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Maria Timmons Flores
Western Washington University

Marilyn Chu
Western Washington University

Michael Sampson
Western Washington University

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Latinos in Action: Cultivating Academics, Access, Equity, and Future Bilingual Educators

Maria Timmons Flores, Marilyn Chu, and Michael Sampson
Western Washington University

Abstract

Developing bilingual teachers is critical in closing the achievement gap experienced by bilingual and Latino children. This qualitative case study investigated the benefits of an academically grounded cross-age tutoring program designed to support low-income, bilingual high school students to graduate, pursue higher education, and explore education as a possible career. Data sources included observations, interviews, program artifacts, and quantitative academic indicators. Data were analyzed using grounded theory and narrative analysis. Theoretically framed as social design experiment (Gutierrez & Vossoughi, 2010), the study employs cultural historical perspectives and qualitative research to define underlying principles of transformative practice. Findings demonstrate shifts in individuals' learning, identity, and efficacy, as well as shifts in the institutional context and teacher attitudes as a result of the students' words and actions. Students' experiences upon graduation also point to the essential work that Teacher Educators and Universities will need to undertake to support these young people if their journey to teaching is to be successful.

Purposes

Washington State's assessment data reveal a large and growing achievement gap for some minority students, most significantly English Learners, Latino, and Migrant students (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, [OSPI], 2010). Between 2000 & 2010, the percentage of Latino students has risen by 72% and students identified as transitional bilingual has risen by 52%. Overall, 35% of the students enrolled in Washington state P-12 schools identify as students of color (OSPI, 2011), and as student diversity rapidly increases, the ethnic and linguistic background of P-12 teachers and teacher candidates remains largely unchanged. Currently, 93% of the state's teachers are European American (Elfers & Plecki, 2009), and 85% of those entering the profession identify as White (OSPI, 2011). Washington State ranks second to last in the nation for a teaching force that is representative of the state's ethnic composition (Peterson & Nadle, 2009).

The *Achievement Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee* was established by the legislature in 2009 to develop priorities and recommend policies and strategies to close Washington State's achievement gap. Two of the ten high recommendations to reduce the differential achievement of Washington State students of color included: 1) *Expanding pathways and strategies to prepare and recruit diverse teachers and administrators*, and 2) *Enhancing the cultural competence of current and future educators and the cultural relevance of curriculum and instruction* (Bertschi, 2010). In response to these recommendations, the state legislature funded the *Recruiting Washington Teachers Grant* to support the development of 4 pipeline

programs designed to expose high school students to careers in education while supporting them to graduate and gain access to college. The purpose of this study was to investigate the benefits of one of these programs, an innovative cross age tutoring program designed as a pathway to teacher education for bilingual high school students. Latinos in Action (LIA) placed bilingual high school students into elementary classrooms as teaching assistants, linking this experience to an academic course in educational foundations during the school day.

Research Questions

How does LIA participation influence the learning, identity, and academic and professional trajectories for the students involved?

How does the students' participation influence the context in which the program exists?

How does participation influence students' understandings and pursuit of careers in education?

Cultural Historical and Political Context

Latinos in Action is located in a rural, agricultural community, which has doubled its Latino population in the last decade, as traditionally migrant families have been settling in the community year round. In 2011, 35% of the district's students were Latino and 50% were on free and reduced lunch (OSPI Report Card, 2011). In this same time frame, between 50 - 60% of Latino students dropped out, and of those who graduated, very few had the academic preparation, GPA, or test scores to go on to higher education. The high school has no Latino teachers and employs only a few adults in any role who are Latino or speak Spanish. Students report (RWT Grant Study, 2011) that they experienced negative messages about their families, language, culture and future possibilities from school personnel and community members on a regular basis. Latinos in Action (LIA) was created an educational context in which students who have traditionally been viewed through a deficit lens, have the opportunity to disrupt assumptions about their identities, capabilities and possibilities through positive contributions in the school and community. Most have received little support historically to develop the kinds of academic literacy or identity that supports college access and success; this program was designed to address those capacities in practice.

Latinos in Action (LIA) is a high school leadership class focused on exposure to educational careers through academic preparation and authentic, hands-on experiences. The academic portion of the course focuses on professional, ethical, and equity issues in education, as well as child development and learning. The class includes a focus on cultural competence and culturally relevant teaching. Following ten weeks of academic preparation, bilingual juniors and seniors are placed in elementary classrooms as teaching assistants and mentors. LIA students spend over 40 hours each semester working directly with elementary students under the guidance of a mentor teacher. To prepare students for tutoring, the class develops students' professional skills in classroom management and teaching math and reading strategies. It includes a weekly seminar with a reflective component in which students write about and discuss their tutoring experiences, and collaboratively problem solving around challenges they encounter.

LIA students take on various leadership roles in the school and community. In the fall, they provide childcare for school and community events. They serve as translators at some school events. In the spring, they plan and offer a conference on higher education access for over 150

Latino students from regional high schools. LIA students planned and facilitated community-building activities at the regional Migrant Youth Leadership Conference. They have presented their program at school board meetings and conducted workshops on bridging cultures between students and teachers at regional conferences and teacher development events. LIA students were instrumental in starting an after-school bilingual program at a local Elementary and another at a residential community that houses migrant families. Students volunteered at family literacy events in the district.

The academic course also features a unit on college preparedness; supporting students to research higher education options linked to possible careers and costs involved. Students develop sample budgets for each college option and make plans for how they will fund higher education. Within the context of the course, students apply for college, financial aid, and scholarships. The LIA curriculum is articulated with a regional college class, so students receive 3 college credits as well as High School English credit.

LIA has been funded by a grant from the state level teaching standards board since 2009. Prior to this time, state funded high school programs designed to recruit teachers attracted primarily white, middle class girls. With growing political recognition of the importance of creating a teaching force that reflects the ethnic diversity of its student body, state grant funding shifted to programs focused on increasing the number of educators of color in teaching shortage areas including bilingual education (RWT Final Report, July 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Situated Learning. This study views learning and identity development as situated in activity in the world (Levinson & Holland, 1996; McDermott, 1993). In this theory, neither social organization nor individual development are viewed as fixed but as evolving—reinterpreted and renegotiated through interaction and across activity settings. Each interaction is influenced by history on multiple levels, including the biographies of individuals, historical development of institutions and practices, and the broader culture of the individuals and institutions. The relationship between the partially given nature of situations and their renegotiation in interaction highlights the dialogic relationship between history and context that allows for consideration of both reproductive and productive features of culture. This paradigm defines learning and identity development as cultural processes—a much broader view than traditional psychological perspectives.

Social Design Experiment. LIA can be viewed as a Social Design Experiment (Gutierrez & Vossoughi, 2010), an approach that intentionally employs learning principles to collaboratively design interventions with and for non-dominant communities that focus on equity. It is a form of participatory action research that is intended to simultaneously create and study change (Nofke, 1997). This approach is framed within a cultural historical perspective with an explicit focus on transformation of both individuals and the contexts in which they interact (Engstrom, 2007). Experiment in this context is used to denote the creation of collaboratively influenced rich learning ecologies that heighten the potential for deep learning to occur for all participants. In this case, as older students teach younger students, and as high school students are mentored or taught by adults, the collaboration produces powerful learning for all involved. As they participate, each individual develops existing and new repertoires of practice that facilitate individual and social change (Gutierrez, 2008). The approach acknowledges the innate complexity, contradictions and revisions that occur in learning through co-construction and

participation over time.

Social Justice. The Latinos in Action (LIA) program defines its “overarching mission...to develop empowered bilingual role models, who graduate from high school, attend and ultimately graduate from college and return to the valley, to obtain jobs in the field of education and to educate the rest of our community about difficult issues related to cultural competency, racism, stereotyping and diversity (RWT Final Report, July 2011).” In many ways, this statement encompasses the design principles for this program. LIA seeks to develop individual efficacy, and academic and professional success. However, it links individual achievement with a commitment to give back to family and community, a value that resonates with the participants. The program affirms language and culture as assets in gaining individual success and in creating role models for younger students. Finally, it acknowledges the racism, educational and social inequities that exist in the school, region and in the lived experiences of the students, yet does so in a way that supports students to overcome these through education and activism.

Methods

Participants

This qualitative case study described and analyzed the benefits of participation for LIA students. The students who participate in this program are from low-income Latino families and have learned English as their second or third language. The study focused on 42 students who participated in the program during the 2009-10 and 2010-11 academic years, with 6 students who graduated in 2009 and 2010 serving as key informants. Researchers were participants in the setting; as ELL teacher, grant evaluator, and teacher educator (Erickson, 2006). The study clearly had an action component, as ongoing analysis of data informed practices as the year progressed. As insiders in this community, they worked to check subjective assumptions by supporting all claims with triangulated data and perception checking with participants.

Data Sources & Analysis

Quantitative data were collected for descriptive analysis and to establish baseline data to monitor change over time. Quantitative data included attendance, disciplinary actions, GPA, graduation and higher education admission rates, and scholarships received. Qualitative data sources included interviews, observations, field notes, program artifacts, student work samples, and researchers’ reflective journals. Data were analyzed using grounded theory in a constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965, Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and narrative analysis (Chase, 2005; Pushor & Clandinin, 2009). As noted above, the study is a form of participatory action research, using cycles of inquiry to inform program design, revision, and action (Nofke, 1997).

Lessons from the Journey to Become a Bilingual Teacher

While still in high school, students’ attendance, grades, and test scores improved. In the programs 4 years, nearly 100% have graduated from high school, 85% have gone on to college and of these over 85% received scholarships. The program clearly exposed students to careers in education and offered them genuine professional experience that lead immediately to work as interpreters or para-educators for some, and longer term may produce bilingual educators. As

students graduated or completed their first year of college, approximately 50% intended to pursue a career in education. A significant number of students experience compounded difficulties in pursuing college, and are barred from a career in teaching due to their immigration status. Many students will not become teachers, yet it was their positive contribution to and participation in the education of younger students that developed the positive identities, sense of efficacy, confidence, and academic and leadership skills shown in the qualitative results.

Both students and their teachers cite a number of tangible benefits gained through participation. Students receive high school and college credit linked to academics and work experience. The course offered support for academic language and literacy development embedded in meaningful and challenging work. Both course readings and experiences affirmed language and culture as assets, personally and professionally. Being a role model for younger students motivated the LIA students to do well academically. Their teacher set very high expectations for students while offering support for them to succeed. The LIA cohort provided a community of support and peers who share a commitment to personal achievement and desire to give back to the community. The program coordinator spoke about the layered benefits for his students,

The program is reciprocal on multiple levels, the LIA students learn reading and math strategies to use with elementary students and we believe this benefits them academically also. They serve as role models for younger students but must also be leaders and be successful academically to deserve this. They are making a contribution in classrooms but they are also learning from master teachers. They take on public roles in the community and teachers are beginning to see them differently, as responsible and able.

This quote summarizes many of the themes that emerged in the data as well as describing the layered benefits for all involved, students across a continuum from elementary through college and their teachers. The following section highlights themes that emerged in the data that point to elements that made this program beneficial for students, these themes are presented in three clusters, including; 1) Opportunities for Success; 2) Reframing Language and Culture as Assets; and 3) Reciprocity of Teaching and Learning. The final theme in this section highlights the challenges experienced by 6 graduates of the program as they navigate community college without the support of the program. These themes - illuminated through the words and experiences of the LIA students and teachers -lead to the design elements cited in the conclusion.

Opportunities for Success

As bilingual students in US public schools, many of the LIA students have had to work harder over many years to close the achievement gap with their English Speaking peers. Many of these students are still refining their academic English and striving to raise their cumulative GPA, affected negatively by their early years learning English. For many of them, LIA is the first time they have had teachers set high expectations for them and tell them overtly that they can achieve academically. Their teacher, who started the program said,

When I started (teaching) there was not a lot of opportunity for the students that I was working with in my ELL classes. If you look at the achievement gap, it is very real and it is

a big deal for the kids to see that they were not achieving as much as other students at the High School. In many ways, that is because they lack opportunities to succeed or be viewed as leaders. They did not see themselves as capable students. One of the things this program has shown me is that you can make a change. It is not easy, and it doesn't happen fast. But all of our seniors in the program have graduated and most of them leave with scholarship money to go to college. All of these students were in that group that were not achieving. But it is possible to make change if they have the opportunities.

The LIA teacher's comments are echoed in the words of his student, Rosario who is now a college sophomore who works as an instructional assistant in the district said,

A lot of Latinos are not really involved in school. I wasn't. But since I got involved in LIA, it helped me to be more involved in school and the community. After this class, I have just kept going and going. It is that involvement that helped me see myself as a leader. All that volunteer work made me stand out. It helped me get scholarships. If it weren't for Latinos in Action, I wouldn't have money to go to college.

The majority of the LIA students work after school, either making money to support their families or caring for siblings and the home while their parents work. Because this program happened during the school day, it provided students who generally do not participate in sports, leadership or extracurricular activities with positive opportunities to contribute in the school and community. This participation enhanced students' learning and shifted their self-perception and those others held of them.

They also built professional networks through the leadership activities in the community. The students developed a sense of competency through participation. With each success, more doors open. This sense of possibility was gained through action, and with each success came a new sense of purpose and confidence and a related desire to give something back. Josue, also a college sophomore said, "LIA really encourages you to graduate and not to just stop there but to go beyond that and to pursue your dream or your career or what you really want to do. LIA took us out of our comfort zone and put us out there in the real world. It made us think ... and to ask, 'what am I going to do with my life?' It makes you want to do something more with your life." This sense of confidence and efficacy came through the opportunity to participate and the support to succeed in leadership roles. The networks they built introduced them to local politics, businesses, and non-profit organizations.

Reframing Language and Culture as Assets

Every LIA student spoke about the importance of education, and cited education as one of the primary reasons their families had come to the USA. Many also spoke about the identity cast upon them by the media, the local community, and some teachers – as unmotivated, drop outs, gang members, or only capable of manual labor. One of the students told a story of her Social Studies teacher who she said was trying to be supportive when he told her, "I know you are a hard worker, if you continue to push yourself like this, some day you may be able to own your own cleaning business." Another teacher told a student, "You can be different, if you would just try harder, you could be like me. You don't want to be like your father." LIA actively counters the messages that

many students internalize.

In addition to providing the older students with the opportunity and support to be successful, it gives them a reason to succeed beyond their own initiative. Mariana spoke with urgency to a theme that ran throughout the interviews, a sense that educational success was vital, that it was the reason their parents had worked so hard, she said, “I will be the first in my family to graduate and that’s very important because I want to show both my brothers that they can do it too. I want my brothers to finish high school and college. It’s my mom’s dream. That’s why it’s so important. I have to do this.” Siblings, cousins, and younger students, all provided a motivation for the LIA students to succeed. They also spoke of a desire to finish college so they could provide for their parents and give back to their communities. This program supported the creation of a positive Latino academic identity and peer community in which students became leaders and role models who were academically successful, bilingual, and bicultural.

The academic portion of the class explored issues of educational equity and included a focus on culturally responsive pedagogy and cultural competence. This academic preparation raised students’ critical awareness, offered them the language to define their own cultural identities, and provided them a forum for discussion and reflection. As LIA students worked with younger students, they saw the immediate application of language and cultural understanding as assets in their teaching. As Juan wrote in one of his reflections,

I think a teacher has to be really careful with how he speaks, acts or interacts with the students. A teacher has to basically learn the culture of those students so they can understand each other. Every day teachers have to look at different strategies on how to teach their students since they come with different cultures, different ways of learning, and different languages.

The LIA students tutor in both English and in Spanish, and they come to see their native language as an asset that many of the teachers with whom they work do not possess. In both its academic and school based contexts, the program affirms language and culture as strengths both personally and professionally.

Often society implies that students must leave their culture and language behind in order to succeed. For many of these students, and the younger ones who follow, LIA allows them to reclaim their family’s heritage language and craft identities that affirm their two cultures in a way that counters an internalized deficit perspective. For the first time, students realize that their language is also a benefit professionally. As one student told me, “I never realized that being bilingual could help me get me a job, not only in teaching but in any field I might pursue.” Developing a positive bilingual / bicultural academic identity once again came through cycles of knowledge, reflection, and action focused on language and culture as strengths.

Not only did the students see themselves differently but their teachers and the community at large began to see Latino students differently also. The contributions they made - in tutoring younger students, translating at parent teacher conferences, building after school programs, and organizing conferences for other students – dramatically shifted the way these students were perceived. LIA has opened closed minds on the capacities of Latino students more broadly. One high school teacher told me he could not imagine how the school had managed to communicate with families before the LIA students began to translate and offer childcare for conference. LIA

student events and achievements are often highlighted in the local paper and offer the community at large a different image of Latino youth.

Reciprocity Of Teaching And Learning

The program builds strategic relationships between students from elementary through high school and into college. I also builds relationships between students, teachers and university faculty in a model of *cascading mentorship*. Essentially the program attempts to build a pathway to academic, social, cultural and professional success through relationships. For example, each LIA student is partnered with a mentor teacher for the semester. Also, the LIA students work with Latino university students as co-facilitators at the Migrant Youth Leadership Conference. Each individual has something to teach and to learn from those a step ahead or a step behind on the path. The following quote by Ariceli speaks to her identity as a role model for younger students,

I remember that when I was a little I looked up to a teacher. I saw that everyone came to her for advice or for help and I said to myself I want to become as important as her. That's why I think it's important to be role models to kids... last year when I went to Buena Vista Elementary there was this little girl who I would help and she once told me, 'I want to be smart like you when I go to the high school.' It felt awesome. I think that this class has influenced kids in a positive way.

Nadia speaks to the role respect and care from others played in pushing her on to become the role model that younger students need.

After feeling all that support, knowing all those kids are proud of you or they want to be like you. You want to graduate and go beyond, you want to inspire other people. You don't want to stop at influencing just those kids. You want to do more. You want to make a difference in your community. That was my experience in LIA.

Our traditional concepts of mentoring imply a hierarchy, with one person being the expert and another the novice, one a teacher and one a student. In this program, the learning and inspiration are much more reciprocal. Younger students ask questions about how to follow in older students' footsteps, which reinforces the value of the lessons and accomplishments older students have gained in life and learning. The mentor teachers, teacher candidates, and teacher educators who teach in elementary classrooms where these LIA students tutor, recognize the cultural competency and assets the LIA students bring to teaching. They tell stories of the learning conversations they overhear, and reflexively they learn about cultural relevance and competence from the high school students making connections to life and text with students in the elementary classrooms. This model of intentional cascading mentorship has benefits for all involved.

The reciprocity of teaching and learning provides academic benefits as a well. LIA students learn the content of their academic class much more deeply as they apply it in the context their teaching. Lupe, looking back on the reading strategies she learned in the LIA class early in the year said, "I did not think I was ever going to use them." She then went on to tell a story of a teacher asking her to work with a student who was struggling to read in English. She described her experience of working with this student,

I realized that Alicia would try to just go through the book without thinking about it. She read the material as quickly as she could and she did not even look at the pictures. I told her that we should read a little slower and actually take time to see what the words meant. I asked her if she needed help understanding the vocabulary. I also told her to start asking questions. I started noticing she would ask me questions, and at times when she read the book she would smile at some of the words she read because was starting to understand the meanings. She was taking the time to actually listen to herself and hear what she was saying. At the end of the week, I asked her to summarize what she had read to me and she did this so well. I think we both learned something that week.

As teachers of English Learners, we teach comprehension strategies and the academic language of summarizing, connecting, questioning, identifying points of confusion, and defining vocabulary in context (Zwiers, 2008). In this brief description of her work with one student, Lupe demonstrates not only her knowledge of these strategies but the ability to use them appropriately in practice. Ultimately, as LIA students learn readings strategies to teach younger students, they are deepening their own academic language and literacy.

Continuing the Journey: Learning from Students' Experience

We are perfect examples of why this program should keep going. We are still in school, we are working hard to earn our degrees, we are still moving forward even though we have a lot of obstacles in our lives. You just have to have the courage and strength to keep moving forward and this class helped a lot with that.

Interviewing LIA graduates who had successfully transitioned to community college offered additional insights. It certainly highlighted the powerful influence that their participation in LIA continued to have in their lives, indeed they were more articulate and clear about naming those benefits as they looked back on their experiences. They identified the multiple roles their teacher had played in their lives, as a teacher who believed in them and gave them genuine responsibly. He also served as an advocate with other teachers and held them accountable when they struggled academically. He helped them to understand what they needed to do to apply for college, financial aid or scholarships. He created a space for them to build their own community of support, challenge and learning. As they spoke about the ways their teacher had supported them, they also lamented that much of this tangible advising, accountability, advocacy, and support was missing in the college setting and their own peer community was difficult to maintain.

The LIA graduates also spoke of the tangible barriers that remained for them; finding money for college, demands of supporting family members, lack of knowledge of how universities work, and for many trying to understand how to navigate a system without papers. Many of them entered college with scores in math and English that required them to take remedial classes that will not count towards their graduation. All of these students experience multilayered challenges as they continue their journey with less support than they had in high school. Joaquin who experiences all of the barriers named above spoke honestly of his greatest challenge,

I am pursuing my citizenships here in the United States but that has been a big obstacle in my life. It has been a lot tougher to find money. I don't qualify for financial aid so I have to find money other places. There are scholarships and if I just keep looking, I can find it. For this

coming year, I have all my classes paid for at Skagit. That's proof that you can do it if you just keep looking but that is something that should be addressed more in schools. A lot of kids are too shy to say anything. When I was younger, I was embarrassed to say I wasn't a citizen. Programs that offered information and support confidentially and told students that it was OK to pursue college would help. But without the Dream Act, I will not be able to become a teacher or a lawyer.

It is clear that their experience in LIA made college access possible and that the benefits of their participation remains strong in their positive academic and cultural identities and their tenacity in the face of challenges. But, once enrolled in a local college, the former LIA high school students report they lacked the tangible support and knowledge, and the network of people who advised them and supported them in the past. The college students' narratives serve as evidence that the former LIA students are struggling to maintain the goal of becoming bilingual teachers. Without institutional commitment to extend support and advising into the college years, it will be a long and challenging journey for these students to complete teacher education. A number of these students have been hired in the district as instructional assistants. While this employment may support them financially to pay for college, without support to complete their journey through a traditional or alternative route to teaching, the program may actually amplify the inequities as schools take advantage of the talents of these gifted and committed young people while the doors close on genuine opportunity.

Conclusions

This study offers a descriptive profile of a pathway program that exposes bilingual high school students to critical educational issues and the work of teaching. It also highlights the powerful learning and identity development that is gained through participation that genuinely enhances the education of younger students. Participation supported students to develop the academic abilities, identities, and efficacy to graduate and gain access to higher education. Perhaps most important is the ethnographic illustration of key program design elements that support individual success linked to efficacy and action for social justice. In a time when the opportunity gap widens for Latino and bilingual students, and the cultural disconnect between students of color and their teachers persists, this paper's findings develop design principles to guide future interventions focused on teacher pathways and critical cultural change. Specifically, these principles, derived from this study include:

- Understand and Actively Address the Challenges Students Face
- Affirm Language and Culture as Assets
- Support Academic Language Development
- Recognize Resources within Communities
- Cultivate Opportunities for Success
- Build Positive Relationships
- Provide Support to Navigate Institutions
- Keep Hope Alive through Action

This study applied research to design a promising intervention to identify and develop potential bilingual teachers in their high school years, supporting them to gain the academic

literacy, identities and self-efficacy to graduate from high school and pursue higher education. As these young people continue on their academic and professional trajectories, their experiences illuminate the many barriers that remain in their journey towards teaching. These potential barriers are more than the financial, informational, and emotional issues identified by the students. The LIA students have yet to discover if the colleges of education they will enter will have the institutional capacity to move beyond the rhetoric of embracing social justice to accepting these often marginalized students and offering them an intellectual home that views their culture and language as assets in teacher candidates (Chu, Timmons Flores, Carroll, French, 2011). The LIA student experiences have the potential to become the fertile ground upon which to build the next steps of the college pathway to culturally and linguistically relevant teacher education.

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