

Chapter 13

Becoming the Teacher I Needed and Never Had

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ABSTRACT

As a Latina first-generation immigrant, the author reflects on her life trajectory that has lead her from the early childhood classroom to the university higher education. Reflecting on the journey has made her aware of some central themes that support her in moving forward in her trajectory, which includes 1) being proud of who you are even when you are not acknowledged or recognized by institutional spaces or individuals; 2) knowing and following what you are passionate about, which for her was the literacy instruction for early childhood Spanish bilingual students; 3) how to overcome obstacles, as well as lack of support and network at an institution; 4) dreaming big and how to take steps to make it a reality. She wants Latinx students' experiences to be valued and centered in classrooms across the United States, not just for her children, but for all the Latinx children both born in the United States and those that immigrated to the United States. This is what has been her main focus throughout her trajectory.

BECOMING THE TEACHER I NEEDED AND NEVER HAD

I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. At six years old, I was “teaching” my stuffed animals, giving them homework, completing their assignments, and grading their assignments with my red teacher pen. I would place about six of my stuffed animals in a semi-circle facing a blue plastic chalkboard easel I owned. This classroom of mine was set up in my bedroom next to my bunk beds. I would write on the chalkboard and call on different stuffed animals to “answer” my questions. I would play the role of both teacher and student. At the end of the given time, I would assign homework to my students. I would give each stuffed animal a sheet of paper and orally give directions of something to write. I would then take the piece of paper myself and write on the page. My favorite activity was when I went back into the teacher role and got to use a red pen to mark up the paper. I would put check marks throughout the page and put a smiley face on top. I wanted to provide my students with positive reinforcement. This

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brought me great joy and happiness. I felt like I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be a teacher of young children.

How It Started

A Chicago native, I had the privilege of attending a bilingual (Spanish-English) pre-kindergarten program in the basement of my local church. At age five, my parents enrolled me in a local monolingual English private parochial school. My mom told me how the school administrators instructed my parents to stop speaking Spanish at home because, according to their deficit-based thinking, I would be confused. I assume that this comment was made by administrators because my parents did not speak English proficiently at that time. They might have spoken English with what others might have considered an “accent.” Without even meeting me or assessing my academic status, these administrators assumed I was lacking. My parents however knew better. They continued to speak Spanish at home because they understood the critical importance of having pride in my cultural heritage, language, and the simple yet crucial ability to communicate with extended family in Colombia.

When I finally entered kindergarten, the nun/teacher and school administrators were surprised at my high level of academic achievement. I had defied the low expectations they held of Latinx students like me. The teacher went so far as to recommend my advanced placement into the next grade, but my parents decided against it. My parents wanted me to stay with my age group. When my teacher broke her leg later that kindergarten academic year, I became the teacher’s helper. I embodied a refusal of that deficit narrative, but I was always left to wonder whether I was the exception or the rule. In the middle of first grade, I moved to a predominately white suburb. My new school was ill-equipped to serve multilingual children like me. For the first several weeks there, I was pulled out of the classroom to receive speech services. This, of course, did not last very long because the speech pathologist quickly realized that I did not have any issues related to my speech; to the contrary, I was quite skilled when it came to my speaking ability in both English and Spanish.

As a proud Colombian American born to two immigrant parents, I knew I wanted to work in bilingual education because of my struggles in K-12 schooling. These childhood educational experiences sowed a seed in my eventual growth into a bilingual teacher. I now can name the wealth of knowledge that multilingual students brought into the classroom through academic concepts such as funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) to enrich the classroom curriculum and practices. Funds of knowledge refer to the culturally and historically developed knowledge gained through life experiences (Moll et al., 1992).

I wanted to be that Latinx teacher I never had. I wanted my students to see themselves reflected in me. My own educational experiences are at the heart of my decision to become a Spanish bilingual classroom teacher, and eventually a university professor. I know that by supporting the development of future and in-service teachers, future multilingual students will not have to endure the deficit-based assumptions that teachers and administrators would otherwise place on them.

In this chapter, I will share my trajectory as a teacher turned academic and provide ideas on how teachers can implement culturally sustaining practices (Paris & Alim, 2017) in their work. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) seeks to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1). CSP is important because it not only recognizes the importance of tapping into the community’s cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that students bring into the classroom; it is about how those knowledges, languages, and cultural practices are sustained and extended. CSP promotes equity across racial and ethnic communities

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