# Embracing bilingualism to heal and empower teachers and students

In an era where multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception, many schools still privilege a narrow version of 'standard' English which overlooks the linguistic and cultural realities that bilingual students and teachers bring to the classroom. At **Texas Woman's University** in the US, **Dr Alexandra (Ale) Babino**, **Dr Mary Amanda (Mandy) Stewart** and **Dr Rocío Almanza** bring complementary perspectives to show how care-centred pedagogy and multilingual practices can support students and teachers alike.

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## Glossary

**Bilingual** — the ability to communicate in two languages

**Biliteracy** — the ability to communicate across all communication domains (listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing images) in two languages

**English language arts (ELA)** — a classroom that primarily focuses on teaching English language and literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening)

**Latina feminist lens** — a critical perspective that analyses issues through a Latina view of gender, race, language, class and culture

**Latina pedagogies of care** — a teaching approach focused on *cariño* (care rooted in love, respect and community)

**Multilingual** — the ability to communicate in multiple languages

**Translanguaging** — using all your language abilities

In classrooms across the US and beyond, multilingualism is now the norm. Yet many schools still prioritise 'standard' English, sending subtle messages about whose language (and, therefore, knowledge) matters. This can impact both students and teachers, causing identity clashes, missed opportunities for literacy development and preventable disengagement.

At Texas Woman's University, Dr Alexandra (Ale) Babino, Dr Mary Amanda (Mandy) Stewart and Dr Rocío Almanza work with bilingual teachers and those who teach multilingual students. They show how care-centred pedagogies and multilingual practices can create opportunities for healing and empowerment in bilingual and English language arts (ELA) classrooms.

### Why does language dominance create wounds in education?

Systems of power shape how languages are valued, marking some as 'legitimate' and others as less so. "This historically prioritises whiteness and standardised English," explains Ale. "In turn, it marginalises bilingual, community-rooted literacies as illegitimate and, by proxy, bilingual people as deficient." This hierarchy does more than determine which language is spoken at school; it communicates who is valued and who is not.

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In their upcoming book, *Latina Pedagogies of Care: How Cariño Can Give Tired Teachers Power and Hope*, Ale and Rocío describe this harm as an *herida abierta* (open wound) – a deep emotional, spiritual and professional injury caused by being told, implicitly or explicitly, that bilingualism is an aberration. For bilingual teachers and students, language systems shape self-perception. "Because educational and societal systems privilege standardised English and fail to affirm cultural richness, bilingual people may see their biliteracies as deficiencies rather than tools connecting them to their communities," explains Ale. Rather than serving as a bridge, biliteracy is often positioned as a barrier.

## How can bilingual teachers heal this wound?

If the *herida abierta* exposes the damage caused by English dominance, then healing requires new ways of seeing and teaching. For Ale and Rocío, the answer lies in Latina 'pedagogies of care', a justice-driven, culturally grounded approach that centres *cariño* (care rooted in love, respect and community) and is shaped by the lived experiences of bilingual Latina educators. Teaching with *cariño* means rehumanising teachers and students while resisting the extremes of toxic positivity and cynical despair that often characterise teacher discourse and professional culture.

Ale and Rocío conduct their research through a Latina feminist lens. "This is a framework grounded in the histories and social realities of Latinas navigating the intersections of racism, sexism, classism, nativism and linguistic discrimination in US society and schools," explains Rocío. "This lens centres knowledge and practice emerging from the *nepantla* (in-between spaces) of culture, language, gender and power that values relational and community-rooted ways of knowing." A Latina feminist lens provides tools to call-out injustice, amplify marginalised voices, heal trauma and transform educational spaces. It combines care with criticality, offering educators strategies to understand the world while actively changing it in culturally grounded ways.

"Our book offers a path towards healing for teachers who feel exhausted or disillusioned by the current educational system," says Ale. "Grounded in Latina feminist thought, it provides a culturally rooted and spiritually sustaining alternative to dominant approaches, centring *cariño* as a source of power, hope and transformation." Most importantly, Ale and Rocío's book affirms that teachers are not alone – their emotions, identities, language and cultural knowledge are not only valid, but vital to achieving educational justice.

## Supporting multilingual learners

While Ale and Rocío focus on supporting teachers in official bilingual classrooms, Mandy addresses how teachers can support multilingual students in English language arts (ELA) classrooms. Her book, *The Multilingual ELA Classroom*, follows five teachers who have embraced innovative ways to teach ELA through a multilingual lens, providing case studies of successful strategies.

While students may face challenges in ELA classes if English is not their dominant language, focusing on opportunities – such as the chance to develop literacy in more than one language – shifts the perspective from limitation to strength. "Multilingual students can receive input and meaning in more than one language through reading and listening," says Mandy. "They can also express themselves in more than one language, which requires much critical thinking and creativity." Students' multilingual abilities enrich collaborative projects, storytelling and problem-solving in the classroom, benefiting all students and creating a more inclusive learning environment.

## A practical example of engaging linguistically diverse students

'Bilingual jigsaw reading' is a collaborative strategy to develop reading, comprehension and speaking skills. Students are split into groups, and each group is given a different short text to read (in one or multiple languages). Students are encouraged to discuss the text with their group in whichever language(s) they prefer (which is an example of translanguaging) to check their understanding, then are reassigned into new groups with students who read different texts. Students share what they learnt from their text with their new group, and in doing so, each student will contribute a piece to the knowledge puzzle.

During her research, Mandy observed Rena, who teaches the English component of a bilingual education programme, using a bilingual jigsaw exercise. As an English speaker, Rena drew on her own experience of learning Spanish to adapt the well-known jigsaw reading teaching strategy for bilingual learners, allowing her students to fully

engage in her lesson in both English and Spanish.

During the lesson, Rena gave students articles in both English and Spanish, which they discussed and made notes on in either language. "As someone who primarily communicates in English, Rena learnt from her bilingual students and saw how they naturally made meaning using their full linguistic repertoires," explains Mandy. "Not only did the bilingual jigsaw activity engage her students, but it also allowed her to learn more about their language proficiencies which then guided her future teaching."

### The benefits of a multilingual approach

"The more I experience people who are living multilingually, the more I am convinced that 'language is people'!" says Mandy. By prioritising the people behind the language, educators can make more intentional decisions about curriculum, instruction and classroom management. Multilingual strategies nurture empathy, cultural awareness and flexible thinking, preparing all students to engage with diverse communities. All teachers work with multilingual students, whether they realise it or not. Mandy's book offers practical strategies to support every learner and shows how seeing language as inseparable from the people you teach will transform your classroom for the benefit of all your students.

## Advice *for teachers*

**Supporting multilingual students and/or nurturing your own bilingual identity starts with reflection and intentional action.**

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### Healing and valuing your bilingual identity

- Name the *herida abierta* caused by systemic racism and linguistic oppression, and honour all parts of yourself, especially those silenced or shamed.
- Embrace Latina pedagogies of care rooted in *cariño*, spiritual activism and *movidas rasquaches* (strategic, resourceful moves).
- "By knowing yourself deeply (*seguir conociéndote*), cultivating your faculties (*seguir aprendiendo*), and building community with others who share your values (*seguir en comunidad*), you can resist deficit narratives and find power and healing in yourself," says Ale.

### Supporting bilingual students and affirming biliteracy

- Encourage students to use their home language(s) in discussions, reading and writing.
- "In Poland, I work with teachers who are teaching Polish to Ukrainian refugees," says Mandy. "My colleague, Dr Barbara Muszyńska, and I developed the **HEART** strategy as we noticed that teaching for biliteracy comes from the heart."
  - **H**: Home language invitations
  - **E**: Engage all language domains (reading, writing, listening, speaking)
  - **A**: Authentic curriculum that centres on students' interests and cultures
  - **R**: Reinforcement through sentence stems for vocabulary and language structures
  - **T**: Teacher-created mentor texts

### Strategies for teachers who do not speak students' languages

Not speaking your students' languages does not have to be a barrier to supporting their learning – it can be an opportunity to expand your practice. The key is to approach multilingualism with openness and curiosity.

- Learn about your students' languages. Ask what language(s) they speak at home and learn a few words or phrases.
- Position students as experts. Invite them to teach you, and each other, about their language, culture and lived experiences. Incorporate this knowledge into reading, writing or small group work to validate their identities and deepen engagement.
- For reading activities, select books and texts that connect to your students' languages and cultures.
- "Don't be afraid of languages you don't speak," says Mandy. "Include them in anchor charts, classroom libraries and discussions."
- Encourage students to use all their languages in activities that connect language learning with personal expression, such as multilingual name poems, identity boxes and bilingual book writing.

## **Meet** *Ale*

**As an Associate Professor, I teach university students who are mostly heritage speakers of Spanish** (they have a cultural connection to Spanish but may have varying levels of proficiency) and who speak varieties of Spanish and English.

**My research aims to illuminate** how bilingual students and educators navigate identity, agency and biliteracies within under-examined spaces of bilingual schooling, particularly where policy and ideology conflict with programme goals.

**My passion stems from my own background** as a second-generation Mexican American and former bilingual teacher. I recognise the emotional and systemic toll caused by deficit language ideologies and seek to counteract these through research and advocacy.

**Even though the maelstrom of forces in the educational landscape is fierce, there is hope**. When nurtured with *cariño*, teachers are powerful agents and stewards rather than passive conveyors of language policy.

**My own language abilities are integral to understanding who I am.** They've provided a deeply personal lens through which I view identity, power and education, and have motivated my commitment to mentoring others as they embrace their own bilingual selves. My bilingual abilities are not just instrumental tools but forces of cultural identity that shape my sense of belonging.

## **Meet** *Rocío*

**I am a kindergarten teacher, and my students speak varieties of English and Spanish.** I teach using a 50:50 mix of both languages, and I leverage translanguaging to help students develop biliteracy skills. But despite my efforts, students are exposed to the power dynamics between the languages and gravitate towards English. Therefore, I strive to create a school-wide culture that embraces bilingualism, even for students not in bilingual classrooms.

**As an Adjunct Professor, my research explores teacher's perceptions of translanguaging and literacy.** I explore how writing is a tool to empower students and how teachers can implement effective biliteracy practices. I also study how teachers resist monoglossic practices and nurture students' languages beyond the academic scope.

**I had to learn English at the age of 12 during the era of 'sink or swim'.** This painful process created in me a language deficit perspective and cultural fissures. As a result, I am passionate about teaching young children and pre-service teachers because I find joy in supporting others as they develop their biliteracy and biculturalism assets.

**My bilingual abilities are fluid and serve many purposes** – they are my voice, a source of knowledge and an interaction tool. Because my language is context dependent and organic, I can perceive power dynamics that impact my personality, emotions and self-perception. At times I have felt shame, but at other times my language gives me empowerment and community. connections.

## **Meet** *Mandy*

**I work with teachers who teach their country's dominant language** (e.g., English in the US, Polish in Poland) to immigrant and refugee students. I hope to promote language equity by helping teachers who don't speak their students' languages to teach through a multilingual lens.

**I fully recognise the irony of the 'multilingual English language arts' classroom.** Just putting the words 'multilingual' and 'English' together can seem a little crazy. But the teachers I work with are genuinely making a difference for their multilingual students and I've seen how their students respond to them. I've also seen the renewed sense of purpose and joy the teachers have discovered in their multilingual ELA classrooms. I hope other teachers will join our crazy little movement! The road might not be easy, but you just need to keep going and persist despite setbacks. We need to support students to use all their languages so they can be their full selves in the classroom.

**I grew up speaking English and have acquired Spanish and French as additional languages.** This gives me insight into the process of acquiring additional languages, which helps me support teachers whose students are developing proficiency in additional languages.