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Retention of First-Generation Mexican American Paraeducators in Teacher Education: The Juggling Act of Nontraditional Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the dynamics and challenges encountered by *culturally and linguistically diverse* (CLD) paraeducators who are participating in a 2+2, distance-delivered, teacher education program in the Midwest. The theoretical framework that serves as the basis of this case study is Thomas and Collier's Prism Model (Collier, 19878: Collier & Thomas, 1989; Thomas & Collier, 1997), which focuses on the four essential dimensions of the student biography (linguistic, socio-cultural, academic, and cognitive). This case study should be understood as an account of the lived experiences of 30 CLD paraeducators in a unique recruitment and retention program designed to support all four dimensions of the student biography. To these ends, the researcher seeks to understand this pioneering project within a complex socio-political system and its implications for recruitment, retention and graduation of CLD students. Furthermore, the paper provides critical insights to inform the field concerning future program design.

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Introduction

As educational institutions across the United States come to grips with the significant lack of "highly qualified" educators in our nation's schools, leaders and change agents within colleges of education must rethink their traditional roles and modes of operation. The tremendous need for "highly qualified" educators, along with the ongoing increase in the number of retirees and new teachers leaving the field, has prompted institutions of higher education (IHEs) to consider new ways of working to effectively address this dilemma (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). It is projected that "over 2.5 million teachers needed in the next ten years will be first-time teachers" (Gutierrez, 2006, p. 17), and the majority of the new students they will be serving will be culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). For this reason, it is critical that IHEs help to diversify the nation's teaching force and to provide quality teacher education programs to equip future educators with the skills they need to successfully teach all students (Gutierrez, 2006; Hussar, 1999).

Surprisingly, the rural Midwest is experiencing the greatest increase in their CLD student population in some of the most remote areas of the region, in districts where it is often difficult to lure and retain teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Gutierrez, 2006). Traditional models for teacher education fail to support and nurture CLD candidates; as a result they fail the CLD children in our schools. For this reason, it is critical that programs work to diversify the teaching force to more adequately reflect the population we are now educating (Baker, 1996; Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; Nieto, 1992; Shroyer, 2004; Valenciana, Morin, & Morales, 2005).

Regrettably low graduation rates of CLD students from high school serve as a major indicator of their limited participation in post-secondary education. Community colleges, often located in less populated areas, tend to know their local population well and are now more than ever serving a vital role in providing quality educational opportunities to those who otherwise would not have the opportunity (Gutierrez, 2006; SERVE Policy Brief, 2000, Valenciana, Morin, & Morales, 2005). By joining forces, two-year colleges and four-year universities are able to recruit, retain, and graduate CLD teacher candidates. This paper documents the efforts and results of one such program in which one four-year university and two, two-year colleges collaboratively designed and implemented a 2+2, distance delivered program to recruit and retain CLD Mexican American paraeducators in teacher education.

Literature Review

The current literature depicts a bleak picture of post-secondary retention of CLD students and serves as a grim reminder of the daunting task faced by IHEs. For example, although the number of Latino/as (a broad term used in the literature to describe anyone from Latin American or Mexican decent) entering IHEs is on the rise, they are half as likely as their White peers to graduate with a bachelor's degree (Fry, 2003; Hobson-Horton & Owens, 2004). This comes as no surprise when 66% of Latina/os who attend an IHE enroll in two-year community colleges

and/or vocational-technical schools, as opposed to 45% of their White classmates. Furthermore, of the Latino/as that do enter four-year institutions, 80% will drop out, giving them the lowest college graduation rate of all ethnic groups (Fry, 2003; Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

Struggles

While there are numerous historical, political, economical, and sociocultural reasons behind these statistics, it is clear that the nation's high schools, colleges, and universities must take a close look at Latino/a students' unique biographies to effectively recruit and retain them in higher education. For many reasons, Latino/a students struggle emotionally and psychologically during the first years in college with issues of identity directly related to living *in between two different worlds* of Hispanic and American identity and cultures (Palmer, 2003; Weis, 1992). Learning to navigate the new world of higher education can create feelings of self-doubt, isolation, alienation, distress, low self-concept, and hopelessness for these students as many of them have few Latino/a academic role models to emulate (Jalomo, 1995; Rodriguez et al., 2000; Weis, 1992).

Institutional and academic factors such as limited representation of Latino/a faculty members on campuses and curricula that frequently ignore or devalue multicultural perspectives can add to CLD students' feelings of isolation in college (Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; Nieto, 1992; Valencia, 1999). Further issues such as small Latino/a student populations at most universities, lack of culturally relevant academic and social activities, rising tuition costs, inadequate financial aid support, and inadequate advising all increase the probability for student attrition from higher education (Jalomo, 1995).

Non-traditional Students and the Role of College Retention Programs

Due to the increase of Latino/a and non-traditional students attending community colleges, these IHEs tend to have a more concentrated experience with these populations than four-year universities. By gaining an understanding of this growing sector of their student body and what strategies work to ensure non-traditional student success, two-year community colleges have a great opportunity to inform universities in the field (Cejda, 2004; Genzuk, Lavadenz, & Krashen, 1994).

Most often, the Latino/a non-traditional students who attend community college are older, work at least part-time, and are of lower socioeconomic status than those who attend four-year institutions (McVay, 2004). Among this non-traditional student population, some of the most noted elements for their retention, in addition to financial support, involve cohort and collaborative groups, mentorships, availability of courses, social activities that involve the family and professional development opportunities (Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Genzuk, 1997). Specifically, opportunities to work with other students in similar life stages, to collaborate in an environment that fosters open communication, and to take coursework via distance education and in the evenings are key to successful retention. Many researchers of recruitment and retention call for IHEs to employ new and alternative strategies to affectively support students in navigating the social and educational terrain (Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; Genzuk, Lavadenz, & Krashen, 1994; Herrera & Morales, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Solaranzo et al., 2000). These strategies

must place CLD students at the forefront of collective efforts to break the static paradigm of traditional programs.

Providing access and ongoing transitional support to CLD students is a complex and highly political topic. Many researchers have addressed these issues in their work from a variety of perspectives (Anderson, 2004; Cejda, 1999, 2001; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Simoniello, 1981). Although these studies and others address the barriers, tendencies, and plausible factors for the academic success of CLD populations, there is little existing literature that identifies alternative program models that support quality recruitment and retention strategies specifically for non-traditional, Latino/a paraeducators (Brandick, 2004; Flores, 1992; Genzuk, Lavadenz, & Krashen, 1994; Valenciana, Morin, & Morales, 2005; Villegas & Clewell, 1998).

Regional Context

It is important to consider how the issues of CLD student retention and the national teacher shortage play out within a specific region of the Midwest where the CLD population is growing dramatically. The most recent census conducted for the Midwestern state where the current study was situated shows a 241% increase in the number of CLD students attending public schools over the past decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The rapid increase in the CLD population, coupled with the *accountability movement* and the shortage of English as a Second Language [ESL] endorsed educators has left this Midwestern state reeling; a reality that is the norm—not the exception—for many states in the Midwest (McNeil, 2000; Montemayor & Mendoza, 2004). As a result, federal and state agencies are searching for effective ways to support and promote the academic success of CLD populations at all levels in education (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Herrera & Morales, 2005; Montemayor & Mendoza, 2004).

In schools, traditional roles are being renegotiated as administrators, counselors, and teachers scramble to change with the times. The role of the paraeducator is no exception to this dynamic. Once considered a luxury in select schools to provide supplemental support to a few students, paraeducators now serve a vital purpose in schools across the nation (Black, 2002; Genzuk & Baca, 1998). With the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in place, requiring all paraeducators to have at least two years of post-secondary education, rural Midwestern districts struggle to hire and retain *highly qualified* faculty to serve the increased language-based needs of their students (Essex, 2006). Career Ladder programs (those that work with paraeducators currently employed by the school to earn an associate’s degree and ultimately a bachelor’s degree in education) and Grow Your Own programs (those that support or mentor high school students to go into the teaching profession) appear to be two of the few existing strategies for creating and retaining quality educators of all kinds in difficult-to-staff school districts (e.g., remote, rural areas) (Black, 2002; Brandick, 2004; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Genzuk, Lavadenz, & Krashen, 1994).

For those paraeducators who are place-bound (own homes and/or have families who are unable to move), lack of access to a four-year university has been a major obstacle. Though they desire to earn a bachelors degree, because of location, they are left with few options (Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Hentschke, 1995). Two-year colleges and four-year universities in the state have attempted to address this issue in the past, but due to a long history of unsuccessful partnerships,

the community colleges are skeptical of university programs that promise to provide the upper-level courses required for a bachelor's degree in their communities (Herrera & Morales, 2005). In the past, for a variety of reasons (e.g., distance, weather in the Great Plains, lack of resources), these types of alternative degree programs have proven difficult for universities to implement successfully.

Theoretical Framework

This study explored how one four-year university and two, two-year colleges collaborated to address the CLD teacher shortage in the rural Midwest, the challenges they encountered in the process, and the experiences of the CLD Latino/a paraeducators who were participants in the project. The theoretical framework from which all data collection efforts in this study were derived is Thomas and Collier's Prism Model (Collier, 1987; Collier & Thomas, 1988; Ovando & Collier, 1998) that builds upon the four dimensions of the CLD student biography.

Collier and Thomas provide a holistic model encompassing the differential learning and transitional needs and diverse assets that CLD students (K-16) bring to the schooling process (Collier, 1987; Collier & Thomas, 1988). The Prism Model guided the research through the utilization of the four dimensions: 1) sociocultural, 2) linguistic, 3) academic, and 4) cognitive. These four elements act as distinct but inseparable axes along which the background and educational progress of a CLD student resides. Exclusive focus on one element (such as the linguistic or academic) gives a shallow picture of the student experience and presents an inadequate assessment of the reasons for a student's success or failure within an educational institution. Therefore, this chosen framework is inclusive of the complex interaction among students' ethnicities, languages, and geographical locations and guides the discovery of those elements that may hinder the students' access to and success in innovative postsecondary education programs.

Research Questions

We utilized the Prism Model as a tool to explore our guiding question: What is the lived experience of the Latino/a paraeducators and the project staff members within the context of this particular 2+2, distance-delivered, teacher education program located in the Midwest? Due to the complex nature of the project and its target audience, there are many factors to consider. With this in mind we focused our efforts specifically on a) investigating what role(s) family, project staff members, and peers play in the paraeducators' educational experiences in the project; b) which aspects of the project students felt to be the most helpful or hindering for their success; c) what aspects of implementation proved the most problematic according to project staff members at the three institutions; and d) how all participants (paraeducators and staff) perceived the various dynamics of the project and their relation to them.

Context of the Study

At the onset of the study, the state university (hereinafter referred to as Midwestern State) was in the third year of the collaborative project, which we have identified as Project Synergy.

This project, funded by a Title III grant, sought to recruit and retain bilingual Latino/a paraeducators from the two rural locations where the two-year colleges were located. The main goal of the project was to graduate 30 students with bachelor's degrees in Elementary Education with an ESL/Bilingual endorsement. The project was designed so that the students could remain in their respective rural communities while taking coursework and then stay there after graduation to teach.

Project Synergy was based in a longstanding recruitment and retention model designed specifically for CLD populations (Herrera & Morales, 2005; Herrera & Murry, 1998). Project B.E.S.I.T.O.S. (Bilingual Education Students Interacting to Obtain Success, 1999-2005) was the initial career-ladder project that initiated the CLD students' biographies as the guiding force for all project design and development. While Midwestern State had successfully implemented and sustained the B.E.S.I.T.O.S. model with CLD undergraduates in their College of Education with a 90% retention rate (Herrera & Morales, 2005), it was the first time that this model was modified for implementation on three different campuses across the state or for a more non-traditional audience. As part of this modification, all courses and project activities were offered onsite at the community colleges. A project coordinator and a project manager located at Midwestern State, along with onsite project managers at each community college served as the support and advising staff for students. The CLD paraeducators took their first two years of coursework for community college credit. In the subsequent years, faculty members from Midwestern State offered the upper-level courses required for the degree through a variety of distance delivery and onsite modalities. Students were informed of the study and given the option to participate. The researchers then gleaned general student information from records associated with initial recruitment and retention activities. Mentor-mentee relationships developed between the researchers and students, which served as the foundation for the two primary forms of data collection-reflective journaling and semi-structured focus group discussions.

Methodology

This research was undertaken as a qualitative, microethnographic case study of the lived experiences of non-traditional, Latino/a paraeducators in a unique, 2+2, distance-delivered teacher education program in the Midwest. A qualitative and microethnographic design is appropriate when the outcomes of the study will surround descriptions and interpretations arising from discovery, insight, and analysis (Creswell, 2007).

The study utilized a purposive sample of 30 paraeducators from the two partner community colleges. Of these students, 80% were English Language Learners (ELL) when entering the U.S. school system. In addition, a large majority (93%) of the participants in this study were Latino/a, of Mexican heritage in particular. All but two of the students were female. At the project staff level, we sought to include the voice of both community college project managers (one male, one female, both Mexican American) as well as the project managers at Midwestern State University (two females, one Mexican American, one Argentinean). Both of the lead community college administrators responsible for overseeing the project were interviewed as well (one male, one female, both White). Finally, the two administrators at Midwestern State (both female, one White, one Mexican American) who designed and initiated

the project were interviewed for their understandings of the inter-institutional dynamics at play, the sociopolitical context in which the project exists, and how all these factors ultimately impact the students' success along the four identified dimensions.

In order to develop a holistic perspective, we chose to pull our data from three varying levels or sources: the paraeducators, the project staff, and the college administrators overseeing implementation of the project. Artifacts and documentation for consideration in the study span two years. From the students we utilized weekly reflective journals, focus groups, and project documents. We also gained access to student/paraeducator academic records to contextualize progress during their tenure in the project. These records include—but are not limited to—cumulative GPA scores, ACT scores, and Pre-Professional Skills Test [PPST] scores. From the four project staff members, we utilized project documents and two rounds of semi-structured interviews. From the college administrators we utilized semi-structured interviews, project/grant documents, and phone and e-mail communication. These methods were employed in this study to elicit critical participant reflection and authentic participant voice (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

We investigated the data germane to the sample group as active observers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). All interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed. We coded each transcription along with student reflection journals according to the procedure offered by Miles and Huberman (1994). Our research team of three also allowed the etic coding (outsider view of the observer), according to our four-dimensional theoretical framework, to guide data analysis via the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987). Subsequently, these initial etic codes came to suggest emic codes (insider view of the actor or participant), categories, and themes that reflected informants' experiences and outcomes as CLD students and project faculty within the project (Creswell, 2007). Credibility of the data was assessed through member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Three students, one project manager, and one administrator reviewed the data to ensure the accurate interpretation of participant voice.

Participant data were gathered and analyzed in accordance with the four interrelated dimensions of the Prism Model. Table 1 provides an example of how participant data (in this case reflective journals) were coded and aligned along the four dimensions: sociocultural, academic, cognitive, and linguistic. Out of 363 coded journal responses, 150 (40%) were coded as sociocultural, 127 (35%) were coded as academic, 57 (16%) were coded as cognitive, and 29 (8%) were coded as linguistic.

Table 1.

DIMENSION	**CODING INDICATORS** (Herrera & Murry, 2004)	**EXAMPLES OF EVIDENCE**
SOCIOCULTURAL	▪ Participants' experiences before, during, and after academics ▪ Balancing home life and school demands ▪ Ability for laughter and enjoyment ▪ Familial support	**GUILT** *…trying to juggle school and family…my kids say they never see me anymore, and that makes me feel bad.* **RESILIENCY** *I know that if I work hard enough, I will make it. I am not going to give up.*

	emotionally and physically	
ACADEMIC	▪ Perception of access to higher education ▪ Level of engagement in the academic experience ▪ Evidence of hope and success in future endeavors	**TIME COMMITMENT** *I would like to know ahead of time when classes will be so I can schedule it in my job, but I understand this is not always possible.* **SELF-CONCEPT** *I feel really stupid and really tired, I don't know what to think, say or do anymore. I am just tired.*
COGNITIVE	▪ Level of experiential and academic knowledge ▪ Ability to think creatively by using acquired knowledge ▪ Capacity to build upon current capabilities to go beyond current learning zone	***PERSONAL TO PROFESSIONAL*** *One of these days when I become a teacher I will encounter these types of situations and I will be a little bit more understanding of students going through this ordeal.* **FUTURITY** *I look at when I first started taking classes to where I am today and I have come a long way. I am reaching one of my life goals of becoming a teacher.*
LINGUISTIC	▪ Ability to effectively communicate in the native and second language ▪ Ability to comprehend in the native and second language ▪ Basic communication skills VS cognitive academic language skills ▪ Ability to express themselves in the native and second language	**INADEQUACY** *I was not allowed to speak Spanish in grades 1-12. It was not easy and I know I lost a lot of academic and social information because of it... they [K-12 CLD students] can't utilize their L1 to communicate and ask questions. I believe they feel just as inadequate as I did many years ago.* **TRANSFERABILITY** *One of the hardest things I have ever done was learning another language. Many people are not comfortable making that step. I know it will serve me well and I will be able to help others who struggle to understand.*

Findings

The Prism Model framework was a highly effective tool for data analysis that shed light on the students' complex realities. It also revealed themes that have strong implications for faculty and staff actions regarding recruitment, retention, advisement, course offerings, and encouragement within the post-secondary educational setting. As we explored the various data for patterns and correlations it became evident that within the socio-political, tri-institutional system being studied, there exist two main forces at work. These two overarching forces of influence encompass the findings within each of the four dimensions of the CLD biography. The two forces are 1) *people and personnel* and 2) *process and infrastructure*. For the purposes of this paper, we focused primarily on the *people & personnel* force of influence. Once we coded the data based on the Prism Model, the most salient themes were then organized according to the force that most directly impacted each one (see Table 3).

People & Personnel Force of Influence

With regard to *people and personnel*, three organizing factors arose from the data and which provide its structure. These factors are 1) spouse and family, 2) faculty and staff, and 3) the student network. The quality, intensity, and frequency of the social exchanges among the individuals involved at all levels of the project were strongly related to the success in retention of the participants.

Spouse and family. CLD students' spouses and families exist as the first factor within the *people and personnel* force of influence. When considering the relative newness of attending college for many of the project students and their families, it is easy to understand why spousal and familial support are significant in the study. Students' statements about family most directly related to the sociocultural and cognitive dimensions of the student biography. In this study spouses and families functioned as sources of strength as well as sources of struggle. Indicators for lack of spousal and familial support experienced by the students manifested as guilt, absence of emotional support, emotional and verbal abuse, cultural clashes, lack of understanding of time and cost involved in the pursuance of a degree, and feelings of being neglected as a valuable part of the family. One student noted her experience in this manner.

> Things at home are somewhat tense between me and him [my husband]. My kids are the only factor that has helped me block anything negative. There hasn't been much communication between us… I have high ambitions and am willing to go on with or without him.

Another student described her negative family situation and the *guilt* she experienced as she took on the role of a student.

> I am learning that it is hard for me to let go and let others do for me. They have to come home and cook for themselves. I do not feel good about that. My mom died when I was 17 so my dad had a lot of influence in my upbringing. He believed that a wife's job is to take care of her husband. I think that is why I feel guilty.

Over 70% of the paraeducators in the study associated with the analogy of a *juggling act* to describe how they coped with the alternative and multiple roles they played on a daily basis (e.g., student, mother, child, breadwinner, full-time student) within their nuclear and extended families:

> I have so many balls in the air… My balls are [Midwestern State], campus [courses] and online classes, right? So that [there] are three, but I have more…like [the] PPST, work, and my home life. I see that, I knew that I would have a challenge with three balls, but in actuality I have six!

Although negative gender stereotypes were evident in participant discourse, one third of the participants related various types of positive support they received from their families as they took on the role of a student. These participants shared contrasting stories as their families exhibited understanding and awareness of the rigors of being a student by providing child care support in emergencies, by giving encouragement and reassurance, and through their willingness

to take on new roles within the family to cover for the student's absence. A statement made by one student echoed the resolve felt by many of the project students as a result of this support, *"My family has sacrificed too much for my dream… To fail now is unthinkable."*

Another example of this positive support was evidenced in the families' understanding of the student's educational goals. One student shared, "*[I] got to see my fiancé for the first time in ages, thank God he understands and supports me. He is my cheerleader, always there when I am feeling down and when people make me feel bad about myself."* Another project participant related her positive family situation in this way: "*I thought things out pretty much before I signed up for my classes and knew it was going to be a heavy load. I prepared my husband by letting him see and know my long-range goal. He understood and asked how he and my godson could help."* This family's understanding of the paraeducator's role as a student and what such a commitment entails (time, financial strains, multiplicity of roles, etc.) proved crucial for sustaining the paraeducator's investment in her future.

Faculty and staff. Related to *faculty and staff*, several themes emerged from the data as influencers of student success in the project, including work demands placed on project staff, the cultural competency of college and university faculty, the level of institutional commitment to students' success, and the quality of management/advising. Students' statements related to faculty and staff coded evenly across all four dimensions, giving slight emphasis to the academic dimension of the student biography.

Faculty and staff expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the multiple and complex tasks involved in managing the project. Because this project is the first of its kind to be implemented with three institutions across the state, many key features and activities of the project were works-in-progress. All project staff related that they felt like their workload was compounded by the lack of institution-wide support for the project. The lack of campus personnel with the knowledge and willingness to work with CLD students was an issue raised by project staff as well as students in the study. One project manager made this comment with regard to the lack of bilingual and/or bicultural support personnel at one of the community colleges:

> They do have some materials in writing [in the students' native language] and they just hand it out but it is not the same thing… and when somebody [CLD student or parent] has a question, you know they don't feel like they can come to the staff [campus personnel] and ask them a question. If they have a question they would rather not ask because they don't know how to ask it.

A second common factor regarding faculty and staff relates to the lack of cultural competency of instructional faculty and campus personnel. Two project staff members felt frustration with the ongoing responsibility of raising the cultural competency of the instructional faculty. They felt as though they had to help the faculty move beyond remediation strategies to focus more on strategies geared toward acceleration. Herrera (1995) identifies the term *pobrecito syndrome* in her unpublished dissertation, which can be used to describe the assumption held by the majority population that Hispanics are ill equipped and inadequate. In this case, the participants' perceptions of instructional faculty members indicated that the faculty often looked

at students through a deficit lens. Over half of the students talked about their struggles to navigate these tumultuous waters of faculty bias and prejudice. One student recounted a difficult situation that occurred in a science class.

> A group of us [cohort of four] went to class the first day and the instructor asked everyone to introduce themselves. When he found out that we were Synergy students, he said that he had heard about us and that he was not going to let us get off easy. He said that we would have to create a portfolio of our work when we transfer to [Midwestern State] and to be prepared because our work was not going to be good enough.

Faculty academic remediation practices and subtle beliefs in the *pobrecito syndrome* in regards to Latino/a students were evidenced in the data through: low academic expectations of students, language discrimination, lack of commitment to students' success, and/or false certainty of academic failure. These perceived beliefs and behaviors were clear barriers encountered by the project students, as evidenced in the following quote:

> Then we told her [the instructor] that we needed more time to understand the story and she says we have already talked about it long enough... I thought that this was instructional bias, and the students felt their learning was being emaciated.

Conversely, one-third of the students shared positive statements regarding faculty and staff support and cultural competence. One student recalled an instance where a teacher pointed out a quality in her that she did not know she possessed. "*I at least received a compliment from the instructor—she said I am a good writer. That statement was a shock to me.*" Another student said, "*Most of my instructors are very friendly and I feel comfortable asking questions in class and they are always willing to support me and every other student that has a need.*"

All 30 students saw value in the services that the project staff and faculty provided them. While the full tuition scholarship was highly valuable to the project students, other types of support were discussed in more detail as factors in their success. Access to professional development opportunities such as national conferences, support to attend college/project functions, mentoring, offering advocacy and literacy seminars, tutoring and financial help for taking entrance and exit exams, class and dormitory cohorting, and development and maintenance of long range course plans were all mentioned as strong, positive influences. All but two of the students felt they would not have been able to maintain the high standards of the project (2.78 GPA) if not for the various types of support mentioned above.

As the project had already been implemented for two and a half years when the study was conducted, many of the initial project issues were resolved, but the effects of one issue was still very real for many of the CLD students and project staff. Eighty-seven percent of participants in the study mentioned project staff turnover and inconsistency as a significant issue. At one of the two community colleges (college A), this issue was particularly challenging for a number of reasons. Due to a major tragedy within the administration of the college and two subsequent resignations of individuals in key leadership positions, maintenance and oversight of Project Synergy was at the time seen as *a "relatively low priority in comparison to all that was going on*

during its first and second year," as stated by the college administrator for that site. She added that the distance and time required for project staff to travel between sites, coupled with the breakdown of communication protocols, only amplified the difficult situation.

At the time of the study, stability at the three sites had been regained and relationships were positive, but project staff inconsistency and their lack of adequate training surfaced as one of the most counterproductive influences on program effectiveness at all levels. This was evidenced in a statement made by a project manager at the leading institution, Midwestern State:

> The original project manager [at community college A] was supposedly bilingual and bicultural but he did not see them [project students] as serious students. He kept putting them in the wrong courses, like Pilates and Intro to Theater, claiming that they were not ready to take Algebra and Comp I… because of his low expectations and poor advising, many of the students got behind and a few of them became so discouraged they dropped out.

Student network. The role of the student network is the third factor found within the *people and personnel* force of influence. As previously stated, the CLD students in the project were primarily paraeducators and non-traditional. As a result, they occupied multiple—and sometimes conflicting—roles (e.g., student, spouse, parent, employee). Therefore, the development of tight support networks was a critical element for student success. This study reiterated the findings of previous researchers; that the people and personnel element is a highly valuable factor in the retention of this group of students. By design, the project managers cohorted students in dorms, courses, and seminar activities to encourage collaborative teamwork. This aspect required students to frequently work in groups, to advocate for one another, and to rely on each other. It was interesting to observe the varied and unique modes of communication that the students exhibited toward each other within these networks. The project managers felt that these networks caused conflict at times, yet required students to build new ways of communicating and to acquire new social skills. Many students talked at length about the value that the student network experience had for them and their success. All the project managers in the study made similar value statements. One project manager from community college B stated the following:

> Since they were in seminar together, now they just do it automatically, they communicate with each other to help each other out…to borrow books, or some of them are experts in math, and some of them are pretty good at writing and reading, and they help each other out like that.

Some students had to learn how to work in collaboration with others, while gaining an understanding of their own personal study styles. One student shared,

> I was one that always wanted to work alone when I was younger. I thought that I could do things on my own without asking for help from anyone else... I think that a lot of times I prejudge… I have always know[n] that two heads are better than one, but this time I learned it... Maria and I were able to help each other by solving our problems; even though we had different quizzes, as long as we knew

> the steps we could work it out and we checked each other's work before submitting.

Over time, the paraeducators developed strong bonds with one another, which played a role in their retention. Based on these findings, the *people and personnel* involved in the lives of the paraeducators proved to be a key force in their persistence, as faculty and staff, spouse and family, and the student network together act as catalysts for sustaining the students' momentum.

Discussion and Lessons Learned

Through the voices of the paraeducators in this study we learned of their lived experiences as Latino/a non-traditional students in Project Synergy. Through project staff and administrator discourse we gained insights into their experiences as implementers of a pioneering project for a diverse audience. Our understandings of this unique constituency in this context were shaped and clarified as the themes developed from the data. Because of the exponential growth of the CLD student population in schools across the nation and the minimal availability of educators properly equipped to teach them, there is now, more than ever, a great need for IHEs to gain similar understandings in order to develop highly qualified CLD educators (Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; Montemayor & Mendoza, 2004). Toward these ends, a commitment to rethinking teacher education programs is imperative if IHEs are to effectively equip and prepare a diverse teacher workforce for today's schools.

While this article discusses some of the complexities of implementing alternative programs, it also further established the overwhelming need for institutions of higher education to commit to this cause. It is clear that typical, traditional constructs for teacher education are not fitting for the population we now pursue. CLD paraeducators not only feel and respond differently in monocultural learning environments, but what they bring with them as their student biography is quite different as well. Implementing any new educational program has its challenges and requires problem solving to some degree, but implementing a recruitment and retention program for CLD paraeducators who are part of a population typically not well represented in higher education requires IHEs to think altogether differently. The intricate interplay of the forces of influence (people and personnel, and process and infrastructure) ultimately determines the effective balance of the CLD student.

It is imperative that the faculty and staff, spouse and family, and student network all know and understand their roles in maintaining this balance. Therefore, quality projects must incorporate systems that include and support these intrapersonal forces, raise their awareness of the students' unique biographies, and acknowledge the valuable part that each group plays in the CLD students' success. Furthermore, the ease of utilizing the four dimensions of the Prism Model for data coding suggests that it is critical to take into account each participant's four-dimensional biography in all project decision making for effective program implementation—beginning with the initial contact with potential students and their families and proceeding on through their recruitment, retention, and graduation. In recognizing and working within each student's individual biography, educators will have the capacity to not only appreciate the existing and ever-changing biographical realm of their CLD students, but to be able to cultivate

the seeds of success, hope, and opportunity in *all* students, even in the midst of turbulent and uncertain waters.

As final parting thoughts, the researchers offer a few lessons learned that echo the findings within this portion of the study. Future designers of such programs might consider some of the following recommendations offered by both the students and the project personnel in this study. These suggestions are offered as strategies to minimize and/or compensate for many of the identified challenges: (a) keep a representative from each educational institution closely involved in the design, development, and ongoing implementation of program goals and objectives; (b) make provisions for offering the faculty and staff involved ongoing professional development opportunities to ensure they understand project goals and can effectively serve the needs of CLD students; c) incorporate ongoing, authentic experiences (literacy and advocacy seminars) that support CLD student networking, reflection, and identity development; and finally (d) consistently evaluate and accommodate for each participant's sociocultural, linguistic, academic, and cognitive biography.

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Table 3

Student Themes	People & Personnel	Process & Infrastructure	
		CATALYSTS OF PROGRESSION	*OBSTRUCTORS OF PROGRESSION*
ACADEMIC			
LOW OR HIGH EXPECTATIONS	**FACULTY, PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Advocacy seminar Student professional development opportunity	Remediation vs. Acceleration Lack of cultural competency of faculty & personnel Faculty's poor attendance to multicultural professional development Pobrecito syndrome perspective of faculty
	FAMILY MEMBERS	Attendance at project functions Encouragement and reassurance	Gender role stereotypes Cultural clash "Double jeopardy"
TIME MANAGEMENT & PLANNING	**FACULTY, PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Maintain long range plans & weekly progress reports Advising	Project requires student to be full-time student Lack of clear communication w/students Staff turnover-discontinuity
	FAMILY MEMBERS	Alternative roles played	Gender role stereotypes
UNCERTAINTY OF SUCCESS/FAILURE	**PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Dorm cohorting, Mentoring-trust building Student professional development opportunity, access to conferences, etc. Actively seeking funding	Poor advising Course development/delivery issues Staff turnover Unstable management plan Asynchronous funding plan
FORMAL TESTING & ASSESSMENTS	**FACULTY, PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Literacy seminar, financial help for test cost Class cohorting	Cultural bias of standardized tests Non-accommodation by faculty

LINGUISTIC			
INADEQUACY (SOCIALIZED & INTERNALIZED)	**FACULTY, PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Value of multiple languages by project Counseling Advocacy seminar	Lack of cultural competency of faculty & personnel Cultural/political climate of institutions Effect of previous experience in schools
	STUDENTS	Network of support	Conflicting learning styles
LANGUAGE TRANSFERABILITY	**PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Faculty accommodations Literacy seminar, tutoring	Language discrimination by faculty
COMPREHENSION	**PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Faculty accommodations Literacy seminar, tutoring	Non-accommodation by faculty Lack of cultural competency of faculty & personnel

SOCIOCULTURAL			
RESILIENCY	**FACULTY, PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Mentoring-trust building Potentiality-based recruitment and retention Advocacy seminar Maintain long range plans, weekly progress reports	Cultural/ political climate of institutions Inconsistent recruitment standards Lack of cultural competency of faculty Effect of previous experience in schools Institutional investment as a priority
	FAMILY MEMBERS	Encouragement and reassurance	Gender role stereotypes
JUGGLING ACT & STRUGGLES	**FACULTY, PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Advocacy seminar Counseling Child care support in emergencies	Project requires to be full-time student Distance/travel time/cost Course development/delivery issues Lack of clear communication w/students
	FAMILY MEMBERS	Alternative roles played Encouragement and reassurance	Guilt/emotional abuse
ISSUES OF FAMILY	**PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Full scholarship and monthly stipends Counseling	Project requires student to be full-time student

PEER/COHORT ROLES	**PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Academic and dorm cohorting B.E.S.O. Activities/Semester Kick Offs	Synthetic grouping configurations for cohorts
	STUDENTS	Book sharing, study groups Trust building Peer childcare support	Conflicting learning styles Lack of trust in peer competencies
ROLE ASSIGNMENTS	**PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Exposure to multiple realities	Lack of cultural competency of faculty & personnel
	FAMILY MEMBERS	Alternative roles played	Gender role stereotypes
COGNITIVE			
PERSONAL TO PROFESSIONAL APPLICATION	**PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Advocacy seminar Student professional development opportunities, access to conferences, etc. B.E.S.O. activities/semester Kick Offs Maintain long range plans, weekly progress reports	Poor advising Poor management plan Staff turnover- discontinuity
FUTURITY	**PROJECT ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF**	Advocacy seminar Student professional development opportunities, access to conferences, etc.	Cultural/political climate of institutions Poor advising
	FAMILY MEMBERS	Faith Encouragement and reassurance	Gender role stereotypes
ACCOMODATIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS	**FACULTY**	Multicultural professional development Institutional investment- seen as a priority Distance delivery of courses- in various modalities	Course development/delivery issues Faculty's poor attendance to multicultural professional development Cultural/ political climate of institutions Faculty/staff burn-out

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