

TEACHER ADVOCACY IN COMMUNITY:

SUPPORTING BILINGUAL FAMILIES IN SPECIAL
EDUCATION THROUGH SUPPORT NETWORKS

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Abstract

Bilingual special education teachers play an important role as advocates for their students as they navigate the special education and bilingual education systems. Teachers can be advocates within schools and within the greater community by understanding the network of supports available to students and their families. Initiatives on my campus prompted an informal case study of the network of support available to bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families of children with disabilities ages zero to five within the greater Fort Worth, Texas area. Through this work, I identified a multitude of supports available including school resources, institutional resources, government resources, supply resources, and close circle resources. With an understanding of the network of support, teachers can be advocates as information sharers and connectors. If teacher preparation programs provide future bilingual special education teachers with the range of resources available to families, it can lead to greater collaboration between teachers, families, and the community, and greater advocacy on the part of the teachers.

Keywords: bilingual special education, advocacy, teachers, network of support

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Teachers hold a range of roles throughout their career as instructors, encouragers, mentors, and as advocates. Advocacy is necessary when working with students who are marginalized by the educational system (Bartolomé, 2004). This is especially true for teachers who work with bilingual students with disabilities. Bilingual and multilingual students are disproportionately represented in special education, a reflection of the social and institutional practices that marginalize these populations (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Kangas, 2021). Therefore, teachers are crucial in ensuring that bilingual and multilingual students are given adequate assessments to identify disabilities, are offered the opportunity to continue in bilingual placement if identified for special education services, and receive the necessary supports and services for their academic needs (Kay-Raining-Bird et al., 2016a, 2016b; Lim et al., 2019; Marinova-Todd et al., 2016, McCray [now Sorrells] & Garcia, 2002; Pesco et al., 2016; Ruiz & Enguidanos, 1997; Scherba de Valenzuela et al., 2016).

Special education and bilingual education are often separate programs within school district structures and programming; yet, they need to be integrated to address the intersectionality of language and disability (Ortiz et al., 2020). In 2015, only 15 teacher education programs were identified as having Bilingual Special Education as a certification (Wang & Woolf, 2015). Recently, however, in states such as Texas, a bilingual special education certification, which will prepare teachers for students who are bilingual, multicultural, and are receiving special education services, will soon be introduced (State Board for Educator Certification, 2022; Texas H.B. 2256, 2021). As the number of bilingual special education certification programs expands, programs need to determine how they will prepare teachers to support students within their classroom and how to advocate for students within the school and greater community. While this group of teachers may be unique to specific contexts, there are a growing number of bilingual populations across the globe (Giannini, 2024). Thus, despite

the specific context of preparation programs in Texas, it is important for teachers internationally to be prepared to support students who are bilingual and have disabilities.

Collaboration among educators, families, and communities is important in ensuring responsive, effective, and equitable learning environments for all students but is paramount for students who are multilingual and have disabilities (Buren et al., 2022; de Valenzuela et al., 2004; Ortiz et al., 2020; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). For these students, teachers act as a connecting point for members of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team (i.e., related service providers, administrators, family) and other community supports. Therefore, it is especially important for bilingual special education teachers to be informed in both how they can support the student within the classroom and the available supports that families can use to navigate the educational system and reach the best outcomes for their children.

To better understand how teachers can become advocates for their bilingual and multilingual students with disabilities, this article discusses the network of support available for bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families with children with disabilities ages zero to five.¹ Different initiatives on my own university's campus prompted me to develop an understanding of this network of support within the greater Fort Worth, Texas area. This article begins by describing the need for advocacy within bilingual special education and the experiences of bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families within special education. A definition of "teachers as advocates" and "network of support" are both included alongside some of the literature from these fields. The process of conducting the informal case study is outlined, and a discussion of the network of support available to families within this specific context is provided. In the interest of considering how institutions can expand their preparation of future Bilingual Special Education teachers, this article finishes by examining how this type of work can be useful to teacher preparation programs (McCray [now Sorrells] & Garcia, 2002).

NEED FOR ADVOCACY WITHIN BILINGUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

Within bilingual special education, teachers must be prepared to account for a range of educational needs and to work closely and collaboratively with students' families. To address the overrepresentation of bilingual and multilingual students in special education, research has found that teachers should know the difference between a language learning need and a learning disability and be prepared to advocate for their students by ensuring they are given proper assessments (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; McCray [now Sorrells] & Garcia, 2002; Ruiz & Enguidanos, 1997). Teachers will also need to be prepared to develop collaborative relationships in the interest of writing IEPs, conducting assessments, and supporting students with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse families (Olivos et al., 2010; Mortier et al., 2021; Shernaz, 2002). However, a literature review of the research on bilingual special education preparation programs found that teachers have difficulty "including and communicating with students' families." (Wang & Woolf, 2015, p. 49). Therefore, teacher preparation programs must account for what teachers will need to know inside their classroom and for how to create the necessary collaboration outside of their classroom.

EXPERIENCES OF BILINGUAL LATINO/A AND HISPANIC FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

In navigating the special education system, Spanish speaking families have reported experiences of discrimination, insufficient respect of their voice, and lack of communication in Spanish (Bailey Jr et al., 1999; Hughes et al., 2008; McHatton & Correa, 2005; Salas, 2004). On the other hand, facilitators to positive special education experiences have included parent peer support, information about special education services and the special education system, and parent-school communication (Bailey Jr. et al, 1999; Burke et al., 2021; Mueller et al., 2009; Rios & Burke, 2021). Specifically, researchers have found families of children with disabilities need informational, material, and emotional support (Cohen et al., 2014; McWilliam & Scott, 2001; Vanegas & Abdelrahim, 2016). Although we can point to research that

has examined the informational, material, and emotional supports, this study seeks to identify one context's network of resources and supports as an example for how teachers can use these networks in their collaboration and advocacy.

FAMILY-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS WITH BILINGUAL LATINO/A AND HISPANIC FAMILIES RECEIVING SPECIAL EDUCATION

A *bilingual* special education teacher must account for the bilingual and multicultural identities of their students' families in their support of both families and children with disabilities. Teachers are encouraged to foster a collaborative relationship, as parents are more actively engaged when there are reciprocal relationships with teachers (Buren et al., 2022). Also, Latino/a teachers have noted the need for schools to consider the differences for families of culturally and linguistically diverse students, such as language barriers and interests (Espinoza, 2023). If bilingual special education teachers are engaging in collaborative relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse families of children with disabilities, they will need to develop strong communication, consider the unique needs of each family, and be prepared to foster a reciprocal relationship (Buren et al., 2022; Espinoza, 2023). One way to create this reciprocal relationship is through increased advocacy and collaboration with families.

TEACHERS AS ADVOCATES

The literature on teacher advocacy views advocacy as either political activism occurring beyond the walls of the school or educational leadership focusing on the curriculum, pedagogy, and organizational structures within schools (Bradley-Levine, 2018; Dubetz & de Jong, 2011). However, in both these articulations of advocacy, families are often not included; there is a need for bilingual students with disabilities and their families to be included in advocacy (Ruiz & Enguidanos, 1997). Researchers have highlighted the importance of moving from isolation to learning and collaborating together (Cahnmann & Varghese, 2005; Palmer, 2018). This could refer exclusively to collaboration with other teachers (Cahnmann & Varghese, 2005) but could also

be achieved through a “solid network of support” found in the community (Palmer, 2018; Ray, 2009, p. 133).

As noted above, collaboration with families of students receiving bilingual special education is an important piece to them feeling supported and involved in their children’s education. To make certain that pre-service teachers are prepared to teach this population and support their families, teachers must have a strong understanding of what equitable collaboration can look like. This includes the desire to transform power, to build both reciprocity and agency, to move towards change together, and should ultimately begin with families and the communities (Ishimaru, 2019). Additionally, part of collaborating well with culturally and linguistically diverse families receiving special education services includes informing parents of all their options available and establishing teachers as the point persons in the school-family collaboration (Olivos et al., 2010).

In my own conceptualization of advocacy, I recognize teachers as advocates within the school and the community. This is due to the role that bilingual special education teachers play as part of an IEP team in collaborating with related service providers, administrators, and families and in their advocacy for inclusion and sharing of resources within the greater community. This articulation of advocacy moves away from teachers who are advocates as leaders (Palmer, 2018) and towards teachers as advocates who are connectors. Here, advocacy includes teachers identifying the resources that are available to families (Dubetz & de Jong, 2011) and then connecting students and families with the various resources across the network of support. By understanding the network of support, teachers also know who is available to them when they personally need to advocate for increased services, support, or materials for a specific student. This leads to teachers as both advocates within the school and beyond the school with families and the larger community.

NETWORKS OF SUPPORT

In the implementation of education policy, such as special or bilingual education policies, an implementation network is a “‘type’ of policy network in that it is composed of the linkages between inter-

dependent organizational actors” (Schroeder, 2001, p. 17). A network includes the multitude of relationships that are developed in the implementation of the policy (Murdoch, 1998). These networks support the implementation of this policy and, in turn, the actors who are implementing it. Although a policy might not specifically identify the network of actors who will implement the policy, this work assumes that there are actors working towards the implementation of this policy.

Here, I have simplified multiple definitions to define networks as “linked interdependent actors connected by their shared goals” (Schroeder, 2001). *Actors* refers to both people and resources (Bartlett and Vavrus 2014; Chong and Graham 2017). This article explores the idea of a network of support made up of the multitude of resources available to bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families of children with disabilities. As the Texas Bilingual Special Education Teacher Certification is going to be enacted through a new policy, there will be an implementation network that takes effect in enacting the actual policy. However, it is also important to consider the network of supports and resources that families can utilize at this stage in their children’s education. As described in the above definition, these actors are connected by their shared goal of supporting bilingual families with children with disabilities ages zero to five. These actors (resource organizations, non-profits, service providers, etc.), which are the focus of the discussion below, are a great resource to families but also to teachers as they advocate on behalf of families and their students.

ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

In examining networks, both implementation and support, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers a key framework. It articulates “the role played by nonhuman actors and, in effect, dissolves binaries by focusing on *interactions* among actors within a network rather than on their location (local, national, global) within it” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014, 133). ANT uses the idea of assemblages, or networks, to appreciate that policies are made of both people and units that can develop plans and materials, launch programs, examine systems, and imagine next steps (Koyama, 2015). Although typically ANT is used to examine a network involved in policy implementation, for this study the frame-

work was used to examine the many resources and actors supporting families. Within this work, ANT was not used to examine the relationships of actors or their place within the network but to construct a clearer picture of the variety of supports available to bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families in navigating special education services.

COMMUNITY CASE STUDY

DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE AVAILABLE RESOURCES

An informal case study was conducted in the interest of determining what services and resources are available for bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families and their children with disabilities, ages zero to five in the greater Fort Worth, Texas community. This included extensive website searches for the actors (resource organizations, non-profits, service providers, etc.) involved in assisting families with children with disabilities ages zero to five in the greater Fort Worth area. Additionally, I held informal conversations with colleagues and key actors working with families in a variety of capacities (e.g., speech, preschool, hospital, schools), including one actor who is a parent to bilingual children with disabilities. When actors shared a potential resource, I found the resource and its information online. These resources were documented in a word document with their subsequent website and/or contact information and a brief description of the services they offered. Using ANT, the available resources were grouped by similarities so that a picture of the network of support for these families could be developed. These actor groups were then labeled based on the types of resources they provide.

The informal nature of this case study means that some actors providing support may have been excluded from the findings. However, this informal case study offers the opportunity to learn about the multitude of supports available to families and what it might mean to compile a network of support such as this for bilingual special education teachers. The resulting resource list is specific to the zero to five age group but is an important starting point for early childhood educators and helpful for all teachers to understand the services at the early intervention level. Moreover, as this case study was conducted

in a very specific context, this resource list should not be generalized to other contexts. However, the method for compiling this list and the network of support identified through the actor groups can be used as a starting point for practitioners and preparation programs to develop something similar for the families they work with or to share with future teachers.

IDENTIFIED SUPPORT NETWORK FOR BILINGUAL LATINO/A AND HISPANIC FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

This informal case study led to multiple discoveries that can be used to better develop the connections across the network of support for Spanish speaking families of children with disabilities. The multitude of resources found through this examination can be seen in Figure 1. These include school resources, institutional resources, government resources, supply resources, and close circle resources. The group of institutional resources contains the largest number of available resources, with several non-profit services available to families. Additionally, there are multiple resources that connect parents with other parents to offer informational and emotional support.

In the grouping of school resources, there are both public and private school options. The local school district offers early childhood education, and a neighboring school district offers inclusive pre-kindergarten programs for students with disabilities to learn alongside their peers. In private schools, there are multiple centers for children ranging six months to six years. These are school-based connections, and the range of schooling choices, including bilingual programming possibilities, can be shared by teachers so that families know all their options.

Within institutional resources, there are a wide variety of available supports. At the university-level for example, Green Tree University, a pseudonym for the university examined within this community, offers a college of education, school of communication sciences, school of medicine, institutes, clinics, and a lab school that can offer resources, research and/or programming for families. The hospital system within this community offers a Down Syndrome clinic, informational pages,

genetic testing, a center for diagnosis and treatment, multiple clinics, and a school onsite. Childcare centers were a salient finding for this age group. There are multiple institutions that offer childcare and organizations that support childcare workers to provide these services. Churches can offer respite care as well as specific services or Sunday school offerings for people with disabilities. These institutional resources may be less familiar to teachers but are great examples of connections that teachers can make for families to a variety of resources. Additionally, several of these resources can be useful for teachers in finding necessary information or advocacy support for themselves.

FIGURE 1

Support Network Available to Bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic Families of Children with Disabilities Ages 0-5 in the Fort Worth Area

School Resources	Institutional Resources	Government Resources	Supply Resources	Close Circle Resources
Local School Districts	University	Policies	Research	Family
Private Preschools	Hospital System	Federal Entities	Funding	Friends
	Child Care	State Entities	Training	
	Churches	County Entities	Transportation	
	Non-Profit Organizations			

Multiple non-profit organizations exist to support families. These include local organizations that offer financial support, parent coaching, and other programming and resource-focused organizations for information and therapy. Additional non-profit organizations include practitioner resource organizations and several recreation focused groups that offer accessible activities where children with disabilities can participate. Lastly, there are several parent-led organizations that offer parent-to-parent support. Both practitioner and parent-led organizations are significant due to their potential to be spaces of collaboration within this advocacy work.

Within government resources, there are policies which include federal laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and state laws that require districts to provide translated Individualized Education Plans and offer early intervention services. There are also multiple government entities that offer support to families. Early childhood intervention is provided by the federal government through Head Start programs and the state government offers parent training and information centers that serve specific regions. The state education agency offers families webpages with the resources available to them in special education and bilingual education. Finally, at the county level, special education services are provided through early childhood intervention services and case management. Once again, teachers can act as connectors between families and these government provided programs and agencies.

Although close circle resources were not identified during my informal case study, it must also be acknowledged that the close circle of people around bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families are another potential support and resource for them, especially in advocacy work. This close circle includes their families and friends and can include informal and emotional support (Correa et al., 2011; Jung, 2010; McAdoo et al., 2003).

Finally, supply resources account for the variety of resources that are essential for accessing, developing, and improving services. Previous research has found that resources such as transportation and training are important supplies in accessing disability services (Mendoza, 2023). Additionally, research organizations and funding bodies offer support to families through information and money. The potential for funding is an important piece of information for families to have and teachers can share those opportunities with families to better assist them in accessing the funding necessary for services and advocacy.

DISCUSSION

The variety of supports identified through these searches demonstrate the range of resources available to families within the network of support. This includes resources that are medically, educationally, religiously, recreationally, and community oriented, as well as thera-

pies, non-profits, childcare, and research. This should not be a surprise as we account for the number of ways that children require care. Although in education we often are focused on the educational aspects of a child's care, we must consider the whole child and the multiple ecosystems that are working in tandem during a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). This is especially true for children who are receiving support for both academic and language needs. Moreover, we know that families of children with disabilities need informational, material, and emotional support; therefore, the resources that support them should cover this range as well (Cohen et al., 2014; McWilliam & Scott, 2001; Vanegas & Abdelrahim, 2016).

Recognizing the variety of actors within the network and the multitude of ways to offer holistic care, the network of support can promote a move from the isolation currently exhibited in the field towards learning and collaborating together (Palmer, 2018). As advocates, teachers can collaborate with families by connecting families to the various resources in the network of support, in turn strengthening the greater network of support (Buren et al., 2022; Dubetz & De Jong, 2011; Palmer, 2018; Ray, 2009). Therefore, if teachers are aware of the range of resources available to families, it can lead to greater collaboration between teachers, families, and the community, and greater advocacy on the part of the teachers.

Researchers “suggest that bilingual teacher advocacy beyond the classroom focuses on locating adequate resources, defending bilingual programs, and convincing colleagues and community members to view their work in terms of enrichment rather than remediation.” (Dubetz de Jong, 2011, p. 256). It is clear that families are interested in gaining access to special education knowledge and in developing greater communication with providers (Burke et al., 2021; Rios & Burke, 2021). To assist them in navigating special education services, it is especially important teachers understand the non-profit and parent-to-parent services available. For example, family navigators and research on their effectiveness has become increasingly common, specifically in working with families of children with Autism (Burke et al., 2023; DiGuseppi et al., 2021; Feinberg et al., 2023). As noted by Dubetz and de Jong (2011), part of advocacy work is locating the resources, and

teachers can act as advocates by identifying these spaces and connecting families to the support available through specific resources, such as parent-to-parent organizations.

IMPLICATIONS

The development of a network of support has multiple uses for teachers and should be considered by teacher preparation programs as both a way to develop relationships with families and to advocate on behalf of students. Although teachers may be most excited and passionate about working with children, their role necessitates building relationships with families (McWilliam & Scott, 2001). To support them in building these relationships, bilingual special education preparation programs should provide pre-service teachers with the resources and supports available to specifically bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families of children with disabilities. Sharing information with parents has been identified as a facilitator towards positive experience in special education. Moreover, teachers can act as the point person and advocate in the school-family collaboration by informing parents of all their options available (Bailey Jr. et al., 1999; Dubetz de Jong, 2011; Olivos et al., 2010; Rios & Burke, 2021). At no point should the responsibility of supporting families and students fall exclusively to teachers. However, as the point of contact for most families, teachers should be made aware of the greater network that families and students can rely on.

Additionally, teachers should understand the school, institutional, government, close circle, and resource actors available to families so that they can advocate on behalf of their students within these spaces. They can use their knowledge to ensure that bilingual and multilingual students are given the proper assessments when testing for disabilities and to ensure that students continue to be offered bilingual services once identified as having a disability (Kay-Raining-Bird et al., 2016a, 2016b; Marinova-Todd et al., 2016; Pesco et al., 2016; Ruiz & Enguidanos, 1997; Scherba de Valenzuela et al., 2016). Moreover, in continuing the work of critical pedagogy, teachers can teach their students about how to use the support network and how to advocate for themselves.

CONTINUED RESEARCH OF THE RESOURCES FOR BILINGUAL LATINO/A AND HISPANIC FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

With the expansion of the Texas Bilingual Special Education Certification, research should be expanded to better understand teacher preparation for this certification (McCray [now Sorrells] & Garcia, 2002; Wang & Woolf, 2015). Specifically, continued research could examine how programs can prepare teachers to be advocates for students and families in accessing their network of support (Canary, 2008; Zhang & Choh, 2010). The development of this type of network of support could also be replicated for additional communities and within additional contexts. When identifying the supports, it is important to talk to actors from a wide range of spaces to ensure that the resource bank is as comprehensive as possible. My own case study became more complete after speaking with more people because each actor or colleague I spoke to could direct me to new resources or websites. In developing these resource networks further, a formal case study could also be conducted by interviewing families and actors working to implement bilingual special education. Future projects should also include a review of these resources for their language accessibility to ensure that bilingual families can navigate and interact with these resources in their chosen language.

CONCLUSION

To address the growing population of bilingual and multilingual learners globally and the introduction of more bilingual special education certification programs, teacher preparation programs need to develop teachers who understand how to academically support multilingual students with disabilities and how to advocate on behalf of these students and their families. Developing an understanding of the resources available to bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families navigating the special education system is a way to build reciprocity and offer families agency and choice in the resources they access (Ishimaru, 2019). As advocates, bilingual special education teachers can identify the resources that are available to families (Dubetz & de Jong, 2011) and then connect students and families with the various resourc-

es across the network of support. This article specifically addresses the supports available to bilingual Latino/a and Hispanic families in the interest of developing further collaboration and advocacy between future teachers and families. This informal case study of resources available to bilingual families with children with disabilities ages 0-5 in Fort Worth, Texas identified school resources, institutional resources, government resources, supply resources, and close circle resources as part of the network of supports. With a clear understanding of a network of support, such as this one, teachers can be advocates as information sharers and connectors, making connections for families to the available resources.

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Footnotes

This piece focuses on children age zero to five who are receiving special education services. Therefore, disability includes children early identified with a disability such as Down Syndrome, Autism, intellectual disability, and other health impairments. Furthermore, the bilingual families are those who identify as Latino/a or Hispanic and are speaking Spanish and English but bilingual families can speak a multitude of languages. Both Latino/a and Hispanic identity markers are utilized because families may consider themselves Latino, Latina or Hispanic.