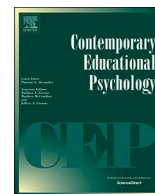




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## Speaking their language: The role of cultural content integration and heritage language for academic achievement among Latino children

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## ABSTRACT

*Asset-based pedagogy* (ABP) reflects teacher instructional choices that affirm students' ethnicity and culture in the classroom and curriculum. The current study examines two key enactments of ABPs for Latino children, namely *cultural content integration* and *heritage language* (Spanish). Utilizing an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, we assess mediation and moderation effects between teacher beliefs ( $n = 33$ ), their ABPs, and the mathematics achievement of 568 Latino children in grades three through five. Next, we use qualitative interviews to probe teachers' understanding and value of cultural content integration, heritage language, and how these work together in their own instructional practice. The quantitative results reveal that honoring students' heritage language (Spanish) is the mediating element through which cultural content integration predicts mathematics achievement for Latino children. Further, the moderated mediation analysis, cross-validated by the teacher interviews, showed evidence that high teacher expectations alone may not be enough to predict teacher enactment of ABPs. Instead, critical awareness along with high expectations work together to predict enactment of culturally responsive teaching and growth in Latino students' learning. Implications and limitations are discussed.

*"Uh, I don't speak Spanish very well. The little bit of Spanish I do speak I picked up here. I find one of the things that I can do in that light that students respond to is I could have them teach me, which they get into, and then let them make fun of me when I mispronounce things. They love that! Um, but it-it definitely has value."* – Ms. Gomar (Latina, teaching 13 years)

Scholars have established that there are unique competencies that are essential to the effective teaching of minoritized youth who face onerous obstacles associated with prejudice, oppression, and poverty (Gay, 2010; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Collectively, these competencies include teacher knowledge and behaviors that affirm students' ethnicity and culture, challenging instructional approaches that assume deficiencies in the child or the child's culture. In the opening quote, one teacher from our sample demonstrates that she does not perceive students' heritage language as a deficiency nor as a barrier to academic learning. In fact, she utilizes her own weaknesses in Spanish as an opportunity to empower students by reinforcing their knowledge-base and ultimately creating opportunities for belonging as well as learning.

Known by various terms, *asset-based pedagogy* (ABP) suggests that teachers who understand the sociohistorical influences on marginalized

students' educational trajectories are better able to incorporate practices that validate students' culture into their instruction (see López, 2016). In the current study, we examine two key enactments of ABPs for Latino children: *cultural content integration* and honoring *heritage language* (i.e., Spanish). Further, we examine two teacher beliefs, *expectations* and *critical awareness*, as potential antecedents of ABPs and whether ABPs in turn predict Latino students' mathematics achievement in grades three through five. To address these questions, we use an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell, 2003) to assess mediation and moderation effects between teacher beliefs, their asset-based pedagogies, and student mathematics achievement, measured via teacher surveys and student standardized mathematics achievement scores. Next, utilizing qualitative interviews, we probe teachers' understanding and value of cultural content integration, heritage language, and how these work together in their own instructional practice.

We use standardized mathematics achievement as an important outcome for this study to highlight the power of culture and language beyond their obvious connections to literacy achievement. While some may perceive mathematics to be culture-free and objective by nature, research is beginning to show the roles culture, context, and language

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play for student performance in mathematics (Clarkson, 2007; Gutiérrez, 2002; Gutstein, 2008). This study extends this line of work to illustrate the far-reaching effects of culture in learning and the need for ABPs even in domains that are perceived to be objective and non-partisan (e.g., mathematics).

## 1. Review of the literature

### 1.1. Asset-based pedagogies

Many efforts to address achievement disparities for poor children of color have been rooted in deficit orientations that reflect the superiority and validity of white middle-class practices, expectations, and experiences (see Banks, 1993; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Tharp, 1989; Valenzuela, 1999). This perspective emerged prominently during education reforms in Lyndon B. Johnson's *War on Poverty* initiative, which provided the first special funding in U.S. history for compensatory programs (Title I) for children living in poverty. Despite the altruistic intentions of this initiative, this reform effort also fostered the notion of a "culture of poverty" (Kantor, 1991, p. 65) believed to be inherent among poor youth. The belief reflected in these compensatory programs was: "If the environment failed to equip poor children with the cultural resources needed for success at school... the school had to compensate poor children for the disadvantages of being born poor by changing their culture" (Kantor, 1991, p. 66). Thus, a deficit frame began to permeate educational initiatives for poor children, particularly children of color.

Classroom approaches that rejected deficit orientations have evolved to reflect asset-based approaches, which we collectively refer to as asset-based pedagogies (ABPs). These approaches view students' differences as potential assets, contesting the ways differences are too often reduced to deficiencies. Some of the most widely cited ABP orientations include culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), and Funds of Knowledge (González et al., 2005), but there are numerous additional conceptualizations (see López, 2017). However, Gay (2010) asserts, "Although known by many different names...the ideas about why it is important to make classroom instruction more consistent with the cultural orientations of ethnically diverse students, and how this can be done, are virtually identical" (p. 31). Two key factors reflected in the ABP literature that we examine in the current study are (1) cultural content integration and (2) heritage language (Spanish in this study) as integral pedagogical practices for historically marginalized Latino students.

**Cultural Content Integration.** Cultural content integration (CCI) concerns teachers' provision and integration of their students' culture into instruction—particularly culture that is not typically validated in the formal curriculum. The emergence of CCI is a response to over a century of U.S. discriminatory practices that have led to an unrelenting undermining of Latino<sup>1</sup> children's culture and language in educational institutions. In the present study, the presence of Mexican-descent Latino children is predominant.

In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican American War and transferred 530,000 miles of once-Mexican territory to the United States, including present-day Arizona, California, western Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah. Simultaneously, this initiated the beginning of decades of persistent prejudice against people of Mexican descent in these regions of the newly-expanded United States (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). By the 1870s, Spanish language was prohibited in public schools, and officials began to purge Mexican culture from the curriculum. In its place, an Anglo-centric curriculum

was disseminated through historical textbooks, which contained mostly denigrating perspectives about Mexicans and their presence in the United States (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Thus, a deficiency-orientation toward Mexican-descent children has been a historical marker of their educational experiences, particularly within the Southwest United States. Unfortunately, these issues and perspectives continue to persist into the present (Gándara & Orfield, 2012).

To counter the development of inequitable and hegemonic curricula, the ABP literature encourages teachers incorporate students' culture into the curriculum to affirm "the legitimacy of cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum" (Gay, 2010, p. 29). Although cultural content integration "is probably the most widely implemented but least studied aspect of multicultural education" (Zirkel, 2008, p. 1150), some evidence exists on its role in improving student learning and interethnic relations (for a review, see Zirkel, 2008). More recent attempts to document the role of CCI have produced research that examines the relation between ethnic studies curricula and improved academic outcomes for historically marginalized students (e.g., Cabrera, Milem, Jacquette, & Marx, 2014; Dee & Penner, 2016). Further, research in mathematics education specifically has shown how creating a mathematics curriculum based upon the lived cultural experiences of Latino students was integral in helping students develop a critical sociopolitical consciousness of their world en route to also developing their mathematical proficiency (Gutstein, 2008). Altogether, this burgeoning body of research suggests integrating cultural content into instruction is not only valuable for building community and social awareness, but is also related to academic achievement and learning. We further investigate these claims in the present study.

**Heritage Language (Spanish).** Honoring student language is a key consideration in ABP, as language plays an integral role in the development of culture and identity. González (2001) illustrates this in her examination of the identities of Latino children and their mothers in her seminal book, *I Am My Language*. Here González explains, "Language is at the heart, literally and metaphorically, of who we are, how we present ourselves, and how others see us" (p. xix). This view is shared by others, including Darder (2012) who asserts, "It is critical that educators recognize the role language plays as one of the most powerful transmitters of culture, and as such, its central role to both intellectual formation and the survival of subordinate cultural populations" (p. 36). It is this idea of language as a 'powerful transmitter of culture' that we attend to in the current study. Moreover, we view the matter of examining language and its role in achievement trajectories as one that applies not only to students for whom English is a second language, but also for Latino youth that have been prevented from maintaining their Spanish due to restrictive policies (see García, 2009), such as Arizona's A.R.S. § 15-752, which repealed bilingual education and replaced it with Structured English Immersion. This suggests that to effectively integrate Latino students' culture into instruction, teachers must honor students' Spanish language in doing so. Integrating culture without honoring heritage language would likely be superficial and disingenuous, potentially affecting students' engagement in an environment where they do not feel seen, acknowledged, or known (Gutstein, 2008; Kohl, 1991). However, there is little empirical data to support this notion that language is the medium through which cultural content can be effectively integrated into instruction for academic learning.

Some elementary teachers may recognize the value of students' heritage language during literacy instruction. However, when it comes to mathematics instruction, teachers often assume the heritage language of an English learner is irrelevant at best and prohibitive at worst for mathematics learning in an English-based classroom. There is noteworthy research, however, to contradict this popular belief. Clarkson (2007) demonstrates that bilingualism can be a cognitive resource aiding metacognition, and that early elementary bilingual students who succeed in mathematics often make use of their two languages when

<sup>1</sup> We use the term Latino to reflect, collectively, the variability in Latino students' backgrounds that include South America, Mexico, as well as Indigenous backgrounds. The students in the present study, however, are overwhelmingly identified as having Mexican descent.

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