

Holding Space for our Stories: Latiné Educators' Experiences as English Learners and
their Journey to Becoming Bilingual Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers, who were once English learners (ELs). It is situated within broader issues of persistent academic disparities among Latiné students and the underrepresentation of Latiné educators, despite the growing demographic of Latiné ELs. This study was centered on current Latiné bilingual teachers in Virginia, where Latiné students constitute the largest group of ELs and concurrently exhibit the highest dropout rates and lowest graduation rates. This investigation explored how Latiné bilingual educators' personal histories with language barriers and cultural transition influenced their educational trajectories. It examined how their dual experiences, as former English learners and as current bilingual teachers, inform their understanding of students' multifaceted needs and how they have shaped their pedagogical practices. Utilizing a *plática* approach, a qualitative methodology linked to Latiné cultural contexts, this study captured the nuanced experiences of these professionals. Findings revealed that familial values and strong community support were pivotal in shaping participants' commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy. These values align with Moll's (1992, 2005) Funds of Knowledge framework, which conceptualizes family practices, skills, and social networks as rich cultural and intellectual resources for learning. Family values, such as interdependence and mutual support represent critical funds of knowledge that educators can bring into their classrooms to affirm students' cultural wealth while disrupting deficit-based perspectives that often marginalize English learners (ELs). This study further highlights how former

ELs' lived experiences inform their teaching identities and professional commitments. Drawing from their backgrounds, participants foster inclusive learning environments, validate students' linguistic and cultural identities, and advocate for equitable access to educational opportunities. Key insights from the study highlighted the critical need to enhance culturally responsive teaching practices and to align instruction with the realities of diverse populations. Implications extend to educational policies and professional learning opportunities that honor lived experiences and promote equitable, culturally affirming learning environments. By amplifying the voices of these educators, this research contributes to advancing equity and inclusion within the educational landscape and formally recognizes the invaluable linguistic and cultural assets that former ELs bring to the profession.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers, who were once English learners (ELs). It is grounded in existing research on academic disparities among Latiné students, which is magnified by the underrepresentation of Latiné educators. This study focused on the experiences of current Latiné bilingual teachers in Virginia and explored how their personal histories with language barriers and cultural transition as former English learners influenced their educational journeys and the impact it has had on their teaching practices. Using a *plática* approach, a methodology rooted in Latiné culture, this study captured the nuanced experiences of these educators. It highlighted how their backgrounds as ELs, coupled with their teacher preparation, have shaped their pedagogical practices. Findings revealed that familial values and community support were pivotal in shaping participants' culturally responsive pedagogy, aligning with Moll's (1992) Funds of Knowledge that acknowledges family practices and networks as rich cultural resources. As former ELs, participants draw from these lived experiences to affirm students' identities, foster inclusive classrooms, and advocate for equitable educational opportunities while challenging deficit perspectives of ELs. By amplifying the voices of these educators, the research contributes to fostering greater equity and inclusion within the educational landscape. It recognizes the valuable linguistic and cultural strengths that former ELs bring to the profession, ultimately aiming to improve educational environments and outcomes for diverse student populations.

DEDICATION

To the boys and girls whose voices were never heard,
your *historias* (stories) live on in the echoes of our hearts.

We honor your silence with remembrance,
and your stories with reverence.
You are not forgotten.

To the new generations of language learners,
We hear you, we see you, and we stand with you.
May your words rise with courage,
your voices & accents bloom with pride,
and your presence create space for future generations to come.



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This journey was extraordinary, and it would not have been possible without the village that supported me along the way.

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To my participants, elevating your stories has been one of the most exhilarating and memorable experiences of this journey. I could not have asked for a more inspiring group, and it is my hope that your voices resonate with others as deeply as they have with me.

To my cohort of scholars, it has been a privilege to work alongside you. Your expertise, commitment, and vision give me great confidence that schools and students are in excellent hands as you continue to create optimal learning experiences for future generations.

I am profoundly thankful for the many supportive individuals in my life who have inspired me and sustained me through this milestone. To my family and friends who have prayed and stood by me every step of the way, your support has been invaluable.

Throughout my life I've held one very simple goal: to honor those who have given me so much. To my parents, the embodiment of unconditional love and unwavering support, your belief in me has been a constant presence throughout my life. *Tus historias* (Your stories) were the first that shaped my path, and it is the greatest honor to be your daughter and to live out a dream that we spoke of since I was a young girl.

To my sister, my best friend, and one of my greatest blessings. Your love and support always exceed my expectations every single day. Life feels brighter and more promising with you by my side. I'm forever grateful for your encouragement and for the bond we share. Our work is not only a reflection of who we are as family, but also a gift of advocacy for those we serve.

Finally, to God, dearest *Papa Dios*, I have witnessed Your hand at work in countless ways. I am in awe of you, and you are nothing short of amazing. Thank you for granting me the strength and the time to see this journey through, and for allowing me the privilege of amplifying the voices of those who so richly deserve to be heard.

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Chapter One: Introduction

With the dramatic increase in the Latiné population, the persistent teacher shortages, and the widening gap between the diversity of students and their educators, researchers have stressed the importance of systemic change in addressing the crisis within schools (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006; Noguera, 2015). The underrepresentation of teachers of color, particularly in schools that serve diverse student populations, exacerbates inequities in education (Hart, 2023). Given the current proposal to revoke Executive Order 11246, an order to prohibit discrimination based on color, race, ethnicity, sex, sexual identity, gender identity, religion, or national origin, this raises concerns (Exec. Order No. 11246, 1965; WH, 2025). Underrepresentation not only affects student achievement and engagement but also limits the cultural relevance of teaching practices and curricula. To break this cycle and better reflect the student demographic, it is crucial for schools and districts to focus on creating opportunities that support the social, cultural, and academic development of youth of color (Rodriguez & Wy, 2024).

Research also emphasizes that the lack of representation in the teaching profession can perpetuate cultural misunderstandings, which may contribute to disengagement and feelings of marginalization among students of color (Brownie, 2024; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Noguera, 2015; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Schools must work to address this by providing opportunities for students of color to see themselves represented in educational leadership roles, particularly teaching (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Lindsay et al., 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Brownie (2024) articulated that embracing teacher diversity “is a proven catalyst for stronger connections, richer learning experiences, and improved outcomes for all students” (para. 3). Therefore, schools must focus on the long-term support and development of these future

educators (Ladson-Billing, 2009). By fostering an environment that nurtures the academic and personal growth of youth of color, educators can help cultivate a new generation of teachers who not only have the academic qualifications but also possess the cultural competence and commitment to social justice needed to serve as role models and advocates for their future students (Ankeny et al., 2019; Coady, 2019; Noguera, 2015).

Background

The Latiné education pipeline and efforts to improve educational access have been ongoing concerns for researchers over the past three decades (Huber et al., 2015; Pérez Huber et al., 2006; Solórzano et al., 2003). Studies consistently show that students of color, including Latiné students, face educational attainment gaps compared to other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. For example, Table 1 highlights the educational attainment disparities (low graduation rates) between the Latiné population and other student groups. Within the Latiné subgroups, Chicanas/os and Central Americans have the lowest levels of educational attainment (see Figure 1). Latiné students still have the lowest high school completion rate compared to other racial/ethnic groups. In 2020, the Virginia Department of Education reported that 44.8% of students who dropped out of school identified as Latiné. Further complicating this issue is that Latiné students make up the largest group of English learners (ELs). As of fall 2021, 77.9% of Latiné students were identified as ELs (Najarro, 2024). The combination of low high school completion rates and the high percentage of English learners highlights the significant challenges Latiné students may face within the education system, which could ultimately create barriers to entering the teaching profession.

Table 1

The US Education Pipeline by Race/Ethnicity and Gender, 2022. (In percent)

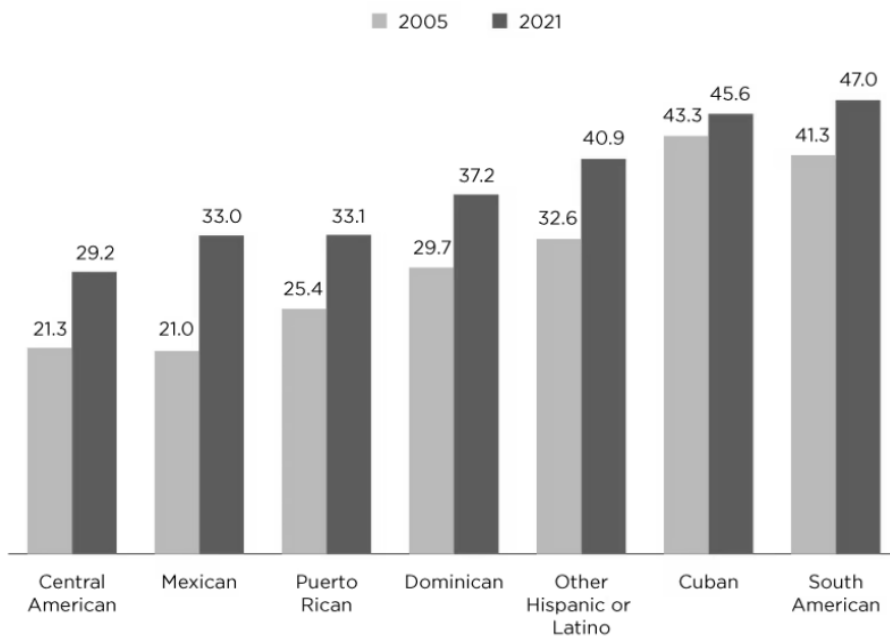
Race/ Ethnicity	White		African American		Hispanic or Latino		Asian American		Native American		Native Hawaiian	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
High School Diploma	93.1	94.3	87.2	89.3	71.6	74.7	89.6	87	76.2	80	87.6	87.7
Bachelor's Degree	38.2	39.7	22	28.4	18.4	22.4	59.3	55.7	14.2	28.4	19.3	20.2

Source: Data from the 2022 American Community Survey (ACS), compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau, illustrates the disparity in graduation rates.

Note: M = Males; F = Females

Figure 1

Share of US Population Ages 18-24 Enrolled in College by Detailed Hispanic Origin: 2005-2021. (In percent)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 and 2021 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

Data demonstrates disparities in college enrollment among Latiné subgroups.

Statement of the Problem

The persistent achievement gaps and low graduation rates of Latiné students, including English learners, represent a significant challenge in education (Cardona & Rodriguez, 2023; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017; King et al., 2016). This issue is compounded

by the underrepresentation of Latiné educators relative to the increasing Latiné English learner population (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Gershenson et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Research indicates that culturally and linguistically diverse teachers positively influence student outcomes (Gershenson et al., 2016; Rashid, 2023). An increased representation of teachers with shared experiences may narrow achievement gaps and improve graduation rates by better addressing the specific needs of English learners. Furthermore, teacher diversity can positively affect academic performance and students' long-term educational goals (Hoxby & Leigh, 2004).

Rationale for Study

Exploring the dual experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers who were once English learners can offer valuable insights into their unique perspectives as both learners and educators. These distinct viewpoints can significantly inform school leaders, instructional practices, and teacher preparation programs, ultimately enhancing support for Latiné English learners. Research could reveal how these teachers leverage cultural responsiveness, potentially through a Funds of Knowledge approach, to cultivate supportive learning environments (Gay, 2010; Moll et al., 1992). Understanding their experiences can shed light on effective strategies for addressing the unique challenges that English learners face, ultimately contributing to improving their academic achievement and overall well-being.

According to studies, the benefits associated with a racially diverse teacher workforce include increased academic achievement (Dee, 2004; Egalite et al., 2015; Montes, 2012; Ocasio, 2014), decreased disciplinary issues (Lindsay & Hart, 2017), and higher academic standards (Gershenson et al., 2016). Studies have also revealed ways in which culturally and linguistically diverse teachers draw upon their own lived experiences and employ a critical and transformative pedagogy that ensures educational equity, promotes activism, and fosters social literacy among

students from racial groups who have been historically underrepresented in society (Albers & Frederick, 2013; Hayes et al., 2014; Milner, 2006). Brownie (2024) concluded that a key factor contributing to the underrepresentation of minority teachers seems to be the significant disparity in the likelihood of young adults from different demographic groups earning a bachelor's degree, which is typically required to teach. She went on to suggest that increasing the number of minority students who attend, and complete college may be crucial to boosting minority representation within the teaching profession, as teachers who share similar racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds can make a meaningful impact.

According to the Pew Research Center (2021), data indicated that 25% of the student population in the US identifies as Latiné. In contrast, only 8% of Latiné teachers represent the teaching population, leaving Latiné students with the largest teacher diversity gap. Although there is limited research specifically focusing on the impact of Latiné teachers on Latiné students, existing studies show that the benefits of teacher-student racial matching are well-documented, particularly for Black students. Research has consistently demonstrated that Black students tend to perform better academically, experience improved social-emotional development, and exhibit higher levels of engagement and self-esteem when they have Black teachers (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020; Shapiro & Partlow, 2018). These positive outcomes are attributed to the ability of Black teachers to serve as role models, build stronger relationships based on shared cultural experiences, and provide culturally relevant instruction that resonates with their students.

While similar studies examining the effects of Latiné teachers on Latiné students are still emerging, there is a growing recognition of the importance of representation in education. For example, Latiné teachers may share cultural experiences and linguistic backgrounds with their

students, which can foster a sense of belonging and understanding in the classroom (Gershenson et al., 2023). Additionally, Latiné teachers may be more equipped to address the unique challenges that Latiné students face, particularly in terms of navigating issues related to language acquisition, cultural integration, and socio-economic disparities (Garcia Nevarez et al., 2005; Gershenson et al., 2023; Reeves, 2006; Walker et al., 2004). As the body of research on teacher diversity continues to expand, more studies are needed to explore how Latiné teachers impact Latiné students specifically, but the evidence from studies on Black student-teacher matches provides a strong foundation for understanding the potential benefits of teacher diversity for Latiné students as well (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020; Shapiro & Partlow, 2018).

Challenges Confronting Virginia

Over the last 20 years, there has been a significant increase in the number of English learners enrolled in public schools. Considering that a considerable number of English learners enrolled in public schools are Latiné, it represents the fastest-growing demographic (Colby & Ortman, 2015; Najarro, 2023). In the coming decades, the number of Latiné students will be comparable to that of White students in public schools (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Although the state of Virginia does not have the largest EL populations in the country, its share of English learners (9.4%) is quickly approaching the national average of 10.6% (NCES, 2024). Addressing the current achievement gaps among Latiné students and identifying the barriers that hinder their pursuit of careers in education is of critical importance to society (Castro & Calzada, 2021).

There is growing concern about the support provided to English Learners (ELs) in Virginia. The Commonwealth Institute (2021) ranked Virginia 6th worst in the nation for its graduation rates among ELs, despite improvements in the graduation rates of non-multilingual learners. Furthermore, a significant disparity in student-teacher diversity persists across the state,

with 81.8% of teachers being White. In comparison, Black or African American teachers make up 9.7%, Hispanic or Latiné teachers 4.1%, Asian teachers 1.5%, and those identifying as Two or More Races 2.7% (NCES, 2021). Given that the population of Latiné ELs is growing, they continue to struggle with low graduation rates, and there is an ongoing diversity gap between students and teachers, it raises the question of whether these factors are connected.

There is a need for further research focused on bilingual teachers working in culturally and linguistically diverse educational settings (Palmer, 2018). Exploring what motivates English Learners (ELs) to pursue a career in education, particularly as bilingual teachers, could offer valuable insights into the key factors that influence their decision to enter the teaching profession. Understanding these motivations may help identify the personal, academic, and societal elements that encourage ELs to become educators, especially in bilingual settings. There remains a significant gap in the literature around understanding the lived experiences of former Latiné ELs in K-12 public education, the impact these experiences have on their decisions to pursue careers in education, and how their background as ELs, coupled with their teacher preparation, influences their pedagogical practices.

Investigating the existing gaps in the literature surrounding the bilingual experience and bilingual education is essential for addressing a range of critical issues (Cummins, 2017). These include promoting culturally responsive teaching practices, enhancing student outcomes, identifying strategies for the support and retention of bilingual educators, and informing the development of educational policies that effectively support bilingual education programs (Cummins, 2017). Furthermore, this exploration contributes to broader discussions for leaders and teachers regarding equity and access for multilingual learners, while also facilitating the creation of tailored professional development opportunities that can enhance the skills and

effectiveness of bilingual educators (Palmer, 2018). Addressing these areas would enrich the educational landscape and support the diverse needs of students and educators.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of Latiné teachers and determine how those experiences influence both their decision to enter the profession and their approach to educating diverse learners. It also explores their perceptions of teacher preparation experiences and how these shaped their pedagogical and cultural practices when working with multilingual learners today. Through the analysis of *pláticas* (dialogue of personal stories and experiences), the research seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex experiences of former English learners, particularly those who have transitioned into roles as bilingual teachers. The following research questions will frame this study.

Research Questions

The following questions guide this study.

1. How do Latiné bilingual teachers draw upon their own experiences and cultural knowledge (Funds of Knowledge) as former English learners to inform their pedagogical approaches and create culturally responsive learning environments for their students?
2. How do bilingual teachers perceive the extent to which their teacher preparation programs acknowledged, valued, and integrated their Funds of Knowledge (i.e., their families' and communities' cultural knowledge, experiences, and practices) into the curriculum and pedagogical approaches?

Significance of the Study

Studying the perspectives of Latiné bilingual K-12 students and their experience in preparing to become bilingual teachers provides invaluable insights that can drive meaningful improvements in education, support, and policy (Larson, 2018). Latiné students often face distinct challenges, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and socioeconomic factors that impact their experiences (Palmer, 2018). Examining their perspectives can help educators, leaders, and even policymakers to better understand these challenges and develop strategies to address them (Villegas & Lucas, 2013). Insights from the Latiné bilingual learner can also shed light on disparities in educational resources and opportunities, and understanding their perspective is crucial for creating more equitable educational environments that accommodate diverse cultural and linguistic needs.

Learning about the Latiné student experience can inform the development of culturally responsive curricula and teaching practices (Larson, 2018). This is important in ensuring that educational content and approaches are mindful of students' backgrounds, which could potentially increase engagement and academic outcomes. When bilingual educators are given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences as bilingual students, as well as the experience of preparing to become bilingual educators, they become advocates for cultural responsiveness in education (Ankeny et al., 2019; Coady, 2019; Palmer & Martinez, 2013). They recognize the importance of validating and integrating students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into the curriculum and pedagogy. This approach not only enhances students' learning experiences but also affirms their identities, helping them to see their culture and language as assets rather than obstacles (Cummins, 2009). Advocating for an educational system that prioritizes social justice, equity, and nurturing practices, bilingual educators contribute to the broader movement toward

educational reform that benefits all students, particularly those from marginalized communities (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011; Guitérrez et al., 1995; Zentella, 2005).

Bilingual educators may perceive their choice to enter the K-12 educational field as a way to advocate for systemic change within the education system. This could involve pushing for policies that support bilingual education (Villegas & Lucas, 2013), fighting against discriminatory practices (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noguera, 2015), and working to create a more equitable educational landscape (Palmer, 2018; Palmer & Martinez, 2013) for all students. In this way, their work is part of a larger effort to transforming the system to be more inclusive, just, and reflective of diverse cultural and linguistic realities. By studying the perspectives of Latiné bilingual K-12 students, teachers, leaders, and policymakers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities within bilingual education (Larson, 2018). This knowledge is crucial for designing and implementing strategies that address disparities, enhance educational environments, and support the development of future bilingual educators. Ultimately, this approach contributes to a more equitable and effective educational system that benefits all students, promotes inclusivity, and leverages the strengths of bilingual learners.

Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

The Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study revealed that Hispanic students face more significant challenges in maintaining enrollment in post-secondary education than any other racial or ethnic group. These students frequently encounter negative experiences related to disrespect, discrimination, harassment, and concerns about their physical and psychological safety (Lumina Foundation, 2022). Consequently, they are not likely to feel valued and are twice as likely to contemplate pausing or discontinuing their education.

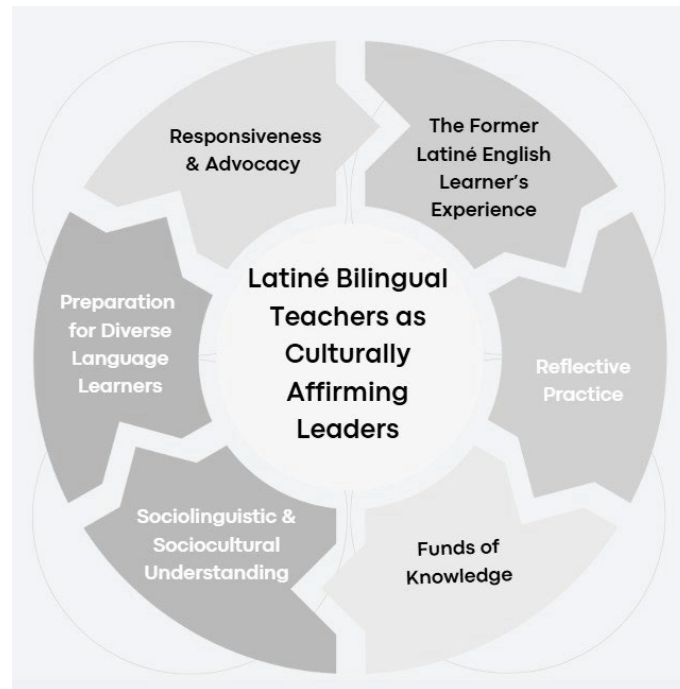
Devaluing their identity as Latiné students can hinder them from entering professions such as teaching. Addressing the multifaceted complexities of race, culture, language, and identity ultimately empowers students to engage with their communities and work toward fostering an equitable society (Azzahrawi, 2020). Before conducting a study on the experience of Latiné students, theoretical perspectives are considered to frame the study. These perspectives help to evaluate the sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches that address issues related to race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, ability, and sexuality.

According to Norma Gonzalez (2005), the concept of “funds of knowledge” is based on the idea that people are inherently competent and possess valuable knowledge gained through their life experiences. This approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing and documenting the skills, knowledge, and cultural practices that exist within households and communities. It is an approach that explores the historical and cultural knowledge that is essential to the functioning and well-being of a household and community. Introducing a Funds of Knowledge (1995) approach enables educators to explore and understand the role of households in shaping the relationships between students, teachers, and families, and how these relationships impact the classroom (Moll et al., 1992).

The following chapter outlines the literature that forms the basis for the conceptual framework for this study (See Figure 2). The framework highlights how the social, cultural, and linguistic experiences of former Latiné English learners influence their teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices. Their Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) provide insight into how experiences play a role in shaping their identities as both students and teachers. Combined with the professional preparation required to teach English learners, these experiences equip them to meet the diverse needs of students and empower them to succeed.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework



The framework emphasizes that when teachers reflect on their own Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), they become more attuned to their empathetic lens, which is rooted in their sociocultural and sociolinguistic backgrounds (Palmer, 2018). This enhances their ability to help students navigate and integrate into diverse cultural and linguistic settings, helping them develop the skills needed for personal growth and future professional endeavors. Furthermore, the framework suggests that personal competencies, when paired with professional training, can influence teaching practices. Educators who are attuned to the sociocultural and sociolinguistic backgrounds of their students are better positioned to provide the critical support and opportunities necessary for success. This includes implementing culturally responsive teaching methods, fostering inclusive classroom environments, and promoting a Funds of Knowledge approach to foster engagement. Ultimately, this framework aims to ensure that Latiné English learners receive the support they need to thrive, not only as students but also as future educators.

Most importantly, it contributes to the advancement of equitable educational practices and outcomes for all learners.

Overview of Research Design and Methodology

Understanding the lived experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers requires a qualitative approach, often utilizing *pláticas* to explore these experiences deeply. In Latiné culture, families often engage in *platicando*, sharing *historias* (stories), *consejos* (advice), *regaños* (scoldings), and *chistes* (jokes), around a large dining table (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). This space is where critical life lessons are learned, and conversations that last for hours often end in arguments, laughter, or tears. Ultimately, it is a place for sharing memories, experiences, and interpretations. *Pláticas* have also become a significant tool for researchers, helping to seek insight and understanding. As a form of dialogue between researcher and participant, *pláticas* are commonly used to explore the experiences of marginalized communities, particularly Latiné communities (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). It provides an open space for investigating social constructs through multiple methods, emerging from human interactions. When researching marginalized populations, standard Western research methodologies may fall short. Therefore, it is essential to adopt non-Eurocentric approaches that involve Indigenous perspectives, sharing knowledge and power in the research process (Chilisa, 2012). This study focuses on a small group of Latiné bilingual teachers. It explores their experiences as English learners and preservice teachers to understand how these experiences influenced their decision to pursue education and shaped their bilingual teaching practices.

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Assumptions play a pivotal role in shaping the design of a study, the interpretation of its results, and the implications for future practice. Recognizing and articulating these assumptions

is essential for contextualizing the research and identifying potential biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed how the delineation of limitations and delimitations is crucial in defining the scope of the research and understanding its potential impact. These constraints and boundaries provide a structured framework for interpreting the study's findings. Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge inherent constraints, particularly those associated with biographical accounts, that cannot be entirely mitigated, as they significantly influence the methodological approach and overall research outcomes.

In research, understanding the limitations and delimitations of a study is also crucial for assessing the validity and scope of the findings. Limitations refer to aspects of the study that are beyond the researcher's control and may affect the interpretation of the results. These are inherent flaws or constraints within the research design that could impact the study's outcomes. While the small, purposefully selected sample will allow for deep narrative analysis, limitations such as time constraints and restricted district access may affect the broader applicability of the findings. Nevertheless, the study contributes valuable perspectives by centering Latiné voices and emphasizing the cultural and linguistic strengths these educators bring to their professional roles.

Delimitations, on the other hand, are intentionally set boundaries established by the researcher to narrow the focus of the study. These are specific decisions made during the research design phase that define the scope and boundaries of the study. For this research, the following delimitations have been established. The following study intentionally focused on bilingual teachers in Virginia who were formerly English learners and hold ESL or Spanish certifications. To explore and understand their unique experiences, these delimitations were

essential to align with the study's qualitative framework and contributing culturally relevant insights into teacher identity and pedagogy.

Bilingual Teachers Who Were Former English Learners. The study specifically targets bilingual teachers who were once English learners themselves. This focus is intended to gain insights from individuals who have direct, personal experience with the challenges and dynamics of bilingual education.

Purposive Sampling from Virginia. The participant selection is restricted to a purposive sample from the state of Virginia. This deliberate choice is made to ensure that the participants have specific qualifications or experiences relevant to the study's objectives, though it limits the diversity of the sample.

Grouping for Case. The study is confined to bilingual teachers who are practicing teachers who were previously bilingual students themselves. The purposeful grouping is chosen to ensure that participants' experiences are relevant, reflecting current trends and challenges in bilingual education.

Organization of the Study

The following sections present a comprehensive literature review that combines historical context and empirical research to examine how the experiences of Latiné English learners influence their educational outcomes. It also explores how these experiences contribute to challenges in diversifying the teacher workforce, particularly in increasing the number of Latiné bilingual teachers. Given that educators often ground their practice in theoretical frameworks, the study includes a thorough examination of its context, including key theories and their historical significance. The third section outlines the methodology, detailing the ontological and

epistemological foundations that shaped the study's design. Finally, the fourth and fifth sections present the study's findings, analysis, and conclusions.

A Word About Terminology

Latino/x/é Rationale

Latiné [la-tee-ney] is a gender-inclusive term used in Spanish writing and expression. The importance of using gender-inclusive language is to reduce existing stereotypes (Nissen, 2013; Sczesny et al., 2016). In the Spanish language, nouns are either masculine or feminine, which perpetuates the stereotype that gender is either one or the other. As gender identity is evolving, language is also shifting to become more inclusive (Villanueva et al., 2022).

This new exclusive option came about in 2010 to describe Latinos/as using a gender-neutral, non-conforming term that incorporates the morpheme -e, a term incorporated in written language that is viewed by many to be more inclusive than terms used previously, such as Latinx (Slemp, 2020). However, Latinx is the second most widely used term. Slemp (2010) conducted a study to determine whether there was a significant correlation between gender and birth country in the use of the terms Latinx and *Latiné*. The researcher used mixed methods to statistically analyze the surveys and interviews of 102 participants who varied in age from 18 to 56+. Findings determined that 90% of the participants who identify as non-binary experience difficulties expressing their gender identity in Spanish. As a result, it is difficult for Spanish speakers to navigate gender diversity because of its binary nature.

Additionally, the findings of this research specifically identified that the most widely used term ending within the last two to five years has been -é, with -x being a close second. The reason the morpheme -é is most popular is because of the ease of use in writing and expression (Slemp, 2020). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the term *Latiné* is utilized.

English Learner and Multilingual Learner Rationale

There has been much debate regarding the terminology used to classify students needing support in acquiring the English language in public schools. Historically, these students comprise a significant percentage of the population, yet they have faced many barriers to accessing quality language instruction and academic support. And the very language that has been used to describe them has propagated a deficit-based view of students. Using a term such as limited-English proficient to identify students has reflected the negative expectations and experiences that they have had to endure. Instead, an asset-based perspective recognizes learners' linguistic and cultural strengths, which establishes an expectation that they will be proficient in two or more languages (Rojas, 2022).

Educators and researchers should be attentive to the usage of terms and how they are conceptualized by others (Paulson & Armstrong, 2010). The language that is used as an identifier has an impact on relationships, identity, and academic success (Webster & Lu, 2012). The use of diverse and unspecified terms can create confusion and can be politically insensitive and culturally inappropriate. Focusing on students' strengths, which they already inherently possess, can lead to greater academic and social-emotional success than focusing on weaknesses (Zecarian et al., 2020). The various labels used (i.e., English as a second language, English language learner, English learner) define the learner's status. The state of Virginia has adopted the terminology English learner to acknowledge that these students bring an asset that can enrich the experiences of students and educators (VDOE, 2024).

Rojas (2022) asserted that these descriptions are counterintuitive because they highlight what students do not possess or cannot do, overlooking that they are capable and that their funds of knowledge are an asset. She is an advocate for promoting the terminology of *multilingual*

learners because it is an asset-based stance, recognizing that the learner possesses linguistic and cultural strengths while developing two or more languages simultaneously. World-Class Instructional Design & Assessment (WIDA) recognized and reinforced the value of language through its English Language Development (ELD) Standards Framework. The framework and resources provided emphasize the use of the term *multilingual learner*, as it promotes pride in linguistic diversity and helps reduce the sense of inadequacy that labels like *English learner* may often convey. WIDA's guiding principles encourage educators to view multilingual learners as capable, diverse, and resourceful students who are valuable assets to the classroom (WIDA, 2025).

For this study, various terminologies will be used when referencing the contributions of other researchers. These terms will be carefully selected and cited to ensure alignment with the original authors' intentions and frameworks. This approach not only maintains the integrity of the original research but also facilitates a clearer understanding of the concepts being discussed within the context of this work. By adhering to established terminology, this study promotes consistency and rigor in the academic discourse surrounding the topic.

Bilingualism & Linguicism

Bilingualism refers to the ability of an individual or community to use two languages proficiently, including speaking, reading, writing, and understanding both languages (Cummins, 2000; Garcia, 2009). It is often viewed as a valuable skill, facilitating communication across cultures, enhancing cognitive abilities, and broadening educational opportunities. This dynamic skill can develop in different ways, such as through childhood exposure to two languages (simultaneous bilingualism) or learning a second language after mastering a first (sequential bilingualism). However, linguicism refers to a form of discrimination based on language. It

occurs when people are treated unfairly or marginalized due to their language proficiency, accent, or the language they speak.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) described how linguisticism can manifest in various harmful ways, such as the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about speakers of certain languages or dialects. For example, individuals who speak non-dominant languages or have accents may be unfairly assumed to be less intelligent or capable. Another form of linguisticism is unequal access to education, where students who speak a minority language may not receive the same quality of education as those who speak the dominant language, limiting their opportunities for academic success.

Linguicism is deeply intertwined with broader issues of power, race, and social class (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). In many societies, certain languages are associated with power, prestige, and social mobility, often reflecting the values of dominant or majority groups. As a result, languages spoken by these groups (such as English, Spanish, or Mandarin, depending on the context) are often seen as more “valuable” than those spoken by minority communities (Porter et al., 2023). This dynamic creates systemic inequalities, where speakers of minority languages face disadvantages not only in terms of social treatment but also in access to resources and opportunities. In this way, linguisticism reinforces and perpetuates existing power structures, making it a key factor in the broader struggles for equality and social justice.

The Bilingual Teacher Clarified

Several states, including California, Georgia, Illinois, and Texas, have established programs to prepare bilingual teachers (Rutherford-Quach et al., 2021). These programs often include specialized training and certification processes to ensure educators are equipped to teach in both English and another language. However, Virginia does not have a specific, separate

endorsement to credential educators as *bilingual teachers* in the same way some other states do (VSBE, 2022).

In Virginia, what most people refer to as a *bilingual teacher* is typically defined as an educator who:

- Is proficient in English and at least one other language, and
- Teaches (or is qualified to teach) academic content in both languages. These educators often work in dual-language immersion programs, where students are taught in two languages, or in English Learner (EL) classrooms, where the focus is on supporting students whose first language is not English.

Therefore, the terms bilingual teacher and bilingual educator may be used interchangeably. Also, it is important to clarify that using these terms does not necessarily indicate that the educators in this study are certified in bilingual education. Bilingual education involves delivering instruction in two languages, aiming to develop proficiency in both (Porter et al., 2023). While English as a Second Language (ESL) programs are not considered bilingual education, in this study, I refer to participants as bilingual teachers or bilingual educators because they are bilingual individuals. However, they do not all necessarily teach in formal bilingual education settings, such as dual language or transitional programs that use both a standardized Spanish and English curriculum and assessment. Instead, their experiences as former English learners themselves, who have become dual language, ESL, and Spanish teachers, highlight their ability to deliver instruction to students in both languages, which can be particularly beneficial in diverse and multilingual classroom settings.

Spanish Terms for Emphasis

Adelante: A Spanish word that indicates to move forward (RAE, 2023).

Choques: A Spanish word used to emphasize a clash or conflict between experiences (RAE, 2023).

Confianza: A Spanish word for trust (RAE, 2023).

Familia: A Spanish word for family (RAE, 2023).

Trenzas: A Spanish word for braid. In this context, it will serve as a metaphor for the intertwining of identities that Latiné students and pre-service teachers experience (RAE, 2023).

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines a critical issue in education concerning the underrepresentation of teachers of color, particularly Latiné educators. This disparity is linked to educational inequities, limited culturally relevant teaching practices, and feelings of marginalization among students of color. Research highlights that a diverse teaching force, especially teachers with shared backgrounds and experiences, can significantly improve student outcomes in areas like academic achievement, engagement, and social-emotional development. Latiné students specifically face significant challenges in the education pipeline, including low high school completion rates and the fact that they constitute the largest group of English learners (ELs). In Virginia, there is a fast-growing Latiné EL population that mirrors national trends such as low EL graduation rates, and a significant teacher diversity gap.

Given these challenges, the chapter presents the need for a study exploring the lived experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers who were formerly English learners. The rationale is that these teachers possess unique perspectives as both learners and educators that can provide invaluable insights. Understanding their journeys, including how they navigated linguistic and cultural challenges, can inform more effective instructional practices and enhance support for current Latiné EL students. The study explores how these teachers use their lived experiences,

particularly their backgrounds as English learners and teacher training, to inform their classroom practices and respond to the specific needs of English learners, especially Latiné students. It focuses on how their lived experiences shape their approach to supporting English and language learners.

This study uses a conceptual framework that links social, cultural, and linguistic experiences to development and teaching practices. It proposes a qualitative study using pláticas (dialogue/storytelling) to explore these lived experiences. By examining the dual perspectives of Latiné bilingual teachers, educators and leaders can better understand the challenges faced by English learners and identify opportunities to provide more effective support. This insight is meant to inform strategies that advance equity and access by promoting responsive practices that not only benefit English learners but also all students.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Society has become increasingly diverse and is expected to become even more so by 2045. According to the Virginia Department of Education, the population of Latiné students has increased by nearly 50% since 2012. Twenty-five percent of the population will identify as Hispanic, and by 2060, Latinés and Asians will represent the steepest population growth among minorities (Hansen & Quintero, 2018). Currently, 44% of the American student population is represented by minorities, while only 16% of teachers are represented by professionals of color (Noel & Sable, 2009). According to the growth rate among the Latiné population and the low representation of teachers of color, there is a need to address the student-teacher minority gap (Gay & Howard, 2000; Sleeter, 2001; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

Irizarry and Donaldson (2012) recognized that there was a substantial increase in the number of Latiné students enrolled in preK-12 schools. They acknowledged the critical shortage of Latiné teachers to support the growth in the United States. Irizarry and Donaldson also predicted that by 2050, the population of Latiné school-aged children would double what they would observe in 2020. In 2019, it was documented through the American Immigration Council (2021) that 5 million children under the age of 19 lived with an undocumented parent, many of whom identified as Latiné (Gándara et al., 2023). With the dramatic increase in population and perpetuation of teacher shortages, researchers have suggested that school divisions need to address the staff crisis systemically by diversifying the teaching profession, hiring more support staff, and offering professional development on supporting immigrant students through trauma-informed and culturally responsive teaching (Ball & Tyson, 2011; Gándara et al., 2023; Gay & Howard, 2000; Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sleeter, 2001; Zumwalt & Craig 2005).

Quality education requires enlisting qualified teachers, including diverse teachers. A diverse teacher workforce is beneficial to students with similar racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Bower-Phipps et al., 2013; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Gershenson et al. (2021) argued that access to a high-quality teaching force is essential for providing students with a high-quality education. Central to this argument is the idea that a representative teaching force that reflects the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the students it serves is a crucial component of educational quality. Unfortunately, the teaching force in many regions today does not adequately represent the demographics of its student population, and this disparity has important implications for educational outcomes. Gershenson et al. (2021) emphasized that diversity is a dimension of quality. A growing body of research demonstrates the significant impact that having teachers who share the same racial or ethnic background as their students can have on academic performance. For example, they highlight that Black and Latino students who have even a single teacher of the same race or ethnicity see a reduction in school absences and suspensions, improvements in test scores, and an increase in referrals to gifted and talented programs. Additionally, these students are more likely to feel engaged in school, which leads to better academic performance overall.

Gershenson et al. (2021) identified three key reasons why diverse teachers have such a profound impact on student outcomes. First, teachers of the same race or ethnicity are often more culturally competent, meaning they are better able to understand and address the unique needs of their students (see also Hart & Lindsay, 2024; Morgan & Hu, 2023). This cultural understanding fosters stronger, more trusting relationships between teachers and students. Additionally, they are more likely to employ culturally relevant pedagogy, which tailors teaching practices to reflect the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of the students. This creates a

more inclusive and relatable learning environment. Secondly, teachers who share students' racial or ethnic background tend to have higher expectations for their students and are less likely to exhibit biases that could impact student performance (see also Shirrell et al., 2024). When teachers communicate that they believe in their students' potential, it can inspire students to work harder and strive for success (Papageorge et al., 2020). Lastly, teachers also serve as role models for students, showing them that it is possible to achieve success through education (see also Curran et al., 2024). Students see someone who looks like them in a position of authority and professional achievement, which can inspire them to pursue similar goals.

This literature review will explore the factors influencing the recruitment of Latiné teachers, particularly in bilingual education, and how school experiences shape students' aspirations to enter the teaching profession. A focus will be placed on how the presence of Latiné educators, especially bilingual teachers, can serve as a source of inspiration for students from similar backgrounds, motivating them to pursue careers in education. Additionally, this review will examine how systemic barriers within the educational system, including disparities in access to resources, support, and professional development, can impede the pathways for Latiné students to aspire to or enter the teaching profession.

National Teacher Shortages and Marginalized Populations

There is a nationwide crisis regarding teacher shortages that is impacting schools (Cowan et al., 2016; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Lankford et al., 2002; Sutchter et al., 2019). Garcia and Weiss (2019) examined teacher shortages and discovered that the issue is growing worse than imagined. According to their report, the educational system is threatened and, as a result, will impact student learning. Various factors clearly demonstrate why this shortage exists, such as teachers not obtaining certification requirements, low compensation, teaching conditions, and the

lack of support and professional development opportunities needed to succeed (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). The nature of the issue is complex, as these multiple drivers create an imbalance in the educational system (Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Mizrav, 2023; Wiggan et al., 2021).

These conditions affect this growing issue, which is unevenly distributed and more acute in high-poverty areas (Aragon, 2016; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Hill-Hennie, 2021). Sutchter et al. (2016) published evidence that there is a greater shortage of certified teachers in high-poverty communities. Racial isolation is steadily increasing nationwide as almost fifty percent of Black and Latiné students attend high-poverty schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; National Equity Atlas, 2020). Despite the data trending in the direction of a more diverse student population, the lack of diversity among teachers and administrators creates a student-teacher diversity gap (Gershenson et al., 2023). Gershenson et al.'s (2023) recent study showed that students with at least one teacher who is racially or ethnically similar are more likely to graduate on time and enroll in college.

In 2020-21, 80% of all public-school teachers were White, higher than the 48% of White students enrolled in public schools. In contrast, the proportion of racially diverse teachers was significantly lower than that of students of that same demographic. For example, while 28% of Hispanic students made up the population in public schools, only 9% of teachers were Hispanic (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023). This issue, where the teacher demographic does not mirror the student demographic, is most prevalent in school divisions that are difficult to staff, commonly associated with increased poverty rates and marginalized student populations (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019; Schaeffer, 2021; TNTP & TNTP, 2020). Making public education more equitable will involve closing the diversity gap that exists among teachers and students (The New Teacher Project, 2020).

This issue becomes even more complex because school systems with higher-than-average low-income households and larger non-White populations are more likely to have teachers who lack proper certification or experience to support students (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). McHenry-Sorber and Campbell's (2019) report highlighted that district leaders' responses to teacher shortages were complex. Those with financial backing were better able to address the issue, while economically distressed or geographically isolated districts faced greater challenges. This disparity in resources has led to difficulties in addressing the shortage, leaving some local leaders with limited ability to find solutions.

The shortage of bilingual educators, particularly those proficient in English and languages such as Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin, is especially acute in rural and economically disadvantaged communities with rapidly growing immigrant populations (Cramer & Ryan, 2023). Additionally, ESL teachers and bilingual educators face significant shortages in many states, with 26 states reporting gaps in these fields (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). To address this, regions have focused on mitigating vacant classrooms, recruiting new teachers, and providing professional learning for uncertified teachers (Aragon, 2016; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019).

Statewide Teacher Shortages

According to the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) (2024), Virginia's teacher workforce has been grappling with significant shortages, especially in high-demand fields like bilingual education. This shortage is exacerbated by issues such as high teacher turnover and the difficulty in retaining bilingual educators, who are crucial to supporting the growing population of English learners (ELs) in the state. According to Katz and Miller (2023), teacher departure rates in Virginia are particularly high among teachers of color, with

Black male teachers departing at a rate of 12.5% and Black female teachers at 13.6%. Hispanic female teachers also experience high turnover, with 12.6% leaving the profession. The overall teacher shortage has worsened, with 4.5% of teaching positions remaining vacant for the 2023-2024 school year, up from 3.9% the previous year (JLARC, 2024). Another concerning trend is that a significant portion of newly hired teachers in Virginia are not fully licensed. In fact, 16% of teachers hired to fill vacancies were not fully licensed, which represents a 2% increase from the previous year and a 10% increase from a decade ago (JLARC, 2024). This points to a growing reliance on underprepared teachers, which can impact the quality of instruction, particularly in specialized areas like bilingual education.

The disparity between teacher demographics and student populations further compounds these challenges. The New Teacher Project (2020) analyzed teacher preparation enrollment against student demographics and found a considerable diversity gap in Virginia's educator workforce. While 48.9% of students in Virginia are White, 70.6% of teacher preparation enrollees are White, leading to a 21.7% gap in teacher-student diversity. Additionally, data from the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) (2021) reveals that 80% of K-12 public school teachers and 77% of principals in Virginia are White, while only 9% of teachers and principals are Hispanic, 6% of teachers and 10% of principals are Black, and 2% of teachers are Asian. The issue is compounded by the unknown certification status of Hispanic educators, making it unclear if many of them are qualified to teach ESL or bilingual education, which is a critical area of need.

The New Teacher Project (2020) further emphasized that these disparities will persist unless systemic inequities are addressed. These inequities include unsupportive school cultures, failure to meet certification requirements, inequitable recruitment and hiring practices, and the

teacher preparation diversity gap. Addressing these systemic issues is essential for ensuring a more diverse and qualified educator workforce. As Zell (2010) noted, understanding the institutional culture of schools and how various practices affect students can offer valuable insights into who is afforded opportunities to become educators. This understanding is crucial for developing policies that will reduce the teacher-student diversity gap and help meet the educational needs of Virginia's increasingly diverse student population (The Commonwealth Institute, 2021, para. 6). Virginia's bilingual education shortage, coupled with teacher diversity issues, highlights the need for targeted efforts to recruit, retain, and diversify educators (Rutherford-Quach et al., 2021). Addressing these gaps is essential for improving educational outcomes, especially for students who rely on bilingual instruction.

History of Bilingual Education

To fully grasp the impact of Latiné teacher recruitment and understand the educational experiences of Latiné English learners, it is essential to first examine the history of bilingual education. The history of bilingual education is complex and deeply tied to the social, political, and cultural contexts of different regions. Bilingual educational programs are designed to teach students in both their native language and a second language, typically the dominant or official language of the region. The state of bilingual education has evolved in response to changing demographics, educational philosophies, and political ideologies (Porter et al., 2023).

During the early 20th century and due to World War II, the U.S. became insistent on cultural assimilation, and the trend shifted toward "English-only" policies (Kaganić-Kamińska, 2019). This reflected the growing belief that non-English languages were a barrier to national unity and economic progress. In this climate, bilingual education programs were marginalized or eliminated, and many immigrant children were expected to assimilate into the English-speaking

mainstream (Nelson & Davis-Wiley, 2017). The rise of “Americanization” programs in the early 1900s emphasized the importance of learning English quickly and fully integrating into American society (Kaganiec-Kamienska, 2019). However, in the 1960s, there was a shift in bilingual education. The modern history of bilingual education in the United States is closely tied to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. As the fight for racial and ethnic equality gained momentum, bilingual education became recognized as an important tool for addressing the educational needs of non-English-speaking students, particularly Latinos and other immigrant communities (Porter et al., 2023).

The landmark case of *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) was pivotal in shaping bilingual education policy. The Supreme Court ruled that not providing English language learners (ELLs) with the same educational opportunities as their English-speaking peers was a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Court’s decision can also be connected to the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. The Court found that the lack of language support for non-English-speaking students were effectively denied equal educational opportunities, which is a key aspect of the 14th Amendment. This case led to the recognition that schools had an obligation to provide specialized instruction to help ELL students overcome language barriers (Calderon et al., 2011).

In response to this ruling, federal laws and policies began to support bilingual education. In 1968, the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII) was passed as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Bialystok, 2018; Gonzalez, 2008). It was the first major federal legislation to recognize the educational needs of students with limited English proficiency and provide funding for bilingual education programs (Bialystok, 2018). The

Bilingual Education Act provided grants to schools that offered programs teaching students in their native language while also helping them acquire English proficiency.

Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a shift in the political landscape regarding bilingual education (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016). During the Reagan and Bush administrations, there was a push for “English-only” policies, fueled by a belief that bilingual education was promoting separation and hindering assimilation (Crawford, 2004; Ovando, 2003). The English-only movement gained traction, advocating for the prioritization of English in schools, government, and society. In response, some bilingual programs were scaled back or replaced with English immersion programs, where students were taught primarily in English with limited support in their native language (Gándara, 2017).

Bilingual education saw a resurgence in the 1990s and 2000s, especially with the growth of dual-language immersion programs (Glanbock & Polat, 2025; Kim et al., 2015). These programs aim to teach both native English speakers and English language learners in two languages, often with the goal of creating bilingual, biliterate students (Gándara, 2017). Dual-language programs are based on the idea that students can succeed academically while maintaining their cultural and linguistic identities, and they have been shown to be particularly effective in promoting language proficiency, academic achievement, and cross-cultural understanding (Alfaro & Hernandez, 2023). One key moment in this resurgence came with the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, which emphasized accountability and standardized testing but also provided support for ELL students (Dean, 2016).

However, the focus on standardized testing under NCLB led to some criticisms of bilingual education, as it was often difficult for students in bilingual programs to meet the same testing standards as their English-speaking peers. In recent years, bilingual education has gained

more widespread acceptance in some parts of the U.S. and the world, particularly with the growing recognition of the cognitive and cultural benefits of bilingualism (Charoenphon, 2023). Programs like dual-language immersion, where students are taught in both their native language and English, have become more common, particularly in states with large immigrant populations like California, Texas, and New York (Williams & Zabala, 2023).

The debate around the implementation of bilingual education continues. Supporters argue that bilingual education provides essential benefits for both students and society, helping to maintain cultural diversity and improve academic outcomes (Collier & Thomas, 2020; Cummins, 2000; Gándara, 2017; Garcia et al., 2024; Gay, 2010). Critics, particularly those from the English-only movement, continue to push for English immersion programs, arguing that bilingual education delays English acquisition and hinders students' integration into society (Crawford, 2000; Flores & Garcia, 2017; García, 2009). Globally, bilingual education programs are expanding in countries like Canada, parts of Europe, and Latin America, where there is increasing recognition of the value of multilingualism in a globalized world (Sánchez-Pérez & Manzano-Agugliaro, 2021).

The Growing Concern

The growing expectation to teach students at varying academic levels and from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds has made education increasingly complex (AASCU, 2023). The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) has emphasized its pivotal role in diversifying the teacher workforce, as it educates 51 percent of minority undergraduate students. While Hispanic-serving and Historically Black AASCU institutions produce a significant number of teachers of color, other AASCU institutions face challenges in recruiting and retaining these teachers.

These institutions are responsible for preparing future citizens who reflect the diversity of society (Shapiro et al., 2018). As the K-12 student population becomes increasingly diverse, there is a growing need for educators who are qualified to teach all students. However, many needs remain unmet, particularly the shortage of skilled and certified teachers able to educate the growing number of students whose primary language is not English. According to the Office of English Learner Language Acquisition (2020), ESL and bilingual educators have the highest vacancy rate at 6%, and it is projected that approximately 76,000 additional ESL teachers will be needed by 2025. ESL and bilingual education programs require teachers to be certified and trained in how students develop bilingualism and biliteracy (National Center for Educational Evaluation, 2022).

Unfortunately, many Latiné students attend schools in high-poverty communities, where they are more likely to encounter less qualified and experienced teachers and limited program support (Garza & New America, 2019). Swail et al. (2004) noted that as a result, Latiné students often face academic challenges and are less likely to complete high school or earn a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), which further exacerbates the need to hire and diversify the teaching profession. According to AASCU, there continues to be a persistent struggle to recruit preservice teachers of color, especially in high-need areas like bilingual education. While there are grant programs that can support recruitment strategies such as dual certification and emergency certification, hiring additional qualified bilingual teachers remains a significant burden for K-12 schools.

Teacher Requirements in Virginia

It is important to note that, according to the Education Commission of the States (2020), at least 25 out of 50 states require teachers to obtain an endorsement or certification to teach

English learners. Virginia Law (Virginia State Board of Education, n.d.) requires candidates to have either earned a baccalaureate degree from an accredited institution with an approved English as a Second Language program, or they must complete 24 credit hours in the following areas:

- Teaching reading and writing
- English linguistics
- Cross-cultural education
- Second language acquisition
- World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) English Language Development (ELD) Standards
- English as a second language assessment.

While Virginia offers EL endorsements and competencies, it remains unclear whether there is a mandate to have an endorsement to work with English learners in the classroom (Education Commission of the States, 2020). This lack of clarity may contribute to an outcome contrary to the findings of researchers who emphasize the importance of teacher preparation.

Bilingual teachers' perceptions of their preparation are crucial in shaping their ability to acquire pedagogical knowledge, as well as the social, cultural, and linguistic awareness necessary for effectiveness in bilingual classrooms (Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Palmer & Martinez, 2016). Programs that certify teachers to work with English learners can provide a foundation for developing both technical skills and the broader awareness needed to navigate the complexities of teaching in diverse, multilingual environments. Villegas and Lucas (2010) stressed that effective teacher preparation should equip bilingual educators not only with a strong understanding of instructional strategies tailored to bilingual settings, but also with the ability to

be linguistically responsive and sociolinguistically aware. This includes understanding language, culture, identity, and the differences in language use and language education. When teachers perceive their preparation as thorough and aligned with the realities of the bilingual classroom, they are more likely to feel confident in implementing strategies that promote both language and content mastery (Villegas & Lucas, 2010).

Preparation programs that emphasize the importance of cultural relevance and responsiveness help bilingual teachers develop an understanding of their students' diverse backgrounds (Garza et al., 2020). Teachers who perceive their training as culturally attuned are better equipped to create inclusive classrooms where students' cultural identities are recognized and valued (Villegas & Lucas, 2013). This awareness enables educators to build stronger relationships with students and their families, fostering a learning environment that respects and celebrates cultural diversity. Teacher preparation programs focusing on linguistic diversity prepare bilingual educators to understand the dynamics of bilingualism and biliteracy development (Garcia & Wei, 2014). When these programs are perceived as effective, they help teachers develop a strong linguistic consciousness, allowing them to recognize and address the unique challenges faced by bilingual students (Cummins, 2009).

This includes an understanding of the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and the need for instructional practices that support both the development of the students' home language and English proficiency. Preparation programs that encourage reflective practice and advocacy for bilingual education further enhance teachers' effectiveness (Cummins, 2009; Howard, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). When teachers perceive their programs as fostering critical thinking and a commitment to social justice, they are more likely to engage in ongoing professional development and advocacy efforts (Dover et al., 2018; Kohli et al., 2015). This reflective

practice helps teachers continuously adapt their methods to meet their students' evolving needs and advocate for policies and practices that support bilingual education.

Existing Challenges with Latiné Recruitment: What Matters and Why

Latiné teachers are underrepresented in the profession, primarily due to academic, financial, and sociocultural factors that students encounter (Carter et al., 2019; Garza & New America, 2019). Challenges are presented very early when students begin their education, attending under-resourced schools with less experienced teachers. Nguyen et al. (2020) argued that there is a cyclical problem that needs to be addressed within the teachers of color pipeline. Teacher preparation programs can improve their ability to recruit Latiné candidates to pursue higher education by advocating for systemic changes (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). According to a 2022 report by the Pew Research Center, students are enrolling in colleges and universities at higher rates; however, a significant number do not pursue studies in education. To understand why Latiné students are not entering the education profession, one must understand the factors influencing inequities in the educational system.

It is important to acknowledge how complex this issue is and the powerful influences that contribute to the inequities present in American society. A long history of discrimination, spanning generations, has significantly impacted student success (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Key factors such as housing, labor markets, and policing disproportionately affect low-income communities and children of color (Anderson, 2015). Moreover, environmental hazards, violence, economic hardship, and adverse childhood experiences create additional barriers to learning (Anda & Felitti, 2014). While schools alone cannot eliminate these structural inequities, addressing them within the educational context is possible through advocacy for instruction and school-based policies that promote equality and well-being (Kena et al., 2016). Key factors such

as staffing, curriculum, and physical infrastructure can significantly impact schools and classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2001). To ensure a high-quality education, elementary and secondary schools must prioritize hiring qualified staff and implementing evidence-based curricula and programs designed to support vulnerable students, such as English learners and students with disabilities (Gordon & Reber, 2021).

These complex issues, deeply rooted in sociopolitical contexts, have far-reaching effects on students' educational and career trajectories, including high school completion rates, enrollment in higher education, and long-term career success (Nguyen et al., 2020). These factors often limit access to quality education, support systems, and career pathways, making it more difficult for these students to succeed academically and professionally (Valdés & Bender, 2021). Considering this, it is important to further explore how sociocultural and sociolinguistic contexts in families and school communities can influence educational outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in a Funds of Knowledge theoretical framework, which acknowledges the rich cultural knowledge and skills embedded within the households of immigrant and marginalized communities. This framework is designed to foster trust among schools and communities, while creating relevant learning experiences where students feel seen and valued. It aligns with the theoretical underpinning of culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds into teaching practices. This research intends to uncover how dual perspectives, as former English learners and current educators, inform and shape their pedagogical practices. Ultimately, the insights gained aim to contribute to the advancement of more equitable and inclusive culturally responsive practices, enhancing educational environments and student outcomes.

Funds of Knowledge (FOK)

Over time, the educational experiences of Latiné students in the United States have evolved (Vélez, 2008). Educational researchers emphasize that it is essential to understand how Latinés' sociocultural, political, economic, and historical contexts shape their educational journeys (Quiñones, 2012). Moll et al. (1992) introduced a Funds of Knowledge theory, which highlights the rich cultural knowledge and skills that are found in the households of immigrant and marginalized communities. These resources are passed down from generations, holding historical and intellectual value. Moll and colleagues (1992) advocated for teachers to recognize and implement these cultural practices in the classroom. Teachers who do so build *confianza* (mutual trust) between educators and families and create learning experiences that are both relevant and empowering for students.

In their initial stages of research, Moll et al. (1992) employed a Funds of Knowledge approach, where teachers volunteered to participate in a qualitative, ethnographic study of their students' households. Teachers served as coresearchers who analyzed data gathered from interviews, life histories, and case studies. This qualitative study revealed that social networks interconnect families within a social environment by exchanging information to develop knowledge and skills further. Additional findings demonstrated that trusting relationships were integral in motivating students when teachers could draw upon experiences outside of school. Using qualitative research as a social justice tool challenges assumptions and generates deeper insight into cultural backgrounds, which can transform students' lives. Teachers and families work together to develop innovative and relevant strategies. Ultimately, validating parents as worthy contributors to children's instruction and academic achievement (Gonzalez & Moll, 1995).

Moll et al.'s (1992) work is still referenced and utilized by contemporary researchers, including Gonzalez, Amanti, Quiñones, Hamann, Wortham, and Murillo (Hamann et al., 2015). Amanti asserts that households from working-class and marginalized communities are rich in cultural and intellectual resources, which are often overlooked by traditional education systems. She advocates for incorporating students' home-based knowledge into the classroom to make learning more meaningful, promoting culturally responsive teaching. Quiñones (2012, 2016) highlighted how the FOK framework can illuminate the culture, histories, and communities that Latina/o and Puerto Rican students bring into the classroom. She emphasized how acknowledging these narratives can challenge deficit-based perspectives, often drawing from her own experiences and those of other educators.

Hamman et al. (2015) expanded upon the framework by emphasizing how students' cross-cultural experiences shape their knowledge. They argue that educators should recognize and incorporate the globalized realities of students into classroom practices, especially those of immigrant or multicultural backgrounds. This broadens the FOK's traditional approach by acknowledging the geographic and mobile experiences of students and families. Esteban-Guistart and Moll (2014) acknowledged that funds of knowledge capitalize on building knowledge on experiences of students and their families to serve as a resource in schooling; however, they have also discussed its limitations. A Funds of Knowledge approach can be limited to using a single methodological approach that identifies the household as the primary unit that is being analyzed. Together, they have acknowledged that individuals develop their own bodies of knowledge, which may not align with the experiences of adults. They have implied that it is important to incorporate exploring students' identities in the methodological approach, which can be done using Vygotsky's theories of identity.

Latiné students, as well as other racially and ethnically marginalized populations, thrive academically as a result of strong social relationships that are established in the educational setting (Portes et al., 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). According to Valenzuela (2020), culture, language, and experiences provide a deeper context when understanding a specific demographic. This approach honors students as they present themselves and how their life experiences are crucial to the learning community. Recognizing the beauty and complexity of who they are linguistically (accounting for the various dialects), their ethnic origins, and their experiences shapes research and how it is conducted (Nieto et al., 2012).

Achievement among Latiné students is deeply rooted in an interpersonal approach coupled with instructional methods used to teach such a population (Chávez, 2021; Dixon & Zhao, 2017; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Roorda et al., 2011). Historically, U.S. schools have been heavily rooted in operating from a deficit perspective of minoritized students, which focuses on the inadequacies of the student (Flores, 2005). Instead of emphasizing the lack of success among Latiné students on cultural and linguistic differences, exploring their identities can inherently change the narrative (Nieto et al., 2012). It reframes culture and language as barriers by using their funds of knowledge as assets, helping them move *adelante* (forward). As a result, new researchers are moving towards discovering how sociocultural and sociopolitical factors play a role in Latiné student progress or lack thereof. Empirical evidence on the factors influencing academic achievement among Latiné students have been analyzed and the results revealed that success is attributed to the positive relationships with teachers and staff, and the culturally sustaining practices implemented in the classroom (Alim et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2017; Taggart, 2018).

Culturally sustaining practices resulting from Funds of Knowledge provide structures that affirm and uplift the cultural and linguistic identities of students while also giving agency to family values and cultural practices in cross-cultural learning settings (Paris & Alim, 2017). Family support is the most common sociocultural variable that has been attributed to the academic achievement of Latiné students. As a result, there is a need for educators to build social capital among Latiné students to create a greater sense of belonging in a school that provides access to postsecondary opportunities (Taggart, 2018). The growing number of Latiné English learners has the potential to form the next generation of bilingual teachers. However, they continue to face significant barriers to equitable education (Garcia, 2015; Larson, 2018; Nieto, 2018; Valdes, 1997). Despite efforts by educational policies, institutional systems, and teaching practices to promote equity and improve outcomes for bilingual students, graduation rates suggest that these initiatives have not been fully successful (Burciaga & Erbstein, 2012; Ocasio, 2014; Orfield et al., 2012).

Examining sociological systems can produce more equitable outcomes across social, political, educational, and economic systems (Bender & Valdes, 2021). Transforming the educational system will require a fundamental shift in curriculum and pedagogy (Valdes & Bender, 2021). Valdes and Bender (2021) advocated for teaching strategies that recognize and address the systemic challenges faced by marginalized groups, particularly concerning cultural traits in a race group, language, and socioeconomic status. Prioritizing inclusivity ensures that all students, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds, have equal access to educational opportunities. It requires educators to create learning environments that validate students' identities, promote critical thinking, and encourage active participation in their sociocultural and sociolinguistic development (Moll et al., 2005).

The Role of Language and Exclusion in Shaping Funds of Knowledge

A leading scholar in linguicism, Skutnabb-Kangas (1988), described how language is often used as a tool of social exclusion. She coined the term linguicism and described it as the devaluation or marginalization of certain languages, which often leads to the stigmatization of the speakers of those languages. Her work addresses how this issue is particularly prominent in minority, immigrant, or Indigenous communities, where their native languages may be viewed as inferior or less valuable than the dominant language. In educational contexts, linguicism affects students who speak languages other than the dominant language of instruction (Baker, 2011; Cummins, 2000). This includes English learners, speakers of regional dialects, and bilingual or multilingual students. These students may face challenges such as being undervalued, misunderstood, or excluded because their language skills do not align with the language that is prioritized in the classroom, potentially impacting their academic success and sense of belonging (Flores, 2019; Hidalgo, 2015).

Historically, in the mid-twentieth century, children of immigrants, African Americans, and others were thrust into learning specific forms of English. The purpose was to undermine their primary language and culture to Americanize them (Garcia & Hesson, 2015). As a result of an influx of immigrants in the mid-60s, especially those of Hispanic origin, the Bilingual Education Act was passed, enabling educators who shared language identity to participate in programs that educate for self-realization. Then, in the mid-70s, bilingual policy restricted the use of other languages other than English, and it was at that point that English as a Second Language programs were introduced. As language policies have evolved in education, they insist on using standardized methods of language instruction. However, due to the diverse landscape

and the complexity of the various languages that exist, educators are not doing enough to address the dynamic languages that enter the classroom (Garcia & Hesson, 2015).

García (2015) defined language as something that we speak, such as English, Spanish, and Mandarin, and delves into the difference between language and “a language”. “A language,” as García explained, refers to “academic language,” which is socially constructed and consists of words and forms that are either accepted or not accepted in different contexts. She argues that language is not merely a set of discrete skills to be learned; rather, it is a complex web of interactions shaped by social practices. Importantly, policymakers influence the ideology of language, how it should be used and perceived, which then impacts educators’ perspectives on language.

García (2015) critiqued the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for reinforcing a narrow view of language. By imposing a rigid set of rules in English, CCSS and English Language Arts Standards (ELAS) treat reading, writing, speaking, and listening as linear processes. This approach overlooks the inherent human and social nature of language and reduces it to something students must “do” rather than something they actively engage with. García argues that educators should embrace the diverse languages and practices that bilingual students bring to the classroom. Doing so would allow these students to build on their existing linguistic repertoire and better acquire the English language skills outlined in the CCSS. (García, 2015).

Mercuri’s (2012) research highlighted the interconnectedness of culture, language, and identity, stressing the importance for all teachers (especially those working with diverse learners and second language learners) to understand this relationship. Language is deeply tied to culture, and is the social framework that communicates values, customs, and norms. Therefore, language

loss is essentially a loss of culture and identity (Baker, 2001). Nieto (2010) further elaborated that culture is multifaceted, extending beyond race and ethnicity, and shaped by factors such as language, family dynamics, and social roles. From a critical theory perspective, Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo (1999) emphasized that language is fundamental to the way that we think about culture. They asserted that language plays a key role in shaping identity, authenticity, cultural preservation, and the learning and thinking processes of individuals. As many prominent critical theorists (Freire, 1998; Habermas, 2004; McLaren, 2003) explained, knowledge construction is influenced by culture, and when students' primary language and cultural identity in school are valued, they gain greater access to knowledge development.

Uncovering Cultural Identity through Funds of Knowledge

Cultural and ethnic representation among teachers and leaders allows students to visually see the possibilities for their future (Guzman, 2022). Gershenson (2021) outlined three key reasons why representation matters. First, teachers who share racial, ethnic, cultural backgrounds with their students possess greater cultural competence and are able to build more trusting relationships. Second, these teachers tend to have higher expectations for their students and introduce less bias when engaging with them. Research has indicated that teachers with higher expectations often foster greater student engagement and improved academic outcomes (Bristol, 2020; Griffin, 2018; Redding, 2019). Lastly, teachers of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds serve as role models, helping students envision themselves in professional roles that require education.

Having educators who share racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences with their students are better positioned to critically analyze and adapt their teaching practices, which honors and validates the lived experiences of the students they serve (Griffin, 2018; Lac & Cumings-

Mansfield, 2018; Lowery, 2018). However, the limited number of teachers of color creates a gap in the pool of future educational leaders who will make critical decisions for minoritized populations (Achinstein et al., 2010; Carver-Thomas, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2004; Villegas et al., 2012). Increasing the number of teachers who transition into educational leadership roles gives them the opportunity to build trust with marginalized communities. This trust enables them to critically assess and challenge existing practices and policies in order to promote meaningful progress (Lowery, 2018; Parker & Villalpando, 2007).

Latiné teachers and leaders, particularly those who have cultural and linguistic ties with the community, play a vital role in enhancing the educational experiences of Latiné students (Flores, 2018). Research shows that when educators reflect the cultural backgrounds of their students, they are better positioned to build trust, foster belonging, and implement culturally responsive practices that affirm students' identities (Garcia et al., 2013; Lopez et al., 2013; Murakami et al., 2013). The key to increasing teacher diversity lies in cultivating academic success early on and exposing Latiné students to pathways and opportunities. Guzman (2022) argued that providing Latiné students with meaningful academic experiences and opportunities, can inspire them to pursue careers in education and leadership, ultimately creating greater representation and inclusion in the educational system.

This representation is not only beneficial for Latiné students but is also essential to fostering culturally conscious educational environments that promote equity and inclusion for all students. Culturally conscious teachers and leaders are critical to advancing justice and equality, as the culturally relevant practices they implement foster the shared growth, well-being, and inclusion of all students (Bordas, 2023; Lowery, 2018). Delpit and Dowdy (2002) asserted that critically conscious teachers and leaders must adopt a total orientation toward language and

cultural linguistic principles that represents a general mindset and not a superficial set of strategies or “bag of tricks” (p. 101). Villegas and Lucas (2007) emphasized that to truly respect student diversity, teachers and leaders have to recognize the influence that students’ individual identities and cultural background have on the learning process.

Culturally Sustaining Practices

In her groundbreaking article, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP),” Ladson-Billings (1995) provided a clear theoretical framework for resource-based pedagogies that had been developing throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Many teachers and researchers in higher education have been deeply inspired by the idea of making teaching and learning meaningful and responsive to the diverse languages, literacies, and cultural practices of students, particularly in relation to issues of difference and inequality (Paris, 2012). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references in teaching practices. Ladson-Billings early work in the 1990s emphasized the importance of students maintaining their cultural integrity while gaining and engaging other cultures. This principle remains relevant to supporting English learners even two decades later.

There are several contemporary researchers who have supported and expanded the work of Ladson-Billings. Paris, a leading voice in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) along with his collaborator Alim, emphasizes that pedagogy should not only be responsive to students’ cultural backgrounds, but also actively sustain their cultural and linguistic practices. CSP goes a step further, emphasizing the need to sustain cultural and linguistic practices. While CSP focuses on academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, CSP builds upon this by valuing and maintaining students’ identities as a critical component to the learning experience

(Caraballo et al., 2020). Flores and Rosa (2015) are known for their work on racialized language ideologies. Their raciolinguistic perspectives challenged dominant discourses of appropriateness in language education. They argued that students' linguistic abilities should not be viewed as a deficiency. Instead, their language is shaped by their racial identity, and they acknowledged that their identity influences how their language is perceived. They asserted that linguistic practices are constrained by monolingual perspectives, a notion that could be challenged through culturally sustaining practices.

To transform the current educational system, schools must move towards recognizing and valuing the rich cultural assets and diverse experiences that students bring with them, rather than expecting them to conform to a single societal norm. In doing so, they must become culturally and sociopolitically responsive to students' identities, recognizing that these identities may extend beyond national boundaries (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017). The goal of culturally responsive practices is to achieve educational equity for marginalized students (Gay, 2013). Culturally sustaining pedagogy is an effective instructional framework that incorporates students' cultural experiences into instructional practices (Paris, 2012). This approach is both a promising and an innovative practice that is improving academic outcomes for Latiné students.

However, Gay (2013) argued that inequity will persist until pedagogical practices and educational programs respect and value the cultures, perspectives, and experiences of students of color. Researchers suggest that this can be accomplished by integrating culturally responsive teaching into instructional practices (Gay, 2013; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lee, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). Incorporating students' cultural heritages, orientations, language, and experiences can be leveraged to teach academic skills (Moll, 1992; Moll & González, 2004; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Studies show that teachers can successfully integrate students' culture and language(s) into the classroom. Villegas and Lucas (2002) emphasized that to do this effectively, teachers must understand how race, language, culture, and experiences shape students' lives. Teachers need to embrace cultural and linguistic differences while encouraging students to explore their identity during instruction. For instance, Bajaj and Bartlett (2017) found that three urban international high schools in New York and California implemented a “critical transnational curriculum” that used diversity as a learning opportunity. This curriculum promoted translanguaging (using multiple languages), fostered students’ aspirations, and engaged them in civic issues. The schools encouraged collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds, supported students’ first languages with bilingual programs, and connected learning to social and environmental issues. Additionally, they helped students consider a wide range of future opportunities beyond the local U.S. context.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) and Funds of Knowledge are closely intertwined both conceptually and practically. Funds of Knowledge is a theoretical framework that recognizes the rich culture and experiential knowledge that students bring from their homes and communities. CSP builds on this foundation by using students’ lived experiences to affirm their identities and enhance learning. Researchers believe that culturally responsive teaching allows students to use their identities to develop critical perspectives, fostering pride and empowering them to excel and challenge inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mensah, 2021). Fernandez (2016) applied Culturally Responsive Instruction Theory (Gay, 2002) to explore what motivates Latiné students’ academic success. Fernandez found that bilingual educators used culturally competent approaches to show respect for their students’ primary language and culture. They integrated their own culturally responsive teaching practices and lived experiences to build trusting

relationships with students and families. Fernandez's study highlighted how the focus on *educación* (moral, interpersonal, and academic goals) and *confianza* (trust) was deeply connected to Latiné families and may have contributed to the academic success of students.

Fernandez (2016) applied Gay's (2002) theory to design semi-structured interviews and protocols aimed at gathering insights from K-3rd grade teachers in California's Arbol Lindo Unified School District. The study focused on the teaching practices, classroom support, and professional learning used to support the instructional needs of English learners (ELs). It captured teachers' perspectives by examining how content was delivered in both Spanish and English at Don Javier Elementary School. The study involved data collected from ten dual-language teachers who held the California Elementary Multiple Subject Teaching Credential with Bilingual Authorization, making them highly qualified to teach in a dual-language immersion program. Central themes and findings that emerged from observations and transcripts included: understanding the English learner, effective instructional strategies, and incorporating cultural responsiveness.

In Fernandez's (2016) study, eight of the teachers who were native Spanish speakers acknowledged the importance of understanding that the needs of the English learner (EL) have evolved and are critical to supporting them in the educational setting. Teachers described how supporting the learner also included effectively communicating and engaging with families. Although teachers expressed that engagement was vital to student success, the expectations of such collaboration varied among them. Throughout the interviews, teachers also recognized how their teaching strategies and cross-cultural practices were effective when working with Latiné ELs. They validated students culturally by using various methods, including chants, kinesthetic movements, and singing. According to Fernandez's (2016) study, teachers recalled relying on

teacher credential courses, colleagues, and/or lived experiences to implement cross-cultural practices that were effective when validating and working with Latiné ELs.

The Role of the Bilingual Teacher in Integrating FK and CSP

Cummins (2017), a leading scholar in bilingual education and second language acquisition, advocated for the recognition of bilingualism as an asset rather than a barrier to student success. Cummins is a strong proponent of social justice in education, arguing that educators must recognize and value students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. His work highlights how monolingual educational practices marginalize linguistic minority students and calls for inclusive teaching strategies that empower students by affirming their identities. He stresses that when educators incorporate students' native languages and cultural perspectives, it fosters academic success, personal growth, and stronger student identities, ultimately contributing to more equitable educational outcomes. Bilingual educators, therefore, play a critical role in fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment that respects and leverages students' diverse cultural and linguistic identities as tools for academic and personal growth (Lucido et al., 2024).

Educators must prioritize addressing the challenges associated with the preparation of ESL and bilingual educators to ensure that they are equipped with the skills and perspectives necessary to effectively teach diverse student populations (Alfaro & Hernández, 2023). Research has identified several essential themes to guide the preparation of bilingual teacher candidates, emphasizing the need to develop culturally responsive, reflective, and adaptive educators. These themes, highlighted by various scholars (Caldas, 2017; Cervantes-Soon, 2018; Freire, 2016; Sarmiento-Arribalza & Murillo, 2010; Wall & Hurie, 2017), include the following key components:

Reflexive Practice for Bilingual Teachers

In 2023, Alfaro and Hernandez explored how reflective practice serves as a transformative tool for bilingual educators. Their work emphasized that educators must be provided with the opportunity for critical self-reflection. They asserted that exploring their own lived experiences and reflecting on their identities plays a pivotal role in shaping how they understand and interact with students. By examining their own cultural, linguistic, and personal identities, teachers can develop greater cultural awareness and empathy, which in turn strengthens their ability to connect with students from diverse backgrounds. Alfaro and Hernandez (2023) argued that they are better able to recognize and integrate Funds of Knowledge into classroom instruction. This reflective process can also help teachers recognize their own biases and preconceived notions that may influence their teaching practices (Alfaro & Hernandez, 2023).

Due to the exponential growth of Latiné English learners and the growth of dual language programs, the need to develop critical consciousness among teachers is vital now more than ever. Alfaro and Hernandez (2016) asserted that teachers must reflect on the foundations of their educational beliefs and the ideologies that shape them. Darder (2018) and Freire (2000) proposed that in order for teachers to co-construct knowledge alongside students, they must challenge their beliefs to determine how they can influence the classroom environment. Teachers must be encouraged to identify and critically examine dominant ideologies and hegemonic practices that may unconsciously shape their teaching. Otherwise, current practices can often perpetuate inequities and hinder students from marginalized backgrounds, particularly bilingual and multilingual students. By understanding the impact of social and cultural norms, teachers can

adopt more equitable and inclusive instructional strategies that affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities, rather than silencing them (Alfaro & Hernandez, 2023).

Leveraging Language and Culture as Assets: Helping multilingual students grow socially, culturally, and linguistically depends on how well teachers value and incorporate their students' knowledge. Darder (2012), Freire (2000), and Norton (2010) aligned with Alfaro and Hernandez (2016) in that students must see themselves represented in day-to-day curriculum and instruction. A central tenet in working with multilingual and bilingual learners is recognizing language and culture as powerful assets that can enhance learning. Teachers must be taught to view students' linguistic repertoires as resources rather than deficits. By incorporating students' first languages and cultural experiences into the classroom, educators can foster an environment where students feel valued and empowered. This approach not only supports academic development but also promotes students' emotional well-being and sociocultural and linguistic identity (Alfaro & Hernandez, 2023).

According to Palmer (2018), bilingual teachers of multilingual learners are characterized by their ability to act as change agents and advocates for biliteracy. Theoretically, Palmer (2018) emphasizes key characteristics that are necessary to serve in this capacity (see Table 2).

Table 2

Palmer's Key Characteristics of Bilingual Teachers

Key Characteristic	Description
Critical Consciousness	Recognize social injustices and power dynamics in education, particularly those affecting language-minoritized students.
Advocacy for Equity	Actively promote educational opportunities and challenge deficit perspectives.

Leadership & Agency	Assume leadership roles within schools and communities leveraging linguistic and cultural knowledge to influence practices.
Commitment to Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy	Integrate students' home languages and cultural experiences into the classroom to affirm both identity development and academic success.
Reflective Practice	Examine teaching and beliefs in sociocultural and sociolinguistic contexts to refine approaches.

Palmer (2018) further highlighted the importance of bilingual educators as "cultural and linguistic brokers" who bridge the gap between students' personal and cultural identities and the broader societal structures within which they must navigate. This dual role allows bilingual teachers to integrate their own cultural and linguistic identities with the educational system, helping students from marginalized communities feel understood and supported. When bilingual teachers critically reflect on their own histories and those of their students, they are better positioned to create meaningful connections and build trust, which is essential for fostering academic success (Corder, 2024).

For Latiné students, this trust is crucial to their academic growth and their ability to master both content knowledge and essential skills (Lowery, 2018; Palmer, 2018). In addition to self-reflection, preservice teachers can transform their instructional practices when given opportunities for research, collaboration, and growth within their preparation programs and placement sites. According to Ball and Tyson (2011), when teacher candidates are allowed to design and implement innovative approaches that align with their learning about students' needs, they can evolve into more responsive and effective educators. These experiences provide a foundation for future educators to develop a critical understanding of the role of culture, language, and identity in teaching and learning.

Bilingual Teachers as Bridge Builders of Culture and Language

The literature indicates that students need to adopt a bicultural orientation, which requires bilingual educators to apply Ladson-Billings's (1994, 1995, 2006) Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework. This framework supports the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) that not only promotes academic achievement but also fosters sociocultural and sociopolitical awareness (Aquino-Sterling et al., 2022). In education, CRT highlights the importance of examining how race, social inequities such as class, gender, culture, and language, shape the experiences of students, particularly those from marginalized communities like Latiné students. Ladson-Billings further underscores the significance of students' lived experiences in shaping educational practices. By incorporating students' knowledge, cultural backgrounds, and perspectives into the classroom, educators can enhance learning and affirm students' identities. This approach also allows students to actively contribute to their own learning, a practice that extends beyond K-12 settings to higher education, particularly in preservice teacher preparation.

Martinez (2018) investigated the experience of Latiné preservice teachers as they navigated Rocky Mountain West University (RMWU), a predominantly White university. During the time of this study, educators at RMWU had spent the last 10 years implementing a new Utah interdisciplinary teaching model within their teacher education program. This program consisted of courses, projects, and school placements that would provide content knowledge and pedagogy to understand the context of being a professional educator in an urban setting. The goal of the program was to recruit, train, and prepare preservice teachers to work with diverse communities while also attaining endorsements in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Dual Immersion (DI). The Teacher Preparation Model focused on preparing preservice teachers linguistically and culturally, which included areas of study such as school-family partnerships and multicultural education. Using Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) as a framework,

Martinez's (2018) qualitative study examined how preservice teachers wrestled with majoritarian thinking of race and education, and how their multiple identities shaped their professional identities. Martinez (2018) used tools adapted from Quiñones (2015, 2016) to examine preservice teacher perspectives of their teacher preparation through a borderlands analysis. *Borderlands* (colonized versus decolonized realities) analysis focuses on understanding Latiné students' experiences in predominantly White spaces and the practices and policies that may contribute to a system of oppression. Such analysis aims to ensure more egalitarian practices are implemented institutionally (Elenes et al., 2010).

Martínez's (2018) findings from eight interviews with Latiné prospective teachers reinforced that teacher preparation models fail to validate and nurture their multiple identities. As a result of several cultural *choques* (clashes), preservice teachers felt isolated and often sought opportunities to garner support elsewhere. Their experiences became more complex when they recognized that not only did race and gender play a role in their teacher preparation, but also their language and schooling experiences early on. Martinez pointed out that participants in the study expressed the need for learning experiences that would have allowed them to explore their multiple identities and align what they discovered about themselves to their professional goals. Martinez (2018) and other researchers emphasize the importance of teacher licensure programs that are responsive to the cultural, ethnic, and educational needs of the community. Such programs would equip preservice teachers with the culturally responsive social justice tools needed to serve students effectively (Cockran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

Bilingual Teachers' Perception of Academic Activism

There is an urgency to establish the most optimal conditions for Latiné students as our country's demographic profile changes (Vergara, 2017). Valdés and Bender (2021) called on

academic activists to critically examine the systemic patterns that affect various social groups, urging reflection on how identity, which can be based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or language, shapes students' educational experiences. Research consistently shows that both interpersonal relationships and broader instructional and institutional practices significantly influence the experiences of Latiné students in schools (Castro & Calzada, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2020; Redding, 2019; Sosa & Gomez, 2012; Weisman, 2001). These studies highlighted how factors such as teacher expectations, cultural representation in the curriculum, and the overall school climate impact Latiné students' academic outcomes and social integration. For example, positive and culturally responsive interactions with teachers and peers can improve students' sense of belonging and academic motivation, while negative biases or exclusion can lead to disengagement and lower achievement.

Institutional practices, such as tracking, testing, and resource allocation, further complicate the issue. When Latiné students are placed in lower-performing tracks or receive less rigorous academic instruction due to assumptions about their abilities or language skills, they face additional barriers to success (Schwartz & Rumberger, 2013; Young et al., 2012). Alternatively, when schools implement more inclusive, culturally affirming curricula and provide support systems that address the unique needs of Latiné learners, it can positively influence their educational experiences and outcomes (Patterson, 2022). These findings suggest that addressing the challenges faced by Latiné students requires systemic changes that reflect an understanding of how identity intersects with educational practices. It is essential to create learning environments that are not only academically rigorous but also culturally responsive and supportive, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, are given the opportunity to succeed (Banks, 2015; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Villegas & Lucas, 2007) . This

study focused on understanding the lived experiences of the former English learner, examining the barriers and successes they encountered on their journeys to becoming teachers. Analyzing these experiences was central to the study's research questions, offering insights into how their backgrounds as English learners informs and shapes their current practices.

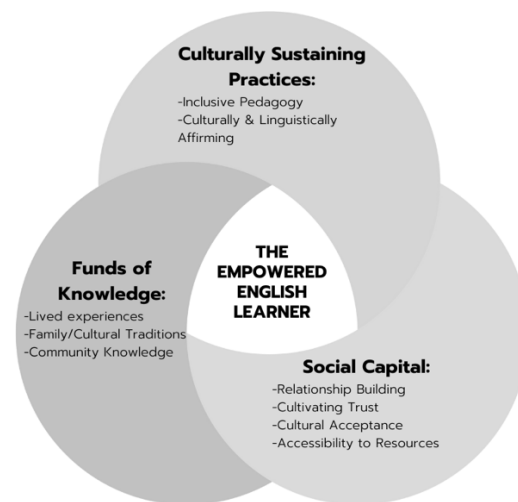
Latiné students as well as other racially and ethnically marginalized populations thrive academically as a result of strong social relationships that are established in the educational setting (Portes et al., 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). According to Valenzuela (2020), culture, language, and experiences provide a deeper context when developing an understanding of a specific demographic. This approach honors students as they present themselves and how their life experiences are integral to the learning community. Recognizing the beauty and complexity of who they are linguistically (accounting for the various dialects), their ethnic origins, and experiences shapes research and the way it is conducted (Nieto et al., 2012).

Researchers are moving towards discovering how sociocultural and sociopolitical factors play a role in Latiné student progress or lack thereof (Cammarota & Romero, 2012; Rodriguez, 2004). Empirical evidence on the factors influencing academic achievement among Latiné students was analyzed, and the results revealed that success is attributed to the positive relationships with teachers and staff, and the culturally sustaining practices implemented in the classroom (Alim et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2017; Taggart, 2018). Culturally sustaining practices provide structures that affirm and uplift the cultural and linguistic identities of students while also giving agency to family values and cultural practices in cross-cultural learning settings (Paris & Alim, 2017). As a result, there is a need for educators to build

social capital among Latiné students to create a greater sense of belonging in a school that provides access to pursue postsecondary opportunities (Taggart, 2018) (See Figure 3).

Figure 3

The Empowered English Learner



Social capital is developed from cultivating trust, capitalizing on relationship building, engaging and supporting students and their families, and implementing cultural acceptance through culturally sustaining practices (Arriaza & Rocha, 2016). Social capital developed from culturally sustaining practices works best through a systematic approach that implements curricula to reflect students' experiences and creates safe and inclusive environments. Building on the cultural experiences of Latiné students validates who they are and values what they have to offer (Cammarota et al., 2012; Zell, 2010).

Reflective Practice

The lived experiences of bilingual teachers who were once English learners themselves can play a significant role in shaping their decision to enter the teaching profession. Their existence cannot be silenced as their words and experiences can transform the world (Freire, 2000). These individuals often have a profound connection to the challenges and successes

associated with acquiring a second language in a predominantly English-speaking context. This personal journey cultivates a deep empathy for the struggles of current English learners, driving them to become advocates for bilingual education (Palmer, 2018).

The decision to become bilingual teachers can be motivated by a desire to give back to their communities and support students facing similar linguistic and cultural challenges (Flores & Garcia, 2017; Palmer, 2018). Having personally navigated these obstacles, they are aware of the critical importance of representation and the necessity for educators who understand and respect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students (Pratt, 2022). This awareness manifests in a commitment to creating more inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments for English learners. Personal experiences with bilingualism and the educational system can give them unique insights into effective teaching strategies (Larson, 2018). These educators understand the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of being an English learner, which significantly informs their pedagogical practices (Cummins, 2009). They are often more attuned to the needs of their students, utilizing culturally responsive teaching methods that honor and integrate students' linguistic backgrounds into the educational process (Pratt, 2022).

Chapter Summary

The literature review emphasizes the significant and growing teacher diversity gap, particularly concerning the underrepresentation of Latiné educators. This gap is of critical concern due to the increasingly diverse K-12 student population, with Latiné students showing substantial growth in Virginia. This chapter highlights that only 16% of teachers are professionals of color, while 44% of the student population are minorities. This disparity is often more prevalent in high-poverty areas and school divisions with marginalized student populations,

and it is compounded by broader national teacher shortages and high teacher turnover rates among teachers of color.

The chapter emphasizes that a diverse teaching force is crucial for providing a high-quality education, particularly for students of color. Research demonstrates that having teachers who share their racial or ethnic background can lead to significant positive outcomes for students. Positive outcomes include reduced absences and suspensions, improved test scores, increased engagement, and higher graduation rates and college enrollment. These benefits are attributed to shared cultural competence, the use of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining practices that validate students' backgrounds and experiences, higher teacher expectations, and teachers serving as powerful role models.

The concept of Funds of Knowledge is introduced in this chapter, highlighting the value of drawing upon students' family and community experiences as valuable resources for learning. The history of bilingual education is also explored, showing a shift from "English-only" policies to a greater recognition of language as an asset. The role of bilingual teachers is essential, especially those who were formerly English learners, due to their unique understanding of the challenges students face navigating language and cultural transitions. These educators can serve as "cultural and linguistic brokers," bridging the gap between students' identities and the educational system, fostering trust, and advocating for equitable practices.

However, Latiné students aspiring to become teachers face significant systemic barriers, including academic and financial challenges, unsupportive school cultures, and inadequacies in teacher preparation programs that may fail to validate their multiple identities and experiences. Addressing these issues is complex. These issues are rooted in societal inequities and require systemic change, including targeted recruitment, improved teacher preparation that incorporates

exploring lived experiences, and implementing practices that promote equity and support the learner as they navigate a new language and culture.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the methodological nuances of my study. To do so, I detail the qualitative, *plática*-based approach used to address RQ1 and RQ2, including participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness strategies. I will explore *pláticas* as a culturally relevant form of informal dialogue and narrative inquiry. This chapter outlines the importance of participant-researcher co-construction of knowledge to center marginalized voices. It details the data collection process, including interview protocols, the use of educational artifacts like photos for elicitation, and the implementation of focus groups. The chapter then describes the data analysis process, focusing on thematic coding to identify key themes. Finally, it addresses the study's limitations and delimitations and emphasizes the importance of trustworthiness through data triangulation and reflexivity. It concludes with a detailed researcher positionality statement to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases.

Reviewing the Purpose

Understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of Latiné bilingual teachers involved a qualitative approach that could make meaning of those experiences. A *plática*-based approach consisting of informal discussions or conversations allowed me, as the researcher, to gather insights directly from participants (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). This research strategy employed a multimethod approach, both formal and informal, to collect and analyze data related to social, cultural, and linguistic constructs (Denzin, 2017; Kanpol, 1997; Sunday et al., 2020; Yazan, 2015).

Social constructs exist due to human interactions and there are researchers who are trying to make sense of the world. This study explored how the lived experiences of Latiné bilingual

teachers, who were once ELs, influence the decisions that they make in the classroom. It also examined bilingual teachers' perceptions of their teacher preparation programs, focusing on how they felt their experience incorporated their Funds of Knowledge and prepared them for teaching in bilingual settings. Ultimately, this study sought to provide a nuanced understanding of the journeys of English learners who transitioned from bilingual students to bilingual teachers. This study utilized *pláticas*, a culturally relevant qualitative approach similar to that of narrative inquiry. This approach enhanced the depth of inquiry and aligned with contemporary efforts to honor diverse narratives and perspectives within educational research. The following research questions guided the study.

Research Questions

1. How do Latiné bilingual teachers draw upon their own experiences and cultural knowledge (Funds of Knowledge) as former English learners to inform their pedagogical approaches and create culturally responsive learning environments for their students?
2. How do bilingual teachers perceive the extent to which their teacher preparation programs acknowledged, valued, and integrated their Funds of Knowledge (i.e., their families' and communities' cultural knowledge, experiences, and practices) into the curriculum and pedagogical approaches?

Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical paradigms underlying this study are fundamental to understanding the methodological choices made to get at the meaning of one's lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Creswell, & Poth, 2017). The experiences of bilingual teachers and the ways they were inspired and influenced to teach bilingual students are marked by questions of their own realities

and sense of being, as well as the ways that they construct and interpret what they know and how they know what is just and equitable (García & Wei, 2014; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Macedo & Bartolomé, 2014).

Our sense of identity and our perception of the world play a key role in understanding ourselves and others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Marichal, 2020). Knowledge is socially co-constructed and influenced by those being researched and the researcher's perspectives and context (Gergen, 2015; Schwandt, 2015). Olsen and Torrence (1991) compared Piaget and Vygotsky's social construction of knowledge. While Piaget focused on cognitive development through environmental interactions, Vygotsky emphasized the social and cultural aspects of development, highlighting the importance of language and social interactions in constructing knowledge. The common theme when defining constructivism as an educational theory is that it emphasizes the active role of participants in constructing their own understanding and knowledge.

According to this theory, researchers do not passively receive information but actively build upon their existing knowledge and experiences through interaction with the world around them. Merriam and Tisdale (2019) described constructivism as a philosophical perspective that focuses on subjective meanings developed through social and historical actions. It allows people to make meaning through interactions, such as in-depth interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). In this study, the researcher and participants actively collaborated to co-create and interpret the experiences of being an English learner and a preservice teacher.

Researchers enhance their research design by selecting an appropriate theoretical paradigm-methodology model to achieve the intended outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A theoretical framework helps guide the researcher in choosing

methodological approaches and methods that facilitate a deeper understanding of the theories through data collection and analysis strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In the following sections, we will explore the philosophical paradigms of ontology and epistemology to better understand their significance in this research.

Ontology

This study primarily adopts an ontological framework to understand the reality, being, and existence of bilingual teachers. Ontology is a branch of philosophy often defined as the *study of being* (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It allows the researcher to reflect on the type of world being investigated and the realities that exist. It is the responsibility of the researcher to develop a critical understanding of the assumptions, motivations, and values of others (Smith, 2012). This study aims to investigate bilingual teachers who were former English learners to understand their thoughts, perceptions, and interpretations of their experiences. Reciprocity between researchers and participants helps break down barriers and creates more equitable opportunities for marginalized populations to define and label their experiences (Datta, 2018).

Investigating their realities requires interpretive designs, such as pláticas (personal and informal conversations), written reflections, artifact analyses, and focus groups to gain insight into their innermost thoughts about their educational experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Padilla, 2006). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended that responses, quotes, word analysis, and artifacts help the researcher gain insight into participants' experiences, including what led them to the profession and their preparation to teach English learners.

Epistemology

Constructivism endorses a subjective view of knowledge and reality constructed within individuals (Creswell, 2017; Schwandt, 2014). People interact with the world around them, and

through reflections of their experiences, they have the capacity to construct their own understanding and interpretation of both existing knowledge and new information (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Essentially, they have an active role in making sense of their experiences and determining how those experiences have contributed to their personal growth (Bruner, 1960). The constructivist perspective guides a critical researcher in understanding a participant's view on social and cultural situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Funds of Knowledge explores how sociocultural and sociolinguistic factors impact marginalized communities (Creswell, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2009; Moll et al., 1992; Norton, 2000). It offers valuable insights for developing more inclusive and equitable educational practices. The principles of Funds of Knowledge encourage active engagement, reflection on experiences, and collaboration among participants, aligning with the constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2017; De Oliveira, 2024; Howell, 2016; Kincheloe, 2005). Each concept seeks to understand how humans interpret or construct knowledge historically, socially, and linguistically. Co-constructing with participants reveals perspectives and generates new knowledge about their experiences as English learners and preservice teachers, and how their experiences influence their current work with English learners. In this study, teachers are learners, researchers are learners, and together are a community of learners. Because their voice is rarely evidenced in social research, this study will provide the opportunity to document their stories (Hylton, 2012).

Gonzalez et al. (2005) described asset orientation as the perspective that views teachers and students as valuable resources with unique strengths and knowledge. This approach contrasts with a deficit view, which focuses on what individuals lack. Instead, asset orientation emphasizes recognizing and leveraging the existing skills, experiences, and cultural knowledge that teachers

and students bring to the educational environment (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Zipin, 2009). By adopting an asset orientation, leaders and educators can create more inclusive and empowering educational practices that build on the diverse backgrounds and capabilities of their community members (Gonzalez et al., 2005). This perspective helps to foster a positive and supportive learning environment where everyone's contributions are valued and utilized effectively.

Research Context

This study took place in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Virginia provides a rich and complex setting for a study of bilingual teacher experience. In Virginia, English learners comprise about 10% of the public school population, representing more than 145,000 students who speak over 280 languages. Latiné students are the largest EL subgroup, with Spanish as the most common home language and the majority among ELs statewide (VSQP, 2023). Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), English learners had the second-lowest passing rates in reading, math, and science (VSQP, 2023). Some school divisions also reported a significant increase in the enrollment of English learners, rising from 3,500 to 4,400 in one year, reflecting the rapid growth of the Latiné subgroup (Krug, 2022).

Understanding why the experiences of these educators are critical as the demographics of the K-12 student population are evolving exponentially, and inequities are rising (Nowicki, 2022). Exploring their K-12 educational experiences and perceptions of their teacher preparation can provide insight into how these experiences shaped them into becoming Latiné bilingual teachers (Flores, 2015; Nieto, 2010). Exploring lived experiences and beliefs provides profound insights into both the content (“what”) and the processes (“how”) involved in K-12 language education and teacher preparation (Nieto, 2010, Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2010). This methodological approach is designed to delve deeply into individuals' subjective experiences,

uncovering the nuanced ways in which they interact with and perceive educational practices. By focusing on participants' personal narratives, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and challenges inherent in teaching English learners (Orellana & Reynolds, 2012).

It is important to note that there have been policy changes and updates to the endorsement requirements for ESL and dual language programs. In 2018, teachers wanting to teach ESL had to complete 18 credit hours of intensive coursework to obtain an endorsement to teach ESL in Virginia. Today, the requirements to be endorsed in ESL have loosened due to a lack of required coursework, although they must still pass the Praxis English to Speakers of Other Languages exam. In 2018, House Bill 1156 was passed in Virginia to ensure that the state would provide teacher licensure in dual language immersion, an alternate direction to meet the linguistic needs of students in Virginia (Massaro & Palencia, 2022). This legislation marked a significant step toward addressing the state's growing multilingual population, especially as the number of English learners continue to increase. However, this legislation lacks clarity on endorsement requirements and the courses that must be fulfilled and whether educators have equitable access to universities that offer dual-language training.

Participant Selection

In this study, individuals with shared characteristics were recruited using purposeful selection (Patton, 2015). This meant participants were often chosen because they had relevant experience or knowledge. Using a purposeful sampling of individuals (Latiné bilingual teachers) allowed me to find patterns that related to their experiences as former English learners and pre-service bilingual teachers. Therefore, purposeful sampling allowed me, as the researcher, to explore how participants were inspired to pursue bilingual education and if they felt that their

preservice experience prepared them to address diverse learners' needs. This research approach combined both informal and formal inquiry, positioning me as the primary research instrument. It aimed to understand and address the social and cultural challenges of English and language learners, focusing on how bilingual teachers can draw on their own experiences to provide an equitable, socially just, and caring educational experience for their learners.

Purposefully selected participants ensured that the *plática* approach covered all relevant aspects of the topic being studied. Purposive sampling is a form of non-random sampling in which participants are selected through specific criteria (Patton, 2015). This type of sampling is determined by the population being considered, and the participants selected serve as the best candidates for that sample (Emmel, 2013). Essentially, the researcher decides what will be determined and finds participants willing to share their knowledge and/or experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). While there are limitations to both convenience and purposeful sampling, it is typically the technique selected for qualitative research. Purposive sampling provides an information-rich account, resulting in a deeper understanding of central issues.

While this approach may introduce selection bias related to the researcher's judgment, accessibility, or referral methods, it allowed for meaningful insights. Conclusions are drawn by analyzing participants' responses, identifying themes and variations among cases, and enhancing research applicability across diverse contexts (Yin, 2018). Selection criteria can be based on experiences, characteristics, or roles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants in this study had a teaching degree from an accredited university, held either an endorsement in English as a Second Language (ESL) or certification to teach Spanish, and are currently employed as educators in the state of Virginia.

Data Collection

As a naturalistic study, collecting data involves the gathering of qualitative information to help the researcher describe, interpret, and capture the essence of individuals' lived experience (Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). The following study provides insight into the experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers in Virginia, focusing on their journeys as English learners (ELs) and their transition into becoming bilingual educators. Similar to Larson's (2018) research, the goal is to explore and understand this group's experiences and amplify voices seldom heard by educational leaders and policymakers. Quiroz (2001) expressed that for a voice to feel empowered, it must be heard. Examining the human experience involves an analysis of participants' accounts through contextualizing and clarifying their story (Bevan, 2014). The following table describes the sources of data that were collected from participants' experiences.

Table 3

Data Collection Sources

Research Questions	Stages of data collection	Sources of data			
		Primary:			Secondary:
		<i>Pláticas (1:1)</i>	<i>Written Reflection (optional)</i>	<i>Pláticas (Focus Group)</i>	<i>Photo Elicitation</i>
RQ1	Stage 1 <i>Constructivism Funds of Knowledge</i>	X			
	Stage 2 <i>Constructivism Funds of Knowledge</i>		X		
RQ2	Stage 3 <i>Culturally Sustaining Practices</i>			X	X

Before data collection, approval was obtained from two institutions, the VA Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) and a school division's county school board office. With the

school division's permission, an email went out to Latiné bilingual teachers within the county. Participants were emailed an explanation of the study's goals, methods, and an invitation to participate (See Appendix A) voluntarily. Individuals who were interested sent their consent to study (See Appendix B) via email, confirming they met the criteria (See Appendix C). Those who were interested confirmed that they were:

- Current bilingual teachers in a K-12 public school in Virginia.
- Former English learners.
- Licensed and endorsed in ESL or certified to teach Spanish.

Once a group of teachers was selected, a plática was scheduled, lasting about 60 minutes. The sessions were spaced a few weeks apart to give participants time to reflect between stages of the study and allow the researcher to analyze the responses and prepare to share them in the next session.

A protocol was crafted to elicit in-depth responses using open-ended questions, allowing participants to share their experiences extensively, reflecting on their K-12 educational journey as bilingual students (See Appendices D and E) and their preparation as bilingual teachers (See Appendix F). The interview protocol was designed to create a logical flow and build progressively on the participants' responses (Høffing & Martiny, 2015; Lauterbach, 2018). The first section was referred to as *la entrada* (the introduction). *La entrada* included rapport-building questions that set a comfortable and relaxed environment. As the researcher, this afforded me the opportunity to connect with participants by sharing my background and commitment to amplifying their narratives, a commitment deeply rooted in my own family history. The initial questions focused on general, non-threatening topics, such as the participants' background, their general teaching experiences (e.g., subject-matter focus, years of experience,

preparation program attended), and their teaching philosophy. This approach aimed to establish trust and ease participants into the more detailed parts of the conversation (See Appendix E).

The second section of the interview, often referred to as *la plática*, consisted of open-ended questions that were directly aligned with the research questions and grounded in the theoretical framework and literature reviewed for this study. These questions were designed to maintain focus while allowing flexibility to encourage expansive, thoughtful responses. During the interviews, prompts and probes were used to explore deeper layers of participants' accounts.

The third and final section of the interview protocol was called *la salida*, which refers to the closure of the conversation. It implies the act of concluding or wrapping up a conversation. The final step in the study was reserved to give participants the opportunity to reflect and share any additional thoughts or insights that may not have been directly addressed by the previous questions. Examples of these questions include: "Is there anything else you would like to add that we didn't cover?", or "Was there anything you mentioned earlier that you would like to revisit or elaborate on." This approach ensured that participants' perspectives were captured comprehensively, even beyond the initial scope of the protocol.

The study design incorporated several methods to gather comprehensive data. Combining an optional written reflection, photo elicitation, and a focus group sought to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of participants' K-12 educational experiences and their development as preservice bilingual teachers. This multi-method approach enhanced the depth of the study by capturing different dimensions of their experiences and perceptions. It also helped to understand how their past experiences as English learners (ELs) influence their current perspectives and practices as teachers working with current English and language learners.

Pláticas

The primary method of data collection for this study was an approach to interviewing known as *pláticas*. A *plática* is a form of informal dialogue commonly used in qualitative studies that involve Latino/a, Chicano/a, and Latiné communities (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Bucholtz, 2004; Molina, 2001). Molina (2001) discussed the use of *pláticas* as a research method rooted in the cultural practices of Latiné communities. The author explains how this informal approach vastly differs from formal methods such as structured interviews. Researchers have described *plática* as a more informal method in that there is reciprocal conversation and a collaborative exchange of knowledge between researcher and participant (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Bucholtz, 2004; Molina 2001). There is an egalitarian approach where all individuals are equal and there is no imbalance of power. It eliminates disparities of hierarchies between people and establishes a relationship of trust where both individuals have equal say and influence (Arneson, 2013).

Valle and Mendoza (1978) recognized *pláticas* as a culturally appropriate way to engage in conversation with Latiné populations. They defined it as cordial, friendly, and mutually supportive. Later, in 1982, Valle emphasized that this approach allows the researcher to build relationships, reciprocity, and trust with participants. Beccera and Shaw (1984) adopted this method in their research over more traditional approaches, finding it to be the most effective way to engage the Latiné population. Gonzalez (1998) identified it as a method for gathering cultural knowledge in both one-on-one and group settings.

In more recent years, Fierros and Bernal (2016) used *pláticas* as a part of their Chicana/Latina feminist methodology to understand the experiences in relation to educational equity and how they navigate their identities in educational systems. They aimed to conceptualize *pláticas* not just as a data collection method, but as a full methodology deeply

rooted in Chicana/Latina feminist scholarship. They discussed how pláticas have evolved, drawing on recent Chicana/o and Latina/o literature, to emphasize the significance of participants' everyday lives as valuable sources of knowledge. Aragon's 2022 study used a plática methodology alongside LatCrit to center the experiential knowledge of Latinx English learners (ELs). The study focused on how these students' race, EL status, language, and culture have influenced their experiences in mainstream classrooms. Rodriguez and Guerra (2023) examined a plática with Latine teachers and pre-service teachers combining Chicana/Latina feminist theory and *testimonios* (testimonies). The study revealed that the Latiné population shares similar social and cultural experiences and recommends providing teachers with more opportunities to engage in discussions on issues impacting Latiné educators in the U.S. Latino South.

There are several principles of pláticas that Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) conceptualized as a methodology. Key aspects include the following:

- Centering Marginalized Knowledge: It emphasizes the lived experiences of marginalized people and examines how these experiences relate to oppression.
- Co-Construction of Knowledge: Participants and researchers are seen as co-creators of knowledge, with pláticas providing a space for mutual theorizing.
- Connecting Experience and Inquiry: The methodology links participants' everyday experiences to the research inquiry, recognizing these experiences as central to shaping participants' ways of knowing.
- Space for Healing: Pláticas can facilitate therapeutic discussions, allowing participants to share struggles and tensions, fostering healing.

- **Reciprocity and Reflexivity:** The methodology seeks reciprocal relationships between researchers and participants, requiring vulnerability and self-reflection from researchers.

For this study, a *plática* methodology was incorporated to center the experiences of Latiné bilingual educators who were once English learners. It explored how their EL status, language, and culture influenced their K-12 experience and preparation for teaching in bilingual classrooms.

Pláticas as Narrative Inquiry. Narrative inquiry is described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as a technique that is used to collect and analyze personal stories to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences. This approach allows researchers to explore the complexity of human experiences within social and cultural constructs. They outline narrative inquiry as a particularly useful technique for giving voice to marginalized and underrepresented groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method involves an in-depth collection of techniques such as interviews, artifacts, and written accounts. This method not only collects and analyzes personal stories but also emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participant.

This study was designed to create a safe space for participants' voices, allowing bilingual educators to share their experiences as students and their journey to becoming bilingual teachers (Flores & Guirao, 2017; Hernandez & Alfaro, 2019). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss the importance of entering a study relationally, which can be established by *pláticas*, and then following up with the recording, transcribing, and analyzing findings. This is done by listening to the experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers with the goal of understanding how the experience impacted their choice to become bilingual educators. Narrative inquiry is central to educational

scholarship that resists systems that alienate people and explores how it contributes to a sense of agency among Latiné bilingual educators (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2020). Guana et al. (2017) used face-to-face interviews to understand the stories of Latinx becoming bilingual teachers in the U.S. They examined Latinx participants to understand what they faced when they elected to become bilingual teachers.

A narrative inquirer studies an experience. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2006) argue that the development of narrative inquiry methodology is rooted in individuals' lived experiences. Humans are the leaders of their individual selves and holders of the way they interact socially and culturally. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006),

people shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 375)

An honest empirical method views inquiry as a series of choices influenced by past experiences, made over time, and examines the outcomes of those choices in the lived experiences of an individual or community (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2020).

Hernandez-Scott (2017) used narrative inquiry and sub-questions to explore the factors that impacted Latino/a teachers' academic and career attainment. The narrative framework she employed was effective in gathering stories about the experiences that supported Latinos/as in their educational and career journeys. Common categories and themes emerged, allowing the

researcher to highlight the importance of understanding lived experiences, as well as the role of culture and power in the recruitment and retention of Latino/a teachers. Marichal (2020) used teachers' narrative accounts to capture their knowledge of classroom teaching practices, making it well-suited for examining what secondary teachers know about teaching ELs in rural communities. Thus, this approach would also be suitable for examining Latiné bilingual educators and documenting their experiences as ELs in K-12 education, as well as their experiences in teacher preparation.

Methodological Significance of Pláticas. Pláticas were conducted through informal interviews, enhanced by optional written reflections, photo elicitation, and a focus group discussion. The study focused on a group of practicing bilingual teachers who were formerly English learners. Understanding the experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers can help identify the most impactful aspects of their education as English learners, how these experiences influenced their career choices, and their perceptions of their preparation to become bilingual educators. Insights from the study can provide broader implications by facilitating an in-depth exploration of the experiences of Latiné bilingual educators (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Researchers can uncover nuanced understandings of the challenges and successes inherent in teaching English learners by concentrating on their thoughts and experiences (Echevarría et al., 2017).

Pláticas situate Latiné bilingual teachers within specific educational, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic contexts, enabling the identification of unique factors that shape their teaching strategies. Through thematic analysis of the data collected from these educators, the researcher identified recurring themes related to access, motivation, barriers, instructional strategies, and support mechanisms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The insights derived from these studies can inform leaders about best practices in teaching English and language learners, while also

contributing to changes in laws and educational policy. Ultimately, the findings may enhance the educational landscape of English and language learners and foster more equitable learning environments.

Conducting Pláticas. Participants chose the location for their individual interviews and focus group based on their preferences, availability, and comfort level. The interview and the focus group were anticipated to last 60 minutes. The plática and focus group allowed for a mix of prepared questions and organic conversation. Core questions were supplemented with prompts and probes to encourage elaboration, clarification, and deeper exploration of participants' experiences (See Appendices E-G). The interview sessions were recorded using a handheld audio device (such as a Sony voice recorder). Verbatim transcriptions were created for the purpose of analysis, using a transcription software application (to be determined) for both the interview and focus group.

Educational Artifacts

My secondary approach to data collection involved what I refer to as educational artifacts. The first artifact collected was a participant-approved photograph. To gain deeper insight into the lived experiences of Latiné bilingual educators, pláticas were enhanced with photo elicitation, allowing for more reflective and detailed responses. Before and during the pláticas, participants reflected on and described how their chosen photo represented their experiences as English learners and their interpretation of what it means to be bilingual educators. Additionally, participants were asked to provide a written reflection offering deeper insights into their experiences as English learners, including the triumphs and challenges they faced and how those experiences influenced their decision to become educators. While these

written reflections were encouraged, they were made optional due to participants' professional and personal time constraints.

Photo Elicitation. Photo elicitation is a powerful tool in qualitative research. It can capture participants' lived experiences and stimulate deeper reflection (Harper, 2002; Marichal, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Photos can reveal contextual meaning by showcasing the environment and surroundings that reflect participants' lived experiences. Collier (1957) proposed photo interviewing to clarify misunderstandings when he studied mental health in Communities in Canada. Copes et al. (2018) allowed participants to determine what data were collected (including the sharing of photos), flipping the traditional power dynamic between researcher and participant.

Garcia and Zaragoza (2020) employed a photographic elicitation project to allow Latinx students enrolled in Hispanic Serving Institutions to define *servingness* (a multidimensional way to educate and empower minoritized students) and describe what it means to be educated at a diverse institution in the Midwest. Marichal (2020) explored how a teacher's personal and professional knowledge related to teaching English learners (ELs) in rural communities. This was achieved through semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation, allowing the researcher to make meaning of participants' experiences by identifying key themes gathered from the data.

Reflecting on a visual can also help participants articulate complex ideas and emotions, especially if there is a language barrier (Collier & Collier, 1986). Combining verbal and visual data fosters a richer, multilayered analysis. It enables both the researcher and participants to reflect critically on societal issues, creating space for diverse perspectives (Banks, 2001; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There have been concerns about the accuracy of the photos (Banks, 2001; Harper, 2002; Pink, 2007). However, Samson and Cordle (2001) stated that any concerns

could be minimized by allowing participants to generate their own photos. At the start of the final phase of this study (a focus group), participants were asked to share a photo that represents what being a bilingual teacher means to them.

Focus Groups

Pláticas in Community. Establishing a focus group is a valuable methodological approach in qualitative research (Patton, 2002; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Krueger and Casey (2015) argue that focus groups are helpful in exploring complex behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions. They emphasize the importance of creating a comfortable and respectful environment where participants can speak openly and freely. Most importantly, Krueger and Casey (2015) highlight how focus groups can be used in different stages of research in various disciplines, including education. Stewart & Shamdasani (2014) explain how focus groups provided depth to approaches such as surveys and interviews by capturing group dynamics and perspectives. Focus groups can generate rich qualitative data that can enhance a research study (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

Productive discussions in focus groups can be fostered by establishing clear guidelines, which the moderator can facilitate to create a structured yet open environment (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). These guidelines typically encourage active listening, respect for differing opinions, and the sharing of ideas without interruption. By setting ground rules that emphasize respectful dialogue, the moderator helps participants feel comfortable expressing their views freely, which in turn leads to a richer data collection process. Researchers acknowledge the value of focus groups as a research tool, yet they recognize that the method is not without its limitations (Patton, 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

For instance, common challenges in focus group settings include participants who are reluctant to speak up, those who dominate the conversation, or individuals who may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics (Krueger & Casey, 2015). These challenges can affect the flow and depth of the discussion, ultimately impacting the quality of the data collected. One way to address these challenges is by designing questions that elicit rich responses and create an atmosphere of trust and openness (Cohen-Miller & Boivin, 2021). Trust-building questions often start with general, non-threatening topics that help participants feel at ease, gradually progressing to more specific or sensitive subjects.

Additionally, the researcher's role is crucial in managing group dynamics, ensuring that no one participant dominates the conversation while also encouraging quieter members to contribute. Techniques such as directly inviting input from less vocal participants, using non-verbal cues to signal when someone has not spoken for a while, or implementing "round-robin" methods (where each participant is given a chance to respond) can help ensure that all voices are heard (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Creating a balanced and inclusive environment fosters more meaningful and productive discussions, improving the overall quality and depth of the focus group data.

Data Analysis

Pláticas create an interactive space that fosters meaningful dialogue between researchers and participants, allowing them to explore topics affecting the Latiné community and deepen their understanding. It is a rich cultural practice rooted in listening, inquiry, storytelling, and story-making, resembling a nuanced, multi-dimensional conversation (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). The Socratic method and critical conversations are similar to pláticas, shaping our cultural, historical, and political views (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). Pláticas are often used in

qualitative research, particularly in contexts where the researcher is trying to understand the lived experiences of a particular group, such as Latiné bilingual teachers. Inferences can be made using analytical generalizations developed from interpreting and understanding the experiences gleaned from the study. Learning about a specific situation, as one does in a study, can consist of many approaches to help make meaning of findings.

A researcher examines personal lived experiences by designing questions to learn about participants' understandings and experiences within specific contexts (Larkin et al., 2014). This type of design provides an in-depth view of their personal experiences. Gathering and interpreting data can be daunting; however, analyzing and synthesizing data from multiple perspectives could build upon links to previous research and provide the researcher with a strong connection to a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). To make meaning from the data, the following sections will discuss methods used to synthesize the data and explore the relationships and connections between and within experiences.

Through reflective and intentional analysis, researchers can uncover critical insights that inform enhancements and address shortcomings in educational practices, ultimately contributing to more effective and equitable educational environments (Schön, 1983). This approach, while not rigidly prescriptive, establishes a framework to systematically plan and analyze their findings. It balances structured guidelines with the flexibility to explore various methodological avenues. The objective is to facilitate meaningful conversations with participants, enabling them to convey their perspectives comprehensively and offer detailed accounts of their experiences. This method not only enriches the data collected but also holds the potential to uncover additional insights or revelations.

Understanding the Data. A common first step in data analysis is familiarization with the data. This study was evidenced through a comprehensive review and analysis of the transcribed interview responses from the participants who were identified as English learners in their K-12 education and are now serving as educators. Responses were analyzed using a thematic coding approach focused on identifying patterns and themes that revealed participants' experiences and motivations. Thematic coding involved systematically organizing data by coding segments of text, which allowed the researcher to categorize and interpret key concepts and insights. This process led to the identification of recurring themes and patterns across participants' responses, providing a structured way to explore and understand the data.

The analysis was based on data from pláticas, collected artifacts, and focus group responses. These data were coded and grouped into themes that reflect the central aspects of each narrative. By coding, the researcher could deconstruct participants' responses, allowing for a detailed examination of specific instances and broader conclusions across narratives. This approach analyzed each narrative and revealed connections between participants. Thematic coding was conducted in multiple stages, starting with open coding (i.e., importance of cultural values and traditions, inspired by role models to love learning, support through family sacrifices, motivated by own EL experience.) to identify initial categories, followed by axial coding to connect related categories and explore relationships between themes (i.e., Personal experience as EL, Institutional barriers, Instructional Practices). Through this process, the researcher aimed to interpret how participants' experiences and motivations emerged from the data, and to develop a deeper understanding of the context in which these experiences occur. This structured approach helped generate useful insights to better understand and support language learners.

Coding. Analyzing the data can include multiple qualitative approaches, and a researcher does not need to subscribe to one method (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Organizing data into major ideas and themes can involve using codes to develop descriptions, followed by interpreting the story and/or findings. The function of coding is just one way to capture the meaning of the data. Data in this study consisted of plática and focus group transcripts, participant observation field notes, and artifacts. Codes generated by the researcher symbolized and attributed meaning to individual data. Codes were used later to identify patterns, categorize, and develop other analytic processes (Saldaña, 2013).

Researchers label codes in stages or levels. First Cycle methods take place during the initial stage of coding. In this study, understanding the experience of the English learner was the first step in determining how it impacted the bilingual educator's decision-making in the classroom environment and instruction. The analysis used descriptive coding to assign words or short phrases that were generated from theoretical frameworks and existing literature (i.e., FAMILY, VALUES, CULTURE, LANGUAGE, COMMUNITY).

Descriptive coding helped identify topics, but did not derive any further meaning from the data. In vivo coding was also utilized to capture and honor the participant's voice. In vivo codes, denoted with quotation marks, used the participants' short phrases to describe their experience. Combining these two First Cycle coding methods in a qualitative study can synthesize several codes to explore a variety of phenomena. This type of coding is often referred to as eclectic coding. Eclectic coding can be employed to generate themes, as does Second Cycle coding.

A Second Cycle coding method was used to clarify the relationships between participants' responses. Two methods of Second Cycle coding, pattern codes and theming the

data, helped to contextualize the data into higher-level concepts. Pattern codes helped to attribute meaning to the data. It identified similarly coded data and then was organized into themes. Themes were identified to create a cohesive narrative of the data. Code mapping was then used to structure the analysis and make meaning by illustrating a textual view of the study.

When conducting an analysis and exploring participants' experiences, a strategic approach is needed to understand how their identity, beliefs, and other constructs impact them. It illuminates a specific experience by effectively describing the realities of a participant's experience. During in-depth interviews, the research participants shared their personal perspectives to bring their points of view to life. This allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the human experience. Analyzing the detailed experiences was messy because codes do not fall neatly into categories as discussed in descriptive coding. Descriptive coding is deductive and subjects itself to *a priori* of codes assigned to a transcript.

In contrast, inductive codes, such as in vivo coding and theming the data, are generated by the data (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Bingham and Wikowsky (2022) described inductive analysis as more of an emergent strategy that can (1) help make meaning of data, (2) develop themes, (3) support findings, and (4) apply theory to the findings. In vivo coding, theming of the data, and eclectic coding are methods that align well with such a critical analysis. This method helped the researcher in this study to organize the data by themes and clearly show how the findings related to the research questions and theoretical framework.

Coding Summarized. Multiple layers of data interpretation make research more interesting. A researcher does not need to adhere to one strategy or another when interpreting the data. This methodological approach enhances the depth and accuracy of data interpretation. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences. Descriptive coding organized the

researcher's thoughts, facilitating a more profound understanding of the data while promoting deeper reflection on the data's complexities (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022; Miles et al., 2020). The first cycle of coding was utilized to organize and sort the data using categories relevant to the research questions. This captured the essence of the data from the interview transcripts.

Various coding approaches were employed, including descriptive and in vivo coding. Descriptive coding summarized key topics and categorized the data. In vivo coding utilized the participants' own terms and phrases, honoring their cultural and experiential contexts. Following the initial cycle of data summarization, a second cycle of coding, or axial coding, organized themes and categories into more refined classifications, known as pattern coding. This process facilitated the aggregation of data into meaningful themes of analysis, enhancing the interpretive depth of the research findings (Miles et al., 2020).

The final phase of the analysis consisted of selective coding. The most relevant themes and categories were identified to build a comprehensive explanation of the analysis. Analyzing themes enabled the researcher to grasp the complexities of each participant's experiences without imposing preconceived notions or biases. The combination of strategies fostered an in-depth discussion, with findings clearly summarized and described. These approaches established a systematic and analytical research process to understand findings, their connection to existing research and theoretical frameworks, and meaningful implications and recommendations for future studies.

Limitations/Delimitations

Elements of the methodology include limitations and delimitations of the study. Limitations are design flaws in the methodology (Miles, 2017). Limitations within a study, often outside of the researcher's control, could impact the interpretation of the results. This study

offers valuable insights by centering Latiné voices and highlighting the cultural and linguistic assets these educators contribute to their professional roles. The benefit of qualitative research is that it includes a deep analysis of a lived experience.

Delimitations are intentionally established by the researcher. In some instances, it makes comparing results and drawing conclusions difficult due to the narrow range of data collected. However, the boundaries of a study are defined and are integral parts of the design. This allows the research to narrow the breadth of the research (Miles, 2017). The researcher identified delimitations of the specific conditions for this study.

- The study was delimited to bilingual teachers who were former English learners.
- This study was delimited to bilingual teachers who were endorsed in ESL or certified to teach Spanish.
- The study was delimited by a small purposive sampling of bilingual teachers from the state of Virginia.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness is essential in research due to the inherent variability of qualitative methodologies. Given the diverse approaches employed in qualitative research, which often lack a standardized framework, it is important to ensure credibility, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1995; Stahl & King, 2020). Triangulating the data is vital in this process and can be achieved by integrating multiple data sources such as pláticas, written reflections, photo elicitation, and focus groups. These sources contribute to enhancing both the credibility and validity of the findings (Creswell & Plano, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For instance, utilizing qualitative interviews (pláticas) in conjunction with written reflections can provide stakeholders with deeper insights into the experiences of bilingual

teachers who were once English learners. It is equally imperative for researchers to adopt the role of active consumers in the study by allowing participants to review, reflect upon, and provide feedback on transcripts. This process fosters mutual trust and enhances the dependability of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1995; Stahl & King, 2020). Finally, credible and reliable information about bilingual education can significantly influence practitioners, policymakers, and the academic community. Trustworthy findings from these pláticas may be adapted and transferred to new contexts and research studies, potentially contributing to efforts to enhance educational experiences for English learners.

Reflexivity

Another critical component of trustworthiness is reflexivity. Reflexivity is often obtained through *epoché* (or bracketing) in qualitative studies, and reflexive journaling is often used. Emotional reflexivity has been encouraged in studies involving biographical narratives. Currently, researcher positionality statements are used broadly in various qualitative approaches. Identifying and articulating positionality helps to describe the worldview that the researcher adopts within a study.

A researcher's positionality shares how their values and beliefs are shaped by ethnicity, race, social class, language, gender, faith, and so on (Sikes, 2004; Wellington et al., 2005). First, a researcher acknowledges that they have the potential to influence the research. Then, they bring awareness to their identities and how others view them. And lastly, acknowledge that the study will be impacted by themselves and the research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Researchers can position themselves personally and professionally to make meaning of social, historical, and cultural experiences; however, they must also acknowledge how their own experiences can shape their interpretation of others.

Researcher Positionality

Before moving forward into the data and findings of this study, it is important to address my positionality to challenge my own assumptions and biases. I identify as a Latiné bilingual woman of Puerto Rican descent whose first language is English. Born in New Jersey, I am the product of my father, who is Puerto Rican, born in Manatí, Puerto Rico, and my mother, who is Nuyorican, born in Brooklyn, New York.

My father attended school in Puerto Rico until the age of eleven. Nineteen years after Puerto Rico became a commonwealth of the U.S. and after his father's death, he migrated to New Jersey with his mother and siblings. He transitioned to public school on the U.S. mainland as an English learner. He did not graduate from high school but acquired his GED in the late 1960s. My mother attended school in New York until ninth grade before transitioning into the workforce. I am the eldest of two daughters, and we attended school in the same district in New Jersey throughout our public education. The student population was primarily Black and Latiné, with a large multilingual community. Academically, I excelled in elementary school, but encountered challenges in middle and high school, particularly in language acquisition (reading and writing).

I learned to communicate in English and Spanish, both orally and in writing. My upbringing included participating in community spaces, such as church and gatherings, where Spanish was the primary language spoken. I communicated solely in Spanish with my grandparents, with the occasional use of English words or phrases they knew. I spoke both English and Spanish with my parents and extended family. I learned to read in Spanish by attending Sunday school at my church. Sunday school consisted of biblical lessons taught in both languages, and we were encouraged to read the Bible in Spanish and respond to questions in

English. Church services were primarily conducted in Spanish, and an English translator was not available until I was in my preteens. Translators did not become available in my community until the late '80s and early '90s. During this time, bilingual children of church leaders translated for the younger members of the congregation, whose primary language was English.

During my high school education, I studied Spanish for four consecutive years, which provided the foundation for my Spanish writing skills. Ironically, I was placed in additional reading instructional programs due to my low scores on standardized tests in reading comprehension. Reflecting on those formative years, I realize that bilingualism may have contributed to my mispronunciation of words and the difficulties I faced in understanding and producing written text, though I cannot say this with certainty. I have always been determined to improve my speaking, reading, and writing skills in English.

Influenced by my father's experience and society's emphasis on prioritizing English as a pathway to academic success, I have consistently worked to improve. My father often said, "If you can read and write, you can do anything." His perseverance in mastering the English language, obtaining his GED, and earning a bachelor's degree from an Ivy League school is a family accomplishment we hold in high regard. His journey of resilience has paved the way for future generations. My mother's encouragement ignited my desire to never quit and aspire for more. Throughout my life, her voice has echoed in my thoughts, emboldening me to aim high because "there is power in getting a good *educación* (education), and no one can take that away from you."

While I can communicate effectively in both languages, I do not consider myself biliterate because I lack the depth of vocabulary in Spanish that is needed to articulate ideas orally or produce written text on scholarly topics. Growing up with grandparents who were

unable to read or write in Spanish and had limited vocabularies, and living in a community where biliteracy was not encouraged nor valued in school, I witnessed firsthand how the dominant belief was that English was essential for survival in the United States. Within this context, the development of biliteracy was overlooked. However, since undergraduate school, I have been committed to immersing myself in both languages, as it has always been a significant part of my identity and a way to preserve my culture.

The dissertation process has served as a reminder of the practices of reading and writing. Regardless of language, it is often complex and marked with uncertainty. I have had to grapple with gathering my own thoughts and trying to organize them into a cohesive narrative, leaving me with a deep sense of appreciation for English learners. Students and their families come to this country and are faced with navigating a new language, maintaining their native language, and adapting to American culture. This journey has highlighted the complexities of language and the many challenges that exist. However, I remain committed to refining my ideas and articulating them in a way that can provide valuable insights into my field of study.

I have remained steadfast in my goal to contribute to the Latiné community in ways I never thought possible as a Puerto Rican girl from New Jersey. I have entered the research space humbled, not claiming to have all the answers, but seeking to create a platform where often unheard stories can be shared. By doing so, I aim to understand how diverse experiences shape identities and influence students' academic journeys. This involves listening to these stories and analyzing how personal and educational experiences impact development and success. My goal is to highlight the unique challenges and triumphs faced by individuals, particularly within the Latiné community, and to foster an environment where their voices are valued and their contributions recognized. Because of my own experiences and passion for contributing to

literature, I recognize the importance of challenging assumptions and acknowledging that I am only an expert in my own experience. The following realities will be used to ground my research and challenge any assumptions:

- English learners come from diverse backgrounds, spanning various cultures, races, socioeconomic levels, and academic experiences, and given the context of this study, it is necessary to address that the Latiné community is not monolithic.
- English learners can be born in the U.S., on territorial islands, and they can also be immigrants.
- English learners may or may not be fluent in their native languages.
- English proficiency is not equivalent to intellectual ability.
- Language acquisition is a process, and everyone's journey is different.
- English learners can have special education needs, and it is important to know the difference between challenges with language acquisition and a learning disability.

Leveraging my positionality enabled me, as the researcher, to enhance reflexivity, refine my research design, and establish trust with participants. By reflecting on my own identities and experiences, I was able to recognize and mitigate my biases.

This reflexivity also helped me interpret data through an objective lens, ensuring that the research is culturally sensitive and appropriate for the population I studied. Acknowledging my positionality can address power dynamics and promote ethical research practices. It fosters transparency and accountability, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. By bringing my positionality to light, I seek to create a more equitable research process that will contribute valuable insights into the experiences of English learners who transitioned into bilingual classrooms as teachers. To remain aware of biases I:

- Engaged in scholarly mentorship to gain guidance and perspective.
- Maintained a reflexive journal to document my thoughts and reflections.
- Sought feedback from colleagues to ensure diverse viewpoints.
- Checked in with research participants to validate findings and interpretations.

Chapter Summary

This study employed a qualitative, *plática*-based approach to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Latiné bilingual teachers who were formerly English learners. This methodology was grounded in a constructivist philosophical paradigm, emphasizing that knowledge and reality are socially co-constructed. The research was designed to answer two key questions: 1) How do teachers draw upon their own experiences and cultural knowledge (Funds of Knowledge) as former ELs to inform their teaching and create culturally responsive environments? And 2) How do they perceive the extent to which their teacher preparation programs acknowledged and integrated their Funds of Knowledge? Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, focusing specifically on Latiné bilingual teachers in Virginia who met the following criteria: former EL, holds a required licensure/certification, and currently an educator in K-12 public schools.

The data collection employed is a multi-method approach designed to capture teachers' insights. The primary method was *pláticas*, which are culturally relevant, informal dialogues or interviews rooted in Latiné cultural practices. It highlighted the reciprocity and co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants. These semi-structured *pláticas* have distinct sections for rapport-building (*la entrada*), main research questions (*la plática*), and conclusion (*la salida*). Additional data sources included optional written reflections, photo elicitation where participants shared photos representing their role as a bilingual teacher, and a

focus group discussion. Data analysis involved thematic coding of transcribed interviews, reflections, photo responses, and focus group data. This process used coding to identify patterns, themes, and construct a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness was established through data triangulation across artifacts. Reflexivity, including the researcher's positionality statement, was used to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases and ensure the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Chapter Four: Holding Space for their Stories

Introduction

To better understand the motivation behind how Latiné bilingual educators draw upon their experiences, learning about their histories is essential. Their journeys are marked by many influences that cover a long and wide span of their lives. From family histories, cultural values, immigration journeys, linguistic environments, and educational experiences, the following participants have entrusted me to share their stories of triumph and challenges as a form of advocacy for future English learners. This chapter will serve as their platform, giving them a voice to discuss how their personal and professional lives collide and contribute to their current educational settings. Table 4 provides general characteristics of each participant.

Table 4

Summary of Participants' Backgrounds

Pseudonym	Isabella	Flor	Ximena	Santiago
Ethnicity/Nationality	Mexican	Bolivian-American	Colombian	Colombian
Birthplace	Mexico	Bolivia	Colombia	Colombia
Languages	Bilingual (Spanish, English)	Trilingual (Spanish, Quechua, English)	Bilingual (Spanish, English)	Bilingual (Spanish, English)
Transitional Year to the U.S.	Grade 9	Grade 9	After 5 ½ years of teaching experience	After 10 years of teaching experience
ESL Support in the U.S.	Yes	Yes	No	No
ESL Endorsement	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Current Role	Spanish Teacher	Dual Language Elementary Teacher	Spanish Teacher	Administrator
Total Years of Teaching Experience	1 year	16 years	23 years	30 years

Educational Attainment	Master's Degree	Master's Degree	Master's Degree	Master's Degree
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In this chapter, each participant provides a profound description, a portrait, of their account as English learners who become bilingual educators. The following narratives, derived from individual *pláticas*, focused on the primary research question: How do Latiné bilingual teachers draw upon their own experiences and cultural knowledge (Funds of Knowledge) as former English learners to inform their pedagogical approaches and create culturally responsive learning environments for their students? For the participant, these descriptions represent formative lived experiences that, in a personal and unique way, shaped their trajectory to becoming K12 bilingual educators. The stories and names are in no particular order.

Isabella’s Story: Isabella and *Abuela*’s Journey to Bilingualism

Isabella is from a small town in Mexico that is deeply rooted in family values. Raised by her parents and grandmother, Isabella’s journey is one of hope, independence, and perseverance. In second grade, Isabella’s parents decided to move to the United States in search of greater opportunities. She would remain in Mexico with her siblings to be raised by the family’s matriarch, her *abuela* (grandmother). As the oldest of her siblings and her *prima-hermanas* (sister-cousins), Isabella recalls the supportive relationships in her family. She was appreciative of how her family provided financially, but it was the social and emotional support that carried greater significance for Isabella. Her fondest memories are from the moments they spent conversing and connecting. She found solace in leaning on her family when she needed guidance.

When Isabella was in the second grade, her parents moved to the United States, leaving her and her siblings under her *abuela*’s care. The most significant lessons that she learned came from conversations with *abuela*. Growing up in a family of mostly females, her *abuela* stressed

the importance of being independent but never forgetting to help those in need. She emphasized the importance of self-reliance, explaining that to achieve true independence, they needed to complete a university education. During her early years in elementary school, Isabella remembered her *abuela* helping her with spelling in Spanish. *Abuela* did not get to finish school, but she instilled in Isabella the importance of learning at a very young age. Having learned how to write in her 30s, *abuela* emphatically helped Isabella with basic vocabulary. *Abuela* made every effort to emphasize the value of education. Isabella's *abuela* was also a very nurturing and spiritual woman. She described her *abuela* as a devout woman who lived by the teachings of the Christian Bible. *Abuela* exemplified generosity and selflessness in her actions, serving as a role model to the women in the family.

Isabella fondly remembers going to her dad's auto shop, where he would give her many books. She was so intrigued that she spent time flipping through them, trying to read them. She could not recall if her father had completed high school, but she did remember that he would read a lot and encouraged her to do the same. He modeled a love for learning to Isabella, as did her mother. Isabella's mom encouraged her to embrace learning at a young age. There came a point when Isabella's mom realized that learning the English language would be important for Isabella, especially as she planned on transitioning her to the United States. In the sixth grade, her mom enrolled her in a school with an English program where Isabella would learn basic English skills. While at home, her mother would encourage her to watch English programming and repeat words in English. Isabella knew all along that her mother was preparing her for the move to the United States.

Isabella was fortunate to have other role models in Mexico, including her aunt and uncle, who were both educators. They were a great inspiration, recalling how they helped her study and

complete homework. Her family motivated her to continue her education by offering incentives for doing well in school. Isabella also fondly recalled the positive experiences and incentives that motivated students in Mexico. Each month, students were awarded diplomas based on their grades, with those earning all A's receiving special recognition. This system was designed to encourage students. Isabella eagerly anticipated seeing her name displayed as a top student. She wanted to make her family proud and demonstrate that, even though they had not received diplomas, she could achieve this milestone. She never felt pressure from her parents and felt connected to them despite the distance. While Isabella appreciated receiving incentives such as her first American doll, a Barbie house, and diplomas, she felt a deeper commitment to excel because of her love for learning. She attributes her passion for learning to her own desire to succeed but also acknowledges that her significant family members nurtured it: her mother, father, aunt, uncle, and the matriarch, her *abuela*.

When Isabella was in the seventh grade, she recalled having a serious conversation with her mother about moving to the United States. Isabella's mother explained that moving to the U.S. would provide Isabella with better opportunities and a higher likelihood of graduating from university. The most impactful discussion Isabella had with her mother was when she told Isabella that she could stay in Mexico. However, she also shared that there was no guarantee she would be able to finish university there. It was then that Isabella realized that she needed to take the risk and leave her family in Mexico to pursue the opportunity to attend university in the U.S. Consequently, at the end of ninth grade, Isabella moved to Alabama to reunite with her parents.

Moving to Alabama was an adjustment, and Isabella found herself missing her family in Mexico, especially since she did not know when she would be able to go back to visit. She lost about a month and a half of instruction trying to get all the paperwork completed to enroll in

school. Once she was enrolled, Isabella made friends easily and started practicing the English language. She encountered peers who were willing to help her learn the language. One of her earliest memories upon arriving in Alabama was when another student asked her if she had read the Bible. Isabella initially did not understand her question because she did not know what her new friend was implying when she asked if she had read the “bubble.” This was one of her initial challenges when trying to learn the language and understand the Southern accent. She generally felt welcomed in the school, and people were willing to help her learn the English language. Luckily, Isabella could rely on the basic English skills that she had learned when she was in Mexico and could communicate with students outside of her ESL class. For Isabella, although being an English learner presented challenges when communicating with others, “language wasn’t a barrier...to be friends” (Isabella, Interview, February 20, 2025).

Isabella made friends quickly but encountered challenges in the classroom. In 2012, she was placed in an ESL class for about a year. She openly shared, “My teacher wasn’t really helpful; she wasn’t really teaching anything” (Isabella, Interview, February 20, 2025). Often, she remembered feeling like she was in “survival mode” because the ESL students all spoke different languages and could not communicate with one another. Her teachers were not as helpful as she had hoped, and she was very concerned about how much content she was expected to learn. She felt that she had to work twice as hard in her 10th-grade year because she had to spend a significant amount of time looking up definitions and then decoding what she was reading/learning.

As Isabella continued learning and studying, she also recognized that her Spanish was limited due to a lack of exposure to a broad vocabulary in her native language during her early years, making it even more challenging. Teachers made accommodations by shortening

assignments and assessments. She noticed that she was not required to write essays, leaving her to believe she would not be prepared for university once she graduated. However, there was one teacher she appreciated most, a history teacher. Her history teacher was the only teacher who went to the extent of providing her with the text in both English and Spanish to help support her. This was Isabella's first encounter of being "seen" by a teacher and was a moment she would never forget.

"It is important for teachers to do more research about where their students are from" (Isabella, Written reflection, March 9, 2025). Growing up, she did not feel people understood certain aspects of a Hispanic household. Her parents instilled strong family values at home, fostering in Isabella a desire to support her family in any way she could. As the oldest, she had several responsibilities that included caring for her siblings and maintaining the home. She had to prioritize caring for them while maintaining what was expected in school.

Once she graduated high school, she was expected to work to help pay for college expenses and transportation to get there. Although she would have wished to pursue more rigorous studies, she had to select something that she could manage while still caring for her siblings. "I wish I did something else. I should have selected another major that was harder. Growing up, I felt like it was more important for me to take care of my siblings," shared Isabella (Interview, February 20, 2025). She felt it was her duty and never resented her family for emphasizing the importance of supporting one another.

After high school, she completed her bachelor's and master's degrees with support from her family. Her father played a crucial role in tutoring her and helping her improve, particularly during the first semester. Additionally, she sought assistance from tutors when her courses became challenging. Today, Isabella is a first-year Spanish teacher at a high school in Virginia.

The journey has not always been easy, but it has been rewarding. As she worked towards becoming bilingual, she struggled with feelings of inadequacy throughout high school and college, stating, “I didn’t feel like I was enough” (Isabella, Interview, February 20, 2025). However, she also acknowledged that “language gives us more flexibility in the way that we think. It allows you to see the world differently” (Isabella, Interview, February 20, 2025).

She is deeply committed to engaging with ESL students and students with diverse backgrounds, many of whom are Latiné. Her strong conviction to work with these students stems from her experiences as an English learner. She strives to make students feel comfortable and welcome, connecting with them outside the classroom and letting them know that someone shares their language and cultural experiences. “Most of them are from Spanish-speaking countries... they feel connected to my cultural background and are like, ‘Oh my gosh, and you’re a teacher too!’” (Isabella, Interview, February 20, 2025). Most importantly, she meets students where they are, guiding them toward their goals and encouraging them to persevere.

Flor’s Story: Tradition and Transformation

Born in Bolivia, Flor cherishes the rich culture and traditions of her homeland. Yet, for most of her life, she has called the United States home. This duality has profoundly shaped her identity, making her both Bolivian and American. Flor remains deeply connected to her roots, speaking Spanish with her family and celebrating many Bolivian traditions. However, she does not see herself returning to Bolivia to live permanently. The U.S. has become an integral part of her life and who she has become. In America, Flor has built a fulfilling life, embracing the opportunities that come with living in a diverse country. Her daily life is a harmonious blend of Bolivian traditions and American experiences, creating a beautiful tapestry of two cultures.

When Flor was younger, she often heard her grandma speaking their native Quechua language. Quechua, an indigenous “people’s” language that originated in the central Andes of Peru, spread to other South American countries, including Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina, and Chile (Britannica, 2025, March 11). Although her grandma did not encourage the children to speak Quechua, it was her primary method of communication, so they learned to understand her. While Flor could not hold a fluent conversation in Quechua, she grasped much of it and could still understand the gist of a conversation if she heard it today. She fondly remembered listening to songs and reading poetry in Quechua, marveling at how it used natural symbolism to describe life so beautifully. Despite Spanish being their first language and being exposed to Quechua, Flor remembered that the Bolivian school system emphasized the importance of learning multiple languages, including English.

Flor fondly reminisced about her childhood days in Bolivia, cherishing the school practices that have stayed with her over the years. She delighted in recalling “La Hora Cívica,” the Bolivian equivalent of American school assemblies, where students immersed themselves in rich cultural traditions and practices. These moments not only fostered a sense of community but also instilled a deep appreciation for their heritage. Flor shared,

We would dance all sorts of Bolivian dances, from Tinku to Cueca. It wasn’t that you couldn’t dance; you had to dance, and you had to learn. Every music class, which was probably twice a week, the teacher would teach us for all those events [La Hora Cívica]. Even though I always thought of myself as a shy person who didn’t want to be the center of attention, I had to dance, and I enjoyed it. That, I loved. (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

She recollected how they celebrated holidays such as *el Día de la Madre* (Mother's Day), *el Día del Padre* (Father's Day), and *el Día del Estudiante* (Student's Day). Every class had to dance, sing, or recite a poem. They sang patriotic songs such as *El Himno a Avaroa* (Avaroa's song). This song paid homage to Eduardo Avaroa, a hero who valiantly defended the motherland and died in battle against Chile when Bolivia lost its seaport. These traditions not only brought joy but also instilled a deep sense of national pride and cultural heritage.

Public schooling in Bolivia stood out for its unique curriculum, which included mandatory classes in Quechua and religion. These subjects were integral to the educational experience, reflecting the country's rich cultural heritage and spiritual values. School teachers and administrators emphasized the importance of learning, fostering an environment where students were encouraged to embrace discipline and responsibility, as well as academic and cultural knowledge. Flor recalled,

We appreciated learning and the teachers emphasized just being responsible. They would check our notebooks for our handwriting to make sure it was clear, and they just instilled these expectations of what your work needed to look like. And, your physical appearance...the *Regenta* (Vice Principal) would actually check your nails, your shoes needed to be very clean, you needed to polish them, and your socks needed to be folded a certain way. It was not even a religious school. (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

Bolivian culture places a high value on respect and community. Being tidy and presentable is seen as a sign of respect for oneself and others. It reflects a person's upbringing and their consideration for those around them (Arnade & McFarren, 2025). Bolivia's diverse cultural heritage includes various traditions that emphasize the importance of appearance and presentation. By teaching these values in schools, educators help preserve and pass down these

cultural practices to future generations (Arnade & McFarren, 2025). Flor remembered that there was an emphasis placed on Bolivian culture and history. Although she could not recall teachers reading stories or holding a book in hand, she fondly remembers how they instilled love for *la madre patria* (motherland).

When Flor was about seven years old, her father moved to the United States, and she remained in Bolivia with her grandmother, mother, and siblings. At ten years old, her mother would also move to the U.S. to help save money before reuniting with the family in Bolivia. The oldest of three, she remembers having to take on many responsibilities between the ages of ten and twelve. Living in the back of her uncle's home in a small apartment, she learned to become independent quickly while watching over her siblings. Considered to be the most serious of her siblings, she recalled, "It's because I had to grow up, you know, rather quickly" (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025).

After two years in the U.S., Flor's mother returned to Bolivia, and they remained there for a few more years. Then, her parents decided to move Flor and her siblings to the U.S. Flor's family agreed that they would call Washington DC home for four years. When they arrived in the '90s, they experienced the aftermath of the recent death of a Latino male in the community. A Salvadoran man was shot and wounded by a police officer. This event led to riots, which were marked by significant unrest and highlighted tensions within the community. They moved into a building next to where the incident occurred and soon learned of another Bolivian family living nearby. Flor's dad met a Bolivian man through a friend. The family was so surprised when they heard their new neighbor shout from his balcony in Quechua, "Bienvenidos llajtamasis (compatriotas/compatriots)!" "Oh gosh, is that Quechua?" the family thought. "We were so

happy, like oh my gosh, Quechua!” (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025). Their shared language created an instant connection, filling them with joy and a sense of belonging.

The surrounding community was incredibly diverse, with many Latinos arriving in the United States to escape the civil wars in their home countries. This influx of people created a dynamic environment where different cultures and customs intersected. Flor recounted,

Everybody else was from El Salvador. There were recent arrivals from the Civil War, who were mainly male and very young. The apartment right in front of us, when they would open the door, you could see so many people in there. If you crossed the street, there was another building of Vietnamese people. It was incredible, Vietnamese, Salvadorian. Then there were African-American row houses behind. There were those three main cultures. I know there were some Puerto Ricans somewhere, but geographically, I can't remember where they were. But those three [Salvadorean, Vietnamese, and African American] do stand out. (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

One of Flor's early encounters with other teenage girls in the neighborhood was when she walked past a group of African American girls on the way to the supermarket. As she and her sister made eye contact, they began yelling. Flor and her sister could not understand what they were saying, but they knew from that day forward, they would no longer look their way thinking that it would reduce any tension. Things escalated when the teenage girls wanted to hit Flor's mother. Her sister stepped in front of her mother in an attempt to protect their mother. Flor remembered thinking, “Oh God, what is this? Are we going to have to deal with this?” (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025).

At that time, she was too young to grasp the reasons behind their behavior and the clash. All she remembered was the overwhelming fear she felt. Although she couldn't comprehend the

situation in real time, she later recognized that the conflict was likely rooted in the generational trauma experienced by African Americans in the U.S. This realization occurred years later when she understood that many of her students from diverse backgrounds had also experienced significant trauma in their lives.

Flor was fifteen years old when she started the ninth grade in a D.C. public school. “My parents were very supportive of my education. They talked to my siblings and me about the importance of succeeding through education” (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025). Her parents made countless sacrifices, always encouraging her and her siblings to take their education seriously. However, her early memories of transitioning to schooling in the U.S. were ambiguous. Flor shared,

On my first day of high school, I’m sure they [parents] took us there, I don’t know, maybe they were working, but we were all on our own, and we figured it out, we figured out the system, and now when we get together with our siblings, we always go like, yeah, we made it! (Interview, March 3, 2025)

Upon further reflection, she realized that although her parents had assisted her and her siblings in enrolling in school, they were unaware of the various services and support available to the children. She said,

I don’t think they [parents] understood how the process worked. They had a general understanding that I was in ESL classes where I would receive support as I learned English, but did not know the instructional approaches then. (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025)

She and her siblings deeply valued their education, a sentiment they attributed to their parents’ upbringing and dedication. Flor’s parents, a high school social studies teacher and an elementary

school teacher, sacrificed their careers in Bolivia to create a better future for their family. They consistently emphasized the importance of prioritizing studies and obtaining a good education, instilling these values in their children from a young age. Flor reflected,

They [referring to her parents] are our role models, both of them, because of how they just wanted a better future for us. The expectations we put on ourselves were high expectations. That's why we took high school seriously, even though it was challenging.

(Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

When she arrived in D.C., Flor knew very little English but was determined to master the language, committing herself to learning and improving every day. While attending school in D.C., Flor found her ESL classes very diverse. However, she felt that students were not given individual attention. She recalled having a Hispanic science teacher who was fluent in English, Spanish, and French. Flor noticed that the teacher often connected with a French-speaking student through their shared language, which left others feeling excluded. Their conversations in French left Flor feeling overlooked, as the French student seemed to receive all the attention, making her long for more direct interaction. When it came to instruction, the teacher primarily used choral reading to review science concepts from the textbook. Flor shared some insight into the teacher's methods.

My science class involved round robin and choral reading, fill-in-the-blank activities, and "lectures". I don't remember other activities that were more interactive or science-based. There seemed to be an emphasis on reading and writing development. However, I felt confident in this class because I was with other English Learners who were from different cultural backgrounds. I was particularly fascinated by two students who were from Zimbabwe and Kenya. I had never met anyone from other cultures besides my own. This

experience in ninth grade sparked an awareness of other cultures. (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025)

Flor remembered a moment from class vividly, a memory that has stayed with her.

She (her teacher) would have us open the book to a certain page, and she would just focus on choral reading. She would call your name, so you had to be attentive and know where to pick up. My focus was just on following the words. I had no idea what I was reading, but I was following the words. Then, when it was my turn, I would get a little nervous. I would focus a lot on my pronunciation and reading. There was no mention of content or whether you understood it. It was just decoding. I don't think I learned as much because of the structure. It was just choral reading and not about lessons or comprehension. (Flor, Interview, March 2, 2025)

Flor remembered being placed in an ESL math class. It did not take long for her to realize that the curriculum was quite basic. The lessons felt too simple. "I do remember feeling that my math class in the 9th grade in DC was too easy" (Flor, Written Reflection, March 30, 2025). She observed that the school appeared to equate students' math abilities with their level of English proficiency. This realization struck her deeply, as it became clear that many students, including herself, were being underestimated.

When Flor and her family moved to northern Virginia, she found the school environment to be more inclusive. Flor developed a deep appreciation for the diverse student body she encountered. She met peers from India, Asia, and other Hispanic countries. One of the highlights of her school experience was International Night, an event where students could share their cultures with the entire school community. Flor and her classmates were delighted to watch other students perform traditional dances, and she felt immense pride in seeing students showcasing

their heritage. There were students from the Hispanic Club who danced salsa, a traditional Cuban dance, and *caporales*, a traditional Bolivian dance. Flor cherished the diversity and the strong sense of respect and inclusion that was felt in her school environment.

In the 10th grade, Flor's schedule consisted of some classes that were exclusively for ESL students, while others, like art and physical education, had a diverse mix of English and non-English learners. In her words,

Once my family moved to Virginia from DC, and I entered the 10th grade, the classes were more inclusive. Science, history, and specials were in the general setting while English was part of the ESL program. I do not recall my math classes in Virginia.

Overall, my experiences allowed me to appreciate the importance of creating an environment where students feel safe, valued, and where they can make connections between their prior knowledge and the new content they are learning. (Flor, Interview, March 2, 2025)

Flor appreciated the ESL offerings, but she felt she had transitioned out of the program too quickly. She believed she could have benefited from additional resources and strategies to support her learning. She explained,

I felt like we still needed support in terms of developing more strategies for writing, reading, and even speaking. They were impressed with how much we learned, so they skipped us through the levels. Then, in my last year, I remember being placed in a regular English class. I remember just being so quiet. I dreaded going there. (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

Flor's feeling of dread stemmed from her experience in a regular English class that primarily focused on reading and writing essays. Although the English teacher provided constructive

feedback, it often felt harsh and judgmental. The interactions were transactional, centered around work completion, grading, and feedback, with little to no personal connection. Flor explained that she had transitioned from a nurturing [ESL] environment, where students were encouraged to learn and grow, to one that felt more critical.

I would have loved to have my teachers explicitly teach me English language structures in oral communication and writing. I seem to have learned through generalizations and realizations based on assigned readings and my peers' dialogue. I was very attentive to how people spoke around me. Teachers did include grammar lessons and taught us to write essays, providing us with sentence starters and a list of transitional words. One ideal practice would have been to have more opportunities for teacher input, not only in the form of written corrections or comments on the written piece, but also an overall evaluation of our literacy skills. For example, if after submitting three written assignments, I continued to make similar grammatical errors or repeated the same words to start a paragraph, I would have found it helpful if the teacher noted this and showed me the correct language structures or introduced new vocabulary. (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025)

Relatedly, Flor also shared: "They didn't understand that I was a second language learner. They saw me as a student, but they didn't know my history" (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025). Flor had a natural love of literature, but her experience in English left her feeling discouraged. As she reminisced about her experience, Flor could not help but reflect on how resource teachers and additional instructional strategies could have made a significant difference. Unfortunately, such support systems were not available at the time.

Flor shared another lasting experience that left her feeling confused, embarrassed, and disconnected. One day, her government teacher asked the class to write a paragraph about *The Jeffersons*. Given that it was a government class, Flor assumed the teacher was referring to Thomas Jefferson. She carefully drafted a paragraph on Thomas Jefferson and submitted it. When the class discussed their assignments, Flor quickly realized she had misunderstood the task. Using context clues, she determined that the assignment was actually about a popular American sitcom from the '70s and '80s called *The Jeffersons*. Having been in the country for only about two and a half years, Flor was unfamiliar with American pop culture. She shared with me, "Teachers did not understand my background or our background knowledge. They would pick subjects or parts of history that were irrelevant to [us]" (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025).

What struck Flor the most was that the teacher did not acknowledge her misunderstanding or the assumption that everyone knew the reference. "I wrote a beautiful paragraph, but the teacher never came to me and said, 'I'm sorry, I did this. *The Jeffersons*, you can watch it on this channel.' No, he just ignored it. I disliked him for that because he didn't address it" (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025). Flor shared her overall sentiments about her experience in this manner:

I wish my teachers in high school had gotten to know me better. I was very quiet and always followed the rules, but it didn't mean I was getting the best education. Oftentimes, it was difficult for me to make connections with new content, especially in my government and history classes. My teachers made assumptions about my American pop culture knowledge that they would include in class activities. This discouraged me from participating, and it made me angry. (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025)

Flor's love for learning was nurtured from a young age and continued to flourish throughout her teenage years. During high school, her exposure to Spanish was limited to *Español para Hispanohablantes* (Spanish class designed for native Spanish speakers), leaving her yearning for more engagement with Spanish literature. Her Spanish teacher gifted her several books in Spanish, but one title resonated with her the most, *Un día en la vida* (One Day of Life), a book about the Salvadoran Civil War by Manlio Argueta. This was particularly timely for Flor, as she lived in a community with many Salvadorans. She was captivated by their speech and their ability to live so freely. The book fostered a newfound appreciation for people, and it opened her eyes to the diverse cultures that existed in America. Through Spanish literature, Flor felt seen, valued, and inspired to learn. She expressed this, stating,

She gave me some books about literature from Spain, and there was more classic literature. I think my love for reading and my love for Spanish were just nourished by her throughout my years in high school. (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

Fortunately, her cousin, who lived with her, also provided her with Spanish literature books. This brought Flor immense joy due to her passion for reading. As her family's financial situation improved, the family began traveling back to Bolivia more frequently, where her father had a vast collection of Spanish literature.

Flor would return with suitcases filled with Spanish books, and her father would continue to purchase books in the U.S. "That love for learning and love for literature, I think it started with him" (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025). Flor's father played a pivotal role in fostering biliteracy, while her mother instilled in her a deep love for storytelling.

Fortunately for Flor, she had several influential individuals in her life who significantly nurtured her passion for learning and shaped her educational journey. Despite this support, Flor

expressed feelings about her overall schooling experience, highlighting both the positive influences and the challenges she faced along the way. Flor expressed this, saying,

It was very easy to go through school unnoticed, and many of my peers, including myself and my siblings, did not have our parents as advocates in our education. We had to navigate the school system on our own. Therefore, we relied on teachers and leaders to look after our education and success in school. Often, teachers did not understand the complexities that caused people to migrate to the US and were not as equipped to teach language and content to students with various language levels and backgrounds. (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025)

After graduating from high school, Flor enrolled in a local community college. Flor embarked on her journey down the Liberal Arts pathway. She was pleasantly surprised when she learned she had passed the English assessment and was placed in English Composition 101. Flor fell in love with the class because it immersed her in a wealth of literature. She enjoyed writing essays and engaging in discussions. While attending college, Flor took advantage of an opportunity to work part-time as a kindergarten assistant at a bilingual school.

As time would tell, what started as a way to earn money to cover college expenses, led to a love for teaching bilingual students. She was inspired by an African American teacher who taught in Spanish for two hours and the rest of the class in English. “I just loved being there, so then I knew what I wanted to study” (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025). Flor would go on to pursue her bachelor’s degree in Spanish.

At that time, a program was available to obtain an ESL endorsement. Flor was accepted into the program, acquired her endorsement, and then transferred to a university. Upon transferring to the multicultural program, she learned that she needed to pass the Praxis exam.

Despite several attempts, she fell short by a few points each time and thought it was due to her English literacy skills. To her surprise, she realized that the issue was not her literacy skills but the timed nature of the test. Then, an opportunity presented itself. The Virginia Communication Literacy Assessment (VCLA), an alternative assessment option, became available, allowing Flor to be tested without time constraints. Through this alternative, she earned an advanced score, proving that it was not about her skills but about having enough time to process and respond to the questions. As a result, she became certified to teach Spanish and ESL.

By this point, Flor was teaching in a public school system at a bilingual school, instructing students in both Spanish and English. While teaching, she enrolled in a master's program to deepen her understanding of language education. However, the process did not come without its challenges and discriminatory practices. In her reflection, Flor wrote,

Writing was very laborious in my first years of college, and I dreaded public speaking. Once I transferred to a four-year university, I gained more confidence but also faced different challenges. When applying to the graduate program of multilingual/multicultural education, there was a prescreening process based on one's last name. If your last name was foreign, you were required to participate in a phone interview followed by an in-person English language proficiency evaluation. There was a lot of discontent with this practice because there were students who carried their spouse's non-foreign last name, who were automatically accepted to the program. At the interview, a renowned and published professor told me that she didn't believe second language learners could become ESL teachers. I wanted to explain that that was not my intention. I wanted to teach Spanish, but I experienced an anxiety attack and needed to retake the writing assessment. Her comments did not create a safe climate for someone

who was about to take an important assessment. It did the opposite. It added a detrimental setting for my performance. There were other stories similar to mine in that department. Students were being criticized for their accent and for being second language learners, and there was a sense of helplessness and resignation. I believe now that the label [English learner] doesn't ever go away, but you learn to embrace it and see it as a gift. (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025)

Flor's personal and professional experiences uniquely positioned her to teach Spanish to Spanish speakers, as well as to those who speak English. Through her journey, Flor acquired a wealth of tools and strategies, which she incorporated into her teaching practices.

Although Flor did not earn a master's degree in multicultural education, the triumphs and challenges she encountered along the way deeply influenced her teaching philosophy and practices. "I had learned about the academic achievements gap of minority students and students with disabilities in the US. This reality impacted me personally because I was part of this group" (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025). Because of this experience, Flor "learned to advocate for students in the gap by making lessons relevant to them and looking for ways to accelerate their learning" (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025).

Flor expressed how deeply she empathizes with her students. "When I look at my students, I see myself because I lived what they're living, how they're learning" (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025). Flor has shown remarkable perseverance throughout her educational journey. She earned her master's degree in Spanish and English from the University of Salamanca in Spain. Additionally, she holds endorsements in Spanish, English, ESL, and K-3 elementary education, showcasing her diverse expertise and dedication to teaching.

At the beginning of her teaching career, Flor applied the methodologies and specific approaches she had learned. Over the years, she discovered which strategies were most effective for her students. Flor understands that being an educator involves continuously learning new approaches and adapting to new research. However, she acknowledges that it can be challenging when teachers are not given the autonomy to implement these strategies. Her years of experience have taught her what works best. She reflected and stated,

You use part of those experiences and knowledge from your upbringing and education. Research will not make a difference; that will not work. I'm able to select based on my group, based on the composition of the class every year. Something that I tried last year might not fit this group. (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

Flor's teaching philosophy is deeply rooted in her own experience as an English learner, having immigrated to America at the age of 15. This personal journey has given her unique insights and a profound level of compassion, which she brings into her classroom every day. "I think that ESL teachers or teachers overall that work with English learners, with diverse students, are just better equipped because we have shared experiences" (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025). Flor values and respects her students and their families. Having navigated American culture, schooling, the English language, and the complexities of having a sibling with ADHD, she understands the unique challenges her students and their families face.

Drawing from her own experiences, Flor prioritizes learning about her students' cultures and the obstacles they encounter, ensuring she can support them effectively and empathetically. As she stated,

I often think about when students come from a specific community, such as the Guatemalan community or the Bolivian community. They are a representative of their

community, country, or culture. There are so many differences within a group. I try to remember that because of past experiences. What is helpful as a teacher is understanding their history. You know, why are they here? Why were they forced to leave their country to establish themselves here? Why are some of my students late or not coming to school? Understand the culture and do it in a very purposeful way. (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

Flor has had to learn about a diverse group of learners who come from various backgrounds and are exposed to multiple dialects. For instance, her Guatemalan students can speak up to 40 different dialects. She would not have discovered this without taking the time and care to learn more about them. By exploring their histories, she also gains insight into their learning styles and how to accommodate their linguistic needs. “If they’re dealing with three languages, Spanish, their home language, and English, it will take them a little bit longer to acquire those language skills. Be aware of students as a community, and also as individuals” (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025). To get to know her students better, she explained,

I work with them independently or in little groups, no more than three. Every group is different every year. That’s when I get to know them. They start chatting informally, and you get a glimpse of their lives or little worlds. (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

Flor shares that during these moments, she works closely with her students to identify where they need additional support.

For example, she has a student who finds it challenging to produce sounds and combine them into syllables. To support this student, Flor offers additional reading opportunities and provides books in both languages to take home for practice, similar to her teachers, who would give her books to encourage her love of literature. Overall, Flor finds that working with students

in whole groups, small groups, and at their individual desks is effective when learning about her students and understanding their home lives and academic struggles.

Flor knows that those with a more profound vocabulary are those students who are given access to read more frequently. Her ultimate desire is to have her students understand the privilege they have in knowing multiple languages. She wants them to love their language and become more fluent by developing their vocabulary.

It is our job to let them [students] know that they're special and they have that [language] to their advantage. If they see themselves struggling, if they see their families going through economic struggles, at least, you have the beauty and gift of knowing another language. (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025)

As a bilingual teacher, Flor envisions herself continuing to learn and evolve, ensuring that she is able to meet her students' needs. She often feels conflicted about the changes to the language learning curriculum.

Her job as a teacher is to understand what the research says about language learning, but she does not always agree with the findings because she recognizes that research can be biased. Therefore, she does her best to learn and apply what she feels is most effective for her students. "I want to be part of a bigger movement, to stand up for their [students] rights and I haven't done that in a formal way, yet" (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025). To date, Flor has been a vocal advocate for the Latiné community, speaking before the school board and participating in efforts to secure more affordable public housing for families. For Flor, language is "the ability to express your thoughts and feelings; it [language] is also about how others perceive it, and depending on who perceives it is when it becomes a powerful tool of communication" (Flor, Interview, March 3, 2025).

After sharing her story, Flor reflected on her hopes for the future, expressing a desire for significant improvements in the education of English learners. An excerpt from her written reflection provides an excellent summation:

I believe that at the higher education level, compassionate practices and support systems are essential in helping English Learners at all levels, not only in the education field. For example, there should be some considerations and accommodations for second language learners in the preparation of college entrance or program acceptance assessments. The proficiency expectations need not be lowered, but providing more time and creating non-threatening testing environments are ways for students to demonstrate a more accurate performance. Next, implement writing and communication workshops to further enhance students' literacy skills at a college level. The language acquisition process is a continuum, and English Learners should continue sharpening their skills. Finally, professors should attempt to know their college students. The students more vulnerable to dropping out or being discharged from a program should receive special attention. English Learners, particularly from war-torn, impoverished countries, face more challenges than other students. They work to meet academic expectations while they balance their emotional and economic tolls. (Flor, Written reflection, March 30, 2025)

Ximena's Story: Celebrating Ximena's Accent

About twenty years ago, Ximena immigrated with her husband, Santiago, to the U.S. from Colombia. She comes from a very small, tight-knit family. Her father became an orphan at a young age and did not have access to education. Her mother attended school through elementary school but did not complete middle or high school. Ximena's family and several committed individuals in the community did everything they could to support her by providing

her with access to the best education possible, an opportunity that they did not have. They supported her so that she could attend a private Catholic school throughout elementary school. While the tuition was free, the family had to pool their financial resources to cover expenses such as books, uniforms, and supplies. These resources came at a price because they were costly to acquire during that time.

Ximena recalled that the school had stringent rules with severe consequences. The teachers were respected and held in high regard. Students generally followed the rules, and there was very little to no conflict among peers. Ximena attended private school for most of her K-12 educational experience, except for fourth and fifth grade. After the fifth grade, her parents felt that students were given far too much freedom. They worked to get Ximena back into private school from sixth to twelfth grade.

Ximena compared public and private schools in Colombia. Private school schedules varied between groups of students. There was a clear disparity between those who had more financial resources and those without. Private schools were competitive to get into. Students whose families paid to attend private school would attend classes from 6 a.m. to 12 p.m. Those students who paid a minimal or reduced fee would attend school from 12:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Ximena pointed out that there were not more than 40 students per grade level, and they would travel to each grade together from sixth grade until the eleventh grade. “Having the same classmate for six years can significantly impact your relationships with friends. This is one aspect I would like to highlight, as it can strengthen these connections” (Ximena, Interview, April 1, 2025).

During the day, students would be given several 45-minute breaks. There was no cafeteria service. Ximena delighted in sharing that students were able to purchase homemade

empanadas and papas rellenas that were freshly prepared by people in the community daily during those breaks. Sharing food with peers fostered camaraderie and deepened the bond between friends. One notable observation was that, regardless of whether the school was public or private, students did not engage in peer conflicts that resulted in physical altercations. For Ximena, this would later be a culture shock when she immigrated to the U.S. to teach and witness the conflict that existed among students.

At twelve years old, there was one teacher in particular who inspired Ximena to want to teach English. Her teacher had extensive international experience, which made her realize the potential for her future abroad. “I’ve always been a dreamer, and willing to work hard to achieve those dreams” (Ximena, Interview, April 1, 2025). Ximena also noted, “I fell in love with the language and always dreamed to go to America to study” (Interview, April 1, 2025).

Ximena began working towards her dream, a dream that her family supported. After high school, she knew she wanted to attend college in her hometown. Prior to applying, she would have to undergo an evaluation. In Colombia, the Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (ICFES), is responsible for evaluating the quality of education in the country. It administers various standardized tests, such as the Saber 11 exam, which is taken by students at the end of their secondary education to assess their academic competencies and readiness for higher education (ICFES, 2025). Ximena would spend the next five years trying to get into the college in her hometown but was confronted with the challenge of getting accepted. The foreign language program was very competitive. She spent two years immersing herself and learning the English language. She worked hard to improve her skills to complete and score favorably on the assessment.

After several attempts, the family would come together to discuss the next steps. Ximena's mother asked, "Do you want to pursue your dreams?" (Interview, April 1, 2025). Her mother then suggested that she apply to a school three hours away. It was not Ximena's first choice, but deep down, she knew that she would have to pivot to work towards making her dream a reality. The challenge with potentially being accepted at a school that was three hours away was that Ximena and her family would have to pay for room and board because it was too far away for her to commute daily. To Ximena's surprise, she would be accepted and would embark on her journey to becoming a bilingual teacher and meet her future husband.

As an English learner, Ximena had to work twice as hard to develop her language skills. She shared transparently, "I've been working very hard to develop my skills. I take every opportunity to study" (Interview, April 1, 2025). She worked tirelessly on her English until she was able to get into a college program that would enable her to teach. In Colombia, prospective teachers would focus on developing their English language skills further before studying to become teachers. However, they were never exposed to the actual language. After acquiring her teaching degree, Ximena would begin to teach in Colombia. She taught in Colombia for the next five years until she and her husband, Santiago, made the decision to move to America. Ximena would finally live out her dream, exploring another part of the nation and teaching a language she loved.

Upon arriving in America, Ximena felt that American culture was unwelcoming to those who spoke multiple languages or had accents. This was particularly strange to her, as her schooling in Colombia encouraged multilingualism. Her rich Colombian accent, a testament to her heritage and identity, presented challenges for both her and her future family. She eagerly

pursued various teaching endorsements, including one for ESL. Today, her approach to teaching Spanish is different from the way in which she learned English while in Colombia.

One of her fundamental goals is to immerse students in the language. About 90 percent of her class is taught in Spanish because Ximena believes that language skills must be practiced both orally and in writing. In her country, teachers learned the language but were never exposed to it in real-life contexts. Her experience was limited to developing written English skills, which left her with a weak foundation in oral English when she arrived in America. “That’s why I didn’t have the best experience when I came here; I didn’t have a strong foundation,” she noted (Interview, April 1, 2025). Ximena strives to give her students the experience she lacked. She helps them develop a strong foundation in both written and oral language, which could position them for opportunities abroad in the future.

In Colombia, opportunities to study abroad are limited. Ximena has always understood the immense value of such experiences, though she never had the chance herself. This is why she is deeply committed to preparing her students for these opportunities. Ximena aims to instill an appreciation for the language in her students. She knows firsthand that immersion is key to mastering it. Studying abroad would offer the perfect avenue for this immersive experience. Ximena shared, “That is what is good here [America], students have the opportunity to participate in exchange programs” (Interview, April 1, 2025).

Santiago’s Story: A Communal Spirit

Santiago was born and raised in Colombia, where he faced significant financial hardships. As the second of four siblings, his life took a challenging turn when his father passed away while his mother was pregnant with their fourth child. Despite these difficulties, Santiago’s mother single-handedly raised all four children, ensuring they had a home, food, and clothing.

Reflecting on his childhood, Santiago shared, “I come from a poor background. Growing up was difficult, but I was very happy” (Interview, April 1, 2025). He fondly remembers his mother’s efforts to provide for them, creating a happy and loving environment despite the adversities they faced.

Santiago developed a love for the English language at a very young age. While working at an athletic shop selling shoes, he encountered a group from Australia. Hearing them speak English fascinated him and piqued his interest. Although he was initially told not to talk to the group, Santiago decided to take a chance and apply the English he knew, influenced by the English music he often listened to. On their next visit, Santiago started a conversation with one of the young girls in English. She noticed his effort and engaged in conversation with him. This interaction solidified his desire to learn English. Santiago spent eight years selling athletic wear and shoes, an experience that unknowingly propelled him into his lifelong career. This marked the beginning of his journey to becoming a dual language teacher.

When Santiago started college, he earned a scholarship that allowed him to study in England for a year. “I was an assistant English teacher. That changed my life,” Santiago proudly noted (Interview, April 1, 2025). Language has always been an integral part of his life. Growing up speaking Spanish in his childhood home, he knew he would continue to nurture and develop it in his future home in America. This would be crucial for preserving Colombian culture and traditions. Together, they would form a significant part of his identity as both Colombian and American.

Learning English in his home country was proudly celebrated. However, 20 years ago, when he arrived in America, he quickly noticed how he was treated differently because of his accent, skin color, cultural roots, and heritage. In Santiago’s words,

I think I became aware of my heritage when I arrived here almost 20 years ago. Before that, I hadn't thought of my ethnic background. I did know that I was mixed. We have a heavy influence of Spanish people, but also the natives and Africans. I became aware of my background and my color when I moved to the United States. I know that every story is unique, but I feel that with the way I was treated by some people here, not in the best way, it made me more aware of my background. (Santiago, Interview, April 1, 2025)

Santiago expressed that engaging with others has been challenging over the years. His educational background and cultural experiences have had a profound impact on his worldview. While his experiences would be valuable in any classroom, they were not always met with openness. "That was a big awakening, in a way, for me to realize that despite my education, despite my knowledge of the language, there was a certain treatment. That was different," Santiago noted (Interview, April 1, 2025). The treatment he referred to was far from positive.

Santiago has encountered many challenges in his transition to a leadership role. He has felt that his leadership abilities have been unfairly judged based on his accent, which is a common issue rooted in cultural stereotypes and societal norms. Accents are often mistakenly perceived as indicators of intelligence, leading to biased assumptions. Santiago acknowledged that accents are frequently associated with marginalized groups, who face negative biases. Certain accents may be unjustly deemed less intelligent, impacting how individuals are treated within educational environments. This has profoundly affected Santiago, often leaving him feeling as though he must always be on guard.

Ximena & Santiago: Deeply Rooted in a Sense of Family

Ximena and Santiago, married educators from Colombia, immigrated to the U.S. in search of opportunities for themselves and their future family. They started their family in

Virginia and would raise children in America from birth. Early on, they knew without question that Spanish would be at the foundation of their upbringing, along with Colombian culture and traditions.

Both children are equally fluent in Spanish and English, something that Ximena and Santiago are very proud of. They both agreed, “We want to pass on the heritage. We want them to feel proud because their parents are from another country and another culture...we do not forget where we come from. We want to pass that to our children” (Ximena, Interview, April 1, 2025). Their children spent many summers in Colombia. As Ximena shared,

Spanish had to always be spoken so they could understand the context in which they live. Since they were little, they have gone to Colombia many times. Every summer, they spent two months with their grandparents, living and immersed in the culture. (Ximena, Interview, April 1, 2025)

As their children went through schooling, they excelled academically, but they experienced challenges that they as parents did not anticipate. Ximena would pack homemade lunches for her children, much like the food that she would have for lunch when she was in school in Colombia.

They were active in their children’s education, often engaged in school activities. To their surprise, their children would be ridiculed for the food that they brought and their parents’ accents. According to Santiago,

There was an instance in which [my son] was told at his school to go back to his country. The teacher relayed the story to me: your son was in the gym, and this kid who had been bothering everybody came behind your son and told him, “Go back to your country.”

[My son] just turned around and said, “I’m already here,” and kept talking to another student. (Santiago, Interview, April 1, 2025)

Their son dismissed the comment, refusing to let it affect him. Their daughter, however, faced a tougher journey. Her cultural identity was frequently attacked in middle school, leading her to stop speaking Spanish at home and respond to her parents only in English. “She kind of cut off Spanish completely,” Ximena noted (Interview, April 1, 2025).

Her parents worked hard to instill in their children the belief that they were equally Latino and American, encouraging pride in both identities while never forgetting their roots. Their daughter found comfort in her parents’ teachings, which had a profound impact on her. She immersed herself further in her cultural heritage by majoring in Latin American Studies and Spanish. Their son, now a medical translator, also embraced his bilingual identity. For Ximena and Santiago, this was a full-circle moment. It affirmed that their efforts to preserve their Colombian heritage and blend it with American culture were successful.

Ximena and Santiago hold on to their strong family values, rooted in the traditions passed down by previous generations. Family has always been a cornerstone of support for them, and they continue to embody and model these values to their children and new teachers alike. Recognizing the integral role of family support in the Colombian experience, they feel a responsibility to nurture and support new teachers who share similar backgrounds and experiences. They have opened their home to new teachers, creating a welcoming environment where they can thrive. Santiago noted, “There is something that is diametrically opposite. America is about the individual. We [Colombians] are about the group. Our [Colombian] train of thought is that if the family is doing well, everybody is doing well” (Interview, April 1, 2025).

Colombian families are renowned for their strong communal spirit, which is rooted in cultural traditions and values.

The communal spirit extends beyond the immediate family to the broader community. In many Colombian communities, there is a strong emphasis on collective decision-making and mutual support. This is evident in practices such as caring for all family members and ensuring everyone is provided for and succeeds. This spirit not only strengthens familial bonds but also enriches the broader community, creating a supportive and nurturing environment for all members. Santiago pointed out that this is inherently different from American individualism. American individualism, with its emphasis on personal independence and self-reliance, has shaped the nation's cultural and economic landscape. While it fosters a sense of empowerment and innovation, it also presents challenges between individual pursuits and communal support.

Ximena and Santiago aim to preserve the communal spirit. They view new teachers as part of their extended family, believing that if these teachers are doing well, their community is also doing well. Their goal is to ensure that new teachers feel supported, ensuring that they have a better experience than they did when they first arrived in the U.S.

Focus Group and Photo Elicitation

Unearthing the Bilingual Teacher

To explore each participant's journey in depth, a single focus group was conducted that lasted approximately an hour and a half. During this virtual session, participants engaged interactively by sharing photos and keywords that captured their unique interpretations of their roles as bilingual teachers. Participants shared their photo stories in their preferred language, and all chose to present in Spanish. This became a pivotal moment as a researcher because I observed how language fostered connection and encouragement within the group. As my research

progressed, so did my use of Spanish in this dissertation. I intentionally incorporated more Spanish to honor participants' voices and provide authentic context, a choice reflected in the increasing use of Spanish in both the data and the dissertation's headings. In this section, I also weave in the descriptions of participants' photo stories. Each participant shared a photograph that they felt best represented their role and highlighted five key terms summarizing what it means to be a bilingual teacher. The group also discussed their preparation for becoming bilingual teachers and shared their insights on what is needed to effectively teach a diverse population of English learners and language learners.

Isabella's Desire for Cultural Understanding

Isabella shared a photograph from her second year of teaching, showing a group of students working together on a class assignment. While the students are at the center of the photo, the perimeter reveals several details that reflect Isabella's identity as a teacher. Flags representing different countries are visible around the classroom. The most inviting feature is the colorful bulletin board, which highlights student work, historical representation, and a space encouraging students to dream. What stands out most are the words that you can observe. Words such as *unidad* (unity), *libertad* (freedom), *liderazgo* (leadership), *igualdad* (equality), *empoderando* (empowerment) are visible.

For Isabella, her photo of students engaging in a classroom activity displayed all that she aspires to achieve in her Spanish class. As Isabella started speaking, the first word that she emphasized was "unity." She often feels it is necessary to build a sense of unity in her class and intentionally finds methods to bridge students together. Fostering connection is at the forefront when designing lessons and creating a space where students can develop cultural understanding. She linked her first word to her second, "culture," highlighting the importance of exposing

students to diverse cultures, not just in terms of race or traditions, but also language. She shared that, gradually, students come to understand that language is inherently part of culture. She noted, “Little by little, they realize that language is culture too. Through language, we can demonstrate different cultures. Each language speaks with different accents, different words, and through language we create our own cultures, or subcultures” (Focus group, April 19, 2025).

Establishing unity through cultural understanding is very important to Isabella. She believes that shared understanding is the gateway to achieving true equality. Isabella shared that “equality” in her classroom is developed by exploring and learning about diverse cultures, which establishes a strong foundation for unity. She challenges students’ perceptions of others by exposing them to how diverse populations live. Isabella encourages them to challenge their preconceived thoughts, ultimately learning that life is a beautiful composition of diverse cultures, traditions, and languages. Her goal is to continually expose her students to the lived experiences of others, as she knows firsthand how learning about other cultures helped her navigate living in the U.S. and prepared her to create an environment where her students can thrive and do the same.

Isabella does not believe that being a Latiné bilingual Spanish teacher should limit her to teaching language alone. She aims to impart and develop life skills in her students, fostering greater wisdom. “Wisdom” is her fourth word. She explains that as a teacher, she not only teaches language but also helps students draw connections to other content areas. She shared, “We have to connect with the language, teach mathematics, teach history, teach science. If you have a lesson, you have to connect them to background knowledge” (Focus group, April 19, 2025).

Isabella feels a responsibility to empower her students. She explained that they have to “learn how to work in teams, how to understand cultures. We shouldn’t question why cultures exist, why people do things differently. How can we empower them to be better people?” (Isabella, Focus group, April 19, 2025). The word “empower” is central to her teaching philosophy. She believes that empowering students goes beyond academic learning. It involves fostering an environment where students are open to new experiences and perspectives. Isabella emphasizes the importance of teamwork and cultural understanding. She encourages her students to embrace diversity and learn from the varied backgrounds of their peers. By doing so, she aims to create a classroom atmosphere where students feel valued and respected, regardless of their cultural or linguistic differences. In her view, empowerment also means equipping students with the skills to navigate and appreciate the complexities of a multicultural world.

She strives to help them develop empathy and the ability to work harmoniously with others. This approach not only enhances their academic experience but also prepares them to be thoughtful, inclusive individuals in their future endeavors. Isabella’s commitment to empowerment is reflected in her teaching methods. She incorporates activities that promote collaboration and cultural exchange, ensuring that her students understand the significance of unity and mutual respect.

Flor’s Inspiration: A Journey into Bilingual Education

It was a full-circle moment for Flor to share the photograph that resonated with her as a bilingual teacher. Having immigrated from Bolivia to D.C. and then moving to northern Virginia, Flor found herself engaged part-time with a Kindergarten class they were piloting. She shared with me,

It was a kindergarten class in Arlington County, which is where I live and where I have worked for most of my life. They were piloting a bilingual program. At that time, there were a lot of Spanish-speaking children who were arriving. Arlington wanted to pilot this program to give them instruction in science and social studies, as well as some instruction in Spanish. (Flor, Focus group, April 19, 2025)

Once a former English learner herself and a graduate of a northern Virginia public school district, Flor connected deeply with the students. Her shared experiences and background resonated with her and the students.

Flor felt immense pride in being part of this pilot program. She highlighted how working with the class and assisting the teacher became a source of inspiration for her to pursue a career in bilingual education. The experience allowed her to see firsthand the impact of culturally responsive teaching in supporting English learners. Flor's journey from an English learner to bilingual education was marked by resilience and determination. She understood the challenges her students faced and was committed to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. This experience reinforced her belief in the power of education to transform lives and motivated her to continue her studies in bilingual education. Flor's story is a testament to the importance of representation and the profound impact that dedicated educators can have on their students. Her full-circle moment not only shaped her teaching philosophy but also strengthened her desire to return to the classroom as a bilingual educator.

This photograph was taken about 20 years ago, when the demographic was shifting in northern Virginia, and the population of English learners was increasing. Twenty years ago, the percentage of English learners (ELs) in Arlington County, Virginia, was significantly lower than it is today. In the early 2000s, approximately 10% of students in Arlington Public Schools were

English learners (VDOE, 2025). As of the 2022-2023 school year, about 20% of students in Arlington Public Schools are English learners. This increase reflects the growing diversity and the rising number of students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the area (APS, 2025). The class in the photo was co consisted of 17 students, all of whom were native Spanish speakers, except for five students whose first language was English.

Flor shared her appreciation for the model that they were implementing at the time, which taught science and social studies in Spanish, while also providing some instruction in Language Arts in Spanish. Students who were non-English learners would go to another classroom to continue their instruction. English learners were given two hours of class time each day to participate in instruction implemented in their native language. Reflecting on her initial experience as a staff member supporting the class, five key words resonated with her. Flor's five key words were: inspired, proud, tenacity, hopeful, and unearthing. These words capture her journey and experiences as a bilingual teacher. In the subsequent paragraphs, we will delve into each of these key words to unravel the depth of Flor's teaching philosophy and the impact of her experiences.

Flor was "inspired" by the class she observed and worked with every day. She loved seeing students learning in their native language, an opportunity she did not have when she attended school in the same U.S. district. She was most inspired and "proud" of the students' motivation and resilience to learn. "*Era un ambiente tan positivo,*" shared Flor [It was such a positive environment]. They exhibited a positive disposition and were generally happy to be part of the classroom environment. Flor continued to draw inspiration from her supervising teacher, who had a profound love for the language and engaged with students in an authentic way that built upon their strengths. This teacher's approach resonated with Flor, reinforcing her belief in

the importance of culturally responsive teaching. However, despite the positive impact on students, the faculty had not fully embraced the newly piloted program. Flor noted, “*Estaban muy en contra*. They didn’t understand its importance and were very much against it” (Focus group, April 19, 2025). This lack of buy-in presented challenges, but it also fueled the supervising teacher’s determination to advocate for the program. She made it a point to provide evidence of the research that demonstrated the success of its implementation at the time.

Flor was inspired by her supervising teacher’s “tenacity” in persevering and advocating for English learners. This teacher remained unwavering in her commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment where all students could thrive, despite initial resistance from some colleagues. Dedication to advocating on behalf of the program ensured its longevity, running successfully for about 9 to 10 years before it was eventually discontinued due to discourse surrounding the need for it after the teacher’s retirement^(OBJ). To Flor’s surprise and joy, the efforts to support English learners did not end with the program’s discontinuation. Flor remained “hopeful.” Instead, the focus shifted to language immersion, a development that resonated deeply with her. Inspired by her supervising teacher’s example, Flor felt empowered to pursue her passion for bilingual education, determined to make a lasting difference in the lives of her future students. This “unearthing” experience played a tremendous role as the foundation for her teaching philosophy.

Ximena Enseña Con Pasión (Ximena Teaches with Passion)

During the photo elicitation portion of the focus group, Ximena began by acknowledging the participants’ passion for teaching. She expressed how connected she felt to their enthusiasm as they recounted the stories behind their photos and the decisions that led them to pursue their careers. This created a seamless transition to the photograph she shared with the group, where

she reminisced about her college days in Colombia. Ximena highlighted that her classmates' dedication to learning English and teaching was crucial for their academic pursuits. This same passion would later be reflected in their classroom practices, influencing their teaching methods and inspiring their students. Ximena shared, "Si no sentimos esa pasión, yo creo que no podemos dar lo que damos en las clases. No sería lo que soy si no fuera por la pasión de ser maestro y dar lo mejor de mí cada día" [If we didn't have that passion, I believe we wouldn't be able to give as much as we do in our classes. I wouldn't be who I am if it weren't for the passion to be a teacher and to give the best of me every day] (Focus group, April 19, 2025).

English has not always come easily to Ximena. However, during her college years, she was fortunate to meet her future husband, who shared her passion for learning the language. Together, they dedicated themselves to mastering English, which was driven by their shared dreams and aspirations. Their commitment eventually led them to move to the United States to pursue those dreams. As Ximena reflected on the memories captured in the photo, the word "dedication" resonated deeply with her, symbolizing the perseverance and hard work that defined their journey. She noted, "Gracias a Dios tuvimos la oportunidad de venir acá. Con mucha dedicación y perseverancia he logrado mejorar mi inglés. Cuando llegué aquí, yo sabía la parte gramatical, pero no sabía lo que era la parte de cómo comunicarme" [Thank God we had the opportunity to come here. With a lot of dedication and perseverance, I have managed to improve my English. When I arrived here, I understood the grammatical aspect, but I didn't know how to communicate (orally)] (Focus group, April 19, 2025).

Because of the challenges she experienced, she would dedicate a majority of the time in her classes to speaking in Spanish so that students can develop conversational Spanish, making her an excellent candidate to teach in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. She often

uses some IB methods from her previous days in her current setting. She emphasized, “Todo lo que planeo y trabajo con mis estudiantes es como si estuvieran allá en una aula inmersos completamente en Español” [Everything I plan and work on with my students is as if they were there in a classroom completely immersed in Spanish] (Focus group, April 19, 2025).

The next keyword Ximena highlighted was “effort.” She understands firsthand the challenges of learning a new language. Ximena believes that she must put forth as much, if not more, effort in improving her English as she expects from her students when they are learning Spanish. This commitment is something she has taken very seriously, as she describes in the following quote.

No es fácil para los muchachos. No ha sido fácil tampoco para mí llegar a aprender el idioma como lo he aprendido. Todavía me falta mucho, tengo 20 años y fui a la Universidad. La parte de aprender una segunda idioma no es fácil, pero con la dedicación, el esfuerzo y la pasión, yo creo que se llega al nivel que tengo hasta ahora [It’s not easy for the kids. It hasn’t been easy for me either to learn the language as I have. I still have a long way to go, it’s been 20 years, and I went to university. Learning a second language is not easy, but with dedication, effort, and passion, I believe you can reach the level I have achieved so far]. (Focus group, April 19, 2025)

Ximena’s journey is a testament to the power of perseverance. Her dedication to mastering English, despite the difficulties, serves as an inspiring example for her students. She emphasizes that the effort required to learn a new language is significant, but the rewards are equally so. By sharing her experiences, Ximena hopes to motivate her students to embrace the challenges and remain committed to their language learning journey.

Ximena's experience as an English learner has enabled her to empathize with her students who are learning a new language. She makes the most of every moment with them, pushing and encouraging them to engage and communicate in Spanish. She said, "Esa es mi otra palabra, amor. Amo muchísimo. Yo siento que me identifico con mis estudiantes. Siempre he dicho que mi filosofía es como si fuera una mamá" [That's my other word, love. I do things with a lot of love. I am able to identify with my students. I have always said that my philosophy is like that of a mother] (Focus group, April 19, 2025). She can empathize with her students, and everything that she does comes from a place of love. She shared, "A la vez que soy profesora, los entiendo. Y sé que no la tienen fácil tampoco aprender un idioma extranjero porque yo no la he tenido fácil tampoco" [While I am a teacher, I understand them. And I know that learning a foreign language is not easy for them either, because it hasn't been easy for me either] (Focus group, April 19, 2025). For Ximena to be able to teach and support her students, she has to do it from a place of love.

The last element Ximena highlighted about her photo is the importance of building connections and creating a family within the classroom. Without the support of her family and community, Ximena would not have been able to persevere and achieve her goals. This constant reminder is something she holds dear and integrates into her teaching. Ximena promotes a family atmosphere in her class by intentionally creating opportunities for students to engage and learn from one another. These interactions foster an environment of respect and understanding. By emphasizing mutual respect and learning, Ximena and her class have gained a greater understanding of one another. As a result, Ximena can implement effective strategies that foster a supportive, family-like environment where students can thrive and achieve their goals. This

nurturing atmosphere encourages students to feel valued and motivated, helping them reach their full potential.

During Ximena's presentation, she paused to acknowledge Isabella's insightful perspective on exposing students to diverse cultures. This exchange between the two participants highlighted the importance of cultural awareness and left Ximena inspired to dedicate more time to teaching her students about various cultures. Ximena appreciated being part of such a thoughtful and engaged group, recognizing that these exchanges should occur more frequently. The group collectively agreed on the numerous advantages of such discussions, emphasizing their commitment to learning and developing strategies to serve as best practices for their diverse student populations. Witnessing this experience reinforced the value of collaborative learning and the sharing of ideas among educators. By creating space where this type of exchange is prioritized, Ximena and her colleagues can feel better equipped for their students and enhance the educational experience by promoting a more inclusive and empathetic classroom environment.

Santiago's Immersion Abroad

When Santiago began to share his thoughts on being a bilingual teacher, he expressed heartfelt sentiments to the group. He acknowledged, "Estoy muy feliz de estar en este grupo otra vez, de ver el viaje de otras personas en condiciones similares a la mía" [I'm very happy to participate in this group again, to learn from others who have shared similar experiences]. Santiago emphasized the significance of each person's contribution to the discussion and expressed his agreement with the key points raised by others before him. His affirming words resonated deeply, leaving participants feeling valued and understood.

Santiago shared a photograph that was taken 26 years ago. This image serves as a constant reminder of what it means to him to be a bilingual teacher. It captures a moment from his early days, during a time when “opportunities” like this in Colombia were few. Santiago was fortunate to receive a chance to study in England, a rare privilege often reserved for students from more affluent backgrounds with greater support networks. For Santiago, coming from humble beginnings, this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The photograph features a diverse group of individuals from various walks of life and countries across Europe, all gathered for a common purpose. Teachers came together to immerse themselves in the English language and learn effective methods to teach the language. Santiago’s journey, as depicted in the photo, highlights the transformative power of education and the importance of “cultural exchange” in shaping his career as a bilingual teacher.

Santiago spoke about how the photo represented so many things to him. The photograph captures a diverse group of individuals from various parts of Europe standing together. Their “connection”, unwavering support, and dedication were a true inspiration. For Santiago, this marked the first moment he understood the profound impact of cultural competence. He learned that appreciating cultural and linguistic differences was a crucial aspect of personal growth and learning. The photo, therefore, stood as a testament to the enduring bonds and the valuable lessons that came from embracing diversity. Santiago’s strong conviction led him to share emphatically, “Sin esa competencia cultural no es posible un aprendizaje real” [Without cultural competence, real learning is impossible] (Focus group, April 19, 2025).

He explained how learning a language can become a mere mechanization of words if intercultural connection is lost. Even though only two individuals in the photo had formal university training, the cohort consisted primarily of those who could understand the language

but lacked formal education. Nevertheless, they made it a point to learn from one another, including the students they worked with at a summer camp. Santiago noted, “La diversidad y la inclusividad eran factores muy importantes para poder enseñar a los estudiantes que tuvimos ese verano en Lindenwald” [Diversity and inclusivity were important factors when teaching students we worked with that summer in Lindenwald].

Although many did not know any English, they were able to learn through the immersive experience. Santiago reflected on how this experience helped him understand the importance of being open to different ideas, perspectives, and cultures. This initial experience has shaped him into the educator he is today, demonstrating a deep level of understanding when working with students daily. Santiago continues to grapple with the mindset of accepting cultural differences when comparing his experience in the United States and Europe. He noted the paradoxical differences in mindset. He shared that learning about other cultures and languages has been pivotal to his advancement and success.

The photo represents “strength” and gives him strength each time he looks at it. It symbolizes a “dream” he once had. It serves as a reminder of a dream that has become a reality, although Santiago still has greater aspirations to achieve. He holds a strong conviction and desire to teach the importance of embracing other cultures and languages to create a society reminiscent of his experience in England 25 years ago. Santiago envisions culturally affirming school communities that embrace bilingualism and multiculturalism.

Focus Group Themes from Findings

The focus group transitioned to discussing common themes identified from their individual interviews: family values, culture and language, culture of care, and community. The first theme revolved around family values and how these values are reflected in classroom

practices. During a discussion on how family values translate into teaching practices, several participants shared their insights. Flor highlighted the variability in family involvement in education. She noted that some parents might appear uninvolved due to pressing priorities like meeting basic needs. She also emphasized how understanding these circumstances is crucial for effective teaching.

I think back about my own experience. Just because a parent doesn't come to the parent-teacher conference or doesn't sign a permission slip right away doesn't mean that they are not involved, that they don't care about their children's education. I have that in mind at all times, especially with the immigrant population. Priorities could be fulfilling basic needs, making sure that they can pay the rent, and bringing food to the table. That's something that I always think of, being understanding. (Flor, Focus group, April 19, 2025)

Santiago emphasized the importance of cultural understanding. He pointed out that educators must consider the needs and schedules of parents, rather than imposing their own standards. This approach fosters a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. He noted the following when he was working with other teachers of English learners.

Did you make sure they got it? Did you send them the message in their language? Did you check when a good time was for them? We are trying to meet our standards and our timetables, not considering other people, and not considering their individual needs. We cannot pretend that this is just another person who came here or who's lived here for a long time and has adjusted entirely. We judge involvement based on our standards, not the other person's. (Focus group, April 19, 2025)

Ximena stressed the importance of genuine care and connection between teachers and families. They shared that even a simple phone call can significantly enhance the understanding of students' needs. This personal touch helps build trust and fosters a supportive learning environment. She emphasized,

You have to care. It's like Isabella shared earlier [when engaging with EL students]. Any teacher who really loves what they do has to care. If I see one of the students from our population [Latiné] or any immigrant student, we try to connect with the family with just one phone call. One phone call makes the difference in seeing what the kid needs. What is going on in the family? (Focus group, April 19, 2025)

Together, these insights paint a picture of an educational approach that values family involvement, cultural understanding, and meaningful connections. The group felt that educators can create a more inclusive and effective learning experience for all students when embracing these key principles.

The discussion seamlessly transitioned from family values to a culture of care, another commonality the group shared. Ximena shared that it is important to build relationships with students and parents, especially for Latiné students who lack resources and encouragement to pursue their education.

A Latino student, who was not my student, came from Colombia two years ago. I would see him around. I learned that the mom was struggling with her health and maybe economically. I thought, what can I do to support this kid? It does not matter that a student is not in my class. I have to do something extra. Maybe I can do something after school. I know that in our [Latiné] community, just approaching the family will be a way

to channel a connection with the parent. I think we need to care, to know what's going on. We can save at least one student who is struggling. (Focus group, April 19, 2025)

The significance of her duty as a teacher was evident and felt throughout the group. Isabella also interjected with her sentiments around the culture of care. As she put it,

When I started calling parents and focusing on the Latino parents, a lot of them said they barely get phone calls from the school. They were really thankful that I called. That was shocking. I took my time to talk to the parents, and it was great that they were able to talk to someone in their language. That made a big difference. I realized that during my internship working with English learners. They had no interest in going to university after high school because they felt they didn't have the resources to attend, and they lacked information. I also noticed that for some of them, families were not pushing them because they weren't aware. We were able to work with school counselors to get them the resources that they needed. That's how I got more involved in helping students. There are teachers like us to push them, where they can see us as role models. They always need someone. I know I did need someone when I was in high school, and there were a lot of teachers who were there for me. It doesn't matter if they are in your class; they want that relationship. (Focus group, April 19, 2025)

The conversation then shifted to discussing the importance of community and the collective effort to support students, another common theme among the group. The participants emphasized their responsibility to ensure English learners have access to resources and opportunities. However, they expressed concerns about the actual accessibility of these resources. There was a shared sentiment that it is crucial to make resources easily accessible to all students. When asked about whether students were aware of resources and opportunities,

Isabella shared, “I don’t think so. I ask them, ‘Do you even know your counselor?’ And they’re like, ‘No. What?’ Okay, let me send you to your counselor. Let me send you so you know about the resources.” Isabella believes that there is an opportunity for her school to increase the awareness of resources promoting students’ options beyond high school. Ximena mentioned how technical schools are important for students who do not wish to attend college after graduating. This will prepare them for the workforce. However, students, especially Latiné English learners, are not made aware of the programs early enough. Ximena noted,

We can do something in middle schools. There are many kids that don’t know they can push themselves for just two years and get a license [in a specific area of expertise]. I was telling my students and was thinking that next year I’m going to talk to parents. If I have to, I’ll call those students, those Latino kids and parents, and let them know all the options that they have. (Focus group, April 19, 2025)

She summarized that there are opportunities available, but they are not aware that they exist. She exclaimed,

Who is going to care? I’m scared. I believe that it is my responsibility because I have been in those shoes before. We come from families that have had to fight for their education. We [study participants] are all so passionate and have to take on the responsibility to serve, support, and care. (Focus group, April 19, 2025)

Santiago brought this portion of the discussion to a close by talking about the importance of representation (Gershenson, 2021; Guzman, 2022). He stated,

We are here to represent not only our abilities or cultures, but also to be trailblazers for others coming behind us. Many students and families have told me in these three years that I’ve been an assistant principal that the most important thing is that I am there [in the

school]. It's what I represent for our kids. They can see in us what they could become.

(Focus group, April 19, 2025)

For Santiago, representation matters. He discussed that there are many factors that are beyond teachers' and administrators' control, such as attendance and dropouts. However, there are ways that schools can effect change. To do so, schools have to adopt a culture of care. This approach will allow teachers and leaders to be most effective.

Journey into Teacher Preparation

Each participant's journey to becoming a teacher was unique, shaped by their individual experiences. The strategies that they developed to serve students learning different languages varied. This next section will explore the experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers as they became educators and whether they felt prepared to support diverse learners, including English learners. It will examine how their training and experiences influenced their effectiveness in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment, the challenges they experienced, and their perception of professional learning opportunities beyond their formal training.

Ximena and Santiago's experiences were unique in that they received their formal teacher training from a university in Colombia. Santiago also had an opportunity to study abroad in England. However, they did not experience public schooling or formal teacher training in the United States. Santiago explained how they were trained to teach English to Colombian students. The population of students was homogeneous in that they were racially and linguistically similar. Economically, there were differences; however, many of the culture and traditions of the students were the same. As they transitioned to the U.S., both Ximena and Santiago would come to teach Spanish and English learners, respectively.

From the participants' perspectives, they arrived as English learners and quickly realized the need to learn about different cultures and ways of thinking. Compared to their classrooms in Colombia, their classrooms in the U.S. were very diverse. Santiago shared that in the process, he learned a lot about himself, racially, linguistically, and culturally. Until coming to the U.S., he was not aware of the color of his skin or accent. However, early experiences made that evident to him, having a lasting impact on him and his understanding of cultural and linguistic acceptance in various countries.

Santiago acknowledged that there are five distinct geographic regions in Colombia, each with their cultural nuances. Despite geographical and cultural differences, language and communication have always been the most crucial factors in connecting with others. He recalled experiencing a sense in Colombia, which he also felt in England. Santiago carried that spirit of openness with him when he moved to the United States. He was eager to learn from others, and this is something that he still practices every day. He highlighted the importance of being receptive to new cultures and beliefs, especially since there are new people coming to the U.S. every day.

Feeling accepted is particularly important for students and their perceptions of schooling in this diverse environment. He reflected on the resilience of youth who have faced challenges far beyond what most people can comprehend. Santiago reflected on how they possess a wealth of knowledge that can be shared. For him, teaching has never been a one-way street. It has been about mutual learning and growth. He believes in the power of shared experiences, the cultural exchange between teacher and student. This philosophy of openness and reciprocity has always guided his approach in education, especially when fostering an environment where students can be themselves and learn from one another.

Flor's experience was slightly different, given that she attended public school and university in the United States. Her formal training took place at a four-year college in northern Virginia. Reflecting on her graduate experience, she recalled how linguistic and cultural knowledge were addressed in theory. However, when it came to practical application in bilingual classes, professors often overlooked students' diverse backgrounds. Reflecting on her professors, she noted, "I felt they didn't take the time to understand our backgrounds and get to know us." In graduate school, she recalled her classes consisting of both native English speakers and second language learners.

Flor felt that their varying levels of language proficiency and cultural understanding were rarely considered. It was evident when they had class discussions. Participating in class discussions was a challenge for Flor. She had to learn to interject in conversations without waiting for her turn. This went against all that she had learned. It was ingrained in her that interrupting a conversation was rude, and this made it very difficult for Flor to challenge the teacher or correct his/her inaccuracies. This created a lot of anxiety for her, but over time she would learn how to navigate those discussions.

She discussed her current practices and how her experience has impacted the classroom structure and lessons. In primary grades, raising hands is valued and seen as a sign of respect, but Flor makes it a point to build in more opportunities for her students to engage in open discussions where students are permitted to speak freely. She also incorporates giving students choices in the classroom. Her Bolivian upbringing did not create opportunities for children to make decisions. They ate what they were given and had no say in family outings. Throughout most of her schooling, it was much of the same. She shared a heartfelt sentiment, "Just because you seem polite and you're following the rules, that doesn't mean that you're getting the most

out of the lessons, out of the learning. You're just there. You're just present, but you're not an active learner." Considering students' cultural backgrounds is crucial when determining what to teach them. Flor teaches many Latiné students from Guatemala and can relate to their upbringing. She believes it is important for her to allow her students to have a voice and express their preferences. Drawing from her experience, she believes students should be engaged and involved to truly benefit from their education.

Flor felt that the university did an excellent job in helping teachers develop the skills and strategies needed to teach students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. However, she took the initiative to enroll in history classes to gain a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural context for various Latin subgroups. A Latin American studies course significantly increased her awareness of her students' and their families' experiences. For her Salvadorian students, Flor understood the immense hardships they faced due to the civil war, an experience she couldn't personally relate to. She also learned about the political unrest and coups in Guatemala. Taking these courses helped her understand where families come from, literally and figuratively. Flor recognized her place of privilege, having not experienced civil war or political unrest, and felt it was crucial to gain a better understanding of the students and families she would be supporting.

As the group discussed their teacher training, they also reflected on their commitment to being lifelong learners. Flor commented that teachers are lifelong learners because each year is never the same. Even if teachers are scheduled to teach the same class or grade level, their students are different. Flor noted, "We're always having to adjust, adapt, and incorporate new approaches." Isabella also spoke about her commitment to learning as a teacher. She spoke about how she often reflects on the lessons she's learned throughout life, especially those from teachers who have left a lasting impression. The classes, the lessons, continuously keep coming back to

her. She reflects on her teaching and wants students to have memorable experiences. Isabella does not want them to just remember the content; she wants to generate excitement and encourage curiosity when it comes to learning.

As a teacher, Isabella discussed that it is important to improve and make learning more meaningful and engaging for students. In her classroom, she encourages students to always be curious, to explore things they might like, and to embrace the idea of becoming lifelong learners. There's always something new to learn and discover. She often shares interesting facts and topics she's passionate about, hoping that they may inspire them and positively impact their lives. For Isabella, it's not just about filling their minds with information; it's about sparking their curiosity and helping them see the value in learning. Ultimately, her goal is to expose them to various experiences and opportunities that will help them grow and thrive in the future, while cherishing the learning experience. Santiago concluded this discussion with a powerful message, "We have to evolve with people, with the culture, and we have to be willing to be flexible. We have to evolve with our children and reach them where they are."

I was curious about their perspectives as lifelong learners and asked how they felt about the resources and opportunities available for their professional growth. Ximena expressed gratitude for being in a county that offers numerous resources for professional development. She and her husband often discuss the importance of continually educating. Ximena believes that each year brings new challenges, making it crucial to stay updated with innovative approaches that cater to new generations of students. This inquiry sparked a discussion about current professional learning opportunities that the group could take advantage of.

Isabella was particularly interested in resources or workshops that could coach her on how to help her students develop proficiency, and she also expressed interest in exploring

opportunities to work abroad. Ximena shared information about National Fulbright Scholarship programs, including summer and year-long teaching opportunities that Isabella could pursue. Flor contributed by recommending the Spanish Institute where she had studied in Spain, offering valuable options to the group. The conversation concluded with the group agreeing to connect and share further details about these opportunities via email, ensuring they could all benefit from the available resources.

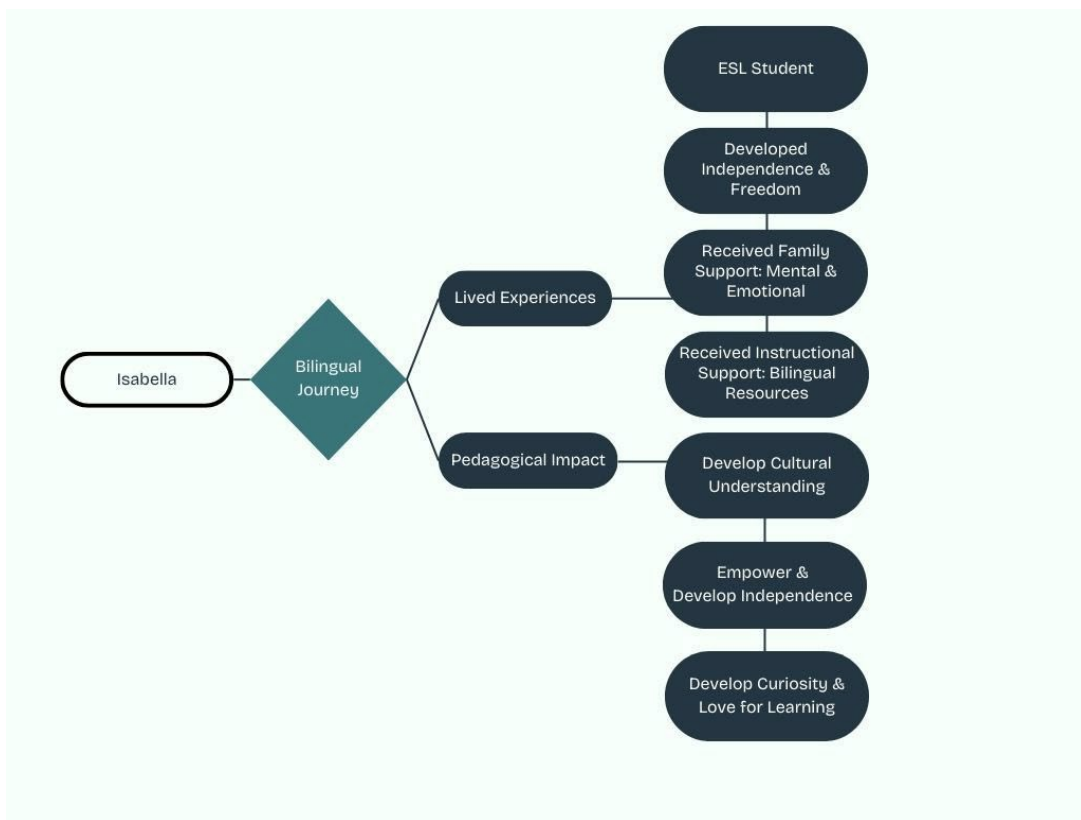
Resumen de Pláticas (Summary of Pláticas)

Isabella

Isabella shared her educational journey and personal experiences when she moved from Mexico to the United States at the age of 15. She navigated the complexities of a new language and culture with basic English skills. She faced the daunting task of integrating into a new school system and the many adjustments to a new life in a different country. Her story is one of resilience through the unwavering support of her family, especially her grandmother. Isabella highlighted the importance of her family's support, providing for her financially, socially, and emotionally. They instilled in her the value of learning, encouraged her, and fostered a narrative of independence, emphasizing that education would be the key to self-sufficiency. This experience has shaped her approach to teaching a second language (See Figure 4).

Figure 4

Graphic of Isabella's Experience and Influence



Isabella’s passion for teaching culminates in helping students develop a curiosity and love for learning so that they, too, can gain the same independence and freedom just as she did when she was a student. Isabella sees her role as a teacher to empower students to take the lead on their educational journey. She aspires to create an inclusive classroom environment, using every opportunity to promote cultural understanding, which is an element that was crucial in her own educational path. The curiosity and love for learning that she seeks to instill in her students are also reflected in her own commitment to continuous learning and professional growth.

Flor

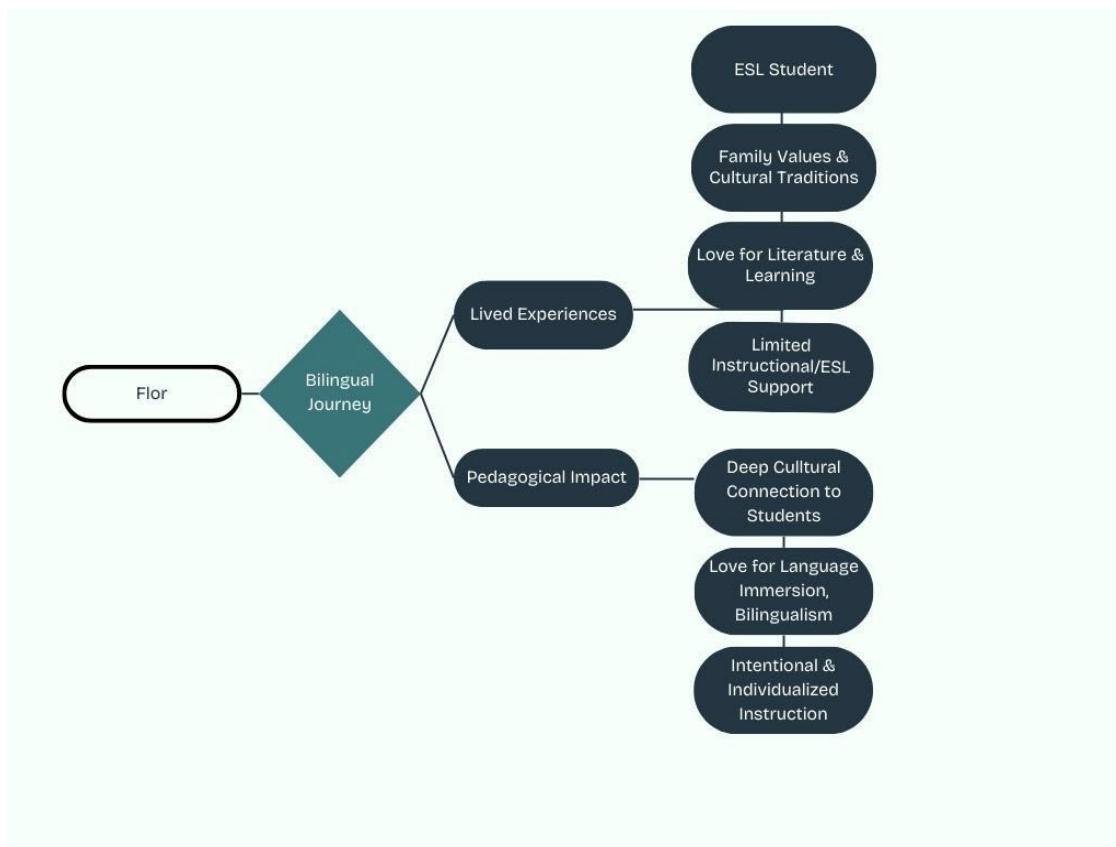
Flor’s family also nurtured a love of learning by providing her access to Spanish literature. Along the way, she encountered a few teachers who had encouraged her to learn the English language and inspired her love of literature by offering her opportunities to read about diverse cultures. Flor appreciated the cultural traditions from her Bolivian schooling and was

grateful for the supportive teachers she met when transitioning to American schooling. However, she often felt that there was a lack of individualized instruction and missed opportunities that could deepen her learning.

Flor's deep connection to tradition, curiosity to understand others, and hope for the future are threaded throughout her story (see Figure 5). She is committed to being a compassionate teacher. Learning about each of her students, both personally and academically, serves as a guide to providing individualized support to her dual language learners. Having to transition from Bolivia to the United States, learn a new language, adapt to different customs and schooling, and navigate diverse communities, she relates firsthand to her students' experiences. Inadvertently, her own experiences are reflected in her philosophy and practices in the classroom, where cultural understanding and empathy meet diversified instruction and intentional teaching. Figure 5 provides a visual of her experience as an English learner and how it is reflected through her pedagogical practices in the dual language immersion classroom.

Figure 5

Graphic of Flor's Experience and Influence



Ximena

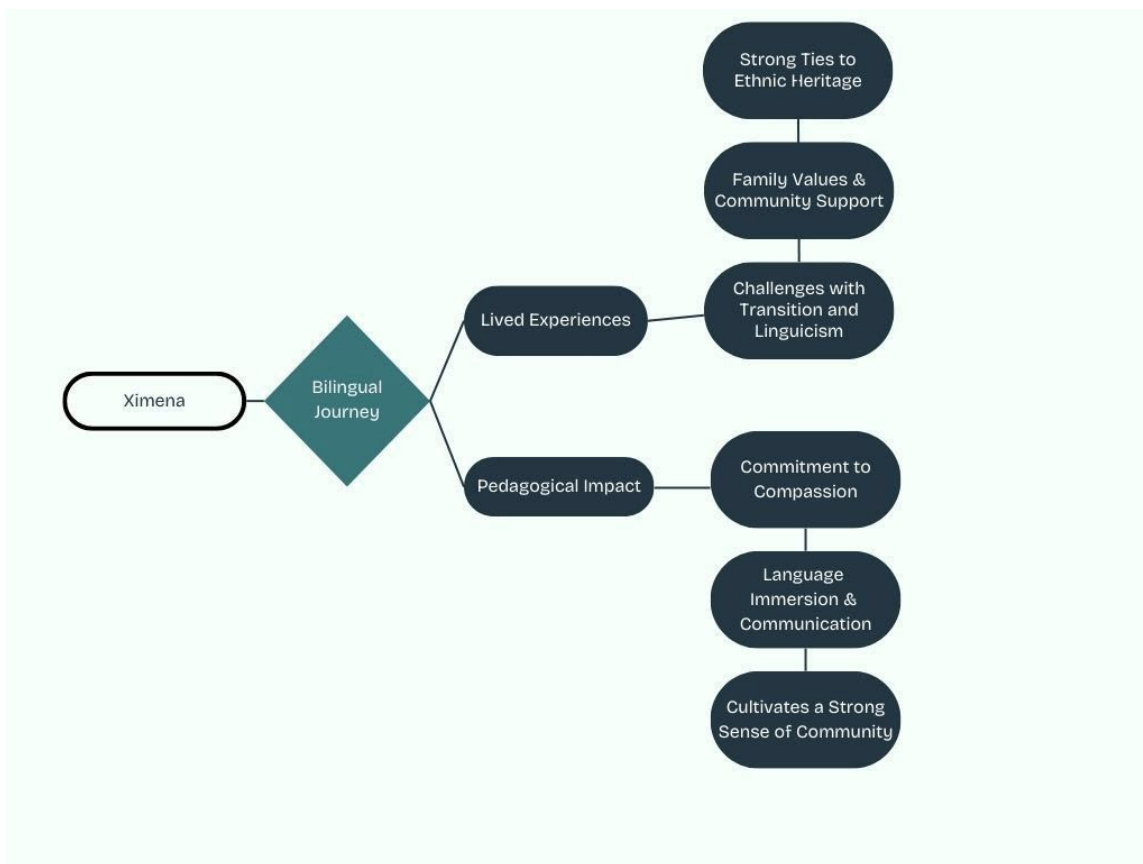
Family values and community support were foundational for Ximena’s educational journey. Her family and community came together to ensure she had access to the best education possible, which they had not had the opportunity to attend. This level of support continued throughout her college years. Ximena’s strong family backing was crucial in making her dream a reality, which included one day becoming a bilingual teacher. Inspired by a teacher with international experience, Ximena diligently worked to learn English by primarily practicing her written skills. She focused more on written skills and lacked the language immersion that she later learned was key to learning a new language.

Ximena experienced many challenges when she immigrated to the United States from Colombia. For instance, she faced difficulties communicating and engaging within her new

communities, having encountered unwelcoming experiences due to her Colombian accent. Ximena's challenges in speaking the English language due to limited immersion and her experience with linguisticism made the transition less than desirable. However, it shaped her pedagogical approach to teaching Spanish in her class. Because she understands firsthand the difficulties of not having a strong foundation in spoken language, Ximena is deeply committed to immersing her students in the language. In Spanish class, her fundamental goal is language immersion and communication. In Figure 6, Ximena's personal and academic experiences overlap with her approach to teaching. She has explicitly stated that she strives to give her students the immersive experience she lacked, aiming to prepare them for opportunities like studying abroad, which she highly encourages. Her teaching approach is a direct response to her own bilingual journey and the obstacles she faced. This commitment to equipping her students with the skills she found lacking for herself demonstrates a form of commitment informed by her experience.

Figure 6

Graphic representation of Ximena's Experience and Influence



Ximena’s journey to becoming a bilingual teacher and her current pedagogical approach are deeply interconnected with her past lived experiences. The graphic lists several key elements that, when examined through her narrative and focus group responses, reveal a cohesive story of challenge, resilience, and commitment to her current students.

Santiago

A significant aspect of Santiago’s background is the loss of a parent and the economic challenges that his family experienced. Santiago grew up in a single-family home with minimal resources. He fondly recalled his mother’s efforts to create a happy environment. His mother raised four children single-handedly, ensuring their basic needs were met despite the adversities they faced. Santiago’s strong communal spirit, an aspect of Colombian culture, is a testament to the broader community coming together collectively to make decisions and provide mutual

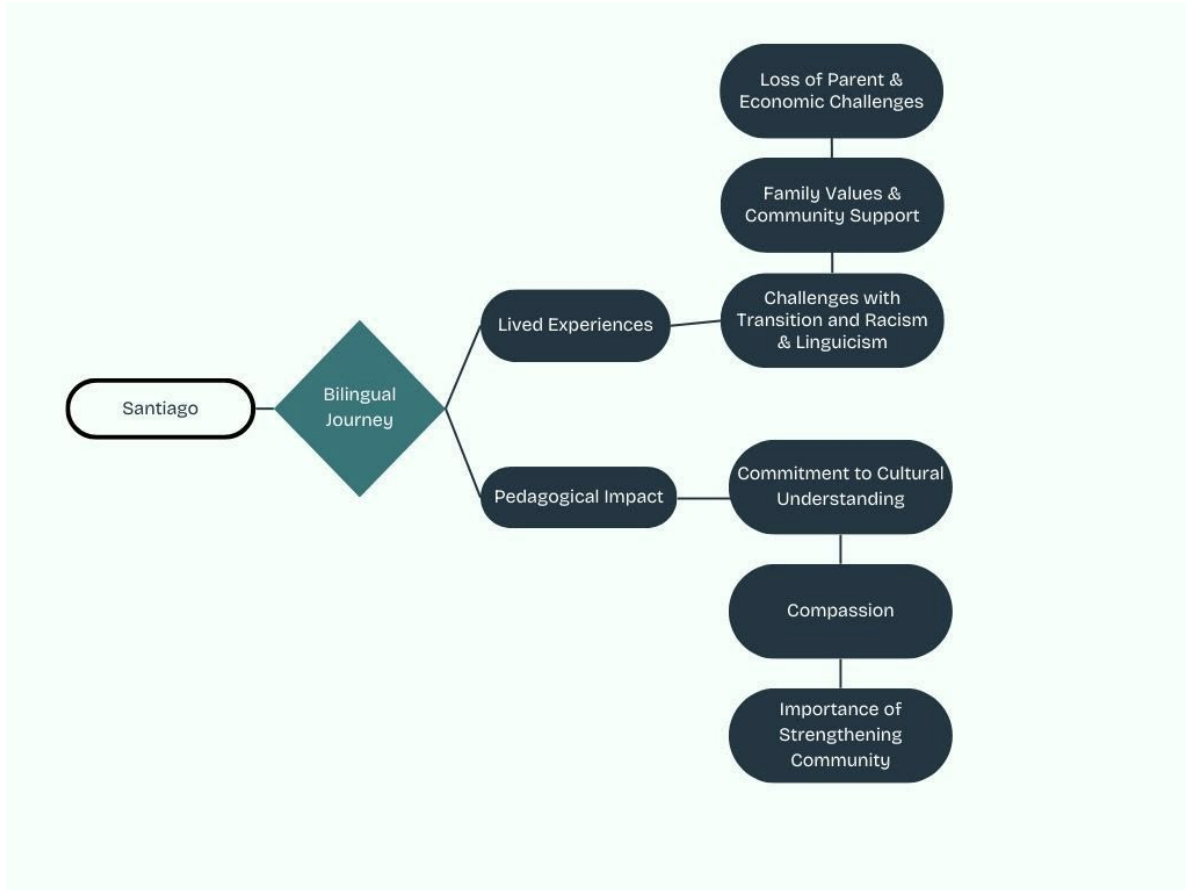
support during times of need. When Santiago immigrated with his wife, Ximena, they were met with a contrasting cultural perspective of American individualism. Having a strong commitment to preserving the communal spirit, Santiago embraces teachers with similar experiences and, together with his wife, embraces them as part of their extended family. Santiago and Ximena open their home to them, demonstrating an application of such strong values. The goal is to ensure that teachers feel supported, reflecting the importance of strengthening the community.

Upon arriving in America, Santiago quickly noticed that he was being treated differently based on his accent, skin color, cultural roots, and heritage. As a result, he became acutely aware of his background and the color of his skin. He felt his educational background and worldview were not always met with openness. He explicitly noted that treatment was far from positive, despite his education and language knowledge. He faced unfair judgment in leadership roles based on his accent, linking this to cultural stereotypes and the biased perception of accents often associated with marginalized groups. In addition, the painful experiences of his children being ridiculed for their food and their parents' accents played a role in developing and shaping their cultural identity. These examples of racism and linguicism are a major component of the challenges that Santiago faced during his transition and adjustment to his new life in America.

Although Santiago doesn't delve extensively into the methods he uses in the school setting, he is strongly committed to creating spaces that foster greater cultural understanding and compassion. Family values and the importance of strengthening the school community, especially through cultural competence and compassion, are at the forefront of all that Santiago does personally and professionally. His experiences and the influence that they have had on his pedagogical and leadership practices are represented in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Graphic Representation of Santiago's Experience and Influence



Chapter Summary

This chapter delves into the experiences of bilingual educators, focusing on their upbringing, schooling in their home countries, their transition to the U.S., and the influences that shaped their career paths. The first part of this chapter is organized around research question #1, exploring four main areas: upbringing, schooling, transition to the U.S., and influences on their pursuit to become bilingual educators. Participants shared their personal experiences, characteristics, and qualities that influenced their journey as English learners. Their interviews were recorded, transcribed, and individual stories were summarized to include their written reflections, if applicable. Each participant shared their experiences and thoughts, focusing on their childhood, education, transition, and influential factors. These narratives provided valuable

insights into the challenges and triumphs they faced, underscoring the importance of understanding diverse educational journeys. Their stories revealed profound moments that paved their journey to becoming bilingual educators in Virginia. These stories highlight the diverse influences that shaped their journeys as English learners, all united by a common thread: the unwavering support of their families.

The second part of this chapter is organized around a focus group that explored research question #2. It started with a photo elicitation and ended with discussions on common themes (family values, culture and language, a culture of care, and community) identified from individual interviews and their perception of their teacher preparation. Participants began by sharing their perspectives on what it means to be a bilingual teacher, providing a foundation for deeper exploration of these topics. This introduction led to a rich discussion on various aspects of teaching students from diverse backgrounds. Participants addressed the challenges they face, the importance of developing cultural understanding, and strategies for empowering students in their learning. They also explored opportunities for growth beyond formal training, emphasizing the need for continuous professional development and adaptability in their teaching practices.

Chapter Five: *Descubrimientos y Conclusiones* (Discoveries & Conclusions)

Introduction

This study presents the lived experiences and motivations of four Latiné bilingual educators who were formerly English learners. Using a qualitative methodology, primarily through pláticas (personal and informal conversations), I explore how these educators draw upon their lived experiences and cultural knowledge to inform their teaching practices. Their transition and schooling in the U.S. involved navigating new linguistic and cultural landscapes, encountering mixed levels of ESL support, and facing instances of linguistic discrimination, and cultural misunderstandings based on their language, accent, and background. Despite these obstacles, strong family support and influential experiences were critical in shaping their resilience and inspiring them to pursue higher education, leading them to the teaching profession.

The pláticas illuminated participants' journeys from early education in Latin America to their transition into U.S. schools and how their lived experiences shaped their commitment to culturally responsive teaching. They rely on their Funds of Knowledge to build connections with students and foster spaces where culture and language are affirmed. The challenges that they encountered shaped their views as educators and heightened their awareness of students' needs, cultivating a culture of care and empathy. Their stories reflected how their journeys became a catalyst to inform their teaching practices where learning extends beyond academics to advocacy, identity-building, and empowerment. Recognizing gaps in their formal training, they actively seek professional development to center students' cultural identities and lived realities. Table 5 presents the key themes from participants' pláticas.

Table 5

Key Themes from Pláticas

<i>Bilingual Journeys</i>	<i>Isabella</i>	<i>Flor</i>	<i>Ximena</i>	<i>Santiago</i>
<i>Lived Experiences</i>	Love of Culture	Valued Cultural Traditions	Strong Cultural Identity & Heritage	Embraced & Valued Cultural Identities
	Family Values Mental & Emotional Support	Family Values	Family Values & Community Support	Family Values & Community Support
	Valued Agency & Empowerment	Experienced Bias & Racism	Experienced Linguicism	Experienced Racism & Linguicism
	Valued Instructional Support	Desired Greater Instructional Support	Desired Experience Abroad	Valued Cultural & Linguistic Opportunities
	Dedication	Perseverance	Resilience	Resilience
<i>Pedagogical Impact</i>	Cultural Understanding	Cultural Understanding	Compassion & Cultural Understanding	Compassion & Cultural Understanding
	Immersion in Language & Culture	Immersion in Language & Culture	Immersion in Written & Oral Communication	Cultivates Affirming School Communities
	Cultivates Self-advocacy & Empowerment	Individualized & Purposeful Teaching	Cultivates Bilingualism	Cultivates Cultural & Linguistic Acceptance

Descubrimiento 1 [Discovery 1]

How English Learner and Preservice Experiences Inform Pedagogical Approaches (RQ1)

The first part of the study explored the unique experiences of four Latiné bilingual educators: Isabella, Flor, Ximena, and Santiago. In Chapter 4, I detailed their upbringing, schooling in their home countries, transition to the U.S., and the various influences that shaped their lives and career paths. By examining their stories, I aimed to understand the motivation

behind how they draw upon those experiences. Their narratives revealed ways in which their personal and professional lives intersect, and inform their practices in the classroom.

Isabella's journey was deeply rooted in the values instilled by her family, particularly her *abuela* (grandmother). Her grandmother instilled the importance of independence, emphasizing that a university education would give Isabella the freedom to do anything. Her parents also modeled a love for learning, with her father giving her books and her mother encouraging her to practice the English language. Her aunt and uncle, who were educators, further motivated her studies. Isabella felt a commitment to excel, attributing her passion for learning to her desire to succeed and the nurturing environment provided by her family. Today, as a Spanish teacher, she strives to create an inclusive classroom environment that promotes cultural understanding, empowering students to challenge any biases, and persevere despite their circumstances (Ankeny et al., 2019; Coady, 2019; Palmer & Martinez, 2013).

Flor's family also nurtured her love for learning. Her father played a pivotal role in fostering her biliteracy by encouraging her to select books from his collection of Spanish literature, and her mother instilled a love for storytelling. Her parents had to sacrifice their teaching careers in Bolivia, but they consistently emphasized the importance of prioritizing studies and obtaining a good education. Her personal experiences of feeling overlooked in her ESL classes fueled her desire to create a supportive and culturally responsive classroom. She emphasized the importance of showing empathy to her students and families by learning about their histories and cultural contexts (Gonzalez & Moll, 1995; Moll et al., 1992). Her philosophy is deeply rooted in her own journey as an English learner, which gives her a profound sense of compassion when working individually with her students.

Family values and community support were also foundational in Ximena’s life. Her family, along with committed individuals from their community, came together to provide financial resources to ensure she could attend a private Catholic school. This reflects funds of knowledge, emphasizing collectivism and actions that support the well-being and survival of the larger group. When she faced challenges getting into her first-choice college in Colombia, her mother encouraged her to pursue her dream by applying to a school further away. The family supported the decision and gathered financial resources to cover expenses. Ximena noted that she wouldn’t have been able to persevere and achieve her goals without the support of her family and community. This, coupled with the challenges she experienced when she arrived in the U.S., directly shaped her pedagogical approach. She is deeply committed to providing students with resources and opportunities (Porter et al., 2023). In her Spanish class, she begins by creating a language-immersive environment, aiming to offer the conversational foundation that she once lacked.

Santiago experienced significant financial hardships growing up, and his journey was marked by his mother’s single-handed efforts to provide for him and his siblings. Despite the difficulties, she created a happy and loving environment. Santiago’s background is also characterized by a strong communal spirit in which the community collectively makes decisions and provides support to ensure everyone’s needs are met. His experiences in the U.S. made him acutely aware of his accent, skin color, and heritage as he faced negative and unfair treatment. These experiences strengthened his commitment to fostering cultural understanding and compassion within the school community. His previous experiences in England left him feeling culturally accepted, informing his belief that “without cultural competence, real learning is impossible.” He believes in mutual learning between teacher and student, as well as the

importance of representation (Alim et al., 2020; Gershenson, 2021; Guzman, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Martinez, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017; Taggart, 2018). Together, he and his wife exemplify the communal spirit, extending support to new teachers with similar experiences by opening their home to them as a part of an extended family (Moll et al., 1992).

The second part of the study consisted of participants collectively discussing their roles as bilingual teachers and what is needed to effectively teach diverse learners, especially English learners. The pláticas took place in a focus group format, and they demonstrated how their Funds of Knowledge (individual experiences and cultural knowledge) contribute to their pedagogical practices. Participants shared how their awareness of family dynamics, especially those of immigrant families with whom they have shared experiences, influences the empathy they bring into the classroom. They emphasized the importance of genuine care, understanding, and building strong connections between teachers and families, directly linking their personal journeys to their teaching practices. From the photo elicitation and group dialogue, the following themes emerged.

Strong Family Values and Unwavering Support. A primary finding of this study is that participants' journeys were greatly influenced by strong family values and the unwavering support from their respective communities (Hamann et al., 2015; Taggart, 2018). This played a crucial role in shaping their educational journeys and professional paths. This familial backing instilled perseverance, prioritized education, and provided the emotional and practical foundation needed to overcome challenges as former English learners transitioning to a new country and culture. *Familismo* is a cultural value, commonly discussed in Latiné communities, that emphasizes the importance of family relationships, loyalty, and obligations. This aligns with Moll's Funds of Knowledge because both value family knowledge, prioritize intergenerational

learning, and recognize the strengths students bring from home (González et al., 2005; Saathoff, 2015). Culturally Sustaining Practices, grounded in Funds of Knowledge, affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities while valuing family traditions in the learning environments (Paris & Alim, 2017). Among Latiné students, family support is one of the most influential sociocultural factors that is linked to academic success.

Navigating New Linguistic and Cultural Landscapes. Themes revolved around the significant challenges they faced navigating new linguistic and cultural environments once they arrived in the United States (Baker, 2011; Cummins, 2000; Flores, 2019; Hidalgo, 2015). Participants consistently encountered difficulties with the English language, adapting to American cultural norms, and integrating into the U.S. educational system. Experiences within schools often felt unsupportive or inadequate for English learners, and at times were marked by a perceived lack of understanding from educators regarding their backgrounds or prior knowledge. One of the most compelling commonalities centered on the encounters that they experienced with bias, racism, and linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Participants felt judged or treated differently based on their accents, ethnicity, cultural roots, and heritage. These struggles raise concerns about systemic issues with cultural acceptance and the difficulties immigrants face in feeling welcomed and supported. Unfortunately, systemic issues and disparities will persist unless issues such as unsupportive school environments are effectively addressed (The New Teacher Project, 2020).

Today's national discourse around merit-based learning, assimilation into American culture, and other dominant narratives in education often overlooks the values of the knowledge that minoritized communities bring with them. Merit-based systems tend to exacerbate inequality because students from privileged backgrounds have greater access to resources and forms of

knowledge that are recognized and rewarded by majority groups (Diaz, 2020). Similarly, assimilationist expectations pressure students and families to conform rather than affirm their cultural and linguistic resources (Shah, 2024). Moll's Funds of Knowledge directly challenges this by highlighting the lived experiences, skills, and cultural practices of minoritized groups (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992; Moll, 2019). This knowledge does not always surface or receive validation in mainstream educational spaces. The theory emphasizes that while anyone can hold vast knowledge, what distinguishes Funds of Knowledge is its recognition of the unique and often invisible ways minoritized communities acquire and use knowledge in their everyday lives. By integrating these funds into teaching, educators resist deficit views of students and instead position cultural and familial knowledge as assets. In doing so, Funds of Knowledge provides a counter-narrative to dominant discourses. It reminds us that true educational equity lies not in assimilation or narrow measures of merit, but in valuing the diverse traditions that all students bring into the classroom.

Despite the significant challenges participants experienced, themes of resilience, dedication, and perseverance are evident across their pláticas. Their journeys shaped how they came to define and embrace their roles as bilingual educators. Having navigated the complexities of language acquisition and cultural adjustment, they developed a sense of care, empathy, and compassion for their students. Their experiences highlighted the importance of cultural understanding. Today, they feel strongly about actively creating inclusive, supportive learning environments where students feel safe, valued, and empowered (Bordas, 2023; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Lowery, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). The use of Funds of Knowledge to inform culturally responsive practices creates supportive and inclusive learning environments (Gay, 2010; Moll et al., 1992). Ultimately, their personal stories of adapting to new linguistic and cultural landscapes became the foundation for their pedagogical philosophies and commitment to

advocating for and empowering their diverse student populations.

Supportive Teachers and Positive Influences. Each plática was marked with stories of supportive teachers and positive interactions. Extensive research highlights the pivotal role of both interpersonal relationships and systemic educational practices can shape Latiné students' experiences (Castro & Calzada, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2020; Redding, 2019; Sosa & Gomez, 2012; Weisman, 2001). Isabella found welcoming peers in Alabama who helped her practice English and particularly valued a history teacher who provided materials in both English and Spanish, making her feel “seen” for the first time. Flor appreciated supportive teachers during her transition, including a high school Spanish teacher who nurtured her love for reading and Spanish literature by gifting her books. At age 12, Ximena was inspired by a teacher who took time to share international experiences with the class, sparking her dream of teaching English abroad. Santiago's interest in English was strengthened while studying in England, which involved learning effective teaching methods alongside a diverse cohort of teachers.

All these influences played a key role in guiding the participants towards their careers as educators (Quiñones, 2012). Flor was particularly inspired to pursue bilingual education after working as a kindergarten assistant at a bilingual school and observing an African American teacher teach in Spanish. She drew inspiration from her, admiring her passion for language and tenacity in advocating for English learners. Ximena's college cohort, dedicated to learning and teaching English, reinforced her passion. Both Flor and Isabella reflected on the importance of teachers being “there” for students, providing them with support they would rely on. Santiago's experience learning from a diverse group of teachers and students in England was his introduction to the importance of embracing cultural understanding in education.

Experiences with supportive teachers, encouraging peers, and inspiring adults outside of their immediate families reinforced participants' dedication to establishing a supportive and nurturing environment where they provide educational and linguistic assistance. These positive interactions highlighted the impact educators can have, the value of diverse learning environments, and the importance of advocating for student needs (Paris, 2012). Both earlier and most recent scholarship closely examined how sociocultural and sociopolitical dynamics impact the trajectories of Latiné students (Camarota & Romero, 2012; Rodriguez, 2004). Empirical research indicates that the academic success of Latiné learners is linked to the strong, supportive relationships with educators and the integration of culturally sustaining pedagogies in the classroom setting (Alim et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2017; Taggart, 2018). These lessons from their personal experiences are now applied in their own classrooms to create supportive and culturally responsive spaces. Ultimately, they transformed personal challenges into a deep understanding of the needs of English learners and a commitment to ensuring their students feel seen, supported, and valued.

Teachers as Cultural and Linguistic Brokers. Palmer's (2018) research emphasized the role of bilingual teachers as cultural and linguistic brokers, helping students connect their identities to the broader societal systems that they navigate. In this study, participants' dual role, as former English learners and current educators, enabled them to integrate their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds into their teaching practices. Palmer (2018) asserted that educators should be given the opportunity to critically reflect on both their personal histories and those of their students. This reflective practice uniquely positions teachers to build trust and meaningful relationships, which are often associated with academic success.

The lived experiences of Isabella, Flor, Ximena, and Santiago as immigrants and former English learners in the U.S. were foundational in teaching them how to effectively serve as linguistic and cultural brokers for their own students (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2006). Their shared journey of exploring new linguistic and cultural landscapes cultivated a culture of care and empathy, which they often felt was lacking in their own experiences (Paris, 2012). These experiences equipped them with unique insights into the needs of diverse learners. Having personally navigated language barriers, encountered confusing cultural references, yearned for cultural acceptance, and experienced insufficient linguistic support, they understand firsthand the complexities their students face. This direct experience instilled in them a commitment to provide intentional support and explicit instruction that they often lacked. For example, Ximena's focus on language immersion stems from her own insufficient real-life exposure, while Flor's realization of the need for specific language strategies arose from the instruction she lacked. They proactively bridge linguistic gaps by prioritizing conversational practice and understanding the nuances of language acquisition from a lived perspective (Flores & Garcia, 2017; Palmer, 2018).

Their encounters with cultural differences, misunderstandings, and particularly experiences of bias, racism, and linguicism highlighted the critical need for cultural understanding and advocacy within the educational system (Kena et al., 2016). Santiago explicitly recognized being treated differently based on his accent, skin color, and heritage as a teacher and school leader, and the unfair judgment rooted in stereotypes. These experiences made him keenly aware of the importance of cultural competence. Flor's experience with American pop culture demonstrated how teachers can make assumptions about students' background knowledge. These personal challenges taught them the necessity of explicitly

addressing cultural differences and challenging preconceived notions, as Isabella does in her classroom, creating environments where diverse backgrounds are valued and understood. They actively prioritize learning about their students' histories and cultures to better support them. This positions them as brokers, interpreting student behaviors and needs through a culturally informed lens (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2006).

Finally, a culture of community support is a core aspect of their home cultures and contrasts with American individualism, especially for Ximena and Santiago. This type of experience has shaped their approach to connecting with students' families and fostering a sense of community and care in their classrooms. Flor emphasized that family involvement may look different for immigrant families due to pressing, basic needs and suggested that leaders advocate for educators to meet parents where they are. Ximena and Santiago emphasized that consideration should be given to students' circumstances rather than imposing their own standards. Understanding students' home lives, combined with their own history of navigating systemic challenges and relying on community, allows them to serve as powerful advocates and role models (Ankeny et al., 2019; Coady, 2019; Palmer & Martinez, 2013). Their personal experiences as linguistic and cultural navigators are not just background knowledge they have acquired. They are the very foundation of their being and pedagogical philosophies. Holding space for their stories helps us to understand their passion for creating inclusive, empathetic spaces, while actively bridging the linguistic and cultural divides for their students (Freire, 2000; Palmer, 2018).

Empowering Independence. Participants in this study experienced the challenges that current students face when learning a new language. Flor's experience of being physically present and somewhat engaged did not mean that she was actively learning in her classes.

She had teachers who did not explicitly teach language structures or encourage active participation, and she uses those experiences to inform her current teaching practices. Flor fosters an environment for open discussion, actively listens, and encourages her students to communicate and engage with her. Similarly, Ximena's experiences with limited oral communication led her to prioritize language immersion and conversational practice in her classroom. They collectively believe that providing explicit linguistic support and creating a safe space for students to practice, engage, and make mistakes is crucial for encouraging them to find and use their voices.

Participants' experiences navigating an educational system that often misunderstood them have fueled their commitment to advocating for their students. Drawing from their own lived experiences, bilingual teachers often recognize the profound value of representation in the educational setting, empowering them to help students overcome systemic barriers (Alfaro & Hernandez, 2016; Darder, 2012; Freire, 2000; Norton, 2010). Their firsthand understanding of cultural and linguistic challenges positions them to foster inclusive learning environments that affirm student identities and promote equity in education (Pratt, 2022). Flor explicitly stated that her experience being part of the minority group that stands in the academic gap taught her to advocate for those students to ensure that they'd be given a voice. Isabella and Ximena highlighted the lack of awareness among some students, particularly Latiné English learners, regarding resources and opportunities beyond high school. This has prompted them to take responsibility for informing these students. Santiago emphasizes that their very presence and role serve as representation, allowing students to see what they can become. The challenges, triumphs, and struggles empowered participants to become advocates for their students' learning

and educational paths and to teach their students to do the same for themselves (Arriaza & Rocha, 2016; Cammarota et al., 2012; Zell, 2010).

The participants' stories illustrate how their lived experiences and personal passions shape their teaching in ways that align with Funds of Knowledge and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy. Moll's framework emphasizes that the cultural knowledge, practices, and experiences of families and communities are rich resources for teaching and learning (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Isabella's use of her family's influence to foster curiosity and cultural understanding, Flor's commitment to literature rooted in her linguistic heritage, and Santiago's transformative encounters with diverse cultures all represent Funds of Knowledge that are carried into the classroom. These experiences are pedagogical assets, enabling them to connect authentically with students and validate diverse ways of knowing. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy builds on this by insisting that effective teaching not only draws on cultural knowledge but actively sustains and nurtures students' cultural and linguistic practices (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). Each participant demonstrates this commitment. For example, Isabella empowers students to share their passions, Flor nurtures bilingualism through literature and vocabulary development, and Santiago embraces multiple cultural perspectives. Together they embody practices that resist assimilationist pressures by affirming and sustaining students' identities while fostering academic growth. Both frameworks converge in the participants' philosophies, demonstrating how lived experiences and cultural identities form the foundation of transformative teaching.

Guide to Resources and Opportunities. Participants highlighted that many students, particularly Latiné English learners, may not be aware of the resources and opportunities available to them. They emphasized the importance of raising awareness and ensuring equitable

access to both students and families (Pratt, 2022). They specifically highlighted how students are not aware of their school counselors or post-high school options, such as colleges, universities, or technical schools. Isabella shared that during her teaching internship, she noticed English learners lacked interest in applying for college because they felt they didn't have the resources or information. She discovered that students weren't aware of resources and opportunities. Additionally, families weren't aware of resources either, preventing them from being able to guide their children. She now makes it a point to ask her students in her classes if they know their counselor and offers to connect them, if needed. Ximena specifically pointed out that Latiné English learners are often not made aware of technical school programs early enough. Ximena and Isabella were two of the participants who expressed a very strong sense of responsibility to help students navigate the educational landscape and access opportunities (Taggart, 2018).

Participants in this study have drawn on their own challenging experiences where they may have lacked sufficient support or awareness of opportunities (Valdes & Bender, 2021). For instance, Flor felt she could have benefited from additional resources and strategies in high school. She believes supportive systems are essential throughout one's educational journey, including guidance on assessments and enhancing literacy skills (Alim et al., 2020; Cammarota & Romero, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2017; Rodriguez, 2004; Taggart, 2018). Ximena's focus on preparing students for opportunities to study abroad stems from the limited opportunities extended in Colombia. It wasn't until much later that she established a greater understanding of the value of immersion. Overall, the participants view their role as extending beyond teaching content to actively guiding students toward educational opportunities (Valdes & Bender, 2021). They are driven by their personal histories and a profound sense of responsibility and care for their students' futures. They believe it is crucial to make resources easily accessible

and ensure students are aware of their options after high school.

Descubrimiento 2 [Discovery 2]

Understanding the Integration of Funds of Knowledge in Teacher Preparation (RQ2)

The data from this study revealed that bilingual teachers' preparation programs often fell short and did not acknowledge, value, and integrate students' diverse Funds of Knowledge and linguistic resources that they possessed and those that their future students would potentially bring into the classroom. This required teachers to draw primarily on their own lived experiences and proactively seek professional opportunities to develop knowledge and strategies needed to create a culturally responsive and empathetic learning environment. The following summary of personal and professional challenges that each educator faced demonstrated the need for leaders in education to reflect upon preparation programs to determine how to better prepare educators for the cultural and linguistic realities of students.

Isabella did not go into depth about her specific teacher preparation details, as most of her time was spent discussing her lived experience immigrating to the U.S. and being an ESL student. She did emphasize that her experience in school with teachers who provided her with both English and Spanish texts made her feel seen. Her current teaching philosophy is largely shaped by her personal experiences and is demonstrated by her commitment to creating a learning space that cultivates unity and cultural understanding by connecting lessons to students' Funds of Knowledge. This could imply that her culturally responsive pedagogy has developed from her own personal Funds of Knowledge, which has filled any gaps left by formal training (Moll et al., 1992). Isabella is also proactive in her approach, intentionally reaching out to speak with families to keep them informed about resources and opportunities. Through direct outreach, she has often found that they were surprised to hear from her or the school, leaving one to wonder whether the system is designed to equip educators on how to engage with families and

incorporate their Funds of Knowledge, especially those of immigrant families.

Flor attended public school and university in the United States. Throughout her public schooling experience, she felt that her level of language proficiency and cultural understanding were rarely considered. This created challenges, particularly during class discussions. In her culture, it was inappropriate for her to interject or interrupt, making it difficult for her to seek clarification or question a teacher when she did not understand something. Navigating a new language while simultaneously learning a new culture was complex. When multiple languages are represented in a classroom, languages can hinder students' understanding, limit their participation, and reduce overall engagement (Ashikuzzaman, 2023). Flor's experience highlights a lack of knowledge and understanding of her cultural and linguistic practices within the learning environment. Flor also explicitly shared that following rules and demonstrating respect was a reflection of her Bolivian upbringing and was not an indication that she was "getting the most out of the learning" or was an "active learner." This implied that the pedagogical approaches she experienced in her public schooling did not account for her cultural learning style. Over time, Flor found her voice and learned how to engage and seek clarification on her own.

While pursuing her graduate studies, she noted that linguistic and cultural knowledge was addressed in *theory*, but professors "overlooked graduate students' backgrounds" in practical application. Flor had to take the initiative to enroll in a Latin American studies class to increase her awareness of the historical and cultural context of various Latin subgroups, many of which were represented in her classroom. As the researcher, this indicated to me that her formal teacher

preparation did not create the space to sufficiently integrate cultural, historical, and linguistic Funds of Knowledge (Cockran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Cummins, 2009, 2017; Martinez, 2018). One of the most compelling moments of Flor's story was an interaction that took place with a professor. This interaction was not related to any theoretical or practical coursework. Before taking a standardized test, a professor shared that she did not believe that second language learners could become ESL teachers. This biased sentiment went against the very identity (English learner) that is a gift and asset as a bilingual teacher to the new generation of English learners. Test-taking can be stressful for anyone, but for Flor, it created a detrimental setting when a professor's lack of cultural sensitivity left her feeling devalued. Flor internalized this remark and knew that it contradicted her cultural values and teaching philosophy, which includes respect and empathy.

Educators who complete their teacher preparation programs in Latiné countries, such as Colombia, often experience a markedly different trajectory from teachers trained in the United States. For example, Ximena and Santiago received their preparation primarily in Spanish, within Colombia's educational, cultural, and linguistic contexts. Their programs were designed to draw upon the Funds of Knowledge, cultural wealth, and linguistic background of future educators, therefore incorporating and valuing their lived experiences in the training process. Colombian teacher preparation programs are recognized for their emphasis on social-emotional learning and effective classroom management. In fact, U.S. researchers have noted that Colombian-trained teachers are exceptionally skilled at fostering social and emotional growth in children, positioning them as leaders in this area (Bustamente, 2017; Chica et al., 2020).

This is where cultural dissonance emerges. In Colombia, their Funds of Knowledge were seamlessly integrated into their preparation and practice. Their training validated their identities, language, and cultural expertise. But in the U.S. K-12 schools, those same identities

and practices did not align with the norms, expectations, or instructional frameworks they encountered. The lived experience of having to relearn or rethink how to bridge those spaces becomes central. They must consider how to adapt their cultural and pedagogical wealth to a new educational system while preserving the strengths that make them effective educators. Therefore, when analyzing teacher preparation experiences for international educators, it is critical to distinguish between what occurred in their original training program and what shifted during their transition abroad. Colombian teacher preparation programs did, in fact, value their Funds of Knowledge, but once in the U.S., these educators faced the challenge of recalibrating their practices to meet new cultural and systemic demands.

The following is a summary of several key themes that emerged from their perceptions of teacher preparation and whether their Funds of Knowledge were acknowledged:

Lack of Integration in Teacher Preparation Programs. One theme was that not all teacher preparation programs acknowledged, valued, and integrated Funds of Knowledge in the U.S. This could imply that programs do not intentionally prepare teachers for the cultural and linguistic realities of students in the U.S. Moreover, programs may not be equipping teachers to engage with families, especially those of immigrants. This lack of preparation may hinder teachers' ability to incorporate families' Funds of Knowledge into their classrooms and instruction. Culturally sustaining practices resulting from family insight help support and affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities while honoring their values and traditions in diverse learning environments (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Reliance on Personal Experience and Initiative. Many participants also reported relying on personal lived experiences and proactive professional development to fill the gaps left by formal training. Personal knowledge replaced structured preparation, prompting teachers to take

initiative to deepen their understanding of students' cultural and linguistic contexts. Teachers are often required to seek out these opportunities independently to develop the knowledge and strategies needed to create culturally sustaining classrooms. Gandara et al. (2023), along with other scholars, emphasize the need to expand professional development opportunities to those who serve immigrant students and families. This expansion is essential to better prepare them for the growing demands associated with an increasingly diverse student population, particularly among the Latiné community.

Cultural Disconnect in Educational Settings. Another theme that emerged from this study was the lack of cultural and linguistic knowledge and understanding within public schooling settings and university programs. Pedagogical approaches failed to consider students' cultural communication and learning styles. In some cases, biased statements revealed a lack of cultural sensitivity, devaluing student and teacher identities rather than recognizing them as assets. This aligns with the work of Ankeny et al. (2019), Coady (2019), and Palmer & Martinez (2013), who advocate for providing bilingual teachers with opportunities to reflect on their personal and professional experiences. Such reflection not only supports the exploration of their identities but also empowers them to advocate for more culturally responsive pedagogical practices. The participants in this study affirm Palmer's (2018) assertion that bilingual educators serve as valuable assets within educational settings, as they function as cultural and linguistic brokers.

A Need for Culturally Responsive and Empathetic Pedagogy. Lastly, findings highlight a critical need for culturally responsive and empathetic pedagogy. The stories shared by participants strongly suggest that learning environments must become more inclusive, respectful, and attuned to the diverse backgrounds of students and future educators. Culturally Sustaining

Pedagogy uses students' lived experiences to affirm their identities and enhance learning. It allows students to use their identities to foster pride and empower them to excel (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mensah, 2021).

Study Delimitations

Delimitations in this study were intentionally established to focus on a specific population: bilingual teachers who were formerly English learners (ELs), hold ESL endorsements or Spanish teaching certifications, and work in school districts across Virginia. These parameters reflect a purposeful sampling strategy aligned with the study's qualitative nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By narrowing the scope, the study aimed to explore the nuanced, lived experiences of a culturally and linguistically specific group of educators whose voices are often underrepresented in educational research. Such delimitations can inherently limit the study's generalizability and can make it more difficult to make broad comparisons. However, they are deliberate boundaries that define the study's focus and ensure alignment with its research questions and theoretical and conceptual frameworks. As Patton (2015) notes, qualitative inquiry often benefits from clearly defined participant criteria that allow for rich, contextually grounded analysis. In this case, the delimitations support the study's aim to understand how Latiné bilingual educators' personal histories as ELs inform their pedagogical practices and professional identities. These delimitations reflect a commitment to cultural specificity and relevance, which are essential in research involving marginalized or linguistically diverse populations (Paris & Alim, 2017). By centering Latiné educators with shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the study contributes to the growing body of culturally sustaining pedagogical research and offers insights that may inform more inclusive teacher preparation and support systems.

Study Limitations

The participants in this study were all former English learners who immigrated from Latin American countries and now serve in various educational roles within K–12 public schools across Virginia. These roles included a K–5 dual language immersion teacher, two Spanish teachers, and a former ESL teacher who now serves as an assistant principal. Their shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds provided rich, firsthand insights into the experiences of Latiné bilingual educators. Given the qualitative nature of the study, a large sample size was not necessary; instead, the depth and detail of each participant’s narrative and the amount of data provided through interviews, focus groups, photos, and reflections were sufficient to support meaningful thematic analysis and validate the study’s findings.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. Although there was a substantial amount of data collected, the study was limited by time constraints due to personal and professional commitments, which may have restricted both the scope of data collection and the depth of analysis. While the research aimed to explore the broader experiences of Latiné bilingual teachers across Virginia, access was only granted to educators in three specific school districts. As a result, the findings may not fully represent the diverse experiences of Latiné educators in other urban, suburban, or rural areas of the state. Additionally, the study’s focus on a specific cultural and linguistic group (Latiné educators who were once English learners) means that its findings may not be generalizable to all bilingual ESL or language teachers. English learner experiences are shaped by a variety of cultural, linguistic, and social factors, and these can differ significantly across communities. For instance, the educational experiences of Latiné ELs may differ from those of ELs from Asian, African, or Middle Eastern backgrounds. Therefore, while the study offers valuable insights into the intersection of language, identity, and teaching practice within the Latiné community, its cultural specificity limits the transferability of

its conclusions to broader EL or bilingual education contexts. Despite these limitations, the study contributes important perspectives to the field of bilingual education by centering the voices of Latiné educators and highlighting the cultural and linguistic assets they bring to their roles.

Implications for Educational Practice

Drawing from the experiences of the Latiné bilingual educators in this study, several key implications can be considered for educational practice. The experiences of these Latiné bilingual educators serve not only as teachers but as advocates for more inclusive, responsive, and human-centered educational environments. These insights highlight the need for educational practices based on cultural understanding, authentic care, linguistically and culturally responsive support, and intentional guidance (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; Bordas, 2023; Caraballo et al., 2020, Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lowery, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Central to their perspectives is the importance of human connection and nurturing the whole identity and potential of every student. The following key implications highlight five essential areas of focus for educators: 1) prioritize, 2) respond, 3) care, 4) guide, and 5) value and leverage.

Prioritizing the Recognition of Students' Lived Experiences. The experiences of Isabella, Flor, Ximena, and Santiago highlight the need for educators to understand the unique needs and challenges students face. Their reflections reveal that effective teaching begins with a deep understanding of students' cultural identities, linguistic diversity, and the socio-emotional challenges they may face as they navigate their lives in America (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017). Flor noted the importance of teachers researching students' origins. This foundational knowledge allows teachers to build more authentic relationships and avoid cultural misunderstandings (Cummins, 2017). Flor learned about the distinct histories and dialects of students from different countries, such as Guatemala or El Salvador. Ximena and Santiago

emphasized that understanding students' circumstances is especially important. It is critical to challenge any assumptions and understand that immigrant and multilingual students are immediately thrust into unfamiliar territory. This complex reality exists for many students and is continually growing as the population steadily increases. The reality is that students face abrupt transitions into American schooling systems that may not align with their prior educational experiences or cultural norms.

To address these challenges, educators must actively engage in culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2013; Paris, 2012). This includes learning about students' family structures, migration stories, and community values (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). One effective framework for this is the Funds of Knowledge approach (Moll et al., 1992). It encourages teachers to view students' home-based knowledge rooted in their cultural, linguistic, and familial experiences as valuable assets rather than deficits (Cummins, 2009). This approach positions teachers as social constructivists, co-researchers within their school communities. Rather than assuming expertise over students' lives, educators are encouraged to engage in reciprocal learning with families and communities (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2006; Moll et al., 1992, Palmer, 2018). This mindset fosters mutual respect and collaboration. It enables educators to meet students and families where they are, literally and figuratively, and co-construct educational experiences that are socially and academically meaningful. By incorporating these funds into classroom instruction, educators can create more inclusive and affirming learning environments where students can thrive.

Implementing Culturally Responsive and Explicit Linguistic Support. Participants encountered inadequate or unsupportive learning environments as English learners. Isabella's constant state of survival resulted from not having an ESL teacher who was helpful. Flor felt her

high school English teacher didn't understand she was a second language learner. Instruction for English and language learners must be explicit, culturally responsive, and tailored to student needs (Paris, 2012). To better support language development and content mastery, educators in this study demonstrate that their pedagogical approaches are informed by both personal experience and professional growth (Marichal, 2020). They make a conscious effort to connect new academic content to students' existing background knowledge, recognizing that learning is most meaningful when it builds on what students already know and value (Chávez, 2021; Dixon & Zhao, 2017; González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto et al., 2012, Roorda et al., 2011). Aligning with constructivist learning principles, this approach activates prior knowledge to facilitate comprehension and engagement. Flor has transformed her classroom into a space that encourages open dialogue and student voice. She now incorporates structured opportunities for students to speak freely, share their perspectives, and engage in collaborative discussions. Ximena prioritizes language immersion and conversational opportunities in her instruction. She understands that language acquisition is not solely about grammar and vocabulary, but also about active engagement through communication and social interaction.

Fostering a Culture of Genuine Care and Community. A strong theme across the participants' stories is the importance of care, empathy, and community support, which is often rooted in their cultural values (Alfaro & Hernandez, 2023). Flor, Ximena, and Santiago highlighted the communal spirit prevalent in Colombian culture, which contrasts with American individualism. Participants emphasized building relationships with students and families, particularly Latiné immigrant families, and viewing a simple phone call as a significant act of care that helps understand a student's needs. Educational practices should cultivate a nurturing,

family-like environment where students feel valued and supported (Flores, 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Hidalgo, 2015; Moll et al., 1992).

This culture of care must extend beyond the classroom to include intentional family and community engagement, which is essential to student success. Participants stressed that when educators actively involve families, especially those from Latiné backgrounds, they foster trust, strengthen home-school connections, and create a more inclusive learning environment. By engaging families as partners and advocates, schools can better address students' academic and social-emotional needs, which could improve outcomes and foster a sense of belonging for all (Gershenson et al., 2023).

Serving as Guides to Resources and Opportunities. Porter et al. (2023) asserted that individuals who speak minoritized languages often encounter systemic barriers, including social marginalization and limited access to resources and opportunities. Participants observed that many Latiné English learners and their families are unaware of available resources and post-high school options, such as college, university, or technical schools. Isabella noticed this lack of awareness among English learners during her internship. She feels a sense of responsibility to expose students to resources and opportunities that align with their potential interests. Ximena emphasized that students are often not informed about technical school options early enough in their education. She stressed the importance of providing this information more frequently and at earlier stages to ensure students can make well-informed decisions about their future. Based on their own experiences, Isabella and Ximena feel a strong sense of responsibility to guide students through the various educational options available to them. Their perspective highlights the broader obligation of educators and schools to take a proactive role in informing students and

their families about different educational pathways and support services that can help them succeed (Rodriguez & Wy, 2024).

Recognizing and Leveraging the Value of Bilingual Educators' Lived Experiences.

This study demonstrates that educators who were formerly English learners possess unique insights, empathy, and skills derived from their personal journeys (Albers & Frederick, 2013; Bower-Phipps et al., 2013; Hayes et al., 2014; Milner, 2006; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). They understand firsthand the challenges of language barriers, cultural adjustment, and biases that students experience. Santiago emphasized that his role as a Latiné administrator is a powerful representation for students and an example of what they can aspire to become. His presence alone challenges stereotypes and affirms the potential of Latiné youth. There is a greater need for cultural and linguistic representation within educational leadership and teaching staff as the population of students, especially as the population of Latiné English learners increases significantly (Gershenson et al., 2021).

Schools must recognize that Latiné bilingual educators bring more than just language skills. They bring lived experiences that are invaluable in connecting with students and families from similar backgrounds. These educators serve as cultural and linguistic brokers, bridging gaps between home and school, and advocating for students in ways that others may not be equipped to do (Palmer, 2018). Their ability to relate to students on a personal level through shared language, culture, and life experiences fosters trust, belonging, and academic engagement. Moreover, their presence challenges colleagues to reflect on and confront their own linguistic and cultural biases. By embracing the lived experiences of bilingual educators as assets, schools can create more inclusive, equitable environments that better serve English learners and students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Implications for Educational Leaders

The experiences of Isabella, Flor, Ximena, and Santiago highlighted the importance of comprehensive professional development for all teachers. Findings emphasized the need for a deep understanding of students' backgrounds to foster truly equitable learning environments. The personal bilingual journeys of these Latiné educators suggest implications for professional development in cultural responsiveness, as well as offering specialized training on the cultural groups represented in the student population.

Deeper Dive into Cultural Histories and Linguistic Dialects. Isabella recalled feeling a sense of relief when she finally felt “seen” by a history teacher who provided her with a text in both English and Spanish. That moment shaped a core belief that teachers should actively research and learn about students' backgrounds to understand both the challenges they experience and assets that they bring into the classroom (Moll et al., 1992). Flor shared similar sentiments when she described feeling unnoticed by her U.S. teachers, and how their lack of awareness resulted in missed opportunities to support her academic growth. Santiago strongly advocated for schools to foster a culture of care that acknowledged the unique characteristics of students and their families, particularly immigrant families whose parental engagement often differed due to economic priorities. He also stressed that teachers should be open to new cultures and beliefs through cultural exchange. Creating space for this kind of exchange would position students as holders of valuable knowledge when they enter the classroom, allowing both students and teachers to become active contributors to the cultural representation observed in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2006; Moll et al., 1992, Palmer, 2018).

Beyond general cultural responsiveness, participants in the study suggested that educational leaders should provide teachers with targeted opportunities to gain knowledge about

the prevalent cultural and linguistic groups within their schools (Ball & Tyson, 2011; Gándara et al., 2023; Gay & Howard, 2000; Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Palmer, 2018; Sleeter, 2001; Zumwalt & Craig 2005). For instance, Flor took the initiative to enroll in history classes to deepen her understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of her Salvadorian students and the political unrest that shaped life in Guatemala. This example highlights the importance of region-specific cultural and historical training, which helps teachers understand the complex realities that shape students' learning styles and needs.

The findings made it clear that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient for reaching all students, especially when the goal is to ensure that all students feel seen and valued (Albers & Frederick, 2013; Hayes et al., 2014; Milner, 2006). Leaders are encouraged to support teachers in learning about the specific cultural and linguistic nuances of their students' educational backgrounds, fostering more individualized instruction. For educational leaders, the implication is clear. Leaders should invest in holistic, ongoing professional development that promotes general cultural responsiveness and also provides in-depth knowledge of the diverse cultural and linguistic groups that shape school communities (Ball & Tyson, 2011; Gándara et al., 2023; Gay & Howard, 2000; Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sleeter, 2001; Zumwalt & Craig 2005). Such an approach would empower teachers to create inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments where all students, especially English learners, could thrive (Ankeny et al., 2019; Coady, 2019; Palmer & Martinez, 2013).

Implications for Educational Policy

The findings of this study suggest that educational policies must go beyond basic language support. Instead, based on participants shared experiences, there is space to implement

policies that foster equitable, culturally affirming environments that recognize and leverage the strengths of bilingualism and multiculturalism.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development. The first priority should be given to reviewing teacher preparation and professional development programs. Participants suggested that current teacher training programs, especially in the U.S., may not adequately equip educators with the practical skills needed to support linguistically and culturally diverse students. Based on participants' accounts in this study, while graduate programs addressed theory, practical application for diverse bilingual classes was often overlooked. Two of the four participants also noted that their own experiences were not acknowledged in their formal training. Marichal (2020) has also encouraged programs to enhance teacher preparation and professional development programs by encouraging a shift toward valuing teachers' relational knowledge, which is deeply rooted in their personal experiences.

Participants also noted the need and desire to learn about diverse cultures and ways of instructing students that were not covered in their initial training. Policy should mandate comprehensive, culturally responsive, and *linguistically* focused training for *all* prospective teachers, not just those specializing in ESL. This will ensure they understand the varied nature of the factors that influence learning, including language acquisition, and are better prepared to teach students of diverse backgrounds. Such policies would also support a “culture of care” within schools that respects diverse family structures and engagement (NCES, 2025). Educators should have access to accessible, ongoing training on culturally responsive professional development that empowers them to continuously refine and adapt their strategies to meet the evolving needs of diverse student populations.

Equitable Access to Resources and Information. The second consideration is ensuring proactive access to information about resources and opportunities available to all students, especially to English learners (Guzman, 2022). Participants noted that many Latiné students and their families were unaware of available support services, such as school counselors or post-secondary options like college or technical schools. This lack of awareness often led to a disinterest in pursuing higher education or technical education. For example, technical school pathways are not introduced early enough to ensure appropriate course planning. Policy should require schools and districts to implement proactive, accessible systems for informing English learners and their families about educational pathways, support services, and post-secondary options (colleges, universities, technical schools, etc.). This should be done so that the information is available in their native languages and delivered through culturally sensitive outreach. Ensuring equitable access to information is fundamental for students to make informed decisions about their future (Guzman, 2022; Pratt, 2022).

Valuing Bilingual Teachers' Lived Experiences. Finally, policy must recognize and value the lived experiences of bilingual teachers (Bevan, 2014; Larson, 2018; Quiroz, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2013). This study highlights how educators who were formerly English learners bring invaluable insights, empathy, and practical strategies derived from their personal journeys. They understand the challenges of navigating language barriers, cultural transitions, and systemic obstacles firsthand. Their presence as teachers and leaders is a powerful model for students. Policy should recognize the unique asset that bilingual teachers' lived experiences represent by creating pathways for recruiting, retaining, and promoting these educators (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). Their expertise as cultural and linguistic brokers, advocates, and role

models should be valuable and essential to building inclusive and effective educational environments.

Considerations for Future Research

This study highlights an opportunity to explore further how educators' rich experiences inform and shape their classroom practices. The study was limited to educators in three specific school districts across Virginia. Therefore, findings may not fully represent the diverse experiences of Latiné educators in other urban, suburban, or rural areas of the state. Research expanding the geographic scope of school districts and different types of areas (urban, suburban, rural) is needed (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). This could determine if the experiences and perspectives of Latiné bilingual educators found in this study are consistent across the state or vary significantly based on location and local context. Acknowledging and understanding Latiné bilingual educators' experiences across different geographic settings is vital for establishing and tailoring support systems, professional development, and recruitment strategies that are specific to regional needs. The advantage of educational leaders having access to such findings would aid in developing policies and practices responsive to the realities faced by educators and students in their particular districts.

The study focused specifically on Latiné bilingual educators who were once English learners. It notes that English learners' experiences are shaped by diverse cultural, linguistic, and social factors that differ across communities. Current research on English Learners (ELs) highlights the importance of educators developing a contextual understanding of bilingual students, especially since language learning is influenced by many connected factors (social, cultural, environmental) working together (Fekete, 2019; NCES, 2025). This includes not only recognizing their unique linguistic abilities but also valuing the rich cultural backgrounds they

bring to the classroom. As de Jong, Harper, and Coady (2013) emphasize, effective teaching for ELs requires more than general pedagogical knowledge. It demands an informed awareness of how students' language experiences and cultural identities shape their learning processes and classroom engagement.

Therefore, findings in this study may not be generalizable to all bilingual, ESL, or language teachers, nor to ELs from non-Latiné backgrounds (e.g., Asian, African, or Middle Eastern). Further research is needed to explore the lived experiences of bilingual educators and former English learners from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, comparative studies examining the similarities and differences between the experiences of educators from various backgrounds would also be valuable (Tatto, 2023). Farrell (1979) emphasizes that comparative inquiry is essential in empirical research because it helps identify the conditions under which system relationships exist in education.

As the demographics continuously change with new educational policies, it is particularly important to create inclusive educational environments for *all* students, and educators and leaders must understand the diverse range of experiences among *all* their students and staff (NCES, 2025). This study is grounded on a social constructivist framework emphasizes that effective teaching for Latiné English learners involves more than general good practices (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014). It requires integrating students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into the learning process. Classroom environments are spaces where learning is shared. It is an interactive experience, and instruction is designed by connecting with students' lived experiences and cultural knowledge.

Studies aimed at cultural responsiveness, addressing bias and discrimination, and valuing lived experiences must be informed by a broader understanding of how these factors play out

across different cultural and linguistic groups (Porter et al., 2023). Longitudinal studies or studies with more extended data collection periods allow for deeper exploration of the long-term impacts of professional development for teachers, early experiences of learners, or sustained engagement with families and communities of students. A more prolonged analysis could reveal greater patterns and causal relationships between educators' lived experiences, their pedagogical approaches, and student outcomes. This could provide stronger evidence for which policies and practices are most effective over time, which could guide leaders to make sustainable improvements.

Concluding Reflections

This study explored the experiences of four Latiné bilingual educators who were formerly English learners. Using a qualitative *plática* approach, it examined how their backgrounds inform their teaching practices. A key discovery highlights the impact of their journeys as former English learners on their teaching practices. Their strong family values and unwavering support from communities instilled perseverance, prioritized education, and provided a foundation to overcome challenges. Navigating new linguistic and cultural landscapes in the U.S. presented significant challenges, including difficulties with language acquisition, cultural transition, and a lack of school support. One of the most compelling commonalities found was their encounters with bias and linguicism. Many participants shared feelings of invisibility and judgment based on their language, accents, ethnicity, and heritage. Achievement among Latiné students is best understood through frameworks that affirm their cultural and linguistic strengths. Funds of Knowledge and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies demonstrate how lived experiences, familial practices, and community resources serve as assets in the learning process and how these assets are honored when instruction integrates students' cultural and linguistic practices to support

achievement (González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Together, they affirm that students thrive when educators build strong interpersonal relationships, validate their identities, and design instruction that sustains culture rather than erases it. This alignment reframes Latiné student achievement as a product of culturally responsive pedagogies that empower students to move *adelante* (forward).

These challenging journeys, coupled with positive influences like supportive teachers, ultimately shaped their roles as bilingual educators. The second discovery highlighted the importance of developing care, empathy, and a commitment to creating inclusive, supportive environments where students feel acknowledged and valued. Participants' dual perspective, as former English learners and practicing bilingual educators, shared how their preservice experiences inform their pedagogical approaches. However, it is their lived experiences that have been fundamental in creating environments where students feel socially and culturally accepted. They understand students' realities and the complexities firsthand due to their experiences navigating language barriers and cultural transitions. This further emphasizes the need to move beyond basic language support to foster equitable, culturally affirming environments.

Encounters with cultural differences and bias encourage the need for cultural understanding and advocacy. A strong sense of community and acknowledgement of the importance of students' social-cultural experiences shape their approach to connecting with families and fostering community in classrooms. Participants' experiences of navigating a system that frequently left participants feeling misunderstood fueled their commitment to empower students to advocate for themselves. Drawing on their struggles, they prioritize explicit linguistic support and create safe spaces for students to practice and find their voices. They serve

as advocates and guides, recognizing that many students and families should be aware of support, educational pathways, and post-high school options.

Findings carry implications for educational practice, policy, and further research. Policy should prioritize reviewing and mandating comprehensive, culturally responsive, and linguistically focused teacher preparation and ongoing professional development for all prospective teachers. Lived experiences are complex and multifaceted. They are shaped by a wide range of social, cultural, linguistic, and historical influences. Understanding these experiences is not a linear process. Factors such as identity, environment, language, and community are interconnected. Therefore, there is a critical need for educators to understand how diverse factors can influence learning and affect student outcomes, an area that needs further exploration.

Policy must also ensure equitable access to resources and information by requiring proactive, accessible systems for informing English learners and their families about educational pathways and post-secondary options, especially if there is a need to improve outcomes among Latiné English learners. Developing culturally responsive educators and advocates can potentially improve students' outlook on their educational trajectory. Bilingual teachers who inherently practice cultural responsiveness in the classroom help school environments become more socially and culturally accepting, fostering a culture of care that demonstrates to students that their academic outcomes matter. Policy must recognize and value bilingual educators' lived experiences, using them to create pathways for recruiting, retaining, and promoting educators with such social and cultural expertise.

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APPENDIX A: Recruitment Email

Dear Bilingual Teacher,

My name is Leslie Vélez and I am a current doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Blacksburg. For my dissertation, I am conducting a research study to understand how Latiné bilingual teachers, who were previously identified as English learners, make sense of their experiences when they reflect on their K-12 education, their decision to become bilingual educators, and their perception of their teacher preparation.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. To be eligible, participants must fit the following criteria: 1) be a current bilingual teacher in a K-12 public school in Virginia, 2) have been a former English learner (EL), and 3) be licensed and endorsed in English as a Second Language (ESL) or certified to teach a language such as Spanish.

There will be one interview, written reflection (optional), and a focus group that will take approximately 60 minutes each. The interviews focus on your views, ideas, and opinions of your experiences both as an EL and your preparation to become a bilingual teacher. The interviews will be conducted in person, and the time and location will be determined based on your needs. All research activities will take place after contractual hours. Your identity and data in this study will remain confidential.

There are no anticipated risks for participating in this study. Each participant will receive a \$15 gift card after completing the interview and a focus group. Information collected will be stored on a password-protected computer, and you will have an opportunity to review information generated from the interview, written reflection (if applicable), and focus group for accuracy.

If you are interested in participating, please email the signed consent form (attached) to leslievt22@vt.edu by [insert deadline]. I will then contact you to schedule the interview.

Thank you for your consideration of this project. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your time and consideration,
Leslie Vélez
Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University

APPENDIX B: Consent Form

Title of Research Study: Our stories need to take space: *Pláticas* reflecting Latiné educators' experiences as English learners and perceptions of their journey in becoming bilingual educators

Researcher: Leslie Vélez

Principal investigator name (Chair): Dr. Charles L. Lowery

Description: You are being invited to participate in this research study because your experiences as an English learner and as a bilingual educator in the K-12 setting can provide valuable insights into educational programs, policies, and practices. The purpose of this study is to understand how Latiné bilingual teachers, who were previously identified as English learners, make sense of their experiences when they reflect on their K-12 education, their decision to become bilingual teachers, and their perception of their teacher preparation program.

Procedures: If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be asked to participate in an interview, a written reflection (optional), and a focus group each lasting up to 60 minutes. All research activities will take place outside of contractual hours. The time and location of the interviews and focus group will be arranged to accommodate you and other participants' needs.

Possible risks: Participation in this study is associated with minimal potential risk.

Potential risks and/or discomfort: Participation may involve sharing your experiences of being identified as an English learner in the K-12 setting and experiences in schools. You are not required to answer any questions you do not wish to, and you may stop participating in the interview or focus group at any time. Your name will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used for both individuals and institutions.

Compensation: You will receive a \$15 gift card as compensation for participating in this study. The gift card will be provided after completing an interview and a focus group.

Audio-recordings: You will be audio-recorded during each interview and the focus group. The audio recordings will be transcribed for data analysis purposes, and the recordings and data will be destroyed after completion of the study. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, please inform the researcher, and only hand-written notes will be taken during the individual interviews.

Voluntary participation: Participating in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question or to end your participation in the study at any time for any reason without penalty. If you decide to withdraw early, the information or data you provided will be destroyed unless you give consent for it to be used.

Questions: If you have any questions about this study or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact me at leslievt22@vt.edu or 856.981.5374.

Questions regarding the rights of research subjects may be directed to Dr. Charles L. Lowery, Chair, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects at 540-230-5291 or clowery@vt.edu.

The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) on the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed and approved the research study.

You have a choice whether or not to participate. Selecting “yes” indicates that you have agreed to participate and have read and agreed with the information provided above.

Do you agree to participate in this study?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: Dissertation Qualification & Demographic Survey

Part I: Background

Q1: What is your name?

Q2: What is your racial background?

Q3: Do you identify as Latiné?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q4: How old are you?

Q5: Were you identified as an English learner in your K-12 education?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q6: Do you know how old you were when you qualified to receive ESL support as an English learner? If so, how old?

Q7: For how long did you receive services?

Q8: What category best describes when you received services as an English learner in your K-12 education? Check all that apply.

- Grades K-2 (1)
- Grades 3-5 (2)
- Grades 6-8 (3)
- Grades 9-12 (4)
- Other (5) _____

Part II: Teaching

Q9: Have you received a certification in English as a Second Language?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q10: How long have you been teaching (total years)?

Q11: How long have you been an ESL teacher (total years)?

Q12: Do you teach in a dual language/immersion program?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q13: What is your email address?

APPENDIX D: Guiding Questions for La Plática (The Conversation)

La Entrada

Getting Acquainted

1. Can you share a bit about your ethnic heritage and how it has influenced your life?
2. What was your childhood like in the place where you grew up? Any memorable experiences?
3. Which languages did you grow up speaking at home, and how did they shape your cultural identity?
4. What were some unique aspects of your school experience in your country? Any traditions or practices that stood out?

La Plática

Inspiration and Motivation

1. What specific experiences or encounters sparked your interest in becoming a bilingual teacher?
2. Can you describe the role model who motivated you to teach, including specific qualities or actions that you found inspiring?
3. How did your cultural background influence your decision to pursue bilingual education?

Experiences as an English Learner

1. Thinking back to your time as an English learner, can you describe a specific instance where a teacher's actions had a significant positive or negative impact on your learning experience?
2. What specific strategies or approaches did effective ESL teachers use that made a difference in your learning?
3. How did these experiences shape your own teaching philosophy and methods?

Influence of Family and Personal Background

1. In what specific ways did your family support or influence your decision to become a bilingual teacher?
2. What values or beliefs from your family's cultural background do you bring into your teaching practice?
3. Can you share a specific story or experience from your upbringing that highlights the importance of bilingualism or multiculturalism?

Impact of Race, Class, and Language

1. Can you describe a specific situation where issues of race, class, or language affected you personally or professionally?
2. How did these experiences shape your understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing bilingual students?
3. In what ways do you address issues of equity and inclusion in your classroom?

La Salida

Closing, Looking Ahead

1. What are your hopes and goals for your students as bilingual individuals?
2. How do you envision your role as a bilingual teacher evolving in the future?
3. What does language mean to you?

Visual Representation (Photo Elicitation)

- When we come together for a focus group, please bring in a photo that captures what it means to be a bilingual teacher. Be prepared to share the story behind the picture. Select five words (in English, Spanish, or Both) to describe it.

APPENDIX E: Teacher Written Reflection

Thank you for participating in the study “Holding Space for Our Stories: Latiné Educators’ Experiences as English Learners and Their Journey to Becoming Bilingual Teachers.”

Please take a moment to reflect and respond to the following question on your experiences as an English learner and how those experiences shaped your decision to become an educator. Feel free to use your preferred language.

Navigating School as an English Learner

1. How did your parents or caregivers come to understand the English as a Second Language (ESL) process?
2. What grade were you in when you started school in the U.S.?
3. How old were you at the time?
4. How were you welcomed into the school? In the classroom?
5. Can you describe the different types of English as a Second Language (ESL) support you received in school and how each one impacted your learning experience?

Understanding My Identity as an English Learner: A Personal Reflection

1. How did being an English learner affect you?
2. How did it affect your relationships with your family? Friends? Classmates?
3. How did it have an impact on your perception of school?
4. How did you feel about being labeled as an English learner?
5. Did you ever face any resistance or challenges as an English learner? If so, can you share your experience?
6. In what ways would you have preferred family or teachers to support you as an English learner?
7. Academically, what kind of support or engagement would have been most beneficial for you?
8. Socially, culturally, and emotionally, how could they have better connected with and supported you?

The Impact of Being an English Learner: Choices, Challenges, and Advocacy for Change

1. Can you share how your experiences as an English learner influenced your decision to become an educator? What specific moments or challenges shaped this choice?
2. How do you hope your story can help improve language education? Are there parts of your experience that show why change is needed?

Questions

1. Do you have any questions for me? Or, is there anything else that you would like to share?

Next Steps

- The final part of the study will involve a focus group. An email will be sent to coordinate a date when the group can meet.
- Please be prepared to discuss the extent to which your teacher preparation programs acknowledged, valued, and integrated your cultural and linguistic experiences into their curriculum and pedagogical approaches.
- Bring in a photo that captures what it means to be a bilingual teacher, be prepared to share the story behind the picture. Select five words (in English, Spanish, or Both) to describe it.
- At the end of the study, I will share your story with you to ensure I have accurately captured the essence of your experiences. You will be permitted to provide feedback.

APPENDIX F: Guiding Questions for Focus Group

La Entrada

1. Last time we met, I asked you to bring a photo that captures what it means to be a bilingual teacher and five keywords that describe the picture in your preferred language. *Could you share your photo, the five keywords, and any additional important details you would like the group to know?*

La Plática

2. During your initial interview, I noticed many common themes I would like to highlight.
 - a. FAMILY VALUES: Many of you highlighted that you all have strong family values, and your family was instrumental in supporting you throughout your education.
 - i. How do you think that this translates into your teaching practices?
 - ii. How do your strong family values and experiences enhance cultural responsiveness in your classrooms?
 - b. CULTURE & LANGUAGE: Many of you emphasized how culture and language serve as powerful tools for building connections with others.
 - i. How important is it that Latiné English learners share similar experiences with at least one teacher?
 - ii. How have similarities enhanced your relationships with students?
 - c. CULTURE OF CARE: Many of you highlighted the significance of creating a nurturing and caring environment.
 - i. How important is it for Latiné English learners to be exposed to a nurturing environment and feel cared for?
 - ii. How do you establish a nurturing environment?
 - d. COMMUNITY: Many of you emphasized the importance of fostering a sense of community within your families and schools.
 - i. Do you believe that teachers have a responsibility to provide resources and opportunities to ESL students?
 - ii. Do you believe that is currently happening? What recommendations would you provide?
3. How was your cultural and linguistic knowledge incorporated into your teacher preparation program?
4. Do you believe that there was enough opportunity for you and your college classmates to explore how to prepare students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds? Why or why not?
 - a. Can you provide ideas or examples of how you would address this?
5. What aspects of your teacher preparation did you feel were most helpful in preparing you to teach ESL students?
6. Were there any gaps in your training that left you feeling unprepared?
7. Do you feel you have opportunities to develop your skills as an ESL teacher beyond your formal education? In what ways?

- a. What additional resources or training would you like to see provided to educators of English learners in the future?

La Salida (Closing)

8. Is there anything you wish to add to the *plática*?
9. Do you have any questions for me?
10. I'd like to review the notes from today and share them with you to make sure I captured your words correctly and then share them with you for your review.

Thank you for your time, openness, and for sharing such impactful stories with me.

APPENDIX G: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board Approval



Division of Scholarly Integrity and
Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North Eild Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
ib@vt.edu
<http://www.research.vt.edu/IRB/app>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 23, 2024
TO: Charles L Lowery, Leslie Velez
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)
PROTOCOL TITLE: Our Stories Need to Take Space: Pí´ticas Reflecting Latin´ Educators’ Experiences as English Learners and Perceptions of their Journey in Becoming Bilingual Educators
IRB NUMBER: 24-1314

Effective December 23, 2024, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(i).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(i)**
Protocol Determination Date: **December 23, 2024**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol.

Invent the Future

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution.

Date*	OSP Number	Sponsor

* Date this proposal number was added.

If this protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the HRPP office (irb@vt.edu).