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## Supporting English Learners through Practice-Based Research

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## Supporting English Learners Through Practice-Based Research

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### Abstract

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Learning to use critical practice-based research as part of teaching is an important goal for preservice teachers, especially for those who plan to teach English learners in linguistically diverse settings. In this study, the authors examine the experiences of preservice teachers who were introduced to a framework for enacting iterative, transformative action research and used the framework to study their own teaching in a one-on-one writing partnership with young English learners. Using an established self-efficacy survey instrument, as well as qualitative measures such as course artifacts and observations of teaching, the authors conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the impact of research engagement on preservice teachers' self-efficacy, self-reported knowledge of practice-based research, and agency. Findings suggest that the experience helped preservice teachers increase their knowledge of practice-based research and reflect on their teaching decisions, but gains in self-efficacy varied across participants in relation to their racial and linguistic positionalities, their understandings of race and language, and their successes and challenges with enacting critically oriented research. This study has important implications for the design of preservice teacher education that emphasizes the role of research in teaching and supports the preparation of teachers for English learners in linguistically diverse communities.

**Keywords:** English learners, self-efficacy, agency, action research, writing instruction

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It is no secret that U.S. public schools are increasingly diverse. Teachers are often different racially, culturally, and linguistically from their students, and outcomes in literacy achievement continue to favor higher income, White, U.S.-born English speakers (Swartz & Stiefel, 2011). In particular, Latinx English learners (ELs) are disproportionately overrepresented among those who experience poor outcomes (Adair, Colegrove, & McManus, 2017; Dresser, 2007).

<sup>1</sup> We recognize that preferred terms change over time and self-identification varies between individuals. For consistency in this article, we use the term *English Learner* to describe students who speak Spanish and English.

Research is one source of inequity. When teachers work with linguistically diverse communities of color, they are often viewed as technicians and judged based on their students' achievement on standardized assessments rather than viewed as professionals who engage students in authentic literacy practices (Au, 2008; Martínez, 2018). External university-based research often positions teachers as lacking agency and efficacy in solving problems of practice, which leads to the promotion of curricular policies that dictate the very words that come out of their mouths (Picower, 2013).

Recent literacy scholarship has tried to construct a new relationship between policy, research, and practice with the goal of achieving more equitable outcomes for students (Eppley & Shannon, 2017). For example, in exploring ways to empower teachers to use their own research for change, Sailors and Hoffman (2019) have drawn on action research (Lewin, 1946), design development research (Van den Akker, 2006), and transformative research (Mertens, 2015) in defining practice-based research. Practice-based research, which has begun to be promoted as a tool for preservice teacher learning, is rooted in a view of teaching as reflective practice (Schön, 1983) and is intended to be used as a research framework that promotes more equitable outcomes for all students (Cochran-Smith, Friedman, Barnatt, & Pine, 2009; Zeichner, 2003).

Because “theorization of translingual literacy has far outpaced pedagogical practices” (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 41), practice-based research is especially valuable for answering questions of how to best serve ELs. Research on teacher preparation for linguistic diversity is in an early stage (Lucas, 2011), but it is clear that preparation focused specifically on EL students' unique literacy needs is required (Linan-Thompson, Degollado, & Ingram, 2018; Palmer & Martínez, 2016; Shin, 2006). Furthermore, strengthening preservice teacher preparation is crucial, given that in-service teachers have consistently reported inadequate ongoing professional development to serve ELs (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005). This study explores the possibility that when preservice teachers learn to think and act as practice-based researchers, they can use their own inquiries as catalyst for action as they equitably support ELs.

This study asks the following questions:

1. What relationships exist between preparation for practice-based research in linguistically diverse settings and preservice teachers' self-efficacy?
2. What relationships exist between preparation for practice-based research in linguistically diverse settings and preservice teachers' agency?
3. How does engagement in critical practice-based research support preservice teachers' enactment of strategies for teaching linguistically diverse students?

## Background

Practice-based research (Sailors & Hoffman, 2019) combines three important traditions. *Action research*, historically characterized by Lewin (1946) as “comparative research on the social conditions and effects of various forms of social action” (p. 35), is a term used to describe practitioners' inquiries into their realities and daily problems. Practice-based research also draws on design/development research (Van den Akker, 2006), which relies on analysis and adjustments across multiple iterations. Finally, practice-based research is informed by the transformative perspective (Mertens, 2015) of research as a

tool for activism and social change. The term *practice-based research* is intentionally inclusive of the full range of practitioners who work in educational spaces and centers the notion of teaching as practice (Schutz & Hoffman, 2017).

Research on literacy preservice teacher learning for practice-based research, particularly with ELs, is limited. Historically, the related (but not identical) teacher-researcher movement took rise in the United Kingdom (Stenhouse, 1971) and later the United States (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, 1999), but most of these efforts involved in-service teachers, rather than preservice teachers being prepared in advance (Topping & Hoffman, 2002). More recently, scholars have begun systematically exploring ways preservice literacy teachers learn to engage in this work (Hoffman, Lammert, Daly-Lesch, Godfrey, & Steinitz, 2018).

Although these projects are not synonymous with practice-based research, preservice teacher inquiry has been found to be particularly supportive for teachers of ELs (Athanases, Wahleithner, & Bennett, 2013; Dresser, 2007) and teachers of emergent readers in early childhood settings (Cobb, 2005; Escamilla & Meier, 2018). Lysaker and Thompson (2013) found a preservice teacher who engaged in an extended one-on-one mentoring experience with a young bilingual writer, using her own research to move beyond obvious interpretations and reinterpret her student's motivations and interests. Similarly, Capitelli (2015) found that by intentionally framing the gap between ELs and their monolingual counterparts as an opportunity gap, rather than an achievement gap, preservice teachers learned to view their students in asset-based ways and actively challenged constraints, such as large class sizes, that negatively impacted their students.

Preservice teachers' struggles to understand the relationship between sociocultural knowledge and their teaching are well documented (Wetzel et al., 2019), but some studies have demonstrated that teachers' inquiries can help them question their own biases toward racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse communities. Simon (2013) found that when preservice teachers analyzed adolescent writing in long-term collaborative research groups, they began to regard linguistically and culturally diverse student writers in urban settings as "authors with intentionality and purpose" (p. 115), and Scherff (2012) found that preservice teachers who used multi-genre inquiry research reframed problems of practice in ways that recognized the sources of power acting on their students.

Cumulatively, these studies suggest that when preservice teachers are prepared in advance to act as inquirers and researchers, there is potential to reframe linguistic diversity as a strength rather than a deficit. Accordingly, the current study explores preservice teacher learning for practice-based research in linguistically diverse communities and examines the possibilities this experience creates for transformative teaching.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

In conceptualizing preservice teachers' development as practice-based researchers in linguistically diverse settings, this study draws on three related theoretical constructs: self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), agency (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998), and critical practice-based research (Mills, 2018).

#### **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to execute courses of action in the learning environment (Bandura, 1977; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990). It has long been understood as a useful starting place for exploring preservice teachers' confidence that they can have a positive effect on learning and achievement. Although self-reporting can be unreliable,

an established positive correlation exists between skill in literacy teaching methods and self-reports of self-efficacy (Leader-Janssen & Rankin-Erickson, 2013; Rushton, 2003). Experiences with ELs have also been demonstrated to contribute toward increased self-efficacy for teaching ELs (Mahalingappa, Hughes, & Polat, 2018). Because the ability to conduct practice-based research suggests the ability to better understand and transform the learning environment, we theorized that gains in self-efficacy for teaching may be linked to engagement in practice-based research.

## **Agency**

Agency can be defined as action intended to resist the existing power relationships that govern social contexts (Ticknor, 2015). From a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), teacher agency entails self-efficacy and requires a belief in the possibility of reshaping the underlying dynamics of educational spaces. Although preservice teachers' own experiences and memories of schooling contribute to "durable" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 55) and culturally situated understandings about how they believe school works (Lortie, 1975), preservice teachers' understandings and practices can be reformed through their actions and agency (Urrieta, 2007). Agentic teachers are capable of using the resources at hand to reconfigure their own identities and enact substantial change to their practices as they work to better support ELs.

## **Critical Practice-Based Research**

Schmuck (2006) and others have argued that action research can be "democracy in action" (p. 31), but not all solutions reached through action research promote equity. Although the traditions of teacher inquiry (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, 1999) are valuable, practice-based research is decidedly more critical and transformative than past conceptualizations of teacher or practitioner research.

Mills (2018) distinguishes between critical, or emancipatory, action research, which is a tool for liberation, and practical action research, which emphasizes the how-to of school improvement. According to Mills, action research can be considered critical only when it is (a) democratic, enabling participation of people; (b) participatory, building a community of learners; (c) empowering, providing freedom from oppressive conditions; and (d) life-enhancing, enabling the expression of full human potential. Research that combines these critical dimensions with the principles of practice-based research affords the highest possibility of supporting ELs' needs.

## **Methods**

### **Context**

This study took place in a university-based teacher preparation program in the southwestern United States. In this program, the three-semester Professional Development Sequence model is cohort-based and involves extensive field-based coursework for students seeking to earn licensure to teach early childhood through sixth grade as generalists with an additional English as a Second Language certificate. All field experiences are offered in a public K–6 school that serves an economically disadvantaged and linguistically diverse English- and Spanish-speaking community where over 90% of students are identified as non-White, Hispanic.

### **Participants**

All preservice teachers who enrolled in one cohort (N =15) were invited to participate; all consented. All were female; ten identified as White, two as Asian, one as

Native American, one as Chicana, and one as biracial. Five spoke a language in addition to English. In this project, we gave additional focus to three purposefully selected preservice teachers chosen because they each identified research questions about their ELs' language practices and they self-identified as having different levels of English and Spanish bilingual proficiency. We are current teacher educators and former elementary teachers committed to culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) practices. As a White monolingual English speaker who grew up in a household where Spanish was discouraged but sometimes spoken (first author), and a White English and Spanish speaker who learned Spanish through community and school experiences (second author), we recognize that we identify in similar but ultimately unique ways in relation to our participants.

### **Procedures**

In the first semester, preservice teachers took two courses concurrently: Reading Assessment and Development, and Literacy Seminar. In the reading course, preservice teachers worked one-on-one in twice weekly sessions to co-author a Beautiful Book (Hoffman & Roser, 2012) with a preschool or kindergarten student in their field placement. Typically, writing began with the student drawing and discussing a story or idea, the pair deciding on an important word for the page, the student copying the word into the book, and the preservice teacher recording the student's narration of the page, although there were variations of this routine.

Simultaneously, in the literacy seminar course, preservice teachers learned about practice-based research. Each preservice teacher read about practice-based research (Sailors & Hoffman, 2019) and was given the assignment of developing a research question and prospectus that was related to the Beautiful Book experience. They read research literature, collected and analyzed data, and presented their findings. We supported them with the assignment by providing a template for the prospectus and helping them identify relevant published literature, but the preservice teachers ultimately developed their own research questions and plans for data collection and analysis.

### **Data Sources**

At the start and end of the semester, all participants were administered a survey based on an established self-efficacy instrument (Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990) and their knowledge of practiced-based research. The survey was divided into two parts, each with 14 questions on the same 6-point Likert scale. In addition, qualitative measures included admissions essays, observational field notes recorded during coursework and teaching, and course artifacts, including reading responses, research notebooks and prospectuses, case reports, Beautiful Book pictures and teaching reflections, and final exams.

### **Analysis**

This concurrent form mixed-methods study used embedded design analysis (Creswell, 2013), which is particularly useful when researchers are asking connected questions and aim to analyze both qualitative and quantitative data without prioritizing one or the other. Given the small sample size and the situated and individualized nature of constructs like self-efficacy, our quantitative analysis relied on descriptive statistics (Mertens, 2015). In reviewing survey data, we first looked to establish overall trends at the cohort level. Then we moved into qualitative, iterative analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) of data related to each of the three focal participants. We applied six a priori codes to the corpus of qualitative data: one for agency, four for the traits of critical action research (Mills, 2018), and one for disconfirming evidence that participants' research fit Mills's

(2018) criteria. After we both separately coded the data for each of the focal participants, we compared codes and found almost universal agreement. After coding, we moved back into the quantitative survey data, this time at the level of individual participants, to examine the ways their self-efficacy and knowledge of practice-based research interacted with their agency as reflected in their practices and statements about research. To ensure trustworthiness, we concluded by conducting member checking interviews with the three focal participants, and in doing so, we gave particular attention to the challenges and sore spots (Madill & Sullivan, 2018) they noted in relation to their racial, cultural, and linguistic positionalities and experiences with teaching and research. When these moments occurred, we used nonevaluative, open-ended statements such as “say more about that” to probe further.

## Results

First, we summarize findings from the survey. Then, we present preservice teacher profiles. The profiles describe their individual positionalities, self-efficacy, agency, and evidence of the enactment of critical practice-based research in relation to Mills’s (2018) four-part framework.

### Self-Efficacy and Practice-Based Research

Data are reported in Table 1. Descriptive analysis suggests meaningful gains of 1.28 points out of 6, on average, in self-reported knowledge of practice-based research and

Table 1

*Survey results for self-efficacy and knowledge of practice-based research.*

	Administration I				Administration II			
	Self-efficacy		Practice-based research		Self-efficacy		Practice-based research	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Cohort N = 15	4.18	0.44	3.68	0.78	4.38	0.38	4.96	0.59
Maggie	4.57	1.28	4.25	1.54	4.64	1.21	4.92	1.16
Nayeli	4.21	1.25	3.33	1.07	4.36	1.15	4.33	0.89
Lainey	4.79	1.05	4.64	1.16	4.15	1.52	6.00	0.00

small gains, on average .2 points out of 6, in self-efficacy. This suggests that experiences with practice-based research coincided with improved self-efficacy for teaching, but it also reflects variations in self-efficacy across participants.

**Maggie: “Research actually makes change; [it’s] not just ‘ponder the possibility of it’”**

Maggie self-identified as an English- and Spanish-speaking White woman. Her mean self-efficacy ratings slightly increased from the start of the semester (4.57/6) to the end (4.64/6). Her self-reported knowledge of practice-based research also increased (from 4.25/6 to 4.92/6). These gains were consistent with her communication, reflection, and instruction in the field and illustrative of cohort-level patterns.

In her research, Maggie first asked, “How does a bilingual classroom foster experimentation and growth in literacy?” Her question, aimed at how classrooms work, positioned her as an outsider studying the bilingual space. Through the Beautiful Book experience, she began to position herself inside her question, taking on the dual roles of teacher and researcher. Her question evolved to “When positioned as an English-dominant teacher, how can I empower [student] to build on her strengths and identities as a bilingual author through an exercise of autonomy and translanguaging?” Maggie’s research was especially democratic and participatory (Mills, 2018). Not only did she transparently explain her research process to the student in their sessions, but they literally shared the pen both in composing the Beautiful Book and in Maggie’s research notebook (Figure 1).

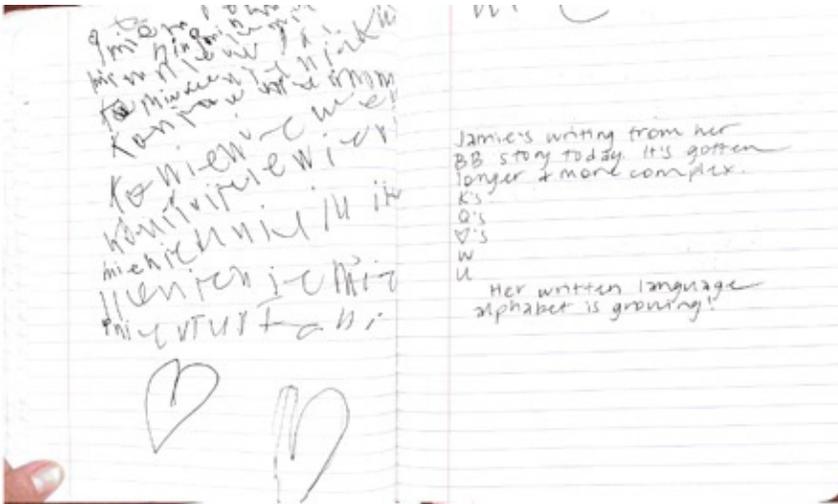


Figure 1. A sample co-constructed page from Maggie’s research notebook.

Early in the semester, Maggie pushed her own use of both languages by making comments such as “C’mon, let’s vamos a la biblioteca” (Observational Notes). However, as her student consistently continued to use English, Maggie realized that her forced modeling of English and Spanish was not just inauthentic, but unproductive in her teaching. Her focus shifted away from her own use of language and instead attended to the power of investing in her student’s writing and speech. Maggie wrote, “Reflection played a key role in my research. My data analysis and understanding of my question only came to fruition after reading and re-reading my observation book and thinking deeper about what I had

observed” (Final Exam).

From the start of the semester, Maggie described a commitment to exploring issues of equity in schools. She explained, “My experiences brought my White privilege to light; I want to use that consciousness to make my classroom an equitable space” (Admissions Essay). In course discussions and written assignments, Maggie noted her desire to conduct democratic, participatory research and affect educational policy in ways that were empowering and life enhancing (Mills, 2018). Reacting to a course reading, she wrote:

It only makes sense that research and change in classrooms should be made by people who have an understanding of classrooms. I feel like teachers and reformers are often criticized for being idealists, but using radical imagination to imagine the world, life, and social institutions not as they are but as they might be is productive and critical to moving towards change. (Reading Response)

Maggie explained that she believed research “actually makes change; [it’s] not just ‘ponder the possibility of it’” (Observational Notes). Her desire to create a learning environment that valued ELs’ biliteracy, combined with her use of critical practice-based research, built a foundation for her to imagine and enact change in schools through her own agency.

### **Nayeli: “We are part of the political movement also known as teaching”**

Nayeli, a Chicana who described her Spanish proficiency as “so-so” (Member Checking), showed an increase in mean scores for self-efficacy (from 4.21/6 to 4.36/6) and mean scores of self-reported knowledge of practice-based research (from 3.33/6 to 4.33/6) across the semester, although her self-reported research knowledge scores were consistently lower than the cohort mean.

Nayeli began with this research question: “How does my student use semiotic systems to express and convey meaning to myself and others?” As she attended more to the symbols and images her student was using to write about her world, Nayeli became more interested in her student’s English and Spanish language practices. By the end of the semester, she settled on this question: “How does our use of translanguaging and shared reading of books influence and foster a sense of agency in my student as an author and reader as well as influence what she chooses to express in her book?” In reflecting on her teaching, she wrote:

We typically go over our previous pages in our book and reread what she had me write, and what she drew, and what they mean to her. Going over her book influences the way she continues to draw. A pattern that recently emerged is her drawing us as mamá y bebé, and almost always her drawings include some kind of familial relationship. (Reading Response)

Nayeli made statements such as “We are part of the political movement also known as teaching” (Reading Response) and explained that she saw teaching and practice-based research as tools for resistance. Although her research exemplified all four of the criteria for critical action research described by Mills (2018), it was exceptionally democratic, participatory, and influential in creating life-enhancing possibilities for her students. Nayeli used her research notebook as a place to ask important political questions about the politics of EL education. For example, she asked, “How do we balance our teaching/learnings with what the school asks of us?” and later, “Is [the language proficiency exam] by school, district, state or federal? What is it used for, and why do they have to do it? How often do they have to do it?” (Research Notebook). Nayeli used research as a space to challenge

mandates and policies she viewed as wrong. She described teaching as a “transformative process” and traditional university-based research as a “cycle done by people in power” that it is her job to “break” (Reading Response). Echoing Maggie, she wrote that she prefers practice-based research because it “produces actual change” (Reading Response). Nayeli’s research poster, a space where she documented that “actual change” is included as Figure 2.

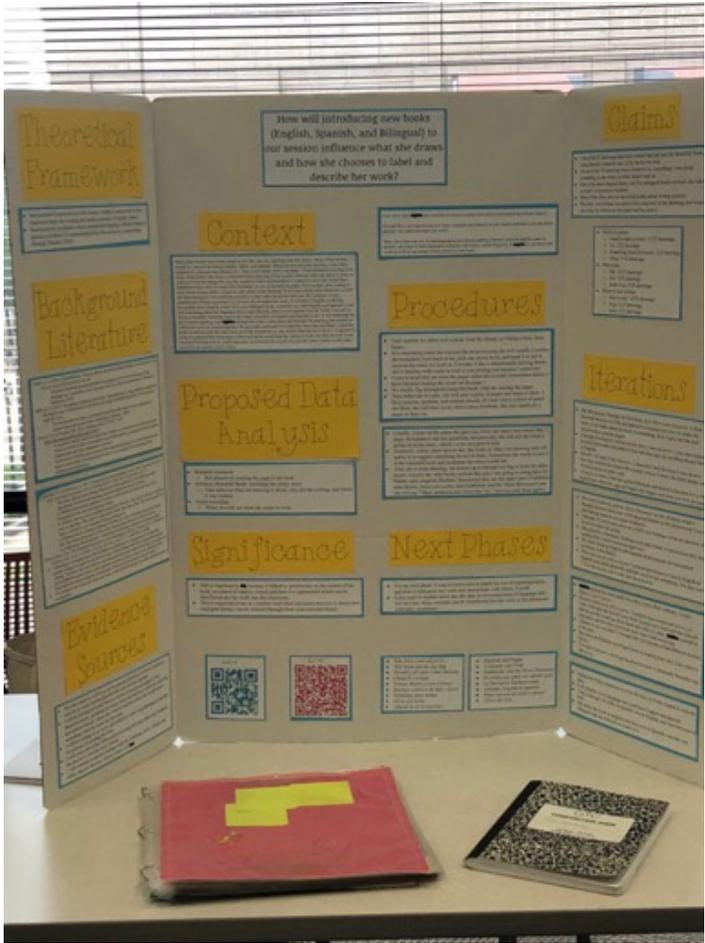


Figure 2. Nayeli’s research poster.

Over time, Nayeli revealed that she personally knew the pain that differences in language proficiency can cause students when they are viewed through a deficit lens. She wrote that her brother was born and lived in Germany until he was 5, so he grew up speaking German and Spanish: “When my parents moved back... the daycare thought he belonged in special education because he could not speak English” (Reading Response). Nayeli is an example of the *double injustice* (Ovando & Collier, 1985) heritage Spanish

speakers face in schools, because her Spanish proficiency was below that of her two White bilingual peers. In one instance, her field supervisor documented, “Sometimes Nayeli does not know the word and she will look it up on her phone or she might ask [her student] how to say something” (Observational Notes). In her teaching, Nayeli was not just modeling a stance of language learner alongside her student; she was still developing conversational fluency in Spanish moment-by-moment.

On the first administration of the survey, Nayeli listed her race as “White/Hispanic,” and on the second administration of the survey, she self-identified as “Hispanic.” When asked during member checking whether course experiences contributed to deeper self-realization, she tearfully explained that working with an EL had indeed made her think more about her own racial, cultural, and linguistic background (Member Checking). Ultimately, she explained that she preferred to be identified as Chicana and had found new strength in her positionality.

**Lainey: “I have deepened my desire to reach all people”**

Lainey self-identified as a White woman conversationally fluent in English and Spanish. Interestingly, her mean scores for self-efficacy declined over the course of the semester (from 4.79/6 to 4.15/6), but at the same time, her mean scores for self-reported knowledge of practice-based research increased (from 4.64/6 to a perfect 6/6). Although Lainey’s self-reported knowledge of practice-based research was higher than any other preservice teacher in the cohort, there were several instances in course discussions and written posts when she revealed tensions with her confidence as a teacher and researcher.

Lainey’s research began with this question: “How can I create a more open environment to foster my student’s translanguaging in our one-on-one Beautiful Book times in addition to his language use in the classroom?” By the end of the semester, she asked, “How does opening the space or inviting a student to use Spanish foster translanguaging in one-on-one Beautiful Book times?” Lainey explained, “I experienced a challenge when trying to narrow down the research question into a focused direction. At first, I had many disconnected observations in the classroom, so choosing one thing to focus on was difficult” (Final Exam). In her Beautiful Book teaching, Lainey became more deliberate over time about when and how she included bilingual texts, and she carefully examined what each decision did for her student’s learning. She explained, “As the semester progressed, the writing of the chosen word became less of a copying activity and more of a mutual writing experience” (Case Report). An example of a page from Lainey and her student’s Beautiful Book is included as Figure 3.

Lainey’s views on the role of a teacher shifted across the semester as a result of her engagement with research. In an early assignment, she expressed the authoritarian view that when students have “trouble listening,” then “teachers need to be a model of consistent morals and stand strong” (Reading Response). However, her Beautiful Book teaching was very student centered, and she wrote that her student’s agency was “a vital tool for building confidence in literacy” (Teaching Reflection). In reflecting back on her learning as a teacher and researcher who valued interests and agency, Lainey explained:

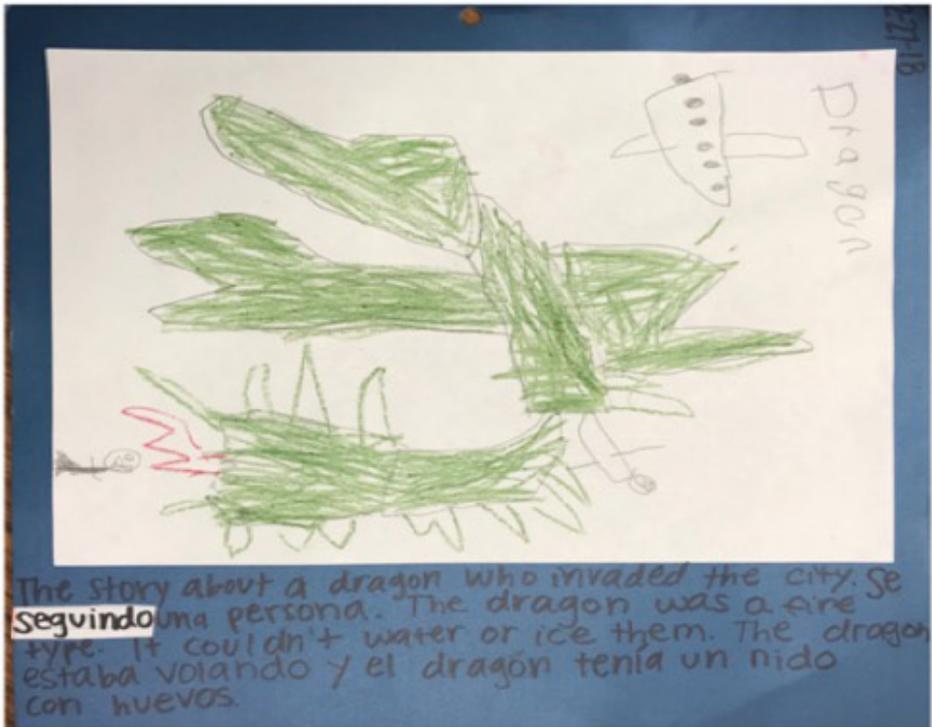


Figure 3. An example of a bilingual Beautiful Book page written by Lainey and her student.

In my life, instead of trying to control things around me, it's more of "How can I change myself to make things better?" I've learned about being proactive, and a lot of it wasn't about how to change other people. It was about how to change yourself, and then the other things will fall into place a little bit better. I think that's a lot more peaceful for me as a person, because I'm realizing I don't have control over everybody, and putting that into that space as a teacher. It's helping me see that there are different things I can do that encourage different behaviors, such as the translanguaging. Instead of telling him "Hey we're doing Spanish today," I wonder, I try to speak in Spanish a bit myself and help him realize that I'm still learning too. (Final Exam)

Lainey's statement that she has come to focus more on herself than on trying to change others is especially important because her self-efficacy declined over the course of the semester. One way she grappled with tensions was to recognize and accept the limits of her control as a teacher.

Lainey's research was participatory and empowering, but it was unclear if it was truly democratic or life enhancing (Mills, 2018), partly because she struggled to define how her teaching related to her EL student's positionality. In her admissions essay, Lainey wrote that teachers should learn about their students' "unique cultural households" and "invite them to share their special backgrounds with the class." Although attempting social

responsiveness, she framed her intentions around an implied other (Kumashiro, 2001), by viewing some students as culturally “special” and “unique,” which comes with the parallel assumption that other children occupy positions that are standard and/or typical. Across the semester, Lainey’s understanding of race and language developed. She realized she needed to learn more about her student’s family, so as a data source for her research, she met with her student’s parents and grandmother, a conversation she had in Spanish, to learn more about him. In her final sharing of research, Lainey explained that she had recently come to believe that her own Whiteness and language background was relevant to her questions and process (Research Prospectus). Although the impact of her positionality on her research was not fully resolved, she concluded that through the process, she had “deepened [her] desire to reach all people.”

### **Discussion**

This study examined how critical practice-based research could support preservice teachers’ self-efficacy and agency as well their development of strategies for teaching ELs. To conduct this examination, we focused on the experiences of three bilingual preservice teachers whose research centered around ELs’ language practices. We recognize that “forming an identity on intimate landscapes takes time... It takes (and makes) personal experience to organize a self around discourses and practices” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 285). And we acknowledge the limitations of a single-semester study focused on a small number of participants. Any study with an emphasis on language and positionality is bound by its particular participants (in this case, English- and Spanish-speaking Latinx ELs), but we view this experience as impactful for preservice teachers and useful for theorizing more broadly about the role of research in linguistically diverse classrooms.

Consistent with other studies in which actual experiences contributed to gains in self-efficacy (e.g., Özler & Alici, 2009), engagement in practice-based research coincided with small increases in self-efficacy. Still, as was true for Lainey, declines in self-efficacy following experiences with teaching and, in this case, research are not uncommon. In previous studies (e.g., Lin & Gorrell, 2001) this was interpreted as a sign of deeper understanding of the complexities of teaching. Here, it may also have been related to Lainey’s realization of the challenges of engaging in critically oriented practice-based research; her recognition that she cannot control everything and everyone else, even as a researcher; and her growing understanding of the rich complexity of EL students’ linguistic resources.

Improvements to preservice teachers’ actual literacy teaching with ELs were also important in this study. We noted that preservice teachers’ research questions became less behavioral and cause/effect-based, and more relational and context dependent across the semester as they better understood their EL students’ motivations for drawing on their bilingual repertoires. Although schools often position ELs through deficit frames (Martinez, 2018), we argue that the shifts in these teachers’ research questions reflect shifts in their stances toward more appreciative and asset-based views of ELs. Although participants like Maggie initially tried to make their students’ language use happen as they wanted it to through their own intervention as researchers, as their projects grew, their understanding of EL language practices evolved into a more nuanced understanding of the purposefulness of language choices. As teacher educators who view instruction for EL students as “more than just a set of translation skills,” but “critical in a learner’s path toward active participation in the broader community” (Hoffman & Roser, 2012, p. 303), we find these innovations especially promising.

In addition, we noticed that preservice teachers' own racial and linguistic positionalities influenced their research questions and practices. As Nayeli's experience highlights, conducting research on others can make us think more deeply about ourselves. Mills's (2018) framework prepared us to notice the ways that critical action research could create life-enhancing possibilities for research participants, but we were surprised that this also extended to the preservice teachers as researchers. It is an accepted convention for university-based researchers to examine our own positionality as instruments of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because positionality is as much as, if not more of, a consideration in practice-based research, which is inextricable from classroom contexts, this project suggests that preservice teachers need the same, if not more, room for self-exploration. By presenting three different experiences, we hope to have demonstrated the importance of helping preservice teachers consider their positions in relation to their work.

Finally, we continue to believe that "literacy teachers must embrace a moral stance in the face of an educational system that is falling short on the promise of providing educational opportunities for all" (Hoffman, DeJulio, & Lammert, 2018, p. 2). Although we accept that teacher preparation programs have different goals and purposes, our commitment to serving EL students and linguistically diverse communities of color dictates that it is not optional whether we prepare agentic, efficacious, and critically-oriented teachers to enact practices that challenge the status quo and promote more equitable experiences for students. Here, critical practice-based research provided learning experiences for preservice teachers to drive their inquiries and understandings while also examining equitable teaching practices with EL students. We feel unfinished in this work, but we enthusiastically invite other teacher educators, researchers, and scholars in other contexts to explore these constructs alongside us as we move forward, particularly in other linguistic settings.

### **About the Authors**

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