

When Only the Language is Valued: Cultural Sustainability, Educator Erasure, and the Accelerating Threat of Anti-DEI Policy in Bilingual Early Childhood Classrooms

Philadelphia Morgan
University of Colorado, Denver
ORCID ID 0009-0007-0233-7271

Abstract

This paper examines what I term the cultural sustainability problem in bilingual early childhood education: the commodification of Spanish as a cognitive asset for children while the Latine educators who carry that language are rendered invisible and interchangeable. Drawing on my experience directing a bilingual preschool in Colorado where thirty-five of thirty-six staff were Latine women, scholarship on educator funds of knowledge and identity, and my positionality as a hybrid-identity researcher and mother of a child with autism excluded from bilingual programming, I argue that language cannot be separated from the people and cultures who sustain it. I situate this analysis within the current U.S. political climate of anti-DEI and anti-CRT legislation, which dismantles the reflective practices Latine educators need to thrive. I call for shifts in family engagement, teacher preparation, definitions of inclusion, and research priorities that move Latine early childhood educators from the margins to the center.

"Well, if the parents want their kids to learn Spanish then they should learn Spanish too." — Lyra, then age 6

My daughter Lyra, then six years old, cut through months of my deliberation with a single sentence. I had been wrestling with a growing tension at the private bilingual preschool I directed in Lafayette, Colorado, where thirty-five of our thirty-six staff members were Latine women who speak Spanish as their primary language. A majority of families enrolled their children because of our bilingual curriculum, yet most had little to no understanding of Spanish themselves. When a group of preschoolers transitioned into the pre-kindergarten classroom, staffed by three teachers who are most comfortable communicating in Spanish, some parents began shifting blame onto the very educators whose language they had sought out. "Maybe he's acting up because his teacher doesn't understand him." "I know I chose this school because of the Spanish, but what if his teacher doesn't understand him when he's trying to communicate something to her?"

These comments revealed a troubling pattern: families valued Spanish as a cognitive asset or social/cultural capital for their children but grew uneasy when that language came embedded in people whose culture, communication styles, and professional knowledge did not mirror their own. Meanwhile, teachers were doing their best to bridge the gap with limited tools, sending messages like "Tuvo un buen día. Good day," simple notes that could not capture the richness of what was happening in their classrooms. I began to wonder: whose responsibility is it to bridge this gap? And what happens when a program values a language but not the people and culture from which that language is inseparable?

Language as Commodity, Culture as Afterthought

The popularity of bilingual early childhood programs has surged in communities across the United States, driven in part by extensive research demonstrating cognitive and

linguistic advantages for children who learn two languages early (Smith & Clegg, 2021). Middle- and upper-income families increasingly opt into lottery or independent bilingual programs, seeking this advantage for their children. But in many of these settings, a quiet extraction is taking place: the language is harvested while the cultural knowledge, identities, and professional dignity of the educators who carry that language are overlooked or actively suppressed.

This is the core of what I call the cultural sustainability problem in bilingual education. Latine educators bring not just linguistic skill but rich funds of knowledge, cultural, emotional, educational, and professional experiences that shape who they are and how they teach (McDevitt, 2021). When their language is treated as a product to be delivered rather than a living expression of identity and culture, the work becomes extractive. Educators become interchangeable language delivery mechanisms rather than whole professionals whose cultural knowledge enriches the classroom.

Research bears this out. Studies on early childhood educator well-being reveal pervasive invisibility; the emotional complexities of educators' work are often opaque to administrators, families, and sometimes even to the educators themselves (Logan et al., 2020; Cumming et al., 2020). This invisibility is compounded for Latine educators, who face additional marginalization through language barriers, immigration status, and racialized assumptions about their competence. When educators' well-being is continually compromised by low pay, systemic oppression, and a lack of agency in their professional lives, they are less able to provide the quality of education children deserve, and they leave the field in high numbers, disrupting continuity of care.

The Personal is Political and Pedagogical

I write from a complicated positionality. As a white, documented, cisgender woman from an upper-middle-income home, I hold considerable privilege. But I was raised in a large Latine community by parents who were undocumented young adults when they came to the United States to have me. I live what I think of as a hybrid life, moving between identities, keenly aware of how power operates because I have experienced both sides of it. This awareness is what drew me to examine the experiences of the Latine educators I worked with, and what eventually led me to leave my role as director to pursue a PhD in inclusive early childhood education.

That decision was shaped not only by my professional observations but by my younger daughter, Hazel. Hazel was diagnosed with autism while enrolled in a bilingual program. Rather than adapting to support her, the program pushed her out. She now attends a monolingual English Montessori school that, despite its progressive reputation, still struggles to meet her needs. Hazel's experience crystallized something I had been circling in my research: bilingual programs that claim to value diversity and inclusion often operate within narrow definitions of both. When a child does not fit the expected mold, whether because of disability, behavior, or communication style, the program's commitment to inclusion is revealed as conditional. The same extractive logic that commodifies educators' language can also exclude children whose participation requires more than the program is willing to invest.

Anti-DEI Policy and the Acceleration of Erasure

These dynamics are not occurring in a vacuum. Across the United States, a wave of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) policies is reshaping the landscape of education. Book bans, curriculum surveillance, and legislative attacks on what is labeled "woke" content have created a climate of fear for educators at every level. Teachers have lost jobs for incorporating anti-bias practices in their classrooms. Faculty face monitoring of their curriculum and teaching, threatening

academic freedom and free speech. In several states, the very frameworks that would support educators in examining their own positionality and honoring children's cultural identities have been outlawed.

For Latine early childhood educators, this political climate is especially dangerous. The research that does exist on their experiences points to the transformative potential of self-study and critical reflection, practices where educators examine their own funds of identity, dismantle internalized racism, and build professional confidence (Souto-Manning, 2021; McDevitt, 2021). When educators are supported in reflecting on their personal identities, they can begin to challenge the white supremacy practices embedded in teacher education programs (Souto-Manning, 2021). But anti-DEI legislation directly targets these practices. Banning critical self-reflection in teacher preparation does not make racism disappear; it removes the tools educators need to name it and resist it.

Internationally, similar erosions are underway. Aotearoa New Zealand, long celebrated for its culturally inclusive and bilingual early childhood framework, TeWhāriki, is shifting toward neoliberal policies that threaten decades of progress in culturally informed curricula. Funding cuts to child care and early education programs in multiple nations reduce the availability and quality of care. These are not isolated trends, they represent a coordinated retreat from the commitment to equity and cultural sustainability in early childhood education.

The Invisibility of Those Who Sustain Bilingual Education

When I began searching for research that elevated the voices and experiences of Latine educators, I found them difficult to locate. There are extensive studies on the experiences of Latine children, many framed through a deficit lens rooted in the legacy of the No Child Left Behind Act, but significantly less attention to the educators who shape their daily lives (Gillanders et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2010). The population of education researchers is predominantly white, and the narrative imbalance in professional research reflects this. Teacher preparation programs too often perpetuate frameworks that position children and families of color as having deficits that need to be “fixed” rather than funds of knowledge to be honored (Gillanders et al., 2020).

The few studies that do center Latine educator experiences are illuminating. McDevitt (2021) documents how one Latino Jewish teacher uncovered his funds of identity as he taught and advocated for newcomer immigrant children. Jackson, Guzman, and Ramos (2010) capture the powerful benefits of professional connection among Latine educators. Irizarry (2007) demonstrates the success of “home-growing” teachers of color, recruiting individuals to work as educators in the communities where they were raised. Soltero-González and Gillanders (2021) emphasize the importance of understanding funds of knowledge in home-school partnerships. These studies show what is possible when Latine educators' identities, agency, and cultural knowledge are treated as central rather than incidental. But they remain exceptions in a research landscape that largely renders these educators invisible.

Toward Cultural Sustainability: What Must Change

If bilingual early childhood programs are to be more than vehicles for linguistic extraction, several shifts are necessary. First, families who choose bilingual programs must be invited, and expected, to engage not only with the language but with the culture of the educators their children spend significant portions of their lives with. As my daughter Lyra put it with disarming clarity, if parents want their children to learn Spanish, perhaps they should learn it too. But beyond language, families must be supported in understanding and valuing the cultural practices, beliefs, and professional knowledge that Latine educators bring to the classroom.

Second, teacher preparation programs must center funds of knowledge and critical self-study, particularly for educators of color. This means resisting the current anti-DEI backlash and insisting that reflective practice—including examination of race, identity, and power- is not “woke” ideology but essential professional development. When educators feel a sense of agency and self-efficacy in their professional lives, research consistently shows positive educational and social-emotional outcomes for the children they teach (Jones et al., 2020; Perren et al., 2017).

Third, programs must expand their definitions of inclusion. My daughter Hazel’s exclusion from bilingual education because of her autism is not an anomaly; it reflects a systemic failure to imagine bilingual, culturally sustaining classrooms that are also genuinely accessible to children with disabilities. Inclusion cannot be conditional, and diversity cannot be celebrated only when it is convenient.

Finally, we need more research that centers the voices and experiences of Latine early childhood educators and children themselves. With one in four children in the United States being Latine (Gillanders et al., 2020), the sustainability of bilingual education depends on understanding and supporting the educators who make it possible. Their stories, their knowledge, and their well-being must move from the margins to the center of our scholarship and our practice.

Conclusion

The tensions I observed daily as a director, between the value placed on Spanish and the invisibility of the women who speak it, between the rhetoric of inclusion and the reality of exclusion, are not unique to one program in Colorado. They are symptoms of broader political and structural forces that commodify diversity while undermining the conditions that make it sustainable. In a political moment defined by anti-DEI legislation, funding cuts, and a retreat from culturally responsive education, the work of cultural sustainability in bilingual classrooms is both more urgent and more threatened than ever. It begins with a different kind of commitment: not just to a language, but to the people, the cultures, and the children who deserve to be fully seen.

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Philadelphia Morgan is a third-year PhD student and Graduate Research Assistant at the University of Colorado Denver, advocating for bilingual education, children marginalized by disability or language, and Latina educators in the field. philly.berro@gmail.com