

Addressing the Educator Shortage

Supporting Pathways to the Teaching Profession for Multilingual Paraeducators

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Abstract

With the strong and increasing presence of Multilingual Learners in U.S. public schools, multilingual educators are vital to ensuring academic excellence and promoting multilingualism and multiliteracy among these students. However, the current shortage of qualified educators exacerbates the disproportionately small share of those who are multilingual. With a higher percentage of multilingual speakers represented among paraeducators, this group represents a corps of potential teacher candidates. This paper explores the history of exclusionary practices in U.S. education which have influenced current teacher shortages, establishes research on the benefits to diverse students of congruent educators, includes examples of teacher preparation programs which support paraeducator-to-teacher pathways, and explores obstacles faced by multilingual teacher candidates to entering the profession, with proposed processes to eliminate such barriers.

Introduction

The United States is an increasingly multilingual society. As many as 21% of students nationwide are estimated to be multilingual (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2023), and in 2019, over 5 million students in the public school system – approximately 10% of the total student population – were identified as Multilingual Learners (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). Multilingual educators play a vital role in ensuring academic excellence and promoting multilingualism and multiliteracy among these students, so it is essential for schools to recruit and retain certificated multilingual educators who can effectively support the needs of their diverse student population. However, the current shortage of qualified educators exacerbates the disproportionately small share of those who are multilingual. In the 2020–2021 academic year, there were 3,764,000 certificated teachers employed in public and private schools across America, of which only 13% spoke a language other than English (Williams, 2023). Meanwhile, one in five paraeducators in the U.S. is multilingual (Williams et al., 2016). With 849,577 paraeducators employed across all school districts in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), recruitment from the corps of multilingual paraeducators presents a promising solution to alleviating the dearth of certificated teachers.

The New America Foundation refers to the promise of the “untapped resource” of multilingual paraeducators, while a recent Education Week article highlights this very group as a solution to teacher shortages in school districts from three different states (Najarro & Will, 2024; Williams et al., 2016). UnidosUS echoes the need for multilingual educators in their recently published *Latino Infant Initiative Policy Agenda* (2023), with a critical policy goal that stresses the

importance of a diverse and qualified workforce which reflects today’s multicultural and multilingual student population. The National Indian Education Association reminds us of the “integral role of Native culture, traditions, and languages in Native education” (National Indian Education Association, n.d.) and advocates for removing barriers to entry into the teaching profession and increasing traditional and alternative pathways for certification. Finally, in its *Raise the Bar: Lead the World* initiative, the U.S. Department of Education aims to provide all students with a pathway to multilingualism and eliminate the educator shortage by promoting greater diversity (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The Department’s Office of English Language Acquisition recently integrated these policy goals by announcing funding for programs which increase the number of multilingual educators via “Grow Your Own” strategies which recruit paraeducators into programs that lead to teaching credentials (Office of English Language Acquisition, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Despite the calls to increase linguistic and cultural diversity among educators, the shortage of multilingual certificated teachers emerges from deliberate exclusionary practices across U.S. history. Below, we trace the origins of such exclusion, then provide background on the research that establishes the benefits to students of culturally and linguistically congruent educators, and include examples of programs working to support pathways into the educator profession for multilingual paraeducators. Additionally, we explore obstacles to entry into teacher preparation programs (TPPs) for multilingual teacher candidates and propose processes to eliminate such barriers.

A historically persistent shortage of multilingual and diverse teachers

The disproportion of multilingual and diverse teachers has endured in the educational sector for a significant period, with both systemic and systematic factors contributing to this phenomenon. Beginning with the Mexican-American War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in the 1840s, Unda (2023) traces a timeline of the systematic exclusion of Latinx teachers and overt racism toward Mexican and indigenous communities by U.S. school systems. Later, the passage of a Texas bill in 1884 established English-only education in an area that was previously dominated by the Spanish language, leading to the manifestation of Mexican and Mexican-American segregated schools in southwestern states. During this time, many court cases were tried against school districts to desegregate them and allow for equal access to education for students of color. The focus of these cases was an emphasis on “Americanization, English language development and a focus on basic instruction due to children’s academic deficiencies,” as in *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District* (Valencia, 2008).

Several scholars have traced later patterns of systematic exclusion, directed toward Latinx and African American teachers following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. Although schools were now desegregated, school systems in the Southern United States balked at teachers of color educating white students. Over 38,000 African American teachers lost their jobs (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Lutz, 2017; Unda, 2023), resulting in a lasting impact on the U.S. classroom after *Brown v. Board*, with Unda indicating that “the widespread removal of teachers of color during the

desegregation era is reflected in today’s majority-white teaching force” (2023, p. 6). Following *Brown v. Board*, the Chicana Civil Rights movement took shape, wherein educational advocates fought for civil rights within school communities, with a focus on prejudicial educational practices such as biased teaching, “English-Only” laws, the exclusion of Mexican-American culture from curriculum, and the failure to hire Mexican-American teachers, counselors, and other professional staff. Despite ongoing advocacy by various groups, the number of teachers of color dropped from 3.6% to 1% between 1971 and 1981 (Unda, 2023, p. 7).

Although about 20% of teachers are now persons of color, this number is a mismatch with student population projections which indicate that 57% of high school graduates will be students of color by 2031 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Despite their strong presence, the U.S. education system continues to underserve Latinx and Black communities, leading to high drop-out rates and making it challenging for these students to pursue post-secondary education (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; Unda, 2023). This perpetuates the cycle of limited numbers of Latinx and Black teachers, resulting in a significant loss of expertise and cultural diversity while impacting the provision of equal opportunities to all students. Furthermore, the scarcity of multilingual and diverse educators through the 20th century has compounded severe teacher shortages brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The U.S. is now grappling with more than 55,000 vacancies nationwide and over a quarter-million teachers who are not adequately qualified for their positions (Nguyen, Lam & Bruno, 2022). In the face of its history of exclusionary practices, recruiting and retaining multilingual and

diverse teachers remains a critical need for the U.S.

The positive impacts of multilingual and diverse educators

Culturally and linguistically diverse educators are critical to helping students master academic content, improve their English and additional language skills, and develop a deeper appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism (Arroyo-Romano, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). They provide personalized support and identity affirmation to Multilingual Learners, create a culturally responsive learning environment, and help bridge communication gaps between students and English-speaking teachers (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017; Gist, Bianco & Lynn, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Educators who appreciate and support heritage backgrounds can ensure that they are preserved, rather than erased by detrimental policies and practices (Bucholtz, Casillas & Lee, 2017). Teachers with a firm understanding of their students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds can effectively use culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms, leading to improved student outcomes (Aronson & Llaughter, 2016; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Redding, 2019). Additionally, when students and teachers have similar or shared ethnic or cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values, teachers are less biased with respect to student behaviors and academic performance than teachers from different backgrounds, and student-to-teacher racial match has shown positive outcomes on measures of student success, such as test scores, academic attitude, drop-out rates, and disciplinary outcomes (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2018; National

Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2019; Redding, 2019).

It is crucial to recognize the significant role that language plays in a student's culture and identity as well. Research suggests that multilingual teachers in a classroom can positively impact students with shared language backgrounds, as they serve as models for language learners, can effectively teach language-learning strategies, and can anticipate and address any potential English-acquisition difficulties students may face (Calafato, 2019; Garvey & Murray, 2004). Multilingual teachers are also likely to value heritage languages in the classroom, cultivating among multilingual students a positive outlook on education, fostering a stronger identity and sense of self-worth, and promoting higher rates of academic success and English acquisition (McNelly, 2015; Soltero-Gonzalez, 2009). While monolingual teachers can and should grow their own metalinguistic knowledge about the English language to support Multilingual Learners better, multilingual teachers are likely to bring requisite language awareness to their instruction, defined by Calafato as "explicit knowledge about and conscious perception of language, its structure and vocabulary, its teaching and learning, as well as its use in social and cultural contexts" (2019, p. 4). Ultimately, multilingual teachers can create a culturally rich environment, promoting inclusive learning opportunities for all students.

Paraeducator-to-teacher pathways in practice

One effective way to support multilingual paraeducators is through "Grow Your Own" programs. These programs are designed to increase access to the teaching profession for candidates who have diverse backgrounds, including those from different

socioeconomic, social, and linguistic groups (Gist, Bianco, & Lynn, 2019). To create these programs, partnerships are typically formed among school districts, community-based organizations, and colleges or universities. The aim is to expand the pool of teachers by recruiting community members as teacher candidates, providing opportunities for current paraeducators to complete licensure, and introducing high school students to the education field (Wood, 2022). Grow Your Own programs show promise for recruiting nontraditional teacher candidates and diversifying the teacher workforce (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009; Garcia & Garza, 2009; Gist, Bianco & Lynn, 2018; Wood, 2022). Below, we highlight several illustrative programs as described in the literature – note that this list is not exhaustive, and there are many more examples of such programs.

University of Southern California: Latino & Language Minority Teacher Project

The University of Southern California (USC) Latino and Language Minority Teacher Project was created in the 1990s to increase the number of Latinas/os in the teaching profession in Los Angeles (Genzruk & Baca, 1998). Paraeducators are recruited as teacher candidates and provided with financial, social, and academic support to complete the requirements needed to obtain bilingual teaching credentials. The project has been successful in providing bilingual credentials to 1,300 paraeducators, with 36 later becoming site administrators or earning doctoral degrees (Woo, 2018). The Ford Foundation provided initial funding, and later funding was provided by the U.S. Department of Education.

The project is governed by a consortium of stakeholders, including higher-education institutions, school districts, and union organizations who share decision-making

responsibilities, such as financial judgments and policy determinations. The program has multiple phases, including teacher preparation coursework, student teaching with support provided by a mentor, and integration into the teacher profession through graduate study and professional development. Participants who maintain on-time progress toward completion of the program receive a bi-annual scholarship that can be used for academic or non-academic expenses.

The project establishes paraeducator cohorts with a faculty advisor so that candidates are guided, mentored, and socially supported as they move through the program. Through the consortium network, candidates are supported in other ways, such as with conference presentations, professional development, and school-site presentations and meetings (Genzruk, 2004).

Chicago Public Schools: Bilingual Teacher Residency

The Bilingual Teacher Residency is based in Chicago and was created with support from the National Center for Teacher Residencies, in partnership with National Louis University (NLU) with a focus on recruiting and training multilingual teacher talent within the district. The first cohort of 11 teachers began in 2018, and the program expanded in 2019 to include tracks in other licensure programs. In the 2022–2023 school year, 156 participants from the entire residency program joined Chicago Public Schools (CPS) as full-time teachers. Of these, 53% were eligible to teach bilingual education, and 74% were Black or Latinx (Chicago Public Schools Office of Communications, 2023).

The program offers a bilingual elementary education license, bilingual early childhood education, and early childhood special education, among other licenses with non-bilingual focuses. Candidates receive pre-

program guidance throughout the application process, screening, and interview, as well as in-program support. Candidates take two years of coursework, including summer sessions at NLU. After the first year, which they spend in residency working alongside mentor teachers, candidates are eligible to teach with CPS four days a week while attending classes on Fridays to complete remaining coursework.

To be eligible for enrollment in the program, candidates must hold a bachelor's degree (Garcia & Garza, 2019). Each participant receives discounted tuition as well as a salary from CPS, with \$15,000 of the salary being provided as a zero-interest loan, to be paid back to the district incrementally over three years.

Portland State University: BiSped Program

The Bilingual Special Education (BiSped) Program at Portland State University (PSU) was designed for multilingual paraeducators who wish to obtain a special education license and gain teaching experience with Multilingual Learners. The program was funded by a five-year grant from the federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services between 2008 and 2013. This program was available at the master's level, requiring that applicants hold a bachelor's degree. The administrators focused on specialized coursework by reviewing the competencies that bilingual special education teachers required for certification and licensure in other states and programs (Esparza Brown & Miller, 2010). New cohorts were admitted annually, and candidates were included part-time with other special education licensure students. After five years, the program produced 30 bilingual/bicultural special education teachers who were uniquely skilled to differentiate among Multilingual Learners who may struggle

due to language differences rather than disability (PSU College of Education, 2013).

Colorado: Collaborative Bilingual Education Teacher Training

The Collaborative Bilingual Education Teacher Training (C-BETT II) program operated from within the Paraprofessional Resource and Research (PAR²A) Center, which is dedicated to the support of paraeducators in Colorado. CBETT-II was a partnership among three Denver-based institutions of higher education and four Colorado school districts from 1999–2008. The project supported 32 paraeducators in pursuit of bilingual credentials (University of Colorado Denver, n.d.), supplying them with a bachelor's degree and either an elementary bilingual teaching credential or a secondary credential in Spanish or English with a bilingual endorsement. Although CBETT-II is no longer in operation, the PAR²A Center has trained over 300 paraeducators to teach in specialized areas, including bilingual education (Paraprofessional Resource and Research Center, n.d.).

Pathway programs for paraeducators: Key challenges

For Grow Your Own or other teacher pathways to succeed in converting paraeducators to teachers, thoughtful assessment and removal of barriers faced by culturally and linguistically diverse teacher candidates must be considered. Several researchers and practitioners highlight the challenges faced, specifically by multilingual teacher candidates, although there is certainly overlap with other marginalized groups. These difficulties included constraints on fiscal resources and

on commitments of time and caregiving, as well as feelings of isolation, language proficiency challenges, and difficulties with standardized testing in higher education settings (Dalla et al., 2006; Najarro, 2023; Rintell & Pierce, 2003). We explore each of these factors below.

Financial Concerns

Problem: Multilingual teacher candidates face financial challenges when pursuing traditional paths to the teaching profession (Dalla et al., 2006; Najarro, 2023; Ocasio, 2014; Rintell & Pierce, 2003). For one, the cost of fulfilling licensure requirements can be prohibitively high. Additionally, in one study that investigated the experiences of students in a paraeducator TPP, students often struggled to balance unpaid internships with paying for tuition and other expenses (Najarro, 2023). Many paraeducators are obligated to leave paid positions to complete unpaid, multi-week practicums. Often, they must take out loans to support themselves since programs will not accept their experience as full-time paraeducators (Amos, 2013).

Solution: Programs can consider offering tuition reimbursements, subsidizing living expenses, or providing book stipends to alleviate expensive licensure requirements, making a career in education more attainable (Rintell & Pierce, 2003; Roy et al., 2023). Another consideration is that some teacher candidates leave their higher-paying jobs to pursue teacher licensure while working as a paraeducator (Dalla et al., 2006). While these candidates view the long-term outcome of entering the teaching profession favorably, they also acknowledged the significant financial strain of achieving this goal.

Time Commitments

Problem: Balancing enrollment in a TPP with full-time employment as a paraeducator poses challenges, especially if

candidates must complete their program before grant funding expires. One such program required that participants take four classes per semester and two during the summer, which resulted in some participants feeling overburdened, overwhelmed, and guilty as they worked to manage academic, professional, and personal responsibilities (Dalla et al., 2006).

Solution: Remote and asynchronous learning opportunities could greatly enhance the accessibility of TPPs for working paraeducators (Keefe, 2020). Additionally, a structured program that offers flexibility for in-person classroom time would be beneficial to paraeducators. Autonomy in selecting their class schedule would also support teacher candidates and reduce feelings of overwhelm while completing college-level courses.

Caregiving Commitments

Problem: Dalla and colleagues (2006) named the difficulties faced by teacher candidates who are also parents, particularly single parents who must balance caregiver responsibilities while fulfilling both paid work and coursework commitments. Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh (2009) showcased several candidates who had to leave their respective programs due to childcare issues. During one interview, a candidate said that if classes were offered on the weekends, they could outsource their childcare needs to other family members, but scheduling conflicts complicated weekday availability. Other candidates in the same study cited family responsibilities, such as caring for an ailing parent, without the option of alternative accommodations. Shifts to familial responsibilities can have a mental toll on participants, affecting their coursework success and sometimes leading to completion delays or dropping out entirely (Roy et al., 2023).

Solution: Accessible and affordable childcare services, even provided by the

program infrastructure, could significantly assist teacher candidates who are caregivers (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009; Dalla et al., 2006). These offerings would enable paraeducators to attend classes in the evenings or on weekends, easing their concern about family commitments and abating disruption to their studies.

Isolation in a higher-education community

Problem: Ample research shows that higher education settings may not be well prepared to welcome students from marginalized backgrounds (for a summary, see U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Such students can face challenges navigating the culture or the admission and registration processes of U.S. higher education systems. Other conditions, such as poor communication between university departments, lack of empathy from campus programs, limited access to services during open hours, and completing untransferable or elective courses can hinder their success (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009; Rintell & Pierce, 2003; Roy et al., 2023). Other isolating factors can occur within course classrooms. Nontraditional students bring different funds of knowledge to the classroom, and these assets can go unseen and unused by professors who place emphasis on GPA and academic writing as indicators of “high-quality teaching” rather than focusing on the lived experiences and knowledge that students might bring to the classroom (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009, Roy et al., 2023).

Solution: One mitigating factor to some isolating challenges explored by Rintell and Pierce (2003) was the cohort enrollment structure, which provides participants with a sense of community and the support to navigate higher education systems. Additionally, providing paraeducators with personalized advising support can reduce

the potential of taking courses that are not supportive of program completion. Finally, TPPs can continue to explore nontraditional funds of knowledge, particularly since paraeducators often bring deep classroom and instructional experience to their licensure pursuits.

Language proficiency challenges

Problem: TPPs often operate with a default assumption that their students will be English-dominant or monolingual English speakers, which can present a linguistic barrier for those with less experience in the English of university settings. As a result, participants may find it difficult to complete the required programs and licensure requirements (Najarro, 2023). Meanwhile, bilingual certification requires a high level of multilingual and multiliterate proficiency, making such programs more rigorous than single-language licensure (Arroyo-Romano, 2016). However, many teacher candidates have gone through educational systems (such as PreK–12 public education in the U.S.) which have not historically cultivated multilingualism and multiliteracy development among learners (Arroyo-Romano, 2016; Goodall & Gomez, 2023). Thus, it can be challenging for aspiring candidates to obtain bilingual licensure or endorsement. For example, when the state of Texas modified the Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test to assess language domains and content area expertise for teaching in a bilingual setting, there was a drop in passing scores, presumably because candidates were not supplied with necessary multilingual support during their teacher preparation (Arroyo-Romano, 2016).

Solution: A particular strength of multilingual paraeducators is their potential to serve in hard-to-staff bilingual or dual-language programs, where instruction

occurs in two languages (Mitchell, 2020). In response to paraeducators developing their academic English proficiency, program coordinators at one higher education institution created an English as a Second Language (ESL) class for participants and organized biweekly seminars led by a Latina ESL teacher (Rintell & Pierce, 2003). This approach helped students improve their academic English skills and engage in collaborative study groups. Additionally, up-and-coming multilingual/multiliterate teacher candidates may be easier to recruit, given that all 50 states have adopted the Seal of Biliteracy, which is awarded to high school graduates who show academic proficiency levels in English and an additional language (Seal of Biliteracy, n.d.).

High-stakes testing as a barrier to licensure

Problem: Some paraeducators expressed significant apprehension regarding the English proficiency required of high-stakes testing, which is necessary for obtaining teacher licensure (Rintell & Pierce, 2003). For most educators in the U.S., licensure examinations are in English only. In one study, professors noted that candidates in paraeducator-to-teacher programs would be unable to complete licensure and state tests without stronger literacy skills in English (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009). Roy et al. (2023) highlighted the experience of various candidates who failed the Praxis exams multiple times, including one who opted out of licensure completion because of repeatedly missing a passing score by a mere two points. The researchers expressed concern that the assessments favor white students and carry language or racial biases which can inadvertently affect participant test scores, although they note that research on the subject remains to be explored (Roy et al., 2023).

Solution: Supporting teacher candidates to complete final licensure requirements should be a priority of TPPs and is essential to offset the teacher shortage. Offering tutoring for specific exams and supports of accountability through cohort groups and faculty mentorship can help teacher candidates fulfill licensure requirements and enter the classroom.

Conclusion

Addressing the growing demand for multilingual educators is crucial to ensuring academic success for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Initiatives at the national level and the utilization of paraeducator-to-teacher pathways present promising avenues for bolstering the presence of multilingual educators in schools. While the implementation of successful programs is challenging, policy decisions can help teacher candidates overcome traditional barriers, whether personal or systemic. By examining the conditions for inclusivity, equity, and professional development, a more diverse and qualified teacher workforce will reflect the multicultural and multilingual student population in the U.S. It is imperative for educational institutions and policymakers to continue investing in programs and resources that support multilingual education, thereby fostering an environment where all students can thrive.

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