



COLUMN: BILITERACY IN TEXAS

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COLUMN INTRODUCTION

The number of bilingual students in our schools is growing which includes many different kinds of learners, each with their unique potential and literacy needs. These multilingual learners are in various educational programs including mainstream, ESL, sheltered, bilingual, language immersion, or world language classes. Though not mutually exclusive, we might refer to them by using these categories: emergent bilinguals (students who are acquiring English as an additional language), heritage language speakers (students who speak a language of their parents in addition to English), simultaneous bilinguals (students who have grown up with more than one language), sequential bilinguals (students who are acquiring an additional language after the beginning of formal education such as in a secondary world language classroom), or even dual-language learners (students are beginning their education by receiving instruction in two languages). This myriad of classifications of bilingual students only scratches the surface of understanding this growing and complex group of global citizens. Therefore, there is a need for all literacy educators (bilingual or not) to have working knowledge of biliteracy assessment, development, and instruction in order to help all students reach their full potential. This column will be devoted to discussing relevant trends of biliteracy in the state of Texas.



JUNTXS WITH THE COMUNIDAD: A COLLABORATION ACROSS TWO UNIVERSITIES AND ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

In this column, a pre-service bilingual teacher from the University of North Texas shares her journey with the Bilingual Homework Hotline—an online homework help platform created in response to COVID-19’s impact in Denton’s Latinx community. She brings a unique perspective as a Latina who has held positions as both volunteer and leader for homework help sessions and who has conducted research with the Hotline to explore the interdisciplinary collaboration between Denton ISD’s Bilingual/Dual Language & ESL Department, the University of North Texas, and Texas Woman’s University. These roles allowed her to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a critical ethnographer while developing critical consciousness (Palmer et al., 2019) with the goal of contributing to what Ladson-Billings (2021) calls the “hard reset.” This column contributes to the developing literature about university and bilingual education program partnerships due to the unique nature of this collaboration.

Keywords: university partnerships, English learners, critical ethnography

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools were operating online as classes became virtual. This unprecedented method of schooling left many students isolated and in need of guidance both academic and socio-emotional. Denton Independent School District’s students faced the same issues but they noticed that their Latinx students were struggling more than most due to language and resource barriers. In order to better serve their bilingual, Latinx students, the district partnered with the University of North Texas and Texas Woman’s University to create the Bilingual Homework Hotline in 2020. The Bilingual Homework Hotline pairs pre-service bilingual teachers from both universities with Denton ISD’s emergent bilingual students to help them with their homework, and in the beginning of the partnership this was the main focus.



I became involved with the Homework Hotline in August of 2020 at the beginning of the project. A couple of my bilingual education courses had a volunteer requirement as part of the course's learning goals with the hotline and I have been involved ever since. During that time, I was learning about the different types of bilingual programs. I was excited to be part of a project that aimed to help children during this difficult time, but I was even more excited to be able to apply all of the knowledge I gained from my bilingual education courses.

Two main themes that I situated myself into were critical consciousness (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2019) and *acompañamiento* (Heiman & Nuñez-Janes, 2021; Sepulveda, 2011, 2018) because they were the most prevalent in my early experiences in the hotline. Critical consciousness is the proposed fourth goal of dual language education and is composed of four actions: interrogating power, critical listening, historicizing schools, and embracing discomfort. This goal aims to foster awareness of the structural oppression that surrounds us and a readiness to take action to correct it. In the literature, *acompañamiento* means to stand with someone and accompany them in their struggles and successes and see them as fully human.

Throughout my experience I found myself emanating all four actions of critical consciousness, but in the beginning due to my sole position as tutor, I mainly participated in critical listening by actively listening to parents' and students' experiences during the pandemic and their suggestions to improve the hotline and I embraced discomfort when learning how to meaningfully connect with students and their families online and when developing my academic Spanish. I practiced *acompañamiento* right from the start before really knowing what it was. I wasn't just helping the students with homework, I was sitting with them as they recounted traumatic events as a result of the pandemic, I was helping students with their transition from moving from a different country, and I was forming meaningful relationships built on trust and through my use of Spanish.



As time passed, I became more confident in my abilities to navigate the Zoom space that we used to host the tutoring sessions and I built relationships with colleagues from Texas Woman's University and DISD, opening the door to assume a leader role on the hotline. At this point in time, leaders would receive phone calls from parents, give them the Zoom meeting code and then they would be paired with a tutor waiting on standby and placed in a Zoom call. Leaders were also expected to manage and solve any internet problems and make sure that all tutors logged on for their time slot. This role as leader offered me a new perspective in that I could start to think about ways we could improve and streamline the communication between parents, students, and tutors.

THE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

In the Spring of 2021, I became a McNair Scholar and I chose to deepen my connection with the hotline by proposing to conduct research with my mentor. Because we have been with the project since the beginning, we felt like we built enough trust and *confianza* with the school district and the community to move forward with the collaboration. I now had the privilege of attending weekly meetings with professors and staff from both universities and DISD and I started to document my experience from four perspectives: bilingual pre-service teacher, tutor, leader, and now researcher. This new added perspective allowed me to engage in the other two elements of critical consciousness: interrogating power and historicizing schools.

During this time period, the discourse surrounding learning loss and test scores was gaining popularity, causing tensions between stakeholders. Some believed the hotline should primarily focus on homework help and other stakeholders believed the hotline could be used as a means to do more transformative work to acompañar students and their families during this difficult time, to develop and offer other programs with different departments, and to aid in lowering the college achievement gap among other ideas. We engaged in interrogating power by continuing to advocate for the students' needs and by



continuing to focus on their socio-emotional health during our homework sessions. For example, some students just wanted to hang out with tutors because they felt lonely and some simply wanted the tutors to silently accompany them while they completed their homework or silent reading. We were more than happy to do so because we understood that this pandemic was affecting these students in ways that we couldn't even imagine and we were willing to do whatever we could to provide emotional support during this unprecedented time. No act was too small.

We also interrogated power and engaged in critical listening by advocating for a morning time slot with one of the middle schools. Up until this point, we were only helping elementary school students with their homework in the evenings, but we realized that more students in the district needed our help. The district also hired teachers to start taking appointments after school to aid in the increase of calls. The way we received calls was different this semester as well in order to streamline the communication process and build community with the tutors. We now had a single Zoom space where all tutors congregated before being placed in breakout rooms with their student. To mark the end of an improved semester, a *celebración* was held with testimonios from students and parents to share their positive experiences with the hotline.

Just because the school year ended didn't mean that the collaboration was over. In fact, the same stakeholders from DISD, TWU, and UNT met online throughout the summer to brainstorm new ideas for the project for the upcoming semester as well as apply to different professional conferences to start sharing our experience with other people.

BRANCHING OUT

The start of the 2021 school year was met with excitement because the Bilingual Homework Hotline decided to branch out and provide workshops about applying for and attending college through the sharing testimonios of current bilingual college students. We



also provided pre-service teachers opportunities to virtually interact with *libros acompañantes* in a dual language classroom and offered expertise in parent meetings that were in Spanish. This was possible due to the many connections the Hotline built over time with departments and programs from other disciplines. We now have university students from the anthropology and math departments participating as tutors as well. When you are involved in a project that centers racially minoritized children and their families during difficult times, you quickly realize that there is no other choice than to partner with as many institutions and departments as possible.

We also partnered with the same middle school to offer another online, morning time slot. However, instead of offering homework help, we are reading the Spanish version of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* by Sean Covey and developing lessons to mentor the students and accompany them through each habit. The time slot was labeled as a remediation period so that the students could continue to develop their oral and written Spanish and English with the help of bilingual and monolingual tutors. In order to make these lessons more engaging and worthwhile for the students, we have integrated *libros acompañantes*, videos, and testimonios from Latinx university graduates. We have also given the students posters and materials to create their own vision boards to document their thoughts and lessons learned with each habit that we cover. The project is ongoing at the moment and I'm excited to continue to build more connections with students and their families and I'm excited to watch the project grow even more.

CONCLUSION

My journey with the Bilingual Homework Hotline has been immensely rewarding and has shown me the complexities and tensions that arise from university and school partnerships. It has also proved that it is possible to contribute to what Ladson-Billings (2021) calls the hard reset.



Ladson-Billings (2021) postulated that “going back to normal” is not a viable choice because black and brown children’s “normal” has historically consisted of multiple inequities. They have been more likely to have underprepared teachers, disproportionately suffer from school discipline policies, and have less access to advanced courses and gifted and talented programs. They have also been more likely to be assigned to special education courses without sufficient evidence. To give racially minoritized students equitable opportunities during the pandemic, we must push for a hard reset by implementing culturally relevant pedagogies and participating in partnerships that work together to affirm students’ cultures and ways of being. Partnerships like the Bilingual Homework Hotline are our best chance to ensure academic, social, and cultural success for the students we serve.

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