

## Cultural Diversity in English Learning

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### Abstract

*An assessment of the U.S. current educational landscape reveals a distance between the cultural, economic, and linguistic experiences of teachers and students. More specifically, because our nation's teaching force is predominantly white, female, and middle-class, decisions, values, and perceptions are likely to be derived from lived experiences very different from those of the increasingly diverse student population. The negative impact on the education of diverse populations has been well-documented (Katz, 1999; Rodriguez, 1993). Research also highlights the need to prepare educators to effectively teach in areas across socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and gender differences and to deal with the lack of familiarity with the cultures, learning styles, and communication patterns of diverse groups (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000). Building teachers' capacity to understand the importance of learning about the strengths and resources that exist in home communities involves awareness and reflectiveness (Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2016). The purpose of the study is to examine the attitudes of teachers toward their students, families, and communities after engaging in a Child and Community Context Study (CCCS), a modified funds of knowledge assignment. The main questions guiding the study are: How did CCCS inform educators' understanding of multilingual families, and how did this influence their interaction with students and families?*

**Keywords:** Culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse student population, teacher preparation, funds of knowledge,

### 1. Introduction

In the fall of 2022, the total number of K-12 students enrolled in the United States (U.S.) public schools was 49.6 million (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES). Of the 49.6 million students enrolled, 22.1 million were white, 14.4 million were Latinos, 7.4 million were Black, 2.7 million were Asian, 2.5 million were of two or more races, 449,000 were American Indians/Alaska Natives, and 182,000 were Pacific Islanders (Irwin, et. al, 2024). Moreover, of the 3.8 million public school teachers in 2020-2021, 80 percent were White; nine percent were Latinx, six percent were Black, two percent were Asian, and less than one percent were American Indian/Alaska Native, and less than one-half of one percent were Pacific Islander. The K-12 proportion of white teachers (80%) was higher than the proportion of K-12 public school students who were white (46%). To the contrary, the proportion of teachers of other racial/ethnic groups was lower than the proportion of students in those groups. For example, 9 percent of public educators were Latinx (the term Latinx helps bring together several nationalities represented in the U.S.) compared with 28 percent of the students. Furthermore, the percentage of public-school students who were emergent bilinguals (EB – an additive term that acknowledges the bilingualism that these students develop through schooling in the United States) was 5.3 million or 10.6 percent in 2024 (REL West, 2024). Spanish is the home language most commonly reported by EBs. In the fall of 2021, Spanish was spoken by 4,023,289, followed by Arabic (130,917), Chinese (95,584), Vietnamese (75,070), Portuguese (50,205), and Russian (39,403). The demographics of the U.S. mirror the demographics of Idaho, the state where the study was conducted. In 2020-2021, Latinx students made up 19 percent (58,000) of the K-12 enrollment. Seven percent (21,000) were EB, and 81 percent spoke Spanish, yet, only 3 percent of teachers were Latinx (Hispanic Profile book, 2023). The growth in the number of EB students in the United States, coupled with a shortage of highly qualified educators to teach them, is one of the most pressing issues in public education. Between 2019 and 2021, Idaho experienced a 1.2 percent increase in K–12 enrollment (NCES, 2019–2021), and it is projected to have the largest increase in total enrollment (11 percent) over the 2022-2031 period. Yet, over those three years (2019-2021), the EB student population in Idaho grew by approximately 24 percent. EB students need educators who are highly prepared and bring expertise in language development (Samson & Collins, 2012). Unfortunately, many schools in Idaho do not have teachers with the knowledge and skills to serve this growing, diverse, and historically underserved population (Hanson & Yoon, 2018). Even though the use of alternative authorizations and emergency provisional certification has increased across the state in

2023, Idaho's five-year teacher retention rate is low (63%), while teacher salary remains among the lowest 10 in the nation and Idaho teacher population is aging – the age group of 30 or younger is growing more slowly than in previous year (Idaho State Department of Education, 2023).

## **2. Rational and Conceptual Framework**

In order to improve the educational experiences of emergent students and develop cooperation among teachers and schools, it is of paramount importance that teachers view the communities where children live, along with the home context, as sources of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005) aims to identify the cultural knowledges, skills, networks, and abilities developed by students, families, and community members to “transform and empower People of Color” (p. 82). Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) challenges the interpretation of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory by highlighting the failure to account for the knowledge, abilities, skills, and contacts that Communities of Color have and use to survive and resist the oppressions felt at the macro and micro levels. Uncovering the White privilege embedded in these misinterpretations of cultural and social capital, Yosso outlines cultural knowledge, skills, networks, and abilities developed by Chicana/o students and their parents. Rather than viewing these ways of meaning-making that families share with their children at home and communities as deficits, a CCW framework requires the examination of these forms of knowledge through an assets-based lens.

Funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) refers to the idea that children bring diverse background knowledge gained from the family and communities into the classroom. González et al. (2005) define funds of knowledge as “those historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being” (p. 90-91). The funds of knowledge theory offers a conceptual framework by which educators can approach and document the strengths, knowledge, and cultural resources households possess (Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992), challenging the dominant deficit discourses prevalent in the education of multilingual students. The underpinning rationale for the funds of knowledge theory is that the educational process can be greatly enriched when teachers learn about the students' everyday lives (González et al., 2005). Deepening relationships among teachers and students' families is also central in the funds of knowledge theory.

## **3. Participants and Site**

The data collected in this study were from twenty-four K-12 teachers participating in a year-long graduate program leading to an endorsement in bilingual/multilingual education. Ninety percent of the teachers identified as female, and eighty-six percent as white. They had an average of about seven years of teaching experience. The twenty-four teachers worked in eleven communities. The smallest district has around 500 students. Latinx is the largest ethnic group, sixty-one percent, while Whites are thirty-six percent of the total (US News & World Report). Emergent bilinguals are a third of its 500 students (IDEDNEWS.org). The district is located in a small town situated about 10 miles from the closest moderately sized city, surrounded by agricultural lands growing a diverse variety of crops, which include potatoes, sugar beets, onions, corn, grain, and mint. The small town is one of the poorest towns in the state, and the residents are largely agricultural workers.

The largest district has a student body of 5,371 with a Latinx population of thirty-five percent, and whites account for sixty-three percent. Twelve percent of the students are emergent bilinguals, forty-four percent are from low-income families, while one percent are homeless and five percent are from migrant families. The county is about 66 miles wide and 49 miles long. Several towns make up the County, with populations ranging from two hundred to ten thousand. The County is home to many industries and several processing plants. It is one of the leading agricultural counties in the state. Teachers were engaged in identifying two multilingual students and gaining insight into the students' lives inside and outside of school. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of taking into consideration multiple viewpoints: the child, families, community members, and contexts.

## **4. Data Collection and Analysis**

This study examines teachers' written narratives collected from the *Child Community and Context Study* (CCCS) writings, a key assignment in the graduate program (24 texts, each text length varied from 10 to 25 pages). The narratives were read several times. After in-depth familiarization with the narratives, the analysis was carried out using the thematic analysis approach (Riessman, 1993). While



analyzing the data, I became aware of the ways teachers responded to their experiences with the CCCS by drawing on hidden funds of knowledge (Martínez-Roldán & Fránquiz, 2008) present in the families, classrooms, and communities. I found that the categories aligned well with Yosso's (2005) forms of cultural capital as reflected in her CCW framework. In the presentation of my findings, I will first briefly describe the CCW framework as explained by Tara Yosso (2005, 2006). Secondly, I will present examples from the data to demonstrate how the CCW framework responds to the guiding questions for this study: How did CCCS inform educators' understanding of multilingual families, and how did this influence their interaction with students and families?

## 5. Community Context Study (CCS)

Through a modified funds of knowledge course assignment, the *Community Context Study*, teachers were asked to gain great insights into two of their students' lives, both inside and outside of school. In the CCS, I asked the participants to extend their understanding of young learners beyond the classroom walls, and into their home communities, where they could learn about the wealth of communities often marginalized by schools (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Yosso, 2005). The CCS was designed with the understanding that learners view new information through their own experiences, beliefs, and knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 1996). My study highlights the importance of taking into consideration multiple viewpoints: the child, families, community members, and contexts: school, home, and community. The first component of the study is the "Community/Cultural Observations." Educators were asked to spend time walking and observing the neighborhood of at least two students who were EBs, and to map those spaces (Steinberg & Stephen, 1999). They were reminded to consider the physical landscape, transportation system, landmarks nearby, the shape of buildings, stores nearby, sights, and to hear the sounds that surrounded them (Berry, 1988). They were also reminded to pay attention to a particular history, an event, or the practices that have created the place, making it what it is in the present. To make clear that spaces cannot be generalized, educators interviewed community members to learn about the assets, types of work, main industries, natural and economic resources, people who inhabit the community, and language(s) spoken and perceived needs of the community. The purpose of exploring the community was to help appreciate the concept of place consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003). The next component was the "Focus Children Observations." Teachers were encouraged to be mindful while observing students' interactions in the classroom context and outside the classroom, and while engaging in informal chats. The third component was the "relationship-building home visits" (Sheldon & Jung, 2015). Home visits minimize the power imbalance between the professional and the family, opening the doors to building trust, which is the first step for collaboration. Educators who are not bilingual were encouraged to conduct the visit with a bilingual colleague or the school's liaison.

## 6. Findings

The narratives shed light on how teachers saw students/parents/families persist despite their trying experiences at school. While I used the community cultural wealth framework to analyze the data initially, my findings show the significance of aspirational, linguistic, and social capital as the most critical elements of CCW among participants. I focus on ways these capitals were intellectualized by the teachers as parents/family members conceptualized their own capitals and shared how they transmit them to their children. For this paper, the definitions of the most salient capitals were somewhat modified to examine them through a teacher's lens of a firsthand account of the parents. The examples selected most clearly represent how CCW emerged in the lives of the families and how these forms of capital were understood by the teachers.

### ***Aspirational Capital***

*Aspirational capital* is the ability that Latinx parents bring that involves a parent's ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of barriers to the educational path of their children. It involves parents' ability to inspire their children to do better and achieve more than they have in their educational goals. During a home visit, a teacher recounted the story told by a mother who shared, "I moved to the United States at 12, there were no English language teachers, and I would come home crying because I had a difficult time at school." Because of her experience, she wishes the children finish school, attend college, and have a career. Yet another teacher shared how during the interview, a parent stressed that she wants her children to have a career rather than "a dead-end job." Another





teacher shared that a father, while talking about the future of her daughter's education, firmly stated, "She will go to college, volleyball, etc." – and she is one of two sophomores to make varsity this year. Many of the teachers reported that parents used their own lived experiences as examples to motivate their children. For example, a father told his child that he could end up working long hours under the hot sun in the fields, or he could study to have a job under a roof. Teachers shared that many parents supported the idea that their children should achieve the highest degree possible, as their own educational experiences were cut short. All of this information shifted the ways teachers perceived their children and families' commitment to school. Teachers acknowledge that the myth that Latinx families do not care about education was dismantled through these experiences. A participant shared, "The biggest thing I learned is that families and community members are likely more invested in my students' education than I realized." Another teacher shared, "Families do not only care about education, they have a strong philosophy that is supportive of education," which, as one teacher mentioned, not only aligns with my ways of teaching, but also makes me aware of how it does.

### ***Linguistic Capital***

One of the biggest challenges students and families faced in school was language. It was apparent that linguistic capital, defined as the intellectual and social skills learned through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style (Yosso, 2005), was present but not always appreciated by the teachers in the lives of these students. Home visits resulted in a better understanding of the role that the home language plays in students' lives and the importance it has in strengthening the connections among generations of language speakers, family ties, traditions, and cultural memory. Instilling in students the knowledge of the home language was deemed very important. Families conveyed the value of maintaining it and revealed the commitment to help their children learn it because, as one mom shared, "I want her to be able to communicate with the family in Guatemala when they visit." One teacher recognized the importance of language in students' lives by saying

I became much more aware of the importance of these children's Spanish language heritage. I had never thought of the inability to communicate with a close family member, such as grandparents. As an English teacher, my concentration has always been on meeting the Idaho state standards for English. I see very clearly that for these students, to retain and develop their Spanish literacy is much more than an extension in their education; it is an imperative connection to their whole family.

Another teacher realized that "Treating students' home language with respect is one of the most important curriculum choices I can make" to become a culturally responsive educator. She realized that parents spoke to their students in their native language because they wanted to strengthen their writing and reading skills, which clearly supports their English language development. Indeed, research consistently shows that students who maintain strong skills in their first language become more successful English learners (Colorín Colorado, 2025). Moreover, the teacher had an 'aha moment' when she asked what she could do to support the children, and the father responded, "Having patience as the girls work to understand that their language [Spanish] is a key [to learn English]."

### ***Social Capital***

Social capital is defined by the close networks of people and community families have and the history within those networks. Teachers' narratives had a common story: students were encouraged and supported along the way. Latinx have been present in Idaho since the 1860s (Jones, 2014), working as mule packers, ranchers, miners, laborers, cowboys, and even some arrived as soldiers in the U.S. Army. Teachers discovered that the Latinx community was much more diverse than they thought – Peruvians, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Hondurans, with distinct differences in their dialects and in their ways of being – provide an intricate network of resources supporting the community. Conversations between families and the teachers revealed that the families relied on family or well-established community members to follow their children's academic progress at school. An educator shared

As I observed the community where my students and their families live [...], the interdependence of families was evident. Although each family functions in its own unique family unit, they also rely on the support and help of the neighbors to care for [the] children and to navigate a new language and culture. Students pick up work for their friends who missed school. Children translate for parents and other [emergent bilingual] students who are just learning English.

Another teacher shared that in a home visit, a family friend – a well-established community member – keeps close tabs on the student, and has been advocating for families in the community for years.

## Conclusion

For the teachers in the study, the opportunity to engage in conversations with the students and their families was critical in understanding the barriers families and students face in the various levels of the U.S. educational system. Initially, teachers struggled with the idea of stepping out of their comfort zone and meeting the families, yet, despite all of their trepidations, they recognized that they had been forever transformed. This quote conveys such sentiments: “This assignment pushed me to explore new ways to connect with my students and their families. Through this process, my understanding of my role as an educator and advocate has grown exponentially.” After learning about their students’ and families’ capitals, many started to approach the success of students from an advocacy perspective, moving away from an instructional stance approach. Because each family differs from the next one in terms of which kinds of advocacy they need, and each community differs from the next one in terms of composition, teachers shaped their advocacy role accordingly. Learning how much wealth of knowledge existed in the communities, pushed teachers to find ways to encourage them to become leaders, to have a voice in communities where they account for a large percentage of the population. For example, a teacher took her advocacy into the classroom, working to impact the services provided to multilingual students in a town of about 1,800 residents where Latinx students account for almost 70%. She wrote,

I am more inspired than ever to create an equitable classroom where all students receive the education they deserve. I developed a plan to get families involved in the classroom. I’m also working with the district’s English learner coordinator to develop a better plan for our district’s emergent bilinguals.

Another teacher realized that for the school to reflect the diversity of the community, and for truly embracing the diversity that exists, things needed to change. She suggested, more events for the non-white community members be held, so families can thrive and demonstrate the many ways in which they celebrate and use their wealth of knowledge. She concluded by saying, “This community has many steps to take to become the close-knit community it believes it is.”

The following comment highlights the impact that conversations with families had on their current and future trajectory as educators:

Everyone has a story, and if you’re willing to take a moment and listen, it is amazing what we as human beings go through each and every day. I have learned much more than just the requirements of this assignment, but a life lesson that people are truly amazing, and the students that walk through my door each year are gifts. As I look to the future and reflect back [...] I find myself wanting to stay in touch with the families and students, and follow them along their educational journey.

Understanding how much value families place in education and how much families were aligned with their commitment to help students succeed, pushed teachers to brainstorm ideas on how to further support their students: Translation of all materials sent home, volunteering with community organizations, home visits and regular check-ins through the year, family biliteracy nights, sending bilingual books home with students to read with their families.

## What’s next?



Educators in rural and urban areas of the U.S. face tremendous challenges and issues as they strive to meet the needs of a growing emergent bilingual population. Unfortunately, the cuts imposed by the current administration may have an unforeseen impact on the educational communities. The current administration decimated the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), eliminating nearly 200 civil rights attorneys who would make sure districts meet their legal obligations to support these students. Many see the removal of staff who oversee Title III – a program that provides funding to states to support English language learners (ELLs, and immigrant students – as a way to bundling the money in block grants that states could use with less restrictions, but many advocates for immigrants worry it could divert resources away from students learning English (Belsha, 2025). Moreover, President Trump has expressed a desire to eliminate the Education Department and move core programs to other agencies. This would have a tremendous impact on essential funds and services to millions of students, including protected populations such as EBs who, for the majority, are U.S. citizens, representing 11 percent of the total K-12 school enrollment. Many teachers are sharing their concern about what is next because they are fully aware that multilingual specialists' positions are federally funded, and if federal funds are cut, the position would be eliminated; therefore, emergent bilinguals will receive less support. Teachers worry that these cuts will also impact the programs available for EBs, pushing them to be placed in a sink or swim situation, repeating the linguistic history that began during the World War I era and lasted until the late 1960s.

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