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*Intersectionality in the Dichotomy of Caring & Complicity  
by Mexican American Teachers*

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## Intersectionality in the Dichotomy of Caring & Complicity by Mexican American Teachers

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### Introduction

As I reflect on my teaching experiences as a career science educator, I cringe at the thought of the many times I reprimanded students because they were speaking Spanish at school. It was my misconception that while at school, all students should be speaking the English language. Why did I think this way? First, I did not realize that I was saying anything that could be construed as negative. Second, English is the language spoken at school and I thought that my Mexican American students should be learning to speak fluent English. After learning the injustice I was committing to my students, I quickly transformed my thinking and actions. The self-analysis and observations of other educators prompted me to do this study. In this article, I delve into the experiences of two Mexican American teachers as seen through teacher reflections written in reflection journals, observations in the classrooms and field notes based on my tenure as a career science educator. I argue that Mexican American teachers are put into a difficult position both personally and professionally, in which they face the dichotomy of providing their Mexican American students a safe educational space to feel a validation for their language and culture, but also assimilate them to a White curriculum that denigrates their Mexican American culture. Through data transcripts, participants reveal an ongoing tension that can be subjectively outlined to trace the evidence showing their struggle. This article advances and contributes to the literature on the gap in Mexican American teacher research.

Via care ethics (Noddings, 2012a) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), this article explores the events observed in fifth grade science classrooms of two Mexican American teachers. The participants were observed expressing dichotomous emotional struggles with their feelings towards their Mexican American students. The struggle consisted of a genuine caring attitude with authentic *cariño* (Bartolomé, 2010) for their students revealed in reflections about their concern for their Mexican American students' future opportunities and a necessity to ensure student success by adhering to a complicity for the hegemonic White dominant culture's curriculum. This study extends our understanding of what teachers struggle with when teaching Mexican American students on a curriculum that is culturally different from the curriculum their school uses. This study suggests that participants in this ethnographic case study do have authentic *cariño* and good intentions of providing a care ethic for their Mexican American students, but their actions and ideology reveal the assimilation (Durden et al., 2016) with the hegemony of the school's culture of standardization (McNeil, 2000), one that promotes a dominant monolingual ideology. The main objective of the STAAR test is to measure school and student success but has evolved into the dominant logic of a "multi-dimensional phenomenon by uniformed and standardized criteria" (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014, p. 3).

In this ethnographic case study, I am focusing on Mexican American students because they are predominantly first, second or third generation Americans with parents or grandparents that immigrated from Mexico. I will use the term Mexican American when discussing my students because it is a term used in the bioregion of Texas where Gold Elementary is located. I will also use the term bilingual to mean students who speak both English and Spanish because those are the languages spoken by the students at Gold Elementary.

This study seeks to continue to voice hegemonic discourse on the struggles teachers go through. The teaching profession is embedded with a standards based culture (McNeil, 2000) in which all students in the State of Texas are tested annually on core content using the same standards, no matter the cultural diversity of the students, causing teachers to struggle with making hard decisions on whether to value their Mexican American students by taking time to embed culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) into their lessons or assimilating students to the underlying Whiteness of the curriculum. It is important for teachers to reflect on their critical understanding of their own motives when interacting with Mexican American students.

The research questions that guided this ethnographic case study were: What underlying motives does a Mexican American teacher have when insisting that their students speak only in English? Does requiring Mexican American students to only speak in English show a caring attitude for the well-being of the student or being complicit with the hegemonic White dominant culture? While it is salient to question whether school leadership assumed culturally responsive leadership responsibilities in the academic success of their students at Gold Elementary, it is beyond the scope of this paper, but in my experience in the classroom, the common practice was to hold teachers to high expectations in academic achievement for their students and administrators considered standardized test results were the ultimate indicator for student success (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014).

### **Positionality**

To inform the relevance to this qualitative ethnographic study, researchers can be transparent using positionality. By acknowledging my individuality and social position (Bourke, 2014) in education and society, as a public-school teacher, I was able to comprehend the struggles teachers face in the classroom daily as I experienced those same struggles myself. Struggles in which I was teaching students a curriculum that did not include the cultural and linguistic diversity of my students, and teaching through a language that is the students second language. I have experienced the struggles of the teaching profession where the standardized tests are the most important focus during the school year. My research on Mexican American teachers' critical understanding of their teacher motives will be through the lens of a Mexican American career science teacher. I am also able to comprehend the struggles of Mexican American students attending a school where the dominant narrative is riddled with the English language. Spanish is my first language but when I attended school, I was not allowed to speak it any longer. I can relate to the marginalization of Mexican American students because I too experienced being marginalized by a school system that promoted a hegemonic White curriculum.

Using reflexivity, I will examine my own epistemology. Epistemology affects my ethnographer's lens by the way I view the environments and people around me. "Epistemology, broadly, is a theory of knowledge construction based on the researcher's worldview - that is, how his or her lens on the world and angled ways of knowing it focus and filter his or her perception and interpretation of it" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 5). I have lived amid marginalized communities of color and have experienced the effects of an American school system where teachers show authentic *cariño* to their students and, without intentional malice, are complicit to the hegemonic environment of the school system. I could relate to the participants because I too showed my students *cariño* yet followed the district curriculum with fidelity.

## Conceptual Framework

### Caring About Teacher/Student Relationships

Strong teacher-student relationships are essential and beneficial to both the teacher and the students. Walk into any classroom and you will see teachers interacting with students either through whole group instruction or working with small groups of students. Caring for students has been shown in research to be salient in elementary education (Jeffrey et al., 2013), middle school education (Scales et al., 2019), high school education (Geosling, 2019), and university level education (Miller & Mills, 2019). Any positive teacher-student relationship based on feelings of trust in a safe learning environment are motives for promulgating care ethics in the classroom (Noddings, 2012a). Schussler et al. (2010) found that pre-service teachers lacked self-awareness of their dispositions on care ethics associated with teaching practices. This study advances the notion that misconceptions of care ethics abound in education.

Caring teachers develop personal relationships with their students, which can be artfully complex (Rabin & Smith, 2013) because if students feel cared for, they tend to want to do their best to please their teachers (Jeffrey et al., 2013). “A well-designed, caring classroom can foster learning opportunities that motivate students to seek an intellectually challenging task and to strive to achieve their best” (Johnson & Thomas, 2009). Bartolomé (2008) called this authentic *cariño* in which love and care are “informed by authentic respect and a desire to equalize unequal learning conditions in school” (p. 2). Cerl Buehner said, “They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” If students are listened to, have an established respectful relationship, and are consistently treated with concern for their well-being, they will feel valued. A safe learning environment creates a haven, which is critical for risk taking in order for real learning to happen.

In an increasingly cultural and diverse school system, caring takes on a different look when it comes to students of color. The difference is that due to cultural differences, in addition to feeling valued, students must also feel respected. The effectiveness of teachers depends on their belief and attitude towards their students which can be manifested as “demonstrating respect and appreciation for cultural diversity” (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012, p. 1092). Marginalized students of color can succeed when they feel they are cared for (Valenzuela, 1999). “Regarding caring, teachers expect students to care about school in a technical fashion before they care for them, while students expect teachers to care for them before they care about school” (Valenzuela, 1997, p. 336). Valenzuela explains that technical fashion refers to terms in a language such as “goals, strategies, and standardized curricula” which are impersonal in nature. The students in Valenzuela’s (1997) study were not able to see the relevance of academic curriculum to their personal lives and did not feel understood and therefore resisted learning. In her study, the teachers were apathetic towards the students because they felt students did not care about school. A study by Garza (2008) found Latino and White students' perceptions of caring behaviors that conveyed caring to them as showing a personal interest in and out of school and providing effective academic support in the classroom. An apathy existed in the school in which students felt teachers did not have care ethics for them. A teacher’s caring is central to a student’s motivation to learn (Miller & Mills, 2019) and can be seen as a teacher being empathetic and relatable to students (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2016). Schools must be a place where students can thrive and become the best they can be.

## **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

The use of culturally relevant pedagogy can increase success in the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy can be used to “counter hegemonic ideological orientations” (Bartolomé, 2004) for a better acknowledgment of the Mexican American academic experiences. Culturally relevant pedagogy dispels deficit model perceptions by educators. Cultural misconceptions teachers have of Mexican American students, such as being disengaged, unsupported by parents, and lacking goals (Dominguez et al., 2014) support deficit model perceptions causing them to experience school through deficit model lenses. A study by Villegas and Lucas (2002), found that culturally responsive teachers having a vision of affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds provided more equitable teaching and learning experiences.

Bilingual students must overcome the negative portrayal of speaking a second language while learning academic disciplines and using their own unique ways of knowing to succeed in American schools. Standards in education are based on the norms in society, and when students are not the norm, they are marginalized. The marginalization of students of color because of their Mexican American culture or other culture can negatively affect their lived experiences in the school setting. It is difficult for Mexican American students to emulate the school culture by trying to make connections to their own home culture. This difference in cultures causes a disconnect between teachers and students of color (Irizarry & Raible, 2011). To remedy the disconnect, teachers can include the student’s culture in pedagogy that is relevant to their home lives. A study by Alanis and Cataldo (2021) used family photographs of their students' narratives in culturally relevant practice, promoting the significance of the children's cultural experiences. When culturally relevant pedagogy is used by educators, the students feel validated and can cause an increase in academic success by acknowledging and valuing the academic experiences in the classroom.

There exists a complex relationship when adding culture as a pedagogical tool to the teaching of culturally and ethnically diverse students of color. Teachers as change agents can be the driving force to positively enhance the school experience for students who are representative of a different race, culture, or language. Because culture is salient in education, the use of culturally relevant pedagogy is a logical choice for teachers. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three tenets: students must experience academic success; students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and students must develop critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). According to Parhar and Sensoy (2011), the praxis of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom recognizes and values differences while validating students’ culture. Students bring knowledge learned from home, family, culture, traditions, and community. If teachers truly care about the success of their students, they will try to connect pedagogy to their culture. Teachers demonstrate a caring attitude when they take cultural diversity into consideration when planning their lessons.

The rhetoric that is prolific in American schools is that students of color such as Mexican American students just cannot overcome underachievement in schools, yet Irizarry and Raible’s (2011), culturally relevant pedagogy study found exemplary teachers of Latino students who connected community culture with classroom instruction and used the homeland language to provide improved educational experiences that maintained classroom culture when weaved into instruction. Likewise, in an empirical study of third grade English Language Learners, Ebe (2010) found that when students read about a culture that was relevant to them, they were more interested and engaged. “Validating and celebrating students’ backgrounds and cultural experiences can often lead to reading engagement and increased reading proficiency” (Ebe, 2010, p. 196).

Research shows that Mexican American students can overcome the marginalization in schools if their teachers utilize students' funds of knowledge. The inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy to the experiences in their everyday lives can help them make connections to academic learning, thus resulting in academic success. This academic success can be manifested by teachers' care ethics.

### **Caring about Emergent Bilinguals' Language**

For emerging bilinguals, care ethics can be seen when a teacher encourages correct use of English reading, writing, and speaking skills. Caring pedagogies are strategies that foster care and nurturance in education (Velasquez et al., 2013). A tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is academic achievement. It is pertinent that all students experience success in learning academic content such as reading, math, science, writing, and technology. The difficulty stems from the fact that Mexican American students have the added need of learning to speak, read, and write the English language. All this must be accomplished in an educational setting that does not believe in them (De Lissovoy, 2012). Culturally relevant pedagogy in action can be seen in learning a second language while learning the different content areas.

Students who are not dominant in speaking, reading, or writing in English, are looked upon as deficient in academics. Teachers tend to stress the importance of becoming fluent in the English language while not recognizing the value of knowing the Spanish language. By normalizing monolingualism, students' first language is of no value in academics. The language that is spoken is so much more salient to the identity of the speaker. Teachers who go along with this deficit thinking are complicit in language subtraction. Martinez (2018) goes on to argue that when we see bi/multilingual students primarily as English learners, we do them a great disservice. Ofelia Garcia (2021) argues that the most misunderstood issue in education would have to be the problem of teaching students who come to school knowing a different language. She asks, "How do we educate students who speak languages other than English?" (p. 322). She insists that inequalities are perpetuated in education when the student's bilingualism is ignored. Ignoring the student's first language, as if it did not exist can be construed as demonstrating a non-caring attitude which is strongly rooted in a hegemonic White monolingual ideology that considers English the dominant language.

There is a misconception among some teachers that bi/multilingual students should only speak one language at a time due to the thought that a mixing of the languages is due to a linguistic deficiency. Research shows that being able to mix languages is more complicated, sophisticated, and requires a greater bilingual skill (Garcia, 2009; Martinez, 2018). Changing the mindset of educators whose ideology believes a student's strength is in keeping different languages separate does not understand the research that shows the human brain's ability to learn more than one language at the same time. Acknowledging linguistic diversity as a strength in academics can manifest as caring for the student's development of the home language and the school language. According to Martinez (2018), students in his study had a diverse language repertoire which ranged on a continuum from Spanish dominant to English dominant and some knew more than two languages. If teachers promote, suggest, or insist on English only policies in the classroom, students are being subtly taught that the Spanish language is of no value in academia and that it should not be used in school. Teachers are being complicit to the White dominant culture when they insist that their students speak English because it is the language to use at school.

## **A Legacy of Flawed Research**

The education system in America is riddled with remnants of faulty research that continues to linger and influence the negative perceptions of classroom teachers. During the 1920's and 1930's, there was a common belief that bilingual students could not do well in school because they had a handicap that could not be overcome (Hakuta, 2011; Ruiz, 1984). In addition to this, a methodological study conducted by the Office of Planning, Budget, and Evaluation (OPBE) in the Department of Education found that many studies did not favor bilingual education and falsely claimed that bilingual education was ineffective (Hakuta, 2011).

One question I always wonder about is, why is there an achievement gap between students of color and their White peers? According to Blanton (2000), during the 1920's, Texas researchers experimented on the intelligence of White, Mexican American, and African American children. "They concluded that there existed a hierarchy of racial intelligences-Whites at the top, African Americans on the bottom, and Mexican Americans in a tenuous middle position influenced by class and skin color" (p. 1014). The research included psychometrics in which Intelligence Quotient (IQ) testing was conducted for the sole purpose of justifying segregated schools. This research was flawed because of errors in methodology and racist preconceptions. Their findings have continued to influence a racist legacy of marginalization that continues to this day. The testing phenomenon continues to stigmatize students of color due to the "measurable underachievement by minorities, particularly Mexican Americans and African Americans" (Blanton, 2000, p. 1014). As a Mexican American, I question the validity of standardized tests.

## **Method**

### **Ethnographic Case Study**

This study was conducted using ethnographic case study as a method. It is the most appropriate approach because qualitative study allows for the views of the participants' culture being observed in the unique setting of their fifth-grade science classrooms. The setting for this study took place at Gold Elementary (pseudonym) which is located on the west side of a major city in central Texas. This elementary school is part of an accredited school district but the school itself has had some academic problems with state mandated test results. The school's location serves a neighborhood that has a predominantly Mexican American population having a low socioeconomic status.

### **Participants**

The focus of this qualitative ethnographic case study was on Mexican American fifth grade science teachers of Mexican American students. There were two criteria for this study. The first was that the participants were required to be of Mexican American descent. The second was that the participants were required to be fifth grade science teachers of Mexican American students. The participants included two Mexican American science teachers named Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores (pseudonyms). Both met the required criteria. As a participant observer, I met both criteria because I am a Mexican American teacher of Mexican American science students.

## Data Collection & Analysis

The duration of the study was two months long and the data collected came from several sources. These sources included pre-interviews, post-interviews, lesson observations, and reflection journals. The use of reflection journals was used by both the participants and the participant observer. Qualitative research is unique in the fact that the researcher is “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15).

Data collection for this ethnographic case study consisted of a pre-interview with participant science teachers to get a good foundational understanding and inform the researcher on their teaching philosophy. The teachers were then observed teaching a science lesson. Finally, a post-interview consisted of open-ended unstructured and semi-structured questions. Understanding the participants' way of thinking and finding out how they develop their thought process is salient to the researcher and the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Ethnographic case studies are reflective in nature and require a thorough understanding of the natural school setting and the participant's interactions in day-to-day school life.

The case study included anecdotes and narratives of field note reflections written in journals by teacher participants and me. Narratives written in the field are valuable because they are written in real time. “Focusing on a procedural categorization, I [we] have divided methods of qualitative data collection into five categories: collaborative, interview, naturally occurring, observational, and structured” (Madill & Gough, 2008, p. 255). Another important facet of data collection was the collection of school documents such as science lesson plans and the school district's science curriculum. Systematic procedures were followed to review and reflect on student and teacher interactions.

After the data was collected, much of the data was synthesized for processing the lived experiences of the participants and their reflections which gave insight on their teacher identities. The input from the researcher was also impactful for the analysis because of the familiarity and similarity of experiences to the participants in the classroom. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) contend that data analysis is a difficult and tedious process that is crucial to ethnographic analysis. The data analysis begins with the consolidation of important data that will help with the construction and interpretation of meaning.

The first step in the analysis of the data was to use an inductive approach that begins with meticulously examining the data that was gathered from interviews with participants' reflection journals, and fieldnotes on classroom observations. The focus of the data analysis consisted of making sense of the field notes, research questions and the theoretical framework. There are some researchers who feel that data collection and data analysis should occur concurrently (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

After the examination of all the data gathered, data management begins by processing large quantities of data and producing concise findings. To begin with, data was organized manually into folders for each participant. The file was then further subdivided into subject matter by themes. The production of themes is salient to research because they can be seen as patterns found in the data (Wolcott, 2009). These themes were grouped into smaller groups having similar identifiable patterns. Once organized, the groups of data were then coded and re-coded. The codes can then be chunked together into smaller chunks of data. The coded ‘chunks’ of data that are grouped and identified into



smaller 'chunks' of data (Voorhees, 2016) are more manageable to process and synthesize. There will be several layers of coding in which themes that resemble one another will be placed into groups. Merriam (2009) summarized coding as a "sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data. The designations can be single words, letters, numbers, phrases, colors, or combinations of these (p. 173). After the data is perused, coded and categorized, a revisit to the data originally coded "may undergo some revision...and actually continues through the writing up of your findings" (Merriam, 2009, p. 182). The final layer of codes represented the findings of the research.

### **Validity and Reliability**

To build confidence in qualitative research, trustworthiness is achieved through three strategies. The three strategies are reflexivity, triangulation, and adequate engagement in the data. Reflexivity is the continuous accounting of reflections, examinations, and explorations by the researcher (Baxter & Jack, 2008). "Personal reflexivity involves the researchers reflecting upon their beliefs, values, experiences, interests, political commitments, wider aims in life, and social identities [that] shape the research" (Borg et al., 2012, p. 6).

Besides reflexivity, another component that ensures trustworthiness in a qualitative study is triangulation. Triangulation "is a technique used to accurately increase fidelity of interpretation of data" (Kolb, 2012, p. 85). Triangulation was applied in the formation of findings by taking data sources and finding a compatible pattern that existed between the pre or post interview data, journal reflection data and lesson observation. The alignment of similar patterns from different sources corroborated the findings.

Along with reflexivity and triangulation, the data collection should have adequate engagement. This was ensured by a thorough perusal of the data. Saturation of the data occurs at "the point of data collection where the information you get becomes redundant" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 62). For this study the data was reviewed multiple times. Other considerations for adequate engagement of the data are the understanding of generalizability. Generalizability is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Merriam, 2009). Although, according to Stake (2005), qualitative research is not generalizable, yet people have the tendency to experience vicariously through the narrative (Merriam, 2009). Readers can make connections to the narrative by a quasi-generalization that can be better described as transferability. This transferability gives case studies validity.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings of this qualitative case study were part of a larger study. In this article, I will focus on one of the findings I identified which was a major overarching theme. Mexican American teachers in this study experienced a struggle with dichotomous feelings of caring and complicity. Both Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores were found to not only be knowledgeable but passionate and caring teachers, yet many of their reflections and actions had me questioning their motives when showing their good intentions as caring educators. On one hand, participants had good intentions that were a genuine authentic *cariño*, or care and love for their students. On the other hand, it could be suggested that participants' care was focused on the complicity of a hegemonic White dominant culture that promoted standardized testing. In this section, I explore the data and participants' dialogue that supported their struggle with dichotomous feelings of caring and complicity to a culture of

standardization. Through connections to the literature review, the framework, and researcher reflexivity, I analyzed the data collected from interviews, lesson observations, field notes and reflection journals to derive the finding. I then concluded with a discussion and implications.

## Figure 1

### *Qualitative Data Revealing Dichotomous Feelings*



### **Participants Genuinely had Good Intentions as Caring Educators**

In reflecting on when I started at Gold Elementary, it was reported to be on the brink of being closed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The students I would be working with were positioned in a situation which had many variables working against them. Many students had a poor home life, had emotional challenges, and many were not on grade level due to the language disparity between home and school. Yet Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores continued to work at Gold Elementary. Both their commute times to Gold Elementary were about thirty minutes long. I admired the participants' loyalty to the students at Gold Elementary. They could very easily find a school closer to where they lived, yet they sacrificed the commute time through heavy traffic to teach at a school that was a challenge. It can be intimidating when working in a school that has most of its' students labeled 'at risk' like the students at Gold Elementary. The job is challenging, and teacher burnout is a real problem as I have seen many teachers come and go within the three years that I was at Gold Elementary. Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores both reflected about their commitment to the students at Gold Elementary in their reflective journals.

More evidence of participants' care ethics was observed during the lesson observation. Ms. Aggie was observed walking around the classroom and stopping at several students' desks to ask questions. I noticed a casual conversation between teacher and student which promoted a positive classroom environment. Ms. Flores was observed delivering the science lesson with passion and enthusiasm. The interactions with students could be interpreted as both participants having positive teacher-student relationships. The classroom climate was observed to be a safe space in both participants' classrooms. According to a study by Noddings (2012b), it was found that when students perceived they were in a safe classroom, it was because their teacher cared about them. The participants' actions and verbatim responses during interviews demonstrated good care ethic intentions for their students.

## A Caring Attitude with Good Intentions about Speaking in English

During the science lesson observation, participants showed genuine interest in students by wanting them to speak better English. Ms. Aggie commented, “they really need to practice their English” and Ms. Flores was asked what language should be used in her classroom, she said, “I would say English.” Both responses could be interpreted as participants wanting students to be successful because they loved and cared about their students and only wanted the best for them. According to Bartolomé (2008), being a loving and caring teacher to students is enough for them to be academically successful. During interviews, both participants commented that they felt concern for their students becoming fluent in speaking the English language so that they would be successful on the STAAR Science Test and for the students’ future careers. Ms. Aggie felt that students would possibly be able to pass standardized tests with better English fluency. Ms. Flores demonstrated a loving and caring attitude when she reflected that she hoped her students spoke better English because it would help them be successful in the future.

Participants showed genuine concern about student’s future success in a society where the dominant language spoken proficiently is not only preferred but expected. The insistence on students speaking English by participants could be interpreted as a teacher being concerned for the future well-being of her students or as knowing that being proficient in English would lead to success in American education and society. Participant reflections were always positive and endearing demonstrating a caring attitude with good intentions when they described their concern on their students’ English fluency. It could be suggested that through the triangulation of the lesson observations, interviews, and reflexivity, participants demonstrated that they truly loved the students they worked with at Gold Elementary. Participants demonstrated good intentions that promoted authentic *cariño* and considered genuine care ethics. Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores, through their actions and words demonstrated a genuine concern that could be construed as love or *cariño* for their students.

### Figure 2

*Data on the English Dominant Language*

DATA ON THE PREFERENCE FOR THE ENGLISH DOMINANT LANGUAGE	
MS. AGGIE	MS. FLORES
“they really need to practice their English”	“I would say English should be spoken at school”
“That’s great but can you say that in English?”	“They can say a word in Spanish as long as they also say it in English”
“I think they need to practice their English, because the more they practice the better they will be at it”	“Speaking fluently in English will help them in the future when they are out of school”
“How can they become proficient in English if they are going to fall back on Spanish?”	“English proficiency is the expectation at school”

## A Struggle with Dichotomous Feelings of Caring and Complicity

The finding that emerged revealed a struggle experienced by both Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores with dichotomous feelings of caring and complicity. When students spoke in Spanish during the class observation, I observed Ms. Aggie experiencing tension. In the lesson observation I saw that Ms. Aggie walked around the classroom and projected a calm and caring attitude. She asked a student to repeat what they had just told her in English. "I know they are struggling with the language, but they will be taking the Science STAAR Test in English and they must begin practicing as much as possible." Ms. Aggie's response suggests that she is concerned about the questions on the science-standardized test. Her students are emergent bilinguals who could possibly have trouble reading the test questions. She reasons that if students can read and understand the questions, they will do better on the standardized test. When I asked Ms. Aggie in the pre interview how she felt if she heard students speaking in Spanish during a science lesson, she responded, "I'm really happy that they know Spanish, but they really need to practice their English because I know the moment, they leave my class they are outside with their friends and they are going to speak Spanish so I need them to practice English while they can." Ms. Aggie's response to the interview question reaffirms her conviction that students in her class are required to speak the English language even though she feels being able to speak in Spanish makes her happy. Ms. Aggie writes in her reflection journal about the possibility that students do not feel they can speak in Spanish in her classroom because when she tries to get them to speak in Spanish, they reply in English. It is possible that Ms. Aggie feels that she gives students the perception that they should not be speaking in Spanish.

During Ms. Flores' class observation, I observed that Ms. Flores interacted in both languages with students, while stressing the English language which was causing her tension. Ms. Flores was observed delivering the lesson with passion using a soccer ball to demonstrate the vocabulary word definitions. She asked a student a question in English and then in Spanish. Contrary to responses made during the post interview, she felt the dominant language spoken at school during instruction should be in English. "It should make sense that they are mastering the English language only because it opens more opportunities for them in the future." Ms. Flores was adamant about the importance of students speaking in English during instruction and gave justification of the monolingual push by talking about their future opportunities. To get a better understanding of this tension, Ms. Flores wrote in her reflection journal the following, "When I hear my students speaking in Spanish, I wish I could join them." This reflective journal response reveals a yearning by Ms. Flores to be able to speak the Spanish language like her students.

Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores show genuine concern for their students. Ms. Aggie feels her students will benefit from speaking in English at school and Ms. Flores feels her students will be successful in their future careers with English proficiency. The insistence on students speaking English by both participants could be interpreted as a teacher being concerned for the future well-being of her students which will lead to success in American education and society. With good intentions, both participants, through the triangulation of the lesson observations, interviews, and reflexivity, truly promoted authentic *cariño* and love for the students they worked with at Gold Elementary. Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores, through their actions and words demonstrated a genuine concern that could be construed as love or *cariño* for their students.

### **A Struggle with Complicity to the Hegemony of a Whitened Curriculum**

Both participants wrote in reflection journals their struggle with worry about the standardized tests. Teachers want their students to pass the standardized tests because in Texas, success is measured by the ability of students to pass standardized tests. Teachers, administrators, and school districts are

accountable for that happening. If a teacher has a low number of students passing standardized tests, their teaching abilities are questioned.

It is a common feeling among educators that if students can read and understand the questions in English, they will do better on the standardized tests. By teachers insisting on English as the dominant language, they were focusing on the passing of the standardized test. The observations and reflective journals gave insight to what the participants were feeling. Ms. Aggie responded with the following, “The science test questions are in English, and they must be able to understand what those science questions are asking”. Ms. Flores’ response was, “It should make sense that they are mastering the English language.”

I, too, genuinely care about my students being successful in academics and, as an educator, feel responsible for helping my students achieve to the highest level they can reach individually and strive to help students so that they have a successful future. Those feelings are of authentic *cariño*, or care and love for my students. I am also cognizant of the hegemony of prioritizing the dominant English language to help students with passing the science-standardized test and becoming an enforcer of the White curriculum. Both participants wrote in their reflection journals about the stress they experience daily. “Almost explicitly, the aim of education is to gain high test scores” (Noddings, 2012a, p. 777). The pressure to make sure their students will be ready for the standardized tests is sometimes subtly but mostly overtly communicated to teachers by administrators. The stress felt by participants to prepare students for standardized tests caused an internal struggle and was evident by comments made by Ms. Aggie when she said she was happy that students knew the Spanish language, yet promoting English as being the most salient language that should be used in schools. Ms. Flores commented that Spanish was a beautiful language and allowed students to speak in Spanish if they were also able to say it in English.

The requirement to speak in English could be interpreted as both participants being complicit in assimilating students to a Whiteness curriculum because of the hegemony of the culture of standardization. There is a dichotomy of motives that could be perceived. The possibility of a genuine caring attitude with authentic *cariño* for the students’ future opportunities or to be complicit to the hegemonic dominant White culture. A constant vacillation is observed through the triangulation of the data.

### **Good Intentions and Complicity Could Both be Present**

Participants wrote in their reflection journals that they felt English should be the dominant language spoken in school with the goal of mastering it. It could be suggested that institutional racism was the hegemonic influence of complicity to Whiteness, manifested in a disregard for the value of the home language in the classroom. Drawing on the work of Bartolomé (2008), the English-only movement is the phenomenon of assimilationist ideology that is a remnant in our country’s legacy of internal colonization. Observations of both participants’ dialogue was interpreted as both suggesting a struggling assimilationist belief in the dominant language. They are not alone in the complicity as “most educators believe that students from subordinated groups-both foreign-and U.S.-born minorities-must assimilate into the dominant culture and be schooled solely in English” (Bartolomé, 2010, p. 509). For many years, I told my emerging bilingual students to speak in English. Only through pursuing higher education did I read about the research on the acquisition of a second language through the first language (Martinez, 2018).

### ***Challenges to Anglocentric Ideology***

Hegemony in the classroom was observed when participants insisted that students speak in English and when they replied to students in English when spoken to in Spanish. This could be interpreted by students as a feeling of being overpowered by the Whiteness rhetoric they heard from participants. In reflection, I too, like the participants, required students to always speak in English and replied to students in English when they spoke to me in Spanish.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I will expound on the struggles with emotional stress that comes from being caring teachers in an academic climate of a culture of standardization. Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores from Gold Elementary were observed while teaching a fifth-grade science lesson on Force and Motion. The finding that emerges was unexpected. Participants were observed experiencing struggles with dichotomous feelings of caring and complicity with the hegemony of the dominant English language. While I observed teachers who interacted with Mexican American students in a genuine caring manner, I also observed them insisting on students speaking in English. The participants stressed the salience of becoming fluent in English at the expense of the Mexican American students' own language. They both explained their reasoning behind the importance of speaking fluent English and the need to practice it as much as possible. Aspects of the struggles being genuine in their care ethic and concern for their students because they both had good intentions while demonstrating a hegemony of the dominant language prevalent in the science lesson showing a complicity with the dominant White culture.

### **Mexican American Teachers Show Genuine Authentic Cariño**

It was evident to me that Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores cared about the students at Gold Elementary. They both commute a distance that is far enough to be considered "out of the way." They both could very easily work at a school that is close to their residence. They also demonstrated genuine authentic cariño when they gave an explanation as to why they were adamant about students speaking in English during the school day. Ms. Aggie wanted her Mexican American students to be successful on the STAAR test and she knew that being able to read and speak English, the dominant language in the United States, her students would have a chance at becoming successful in passing the exam. Through a culturally relevant pedagogy lens, it could be suggested that she realized that if Mexican American students fail to pass the standardized test, they could face scrutiny from an insensitive school system. The first thing to happen would be being labeled "at risk" which carries negative stereotyping. If her students do pass the exam, they could experience academic success in an academic culture that values the conformity of students. Ms. Flores explained that if her students could speak fluent English, they would be able to have successful futures. It could be suggested that she understood that it is essential to be fluent in English to prevent employers from having preconceived notions of inadequacy. Assimilating students by having them speaking in English, the dominant language of this country, has been perpetuated in academia because of the prevalent hegemonic discourses of the dominant White culture which firmly believes in monolingualism. Through reflexivity, it could be suggested that Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores believe they are showing a caring attitude for the well-being of their Mexican American students by enabling them to be assimilated and acculturated to the American way of life.

### **Complicity with Whiteness**

Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores demonstrated good intentions as caring professionals that considered their students' well-being. Observations during the science lesson could be interpreted as authentic *carifio* for their students, but another interpretation could be that the caring attitude was superficial. The participants were observed insisting that students speak in English. Ms. Aggie reflected, "they really need to practice their English" and Ms. Flores reflected, "let's make sure they are speaking in English." Through a culturally relevant pedagogy lens, having a "no Spanish policy" equates to subtracting their cultural competence. This "no Spanish policy" could be interpreted as discriminatory in nature by sending covert messages of devaluing their home language. Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores are not recognizing the value of being knowledgeable in more than one language. They are complicit in normalizing monolingualism and could be viewed as displaying the manifestation of interpersonal discrimination (Ayon & Philbin, 2017). The participants in this study may unintentionally be negatively affecting their students by restricting their use of all available language practices for the purpose of making meaning. It could be suggested that Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores are put in a difficult position of insisting that students speak in English, thereby displaying a deficit thinking and are being complicit to language subtraction. A monolingual society will continue with Mexican American students' language and culture being ignored in education thus creating the continuation of the hegemonic White dominant culture with Mexican American teachers as the promoting agents.

### **The Existence of a Dichotomous Point of View**

I am so embarrassed when speaking Spanish to someone who is fluent in Spanish, yet I feel proud when I can understand someone who can only speak Spanish. Likewise, Winstead and Wang (2017) describe how students in their study felt pride in their home environment about speaking in Spanish where it was valued yet felt shame in their school environment about speaking in Spanish where it was not welcomed. Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores both are English dominant. They voiced their remorse in not being able to speak better Spanish. They grew up assimilated to an American culture so it could be suggested that they struggle with valuing marginalized Mexican American students' culture and not honoring their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). The assimilation they experienced is then perpetuated in their classrooms. They are continuing the cycle of assimilating students to the underlying whiteness of the curriculum mandated by the state of Texas whose main purpose is to teach to a standardized test. Teachers like Ms. Aggie, Ms. Flores and me, who are Mexican American, struggle with experiencing a contradiction of our feelings toward the Spanish language by vacillating between a positive and negative view, thus emphasizing a personal and professional struggle which ultimately transcends into the science classroom.

My Mexican American students struggle with dominant ideology and stereotyping not only by their teachers but also by the American educational system. The pervasiveness of institutional racism is so deeply stitched into the fabric of our nation making it inevitable that it seeps into our education system. Without any intentions of malice, I am a Mexican American that has perpetuated the hidden curriculum of a prejudice towards students who spoke Spanish at school. I do not consider myself racist, or of being prejudiced. "Most people, in most situations, neither think of themselves as prejudiced, nor do they exhibit overly prejudicial speech or behavior" (Shields, 2014). None of us are ever completely free of unconscious bias. I am sure Ms. Aggie and Ms. Flores do not consider themselves racist either, but because they are agents who participate in the teaching of Whiteness standards of science, they are perpetuating the Whiteness curriculum that is assimilating their Mexican American students.

## Implications

The significance of this research is that it adds insight to the literature on Mexican American teachers. There is a gap that must be filled in education research on teachers of color probably due to the disproportionate number of teachers of color compared to White teachers. This article specifically focuses on the Mexican American teacher's role in caring for students by negotiating a safe space for them to value their Mexican American heritage and the complicity that teachers fall into when under tremendous pressure to assimilate their students to a pernicious White curriculum that embodies a culture of standardization in American schools.

There are positive outcomes that students perceive when they feel their teacher understands them. Teachers that take the initiatives to provide inclusive educational environments that practice care pedagogy for creating teacher-student relationships become successful in care ethics. It is imperative that preservice teachers and novice teachers are aware of and prepare for the academic stress that comes with making sure their students are learning the content well enough to pass standardized tests, while at the same time focusing on the care ethics for providing a happy learning environment that validates their culture and language. It is important that teachers challenge themselves to reflect on their own teacher identity so they can counteract any social biases they may have either consciously or subconsciously. Implications of this study suggest that there could be other educators who experience this same ambivalence when conceptualizing their authentic *cariño* while trying to stay true to the mandated curriculum. Mexican American teachers and teachers of color would benefit from further research on care ethics.

Another implication of the finding is that Spanish is a language not appreciated in academics. There are no explicit 'English Only' policies at Gold Elementary but a prevalent understanding due to hegemonic English language preference. This study gives insight into personal and professional beliefs by teachers concerning the use of the dominant language in academics. It is imperative that new teachers be aware of the possibility of adding to the language disparity of their students when saying innocent comments or sending negative messages about speaking in Spanish at school. Culturally relevant pedagogy's second tenet, cultural competence cannot happen when teachers do not use the home language in lessons. Mexican American students will only feel validated when they experience learning that includes their language and culture. The pressures to comply with the district curriculum are highly scrutinized and controlled. If this continues, Mexican American teachers will have to become aware of equity and inclusive discourses surrounding cultural responsiveness approaches to teaching students of color. The use of culturally relevant pedagogy could counter negative assumptions and biases. Even though Mexican American teachers could be considered assimilated and acculturated into the hegemonic ideology, they are still Mexican American and will always have an advantage over White teachers when it comes to teaching students of color because they have an intimate cross-cultural knowledge that is valuable in making connections with Mexican American students. I hope to add to current research and expose the shortcomings of the inclusion of language and culture in the science curriculum being perpetuated in educational institutions as seen in this ethnographic case study.



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