

# Mining Gems, Nurturing Relationships, Building Teacher Practice

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## Abstract

This report from the field presents a field-based program designed to prepare teachers to serve diverse children and families by emphasizing the *actual* practices that inform family–teacher partnerships. We argue that collaborative relationships across and among families and teachers can result in “mining gems” of knowledge that reside in students, families, communities, and schools for the enrichment of teaching and learning. We elaborate on the design of case-based, simulated parent–teacher conferences that provide teacher candidates with opportunities to learn to enact productive partnerships with families. Our design process resulted in a fictitious case featuring a Mexican American student, Marco, and his mother, Mrs. Silva. We designed the case such that Marco’s academic knowledge is related to his home-based experiences to emphasize that such experiences can support academic learning. To create this authentic case—a goal of this report from the field—we drew upon school-based observations to describe Marco’s academic and social experiences. To authenticate the case, we interviewed informants who had characteristics in common with that of Mrs. Silva or whose professional experience aligned with the teaching scenario. The case includes descriptive information gleaned from the perspective (a) of a teacher who observes the student in her class, and (b) of a mother who knows the child holistically. This information is used by a teacher candidate (playing the role of the teacher) and an instructional team member (playing the role of Mrs. Silva) during a 10-minute simulation of a parent–teacher conference.

Key Words: multicultural education, teacher education cases, diversity, English learners, English language development, cultural capital, school–community partnerships, family engagement, parent–teacher conferences, parents

## Introduction

Educators commonly acknowledge the important resource to teaching and learning that is children's prior knowledge (see, e.g., Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2006; Lee, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Prior knowledge allows for young learners to anchor new learning in already solidified understandings and thus more easily make connections with new information. Teachers, thus, should recognize that all learners come to school with sets of experience that can be leveraged as prior knowledge. We argue here that teachers of English Learners (ELs) must also acknowledge that their students possess significant, instructionally salient knowledge, even when the knowledge bases of EL children in particular are not fully visible in schools (Moll et al., 1992). Teachers must be learners and boundary-crossers to access that knowledge—all so that they can ultimately learn to integrate children's cultural home-based knowledge into their classroom teaching. We further argue that teachers should build and leverage relationships with families in order to learn about their students' cultural home-based knowledge. In order to learn from children's parents, teachers must actually interact with them—despite whatever cultural and linguistic barriers exist.

In this report from the field, we build on the work of scholars in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Others Languages (TESOL), who write that families of ELs have substantial knowledge about their children (i.e., Amanti, 2005; Hawkins, Johnson, Jones, & Legler, 2008; Kahn & Civil, 2001; Moll et al., 1992; Tenery, 2005) that can be significant resources for learning. But what are the discrete practices that teachers should use to listen to and interact with parents in order to learn from them? How and where do beginning teachers learn to have these conversations with parents, in particular parents whose identities are different from their own? While it is true that beginning teachers may have opportunities to learn about the theoretical construct of “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992), it is rare that they learn the interactive practices to actually identify these funds. Instead, teacher educators often assume that beginning teachers can, themselves, move from theory to implementation and practice without scaffolds, without examples of the possible, and without opportunities to practice with the guidance of others.

In order to respond to this issue, we elaborate upon our program design and scholarship which draw upon home, community, and cultural contexts. How

might a teacher interact with a student's mother to learn about her daughter's deep and meaningful body of scientific knowledge? How could we, as teacher educators, ensure that teacher candidates are equipped to design lessons that build on *all* of their students' cultural and community-based knowledge? And, could we work with teacher candidates to increase the likelihood that when a student offered a response or an answer that illustrated their cultural and community-based knowledge, our candidates would be equipped not only to hear and recognize this, but to build upon the students' knowledge in instructionally salient ways? These questions inspired our design of a case study about a young boy and his mother: Marco and Mrs. Silva. We begin, however, with a narrative: a snapshot of a classroom lesson that inspired this case design.

### **A Classroom Snapshot: English Learners' Cultural Knowledge as Content Knowledge**

Ms. Martin, a student teacher in an elementary teacher certification program, was teaching a science lesson focused on plant biology (Note: all names used in this article are pseudonyms). She designed the lesson so that her first graders would have ample time to be scientific inquirers, taking care to position them as the agents in the lesson—the actors who would examine, question, and make hypotheses about the picture cards of the various seeds they were given. She also designed the lesson to enable the children to work toward a Next Generation Science Standard (NGSS): “All organisms have external parts. Different animals use their body parts in different ways to see, hear, grasp objects, protect themselves, move from place to place, and seek, find, and take in food, water, and air. Plants also have different parts (roots, stems, leaves, flowers, fruits) that help them survive and grow” (NGSS Standard 1, Living Sciences 1–1). The students were to make observations about the features of the seeds and then state a hypothesis about whether each of the seeds was likely to be dispersed by wind, water, or animals. The children sat in small table groups, each group with three plates labeled “wind,” “water,” and “animal,” as Ms. Martin walked around the classroom handing each group a set of picture cards of different seeds.

The students at table 4 enthusiastically got to work as soon as they were given the cards. Students mostly chimed in and quickly came to agreement, often with one student claiming their opinion, and others voicing agreement. For example, one card showed a maple tree wing. The students, all residents of Michigan, chimed in “wind!” The seeds were regularly seen floating through the air, beckoning to the wind, in the spring. The classmates often played with them, calling them “helicopters” and sending them off floating through the air.

Thus, when the next picture card of a coconut was raised, the children again enthusiastically called out “wind!” perhaps imagining the wind knocking a coconut out of a palm tree. One young girl, Gabriela, an English learner who had moved to the U.S. from Mexico just over two years ago, interjected in disagreement: “No, it’s water! The coconut falls out of the tree into the water and the water moves the coconut.” She shrugged her shoulders as if exasperated by the fact that she had to explain this to her peers. Gabriela’s peers accepted her confident explanation without question and placed the coconut on the “water” plate. This was a small moment—one that could easily have gone unnoticed and invisible—but one of great significance that was witnessed by the second author as she observed Ms. Martin’s lesson. In this moment, Gabriela was able to draw upon her lived experience in service to her own and her fellow students’ learning; her home-based knowledge here complemented the content knowledge that the teacher had designed the lesson around. Though Ms. Martin had not designed this lesson to intentionally draw out and capitalize upon Gabriela’s particular knowledge bases, by happenstance, she had. Ms. Martin was not necessarily looking for students to make hypotheses and problem solve by building upon their home-based knowledge. But this is, in fact, what Gabriela did when she brought her knowledge of coconuts, and what the other students were doing when they connected the “helicopters” to maple tree dispersal.

As researchers and teacher educators, this is one of many moments that we hold onto for inspiration. Gabriela’s moment of success was one that we returned to, analyzed, and integrated into our ongoing research over the course of the following year. We noted that Gabriela’s confidence in her response about the coconut seed was similar to the confidence the children had in their mutual decision about the maple seed. She and her classmates, in their Midwestern community, had seen, touched, and interacted with maple seeds. Their community-based knowledge about these particular seeds positioned them to have content-based knowledge in the discipline of science. We inferred that Gabriela had additional cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) that was related to the knowledge she had as a result of her cultural experience. As a young child, she had lived in a tropical climate, likely having seen palm trees with coconuts that typically fell in the water with far greater regularity than a typical Midwestern family. We were excited by the fact that, in this particular lesson, a young child’s cultural knowledge, founded in her geographical and ecological awareness of the tropics, positioned her as having salient and advantageous content knowledge in a first-grade science lesson, related to the NGSS standard that Ms. Martin had targeted in her lesson.

Schools privilege the social and cultural capital of children of higher socioeconomic status and value their prior knowledge, positioning them as having

significant advantage (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau, 1987, 2002; Lareau, Adia Evans, & Yee, 2016; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). In particular, “teachers, it is argued, communicate more easily with students who participate in elite status cultures, give them more attention and special assistance, and perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack cultural capital” (DiMaggio, 1982, p. 190). We wondered, what bodies of knowledge do EL children bring from their communities to their school-based learning that, rather than being capitalized upon, are rendered invisible by the institution of schooling? This question led us to wonder: Are there ways that teachers can learn about these bodies of knowledge and more regularly and purposefully integrate them into the school lives of EL children? What would be needed for this to happen?

### **Learning About Children’s Knowledge Bases From Their Parents**

These questions, and our learning from children and teachers in schools, motivate our research and inform this report from the field. While Gabriela had the confidence, as a seven-year old child, to identify and articulate her background knowledge to her peers, many children would not have been able to do so. Teachers must be equipped to consistently recognize that every child, including an EL, comes to school with a wealth of cultural knowledge, a context from which specific bodies of instructionally salient knowledge have been developed. Many researchers have recognized this and have articulated ways that community- and family-based knowledge can be taken up in classroom teaching (Amanti, 2005; Conant, Rosebery, Warren, & Hudicourt-Barnes, 2001; Kahn & Civil, 2001; Moll et al., 1992; Tenery, 2005). For instance, a compelling set of examples is offered in the TESOL volume *Revitalizing a Curriculum for School-Age Learners* (Hayes & Sharkey, 2008). In their chapter, Hawkins, Johnson, Jones, and Legler illustrate what we believe is the first critical step in developing relationships with families of EL students that acknowledge their community-based knowledge: reaching out to families in an effort to learn—to learn about their children, their lives, their goals, their challenges, and their disciplinary knowledge.

#### **What Does It Take for Beginning Teachers to Be Able to Learn From Parents?**

In our elementary education teacher certification program, we use these pieces of scholarship to demonstrate how teachers can learn about ways to cross boundaries between the home and the school to identify significant bodies of knowledge that are typically unacknowledged in schools. Our program’s

design reflects a growing recognition of the pressing need for beginning teachers to learn about family engagement and for teacher educators to design and support this learning. Over two decades ago, a survey of 60 preparation programs across 22 states found that less than one-quarter of programs required candidates to interact with parents and families during student teaching experiences (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). More recent research indicates a growing integration of opportunities for teacher candidates to learn to engage families but a continued need to improve upon the design of these opportunities. In 2006, Epstein and Sanders reported on a study of 161 colleges, departments, and schools of education, where approximately 60% offered a course dedicated to family engagement. However, few respondents (7.2%) felt that new teachers were prepared to work with all students' families and communities. These findings confirm the need for improved teacher education pedagogies that support teacher candidates to learn to engage with families.

It is within this context that Gabriela presents us, as teacher educators, with a rich case example. As teacher educators, we recognize that Gabriela's knowledge of the life sciences was robust, but we are aware that beginning teachers are unlikely to easily see this. Gabriela knew how to draw upon her knowledge of palm trees and coconuts when it aligned with her teacher's science lesson. We aim for teacher candidates to begin to wonder: What is there to know about Gabriela and EL students like her? What knowledge rises above the surface and what knowledge lays dormant, untapped and hidden by the invisible barriers between schools and homes, and by the varied experiences of those who hold the power in classrooms and determine what will be studied, as well as what questions will be asked, and what will be deemed worthy? As teacher educators, we see our role in this quest to be of paramount significance. Educators must be primed to acknowledge that Gabriela, and EL students like her, possess a mass of knowledge, but that it may very well be invisible to them, especially if they do not share cultural identities with their students, and that they must work skillfully to cross boundaries into the community and position themselves as learners. This is no small charge.

### **Designing Marco and Mrs. Silva**

This one classroom example—Gabriela's fascinating and lovely answer—provided rich and fruitful inspiration for our work as teacher educators, especially towards our goal of building an authentic case. Drawing from this instructional segment, we designed an opportunity for teacher candidates to learn from a school age child's parent about her child's knowledge bases via a very typical context: a parent-teacher conference. Despite their ubiquity in the

life of schools, teacher candidates do not necessarily receive robust preparation to engage in parent–teacher conferences during their teacher preparation programs (Shartrand et al., 1997). Thus, we built upon this classroom observation to influence our design of a learning opportunity that teacher candidates need. In the reality of schools, parent–teacher conferences are contexts in which parents and teachers regularly interact, but even so, too often the majority of the time is spent updating a parent on the child’s progress in the classroom, without harnessing the opportunity to learn from the parent/caregiver about the child’s home life, interests, and lived experiences (Minke & Anderson, 2003). We sought to enable teachers to conduct a different kind of parent–teacher conference—led by a teacher who is skilled at positioning both herself and the family as learners and as resources, where teachers update parents but also learn from them. Further, we sought to provide teacher candidates with scaffolded opportunities to participate in a *simulation* of such a parent–teacher conference, one where the teacher candidates would interact with an actual person playing the role of a parent and have the opportunity to share information with that parent and also experience the potential to learn from that parent. In order to realize these imaginings, we crafted a case about a mother, Mrs. Silva, and her son, Marco, creating rich and detailed descriptions of his life in school (for our candidates) and his life with his family in his community (for our simulated parents).

In an earlier pilot program, we had asked ourselves what teachers would need to know in order to build partnerships—reciprocal relationships—with parents (for an elaboration of this, as well as findings regarding candidates’ developing facility with partnering practices, see Khasnabis, Goldin, & Ronfeldt, 2018). We hypothesized that the following five competencies were skills that would be critical for teachers to enact in order to build such a relationship. Teachers would need to:

1. Communicate appreciation for the learner, as a student and as a child.
2. Help the parent to understand the child’s academic work from the point of view of her teacher.
3. Ask questions that show respect for the parent and elicit her thinking and insight, drawing upon her knowledge as the child’s parent.
4. Determine resources that the child’s family brings to her education.
5. Specify a range of next steps that harness those resources.

When we reflect upon what we knew about Gabriela, we knew that she had a wealth of knowledge that was linked to her life experience in Mexico and likely had been nurtured through interactions with her family about her surroundings. In Ms. Martin’s lesson, Gabriela had revealed this knowledge

by happenstance, but we surmised that if a teacher had engaged in a deliberate set of interactions with Gabriela's mother and other family members, then Gabriela's knowledge would have become more transparent, a resource not only for Gabriela in the lucky moments that connected with this knowledge, but for the teacher in all aspects of her teaching and instructional design work. We believe that these skills can be taught and can ultimately serve to reveal the very knowledge bases that EL children possess but are often unrecognized or silenced in American schools.

We drew inspiration from many places as we embarked on this work. The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP; now Global Family Research Project, n.d.) cases provided strong examples of the use of cases for the support of substantive teacher candidate learning. The use and flexibility of these cases highlighted to us the key ways in which cases can provide significant support for candidates' learning and practice. However, what the HFRP cases did not provide were details about *how* to write cases that center on racial and ethnic identity. Thus, for conceptual and theoretical inspiration on these critical aspects of our design work, we drew from the work of Delgado and Stefancic (2012) and Asimeng-Boahene (2010) and their work on counterstories. Counterstories allow us to problematize and decenter narratives about marginalized groups that arise with frequency in public discourse and that are typically told by dominant groups. Counterstories explicitly position members of marginalized groups as the narrators of their own stories, highlighting their perspectives and experiences, identifying and elevating, in turn, their assets to constitute asset-based frames. What follows is a description and analysis of our methods to build a case that would provide the instructional scaffolds that the HFRP cases provided and that would also give voice to groups who are often marginalized in schools, drawing upon scholarship on counterstories.

We thus set out to craft a simulation and a set of narrative documents for our teacher candidates and for the women who would play the role of Mrs. Silva as a simulated parent so she could reveal the extensive knowledge she has about her child. In order to do this in a way that would be authentic and would not trivialize or essentialize, we needed to construct an elaborated, rich case that would complement the knowledge that a teacher would have of one of her students. Working in collaboration with informants, we crafted a case that included information about the school life as well as the home life of the child. We decided that the child, Marco, would be someone who exhibited familiar challenges of EL children early in their time in the U.S. We wrote that Marco was well-liked by classmates but shy and struggling to get comfortable in the classroom setting, in particular in the morning after being dropped off at school. We decided also to vary features of the case child from features of

Gabriela, in order to ensure that the story was inspired by an authentic, lived experience, but also ensuring that Gabriela's anonymity itself would be protected. We built in moments of challenge and strength for the teacher candidates to discover and grapple with to maximize the learning potential provided by the case simulation.

We changed the gender and grade level of the child to that of a young third grade boy, Marco, and we began to name and specify Marco's ample knowledge about coconuts, plants, and gardening, suggesting this knowledge base would have resulted from both his experience on the beaches of Mexico as well as working in the family garden with his mother and grandmother. We combed through our experiences of interacting with Mexican families, in particular the experiences of the second and third authors who were former and current teachers of Mexican students. Building on what we had learned in our work as educators, as colleagues, and as scholars, and in deep collaboration with others, we developed a fictitious family profile, in which we fleshed out many more details about Marco, his mother Mrs. Silva, his father, and extended family. These details included information on the occupations of family members, favorite pastimes, schooling experiences, and the relationship Marco had with his former preschool teacher. All of these details were incorporated into a set of materials that included information that only a parent would know.

While we elaborated an extended narrative about Marco, his mother, and their home life that described Marco and his family, we did not share all of these details with our teacher candidates. Those were meant to be knowledge held by the family, rich details that the teacher candidates could learn in the parent-teacher conference, to the extent that they elicited this information. But, just as families see and know their children in particular ways, so too do teachers see and know these same children in particular and also different ways—as students. Thus, we built complementary narratives into documents about Marco for the teacher candidates. We told our teacher candidates at the start of the simulated parent-teacher conferences that the purpose of the conference was for them (1) to communicate to Mrs. Silva their assessment of Marco's development in scientific understandings and his behavior, and (2) to learn from her what family-based practices and resources support Marco's learning. The packet that teacher candidates received contained elaborated descriptions of Marco as a student—knowledge that a teacher would have of a student in their class. Thus, while we stitched some information about Marco and Mrs. Silva's home life into this packet, detailing that “Mrs. Silva has lived in the United States for 2.5 years and is able to speak basic social English,” we limited this information to what a teacher might know about one of their students, what might have been gleaned from brief greetings at drop off and pick up and from Marco in the classroom.

What we elaborated for the teacher candidates were details about Marco as a student—and, even more, information that a teacher would have the professional responsibility to share in ways that a non-educator could understand, free from jargon. Thus, we crafted a portrait of Marco as a student—his easy friendships, his progress in English language development, his reading level. We layered in a “behavioral problem,” telling the teacher candidates:

He can at times struggle to settle in the morning after drop off. Mrs. Silva, Marco’s mother, is one of the only third grade parents who walks her child to his locker and then the classroom. Mrs. Silva’s departure is often difficult for Marco and results in him becoming teary eyed and withdrawn, often requiring you to check in with him or ask another child to be a morning buddy for Marco. This is sometimes difficult to manage on a hectic morning. As the day progresses, Marco gets comfortable and is able to complete his work

This was carefully constructed, an open space for teacher candidates who might interpret this—and relay it to his mother—as purely problematic, or who conversely might seek to better understand the family’s drop off routine and what she might do to ease the teary eyes and withdrawn nature of Marco who was also described as a “sweet third grade student who is friendly and well-loved by classmates.” If the teacher candidate did ask this of Mrs. Silva, then the simulated parent would be able to draw upon information provided in the simulated parent packet of information, information that the teacher candidate would not yet know: “The morning is often the only time that Marco is able to spend with his mother on a weekday, as Mrs. Silva is at work cleaning offices when he returns home after school, and she does not return until after Marco is already asleep. Marco often struggles to settle after drop off, sometimes becoming teary-eyed and withdrawn.” Through focus group meetings, rehearsals, and pilot enactments, detailed below, we enumerated a set of four varied ways that the teacher candidate might ask Mrs. Silva about drop off, and the varied ways that Mrs. Silva might respond. We included these “decision rules,” as well as many others in the standardized parent packet. In the interactive setting of a parent–teacher conference, much rich information could be gained; and, much could remain hidden and invisible.

Table 1. Decision Rules Around Marco's Behavioral Challenge

If the teacher candidate...	Then Mrs. Silva will...
Shares concern about Marco's behavior in the morning, i.e. need for extra emotional support.	Listen and say that she will talk to Marco about this.
Makes comment that suggests judgment of his "overly sensitive" behavior.	Say, "I'm sorry. We work a lot. Maybe it's because he needs more from me."
Asks if Mrs. Silva has ideas for why Marco might be behaving this way.	Explain that she is gone all day and Marco misses her.
Asks Mrs. Silva if she has ideas for how to help Marco.	Say she doesn't know and ask the teacher what she should do about this.

Just as we layered in a behavioral issue, we also described Marco's academic abilities, indicating both spelling challenges that are typical to second language learners and content-based understandings that we drew from our observations of Gabriela. So too did we describe in the teacher candidate documents instructional examples that highlighted Marco's enthusiasm and content-based knowledge. For example, we wrote:

...though Marco has made good progress in his oral English, he still struggles to write in academic English, as evidenced by a recent writing prompt that he responded to in science regarding seed dispersal. He misspells some science words (such as "coconut") that are displayed accurately on the science word wall. He did, however, have a strong understanding of the central science topics in the recent unit on plants. During a recent activity, the students were asked to work in their table groups to sort pictures of several kinds of seeds. They were asked to distinguish whether each of the seeds were dispersed by wind, water or animal. Marco eagerly participated in this activity, enthusiastically examining the photos and sharing his ideas with the other children.

At the end of the activity, each child was asked to complete a writing prompt where they explained how any one of the seeds was dispersed. Marco's classwork, which is attached [to your packet], reads in the following way:

*My cockinot seed is dispersed by water. I think this because when it falls, the cockinot cracs then they fall on the water and water bushis the see.*

His response in conventional spelling reads as follows:

*My coconut seed is dispersed by water. I think this because when it falls, the coconut cracks then they fall into the water and water pushes the seeds.*

My Cockinot seed

is dispersed by Water.

I think this is because...

When it falls The  
Cockinot cracks Then  
They fall on The  
water and water Bush is The see

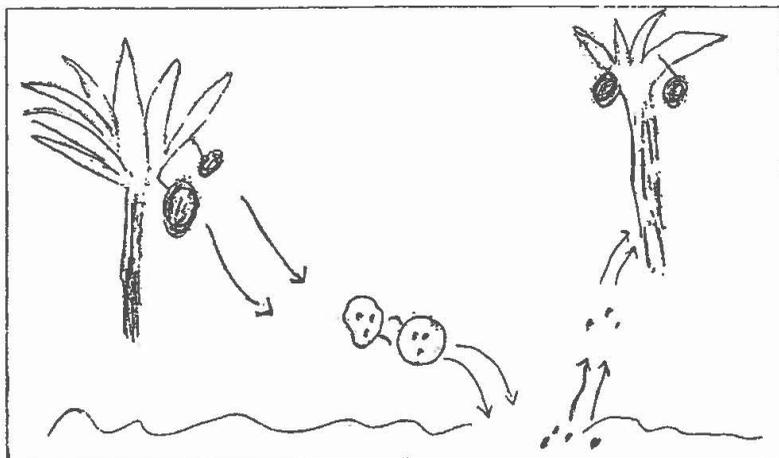


Figure 1. Student work.

Here, the teacher candidate's packet conveys Marco's enthusiasm exhibited in the teacher candidate's classroom and his detailed knowledge about coconuts and the plant cycle. We also included in the teacher candidate packet a mocked-up work sample from Marco that was modeled after Gabriela's actual work in the observed lesson (see Figure 1) including both her written response and drawing.

Again, working with informants in focus groups, we developed a set of possible questions the teacher candidate might pose and the responses Mrs. Silva might tender. We included these also as decision rules in the standardized parent packet (see Table 2).

Table 2. Decision Rules Around Marco's Home-Based Cultural Knowledge

If the teacher candidates...	Then Mrs. Silva will...
Asks "What does Marco do at home?"	Report briefly that Marco plays on father's phone, watches TV, plays outside, plays with neighbor's dog, draws, and likes to work in the garden with his mother. Also shares that he likes to talk with her grandmother.
Teacher candidate continues to ask questions about Marco's interests in plants/gardening.	Provide more information about Marco's uncle who was a farmworker, gardening with his grandmother, planting hibiscus and his desire to plant sunflowers. Mrs. Silva can add that in the summer time, they grow more flowers. Marco accompanies Mrs. Silva to the store to buy seed packets that he likes, using the pictures to help him make a decision about what to buy. If Mrs. Silva refers to the hibiscus, she says, "I don't know how to say it in English. It's <i>hibisco</i> in Spanish."
Shares specific positive observations about Marco's work in the plant unit	Respond enthusiastically saying, "Yes, Marco really likes to work in the garden."
Using the writing sample, asks Mrs. Silva to review Marco's work and/or asks for any feedback from Mrs. Silva regarding what she is noticing about the writing.	Respond positively, saying, "I can see how he's learned so much." Laughingly adds, "Look at this beautiful picture! He has always loved plants!"
Asks follow-up questions of Mrs. Silva about Marco's work	Provide information about Marco's exposure to plants in both Mexico and US and specifically to palm trees and coconuts.

## Authenticating the Case

As we have noted, crafting an authentic case was an essential goal of this work. In order to assure that Marco's family story, educational history, and cultural knowledge was realistic, once we had written an initial draft, we circulated

the case amongst various people for review and engaged in several rounds of iterative revisions. We started with the experience of the third author, a practiced teacher of English learners who was familiar with the English language development of students such as Marco. She helped identify typical errors that would likely show up in a written sample of an EL student's work. The sentences in Marco's science work were based on the original work of Gabriela but modified to reflect both intentional examples of progress and areas for further language development (namely English spelling patterns) that teacher candidates might notice and choose to comment on during the parent–teacher simulation. This was critical as we aimed to create a case that would be both (a) authentic and respectful, and (b) instructionally useful, a real resource for expanding and supporting teacher candidates' learning.

Multiple elementary school teachers also reviewed the written work sample. During one conversation with a first grade teacher, we learned that Marco's misspelling of coconut with a "k" felt authentic to her because many of her students with Spanish language background overused that letter to represent a hard-c sound. Another teacher noted that the morning separation anxiety that Marco exhibited felt like something that she had faced in her own career. She commented that she often struggled with how to best navigate this situation herself and that providing teacher candidates an early opportunity to experience and learn from this was a good choice. They would have, here, the opportunity to practice this in simulation before enacting it with the parents and caregivers of their students in placement, thus increasing the likelihood that they could navigate these complex conversations respectfully and supportively. The teacher also shared that she had expectations for students to be dropped off outside of the classroom space but had often felt uncertain about interfering when parents chose to escort children through the morning routine. She noted that when one has a limited relationship with a parent and a difficult time communicating, it is uncomfortable to be corrective. Again, the real challenge this practicing teacher shared with us emanated from her own work in her classroom. We drew upon this and other real challenges as we aimed to choreograph an opportunity for our teacher candidates to practice navigating an authentic problem that occurs with some frequency in the context of a simulated, scaffolded case.

A final move to ensure the authenticity of the case was to share it with Mexican mothers. We leaned on familiar, collegial, and personal relationships to identify women that could relate to our fictional Mrs. Silva. During these conversations, we heard stories that helped confirm our portrait of both Marco and Mrs. Silva. One Mexican mother commented that Mrs. Silva seemed "just like her mom" because her mom was always trying to help her with school but

did not have the experience of American schools to draw upon. Another Mexican mother appreciated that Mrs. Silva had a “special shared knowledge” with Marco (gardening) because she had experienced that in her own childhood as she learned to cook from her own mother. Another Mexican mother helped us to understand how technology is shaping students’ experiences, which drove us to revise our case to be more contemporary. She explained that our initial characterization of Marco as being forlorn because of the distance from his grandparents reflected her experience as a child, but now access to cell phones often helps immigrant children to stay in better contact with family back in Mexico. Accordingly, we updated our scenario to incorporate this valuable experiential knowledge.

In addition, we wrestled with fleshing out Mrs. Silva’s persona, as it intersected with her linguistic knowledge. Mrs. Silva would have rich familial history about her son, but we questioned the degree to which she should readily offer up that information to a teacher during a parent–teacher conference. To address this question, we requested the feedback of multiple informants, including the Mexican mothers we had interacted with, as well as a set of women of various Latina identities who ultimately played the role of Mrs. Silva as standardized parents. Most of these women were graduate students of various nationalities. Overall, there was consensus amongst our informants indicating that Mrs. Silva would likely first offer detail sparingly, given her limited exposure to English. Further, most indicated that parent–teacher interactions were often deferential on the part of parents, as Mexican culture typically positioned teachers in highly respected roles where teachers tended not to be questioned. Thus, in our design of the simulated parent decision rules, we indicated brevity in Mrs. Silva’s initial responses, and greater detail only when a teacher candidate pressed for more information in welcoming ways. These things are exemplified in Tables 1 and 2; as can be seen there, Mrs. Silva’s first responses to the teacher’s questions—across potential topics of discussion—are to thank the teacher. Only when the teacher probes more deeply does Mrs. Silva open up and share more information with the teacher. Another way to see this, in addition to being reflective of Mrs. Silva’s deferential relationship with the teacher and her language proficiency, has to do with the devaluing of home-based knowledge. It is possible that Mrs. Silva—and our teacher candidates as well—might not recognize the pedagogically salient and fundamentally content-based knowledge that she, Marco’s grandmother, and her son possess.

We realize also that Mrs. Silva cannot represent all families whose English language proficiency is limited. Mrs. Silva is a mother with some limited English language proficiency, but some families will have less ability to communicate in English. For such cases, we recognize that teacher candidates would

need to learn to communicate with families through interpreters. While we do not address this need in the parent–teacher conference simulation, we do provide teacher candidates with some orientation to working with interpreters in other components of our teacher education program.

## **The Simulation in Practice**

As part of our teacher education program, teacher candidates provided passive consent to have all aspects of their coursework, including their simulations, included in ongoing research. We provide here a few excerpts of their simulations, using pseudonyms.

### **The Behavioral Issue**

We now offer a few images of the simulation, as enacted by teacher candidates and simulated parents. We first examine excerpts focused on the behavioral concern in the case, Marco’s tearfulness in the morning. In the case of candidates such as Joan, who did not ask for Mrs. Silva’s feedback on this issue, they gathered little information from her:

Um, one thing that I wanted to talk about was just that he, when he’s dropped off in the morning, sometimes he has a hard time just like getting into the flow of things. You know, gets a little upset to be leaving you in the morning. Um, so, I don’t know what, he, a lot of times we’ll pair him with a buddy. You know, it like helps him calm down, helps him, you know, get into the flow of things. Um, so, I just, regarding that, um, for, you know, to make his flow into the classroom easier and to make drop off a lot easier, um, I would suggest, like, rather than walking him to his locker and everything, dropping him off at the door. Um, just to help him see school as more of an environment where he’s with his teachers and he’s with his friends and doesn’t, you know, um, see it as somewhere where he has that like interaction as much with, you know, his home life and his parents and everything.

Given the lack of invitation to Mrs. Silva to share her insight, Mrs. Silva did not offer Joan any thoughts or explanation of Marco’s behavior.

In contrast, Karen engaged in this topic in a more elaborated way. She started by asking for Mrs. Silva’s confirmation that she brought Marco to his locker every day. She then stated, affirmingly, “And then you bring him to class. And we’ve been finding, I can tell that Marco has a great relationship with you.” These affirming statements preceded Karen’s sharing of the challenges Marco was having in the classroom, and she explained that “he does have a really difficult time settling into class, getting ready to learn, often he has tears, and it

takes, it takes away from his learning time then at that point.” Mrs. Silva then, as laid out in the decision rule, responded that she is sorry, to which Karen responded, “No, it’s not your fault at all” before proceeding to offer a number of possible solutions, involving either a buddy offering to help Marco transition into the day, or Karen’s help herself. Karen then checked in with Mrs. Silva, asking, “Would you feel comfortable with that?” thus offering Mrs. Silva space to voice her concern that she didn’t know which kids could be a buddy for Marco, to which Karen responded with particular suggestions. Thus, Karen’s collaborative approach to sharing the concern about Marco’s difficult morning drop offs varied dramatically from Joan’s approach and opened up new possibilities that were more inclusive of Mrs. Silva’s input and concerns.

### **The Academic Issue**

We now examine simulation excerpts focused on Marco’s academic work. Many candidates, like Teresa, shared Marco’s work, but never asked for Mrs. Silva’s feedback on his work nor followed up on Marco’s interests. Teresa elaborated on the spelling challenges shown in Marco’s writing and explained that she would instruct him to use the word wall in the classroom to check his spelling. She later asked if Mrs. Silva had any concerns, which Mrs. Silva responded simply, “No, I just want to know if he is being good and if he is doing his work.”

This example lies in contrast with that of another teacher candidate, Stacey. Stacey shared Marco’s work sample and, while she noted his spelling errors and the ambiguity in his drawing, she also commented at length on Marco’s conceptual understanding of the plant cycle. Stacey then pressed on, asking many questions of Mrs. Silva to try to understand the nature of Marco’s academic work at home. The following query, voiced by Stacey, opened up a new area of sharing from Mrs. Silva: “And then I was just wondering if there was anything else you do with Marco at home, in terms of activities, what education, um, I know you mentioned he talks about his reading a lot, is there any other games that you play when you have the time with him?” At this point, the standardized parent playing the role of Mrs. Silva offered up details about Marco’s experience in gardening, as directed by the decision rules shown in Table 2: “Uh, when we’re home on the weekends, uh, we like to plant, we have a garden, so he, he loves plants. Um, so we garden together, um, and what, um, he loves to talk with his grandmother in Mexico, um (pause) those are the things that he likes.” Stacey immediately followed up on this by asking questions about what plants the family grew and for what purposes. She also reported that she would talk with Marco more about his interest in plants and gardens. In this way, Stacey’s interactions with Mrs. Silva were indicative of her

recognition that Mrs. Silva had knowledge about her son that could be helpful to her as his teacher.

Thus, the teacher candidate document contained glimmers of Marco's rich experiential and subject-matter knowledge, and the simulated parents had a set of cultural and familial experiences to share that increasingly uncovered the knowledge and expertise that could be used in instructionally significant and useful ways to support Marco's learning. If the teacher candidate pursued these glimmers, the simulated parents had ample and extended accounts of their lives with Marco to offer in return.

Our most important goal in all this was to *simulate authenticity*; to create a case that would offer rich opportunities for our teacher candidates to learn from a parent and to show them that bringing fascination and curiosity to interactions with children and their families and communities would reward them. Around every corner, *real gems lie*, barely hidden, within reach of the teacher candidate if she worked to enact the practice we taught and scaffolded in class—a partnering practice characterized by asking and listening, all with the trained eye of a teacher. Behind every thread of conversation there lies more: if the teacher candidate were to share positive observations about Marco's work in the plant unit, Mrs. Silva would respond enthusiastically, saying "Yes, Marco really likes to work in the garden." This is good and useful knowledge for the teacher to have. But, if she were to pursue this further, continuing to ask questions about Marco's interests in plants/gardening, she would uncover even more nuance, as Mrs. Silva would then provide more information about Marco's uncle who was a farmworker, about how Marco gardens with his grandmother when they are together, about buying seed packets from the local gardening store, planting hibiscus, and his desire to plant sunflowers. Each of these additional details, if uncovered, would help the teacher to plan skillfully and build purposefully in her work with Marco, leveraging his home-based knowledge and practice in the service of his work in school.

## Tensions We Faced

Building a case with hidden gems and rich detail is not easy work. It is work that could, in its worst enactment, be reductionist, or work that could reinforce stereotypes and divisions. Thus, we elaborate here on how we managed these real dangers. We aimed to create a case that would simulate authenticity and not reproduce deficit views of families and communities. Throughout the development of the case, we sought to manage a set of tensions or problems, each of which were critical to the development of a case that would enable us to choreograph an opportunity for our teacher candidates to learn to design instruction

for and support Gabriela and all the children they would come to serve when they took full responsibility for the education of their future students. Here we discuss three especially salient tensions and the ways in which we worked to manage these, in design and in extended consultation with informants.

The first problem we confronted had to do with gender. As we wrote above, this case was inspired by a real child and her content and cultural knowledge, Gabriela. Perhaps because of this, when we set out to write this case, we began with the vision of a girl and her mother. However, when we took that case to our informants in our focus groups, we could see together that there was a danger that we would be reinforcing gendered stereotypes about girls being overly sensitive or easy to cry. We worried that the behavioral problem that we sketched above, when tied to a girl, was problematic. Thus, the fictitious child became Marco.

A second tension that we managed had to do not with the case but with the enactment of the case. As we've detailed here, Mrs. Silva's limited exposure to English was a key component of the case; we wanted very much to put our teacher candidates into conversation with a parent and have them practice learning from this parent and sharing information about her child as a student. The simulated parents who played Mrs. Silva shared many aspects of their identities with that of Mrs. Silva's, but there were also important ways in which their identities diverged. Many had high linguistic knowledge, enjoyed socioeconomic or educational privileges, and were English proficient. How could they learn to play the role of a person whose first language is not English? We took a number of steps in our efforts to manage this problem: we assembled many sets of feedback and wrote detailed guidance, much of which was meant to manage these problems, and we practiced enacting the parent-teacher conference with each other and with undergraduates who were not teacher candidates and thus would not be participating in the simulation. Last, after the first round of enactment, we studied video records of the enactments with simulated parents, using these to practice what to say, when, and how.

In addition, we recognize that there are always risks associated with constructing cases that highlight the experience of people of marginalized identities, in particular, people of color. Through our case about Marco and Mrs. Silva, we have told one story about a Mexican American immigrant family, and some would likely argue that the case is too limited or, potentially, that it inadvertently reinforces stereotypes about immigrant families. We see the merit in this critique and have attempted to address it, first by consistently integrating the voices and feedback of many informants, including those with identities similar to those of the individuals portrayed in the case and, secondly, by working over time to increase the number of cases we have written. To date, we have

written five cases, each featuring children and parents of different marginalized identities. We believe that while each of the cases offers great utility in that each highlights assets and knowledge of a different family of a different identity, teacher candidates need to be offered experience with many cases in order that we do not run the risk of reinforcing the stereotypes that teacher candidates may have of varied communities.

We also are purposeful about inserting the possibility that teacher candidates can confront their stereotypes and, through the experience of the simulation and coursework in our program, learn to disrupt those same stereotypes. For example, we realize that racial identifiers are often accompanied by assumptions about class; in this case, Mrs. Silva is a Mexican mother who is of working class. There is great danger that teacher candidates enter teacher education programs with problematic assumptions, for example that Latino families are poor and, even worse, lazy or uninvolved in their children's education. These stereotypes, or "single stories" (Adichie, 2009) about Latino identities have been confirmed by other scholars, such as Olivos (2006), and Ada and Zubizaretta (2001) who indicate their frequent encounter with teachers who assume Latino parents do not value education.

Mrs. Silva, one could argue, could reinforce this stereotype. But through simulated experiences, we aim for teacher candidates to learn that parents, regardless of race and class, should be seen for the resource they provide to their children, the knowledge they have about their children, and the great potential for partnership that teachers can develop when they see parents from this frame. Through their experiences with Mrs. Silva, in particular, teacher candidates can learn to address, test, and disrupt assumptions they have about Latino parents. Like other Latino parents interviewed by Ada and Zubizaretta (2001), Mrs. Silva's engagement with her child's education is evident in her great aspirations for her child—she possesses what Yosso (2005) refers to as aspirational capital—high hopes for her son's future that are a guiding force, even in the face of challenge she and her family have endured. Alfaro and colleagues (2014) also documented the ways that Latino parents use "*consejos*" ("advice;" see Delgado Gaitan, 1994) to instill optimism, determination, disposition toward schooling, and motivation in their children, all in the hopes for a better future. Thus, our intention in the design of Mrs. Silva as a working-class Latina mother is that teacher candidates will recognize the tremendous knowledge she has about her son as well as her engagement in his learning through her aspirations for him, her support for his needs, and her efforts to help her family thrive economically despite great difficulty.

Instead of denying the existence of this stereotype, we address it as a tension in our simulation design. We would rather support teacher candidates to

interrogate stereotypes, including their own biases, than deny their existence altogether. We do this in multiple ways, including in and through reflection—candidates analyze and reflect on their enactments in writing, as well as in class in small- and whole-group discussions (see Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2005). It is likely that many teacher candidates will work with working-class Latino children and families and other marginalized communities; we therefore believe that our efforts to support teachers in seeing *all* community members holistically and from an asset-based perspective are needed and worthwhile.

## Conclusion

The goal of our program is to develop rich opportunities for our teacher candidates to learn with and from families, to learn to see, hear, and leverage children's and families' knowledge. This goal arises from the recognition that the knowledge bases, values, and beliefs of marginalized families and communities—including immigrant communities—are typically not visible within a dominant school-based setting, or worse, seen as problematic. Purcell-Gates and colleagues (2014) elaborate on the tendency for North American teachers to see the parent as the child's "first teacher" of literacy, a role envisioned typically as parents "working with a child in the home to develop the child's literacy knowledge and skills" (p. 18), perhaps through pointing out print and sound-letter correspondence in the child's environmental print. Instead, they advocate for an orientation to the notion of parents as children's first teachers of literacy through the mediation of life activities. Along these lines, we note that the ongoing life activities of Marco and Mrs. Silva would create opportunities for engagement in literacy practices, perhaps through oral and written interaction with their family members or through decision making about which seed packets to buy when planning a garden.

Purcell-Gates and colleagues (2014) state,

We believe that the ability to see one's own beliefs, values, attitudes, and knowledge as culturally constructed is key to learning about and working with children and families from differing cultural groups. Without understanding our own cultural constructions, we will continue to see those who are different from "us" as the "Other." (p. 21)

We are influenced heavily by this notion that beginning teachers must learn to gauge and analyze their own beliefs as they listen to and learn from children and families. We also believe that teacher candidates must learn to do this in an applied way, gaining insight into the actual conduct of interactions with families. Other scholars (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012) have advocated for and laid out a set of practices that are critical for meaningful

parent–teacher interactions—for example, noting the need for active listening, when teachers observe the parent’s behavior and body language before responding. We too advocate for an attention to practice. We build upon the work of Symeou and colleagues by noting that listening and learning from families should ultimately enable teachers to return to the design of their instruction in ways that are enlivened by what they have learned.

We join other scholars, who have found that substantive coursework focusing on the development of partnerships between teachers and families can have important consequences for both beliefs and practice. Warren and colleagues (2011) identified changes in teachers’ knowledge, skills, dispositions, and relationships with families, including the finding that focused work on family engagement led to many participants shifting “from holding negative assumptions about students’ families to valuing their contributions” (p. 104). We agree that attending to beliefs such as these are critical, as is practice. Our work allows the opportunity for teacher candidates to examine both their practice and their beliefs as they evolve and as they are influenced by their interactions with Mrs. Silva. Our work is ongoing, and we believe that the development of more cases portraying families of various backgrounds can offer our teacher candidates ample experience in learning to interact with parents and to recognize and build upon the home- and community-based assets of their students.

We emphasize that the development of simulations requires an orientation to both process and ethics. Our process integrated an approach to ensuring authenticity; ensuring that children’s authentic ideas and classroom-based work remain central was critical to our process. As we departed from the real, lived observations we had of children’s work, we crafted fictitious details about a child and family through an iterative approach that drew repeatedly from the knowledge and critique of many informants. This required a consistent commitment to highlighting the assets of a marginalized group and to integrating an informant validity check to every step of the process of creating the case. We recommend this process to other teacher educators who share our goals, but advocate that each step of ensuring authenticity and ethics must be attended to with care.

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