

Voices and Perspectives of Latina Paraeducators: The Journey Toward Teacher Certification

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This study employed open-ended questions on a survey, a focus group interview and participant observations to document the perspectives of Latina paraeducators concerning the challenges and support systems they encountered in order to complete college and gain admission to a teacher certification program. Findings reveal that their challenges included a lack of knowledge about higher education, unresponsive institutional bureaucracies, and the need for financial aid. Family and a cohort group of peers were identified as important sources of support and motivation. As a result of the struggles they experienced these paraeducators expressed a strong commitment of helping others to pursue academic and professional goals. This work highlights the need to critique and transform fundamental inequities within institutional structures that obstruct equal educational opportunities and hinder the recruitment of bicultural teachers.

KEY WORDS: Latina paraeducators; minority teacher candidates.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a marked increase in the diversity of the nation's population. The Census Bureau reports that Latinos account for half of the country's overall population growth (Suro, 2005). Currently the nation's Latino population totals 41.3 million ("The 25 Most Influential Hispanics in America," 2005). Over 30% of school-age children are from

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ethnic and racial minority groups (Bennett, 2003) and not surprisingly the numbers of Latino children of school age have surpassed African-Americans as the largest minority group in public schools in the country (Jacobson, 1998). In addition, the number of students with a home language other than English is large and continues to increase. In 2001–2002 there were 4.7 million students who were limited in English, an increase of 14% in only 2 years (Nieto, 2004). In California these students constitute over 25% of student enrollment or over 1.5 million (California State Department of Education, 2004). Despite these growing numbers there is a critical shortage of qualified teachers in urban areas where there are large numbers of diverse children, many from low-income families who may require additional educational opportunities (Haskelhorn & Fideler, 1996).

The educational landscape for Latinos is currently a rocky terrain. The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans found that one out of every three Latinos fails to complete high school, only 10% complete a four-year college degree, and for many Hispanic parents and their children, language and cultural differences, as well as unfamiliarity with the educational system, hinder their ability to envision a college degree as an achievable goal (United States Presidential Advisory Commission, 2003). Latinos are retained a grade at a rate that is three times higher than that of the overall population and Latinos are much more likely than other students to drop out of high school. Even English dominant Latino students drop out at disproportionate rates. All of these factors point to an educational system that hinders rather than promotes Latino achievement (Garcia, 2001). Further compounding the educational difficulties of diverse students is the gap that exists between the racial and ethnic makeup of students and teachers and this gap continues to widen. (Nieto, 2004). Some researchers attribute this gap to the low salaries of teachers, the availability of other career opportunities for students of color who attend college, inadequate academic preparation, lack of encouragement, discrimination and negative experiences in schools (Gordon, 2000; Hodgkinson, 2002).

Given the dynamic student population in the United States, a critical issue for teacher education is how to increase the ethnic and racial diversity of the teaching force. Teachers who share the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students are more likely to understand their special needs and to possess cultural mediation skills that can help these students to negotiate the two distinct sociocultural environments of home and school (Darder, 1991; Irvine, 1989). The concept of race-matched teaching is not new and has many proponents (Gordon, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Elsewhere, Ladson-Billings (1994), Foster (1997), and Henry (1995) examine the work and lives of African-American teachers working with African American students and suggest that African-American teachers

are able to bring to the educational table an appreciation of the uniqueness of the African American experience and thus create pedagogies that are more culturally relevant and responsive. African–American educational researchers have established a solid and growing body of work with African American teachers, which includes their narratives and views on teaching, careers, teaching under segregation, cultural relevance, their impact on African American students, and education in their communities (Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1997; Henry, 1995; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This research has allowed us to understand that one-size fits all approaches to improving education many times fail minority children because of their diverse understandings of the way that power and authority codes play out in the classroom. Delpit (1995) suggests, “that students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life...” and that they must be “assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent” (p. 45).

One potentially rich source for obtaining bilingual–bicultural teachers is the pool of paraeducators who are employees in schools and have instructional responsibilities under the supervision of a teacher. They are also referred to in the literature as instructional aides, educational aides, teacher associates, teacher assistants, teacher aides and paraprofessionals. Paraeducators tend to live in the same communities as their students and come from the same backgrounds and thus are familiar with students’ cultural experiences (Monzo & Rueda, 2003). The bilingual and bicultural skills of these paraeducators facilitate communication with students and families in urban schools with large populations of children whose first language is other than English. More importantly, their familiarity with the realities that students face living in subordinated communities can give them crucial insight into many issues related to class, race, culture and discrimination that affect these students and their communities (Rueda & Monzo, 2002).

Little is known about what Latinos think about their schooling experiences, what factors impact on their academic success, and ethnographic data in general about the schooling of Latinos, including the effect of Latino educators on Latino students (Flores, 2003). In this study we explored the perspectives of Latina paraeducators regarding both the barriers as well as support systems they encountered in their own pursuit of a teaching credential. Their voices provide insight into issues that institutions of higher learning and, in particular, teacher education programs must grapple with if we are serious about the recruitment and retention of minority individuals into the teaching profession.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The research that has been conducted on minority teachers and Latino teachers in particular, together with an exploration of paraeducators as a source for the new teaching force holds much promise for understanding how to best educate minority children in ways that capitalize and affirm their culture while providing them with a high quality education.

Latino Teachers

Galindo, Aragon, and Underhill's (1996) case study of two Chicana teachers suggests that the life experiences of teachers shape their ideology and inform their practice and their competence to act in the classroom. This study looked at two first generation college graduates in the Southwest. Both were experienced teachers with an average of eighteen years spent in the elementary school classroom. Both teachers elected to teach in schools with large Latino student populations where they were able to create family like environments and where parents could become more involved in the education of their children. Galindo et al. discovered a critical component of the teachers' identity is the similarity between the students' cultural, working class backgrounds, and their own backgrounds. Additionally, both teachers saw themselves as advocates for their students, the parents, and bilingual education. The two Chicana teachers saw their competence to act as derived from their socialization of family and cultural values.

In a similar study of three experienced Latina teachers, Galindo (1996) introduces the term "bridging identity" when discussing the link between past biographical experiences and a professional teacher identity. Galindo found teachers possessing "bridging identities" valued and validated the experiences of their minority students. Further, Galindo explores the aspects that played a critical role in the valorization of values and socialization leading the way towards the teachers' professional identities. Likewise, Lemberger (1997) studied the teacher narratives of bilingual teachers. She interviewed eight bilingual teachers, two of whom were Latinas. She was successful in getting "the inside story of those personal experiences of what each teacher brought to her teaching context" (p. 4). Her work further supports the significant role of teachers' personal histories in their perspectives about the teaching and learning process.

Gordon (2000) in the *Color of Teaching* explores what she calls race-matched teaching, which she describes as an important mechanism for transmitting "a common history, language, and world view often in the face of oppression, [which can] provide subtle avenues of communication among a group of individuals who share a common heritage" (p. 69). Utilizing

interviews and observations she examines the perspectives of African–American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American teachers in three separate school districts. She suggests that teachers of color are a crucial resource for meeting the needs of children in urban schools as well as for educating their fellow teachers about diversity issues. Gordon highlights one of the major challenges in the education of Latino youth, which strips immigrant students of the respect, high expectations, and hopes for a better education and replaces it with negative attitudes towards school. In her review of the literature, Gordon identified the main reasons for the underrepresentation of Latino teachers in the profession: inadequate K–12 schooling, negative experiences in school, limited access to career options, discrimination based on accent and racist attitudes amongst other professionals, lack of encouragement, and low pay. However, Gordon found that the Latino teachers she interviewed did not view teaching as low paying or low status jobs. Instead, she found “pride in the profession, and the numerous stories that reflected gratitude for a job with a good income, security, benefits, and an opportunity to help others” (p. 47). Additionally, the Latino teachers in her study had mixed feelings about race-matched teaching and Gordon noted that “without an understanding of the complexity of ethnicities and how they are mediated through socioeconomic class, color, educational opportunities, and regionalism, teachers are bound to mislabel and misinterpret their students, resulting in profound inequities” (p. 75). This would suggest that being a Latino teacher does not necessarily provide any guarantee of success working with Latino children because of the many variables involved.

Paraeducators

The need to recruit more teachers of color has motivated educators to tap into the community resource pool of paraeducators who have extensive experience working in schools and valuable knowledge gained as members of the communities in which their students live. Research suggests that the cultural and linguistic knowledge of paraeducators enhances their teaching effectiveness with bilingual–bicultural students. Flores (2002) observed paraprofessionals during their student teaching and found that their familiarity with the cultural and linguistic heritage of the community enabled them to use rich cultural references in their interactions with students. Similarly, in examining the experiences of one Mexican immigrant paraeducator Monzo and Rueda (2003) found that her “funds of knowledge” about students’ home and community practices shaped her beliefs about teaching and learning. Their work highlights the ways in which the personal history of a paraeducator who shared many of the same background experiences as the

students she worked with significantly influenced her ability to effectively interact with these students, create close bonds with them and present instruction in meaningful contexts.

Scholarship focused on the preparation of paraeducators as teachers is bringing to light the challenges faced by many teacher candidates of color and Latinas in particular (Valenciana, Morin, & Morales, 2005; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). First, as women of color from low socio-economic groups they often have many family obligations and frequently lack flexibility of time and the economic resources required to attend college and obtain a teaching credential (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). Further, many women of color have been subjected to schooling that has left them with inadequate academic preparation and little motivation or encouragement to pursue higher education. Other barriers include testing requirements for which students of color are poorly prepared, university and school district bureaucracy, and the traditional organization of teacher education programs which generally are not responsive to the needs of working class students of color (Villegas & Clewell, 1998; Zeichner, 2003).

Several successful paraeducator-to-teacher programs which provide academic and financial assistance for qualified paraeducators to attain their teaching credentials, suggest that problems must be addressed with corresponding programmatic solutions at the school district, community college and university levels (Haselkorn, & Fideler, 1996; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Valenciana et al., 2005; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). Villegas and Clewell's (1998) meta-analysis identified the following characteristics in successful career ladder programs for paraeducators: collaboration between school districts and universities, recruitment, non-traditional indicators for acceptance of potential participants, modification of the teacher certification program, academic support, social support, and financial support. Some programs that demonstrate these characteristics have been identified in the literature (Haselkorn, 1996; Genzuk and Baca, 1998; Villegas & Clewell, 1998; Valenciana et al., 2005). A more limited number utilize the paraeducators' voices to focus on the specific challenges and successes that they experience while pursuing teacher certification (Valenciana et al., 2005; Yopp, Yopp & Taylor, 1992). Thus, the literature related to the experiences of paraeducators who expect to become certified teachers is ripe for studies that document from the participants' perspective the many obstacles and successes they encounter. One of the requirements of *No Child Left Behind* legislation is that paraeducators complete two years of study at an institution of higher education (Likins, 2003). Understanding the support they require can facilitate compliance with this requirement as well as provide the encouragement for many to successfully pursue a teaching credential.

THE STUDY

While paraeducator to teacher programs are an important means to facilitate their certification as teachers, not all paraeducators who wish to become teachers participate in these programs. In some cases these programs are not available where they work as paraeducators, the schedule configuration of college and teacher education programs may interfere with family as well as work obligations or they do not meet the admission requirements (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). Many paraeducators, often first-generation college students, are left on their own to overcome major obstacles in the path to completing a college degree and obtaining a teaching credential. In this study we examine the experiences of mainly working class Latina paraeducators who did not have the benefit of any type of paraeducator-to-teacher program and who were forced to contend with a number of obstacles as they negotiated their way to teacher certification. We began our study by viewing them as richly endowed with “funds of knowledge” from their families and communities as described by Moll and Greenberg (1990) and Monzo and Rueda (2003).

Method

Six Latina women with experience as paraeducators in public elementary schools participated in this study, which took place in a university located in southern California in a large urban area. At the time of the study all participants were enrolled in a teacher education program leading to bilingual teaching certification. This program was organized so that teacher candidates were placed into cohort groups or “blocks” and took all teacher education classes with the same cohort for the duration of the program. The bilingual teacher cohort was comprised of predominately Latino students and taught by a team of faculty, six of who were Latinas who collaborated on the courses.

In southern California the vast majority of Latinos are of Mexican origin although others from Central and South America also comprise this population. Among the six Latina participants four (Dolores, Lizbeth, Leyda, and Cristina) were second generation Mexican Americans born in the United States to immigrant parents. One, participant (Sandra) was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States as an adolescent and another (Victoria) is a third generation Mexican American whose parents were born in the U.S. and were college-educated. Although Victoria grew up in a middle class community, the others grew up in low-income areas with predominantly Latino populations. The six participants had all attended public schools with few or no teachers of color. Prior to entering the teacher

education program all of our participants had worked as paraeducators; their experience ranged from two to ten years working in various capacities assisting certified teachers in preschool, elementary and high school settings. The majority of these teacher candidates were still employed as paraeducators while they continued to complete their teacher education program since classes in the program were scheduled in the late afternoon and on Saturdays to accommodate work schedules.!!!

The key modes of data collection were an open-ended survey about their background and the impact of the cohort group on their learning and progress in the credential program, a focus group interview and participant observations. Selection of Latina teacher candidates was made by identifying students who were not involved in a paraeducator to teacher program and who were willing to participate in this research study. The focus group interview was conducted with the six participants to explore their experiences as they pursued a college degree and teacher preparation. Although semi-directed, the interview questions were open-ended to elicit a richer set of responses and to allow participants more freedom to explore personal issues and struggles (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992). The focus group interview, which was two hours in length, was video-taped and transcribed. Respondents' statements from both written surveys and interviews were then coded and analyzed for recurring patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Lastly, participants were observed during the classes in which they participated and during formal and informal mentoring. Observational notes were taken and were analyzed for emergent themes.

Findings

Although our participants had different experiences and therefore unique responses, there were four themes that emerged from the data. The key themes identified were (1) difficulties navigating the system, (2) the need for financial aid, (3) sources of support and (4) a sense of duty to help others.

Difficulties Navigating the System

All of our participants expressed that they had always had the desire to further their education after high school but faced numerous challenges as they attempted to pursue a college degree. Their high school experiences did not provide them with the necessary preparation and since almost all of these teacher candidates were the first in their families to attend college, they had little or no guidance from their parents or other family members regarding requirements for admission or even how to begin the process. Consequently when they enrolled in college they had no idea of what courses

they should take and how to cope with the complexities of the college system. Four of our participants first entered a two-year community college and not only experienced confusion about what courses to take but also about the transfer process to a university. This lack of understanding contributed to feelings of frustration and despair, created doubts about their abilities, and prolonged the time it took them to complete their education as illustrated in the following comments:

It took me years. I didn't know I needed to keep checking with counselors every semester. I didn't know what to do. I just kept taking classes for years. I started thinking—is this it? Is there anything after this? (Cristina)

I went to a community college. It just seemed like I was going to be there forever. I thought I wasn't a good enough student to go straight to a four-year college. But looking back I think I would have been able to come here [a university]. But I felt like I didn't have the option so I went to the community college and I was just there for so long and it seemed like I would never get out of there. I was there for so long; they just kept changing the counselors on me. I was told, "Do this, do that." I took a lot of classes and pretty soon I had so many classes I went over units and financial aid wouldn't cover it. It just became a family joke, you know, how long it took me. And it hurts me, I keep thinking of all that wasted time. (Dolores).

For others, immigration status or limited English language skills presented obstacles in their pursuit of a college education. One participant explained how these factors affected her:

I started at [local community college] and it was hard because I didn't have my green card. And I tried to take classes but it was like over \$150 a unit. But I didn't want to wait so I went to Adult Education and just kept going until I got my green card. Then I went to Orange Coast [a 2 year community college] and I had to ask about classes and I took ESL classes because I knew that I needed to know the language well if I wanted to be a teacher. (Sandra)

In contrast, one of our participants was from a middle-class family who provided her with experiences and resources that facilitated her access to higher education. Through her work as a paraeducator and interactions with other Latino students in the teacher education program she became acutely aware of her privileged status.

Going to college wasn't even a question. My mom went to college. Sometimes I feel embarrassed because I didn't have to struggle... I just jumped right in after high school. I was able to attend a private university and live in the dorms. I was able to travel abroad. (Victoria)

Gaining admission to a teacher education program after completing college also presented a number of challenges. Participants were faced with a

myriad of requirements and an impersonal bureaucracy that made the process time consuming and disheartening.

I saw red-tape everywhere. I just kept having doors shut in my face. I had to keep taking tests, filling out forms, getting letters and more letters. The whole process took me about a year. Then I was told different things by different people. The consistency wasn't there. (Victoria)

They told me I had to raise my GPA (grade point average). Along the way I had taken a class I didn't even need and that had lowered my GPA so I had to take another class to raise it in order to get into the teacher education program. (Cristina)

Further compounding the difficulties paraeducators face navigating the system is their lack of adequate economic resources. The exponential rise in student fees in the California State university system in recent years only worsened the situation for these paraeducators.

The Need for Financial Aid

A lack of economic resources was a major factor that affected all of these teacher candidates, even for the one participant who came from a middle class family. They all spoke about receiving some type of financial aid and working part-time while attending college. It was clear that without some type of financial assistance they could not have achieved their goal of completing a college education. As one teacher candidate expressed:

Financial aid really helped me. I told my sister she had to apply. But she didn't qualify and it was really hard for her. It helped me so much because I was working and paying rent but I had the financial aid for college expenses so that made it so much easier. Financial aid really made a difference for me, that's what brought me here." (Sandra).

Although in most cases financial assistance came in the form of scholarships and loans, family was also an important source of financial support. Families made many sacrifices in order to provide their children with the economic support required to complete their education. For example, several teacher candidates noted that their families provided them with basic necessities such as food and shelter or money for books and this facilitated their pursuit of a college degree. One teacher candidate described how her family rendered assistance:

I lived at home so my family helped me a lot. They put a roof over my head, provided food. Then my mom started to pay my car insurance because I had to cut my hours as an aide to put more time into my school work. She told me not to worry that she'd cover that. (Dolores)

While our participants experienced obstacles they also identified crucial sources of support which provided them with the necessary assistance, guidance, and inspiration to persevere and achieve academic success.

Sources of Support

Personal and institutional support Although community colleges and universities have counselors for advisement about courses and to provide guidance, our participants identified other sources that offered them greater support. In some cases, the elementary school teachers that they worked with played significant roles in offering encouragement as well as guidance. One participant described how the teacher that she worked with played a key role in advancing her towards her goal:

When I was at the community college I was getting frustrated and one of the teachers I worked with, she went with me to the counselor. And so finally I was able to get the classes I needed to take to finish. Because of that teacher who helped me that counselor was able to help me. (Sandra)

In most cases it was other students with similar backgrounds who were instrumental in offering guidance and sharing what they had learned about successfully advancing through the maze of institutional requirements. The following comments are typical of what participants expressed about receiving assistance from others:

I didn't think counselors were that much help. I would meet with one then another one. I got more help from friends. I got a lot of help from a good friend who helped me. We were always together helping each other. When I got here (the university) I met another friend who helped me get all my paperwork in to the credential program. I feel blessed having this help from friends. (Leyda)

The organization of the teacher education program into cohort groups was repeatedly cited as a significant source of support. All of the participants expressed that while in the credential program their cohort group or "block" provided them with overwhelming support and helped to reduce the stress of the rigors of the program. Unlike their previous experiences in higher education settings in which they often felt isolated, the cohort model helped them to establish connections with others like themselves and created a strong sense of community. The fact that several faculty members were Latinas who shared many of the same background experiences as these teacher candidates also contributed to fostering a climate of collaboration and trust. The following comments reflect how the cohort model offered critical personal and institutional support:

The block has been great. I've never felt so accepted. We all have the same experiences, backgrounds. We're able to share information and our hopes for the future. We feel such a connection with each other and with all the professors. (Victoria)

We all helped each other out when we needed help. We made time in our busy schedules to listen to family problems, to help with the lesson plans, to celebrate successes and to comfort each other when it all became too much to handle. We really became a "backup family" in a sense. (Sandra)

Our block helped me to surpass challenges because I knew that we were all going through the same experience and that everyone had problems and knowing that my peers could do it, I was sure that I could do it, too... For the reason that we speak the same language I felt comfortable saying how I really felt about some injustices that I encountered throughout and I was given professional advice on how to deal with every day problems that they (faculty) had experienced as well. (Dolores)

What I like most about this block is that it brings like-minded people together. The BCLAD (California bilingual credential) block experience brings a unique dynamic to the classroom environment and to the interactions that take place within it. I think it's the result of common understandings and passions coming together in a welcoming environment. Overall, it feels like we are one big family. (Cristina)

Being able to have someone to go to, namely anyone in my block was a relief for me. The other ladies have given me insight that I may not have seen on my own ... It was also a relief to know that there were ladies that may be going through the same things that I am going through or feeling the same frustrations that I was feeling. (Leyda)

Family support Another major source of support for these teacher candidates as they struggled to achieve their goal of becoming teachers was their family. Although the parents of most of our participants lacked knowledge about higher education and the "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977) that would have facilitated their children's advancement through such institutions, they provided necessary emotional comfort and a powerful motivating force. The following comments reflect how family members conveyed crucial messages to these teacher candidates that served to motivate them to succeed not only for themselves but also for the benefit of their families:

My mom was my greatest inspiration, not that she had a career or anything but just the fact that she worked hard to support us and was able to get ahead without even having an education. She was always supporting us. She would say, "M'ija. Yo no se como ir a la escuela o como ir al colegio pero you can do it. [My daughter, I don't know how to go to school, how to go to college

but...]. You can figure it out. I'll be here. I'll make your breakfast, your lunch, your dinner. I'll support you." (Sandra)

My mom was a single mom. She raised me. I'm the oldest of all my cousins. I felt I had to be an example for everybody else. Throughout my life she would always tell me: They're looking at you and whatever you do. I know it's a big responsibility but you have to set an example. So I felt I had to do the right thing; I had to do this for everybody. (Leyda)

My dad would always push me. He would say: You have every potential to do this. I was the oldest granddaughter so I was the model for the others. (Victoria)

What motivated me a lot was that I was the only one of my 40 cousins to go to college. Everybody had the opportunity but I was the only one to do it. Now I see that it was my family that really provided me with that support, that encouragement. They always wanted me to have something better. I always knew they were there for me. (Lizbeth)

Developing networks of support with peers and family not only served as an important strategy to counter the many challenges that they faced, but also created a sense of collective struggle and a desire to reach out to other bilingual–bicultural individuals, who like themselves, strive to break through the existing structures of power that attempt to limit their possibilities.

A Sense of Duty to Help Others

Many of our participants expressed that through their struggle to complete college and eventually enter a teacher preparation program they gained important knowledge and insights that can help them to serve as resources for others. They understood that not having had adequate information and guidance at an early stage in their education delayed their progress and as such they now wished to provide that guidance to others like themselves. Recognizing the many institutional obstacles that can hinder progress, they expressed a strong commitment to facilitate the process for others. The following comments reflect this commitment:

It's our mission now to give a hand. Someone helped us and now we need to help others. (Sandra)

Now I'm an expert on financial aid. Now I can help others to fill out the forms. (Dolores)

During that time when you don't have that support and you don't know, you look back on this later and you think: I should have known. But we learn and now we do know and now it's our turn to share this with students who may be in the same position that we were in—the next generation. I'm telling my sister to take honors classes in high school because now I understand what it is

needed... I learned what I needed to do. So now I tell my nieces and nephews what they need to do. So for me I'm glad I went through that because now I am able to help others. (Cristina)

In sum, the journey to teacher certification for these paraeducators was hindered by a lack of preparation and knowledge about institutions of higher education. This impeded the ability of our participants to navigate their way through a complex bureaucracy that was often impersonal and unresponsive to the needs of working class Latinas. They found counselors to be of little help and relied instead on friends and peers to guide them through intricate requirements and often frustrating procedures for completing college and gaining admission into a teacher preparation program. Their struggles were compounded by economic conditions that required them to work while attending college and to depend heavily on financial aid. Family was an important source of encouragement, support and motivation. The cohort model of grouping students together for all of their coursework was instrumental in providing these teacher candidates with a crucial support system of peers who shared similar background experiences and created a sense of community and extended family. As a result of the struggles they experienced, our participants expressed a strong commitment to helping others, who like themselves, become lost in the myriad of requirements to pursue academic and professional goals.

DISCUSSION

Our findings build on the work of others who have identified a range of obstacles for paraeducators who seek teacher certification, including financial need, academic and social factors, and institutional bureaucracies (Genzuk, 1997; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996). Most significantly, our findings illustrate how educational institutions function to perpetuate inequality. The majority of participants in our study were working class Latinas and many of these from immigrant families who did not have the background knowledge and resources to facilitate the process of completing college. To compound this disadvantage, our participants did not have the benefit of teachers who encouraged them to attend college or provided them with the necessary background knowledge to understand and negotiate the system. Consequently, their pursuit of a teaching credential was a constant struggle and was prolonged by many years. This is in sharp contrast to the situation for most middle and high-income students whose teachers and parents readily equip them with the social, cultural and economic capital that facilitates access to higher education and completion of a degree. Poor children of color tend to experience fewer educational resources and lower

academic expectations than do middle class white children (Darder, 1991; McLaren, 1994; Nieto, 2004). Moreover, they often do not receive explicit instruction in the linguistic forms, communicative strategies and ways of interacting that are so necessary for successful participation in the “culture of power”, that is the mainstream, middle class society (Delpit, 1995).

Our participants were successful largely due to their own efforts and perseverance. Additionally, peers and, in particular, participation in a cohort group provided crucial support by establishing connections to others with similar struggles and background experiences. The value of building cooperative, interactive support systems with others working towards the same goal has been well-documented in the literature (Genzuck & Baca, 1998; Yopp et al., 1992). As well, these findings are in keeping with what other scholars have espoused regarding education for students of color, specifically the importance of easing feelings of alienation and creating communities among students of color in which they can engage in dialogue and validate their experiences (Darder, 1995; McCaleb, 1994). The teacher preparation program in which our participants took part provided them with many opportunities to work collaboratively and support one another’s academic success. Moreover, they were able to share their life experiences, hopes and dreams within a context that was accepting, nurturing and respectful of everyone.

Important to note as well is the key role that family played in providing motivation, inspiration and emotional sustenance while these Latina women struggled to get an education. This contrasts sharply with the stereotypical notion that the cultural values and beliefs of Latino families, particularly as they relate to traditional gender roles, tend to restrict educational advancement for Latinas. For all of our participants, family members were a significant source of encouragement and support. Similar familial support and encouragement of working class Latino students has been noted in other scholarship that recognizes the important social and emotional support provided by families for schooling and education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Gándara, 1995; Valdés, 1996).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The conditions facing working class Latina paraeducators on their path to becoming teachers need serious attention. Clearly, there is a need to continue paraeducator-to-teacher programs that provide paraeducators with the critical support systems that they require, including consistent and ongoing counseling to facilitate academic progress, mentoring to effectively cope with institutional bureaucracies, and financial aid to ease difficult economic circumstances. Additionally, establishing cohort groups can

provide a crucial means of support to enable paraeducators to share concerns with and draw strength and inspiration from others working towards the same goal. This is particularly important for students of color whose traditional schooling has failed to acknowledge and value their cultural and linguistic resources. By coming together with others who share similar backgrounds and engage in dialogue about their experiences with mainstream institutions, students of color can affirm the knowledge they possess and establish important relationships of solidarity (Darder, 1995).

However, our findings also suggest a need to critique existing structures that hinder rather than facilitate minority students' efforts to access higher education and teacher education. For example, a consideration of the economic realities of most paraeducators should also take into account the fact that they must continue to work throughout college and teacher preparation programs. This implies rethinking the traditional structure of most teacher education programs that require full-time student teaching within a specific time period. Flexible scheduling of student teaching by universities as well as employment hours by school districts can help paraeducators to overcome one of the major obstacles they face in completing a teaching credential (Valenciana et al., 2005; Villegas & Clewell, 1998).

Efforts to recruit paraeducators into the teaching profession must also recognize and address the critical role of family. Including parents and family members in orientation sessions and social activities for paraeducators preparing to become teachers can acknowledge this important role and promote increased understanding of the significance of teacher preparation for people of color. Genzuck and Baca (1998) found that involving family in social events for paraeducators preparing for teacher certification enhanced family awareness of the importance of this endeavor and as a result enhanced their support.

The voices of the participants in our study provide insight into the ways in which social, economic and political forces impact the lives of individuals from disenfranchised communities. They highlight the need to seriously critique and transform fundamental inequities within institutional structures that obstruct equal educational opportunities and hinder the recruitment of bilingual-bicultural teachers. While one answer may lie in paraeducator-to-teacher programs that facilitate the process of navigating through the system, another surely resides within educational institutions themselves, especially teacher preparation programs. Kanpol (1998) suggests that we engage in both personal and institutional confession by "owning up to how one is structurally implicated in reproducing race, class, and gender" and by recognizing our involvement and "personal investment in oppressive ideological structures" (p. 68).

To promote academic achievement among low income students of color, teachers must be prepared to recognize the inequalities that exist within the structure of schooling, challenge these and prepare their students to do so as well. In addition to validating the students' cultural and linguistic identities, they must also explicitly teach how to participate successfully within mainstream institutions. This means developing bicultural students who respect and retain their primary culture, are able to participate in the dominant cultural milieu and are committed to transforming conditions of inequity. Only by practicing this kind of education can we hope to make equal educational opportunity a reality.

The voices of the six paraeducators in this study are powerful and exact that we take this study beyond research and into praxis. Macedo (1994) cautions us that "sharing of experiences must always be understood within a social praxis that entails both reflection and political action ...it must always involve a political project with the objective of dismantling oppressive structures and mechanisms" (p. xv). The project of diversifying the teaching force and expanding the field of possibilities and dreams for minority students is but one step towards critiquing and resisting oppressive school structures. This endeavor of which Macedo speaks is voiced by one of our participants:

I want to be an advocate for my own people. These experiences [as a paraeducator] gave me the extra push to pursue education...it gave me an extra push to go on. I want to help my own people learn who don't have the access to education. They don't have the money for their 2 and 3 year olds to start education right away. I just want to be an advocate for all. (Victoria)

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