Neoliberal teacher preparation: Conceptualising a response in the US borderlands

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Abstract
The current era of neoliberal capitalism has witnessed the domination of public education by business interests which openly promote the spirit of competition among schools, educators and students through a policy of high stakes accountability for immediately measurable educational outcomes. Legislation has swept across Europe demanding core curriculum, common standards, and assessment targets (Glenn, 2007). This market-driven version of educational ‘reform’ has penetrated public school systems in most English-speaking countries and parts of Asia by publicly ranking schools by student test scores and altering education funding formulas according to achievement outcomes (Leithwood & Earl, 2000). High stakes accountability poses a challenge to the autonomy of higher education as well. For example, the Japanese national university system faces the threat of bureaucratic evaluation by a business-influenced external review institution (Yonezawa, 2002). In the developing world,
and particularly in Latin America, the value placed in higher education as a social investment and in university autonomy as a means to distribute that investment is being seriously challenged by a market-driven neoliberal agenda (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002). The imposition of this neoliberal agenda on public education in the United States was formalised as a national policy in 2002 with the No Child Left Behind legislation.

There is little doubt that neoliberal accountability has entered the arena of US teacher preparation (Wineburg, 2006), and the preparation of teachers to meet the needs of the growing population of Bilingual Learners (BLs) is no exception. Pre-service programmes must now prove their effectiveness (Cibulka, 2009). US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in his address at Columbia University (USDE, 2009), recently exhorted, “We should be studying and copying the practices of effective teacher preparation programmes – and encouraging the lowest-performers to shape up or shut down”. Acting in concert with this discourse, under new state legislation in Texas pre-service education programmes’ effectiveness will be measured, in part, by their graduates’ impact on BLs’ academic achievement over a three-year period. Educator preparation programmes that do not meet set criteria will inevitably face sanctions.

Most language minority education researchers understand the inadequacy of inferring direct causal relationships between teacher preparation quality and subsequent BL student outcomes. The linguistic, academic and cognitive aspects of the sociocultural context of schools and their local communities significantly influence BLs’ academic performances (Thomas & Collier, 2007). However, it appears that the quality of teacher preparation does contribute to long-term student achievement patterns (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Greenberg & Walsh, 2009; Levine, 2006).

Unfortunately, there is scant empirical evidence about specific programme features associated with effective teacher preparation, especially with regard to those who will teach the growing population of BLs (August and Hakuta, 1997). So while Secretary Duncan and state education agencies create sanctions for teacher preparation programmes, Teacher Education faculty lack substantive empirical evidence to guide their quest for effective teaching practices. Moreover, we are required to teach a state-mandated teacher preparation curriculum whose content is not linked to successful student outcomes, especially in the case of BLs’ (bi)literacy development (Gee, 2008; Strauss, 2005; Perez & Huerta, 2011). More challenging is the fact that some of our pre-service bilingual education candidates are themselves working class BLs, with a history of low academic achievement. How should a concerned faculty proceed without a guideline of proven teaching practices for this non-mainstream population?

We describe here how our team of concerned bilingual teacher education faculty conceptualised its approach to improving the preparation of pre-service teacher candidates at a Latino-majority public university in the South Texas borderlands. Funded by a multi-year programme improvement research grant, we have studied together and collaborated in the teaching of a specific cohort of bilingual teacher
candidates during its entire progression through the programme. As these candidates obtain teaching positions in local schools, we will measure their classroom performance and their BL students’ learning to gauge the effectiveness of the preparation we provided them. Our findings from this ultimate phase of the research project will be forthcoming once the data are collected and analysed. In this paper, we describe the pre-service programme features that we have examined and modified, focusing on that which we faculty most directly control: the students’ opportunities to learn and how we teach the mandated curriculum. Further, we describe how we synthesised a unique, context-specific pedagogy from a variety of sources that we feel is suited to the particular needs of our students.

**Conceptual framework**

Our approach to understanding the impact of our programme completers upon local BLs’ academic achievement and language development is congruent with the conceptual model for assessing teacher education used by Cochran-Smith and the Boston College Evidence Team (2009). Presently in the final year of a federally funded five-year professional development grant that began in 2007, our interdisciplinary evidence team aims to follow our programme completers into their first year of teaching to begin to gauge our impact upon local BL students’ learning and to use this empirical data to inform improvements to our teacher preparation programme. The Boston team’s conceptual framework includes components related to school practices and pupil learning outcomes. Our investigation and analysis of these factors will begin when our programme completers become teachers. This paper discusses the first component of the framework, the teacher education programme itself (e.g., teacher candidates’ characteristics, opportunities to learn), with some reference made to the second component (e.g., teacher candidates’ learning). Both these components ultimately influence teaching practice and pupil learning, thus completing the basic chain of evidence (Cochran-Smith & Boston College Evidence Team, 2009).

**The Borderland Context**

The region’s low education rate highlights the need for educational improvement: an extremely low SES rate, an 85.5% Educationally Disadvantaged Youth (EDY) rate, a 68% “At Risk of Failure” student population, and a proportion of almost 40% BLs in the pre-kindergarten to 12th grade (PK-12) system. Latino children in the region’s schools had below-average passing rates in 2006 for the 3rd and 4th grade state-standardised achievement tests, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) (Texas Education Agency, 2009). An increased BL failure rate from 3rd to 4th grade continues the pattern since 2003. Dramatically low educational attainment as measured by rates of 9th grade completion, high school diplomas, high school graduates’ college readiness assessments, college enrolment, and college completion characterises the region (Texas Education Agency, 2009). A recent study by the Brookings Institution
(2010) indicates that residents in this region ranked 98th among the country’s 100 largest metro areas based on the 15% of residents aged 25 and above with a bachelor’s degree. The national average is estimated at 35%.

This university has one of the largest enrolments of Latino students (85%) in the USA, graduating Texas’ second largest number of teacher candidates and, by some accounts, the most bilingual education candidates in the USA (Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2004). Unfortunately, first-time test-takers in the Early Childhood – 4th grade (EC-4) Bilingual Education programme had an unacceptably low passing rate at the Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TExES), the state certification exams. For example, during autumn 2004 through autumn 2006, 31.28% of 418 students did not pass the Bilingual Generalist (103) exam at the first attempt. Spring 2006 showed an even lower pass rate for first-time test-takers, and recent test data from autumn 2009 reflect the continued less than acceptable first-time pass rates for the new EC-6 exam. These tests are required for the state teaching licensure and purport to measure pedagogical content knowledge of elementary school subjects. Much of the content tested involves knowledge that should have been acquired prior to admission to the teacher education programme. The implementation of a new state-mandated Spanish language proficiency test for bilingual education teachers adds more challenge. Of the university’s 60 students who took this examination in its first year, only half passed. Not surprisingly, the exam’s reading and writing portions posed the greatest challenge to our students.

This low first-time pass rate gives cause for concern since there is some empirical evidence to show that teachers who pass their licensing tests at the first attempt (Greenberg & Walsh, 2010) or score higher at teacher licensure examinations (Wayne & Youngs, 2003) produce higher levels of student achievement. Moreover, the failure to score adequate yearly progress based on state-regulated teacher certification standards opens the door to negative sanctions such as site visits, corrective action plans or even the shutting down of an educator preparation programme.

Our Teacher Education faculty offers a variety of explanations for students’ weak test performances. Most complain about the larger class sizes that result from the administration’s insistence on ‘faculty productivity’. Yet few voice concern over the lower pre-service programme admission standards associated with this policy. Many criticise the university’s failure to offer pre-programme opportunities to students to appropriate English and Spanish language and literacy skills, as well as basic knowledge of mathematics, science and social studies. The content of the generalist test poses the greatest challenge to our students and allows programme faculty to place the blame across campus. Since our students score fairly well on the bilingual education content and pedagogy components, most faculty seem to feel they are fulfilling their teaching obligations.

To address the low pass rates of first-time test-takers, the programme faculty and administration have adopted a “test early and test often” policy. The faculty generally
oppose a teach-to-the-test remedy and condone voluntary test-taking ‘workshops’. To provide such optional, non-salaried workshops would require an additional service, and very few faculty members have offered this service. Current policy requires that students pass the EC-6 Bilingual Generalist exam before being allowed to register for student teaching. Consequently, some students take this exam about half way through their preparation so that they can retake the exam as often as needed to qualify for student teaching. The state charges a USD 120 fee for each exam attempt that represents a heavy financial burden for our working class students. A testing support office attempts to identify their weaknesses and provide guidance and support for passing the exam on subsequent attempts.

The paucity and content of our pre-service faculty’s discussions about programmatic opportunities to learn signals a belief in external causes of the teacher candidates’ academic shortcomings. Perhaps as with similar programmes, the collective reflection, discussion and investigation of the impact of our own teaching practices have not been part of the faculty’s culture or teacher preparation discourse (Gee, 2008). Ironically, there is general agreement that our pre-service teachers should learn and practice effective pedagogical approaches for BLs, such as dual language models, native language instruction, constructivist teaching, funds of knowledge, scaffolding, thematic units, and sheltered instruction. However, the evidence seems to indicate that few faculty members believe that the teacher candidates entering our programme would more favourably respond to similar pedagogy and learning experiences tailored to their needs or that we should collectively offer these in an effort to improve test performance and perhaps the impact programme completers have on the BLs they go on to teach. The impact of our programme is at the heart of the matter, given our symbiotic relationship with the local schools where our students will teach. If we cannot prepare better teachers, we are unlikely to contribute to offsetting the overall academic underachievement in this borderland region.

Guidelines for Improved Teacher Preparation

While factors such as explicit programme purpose, curricular coherence, curricular balance, faculty composition, admissions criteria, degree standards, site-based research, budget and assessment practices all play a role in shaping the quality of teacher candidates’ preparation (Levine, 2006), our evidence team first reviewed the existing literature on college teaching, the one factor we can directly control. Our journey was centred not so much on what to teach our prospective bilingual education teachers but how to teach them. Consistent with Menges and Austin (2001), we recognised that how we planned our courses, delivered instruction and assessed student learning could significantly shape our candidates’ preparation, including their performance at the certification exams.

We recognise that, unlike most US pre-service teacher preparation programmes, we do not prepare a student population of primarily White middle class females. We
need to gain a profound understanding of teaching approaches that would deepen the learning of our largely low-income, variably bilingual-biliterate, Mexican-origin female teacher candidates, most of whom were products of the region’s weak K-12 schools. Menges and Austin (2001) conclude that many research questions remain unanswered about “relationships between such variables as students’ cultural background and race and preferred learning strategies and learning styles” (p. 1136). Even scarcer are empirical studies that might shed light on the effectiveness of language minority or bilingual education teacher preparation programmes and BLs’ achievement outcomes (Sheets, Flores & Clark, 2011).

Even if we had a better sense of the knowledge and skills that teachers ought to have, we would still be left with the need to understand how to create opportunities for prospective bilingual education teachers to appropriate them within the confines of the state-mandated degree plan. Menges and Austin (2001) maintain that in college teaching instructional methods usually reflect individual faculty preferences or trial and error rather than systematic attention to the nature of the expected learning. Along these lines, Reybold, Flores and Cortez (2006, p. 2) contend that faculty are often grossly unprepared for the rigours of teaching, and that what they do learn is more the product of accidental occurrences. Ironically, we assume this to hold true even in departments of Curriculum and Instruction where faculty may be adept at teaching children and adolescents but have not had much opportunity to appropriate the expertise to teach university-level bilingual learners with weak prior academic preparation.

Towards the Conceptualisation of a Border Pedagogy

Drawing from Giroux (1992), Calderon and Carreon (2000, p. 168) call for an approach to enacting the curriculum that is essentially tailored to the children whose experiences are embedded in a US-Mexico border reality and landscape. The two authors view this new border pedagogy as a kind of progressive education with a social justice orientation. It may, however, be better construed as a liberating pedagogy since it addresses “how inequalities, power, and human suffering are rooted in basic institutional structures” (p. 168). Unfortunately, they do not elaborate on what this border pedagogy might look like instructionally within the context of pre-service teacher preparation.

More recently, Romo and Chavez (2006, p. 143) describe border pedagogy as a means to decolonise and revitalise learning and teaching to promote liberty and justice for all. However, they too do not elaborate on what kind of instructional approaches might be used in the operationalisation of border pedagogy with pre-service teachers who grew up and were educated along the US-Mexico border. Their study involved students who were predominantly European-American and female. They do however make some passing reference to the pedagogy used. They briefly describe it as eclectic, favouring experiential learning aimed at eliciting visceral responses. In spite of the lack of specification of border pedagogy from an instructional standpoint, what we
draw from this notion is the need for our instructional approaches to be consistent with how our teacher candidates best learn, and to gain this insight requires a study of our students and their contexts. This constitutes new ground with few specifics about instructional approaches.

For instance, how would a border pedagogy guide us in compensating for the general content knowledge some of our students have not had the opportunity to appropriate prior to entering our programme? We do not believe that offering random test preparation workshops, placing the blame across campus, or adopting a “test early test often” mantra is consonant with border pedagogy. We certainly expect our students to meet the needs of BLs within the subtractive school settings where they will likely begin teaching and, to the extent possible, to correct and even subvert the miseducation and mislabelling of BLs. Our border pedagogy beliefs are intact (e.g., decolonise ourselves, our pre-service teachers, and the BLs they will teach), but within the constraints of our present teaching/learning situation, the major challenge is to refine our practice, i.e. Porter’s (2006) enacted curriculum, to better meet our students’ academic needs. In sum, we must find ways to teach at least some of our students what the degree plan indicates they should know (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies content knowledge) before entering the teacher education programme (e.g., read large amounts of academic text quickly and with comprehension) as we attempt to develop their political clarity (Bartolome, 2008).

Key Aspects of Signature Pedagogies
Shulman’s (2005a, p. 54) notion of signature pedagogies provides us with a key concept that we can use to advance our general understanding of how our students might best learn. As he explains, signature pedagogies have three dimensions: a surface structure (concrete, operational acts of teaching and learning); a deep structure (a set of assumptions about how best to impart a certain body of knowledge); and an implicit structure (beliefs about professional attitudes, values, and dispositions). For instance, and given the act of assigning articles and chapters in textbooks as a pervasive pedagogical strategy within our profession, we need to reflect on its three dimensions. The surface structure is the act itself of assigning readings for students to study in preparation for class and includes how we engage them in gaining knowledge from the text. Then the deep structure represents our pedagogical assumptions underlying this act (e.g., the need to read, discuss, write, and then apply). The implicit structure entails the attitudes, values and dispositions we associate with being able to extract meaning from a teacher education text.

Clearly, the surface structure may have other components such as critiquing a related video clip, followed by a discussion, and culminating in a written reflection that entails concepts included in the assigned reading. Nonetheless, reading and negotiating the meaning of professional texts lies at the core of the deep structure of this pedagogical tool. While we might not regularly use video clips in our efforts to assist
our students in appropriating target knowledge, we cannot imagine imparting valued knowledge about teaching in the absence of some kind of interaction around written text. Its use is habitual and routine, but this is not sufficient for signature pedagogy status since there is likely to be wide variation among teacher-educators with regard to the best way to impart knowledge using written texts. As Shulman (2005b) stresses, it is difficult to identify the signature pedagogies of teacher education.

A certain irony reveals itself when students struggle to comprehend a text because of the limited opportunities they have been afforded to appropriate the knowledge to make sense of an academic text associated with social studies concepts (e.g., capitalism), for example. The matter becomes even more complex with pre-service students who struggle to comprehend academic English text and make academic concepts accessible to elementary grade native Spanish-speaking children. We need to understand what the signature pedagogy involving the use of written text looks like for the population in question. For example, does it entail a form of scaffolding like previewing the reading, developing concept maps, using guide-o-ramas, writing reflections, and/or the strategic use of both languages? The need to create a border signature pedagogy thus emerges. Shulman (2005b) emphasises that signature pedagogies emerge contextually, historically, in settings. The demands of our unique context challenge us to synthesise an innovative approach to border pedagogy.

Fink’s work (2003) with significant learning provides a detailed approach to what he calls integrated course design, which appears compatible with Shulman’s notion of the deep structure of signature pedagogies and aspects of Calderon and Carreon’s generalised notion of a border pedagogy. This step-by-step procedure also breathes science into the organisation (e.g., coherence and cohesion) of the intended curriculum. The primary goal of Fink’s approach is to lead to deep significant learning, or what students should be able to do two or three years after course (or programme) completion. This is achieved through active learning or involving students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing. Fink states:

One of the more powerful ideas to emerge in the literature on college teaching in the last decade or so is the concept of active learning. In essence, the concept of active learning supports research that shows: students learn more and retain their learning longer if they acquire it in an active rather than a passive manner (p. 16).

It seems obvious that active learning is an easy candidate for signature pedagogy status, but what is its nature in the context of bilingual education teacher preparation? Perhaps active learning is what Ball and Forzani (2009) have in mind as they argue for making practice, or the work of teaching, the core of the teachers’ professional preparation. Their notion of a practice-focused curriculum shifts preparation from knowledge acquisition to practice through the specification of what they call high leverage tasks of teaching. Ball and Forzani (p. 504) describe these tasks in the following manner:
High leverage practices include tasks and activities that are essential for skillful beginning teachers to understand, take responsibility for, and be prepared to carry out in order to enact their core instructional responsibilities.

Of course, the identification of a set of agreed-on core tasks of bilingual teaching may be a long-term goal, but this should not preclude the use of active learning or practice as Ball and Forzani so thoroughly and convincingly argue. Opportunities to actively practise the core tasks of bilingual teaching are thus central to the synthesis of a signature border pedagogy.

In our context, a balance must be struck between practice and the development of the pre-service teachers’ beliefs and commitments, which runs somewhat contrary to the position taken by Ball and Forzani (2009). Reorienting our teacher candidates’ beliefs about their own bilingualism and about bilingual education is essential in a society that has long imbibed both concepts with deficit thinking, and such a reorientation must go hand in hand with learning effective teaching practices. Curricular time and space must also be made to address our students’ extensive academic needs, including the development of their academic Spanish language abilities (Guerrero & Valadez, 2011). These context-specific needs legitimate the notion of border pedagogy (i.e., meeting border learners’ academic needs) proposed by Calderon and Carreon (2000).

Fink’s (2003) course design for significant learning also makes clear that situational factors must be considered. Of particular relevance to this paper, he recommends the inclusion of learners’ characteristics in course development. This entails asking oneself:

What is the life situation of the learners (e.g., working, family, professional goals)? What prior knowledge, experiences and initial feelings do students usually have about this subject?
What are their learning goals, expectations and preferred learning styles?

Here again we are instructed to ask ourselves who our students are and how we can build on these characteristics to create the kind of active learning opportunities that will best prepare them for the tasks that lie ahead of them. This is clearly one of the fairest and most complex questions all teacher educators respond to in one way or another. At one extreme, pre-service candidates might be treated as a generic population with little or no effort made to design a course or programme with student characteristics in mind. At the other extreme, the faculty would at least study a question like: How might border signature pedagogies account for the reality of a student population that works 30 hours a week, includes single mothers, and wants to graduate as soon as possible to offset their life of poverty?

At least two inter-related effective programme features come to mind: programmatic coherence and grouping. Darling-Hammond (2006, p. 306) believes that radically different or more positive outcomes in teacher preparation are linked, in part, to intensely coherent programmes. The idea that faculty plan together and share syllabi
within departments in order to achieve a kind of seamless experience of learning to teach is another aspect to include in a signature border pedagogy. She recommends that coursework be carefully sequenced based on a strong theory of learning to teach, explaining that (p. 306), “In such intensely coherent programs, core ideas are reiterated across courses and the theoretical frameworks animating courses and assignments are consistent across the program”.

Such cohesion could be achieved if faculty collectively designed their syllabi around Fink’s significant learning (2003), which entails a careful consideration of who the students are. A community of working class pre-service Latina teachers would benefit from a more coherent programme, and the more efficient use of time, one of their most valuable and limited resources, would be maximised. As we see it, programmes that are largely a collection of unrelated courses due to departmental divides and individualistic faculty norms (Darling-Hammond, 2006) unnecessarily tax students’ valuable time and negatively impact BLs’ learning and academic achievement.

A major issue for Teacher Education professors is the organisation of students into cohorts, groups and teams to improve their learning opportunities. Our teacher preparation programme uses a cohort model in which the same students take the same classes in each given semester. In each of the four semesters, students are free to change cohorts at registration so that there is limited consistency in the composition of cohorts. The review of the literature on the use of cohorts in teacher education is somewhat mixed (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006; Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001), and studies examine participants’ positive or negative experiences, but not their outcomes at high-stakes teacher certification tests, nor their impact on children’s learning.

However, research related to the use of groups and teams suggests they may be a worthwhile programme feature when standardised test scores are in the balance. A pioneer in team-based learning (TBL), Michaelsen (2004, p. 27) argues for the careful and orchestrated use of student teams to facilitate learning. He maintains:

...the effectiveness of team based learning as an instructional strategy, is based on the fact that it nurtures the development of high levels of group cohesiveness that, in turn, results in a wide variety of other positive outcomes.

According to Michaelsen (p. 48), the benefits of this approach include but are not limited to:

1. developing students’ higher level cognitive skills in large classes;
2. providing social support for at-risk students;
3. promoting the development of interpersonal and team skills; and
4. building and maintaining faculty members’ enthusiasm for their teaching role.

Menges and Austin (2001) support Michaelsen’s position on the value and effectiveness of small group learning, noting that this approach has increased in popularity more than any other college teaching innovation. More importantly, Menges and
Austin report that research associates the use of small groups with improved performance on course examinations, grades and even standardised tests.

It is important to highlight that, unlike cohorts and groups, team-based learning as proposed by Michaelsen (2004) entails a specific process for constructing teams. Briefly, the course relevant knowledge and skills of the members of the entire group are gauged and then students with the desired learning capital are distributed as equally as possible among the teams. For example, in a pre-service bilingual education programme and in a course on the development of biliteracy, students who can read aloud fluently with comprehension and expression possess a key resource that should be distributed as equally as possible across the teams. This modelling will also promote the Spanish language development of the less Spanish-proficient students in the team. Similarly, parents of young children moving through early biliteracy might be an asset when it comes to understanding this process in the coursework.

Further, the work of teaching described by Ball and Forzani (2009) to which our students must be socialised very likely entails working in professional groups or horizontal and vertical grade level teams. Recent work on school-based inquiry teams (Gallimore, et al., 2009) suggests that the work of teaching should also entail learning to function in teams. It appears then that having students work in groups and teams may not only enhance the learning of at-risk students, it may also prepare candidates for the work of teaching. We should also emphasise that Michaelsen (2004), like Fink (2003), advocates the goal of significant learning. The conjunction of TBL with significant learning contributes to our synthesis of a unique border pedagogy specific to our borderlands context.

How faculty relate to their students is paramount to learning (Noddings, 1992). Studies on Latinos in PK-12 education also seem to point to an affective dimension, in this case caring, that influences their learning and academic success overall (Bar-tolome, 2008). At the post-secondary level, O’Brien (2010) notes that, when working with students who find schooling a challenge, teachers who care about their students as people and learners may make an important difference. Jacobsen, Eggen and Kauchak (2006), cited in O’Brien (p. 111), contend that, “... it is virtually impossible to succeed in any part of teaching without genuinely caring about students and their learning”. Goldstein (2002) maintains, that if we want our teacher candidates to care about their students, we too must model the desired attitudes and behaviours. This seems to be the case for Latino students as well.

In fact, in a recent study of Latino bilingual education pre-service teachers Fitts and Weisman (2009, p. 384) report on the importance of professors’ strong personal and caring relationships with their students and how these relationships are fostered. The authors state:

This was developed by the professors through consistently expressed expectations that all of the students in the programme would excel and by providing students with concrete assistance.
and support when they needed it... The modeling of authentic caring by university professors led participants to realise that this was something that they were committed to providing for their students in the future.

What authentic caring might look like in this borderland setting serving primarily first-generation Latina students invites a number of possibilities. If time is an issue for these working class students, faculty might be able to show that they care by carefully planning together so that any opportunities to build on each other’s core assignments are fully but meaningfully exploited. This would likely positively influence the degree of programmatic cohesion and deep significant learning of high leverage practices. As the pre-service teachers in the Fitts and Weisman study reveal, authentic caring transcends simple verbal encouragement. It also entails providing students with the tools to succeed. In our context, this would likely involve extra-curricular and explicit coaching and guidance on how to transact with academic texts and the creation of course-integrated opportunities for students to acquire the academic content they might be lacking. Clearly, this would be in stark contrast to a “test often test early” policy.

Reflecting upon the core programme features that best prepare teachers within our borderlands context, we have embraced those concepts that maximise our students’ learning opportunities. In our estimation, our students’ ways of being, of thinking and learning, merit special attention and we thus embrace the notion and challenge of more fully defining a signature border pedagogy for the preparation of bilingual education pre-service teachers. No part of the PK-16 infrastructure in the USA has ever meaningfully taken into account anything other than an English-speaking White middle class perspective for teaching and learning. Our signature border pedagogy has consequently diverged significantly from the mainstream approach to teacher preparation.

The use of groups and teams and the demonstration of caring for our students, as models of how to teach children, are additional examples of our innovative pedagogy. Knowing how to pool scarce resources and cooperate with colleagues are valuable skills within an educational context that marginalises our linguistic minority students. Likewise, it is essential that we help our students develop ideological clarity. They must learn to deconstruct the myth that their own underachievement was caused by their bilingualism and culture. Otherwise, they are destined to replicate the subtractivist teaching that contributed to their own oppression. In effect, we must prepare a force of bilingual education teachers who can skilfully infiltrate local schools and transform their hegemonic practices. It is our responsibility as faculty to build a foundation for the ultimate disruption of the cycle of educational dysfunction by preparing effective bilingual teachers.

The signature border pedagogy perspective, as described above, that we have begun to implement has made our students more conscious of the root causes of their
academic shortcomings, and this increased awareness has reduced their feelings of personal inadequacy. Undoing these causes takes time, effort and study and may not fit neatly into a homogenised state-mandated curriculum, degree plan or pedagogy. While there is little to explicitly guide us in addressing the needs of our marginalised local academic milieu, shutting our programme down is not an option.

Closing Remarks
Our intention with this paper was to share with the educational community how we have begun to reconceptualise a course of action for understanding our teacher education programme, and how we have attempted to begin to improve the preparation of our teacher candidates through the implementation of a few key programme features that appear promising. We have in effect taken the first steps in the process of re-culturing our approach to the preparation of our teacher candidates. As such, we have started shifting our cultural practice for making programmatic decisions away from intuitions, anecdotes or departmental and college politics toward a practice based on our own students, programme, and research questions. We acknowledge that the task is difficult, but it is certainly worthwhile and rich in professional growth opportunity. Our ultimate goal is nothing short of giving others something to copy, but to do so first requires a careful study. The inception of a signature border pedagogy of the kind envisioned here is clearly long, long overdue.

Acknowledgement
This article was made possible in part by the US Department of Education (Office of English Language Acquisition) Grant No. T195N070232. However, the viewpoints expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect those of the funding agency.

Endnotes
1 BLs: mother-tongue speakers in the process of acquiring the society’s dominant language
2 EDY = students with low achievement test scores
3 EC4/EC6 = elementary grades Teacher Education programmes
4 the required Teacher Education courses

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