

*Enlaces: Moving the Needle Towards Quality Engaged Education*  
Lydia Carnesale

*Miedo*

Beautiful shells in hidden selves,  
shadows of linguistic lives.  
Language placed on shelves  
Non-English utterances surprise.

*Enredo*

Why do teachers feel insecure?  
No language is pure.  
Can't they see the practice is similar?  
What is the academic cure?

*Lo que sucedo*

Teachers learn and learners teach,  
Efficacy and expertise,  
Relationships reach,  
And fear is eased.

*Confianza*

Uniting voices in a changing world,  
Creating safe spaces to grow.

By: Lydia Carnesale

## **Introduction**

For some the reaction to the above poem will be empathy, sadness, or frustration from knowing the challenges of engaging or being a multilingual, bound to dominant linguistic practices. For others, the blend of Spanish within the poem distracts, leaves questions, and loss of the full meaning of the poem. Would it be ironic to parse the written lines out for monolingual educators so they would only read and engage the English language lines, leaving the Spanish parts in silence? Consider, that the manner in which the poem is written is also how many young multilingual children utilize language in their daily lives. Young multilinguals shift, blend, and parse their languages throughout their day and when they are silenced part of their identity is stripped.

Scholarship notes that the investigations within the early childhood realm are sparse and those of emergent bilinguals even more so (Kirsh et al, 2020). Historically, early childhood has been seen as the red-headed stepchild of education, dismissing the value and importance of the stages of development found within these vital years (Kirsh et al, 2020). Garcia (2009) notes that there is not a 'critical' time to learn a language but that a child's language learning is less complex when young, making it an easier to acquire language early. The current educational narrative speaks to the vital areas of need in early childhood being literacy instruction, linguistic responsiveness, and the curriculum that is present for young children (Cervantes-Soon, 2014; Orellana & Garcia, 2014 & Cavazos, 2021). As educators, we know literacy and studies of literacy to be non-static and dynamic and yet we find implementation is often encased through monolingual instruction and assessments (Perry, 2012). What is currently being unveiled from

the fogs of truth, though, is that often these presumptions of teaching and learning are rooted within unequal power relations and traditions of oppression (Souza, 2017).

### ***Enlaces: Young Multilinguals***

For the purpose of this paper, young multilinguals' will be the term used to identify the dual language learners (children 0-8 who are simultaneously or sequentially acquiring more than one language) represented within this paper. Within the context of schools, young multilinguals are currently acknowledged and identified, but often done so with deficit consideration (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). Social and political constraints limit the capacity of, regulate, and shame young Latin@ students whose linguistic ingenuity could strengthen classroom conversation (Flores & Rosa, 2015, Cummins, 2000 & Flores, 2013). The Latin@ population makes up roughly 75%-79% of the English Language Learners within the country, their presence is distinctive to those that live in monolingual Spanish and monolingual English worlds (Flores, Tseng & Subtirelu, 2021). One of the top five states of increase of the Latin@ population is SC with 32% of the school age children being Latin@ and 5.3% of those being 0-4 years of age (ICS, 2016; Scchildren.org, 2022 & The Education Trust, 2023)

These children navigate linguistic and cultural borders, to communicate and engage in variety of ways, ways beyond what a single language of instruction can encompass (García, 2009, Wei, 2018, Flores, Tseng & Subtirelu, 2021 & Hamman, 2018). Yet their language abilities have been dubbed insufficient and their linguistic capacity dismissed. The creativity with which language(s) *se sale* from the mouths of diverse babes is a natural gift and yet too often over shadowed. The capacity our young multilinguals have to be an interlocutor of multiple worlds should be recognized not erased daily.

### ***Enlaces: Prepared Educators/Educadores of Young Multilinguals***

Early educational spaces set the foundational expectations of school/family relationships and the trajectory of not only a child's learning but also value as an individual (Sabol & Chase-Lansdale, 2015). Therefore, this paper does not seek to disparage hardworking teachers, instead providing an innovative manner of teaching and learning that weaves and supports all those who have young multilinguals in their lives.

Accessibility and knowledge of quality early childhood spaces is often a barrier for the families of young multilinguals (Children's Equity Project and Bipartisan Policy Center [CEPBPC], 2020). The current political landscape creating fear, lack of transportation, and cultural barriers deters families from utilizing early childhood services to support the growth, development, and preparedness of their children (Peterson et al., 2018). When considering the educational capacity for teaching and learning, multilingual growth and development is unique to that of their monolingual counterparts and curriculums often do not reflect these needs (Bacon, 2020). Unfortunately, preparing learners for assessment commonly dismisses the importance of play and socialization to develop language(s) and replaces them with rigid content standards (Rowe, 2010). Further, humans are social beings and the early childhood years are times when the skills of being members of society are developed, through social interaction and learning (Bauer et al., 2002 & Dominguez & Trawick-Smith, 2018).

The concern among leaders and administrators with respect to teacher retention is valid but overshadows the lack of preparedness that teachers feel as they are placed in classrooms with young multilingual learners. Scholarship notes that the disconnect between teachers and their understandings of best practices is linked to their own language beliefs, lived experiences, and classroom practices (Flores, 2001). Linguistically responsive teaching needs to be built from a

foundational sociolinguistic consciousness, value for linguistic diversity, and desire to advocate for young multilinguals (Bacon, 2020). Districts offer professional development but do not always focus on these areas of additional support. Connecting with multilingual families and learners is an area of great concern for professionals, both understanding familial language and culture as well as how to leverage these factors as key connections to English language curriculum to support positive growth and development (Heineke et al., 2022). Therefore, enhancing this robust pedagogical skillset includes participating in cultural experiences between teachers and children that allow an authentic purview to young multilinguals' needs and abilities (Nieto & Bode, 2009).

Often unknown and underexplored are the family language goals, decisions, and attitudes towards the growth and development of young multilinguals (Surrain, 2018). As families struggle with wanting their children to be academically successful and economically capable, they also recognize the value to their home language(s) and cultures, and a need for their children to be competent in both (Nuñez, 2019). Many myths still surround the benefits of bilingualism and the notions of pathways towards progress for our multilingual and immigrant opportunities (Bacon, 2020). Finally, the notion of families being their child's first teacher is well-known; what discounts the young multilingual's family's language beliefs and practices from this idea (Surrain, 2018)?

To frame this in its totality is to accept that the idea that prepared young multilinguals of South Carolina are children who use language in a fluid, dynamic, and non-bound manner to navigate their worlds and the communities they live within (García, 2009, Wei, 2018 & Hamman, 2018). To prepare young multilinguals, *all* of their teachers must want to pursue full linguistic truth, build agency, and push back against those who wish to silence young voices. It is

important for young multilinguals to bring their full authentic selves into the classroom, this includes their language repertoire. It is as Ofelia Garcia has identified that young multilinguals construct and facilitate meaning within a ‘hybrid language use’ process, which can be constructed from their unique lived experiences (García, 2009, Garcia, Johnson & Seltzer, 2017 & Garcia & Lin 2016). For example, when a child translanguages or uses languages in fluid and woven ways, they may recall or insert a home language word(s) with no pattern in English context except what their lived experience denotes. Equally, vocabulary recall may trigger similar cognates in both language that form new words (nonsense or blended languages) but that are meaningful to the child, creating an instance to build confidence and teach when the child is recognized for the emergent literacy practice effort. In honoring these practices, one allows a construction of multiliterate relationships as young multilinguals navigate the multiple language worlds they traverse, employing all language resources without having to turn one off. The following is a depiction of what occurred when language and context power (i.e., school classroom space) were removed and all participants were granted the gift of *enlaces*.

### ***Enlaces: Weaving and Responding***

While navigating the state of South Carolina and engaging in discussions with administration and educators as an ML Learning Engagement Coach, a new way of thinking about this professional development and familial need began to take shape. The creation of personalized learning opportunities through micro-credentials, professional incentives for teachers to be able to assess their knowledge and growth regarding multilingual learners, and highlighting the importance of family empowerment, a program was woven. The SC K-12 Family Engagement Framework’s components of building relationships, communication, community partnerships, linking families to learning outcomes, and collaboration came to life by

the efforts of the [Office of Early Learning and Literacy](#), a local district's Title 3 Coordinator, and a willing group of early childhood teachers.

### ***El Enlace***

The day is dreary and the desire to not return to work is strong, but a commitment was made to open doors and continue learning, *respira*. Entering, there is an air of insecurity and expectation, *confianza*. I realize the others have had days just as arduous as my own, and I wouldn't be surprised if they decide to stay home and relax instead of attending yet another professional development.

The selected community space is a veteran's lodge that houses Quinceneras, *platicas religiosas*, and *cenas familiares* for the local Latin@ community. It is a space that has been designed to intentionally meet families where they are, this time creating *enlaces*, weavings to their children's teachers. As I move through the space, I think of my own home and how I welcome new friends to dinner, impressing upon them not only the value of sharing my home but the connection I hope to make as we break bread. The quiet melodies of *canciones infantiles* play while families enter and teachers awkwardly shift where they stand.

Teachers are unsure of their role in this space as no longer does the power of a classroom set the tone to direct and teach. These *Maestras*, teachers who when asked if they would like a professional development opportunity to enhance their teaching practices and connect better with the ML students and families they serve, immediately responded *yes*. These overburdened and tired teachers wanted support, skills, *enlaces*, to support the growth and development of *ALL* of their students. They were surveyed about their challenges when engaging multilingual families and the areas of support needed when developing early literacy skill sets. They were excited and involved with the planning of the sessions and eager to see how the community would respond.

As the evening's events commence, one of them approaches and shyly asks if she is supposed to join the families in eating and wonders how she is supposed to speak with them if she doesn't know any Spanish. I ask her to let down her walls and forget the gap that seems to widen as the unfamiliar language surrounds her. I encourage her to simply join in and naturally note what happens. A bluetooth speaker dynamically shifts between familiar Spanish children's songs and Siri translating English instructions about what will be happening as the night continues. As the statements are translated, to the best of Siri's ability, the air shifts. Giggles displace language power and begin to weave relationships amongst these seemingly distinct individuals.

*Las maestras* gain confidence, weave themselves within children, and set their shoulders, ready to impart the curriculum lesson they have prepared for print awareness. As the instruction begins in Spanish, *las maestras* become active learners of the children and families present, who are using their home language practices meeting the goal for the lesson. Children eagerly engage in the dialogue: naming images, reading words, recognizing letters and sounds, and making connections to their lives in both languages. Teachers are stunned by the ease and confidence with which these students use Spanish to support their developing English.

Anecdotal notes are written in English, both to denote the literacy learning data points connected with the emergent bilingual practices in this novel space and as reference points to support later practices in the classrooms for *las maestras*. Teachers note how this work will inform their visits from [Child Early Reading and Development Education Program \(CERDEP\)](#) monitors. Their new knowledge will inform how they structure small group time and pave new ways to support the home language while still using their required curriculum.



The small veterans lodge transformed that evening into a space where educators can connect and learn with families, stripping away language boundaries and restructuring how literacy and languages are lived through a personalized learning opportunity. This experience sets the stage for ongoing learning through micro-credentials and future shared opportunities. Research confirms that teachers who feel supported tend to have agency in their abilities and higher teacher efficacy resulting in better student outcomes (López & Santibañez, 2018).

### ***Enlaces: Implications and Conclusion***

In entering the community of their students, a new relationship is forged, wherein they are the outsider being invited to participate in new language experiences and understand literacy from their student's lived experience. An authentic understanding envelops teachers when watching families interact, with varying language skillsets, which allows negotiation of each child's full repertoire of language. Mutually, teachers and families begin to connect the importance of Language(s) in their child's lives. They witness how for young multilinguals there is no bound manner to understand what surrounds them, only ways to begin to shape the meaning language has for them. Through the interaction and activities, a student and teacher can examine how their languages are similar and different and how they use each depending on the space or situation they find themselves, a vital part of understanding a translingual writing process (Bauer et al., 2017, García, 2009 & de los Ríos, C.V. & Seltzer, 2017). Equally, as families are recognized as their child's teacher in their home language throughout these experiences, they become empowered in their ability to enhance their child's early (bi)literacy development.

Empowering and enhancing educational spaces to be able to serve our Latin@ families within the state is no longer a future task. South Carolina ranks in the top five and one of the fastest growing states within the nation for Latin@ growth (Institute for Child Success, 2016).

Teachers are learners, and our learners can be teachers. It is time to begin crafting *enlaces* in an effort to connect *fronteras* that are often spaces of disconnect for families, teachers, and young multilinguals to facilitate cognitive, social, and language and literacy development for our earliest learners (Espinosa, 2015). In forming out of school home literacy spaces, a new *enlace* was created that brought the SC K-12 Family Engagement framework to life. This reinvention of family engagement, wherein communities, home language, teachers, and teaching strategies support emergent bilinguals from their lived experience and frame them as capable producers of knowledge was formed (Axelrod & Cole, 2018; Conboy, 2013 & Espinosa, 2015). By appreciating and tolerating language plurality an increase in family voice occurred, as well as a professional experience to enhance classroom engagement.

As we consider data tracking, the Science of Reading, developmentally appropriate practices, and decision making for early childhood spaces let us not forget our “who.” Young multilinguals must be competent on each side of the *fronteras* they will reside, to ensure they are language and literate beings capable of interacting both in English and their home language(s) (García, 2009, Wei, 2018, Garcia et al., 2011, Flores, Tseng & Subtirelu, 2021 & Hamman, 2018). We have the capacity to support our youngest learners, as well as those that serve them to reimagine effective programing we just have to be willing to weave *enlaces* to get there (Garcia, Jensen & Cuellar, 2006 & Fry & Gonzales, 2008).

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