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### **Review: Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies and Community Literacies en Confianza: Learning from Bilingual After- School Programs by Steven Alvarez**

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## Review:

### ***Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies and Community Literacies en Confianza: Learning from Bilingual After-School Programs* by Steven Alvarez**

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Steven Alvarez's commitment to understanding the complex challenges faced by emerging bilingual (or multilingual) students and their families is easily seen through his two recently published books, *Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies* (2017a) and *Community Literacies en Confianza: Learning from Bilingual After-School Programs* (2017b). As educators who are invested in diverse student groups, we were particularly drawn to these texts. Megan Hartline is a white community literacy scholar working as the associate director of community learning at Trinity College, and Amber Montalvo is an Afro-Latina educational studies major at Trinity who is invested in community-engaged research and plans to work with public schools in Hartford, Connecticut and New York City. For both of us, Alvarez presented new ways to address disparities among emerging bilingual students and their families, which is a key concern in

Hartford, as the largely Latinx population continues to grow with families relocating here following the recent hurricanes in Puerto Rico. Alvarez's dual studies of after-school programs in New York City and Lexington, Kentucky provide deep insight into the educational challenges emerging bilingual students face in and out of the classroom, as well as how to form relationships between students, parents, teachers, and other mentors that can help students succeed.

In *Brokering Tareas*, Alvarez (2017a) focuses on emerging bilingual Mexican families who find academic support through MANOS, an after-school mentoring program in New York City. Through his ethnographic study that draws on five years of engagement with MANOS, Alvarez describes the benefits that come from "homework help programs that mentor emergent bilingual youth who broker language and literacies for their families" (xviii) as he discusses the complex translanguaging strategies employed by students, parents, and mentors at MANOS. This after-school program provides space for Spanish-speaking parents not only to find English-language homework help, but also to foster stronger student-parent relationships as both parents and students develop their understanding of English. Alvarez details translanguaging events between students, mothers, and mentors during homework help sessions at MANOS as well as interviews in which participants discuss their understanding of connections between the English language and academic success. These narratives and interviews help the reader further examine the way students juggle learning a new language and sustaining their home language in English-only educational environments.

In *Community Literacies en Confianza*, Alvarez (2017b) profiles two after-school learning sites in Lexington: Kentucky United Latinos (KUL, pronounced "cool"), a bilingual after-school group for high school students, and the Valle del Bluegrass Library (VBL), which hosts a bilingual after-school homework assistance program. He argues through his ethnographic case studies of these programs that "K-12 English language arts teachers must expand their knowledge of the literacy practices of English language learners by engaging with their students' communities, learning from their expertise with the trust of *confianza*" (4). *Confianza* is a reciprocal learning relationship

between adult mentors and emergent bilingual students built on mutual respect, trust, and care. Throughout *Community Literacies en Confianza*, Alvarez depicts what *confianza* entails and suggests how K-12 language arts teachers can create such relationships through demonstrating understanding of and appreciation for students' linguistic, familial, and cultural backgrounds.

Across these books, Alvarez offers multiple perspectives on the issue at hand, considering how multiple stakeholders can help emerging bilingual students succeed in a monolingual educational environment. Alvarez weaves together educational and rhetorical theory with the stories of emerging bilingual families, making the realities of their specific challenges more visible to help us see how pressing their needs are. Importantly, Alvarez moves beyond simply making these needs visible by suggesting multiple teaching and research strategies to address these challenges in and beyond classrooms, whether they are K-12 or college. In this review, we explore four key themes that cross the two texts and address the needs of emerging bilingual students: challenges faced by students, cultural narratives and realities about immigrant parents, the creativity that emerges when bilingualism is valued, and the role of teachers and researchers in helping these students succeed. Through these themes, we highlight what teachers and researchers gain from reading these books in tandem.

## CHALLENGES FOR EMERGING BILINGUAL STUDENTS

Federal educational policies like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have standardized English-only practices that exclude the languages and cultures of students who speak other languages at home. In *Community Literacies*, Alvarez (2017b) writes that “rigid standardization ... minoritizes the home cultures and languages students bring with them,” marking these traits as “deficits” (7). Students' intellectual capacity is viewed as based solely on their understanding of English, and any abilities to translate and translanguage are not valued in this type of school environment. This deficit-based approach to schooling means that emerging bilingual students have to leave their home identities, cultures, and languages behind when they enter their classrooms. As Amber witnessed during her fieldwork in Hartford, Spanish-speaking students recognize the privileging of English and often choose not to communicate in

larger group settings rather than speaking in Spanish or less-than-perfect English, even if the teacher is willing to instruct in Spanish. Federal policies have created systems that require English in order for students to fully engage in their education. When students' full identities are not an integral part of their education experience, they have a much harder time succeeding in these English-only environments.

In order to help these students succeed, community programs like MANOS and KUL focus on the positive aspects of emerging bilingual students' culture and language skills while offering tutoring and informal learning experiences. This is particularly important because many emerging bilingual students struggle with the need for help on their English homework, which is the subject of *Brokering Tareas*. Alvarez tells story after story about MANOS families with mothers who have tried many avenues to find homework help for their children, because they cannot fully understand the English homework assignments. These mothers crossed boroughs to have their children meet with family members who had a better understanding of the language, paid hundreds of dollars for translating services, and found not just one, but many bilingual homework help programs that might give their children a better way of working through their assignments. They know that for their children to succeed in America, they need a good education. And for them to receive a good education, they need to be able to complete their homework sufficiently and have additional learning experiences outside of school. In *Community Literacies*, Alvarez shows that these issues are not limited to NYC, exploring the necessity of after-school homework and mentoring programs like VBL and KUL in Lexington. In addition to baseline homework help, these programs can foster *confianza* relationships, which are central to creating a community where students feel understood, accepted, and respected, encouraging confidence in their ability to succeed. Because of the trend toward English-only classrooms where students' home cultures and languages are deficits, after-school problems can be important safe places where emerging bilingual students can find the educational and personal help they need to do well in school and beyond.

## DEFICIT-ORIENTED STEREOTYPES ABOUT PARENTS

Latinx immigrant parents and children are frequently portrayed in the news media as unable to keep up with the demands of the American educational system. Parents are seen as uninterested in or unaware of the importance of education, and students are seen as lazy and low-achieving. Alvarez illuminates how deeply-ingrained these stereotypes are by detailing media accounts of low-performing students (2017a, 32) as well as conversations where Latinx students claim that “immigrant parents don’t care about their kids in school” (2017b, 25). However, he and many other scholars discussing the challenges faced by immigrant and multilingual students note the discrepancies between these stereotypes, the realities of parents’ high hopes for their children’s educational success, and how hard parents work to help their students succeed (Gálvez, 2009; Louie 2012; Smith 2006). In our local context of Hartford’s public school system, which has a high population of immigrant and multilingual students, parents’ high expectations of their children are well documented, seen in the decades-long fight for school integration and increased educational opportunities for students (Eaton 2009; Joffe-Walt 2015; Cohen 2017) and high attendance at recent board of education meetings to advocate against school shutdowns (de la Torre 2018; Megan 2018). Despite prevailing stereotypes, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary, showing that immigrant parents *do* care deeply about their children’s education.

To continue disproving these deficit-oriented stereotypes, we need more accounts of the stories of hardworking Latinx immigrant parents and children, which Alvarez seeks to provide in both of these books. In *Brokering Tareas*, he directly quotes mothers about their commitment to their children’s educations (2017a, 72, 118, 130–8) and shows how they are integral to the work of MANOS. As one MANOS mentor explains, “It is not the mentees working with the kids—it is also the moms. They are the true role models. They are already involved, so we need to support them more” (30). He offers more stories of parental involvement and success in *Community Literacies*, but this time from the students’ point of view. He shares poems and essays students wrote about their parents after a long discussion about the complexities of immigrant stereotypes (2017b, 44–52). In both *Community Literacies* and *Brokering Tareas*, Alvarez’s

sustained discussion of immigrant parents shows a unique level of care for their children's education *because* of the sacrifices they make and the lengths they must go to in order to help their emerging bilingual children succeed in English-only classrooms. This in-depth portrait of parental engagement with education helps readers rethink their understanding of immigrant populations and how we can better engage parents in the joint work of educating emergent bilingual students.

## TRANSLANGUAGING AND CREATIVITY

Translanguaging involves “moving back and forth between and across languages, a dynamic literacy activity among bilingual communities” (Alvarez 2017a, xx). Translanguaging requires a certain level of imagination and intellect, which have positive effects on students, seen in their linguistic practices and visual representations. Alvarez demonstrates how educators who encourage translanguaging will, in turn, plant the seed for student intellectual creativity to flourish.

Alvarez builds on translingual scholarship about the inventiveness required when moving between languages (Canagarajah 2013; Farr 2011; Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur 2011) by detailing such innovative moments at MANOS. In one instance, Alvarez witnessed a student using language resourcefully while translating between his mom and a MANOS mentor, so they could discuss his recent vocabulary quiz. Although Spanish was the student's first language, he didn't know how to translate every word, such as the Spanish word for “sentences.” To navigate this brokering situation, he described “sentences” to his mother as *lineas de palabras*, or “lines of words” (Alvarez 2017a, 41). His mother then understood what he was referring to and taught him the proper translation, *frases*. Alvarez describes this as a learning moment for both mother and son, encouraging stronger understanding of both Spanish and English for the student and English for the mother, who had not known the word “sentences” in English. Translanguaging is another way to think about learning language beyond rote memorization of vocabulary words. It allows students to have greater agency as they develop their understanding of *multiple* languages, not just English, because it encourages students to think creatively and independently about how to work between the two languages.

Alvarez's focus on creativity and translanguageing extends beyond discussion of linguistic choices to show readers how students use translanguageing in art forms, including poetry and drawing, to express their shared experiences as emerging bilingual students. In *Community Literacies*, he describes *Don't Cry*, a piece of art created by Bianca, a high school student, which depicts an anime character with the phrase "Don't Cry" written around her in twenty different languages. Alvarez argues, "the deep emotional connections to language and diversity in *Don't Cry* remind us of the pains of becoming bilingual, shared by students from a variety of context" (2017b, 42). These pains are also shared by other students in poems and short stories (44-48) that the group eventually published in a collection. Creative workshops allowed students to further develop their skills across languages and use their multilingualism to produce collaborative projects through a new medium, art. Based on these experiences, Alvarez posits that teachers should "encourage students to translanguage to express their truths through original prose and verse, using more than one language" (45). In this way, all languages are held at the same value as English, which, as a result, allows students to activate their creative talents. This unique approach highlights the importance of not only translanguageing to succeed in academic environments, but also encouraging students to use their language skills in creative pursuits as well. Through an arts-based approach to translanguageing, Alvarez suggests a new way for researchers and educators to discuss the use and effects of translanguageing in the creative arts, especially for emerging bilingual students.

## ROLES OF TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS

To address the intersecting challenges faced by emerging bilingual students and their families, teachers and researchers must build trusting relationships with these families to help students succeed in and beyond the classroom. Alvarez's description of *confianza* presents teachers and researchers, especially those dedicated to community literacy and service learning, with a key strategy for enacting such relationships. *Confianza* is a "reciprocal relationship in which individuals feel cared for," which involves "mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation" (Alvarez 2017b, 4). Toward that end, Alvarez offers practical suggestions for assignments (21), writing activities (45), and classroom practices



(50) that can show students that their languages and cultures are valued in the classroom, an important first step in building *confianza*. Though the primary audience for *Community Literacies* is K-12 English Language Arts teachers, Alvarez shows how all people involved in students' lives across contexts can create these trusting relationships that enable emerging bilingual students to succeed. Alvarez depicts librarians, college students, college professors, K-12 teachers, and after-school program leaders all as entering these relationships. Students flourish as a result, enabling readers—ranging from researchers and community engagement administrators like Megan to future teachers and student researchers like Amber—to see how they can develop *confianza* relationships.

Researchers, especially ethnographers, can also work toward building *confianza* relationships with their communities. Through these relationships, researchers can help families in their communities through multiple means. In *Brokering Tareas*, Alvarez points to the importance of ethnographers continuing the work of uncovering “how families from all walks of life in the United States do not lack aspirations with regards to schooling” (2017a, 143). Sharing stories from these families disrupts the stereotypes described previously and increases scholarly understanding of literacy, of bi- and multilingualism, and of how and where education happens. Additionally, Alvarez encourages long-term, multipronged research that connects local organizations, students across levels, and families in order to better understand a community. With this deep knowledge, researchers can also advocate for community members. He writes:

Educators participating in satellite programs can lend support and credibility to the arguments and perceptions of emergent bilingual parents, raising schools' awareness of the community's concerns and advocating on their behalf. Institutional support translates into knowledge of how institutions work (2017b, 91).

If an elementary school is advocating for policies that don't work (like English-only) *and* the researcher understands the concerns/needs of the community because they are involved in it and have built *confianza*, the researcher can be a strong advocate for families that do not have as much power. In Hartford, we are currently working

to build *confianza* with a group of teachers and organizations advocating for a more diverse teaching body at Hartford public schools that reflects the diversity of the student body. Taking the lead from organizers who began this work, we (along with students in the class that Megan teaches and Amber assists with) are currently compiling scholarly research and composing documents and visuals to communicate this issue with a wider audience. For us, building *confianza* means forming relationships with the organizers and completing the work they identify as a priority before bringing in a research agenda of our own. Through researching *en confianza* with communities, community-engaged researchers can pursue multiple methods for helping our local communities achieve equity and justice—challenging stereotypes, mentoring youth, or advocating for change. Through all these projects, developing *confianza* relationships is what allows researchers to understand the best ways to move forward in collaborative projects with our communities.

## CONCLUSION

What we have found unique about reading these books together is the way that both of these recently released texts build on one another to further the conversation about teaching and researching emerging bilingual students within their familial and educational contexts. *Brokering Tareas* is a book about literacy practices, and *Community Literacies* is a book about teaching practices. To fully understand the depth and breadth of Alvarez's research on and with emerging bilingual students, you must read both texts to comprehend their specific literacy practices, the challenges they face, and strategies for addressing these issues. Through reading both, researchers and teachers from across contexts can find valuable insight into the ways they think about and work with emerging bilingual students. For example, these books have helped Megan progress her thinking about how to further develop relationships with people and organizations from the Latinx communities across Hartford and how to extend current learning opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds on Trinity's predominantly white campus. For Amber, these texts helped her connect her current academic study in education to her lived experiences in a predominately Dominican community (Washington Heights, a neighborhood in New York City), offering her new ways to think about how to engage with the diverse students

who she will work with in public schools in Hartford and New York City. These two books provide researchers and teachers a detailed view of the problems that stem from English-only education, an ideology that is embedded within all of our work across K-12 and university settings. Alvarez makes visible these systemic problems *and* the individual stories of students who are directly affected by English-only education every day. His unique approach provides a valuable contribution to scholarly conversations about literacy, education, and support for emerging bilingual students. As educators and scholars read his work, we are forced to recognize the role we can and should take to help students succeed.

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**Amber Montalvo** is an Educational Studies major at Trinity College. Her research interests include issues of diversity and equity in curriculum construction, teacher training, and educational policy. She is currently working for the Trinity College Community Learning Initiative and is part of Jumpstart's first corps team in Hartford.