

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Diversity of life and professional experiences of becoming female researcher in special Education

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Perhaps the most influential thinker about education in the late twentieth century is Paulo Freire. He has been particularly popular with informal educators with his emphasis on dialogue. According to Freire, to enter into dialogue presupposes equality amongst participants. Each must trust the others; there must be mutual respect and love (care and commitment). Each one must question what he or she knows and realizes that through dialogue existing thoughts will change and new knowledge will be created. This study highlights the diversity of life and professional experiences of one doctoral cohort at New Mexico State University in Special Education. We reflect on topics of gender, culture, and language by reflecting on the impact of individual backgrounds on our collaborative intent to build a doctoral learning community.

**Key words:** Gender, language, culture, education, experience.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the birth of academia gender, culture, and language have played a large role in the hierarchy of higher education. Contributing to this hierarchy could be that two thirds of all illiterates in the world, approximately 565 million people, are women (Finke, 1993). In the field of education, females are the dominate fixtures at the primary and elementary level; however, the comparison between men and women drastically changes as the level of school increases.

At the secondary and higher education levels, men easily overtake women in their numbers (Staudt, 1998). The most significant gaps in gendered education occur at the secondary level in which females are rarely encouraged to study in fields of science, math, or technology; contrastingly, females are often found studying in the fields of humanities

service, and commerce (Staudt, 1998). Segregations among males and females in the aforementioned mentioned fields of study contribute to post higher education outcomes. This logic does not follow that of a modern female.

Paulo Freire, perhaps the most influential thinker about education in the late twentieth century, suggests that “the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system” is not only necessary, but imperative to ensure a future which would allow for the “practice of freedom” (Freire, 1968). Freire’s “practice of freedom” and “dialogue” is the enabling of students to become activists for the transformation of the current system (1968). According to Freire, to enter into dialogue presupposes equality amongst participants. Each must

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trust the others; there must be mutual respect and love (care and commitment). Each one must question what he or she knows and realizes that through dialogue, existing thoughts will change and new knowledge will be created.

Student who learn English as a second language are not lazy, unprepared, and passive, there are some reasons preventing them from participation in the class such as shyness, culture, power, their backgrounds, and not feel entitled to participate in the class (Vandrick, 2000).

Culture is a way of life that include knowledge, laws, attitudes beliefs, mores, customs, language traditions, habits, achievement, spiritually, thoughts mores, values, customs, religion and rules which allow interactions and communications with group of people in the society. The interaction among the members of society may accrue through the use of language through using verbal or non verbal which is considered as the vehicle of culture (Ogunsiji et al., 2012).

This study highlights the diversity of life and professional experiences of one doctoral cohort at New Mexico State University in Special Education. We reflect on topics of gender, culture, and language by reflecting on the impact of individual backgrounds on our collaborative intent to build a doctoral learning community.

### **The Freirian background**

Born in 1921 in Northeastern Brazil to middle class parents, the young Paulo Freire began life as privileged. That was, until the economic crisis of the 1930s Great Depression in the United States radiated onto a precariously underdeveloped Latin America. Like much of the population, Freire too came to experience a "culture of silence" and hungering poverty that so poignantly motivated his viewpoints and manifesto-like pieces of educational and political philosophy. Devoted to advancing those who were marginalized, Freire dedicated himself to a "pedagogy" of enabling the oppressed of the world. The following will attempt to summarize historical context, and some of the main concepts of the singular "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," including our emphasis on Freirian dialogue as tool for building a doctoral learning community.

### **Historical contexts**

It was during the 1964 Brazilian government coup d'estate, the first of many in Latin America, that a violent political take-over forced Paulo Freire into exile in Chile, a country itself not far from dictatorship. There he worked for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and later traveled to the United States before returning to his homeland. Some of

his counterparts, other targeted public figures in denouncing militant dictatorships, would become martyrs like Chilean Victor Jara. Other exiled compatriots, like Caetano Veloso, a musician also from Bahia, Brazil, would travel and live in the underdeveloped "third" world but in the philosophical realms of European society. The exile fueled Freire to develop a philosophy of the education for the marginalized, oppressed, silenced, illiterate, adult, and so-called ignorant. He believed that all are capable of critically encountering their reality, in both personal and social situations, when given the proper tools. Pulling from philosophers such as Ortega and Gasset, Unamuno, Martin Luther King, and Che Guevara, the philosophy then also became politically volatile and such an actual threat to established order that he would be exiled for attempting to empower the impoverished, disinherited, and illiterate masses to carefully look at their situation and towards participation. In the United States, these Latin American masses can be likened to those outside the dominant Euro-American culture, i.e. immigrant and minority populations that have also been historically displaced in their citizenry.

### **Implications for education**

Perhaps one of the main Freirian conclusions for us universally is that the educational system itself is the major policy setter and instrument in perpetuating a "culture of silence" so often mentioned throughout his work. This "new" education proposed by Freire instead lends itself to novel experiences of reality, self, and dignity to transform worldviews and deprogram cultural conformity into radical self-awareness as a non-static, non-given world needing humanitarian problem solving. Man's ontological vocation is thus to be a subject acting on and changing the world. Freire also describes the oppositional "banking" style of education, in which teachers are the supposed know-all and end-alls who deposit information into students. Instead, Freire calls for authenticity in a model of pedagogical thought, communication, participation, responsibility, and freedom.

### **Applications in special education**

When considering the ever-dominant dependence on the Western model of education, Freirian perspectives have reminded us to revisit our own automated approaches to our dynamic roles in becoming researcher-academics in the field Special Education. The Freirian "practice of freedom," despite its original Portuguese and historical context, hits close to the heart and mission of special educators in the long-standing battle for societal inclusion of those with disabilities.

## Perspectives on disability

The definitions of disability have varied widely in the United States and abroad due to changes in societal and educational perspectives across the years, especially during the last century. The traditional deficit view of disability has been particularly marginalizing and is based on early drives in educational measurement in the 1900s to capture the average man's traits and capabilities. Over time, more contextualized views of disability have emerged to compete with the typical vs. atypical nature of deficit perspective. For example, a cultural perspective recognizes the meaning, and degree of handicap due to disability in terms of one's culture. Even more progressive in terms of equality for all, and fitting with Freirian philosophy, is the sociological perspective which suggests it is society who collectively constructs notions of disability and subsequent barriers (Smith and Tyler, 2010).

In the case of the United States, the decision of Brown vs. Board of Education, 1954, paired with the sociopolitical climate of its time, assisted in bringing the Civil Rights movement to fruition for a variety of minority groups. Americans quickly found the will to challenge the government en masse; sit-ins, protests and many more issues of equality came about after schools were desegregated. This landmark case, given special importance by Smith and Tyler (2010: 12), reaches especially deep into our legal promises for fair and appropriate services for all children. The first civil rights law for people with disabilities comes from Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and was followed years later by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 1990 (Shapiro, 1994). These laws specifically ensured that people with disabilities could not be discriminated against because of their disability (Shapiro, 1994). Later, the authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990), formerly Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975), and reauthorized most recently in 2004 provides a free and appropriate education for all students with disabilities (Shapiro, 1994). Thus, over the last fifty years, cultural diversity and the need for cultural competency has taken a foremost role in the preparation of pre-service and in-service professionals in the field.

## Growing diversity

Acknowledging a rapid racial and ethnic diversification in the United States, special educators have begun to pay more attention to promoting culturally relevant practices to better serve students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds. That being said, however, past and current research reveals an over-representation of minorities being placed in special education programs (Donovan and Cross, 2002), requiring continued advocacy for CLD assessment and intervention reform.

While the intended audience of Freirian pedagogies was specifically the earlier mentioned community of educators and humanists at a time in Latin America when Socialism was on the verge of possibility, due to the reality of the now audience, ourselves as students, it must also be that the work of Freire is applicable to the situations of the doctoral education. This includes, but is not limited to, the realms of special education scholarship and leadership acting on behalf of diverse populations to fight against oppression of groups historically labeled as "inferior" and provide tools, specifically for those called "disabled" to participate and transform their situation.

## Our becoming and dialogue

The reader and student of Freire's methodology must react openly and actively, since liberation is not passive. The truths of those willing towards radicalism, and "unveiled reality" are the only trustworthy actors of these goals. What Freire deemed *conscientização* in his native Portuguese, is learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and then taking action against the oppressive elements of that reality. Therefore, the approach must be a dialogical and problem solving education. The "dialogue" suggested must prove then to be a commitment to a mutual trust and faith in humanity, such that thematic investigations are anthropological and cultural concepts rather than dehumanizing.

The justification for such an education stems from those truly involved with a concern for humanity, so much so that the recognition of dehumanization is unavoidable. This dehumanization includes acts of injustice, exploitation, oppression, violence, labor, alienation, rape, struggle and so forth. Freire denounces this historically structured discourse of conquest, manipulation, and cultural invasion that has preserved certain dominations and status quos over time. Again, the alternative and necessary is a theory of action and communication, the *conscientização* of the oppressed. To overcome the *conscientização* a clear and resounding voice must be present.

Giroux (1988) refers to voice as "the means at our disposal—the discourses available to us—to make ourselves understood and listened to". As women in academia our voice must be discovered and listened to. In the United Kingdom, the percentage of female professors stands at 15.3% and in Germany women represent a mere 8.6% of professors (Pritchard, 2007). It is suggested that women carry the „curse“ of caring and that students have a certain expectation for women professors that requires the adaptation of a feminine style of teaching (Carson, 2001). Therefore, women in higher education are required to work harder to overcome their „curse“ and meet not only the research standards, but also that of teaching and counseling (Carson, 2001).

Instead of neutralizing of our gender roles, we view the road to true equality and intellectual freedom for academic women within the context of oppression.

Interestingly, Freire outlines the contradiction of the oppressed and the oppressors, obvious to him in the historic setting of his writing that as the first step of self-awareness begins there is surprising effect of "fear of freedom," in which the oppressed begin to actually adhere to the modeled attitude of oppressive power which has already been internalized as the only gaining group, precisely materialistic in its purpose despite the cost to the "other" as a human given right (Freire, 1968). Since the oppressed are emotionally dependent, Freire claim their behaviors actually prove "necrophilic" or self-and fellow- destructive. While obvious efforts are being made in academia to move to a better appreciate of the scholarship of teaching, the publish or perish mentality still exists (Boyer, 1990).

The cutthroat nature of academia is ever present with regard to research ideas and publications. Rather than an outpouring of continuous research knowledge, academics are holding on to manuscripts and research so as to submit for publication at a time that will most benefit their career. Liberation then must be mutual for both the oppressed and it's oppressors to destroy false charity, greed, and dehumanization, to create a revolutionary leadership that practices, "co-intentional education". Freire describes that, "teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality...

[but also] through common reflection and action" (p.51). To us, this last thought of co-intention with dialogue is the most fundamental to what we would also call cooperation, being the only means for equality en masse.

In his book, *Teachers As Cultural Workers*, Freire describes the notions of understanding oneself by stating, "the importance of identity of each one of us as an agent, educator or learner, of the educational practice is clear, as is the importance of our identity as a product of a tension-filled relationship between what we inherit and what we acquire" (p.125). According to Freire, we interact with our world based on our identity, and our identities are formed through dialogue and discourse. As a part of dialogue and discourse in learning and communicating, comes the importance of individual stories. Individual stories guide how each person view his or her world, especially when interacting in the education arena.

## METHODOLOGY

The authors used descriptive research in their study based on their own personal experiences reflected on topics of gender, culture and language. Four participants were participated in this study, their age between 30 and 40, came from different back-grounds.

## Research question

This research is attempting to answer the below questions:

Does getting higher education affect women from different background positively reflected on topics of gender, culture, and language?

What are the affects of getting higher education in women life from different backgrounds?

## Our stories

### Culture

**Leslie:** *According to Freire (2005), as cultural workers, educators must be able to know and understand their own ideals. For me, this involves understanding my foundation for researching and approaching scholarly endeavors. My life as a cultural being, a woman and an educator means that many of my lines cross, but none of these lines hide my core.*

*I never knew that I was biracial, until someone told me that I was a "half-breed". Growing up while being both Hispanic and Native American was not an hindrance, and in fact, my background was a blessing. I have never felt like I was living in two worlds, but instead like I was living in one world with many opportunities to view that world differently. The difficulty for me was never discovering who I was as an individual, but the difficulty lies with where I fit in academia.*

*When I decided to get my PhD, I knew there would be challenges, but what I did not expect was that the challenges would be mainly in terms of inner struggles. We learn so much about paradigms in college and how these schemata help shape how we approach research and learning. This notion of paradigms is where I found myself pondering possibilities as a minority woman. I do not find myself shifting paradigms. I only find myself building and removing from the paradigms I already have. The biggest building block for me was not in terms of methodology or frameworks for research, but instead was the paradigm of my own credence of seeing the world, which was static and dynamic at the same time. Why do I have to choose one way of thinking when my whole life I have been blending different ideologies? Along with blending ways of thinking comes the ability to blend roles.*

**Amal:** *In general, women in developing countries live in almost the same situation, in terms of their role in the family compared to men, for example when there is limited resources for the family in deciding between a male and femal, the male is still preferred to get his chance to continue his higher education - because he is a man - and the woman has to sacrifice for her brother - because she is a woman.*

*Historically, women were taught the skills of fine*

weaving, and the preparation of food and taking care of their families where men go to work, hunting, and provide the protection for the tribe. During the Turkish conquest, this concept was consolidated, but after the independence in 1946 the first signs of any Government concern to promote women's education were seen in the 1967 after establishing the first university in Jordan. After women were given new roles in the society, the ideas grew and matured, but very slowly, and start to speed up after the 2000s.

In addition to the cultural components we are raised in within our societies, also as international student in the US we are dealing with different ideologies and multicultural community which puts us in a situation where we don't know what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in this new environment. For example, graduate and undergraduate students in my country are not allowed to eat in class, leave the class room without reason, or use laptop during the class time. But in the US universities, students can do all these things. In my culture it is considered as disrespect.

During the first time I get involved in classes with American students I got the feeling that American classmates have the tendency to see American culture as superior to other cultures and that the American's culture should be the model for others. Because of this feeling, it was hard for me at the beginning to make friends in addition, because of other reasons I did not feel accepted from some people and tended to be evaluated negatively. But after few times I was able to make great friends and I invited them to my house and now they are very supportive of me and my family.

**Randa:** When I consider for a moment I realize my culture is patrilineal. Through my mother's side I have inherited the Cherokee Indian Tribe of Arkansas and Missouri. I am an inactive tribal member, but if you just look at me you wouldn't believe that statement at all. I am pale skinned and freckled, I don't speak Cherokee, and I have never been to a function related to the tribe, but none-the-less I am Cherokee and I have the credentials to prove it. Now, on my father's side I am considered Irish and my physical characteristics, other than my dark brown hair and brown eyes, reflect as much. Lineage aside, my culture originates in the deep southeast corner of Oklahoma, not Arkansas, not Missouri. My culture consists of fried foods, Baptisms, Sunday dinner at grandma's, fishing and hunting, long endless summers, and an expectation that I will always do the right thing. Way down south in Oklahoma is where my story of culture begins.

Along with culture comes an identity. My identity as an educator began long before I ever conceived of becoming a teacher. My journey begins with the reputation of my educator parents in a small town. I was raised in a small town in the south by educator parents with a stellar

reputation and at an early age I became well aware of the influence teachers have on the lives of their students and the parents of those students. Although as educators my parents made a meager salary they never hesitated when one of their students needed something. There were a number of occasions I remember them providing clothing or shoes to students they knew had none or providing money to students that would otherwise go without. There were times when their former students, now adults with children themselves, would stop by our house in need of money to help make ends meet and never failingly my parents gave. Still to this day former students stop by my parent's home just to say hello or talk to my mom and dad about how they had influenced their life. My parents were agents of change, and still are. They have made a difference in the lives of so many people. Their kindness, fairness, and compassion have transcended the tension-filled issues of education and indeed they leave their mark and legacy behind as they enter the last years of their work as educators.

Therefore, my journey as an educator begins with an inherited culture, identity, and reputation. As an educator I have inherited compassion, fairness, and kindness; I have acquired tenacity, conviction, knowledge, drive, and ambition. When choosing to become an educator I thought of the influence my parents were able to have on the students that they taught, and although I knew they struggled with education and its policies that they made a difference in this world. I too wanted to make a difference and help to correct some of those policies and procedures that had plagued the educational system for so many years.

**Amelia:** How do I address my White Midwestern English-speaking roots with my acquired Latina and native-like Spanish-speaking second culture? In reality, and despite a couple of decades with this question, I still struggle to reconcile a linear narrative of my bilingual and bicultural identity. Perhaps 'these' complex emotions may be shared by students across the U.S. and across the globe, although without the luxury of an adult emotional capacity. As I approach the topic, are memories of mistaken identity, confidence, anger, pride, guilt, freedom, loss, privilege... all confusing feelings about who, how, and why I am. A defensive voice usually appears trying to make a legitimate argument my name, profession, interests, beliefs, etc. Eventually, I would like to convey the richness of these feelings but also illustrating a picture of a confident professional woman. As a mother, I would also like that by the time my son, Lucas, deals with this, maybe society will not care so much.

## Gender

**Leslie:** My husband recently got his PhD, so I feel like I

am lucky to have an example of what to aspire to because we were told that over 90% of PhD students never finish. I am not just a student, so having this example to guide me is important. Some of my roles in life include: student, wife, mother, instructor, researcher, community member, homemaker, provider and supporter. Within each of these roles I find myself always the same at the core, but I use different tools within each task at hand, just like experiences in developing new ideologies in the doc program. It is impossible to completely change my own views or paradigms depending on my role, but it is possible to adjust the pendulum based on necessity. Through the process of the doctoral program, I have learned to mold academia to myself instead of the other way around. My learning involves knowing my views, my values and myself, and how these ideas mold my creed for life long learning. The best way to explain my experiences in being in a doctoral program and coming from a diverse background is with a metaphor. The doctoral program for me is like a bubble: a delicate balance of science and beauty, changes colors depending on outside influences, and travels along a journey waiting to burst with knowledge. Although this intellectual bubble may seem clear upon first glance, it is complex and lustrous. This bubble can also be deceiving in that it can only be produced with the right combination of elements. This same bubble also allows you to see yourself through all of the complexities, only if you look closely.

**Amal:** Some people may wonder if women are prohibited to be educated in Islam. To answer this question, we need to understand the role of religion and culture and we must distinguish between the impact of religion and traditions in a woman's right to learn. Islam does not ban women from their right to learn, in contrary, Islam urges all Muslims to learn, and Islam does not separate men from women when urging for education, we obviously see that education is a must for both men and women. In Islamic history we can find many examples of educated women, one of them Ayesha was Prophet Mohammad's wife, and so many others. What some people may see of women banned to get their rights or education in some areas around the world including some Islamic societies. I can guarantee that most of these actions against education women were inherited form generation to generation as part of the culture. For long time, because of poverty and their dependence on agriculture as source of income, men used to provide protection and faring activities and they were responsible of their families. Societies and tribes used to maximize the role of men in societies more than women because of duties they were required to do. Based on that and when there are limited resources to educate family members, the priority was always for men. Now, women in my society have the same right as men in education and no preference for

male over female (DoS, 2010). There is no doubt that women who access the higher education make a great difference for their families and communities as a whole. The education brings additional income women make and can improve family life quality and provide her kids with high quality education and better future. Higher income levels have their right to primary, secondary and higher education.

**Randa:** My undergraduate college experience was ideal. From the beginning I had little difficulty finding avenues of funding for school and therefore was able to manage a bachelor's degree with zero debt. Trials as an academic came after my bachelor's degree was awarded. It is far from economic to return to school after finishing a bachelor's degree and beginning a career. At this point in life I was married to a teacher and coach and expecting our first child. Therefore, the struggle to obtain an alternate certification in secondary education and master's degree came at an economic and time constraining price. Coincidentally, an alternate certification program was nearby and consequently my certification as a secondary English teacher was obtained through attending night classes for a year while working as a paraprofessional and coach for a small school district. What is less readily advertised is the cost of education at the graduate level. Nonetheless I obtained my certification and received my first teaching assignment in a very small school district in Texas. It was at this school that I discovered the importance of continuing education because it was immediately apparent to me that the field of education was and is littered with problems. I wanted to be an agent of change in an effort to correct some of those problems.

Sometimes I think of my husband as both a blessing and a curse. He is everything anyone could ask for in regards to being a great husband, companion, provider, and father. With that said I will also say that he is very driven and I am very competitive. Anything he attempted gave me the courage and motivation to try as well. So, when my husband decided to return to school for a master's degree, I did as well. He and I both returned to school for a master's degree around the same time. Both of us were full-time teachers and he was a coach as well. He and I sacrificed our salaries and our time with family to become more educated in our fields. He and I received a master's degree in the same year. The experience was exciting and disheartening at the same time. While we had both worked to improve our level of education we discovered that the master's degree had been greatly diluted. Currently, around the country there are master's programs that take less than a year to complete and have vastly reduced standards as compared to our degrees. Yet, these degrees maintained the same weight as our degrees in terms of salary bumps and job qualifications. We knew we both hoped to continue to obtain a terminal

degree, but found ourselves at a crossroads because we could not both attend at the same time as we had with our master's programs.

Through my experiences it has become clear to me that an academic that chooses to continue their education up to their terminal degree in a traditional sense has often put off a marriage and family. I did not, which is why I find myself as a non-traditional doctoral student. This section of our academic struggle I refer to as the doctoral compromise. We knew that while obtaining a doctoral degree each of us wanted to be a full-time student and experience a program fully. Therefore, one of us would continue to work full-time while the other quit a job and went back to school full-time. My husband and I were at a crossroads at this point. Which of us would begin a doctoral program first? After discussions regarding the matter he and I decided that he would return to school while I continued to work. The main reason for this was that he was completely disenchanted with his job as a teacher at this point that he felt he would be miserable if he continued while I knew that education would be the area I would study at the doctoral level and therefore more experience in the classroom would benefit my studies. Our reasoning sounds very practical and responsible, but I can't help but wonder if I gave a small inch to the fight against feminism with that small, but significant decision. I harbor no ill feelings towards him for going back to school first and I feel the pressure he felt by going first has spurred him into becoming the innovative researcher he is today, but as a female I can't help but wonder at myself, why did I do that? And so it was done. He began a program and I became the supporting wife, mother, financial support, and cheerleader.

With all honesty, my husband's time spent studying for his doctorate could not have been more beneficial to me. I was able to experience, through him, what it was like to be a full-time doctoral student and how I would need to efficiently manage my time in order to capitalize on the full-time student opportunity. I learned that funding is available to doctoral students for tuition and other items, publishing is very important, time spent at conferences is both educational and an opportunity to network, a dissertation committee can make or break your degree, and many other very important pieces of information. Therefore, when I formally started my doctoral studies as a full-time student I felt more than prepared for the challenges I would face. I did not enter my program blindly. I have seen what it means to complete a program and I know the trials of the dissertation and job search process.

Because my husband went through a program ahead of me I have a new graduate ally that can consistently walk me through issues that arise during my program of study.

**Amelia:** As a woman today, society allows me to exist

both in family and professionalism, beauty and intelligence. But I do not have true freedom because I am still plagued with self-comparison about gaining status in the academic workplace and doubts about my duties as a mother. Science is supposed to be a humanistic and creative endeavor. To me, this is part of my nature, my gender. But science is to be skeptical, held up to scrutiny, falsifiable, rigorous, and replicable. The battle, I believe, is in adding strength to feminine innovation and humanism to prove ourselves as part of the range of what is a scientist vs. the typical stereotype of the older Caucasian man wearing a lab coat with glasses and working with test tubes. Sometimes, there is an overt message to keep one's multiple roles as woman distant (mother, daughter, partner, friend). In a still too male-dominated world, women are made to see each other as enemies. The goal is that gradually we can share together as fellow intellectuals, friends, and confidants of the same social group and the same generation, to create a new one.

## Language

**Leslie:** Language is me. What I mean to say is that my whole cultural and professional being revolves around language. I grew up around Tewa, Spanish and English. For every feast, cultural activity or family event, all three of my languages were used. Each language wove within the cloth of my upbringing showing the delicate balance of language and identity. When I think, I use my language identities to relate to my world. When I think about my Native side, I think in Tewa because Tewa reveals how I connect to nature. When I think of my Hispanic side, I think of Spanish and how Spanish reveals my passionate side. When I think of English, I think about my professional side and how being a Speech-Language Pathologist means understanding that language is key in cultural reciprocity. I cannot imagine my world without having these languages in my life. Without one piece of my language repertoire, I would not be a whole being. There are times in my doctoral program that I find myself searching for which language represents the task at hand. Although most of the time I relate to English, I also have come to realization that I can use my cultural and passionate sides by incorporating my other languages. Language to me is like a beaded design: my languages are different colors and used to show different brilliance, but all of the beads make an aesthetic picture that is me. I am proud to be diverse and feel as though my spectrum of colorful languages only enhance my ability to succeed in life.

**Amal:** When I came to the US in 2007. I knew few English words, but I worked hard to improve my English through English classes in the Dona Ana Community College. Also through reading and listening to English

speakers. After that I did the TOEFL exam to apply to the master program in EMD. It was hard at the beginning to be in class where everyone speaks in English (different accent). In this regards I can say that the silence that most international student have in classes does not usually mean they are not knowledgeable with the topic they are studying; indeed, it is the language issue. This is what I can tell based on my personal experience. Sometime I got a feeling that my discussion will add nothing in the class, or I may don't have the right words to express my ideas which may be understood differently. Many of my friends came from the same background as me and faced the same problems, especially the first semester they arrived to the US, unless the person lived before in the US and they knew about the language and the culture.

Because most international students have less-than-standard oral English ability this influences their effort within group projects and during presentations. Preparing a presentation is not an easy task, because it makes me worry if I can express my ideas correctly. But after the first or the second semester I have begun to speak up in class a little bit because I dislike feeling isolated and being considered incompetent anymore, also I became more confident to present my work to the class.

**Randa:** As mentioned earlier I hail from a small town in the south, southeast Oklahoma to be precise. With that origin in mind, in all of my travels I bring with me a souvenir, one that is always with me and never goes away, an accent. Now, there are many things assumed about me because of the twang in my speech, as some people like to call it, some are negative and some positive. I believe that some people initially believe that I couldn't possibly be intelligent because of this accent, some people associate a certain level of compassion and good manners with the accent as well, and some people just consider it a novelty for entertainment purposes. Nonetheless I am certainly considered an obvious outsider once my mouth opens at any place in the country other than a small region near and around where I was raised. It is the otherness that my accent causes that, at times, creates a problem. There have been situations where I have been less readily accepted because I was obviously not from around there, wherever there was. There have also been times when I was readily trusted because of assumptions regarding where I was from. Here in New Mexico my family sticks out like a sore thumb and we have yet to be accepted in this culture. Whether it is my language that is affecting this resistance to us I can't be sure, but I have a feeling that if I spoke a little differently and looked a little different the acceptance time span might not be quite as long. I can't say one way or another as to whether or not that is a good or bad thing, but I can say that as an educator I can't afford to be that way. I have one shot with my

students and language notwithstanding I must make a connection, so I can't exclude or make a student "pay their dues" in essence before they are allowed to be a part of my classroom culture and that is what my language has taught me.

**Amelia:** Language is central to the human experience, central to our identities, how we solve problems, think, learn, and interact with our environments. Perhaps it is our most powerful tool to access social, academic, and vocational opportunities in life. A first language is also the glue that binds parent-child relationships. My first language was the majority language, English. But language interacts with social forces. While the majority of the world's population speaks at least two languages, recent estimates suggest one-in-five children in the U.S. learn two languages beginning in early childhood (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE] and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2003). Unlike early developing bilinguals, I grew into a fully acquired English as my home, social, and academic foundation to which I could later map the second language of my choice.

Although my grandparents spoke German in early childhood growing up with extended family on farms in middle Texas, our heritage language and tradition were intentionally abandoned as my great uncles enlisted in the U.S. services in WWI and again in WWII to fight against Nazi Germany. Although my grandmother continued to use some German-language recipe cards and a few Christmas carols, I can recall no other distinct German rituals or traditions present in my childhood. My relatives left Europe at the time of drought and famine so common in the mid- to late-1800s, so the shame of Holocaust only provided further assimilation and allegiance to being „American“ for the first and second generations of my family. Myself, as a third-generation German-American, I began to study Spanish as an elective course in middle school. I think this speaks not only to the requirement of foreign language learning in the U.S., but considering the extent to which I adopted a new language and culture as part of my own identity points to how strongly culture binds us on a physiologic scale. At sixteen, my first foreign exchange was in Costa Rica. During college, I found myself in Santiago, Chile to study Latin American history and politics. Later, I would live briefly in Buenos Aires, Argentina for coursework in Speech-Language Pathology. The list of a passion for travel and a choice for second language learning goes on... Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay, and Peru. I would like to know Germany and understand more about my ancestry. Use Spanish daily in my personal relationships and work. Surprisingly, or not, this has been controversial for some in my life who have accused me of both rejecting my roots and attempting to claim what is not mine. Yet, whether native to my blood or not, it is this



*necessary bilingualism that impassions my identity and career.*

## Conclusions

While we are not political figures, the policies and plan for global action that Paulo Freire represents should be an obligating call for ethical and advocating education to individuals from every sphere of cultural worldviews and experiences, every racial color and every level of socio-economic status. "Society has a collective value system that still supports traditional roles for men and women. This value system views women who achieve in nontraditional ways as exceptions to the rule. Many women feel like superwomen because they are expected to" (Mitchell, 1993, p. 118). From our own unique experiences in gender, culture, and language, we have highlighted the value added by individual backgrounds and journeys to the passion needed to sustain a career.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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