
Personal and Professional Success in a Bilingual Teacher Training Project

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Abstract

This paper describes the factors that helped students succeed in a minority bilingual teacher training project. Using a qualitative research design, focus group interviews were conducted and the data analyzed for recurring themes. Results showed that structural factors such as centralized advising, caring staff and cohorts, and ancillary factors such as an increase in self-esteem helped students succeed. A theoretical framework can be constructed from the findings of this and similar studies that will help in the design, evaluation, and research of minority teacher training projects. Replication of this research model is recommended in future investigations of teacher training projects.

This paper reports on the results from focus group interviews of female Hispanic students' perspectives about the factors that contributed to their retention and success in Project ESCALERA, a bilingual teacher training project. In 1997, Project ESCALERA was awarded a Title III (former Title VII) grant to recruit and train bilingual teachers and teacher aides from the adult and largely Hispanic immigrant population in Elgin, Illinois. As a combined effort of two community colleges and two state universities, spearheaded by Elgin Community College, Project ESCALERA was extremely successful in meeting its goals. During the five years of the project, 36 students (or scholars¹ as they were called by everyone in the project) obtained bachelor's or master's degrees in education, 45 obtained full standard teacher certifications, 37 completed course work leading to the Illinois state approval for teaching in a bilingual or ESL program, and 26 obtained Illinois teacher-aide certification and/or an associate's degree. By the end of this five-year project, 213 of the students had met 181 separate educational goals.

A number of reviews throughout the five years of the grant identified different factors that contributed to the success of this bilingual teacher training project, from the administrators' and reviewers' points of view. However, it was important to identify the factors that led to successful goal achievement or continuation in the project from the perspective of the students, because, ultimately, it is the students who determine the success or failure of a teacher training project by the decisions they make to remain or leave the project. Knowing what these factors are will assist project designers, grant

directors, and grant agencies in designing, funding, and conducting teacher training projects that will successfully produce the minority bilingual teachers who are so urgently needed in our nation's schools.

In this article, we first review the relevant literature on minority teacher training programs in general and then bilingual teacher education programs in particular, and the factors that have led to success or insights in these programs. We then discuss the research method and the results of the study, comparing the factors that students in Project ESCALERA credit with their personal and professional success to factors that have been reported in other minority teacher training projects. Finally, we offer implications for current and future teacher training programs, implications for a theoretical framework, and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

In 1990-91, Garcia and Baptiste asked the question that many other educators and administrators continue to ask: What is the magnitude of the shortage of minority teachers? At that time, they noted that "College enrollment of minorities has declined steadily in the last ten years, but for those in teacher education, the trend is even worse" (p. 14). In 1994, Diaz-Rico and Smith pointed out that the need for bilingual teachers (who are often minorities) was also a concern. They noted that "the nation needs between 100,000 and 200,000 bilingual teachers, depending on the estimate of students with limited English proficiency and the desired student-teacher ratio" (p. 1). Unfortunately, the pool of Hispanic high school students who could fill an important niche in bilingual teacher education programs is diminished by the high dropout rate (currently 44.2%) of Hispanic² students (NCES, 2002). These statistics point to the importance of determining what factors strengthen minority bilingual teacher training projects in ways that provide the students with every opportunity to complete their educational program successfully.

A number of minority teacher training programs have been created in an attempt to rectify not only the shortage but the imbalance in the demographics of the available teacher candidate pool. Researchers have highlighted a number of factors that have consistently appeared across programs that have been successful in producing minority teachers (e.g., Becket, 1998; Gonzalez, 1997; Yopp, Yopp, & Taylor, 1992). They have suggested that these factors are likely to increase the pool of minority teachers and are positive predictors of successful teacher training experiences for the minority students within these programs. For example, Diaz-Rico and Smith (1994) commented on the successful Minority Teacher Recruitment Project in Jefferson County, Kentucky in which the local school district and local university cooperated in the project design. The university's role was to (a) assist minority students in planning their course of study, (b) offer courses at times that are convenient for students with family obligations and daytime job responsibilities, (c) provide financial aid, (d) encourage supportive faculty participation in career fairs, and (e) collaborate with students on projects and research. Another example of a successful minority teacher training project is Lamar University's partnership with the Beaumont (Texas) Independent School District on a recruitment

strategy for training minority teachers. This project included three phases: (a) early identification of teacher candidates in high school, (b) a teacher education induction to create connections and networks of support for the students, and (c) an evaluation of the project (Cooper & McCabe, 1988). Cooper and McCabe point out that the teacher education induction program was necessary to reduce the potential for social isolation and lack of a peer group which many minority students experience at college and which can eventually cause them to abandon their goals.

As informative as these studies are, we still need to hear the voices and experiences of the students in these programs and the reasons why they remain in or leave these programs. Knowing what factors students identify with their positive educational experience can help project and program directors design and conduct minority teacher education programs that successfully produce trained teachers for our nation's schools.

Gonzalez (1997) added a significant body of knowledge to what we know about students' experiences in minority teacher training projects with his large study of six minority teacher training projects in three different regions of the US. In his interviews with students across these programs, he found that students echoed common themes across these programs about what helped them remain and be successful. These factors included (a) programs that offered services beyond the typical tutoring or financial aid (e.g., tutorials to develop learning skills and time management); (b) mentors who cared about minority students' well-being and success; (c) a caring and nurturing environment that helped students stay focused on their goals, in spite of setbacks, academic challenges, and other personal problems; (d) a cohort design in which students are admitted in groups so that they can help each other through the program; (e) the setting of educational goals, followed by regular faculty/student meetings to monitor students' progress toward the goals; (f) volunteer work as part of the program for those students who were receiving financial aid; (g) the same high academic standards for minority students as were expected of majority students; and (h) project staff as mediators between students and institutional bureaucracy (e.g., financial aid, admissions, transcripts, etc.).

Gonzalez (1997) found what he called "high levels of student satisfaction" with the teacher training projects in these schools. In particular, students were very satisfied at those schools that integrated their services to cover individual as well as group needs. He reported that reducing rigid rules and bureaucracy helped them through the administrative system at the institutions. Other recent research has also corroborated his findings (e.g., Alston, Jackson, & Pressman, 1989; Middleton, Mason, Stilwell, & Parker, 1993).

Yopp et al. (1992) also investigated a minority teacher training project in terms of the students' perspectives. They surveyed students in the California State University (CSU) Teacher Diversity Program, a minority teacher training project that includes California State University at Fullerton, community colleges, and school districts in the area. The majority of the students in this program were female (95%), Hispanic (70%), bilingual in Spanish and English (81%), and between 20 and 55 years old. Yopp and colleagues conducted a written survey of approximately 13 of the 66 instructional aides in the program, "to determine the success or failure of certain activities to retain candidates in a program which is designed to bring them closer to achieving teaching credentials" (p. 30). The factors that students considered as helpful in keeping them in

the program were (a) ongoing career and academic advising, (b) peer support group meetings, (c) financial support, (d) informational and motivational pamphlets that communicated the successes of various students in the program, and (e) special events and guest speakers. Yopp and colleagues noted that the factors that students in this minority teacher training project identified as helpful in their pursuit of a teaching degree have been suggested by other teacher education reform research to be important in the recruitment and retention of minority individuals (e.g., Alston, 1988; Goodlad, 1991; Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 1987). Goodlad, for example, identified cohort groups who move through a teacher program together with a team of faculty as an important condition to improve teacher education programs (1991).

Mullen (1997) added important information to our knowledge of what minority students in teacher training programs view as significant factors contributing to their success. From her study of Hispanic pre-service teachers, she concluded that students wanted support from their institution on advising and counseling. Of special interest was the students' desire for help in developing leadership roles. The students noted that stereotypes of Hispanics as "low achievers" and "lazy, stupid, and unmotivated" were "damaging to their identity as developing professionals" (p. 11).

Despite the successes of these minority teacher training projects across the nation, they still represent a very small reduction in the shortage of available and qualified minority teachers. Becket points out that the teacher population continues to be mainly White and female (1998). One might add that it also remains largely unprepared to assist English language learners (ELLs), given the fact that only 3% of teachers have a degree in teaching English as a second language or bilingual education (NCES, 1997). The serious nature of the shortage of qualified bilingual teachers is clear when one considers that 41.2% of all public school teachers report teaching students who are ELLs, but only 12.5% report having received 8 or more hours of training on how to teach children who are in the process of learning English as a second language as well as academic content delivered in English (Gruber, Wiley, Broughman, Strizek, & Burian-Fitzgerald, 2002).

Garcia and Baptiste (1990-91) note that it also takes more than aggressive recruiting of minority students to ameliorate the severe shortage of minority teachers across the nation. More effort must be made to retain and guide the students to graduation after they arrive on campus, and to make college campuses less alienating for minorities. Consideration of what minority students say about their teacher training programs can help create a more positive climate that nurtures minority students and assist them toward the completion of their degree programs. Gonzalez (1997), in his six-program study asked "From the perspective of the students themselves, what are the most promising practices used by colleges of teacher education to attract and retain students of color?" (p. 57). Educating more minority teachers to work with ELLs means that many of the teacher trainees will be bilingual and bicultural themselves, another factor to consider in program design. Mullen, in her interviews of Hispanic pre-service teachers (1997), concluded that input needs to be elicited from minority teacher candidates and considered in future designs of teacher training programs. Accordingly, we interviewed minority students in the Project ESCALERA bilingual teacher training project about their experiences. The general research question that guided our study asked what factors

make a minority bilingual teacher training project successful from the students' point of view.

Method

In order to gather data about students' perspectives of a teacher training project, we used a qualitative research design, conducting six focus group interviews with students about their experiences in the Project ESCALERA bilingual teacher training project. The focus group interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and subsequently analyzed for patterns of recurring phrases and themes that students related to their experiences in the project.

Interviewing students about their impressions of an educational program has precedents in other research studies of teacher training projects (Gonzales, 1997, Yopp et al., 1992). Gonzalez pointed out in his study of six minority teacher training programs that "by giving students a candid voice in identifying the qualities that are important to them, promising program elements were discerned concerning the direction minority teacher training should take" (1997, p. 57). Focus group interviews are particularly useful because the researcher is able to structure the interview around specific and well-defined goals by the use of guiding questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In particular, focus groups provide an opportunity to collect data from group interaction. Bogdan and Biklen point out that "Group participants can stimulate each other to articulate their views or even to realize what their own views are" (p. 101). From this perspective, students in teacher training projects can be valid and important sources of data about the elements of the project that have affected the way in which they are proceeding toward their educational goal.

There were two research questions that motivated our study. The first general question was:

1. What are the factors that make a teacher training project successful from the students' point of view?

Under this general question, there were five related questions that focused on the design elements of Project ESCALERA. They were also influenced by the findings of previous studies on teacher training projects (Diaz-Rico & Smith, 1994; Gonzalez, 1997; Yopp et al., 1992). They were:

- 1a. How does course scheduling affect students' success?
- 1b. Does financial assistance affect students' decisions to enter and remain in teacher training projects?
- 1c. Does program advising and personal counseling affect students' success?
- 1d. Do special workshops and conferences affect students' success?
- 1e. Do volunteer requirements affect students' retention and success in the project?

The second research question, suggested by anecdotal data gathered by ESCALERA's Project Director over the length of the project, was:

2. In what ways does participation in a teacher training project affect students' personal lives?

Participants

The participants in this study were a volunteer sample of students in Project ESCALERA who were either working toward their degree objectives or who had graduated. All students received a letter from the Project Director (who was also a researcher in the study), inviting them to volunteer to participate in a focus group during which they would be asked to share their experiences in the project. Students who volunteered were then assigned to one of six focus groups, based on their status in the project. These six groups were composed of students who (a) were in the associate's degree program, (b) had completed the associate's degree program, (c) were in the bachelor's degree with teacher certification program, (d) had completed the bachelor's degree with teacher certification program, (e) were in the master's degree with teacher certification program, and (f) had completed the master's degree and teacher certification program.

Based on the recommendations of Krueger (1998) regarding the optimum number of focus groups and the number of participants within a focus group, we had initially intended to have six participants in each of the six focus groups for a total of 36 participants. However, of the 36 students and former students who volunteered, only 23 actually attended their scheduled focus group interview. All the volunteer participants were female. The age range of the total population of participants was from 24 to 59 years of age, with an average age of 38.3. Twenty-two of the 23 participants identified Spanish as their native language. The final number and composition of the participants in each focus group is listed below in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographics of Focus Group Participants

Focus Group Number	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six
Educational Goal	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree with Bilingual Approval	Earned Associate's Degree	Earned Bachelor's Degree	Earned Master's Degree with Bilingual Approval
Number of Participants	6	3	5	3	4	2
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age Range	30-59	24-50	30-47	30-38	37-52	42
Ethnicity	Hispanic	Hispanic	4 Hispanic, 1 Filipino	Hispanic	Hispanic	Hispanic

Procedure

The six focus group interviews were held within a 1 year span in 1½ hour sessions at a time. A time convenient to the participants was chosen so that it would not interfere with the participants' work or class schedule. In all cases, the participants had sufficient time to make comments on all the guiding questions. The authors of this paper, in their roles of Project ESCALERA Director and partner in Project ESCALERA, met with the participants in a conference room adjacent to the Project's main office at the community college. We started by reading aloud the six guiding questions that we would be asking the participants during the interview session, to alleviate their nervousness about the process. We encouraged the participants to be forthcoming and honest in their comments, indicating that this was an opportunity for them to improve Project ESCALERA and other teacher training projects that were to follow it, and to help other students in the program. The participants were assured that they would not be subject to any retaliation or punishment if they gave negative or critical opinions about Project ESCALERA or its staff and/or instructors, especially since Project ESCALERA was ending its fifth and final year three months after the date these focus group interviews started. In addition, we assured participants that their identities would be kept confidential and group findings would be reported anonymously. We asked each participant not to discuss the contents of the focus group discussion with others until the data collection was completed.

At the beginning of each session, we began by first asking the guiding question and then inviting each participant to make a comment. However, after the first question cycle, the participants invariably settled into a routine and each automatically took a turn responding to the guiding question as the general conversation proceeded. At times, one or more of the participants added comments to what the other participants had said about a particular topic. On a few occasions, the Project Director added a comment, sometimes noting that he remembered an incident that a participant had mentioned, or acknowledging one of their statements. During most of the sessions, his interaction consisted of non verbal encouragements for the participants to continue with their comments. The professor took notes and also gave non verbal encouragements consistent with attentive listening. The same format was followed for each of the six focus group interviews.

Instruments

The eight guiding questions listed below in Table 2 served as the data collection instruments. These questions were based, in part, on questions used in a prior written survey distributed to Project ESCALERA students two years prior to the focus groups and on anecdotal evidence collected by the Project Director over the period of the project. They were also based on the factors identified by previous studies of minority teacher training projects (e.g., Becket, 1998; Gonzalez, 1997; Mullen, 1997; Yopp et al., 1992) as helpful to students in meeting their educational goals. Guiding Questions 1 and 2 were related to our general Research Question 1, including 1a through 1e. Guiding Question 3 was related to our Research Question 2. Guiding Questions 4 through 8 were general questions for the purpose of stimulating reflection and conversation in the group setting.

Table 2
Focus Group Guiding Questions

Order	Question
1.	How likely is it that you would have gone back to school to meet your career goals without the Project ESCALERA scholarship?
2.	What are your opinions about the project; i.e., what was successful or not successful about it? Prompts: Courses Financial assistance Program advising/counseling Workshops/conferences Volunteer aspect
3.	What impact has Project ESCALERA had on your life?
4.	What impact has Project ESCALERA had on your ability to teach?
5.	What has been the most difficult challenge for you during your participation in Project ESCALERA? How did you address that challenge?
6.	If you could change one thing about Project ESCALERA, what would that be? What would you change/leave the same?
7.	If you had it to do all over again, would you change any of your actions?
8.	What advice would you give to the Project STEP scholars?

Data Analysis

Approaching the data from a symbolic interactionist perspective, each of the authors independently read through the transcripts of the six focus group interviews, looking for patterns in terms of similar words, phrases, or concepts. These became our preliminary coding categories or themes. When our independent analyses were completed, we met to discuss and compare the categories. On our initial discussion, we reached an interrater reliability of 95%. We then compared the categories that we had developed, looking at representative quotes, and were able to resolve points of disagreement. Because the same themes were arising consistently from all six of the focus group interviews, we combined the data and discussed them together as one group, based on the major themes that arose during our analysis.

Analysis of our coding categories revealed that the data fell into two distinctly different groups. One group of categories represented information about the way in which the project's design and administration affected the students. The other group of categories included information about the way in which students' personal experiences influenced them during their time in the project. We labeled these two major categories as the Structural Factors Category and the Ancillary Factors Category. We then assigned the other categories as subcategories in one or the other major category. Table 3 below shows the final structure of coding categories used in our analysis.

Table 3

Major Categories and Subcategories Developed for Data Analysis

Major Category	Structural Factors	Ancillary Factors
Subcategory	Centralized Location	Self-Esteem
Subcategory	Convenient Class Location	Role Model
Subcategory	Institutional Paperwork	Influence on Others
Subcategory	Caring Support Staff	
Subcategory	Cohorts	
Subcategory	Informational meetings	
Subcategory	Mini-Conferences	
Subcategory	Financial Assistance	

Validity

The validity of the data was strengthened by the consistency of the same themes arising across all six focus groups. In addition, we also considered two other points in triangulating the data. One point arose from the relationship of the themes from the focus group interviews to themes that arose from a previous survey of 58 Project ESCALERA students, conducted two years prior to the focus groups. Very similar themes emerged from the previous survey data, such as (a) the value of cohorts for peer support, (b) the development of self confidence among the students, (c) the value of the counseling and advising received, (d) the importance of workshops and mini-conferences, and (e) the accessibility and personal care and support from the Project Director and Staff Assistant. A final point of triangulation arose from a comparison of the themes from our focus group study to themes discovered by research into other minority teacher training projects (e.g., Diaz-Rico & Smith, 1994; Gonzalez, 1997; Mullen, 1997; Yopp et al., 1992), which showed similarity in such themes as the value of cohort groups, counseling and advising, and personal care and support from Project staff.

The construct we were examining in this study was how students perceived their meaning of success. We wanted to know, from the students' point of view, what they believed were the factors that led them to success in the project. We, as the researchers, initially defined success as remaining in or graduating from Project ESCALERA, and looked to the structure of the project for the factors that helped the students achieve their individual success. The students, however, defined success in a broader scope. They included the structural factors in their definition of success, but they also added their own personal views of what success meant to them, which we categorized as ancillary factors. Thus, we believe that our research method was appropriate because it allowed for an expanded definition of success based on the participants' views.

With regard to possible bias in the study, there was unavoidable self-selection bias because our participants were a volunteer sample. Thus, it was possible that only those students who had positive comments volunteered and, therefore, our findings were biased by hearing only positive comments about the project. However, since the purpose of the research was to look for the factors that contributed to success in the program from the perspective of students, one would expect more positive than negative comments to be offered. We attempted to minimize the bias by explaining to the participants that we

wanted to hear both positive and negative comments and that they would be helping students in future projects by doing so, and some participants did make such comments.

Another element of possible bias arose from our different personal knowledge of the participants. The Project Director had been the project advisor and counselor for all the focus group participants and knew them on a personal basis. The faculty researcher, however, met the participants for the first time at their focus group interview, with the exception of one participant with whom she had an informal advising relationship. We believed, however, that our disparate relationships with the participants led to a balance in our analysis, because we were more cognizant of when the Project Director tended to “speak for” the participants because of his close relationship with them or when the faculty researcher tended to focus solely on their oral comments without consideration of how the participants’ experiences were reflected in their comments and interactions within the focus group.

With respect to reliability, Miles and Huberman (1994) pointed out that the researcher is likely to change the behavior of others by his or her presence. The issue of reliability, they maintained, is whether the process of data collection and interpretation, are consistent over time and across researchers and methods. While there is no doubt that the participants were influenced by our presence as researchers and also each other’s presence, we believe that the consistency of the comments across the six focus group interviews lends a measure of reliability to the information they provided.

In addition, our analysis showed that the factors the participants judged as useful in recruiting, retaining; and graduating them from the project bore a close relationship to the factors identified as helpful in other minority teacher training projects, thereby supporting both external construct and content validity for our findings. Finally, it should be noted that the data represent the experience of the participants over the five years of Project ESCALERA. Consequently, we were able to examine not only the factors in the process but also to see whether they had led to successful goal achievement for the students, and to an increase in the number of minority bilingual teachers and teacher aides in the surrounding community schools.

Results and Discussion

The results of the focus group interview analysis with respect to the research questions of this study will be combined with a discussion of how they compare to the results of other minority teacher training programs. We wish to give the reader an understanding of both the structural bases to have in place when creating or improving a program and the effects that a successful teacher training program can have on a community and the participating individuals. We will also now refer to the participants as scholars, to reflect how they were referred to by all Project personnel and also how they referred to themselves throughout the length of Project ESCALERA.

We discovered a number of factors in common across all six groups which the scholars identified as contributing to their success in achieving their goals and motivating them. We divided these factors into structural factors (those which pertained to the design of the program) and ancillary factors (those which pertained to the personal

experiences of the scholars both within and outside the program). We believe that it is important to recognize and discuss these ancillary factors as well because they affected not only the scholars but also their families, their communities, and the children they were either teaching or would be teaching in the near future. Professional success for these scholars was intimately connected with their personal success. We will discuss these two sets of factors separately.

Findings: Structural Factors

Our first research question asked about the factors that make a teacher training project successful from the students' point of view. The structural factors that the Project ESCALERA scholars identified as were important to their success in the program were (a) a centralized location for information and advising, (b) convenient class locations, (c) help with managing institutional paperwork, (d) a personal and caring supportive staff, (e) cohorts for study and peer support, (f) informational meetings, (g) mini-conferences, and (h) financial assistance. Each will be elaborated on below, with representative quotes from the focus group sessions.

A centralized location for information and advising

In support of the need for advisement for Hispanic teacher trainees, Diaz-Rico and Smith (1994) cited Monsivais' study of 156 Hispanic teachers in which 58% reported that inadequate and insufficient counseling from the university faculty was a barrier to successfully completing a teacher education program. Yopp and colleagues (1992) also noted that students in their survey repeatedly expressed the need for advising and feared that they would make mistakes in selecting their courses without adequate help. They add that, to ensure the success of minority students, "the services of academic counselors at the community college and the university are critical" (Yopp et al., 1992, p. 36).

The availability and quality of information and advising was also important to the ESCALERA scholars. They reported that the ESCALERA Project Office served their need for a centralization location for information about the project, their courses, and other academic information. They noted that they were always able to call either the director or the staff assistant and get their questions answered. One of the scholars commented, "We were going up and down, east and west, trying to find the classes that we need and who can offer it ...And Project ESCALERA gave us a time...[and], give us the place to take it, it was a great facilitator" (fg33). Another added, "[To go to] one location and get the answers that I needed was a marvelous thing. Usually you're running around in circles and everyone sends you...from one person to another" (fg5). This aspect of the project was particularly important for a significant number of the scholars applying to the local universities because generally counseling is available only for students already enrolled in their programs, not prospective students.

Convenient class locations

One of the major elements of the project design was to enable scholars to take classes in convenient locations close to their homes and schools. As Michael-Bandele (1993) noted, we need to consider a restructuring of teacher education programs for minority students so that classes are offered at times that people with daytime responsibilities can attend. In Project ESCALERA, all of the courses were located in

schools within the four school districts that were being served by the project. This element was important to the scholars also since most were employed in full- or part-time jobs during the day, many in the local school districts. As one scholar reported, “The positive thing...is...we can take classes all very close to our homes and so we don’t have to travel” (fg3). Another noted, “Classes were available in a reasonable distance from my house and work” (fg6).

Help with managing the institutional paperwork. It was very clear from the start of the project that some of the scholars were going to need help to successfully navigate the educational system in the US. Some scholars did not have university transcripts from their respective countries; and others had difficulty obtaining verification of their high school diplomas. The interface between the scholars and the state universities was often strained due to the institutions’ lack of understanding about educational systems outside the US that do not routinely provide the documents that US educational institutions deem necessary for admittance. Scholars educated outside the US often become overwhelmed trying to understand and obtain all the documents required for admittance. One scholar commented on the help that the Project Office provided: “It’s crazy for us to understand the system here.... Since I started [at ESCALERA], I know where I’m going to so I know for sure how to plan ahead of time and...it’s...great for me” (fg3). Another scholar pointed out the effect that not knowing the educational system has on first generation students: “I’m the first generation. Many of our students don’t go on because they just don’t understand the system. There’s nobody there to help them. Just not knowing how the system works keeps some of our kids out of it” (fg6).

The Project Office played a critical role in these instances, contacting people in various offices at the university (some of whom were Project ESCALERA Advisory Board members) and soliciting their help in getting the student through the paperwork requirements. The scholars characterized the Project Office as “a bridge between me and the colleges” (fg5).

Personal and caring supportive staff

Diaz-Rico and Smith (1994) noted the importance of a personal relationship between the students and the educational institution. When students have a contact person they can approach to assist with advising and other issues, their anxiety level is lowered and their efforts can be focused on their studies instead of on deciphering institutional rules and regulations. Gonzalez (1997) also found that “the presence of a caring and nurturing environment appears to be an important contributing force in keeping students focused on their mission. They claimed it inured them to some degree against unpleasant encounters, academic challenges, personal disappointments, and other problems” (p. 58). Indeed, lack of support or poor support is cited as one of the main reasons that minority students fail to remain in teacher education programs (Gordon, 1994).

For the scholars in Project ESCALERA, the availability of caring and concerned staff who would listen to their problems was also an important factor in keeping them motivated to continue with their classes. As one scholar pointed out, “Every time we need it, you [the Project Director] and Sandra [the Project secretary] will be there for us. Every problem that we have, you [are] always there for us even at home or on your

cellular phone” (fg3). Others added, “Students need support in a different way, to keep from being overwhelmed, to stay focused on the moment instead of the big, overwhelming picture” (fg2) and “To be positive and encouraging is important. One of the things that I see as very positive is that you try to encourage us every time that you can” (fg3).

Having someone who would just listen to their problems was a very important factor for the students. One scholar commented about a critical moment for her: “My most challenging moment was when my father passed away. Then I really messed up, but luckily teachers and Project ESCALERA helped me through it and kept me focused so I could continue” (fg2). The Project Office was clearly a place that the scholars found to be comfortable and welcoming. Having one centralized location with people willing to listen and care was very important to the students. In addition, the Project Office met the needs of many of the scholars who were both older and first-generation college attendees. As Gonzalez noted in the results of his six program survey, students want services that address their personal as well as their academic needs (1997). He also added that “such programs appear to be especially well suited to the needs of older students and first-generation college attendees whose families have little or no prior experience with college life” (1997, p. 56). This situation was the case with many of the ESCALERA scholars.

Garcia and Baptiste (1990-91) commented that minority students often face an unwelcoming climate on college campuses. Aware of this issue, there was a conscious attempt by ESCALERA staff to provide a helpful and nurturing and caring climate for the scholars. The Project Director spoke Spanish, as did his staff assistant, who was Hispanic. Also, the main campus location of Project ESCALERA had a high percentage of Hispanic students and staff.

Cohorts for study and peer support

Cooper and McCabe noted that “it is most important for the students to have an identified peer group” (1999, p. 46) and Michael-Bandele (1993) added that students need a social support system that nurtures and motivates them. Yopp and colleagues (1992) also found that peer support groups became more valuable to students as they progressed in the program. ESCALERA scholars echoed these findings as they commented about their own cohort group membership. They generally characterized the cohorts as “one of the elements that will really help [them] to continue [on] and get their goal” (fg6). They had strong personal feelings about their particular cohort group. As one scholar explained, “It’s like a family. You really want to learn because everybody is helping each other. It’s hard sometimes because...English is my second language. But there were other people there that are in my same situation and everybody helped” (fg2). Another agreed, adding, “We help each other and we encourage each other also to succeed and that is something that I like very much. It’s a good environment and it encourages us to continue studying” (fg3).

Informational meeting

One of the means by which information about financial aid, course offerings, and other project-related news was disseminated to the scholars was through regular informational meetings. The Project Director also used this opportunity to share some of

the stories of scholars who had overcome difficulties during their course of studies, and to encourage the scholars to persevere. The scholars' comments verified that these meetings provided them with helpful advice and motivated them to continue their efforts. One scholar stated, "One of the things I see very positive...[is] telling us what is happening in the program or what things we need to do...,what classes are going to be the next ones" (fg3) and another remarked, "We always came [away] with some...feedback, some information, [and] more excited about it [the project]" (fg2).

Mini-conferences

During the fourth and fifth year of the project, mini-conferences were held for the scholars. The mini-conferences offered the scholars the opportunity to learn about new material and new ideas from regional and national experts in the bilingual education field. The purpose of the mini-conferences was also to motivate the scholars and impress upon them their importance as professionals in the bilingual teaching field. Both mini-conferences were highly attended. One scholar observed that, "A lot of information has been given not only at the time or level that we're studying, but to further our education and to continue on as professionals" (fg5).

Financial assistance

Kennedy (1991) noted that simply offering financial aid will not solve the problem of underrepresentation of minorities in the teaching profession, but without it there will not be any chance to correct the imbalance. Garcia and Baptiste pointed out that "students from low socioeconomic status depend greatly (if not entirely) on financial aid to pursue degrees in higher education" (1990-91, p. 17). This was evidenced in the study by Yopp and colleagues (1992) and also in our study. ESCALERA scholars commented about the importance of financial aid in their decision to return to school. As one scholar noted, "I'm a single mom and my parents live with me. Without the money, I couldn't make it" (fg3). Another added, "I was thinking of spending the money for my kids rather than going back to school until I hear[d] about ESCALERA...[which] made it so I was able to take classes" (fg3). For some, financial assistance was the key to accomplishing a lifelong goal: "I've always wanted to be a bilingual elementary teacher. When financially I couldn't afford to have it, it was too upsetting that I couldn't accomplish my goal" (fg2).

Findings: Ancillary Factors

Our second research question concerned the ways in which a teacher training project affects students' personal lives. In the analysis of the data, we discovered that the ESCALERA scholars also credited a number of non-structural factors with not only helping them to achieve professional success, but helping them achieve personal success as well. For these scholars, their personal success and confidence in their abilities seemed to be linked together in these ancillary factors which were (a) an increase in self-esteem; (b) being a positive role model for students, family, and friends; and (c) the opportunity to have more influence on family, school, and community.

Increase in self esteem

One of the significant motivators that the scholars mentioned was the increase in self esteem that they experienced as a result of being in Project ESCALERA. By returning to school, they had earned the respect and admiration of family and friends, which increased their motivation to reach their goals. One scholar explained, "My family and I...were very proud of what I achieved" (fg6) and another mentioned, "[You are] more secure and confident in yourself...you can achieve whatever you want" (fg6). The prestige of the project also enhanced the prestige of its students. As one scholar said, "You know the program got a good reputation to the point that you know they say, 'Oh, ESCALERA, you know it's a trustworthy program.' It's got prestige" (fg5).

This increase in self esteem may be due to their view of teaching as a high prestige profession. In his survey of minority students in six teacher training programs, Gonzalez (1997) found that "in contrast to the generalized view of teaching as a low prestige profession, many of the students in these programs expressed a different attitude. Often, and with considerable conviction, the minority students said they regarded teaching as an honorable profession" (Gonzalez, 1997, p. 62).

Being a positive role model for students, family, and friends

An important ancillary factor that the scholars mentioned was the effect that they had on young Hispanic students struggling with whether to remain in or return to school. Some scholars mentioned being role models to their young students: "For girls, especially...working with Latinas, young girls, the role model that we provide for our students is very, very powerful" (fg6) and "Now that I am a teacher, every time I enter the classroom, I have the opportunity to share part of me with my students as to how beautiful education is and the opportunity they have to acquire it. I think especially for the bilingual children. Sometimes they have that sense maybe it isn't for them" (fg5). Students also mentioned the effect on their family members: "It's also an incentive for my family, mainly for my nephews and nieces. They see that their older aunt is still in school so that there's not an end to studying. My younger sister also is continuing studying because she sees me and it's an incentive not only for myself but for my whole family" (fg5) and "Since I went back to school, my younger [son], he quit his job, he went back to school" (fg6).

The desire to provide guidance and to serve as role models for Hispanic students was also found by Mullen (1997) in her study of Hispanic preservice teachers. She noted that these students were involved in "apprenticeship forms of guidance" (p. 13) as a way to support and strengthen their communities.

Being part of a bilingual teacher training project also gave the ESCALERA scholars the ability to help high school students understand the US educational system. One of the scholars commented on mentoring students to stay in school and prepare for attending college: "[I'm] mentoring my nephews and nieces...telling them 'look, you guys can do this. But you need to be savvy about this kind of stuff because that's how the successful kids get through four and five years of college'" (fg6).

The opportunity to have more influence on family, school, and community

One of the most important aspects of Project ESCALERA was to train and retain bilingual teachers who would, hopefully, remain in the area and teach in one of the four local school districts. There were, however, no requirements that the graduates of the project do so. Nevertheless, most scholars indicated that they intended to remain in their community and return to teaching the students in the area schools. Many of them discussed their responsibility to their family and community as a result of being in the teacher training project. One scholar commented, "How can I disregard this opportunity? Everything is given to me and...they are giving me the opportunity to achieve my dream since I was a teenager" (fg2). Another spoke about how being in the project had affected her view of herself: "It has helped my teaching [by] enhancing the way I feel about my own language, my own culture, my own capabilities as a person, as a woman. I see myself as an example. I've been maintaining my language and my culture through education and I always tell them that it's the best thing that they can do. Learn to become a whole person. When you lose part of your language, you lost part of your personality" (fg5). Similarly, Gonzalez (1997) found that many of the students in the six programs he surveyed "spoke of the responsibility associated with the teacher's role within minority families and communities" (p. 62).

The scholars also spoke of their role as advocates for the educational rights of Hispanic children and parents. One scholar spoke eloquently about how being in the project had prepared her to help in her community when she commented, "It showed me the rights for my students, what they can ask for, what they should have that they don't have. So, it made me aware of a lot of things and I really sometimes get really upset because I say these kids or these parents can fight more for their children's rights. And they don't fight because nobody tell them that they have those rights to fight for. We as a Hispanic or Mexican we are very passive parents and we say he's the teacher, he knows the best, but sometimes they don't say all the rights that they have....We as teachers should do more for these kids, especially in special education" (fg2). Scholars also mentioned the need to instill a sense of self-identity and cultural pride in Hispanic children. As one scholar explained, "During Thanksgiving, our [Hispanic] kids were the Indians, of course. [My kids asked] why do we have to be the Indians sitting on the floor? It was such an emotional thing for them that they were very dejected. I said why are you walking like that, you come from Mayans, and Aztec Kings. You're somebody important. Think of what your culture is" (fg5).

Michael-Bandele (1993) noted that well-prepared minority teachers "provide students with a positive example of the teacher profession and encourage them, based on their own positive learning experiences, to consider pursuing the profession" (p. 15). Similarly the ESCALERA scholars indicated that the pursuit of a teaching degree not only allowed them to enter the teaching profession, but also to be taken more seriously in their community and to have a larger impact on their community. In essence, the degree gave them the voice that they had been previously denied. As one scholar noted, "I've been involved in the community almost all my life and I have been able to learn a lot that I've been able to share with the community. But because I didn't have the degree before, they viewed me as a person without the [knowledge]. Now, with the degree, is a totally

different thing. I can tell them the same thing I told them before the degree, but because of the degree, it makes a difference” (fg5).

Implications and Conclusion

The research questions that guided this study asked what factors make a minority bilingual teacher training project successful from the students’ point of view, and how it affected their personal lives. Through the voices of the ESCALERA scholars, structural factors in a teacher training project that had a positive effect on helping minority bilingual students remain in and successfully complete their educational programs were identified. This study also revealed ancillary factors that developed outside the structure of the project, but were equally important to the scholars and motivated them to continue pursuing their goals. Our findings support Gonzalez’ suggestions that "a new type of project design is emerging for recruiting and retaining minority students in the teaching profession...based on a more holistic view of minority students...which recognizes the personal as well as the academic dimensions...[and] the importance of a supportive and nurturing environment" (1997, p. 63).

We can draw important educational implications from this study about both the future design of minority and bilingual teacher training projects and the recruitment of students to those projects. When students have a centralized location for information and advising, convenient class locations, a personal and caring supportive staff, and cohorts for study and peer support, they are able to achieve academically. Projects that provide help with managing institutional paperwork, informational meetings and conferences, and financial assistance allow students to manage their lives as students, employees, and caregivers more successfully.

Another equally important implication comes from the fact that the majority of Project ESCALERA scholars were non-traditional; that is, they were returning to school or experiencing their first opportunity to pursue a college education and career. They exhibited a willingness to sacrifice and reprioritize their lives for their studies and they also had a strong sense of responsibility for working in their communities. Similarly, Birrell, Allred, and Butler (1999) noted that nontraditional students often make great emotional, personal, and financial sacrifices to pursue their educational goals and are very committed to their learning and to their goals. Therefore, focusing recruitment efforts on older, non-traditional, and female Hispanic students, like those in Project ESCALERA, may produce a significant number of new minority bilingual teachers who have the cultural and linguistic background to provide Hispanic students with the high quality education to which they are entitled. The benefit to the community brought about by the ancillary factors such as those we found in our study should not be overlooked. In addition to producing qualified teachers and teacher aides, ancillary factors can influence students to become influential role models and powerful advocates for the Hispanic community.

The findings of this study contribute to a theoretical foundation for understanding the design and the functioning of minority and bilingual teacher training projects, as well as their evaluation. Combined with the findings of other similar studies, a theoretical

framework should be designed to help researchers understand and derive meaning from the interactions of students in minority and bilingual teacher training projects.

Because of the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of our nation's schools, the need to identify, recruit, and retain bilingual teachers, especially minority bilingual teachers, will continue. Ongoing research into the factors that promote the successful recruiting and retention of these teachers is needed. This study represents a successful model that should be replicated in future investigations of teacher training projects. Other methodologies such as surveys, individual interviews, and participant observations of students from entering to exiting these projects can provide richer and more longitudinal data to validate and extend the findings of the studies that have been done thus far. Also, we cannot assume that lack of success is due to the absence of the factors that have accompanied success for some students. Therefore, research is also needed on factors that prevent students from remaining and/or succeeding in minority and bilingual teacher training projects.

Research into the factors that help minority and bilingual students create personal and professional success for themselves has far-reaching implications. As Birrell and colleagues so aptly pointed out, "By attending more thoughtfully to the development of the whole person during teacher education, we may contribute more fully to the depth and value of ordinary living in the mind, heart, and soul of the people we teach, and if we take seriously the influence that teachers have on their students as role models, then we contribute more fully to the development of the whole student as well, in particular, Hispanic students" (1999, p. 42).

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Endnotes

- 1 Students in Project ESCALERA were referred to as scholars by administrators, instructors, Board members, and the students themselves. The decision to refer to the students as scholars was indicative of the high expectations for them. This was manifested in various ways throughout the duration of the project; for example, in the mini-conferences held exclusively for the scholars that drew important speakers such as James Crawford, and in the volunteer hours required of the scholars, in which they could share the expertise they were developing.
- 2 While we recognize the fact that not all Hispanic students are bilingual, it is still this population of students who are the largest pool of candidates for bilingual teacher training programs.
- 3 Coding of the focus group participants' quotes refers to the number of the focus group. For example, fg3 refers to the transcript of Focus Group 3.