strove to understand how their own racial/ethnic identities might impact their work with Latino students and families. Schools, like the communities in which they are located, are racialized spaces. Latinos, who can be of any race or multiple races, deal with racism as well as other forms of discrimination that impact their access to quality educational opportunities. Schools were viewed as a logical place to engage in conversations and develop the skills necessary to navigate, disrupt, and dismantle oppressive institutions that serve as gatekeepers for educational and other opportunities.

Fourth, *barrio*-based epistemologies and ontologies reflect teachers' *sustained commitment to and engagement with Latino communities*. The knowledge and skills necessary to be effective teachers of Latino students cannot be learned in one course or during a semester or two of "field placements" or practicum experiences. Rather, the experiences of teachers in the study suggest that a sustained commitment to and involvement with the community is required. This process should be about more than just schooling. Done correctly, it also has the potential to inform a process of "transracialization," through which dominant identities may be reinscribed, drawing on the knowledge base that is informed by immersion in subaltern social networks (Raible, 2005). Long-term immersion with racialized others has the potential to facilitate the emergence of new teacher identities, even though teacher may not come from the communities or racial backgrounds of their students (Raible & Irizarry, 2007).

Finally, *barrio*-based epistemologies and ontologies *inform both the pedagogy and language practices of effective teachers*. Learning multiple languages in order to connect to Latino students, families, and communities was important to the effectiveness of participants' teaching practices. Moreover, these teachers actively drew

on their knowledge by translating it into liberating pedagogical practices. That is, they symbolically and virtually began their teaching in *el barrio* by centering classroom activities in the sociocultural realities of their Latino students' lives. Adelaide Morales perhaps summed it up best with her example of moving literally toward the children entrusted to her care: "Love your students and try to get acquainted with the families, and tap into the richness that they are bringing to our school everyday."

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