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Angie Zapata PhD
University of Missouri

Mary Adu-Gyamfi, PhD
University of Missouri

Adrianna González Ybarra
University of Missouri

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Cover Page Footnote

Footnote 1: By “we” we include the voices and experiences of each of the ECE and university partners participating in the collaborative. Footnote 2: By “just right” Tamara refers to decodable or leveled readers that are accessible to the individual reader.

“I Want to Say the Right Thing”: Developing Translingual Literacy Practices Through Early Care Educator and University Researcher Partnerships

Angie Zapata, Mary Adu-Gyamfi, and Adrianna González Ybarra

A collaborative inquiry model of teacher learning offers a distinct departure from common top-down models of early care education teacher development. In the context of the teacher and researcher collaborative inquiry model presented in this paper, we encountered an intergenerational collective of early care educators (ECEs) and university partners as they mentored one another through classroom critical encounters with translingual picturebooks and took turns holding and loving their babies during afterschool gatherings. The learning was enlivened not only by talk, laughter, food, and reflections of instruction, but also was animated by the vibrant colors of the translingual picturebooks that flooded the room and served as essential socio-political art to read, discuss, and inform teaching. Entering this space of professional learning committed to collaborative inquiry and equity-focused instruction often elicited astonishment from those accustomed to tidy rows of teachers silently taking notes as a one-time speaker read from slides. At first glance, you might have been unsure who the “leader” or “expert” was, because everyone was participating in the discussion.

As predominantly White ECE teachers and predominantly Black and Brown university researchers, we turned to collaborative inquiry as an innovative and collaborative model of professional learning. In this essay, we feature the experience of Tamara, a White, middle-class teacher (all names are pseudonyms) in a midwestern rural suburban early childhood classroom. Nagasawa and colleagues (2023) note that “by humanizing these issues, our aim is to show that possibilities exist, even with difficulties and within complexities” (p. 170). By featuring Tamara’s experience to highlight the critical components of a collaborative inquiry model, we locate ECE professional development within the historical systems and socio-political issues shaping early care education and highlight how White, female teachers (the predominant ECE workforce demographic in the US) experience and take up professional learning that centers equity in racially, linguistically, and ethnically (RLE) complex classrooms. By identifying the critical components of a collaborative inquiry model in this way, we also offer direct implications for ECE learning, research, and practice.

TURNING TO TEACHER-RESEARCHER PARTNERSHIPS IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

A history of inequities for RLE-diverse children and their families persists in early care education settings. As research has documented, early childhood school policies and initiatives have firmly entrenched systems and structures that protect White interests and perpetuate racism and inequities as the status quo (Adair, 2014; Nxumalo & Adair, 2019). As Souto-Manning (2021) explains, “The dysfunction of early schooling is illustrated by its strong attachment to ‘the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline’ (Harris, 1993, p. 1714), against which growth, development, and learning are scaled and rated” (p. 10). Indeed, RLE children and their families endure insidious harm in schools, which too often view RLE students through a deficit lens and treat them in prejudicial ways. By devaluing the linguistic and cultural practices of RLE communities, we fail to give due justice to the learning capacities and promising futures of RLE children and their families (Zapata, 2020; Bengochea et al., 2018; Osorio, 2018). To begin to address these disparities, we turn to ECE development that brings awareness of these issues through a model of collaborative professional learning that values the humanistic interactions that young RLE children and their families similarly deserve to experience in schools.

The early care education schooling disparities students and educators encounter are exacerbated by the current US socio-political landscape. Research highlights the additional physical and psychological labor endured by ECEs during the pandemic as they worked to keep young children safe and learning in their classrooms (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2022). ECEs find themselves further constrained by one-size-fits-all approaches to language and literacy curriculum and instruction that were initiated in response to concerns of “learning loss” after the pandemic (Bomer, 2021). They are similarly negotiating political responses (e.g., book bans, fear of critical race theory in curriculum, anti-LGTBQ+ initiatives) to global racial reckoning movements that center RLE equity efforts as state legislators propose bills and instantiate “back to basics” mandates (Kissel, 2023). In the midst of these difficult times, ECEs seek opportunities for professional learning, guidance, and community, but the current professionalization of ECEs in many midwestern states (e.g., adopted curriculum trainings, narrow interpretations of data) rigidly positions ECEs as curriculum puppets rather than as responsive curriculum designers and fails to address the unique needs and assets of the profession in humanizing and equity-focused ways.

In response to these difficult working conditions for ECEs in one midwestern state, we reconceptualize relationships among ECEs and university partners (e.g., Coburn et al., 2013; Yelland & Franz Bentley, 2017) as a pathway for ECE development. We embrace the “pandemic as a portal” (Souto-Manning, 2021, p. 3) to reimagine what is possible for ECE professionalization through a teacher and researcher collaborative inquiry collective. We define our collective by our commitment to receive one another as critical social educators (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2021), each in a different place in our teaching journeys. We recognize there is more expertise distributed in communities than in any one person—however educated or schooled an individual may be (Souto-Manning, 2021)—and we engage one another as creative intellectuals and leaders. We ground our work in relationship- and strengths-based approaches as a way to resist harmful ECE conditions for teachers, children, and their families in schools. We value equity and humanizing ways of interaction and professionalization that view ECEs as capable, whole beings who are worthy of sustained care (Falchi & Medellin-Paz, 2023).

METHODS OF DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

We¹ characterize the research of the collaborative inquiry model as a Social Design-Based Experiment (SDBE) (Gutiérrez, 2018; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016), wherein teachers and university partners collaborate to examine and design instruction to address inequities in early childhood schooling. As Gutiérrez (2018) explains,

Animated by commitments that aim to make a possible, sustainable, and dignified life for all humans, scholars who engage in SDBEs seek to create and study change in partnership with a range of communities in which new practices and futures are codesigned... As educational experiments, like other design experiments, social design experiments are grounded in empirically derived hypotheses about learning and human development but are iterated, implemented, and continuously reflected upon, refined, and repaired over the course of the work; in other words, these are theoretical and experientially informed models of the future that are codesigned, studied, and corevised in the present. (p. 90)

Using a qualitative inquiry process designed to resist social inequality afforded in-the-moment refinements to the collaborative model. For example, in response to the ECEs’ narratives of their struggles during a difficult socio-political climate, we refined the model to include focused check-ins on well-being before each meeting. SDBE recognizes this unexpected revision as a promising finding, given that these revisions typically emerge in response to problem-solving in a particular context. In other

1 By “we” we include the voices and experiences of each of the ECEs and university partners participating in the collaborative.

words, using SBDE demands that we be responsive to our context and partners and holds us accountable to the efficacy of our model through ongoing analysis of each teacher meeting. Adding well-being check-ins to the model allowed us to acknowledge ECE burnout, sustain fidelity to the reality of the early care education context at the time, build community through shared vulnerabilities, and nurture teacher leadership capacity and agency. We also noted that through this honoring of one another's well-being, our work together transitioned over time to a familiar professional space that included more honest and vulnerable reflections of practice.

Centering Translingual Literacies Through Teacher-Researcher Collaborative Inquiry

A previously established relationship between Angie and one of the ECE partners (Zapata, 2022; Zapata & Kleekamp, 2022) served as a catalyst for this collective, which was focused on developing understanding of translingual literacies through picture book literacy instruction. Although the focus of this paper is on the collaborative inquiry model itself and not on the translingual literacies learning among ECE and researchers, it is important to understand translingual literacies in order to appreciate how the discussions came to be.

The concept of translingual literacies highlights the ways people shuttle across languages and language varieties, utilize hybrid language practices, and are multilingual (Canagarajah, 2013; Zapata, 2020). Together, we explored the scholarship on translingual literacies, given its focus on both the multilingual *and* multimodal ways of making meaning, which is a well-documented phenomenon among RLE students and their families. Growing awareness and instruction that attends to the vastness of RLE students' linguistic and broader multimodal resources can cultivate a more inclusive and equitable space where RLE children can thrive (Zapata & Laman, 2023; Linares, 2022; Machado & Hartman, 2020). Specifically, we turned to translingual picturebooks, literature that offers written and illustrated portrayals of bi/multilingual and linguistically diverse communities' everyday lives, as an important resource for teaching.

Generous funding from the Foundation of Child Development (FCD) afforded the ECE extensive access to classroom libraries of translingual picturebooks and time for university partners to facilitate gatherings over two years. Included in our group of 12 partners was Angie Zapata, a Latina university associate research professor, two graduate research assistants (at the time of study)—Mary, who identifies as a cis White female, and Adrianna, who identifies as a third-generation Chicana/Latina—and two Black female preservice teachers. Participating ECEs included five early career and experienced classroom teachers who identified predominantly as White, English-dominant female teachers, and a White male librarian. The school setting has significantly shifted over the past five years. Many of our partners noted how their classrooms have gone from having no students identified as emergent bilingual learners to including a diverse representation of students identified as multilingual and refugee students from countries like Cambodia and Afghanistan.

As a group, we gathered a total of 13 times across both virtual and face-to-face settings. Our 90-minute meetings typically included a well-being check-in followed by sharing translingual picture book titles and reflections on classroom instruction. Angie would begin with the check-ins, which often elicited conversations about students, personal life updates of joys and challenges, or concerns about developing educational policy and rhetoric in state politics. She would present an agenda, followed by discussion led collectively by Angie and the educators, the modeling of translingual picturebooks by Angie, and reflections from teachers engaged with the translingual picturebooks in their classrooms. During these meetings, other university partners also shared their thoughts and experiences. To provide a more intensive encounter focused on curriculum planning with translingual picturebooks, the collective also met for two, three-hour gatherings at the local university.

The analysis presented here draws from observation video data and transcripts of meetings from both year one and year two, as well as 13 field notes and two analytic memos to document Tamara's experience with the collective, for a total of 575 pages of data for analysis. We utilized an iterative process of inductive analysis (Saldaña, 2021) to identify three critical components of an ECE and university partner collaborative inquiry model: the role of ECE partners as mentors and supporters, translingual picturebooks as tools, and the role of university partners as facilitators. Certainly, we see these as interactive and intersecting themes, but present them here as distinct for readers' ease and clarity.

FINDINGS: LEARNING FROM TAMARA

Tamara is a sixth-year second-grade teacher and continues to teach in the same midwestern rural suburban school where she began her career. Within the collective, Tamara is recognized as an early career teacher and first-time mother. It is important to note that eight years earlier, Tamara was a student in Angie's undergraduate reading methods course at the local university, and her participation in the group built upon their relationship. Tamara identifies as a White, monolingual woman who wants to bring more equity-focused practices to her teaching. During the course of her participation, we observed Tamara's growing readiness to be vulnerable, to ask questions, and to position herself as a learner. For example, it was not uncommon to hear Tamara stop the conversation, and ask, "Okay, but what do I do?" This learning disposition and attitude toward her role within the collaboration is illustrated in the themes below. We highlight Tamara's qualities through the presentation of all three themes as we believe they played a significant role in her own and others' experience with the collaborative inquiry model.

Role of ECE Partners: Mentorship and Support

As the first critical component of the collaborative inquiry model identified in the analysis, we demonstrate how ECEs interacted with each other in two specific ways. We noted complex moments of growth and tension in which *mentoring and supporting* one another became standard practice as they shared their professional and personal challenges while learning about and sharing translingual picturebooks. We focus first on how ECEs engaged in snowballing, a dynamic in which one question or statement builds upon another, providing opportunities for teachers to continue building and expanding upon previous comments. The second pattern of teacher-peer interaction focuses on how the ECE received one another as colleagues and unburdened themselves of uncertainties and fears about equity-focused picture book instruction during an oppressive socio-political education climate.

Snowballing as mentoring

Snowballing discussions about translingual picturebook instruction repeatedly occurred during our collaborative meetings. Engaging in a reflective practice in this layered way produced a cumulative effect, allowing teachers to build upon one another's stories, perspectives, and thoughts in an open and continuous dialogue. For example, Tamara sought advice and mentorship from the teachers regarding students' book choices by explaining first that, in her classroom, students read their "just-right books" (i.e., books that are easily accessible to that particular reader) during a specific reading time during the day. While she acknowledged having been told by others to do things this way, she questioned the practice based on our conversation regarding students' free choice of books to read, including translingual picturebooks, as a more inclusive practice. In the data example that follows, note how Tamara launched the snowball effect with a question and how partners layered their offerings one after the other.

Tamara asked, "Do I need to go over there and make sure they have a "just-right" book...[or] should I give them opportunities to have whatever book they are drawn to?" Wendy, an ECE partner, then asked her, "What do you think?" Tamara responded that before this day, she would have said the students

needed to be reading “just right” books but then stated that her thinking had changed. She mentioned a statement Jacob, a male librarian partner, had made earlier about allowing student choice, suggesting that if a student were drawn to something, teachers should encourage it. Angie agreed, adding that it is a “both/and” situation: students need texts and time to build their decoding and fluency skills in addition to opportunities for self-selection as a way to encourage their “identity as a reader” and their “pleasure” in reading.

After hearing different perspectives from her ECE partners, Tamara said that she would “be making some changes.” Jacob affirmed that he had faced the same challenge with his fourth-grade students and explained that “it’s a balance.” Speaking to his experiences as an educator of 13 years, he elaborated on a few ways to support students’ self-selection of books, including reading picturebooks and frequently rotating in new books that they could read together as a class. Jenna, another ECE partner, discussed how she used individual book boxes for her students, putting one book of her choice for them in their book box and giving the students some choice, too—calling it “Yours and Mine.” Wendy suggested Tamara could consider setting up her literacy stations differently next year to accommodate book box time. Dena, another ECE partner, added that it could be timed, stating that students “must read” a teacher-selected book for a certain amount of time, then have their own choice for the rest of the time. As her partners made suggestions, Tamara nodded her head in agreement and shared that she would like to have two “must-reads” and make room for students’ readings choices, as well.

In this snowballing dialogue, we noted how Tamara’s uncertainty and questions about students’ text selection invited everyone in the room into the discussion. Her question served as a catalyst for a long list of ideas to consider for her practice and an opportunity for more seasoned teachers to similarly reflect on their practice.

Receiving uncertainties and fears

In the next illustrative data sample, we highlight Tamara’s willingness to unburden herself and share the tensions and challenges she experienced after selecting the children’s book, *Something Happened in Our Town* (Celano et al., 2018). It tells the story of two children, one White and one Black, and illustrates how they deal with a police shooting of a Black man in their community. Tamara explained that she ordered *Something Happened in Our Town* for her classroom and read through it on her own, but was unsure about reading it in her classroom.

As she reflected on her discomfort about sharing this picture book portrayal of racial injustice from a child’s perspective, she expressed concern over the “different perspectives of different families” in her class, specifically noting the racist comments of one student in the classroom. Tamara stated that she was simultaneously “worried” and “not worried” about what this student might say and how this student’s family might respond. Listening, Angie enthusiastically mentioned wanting to “open up a space about what it’s like to share texts,” like this picture book, which offers anti-racist perspectives, with students. The ECEs and university partners made space for Tamara to express her uncertainties where she revealed how she found planning for a read-aloud with this picture book to be a bit “nerve-racking” because “I want to say the right thing.” Angie responded with a question, “And what is that right thing?” Tamara quickly answered, somewhat nervously, “I don’t know right now.” Other ECEs contributed their personal responses to Tara to both affirm and reconcile her fears.

Tamara articulated her uncertainties and fears about difficult literature topics and looked to the ECEs for support. Tamara perceived introducing this picture book as a risk for both her and her students because of her own insecurity about saying “the right thing.” By creating space to receive Tamara’s uncertainties, the collective not only supported a partner’s process of negotiation, but encouraged her to take time to familiarize herself with a book before sharing it with children. These interactions served

as an important foundation while the collective began to hone in on translingual picturebooks more closely.

Translingual Picturebooks as a Tool for Learning

The second critical component of the collaborative inquiry model, translingual picturebooks, served as an important tool for discussion as the ECEs sought to connect curricular materials to children's lives, languages, and literacies. In this section, we highlight *Bright Star*, a picture book by Yuyi Morales (2021). It blends Spanish and English, and centers the topic of immigration through a story about animal migration. The book includes illustrations of the US-Mexico border wall to depict the borderland, animal life, flora and fauna and the disruption of a fawn's migration.

At our second meeting in our first year as a collective, we engaged in a discussion about selection processes and approaches to translingual picture book read-alouds, including *Bright Star*. It offered an important illustrated and print narrative for questions and conversation about the American and Mexican socio-political context.

Tamara shared how the students in her classroom responded to the picture book. She explained that they recognized a connection between the illustrations of the animals and of the children by noting that the children's clothing had images of the animals represented in the book. But they did not make the link that both of them were migrants. The children also focused closely on the need to breathe slowly when you're afraid, connecting this practice to familiar Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons that they had participated in. Sharing the book without explanation did not generate discussion of the deeper theme of immigration or of the translingual features, such as the Spanish in the text:

Tamara: [The students] didn't bring up anything about immigration, the wall, the border. The Spanish [in the text] didn't ring any bells for them. And so, I was wondering, I knew that that was like a [translingual] connection that the book had. And so, like, should I initiate that and bring it up? Or should I just follow their lead?

Angie: Can you talk a little more about how that felt? The negotiation?

Tamara: I ended up just, like, going with their conversation and not bringing it up. But we did watch the video of her [the author] reading it. And they were really excited to do that. But yeah, we didn't bring up any conversation about the social context of it. But they still really enjoyed it.

In sharing *Bright Star* with her students, Tamara was confronted with the challenge of whether or not to name the translingual features and the illustrated geographical and social context of the book with her students. The absence of any discussion of the translingual features of the text made her question whether she should "initiate that and bring it up" or "just follow their lead." Tamara explained that her purpose in reading the book was to "see what they discovered from it." She said she "didn't want to make it a social conversation ... if that's not where they took it." Clearly, the book brought up specific conversations and questions about instruction that the collective and in this case, Tamara, had not considered at first.

Through this teaching reflection, Tamara acknowledged the importance of introducing global topics to students rather than working from the assumption that because they do not have "prior existing knowledge," students do not need to engage in the themes presented in translingual picturebooks. After discussion with the collective, Tamara stated that she wanted to do "it the right way," but at that moment, she was not ready.

The salience of having materials like translingual picturebooks to mediate ECE and partner reflections is noteworthy. Translingual picturebooks provided opportunities for partners to reflect on teaching practices that underestimated children's capacity for engaging in global socio-political issues and confronting complex equity issues, such as immigration. Without materials like translingual picturebooks shared in the context of a collaborative inquiry, the discussion, reflection, and development of more equity-focused instruction would not have been possible.

Role of University Partners as Facilitators

The final critical component of the collaborative inquiry model illuminates the role of university partners as facilitators who offer "nudges" towards reflection. In this context of a reciprocal relationship of learning, university partners amplified voices of Color and critical translingual perspectives as a model for the ECE partners. Angie, in particular, did this in various ways, including sharing her personal schooling and life experiences as a bilingual Latina and ECE. Angie also posed questions and provided resources centered in critical language and literacy frameworks. In this final theme, we focus on how Angie provided "nudges" through comments and questions, and encouraged Tamara to reflect on her ideological beliefs and the ways they shaped her teaching practices.

For example, we noted how Angie encouraged Tamara to examine her pedagogical decision-making by nudging her to talk more about how she felt about her students' initial responses to *Bright Star*. Tamara's response revealed the tension she felt between steering the direction of the conversation or "seeing what they took out of it." After this facilitated discussion with the university partner and her final realization that she was "not ready," Tamara's confidence grew, and she made careful preparation of translingual read-alouds. In her follow-up reading of *Bright Star* as a whole-class read-aloud, Tamara provided more information to her students about the socio-political and geographical features of the book. Although she still expressed apprehension about discussing the translingual features, it was clear that her uncertainties were not about the content and preparation, but about how to support discussion of such a complex and important topic.

The university partner's facilitation further mediated the ECE partners' engagement with translingual picturebooks in complex and encouraging ways. In this second illustrative data sample at a teacher inquiry meeting later in the second year, Tamara shared a book from her collection entitled *Wishes*, by Muon Thi Van (2021). Tamara said she found this title by using a search for "diverse literature books 2022" on various literature search engines, and then learned more about the author. These were skills she developed through her work with the collective and which reflected her growing understanding of how to select authentic representations of translingualism in picturebooks.

Tamara asked how she should approach a class reading of *Wishes*, which centered on a Vietnamese family's powerful immigration story by boat. She was hesitant and uncertain, expressing distress about how to begin. Angie encouraged her to "work through the discomfort." In this way, Angie not only nudged Tamara forward, but affirmed that she was capable of engaging with the picture book with intentionality and with care. Speaking to Tamara's concern about how to engage the themes of immigration in the book, Angie encouraged her and the other teachers to "make sure we are not contributing [to] narratives that all immigrants go through that [the same experience]" and emphasized the need for "robust and nuanced collections" of immigration stories for children.

Tamara reflected on these comments, thinking about ways she could pair *Bright Star* with *Wishes* to contextualize stories of immigration and disrupt stories that might perpetuate stereotypes. In her concluding thoughts, she reminded herself to "slow down" and not rush the process of selecting and sharing translingual picturebooks. Like Tamara, the ECE partners in this collaborative inquiry model responded well to university partners' facilitation of discussions as nudges that cultivated a habit of reflective practice in the collaborative inquiry experience.

DISCUSSION

Together, these findings illuminate *relationships* as essential to ECE learning that centers equity and inclusivity in schools, particularly when located within an ECE and university model of professional development. The analysis highlights how ECEs and university researchers nurtured partnerships of mutual respect through the following: relationships among ECEs, relationships to materials, and relationships with university partners.

Relationships among ECE partners can be characterized as relationships of inquiry, trust, and vulnerability, as demonstrated in the data. The snowballing dialogue and mentoring unfolded in the contexts of the relationships and the sense of community they had cultivated over time through their participation in the model. ECEs nurtured their community of trust as they listened and engaged in a non-hierarchical and non-judgmental conversation that affirmed, mentored, and challenged one another in their teaching practices. This later served as a foundation for developing their translingual picture book instruction. Within these relationships of support and trust, Tamara was able to be vulnerable and reveal her fears around literature instruction about equity and anti-racism, which in turn set an important precedent for other partners to do the same.

The relationships the partners developed to curricular materials, specifically translingual picturebooks, were essential to the development of practice and to discussions about equity. For example, Tamara repeatedly reflected on her own picture book instruction and often voiced her thoughts within the group. Specifically, she talked about her teaching of *Bright Star* and later recognized *Wishes* as a helpful companion book to elicit discussion about translingualism and immigration, and she spoke about the ways the picturebooks provided an opening to connect to her students' lives. Tamara's questions about translingual picturebooks often ignited an opportunity for other ECEs to mentor her and reflect on their own teaching practices and teaching ideologies. Translingual picturebooks were a tool that Tamara and her partners could grapple with as both educators and learners.

The relationships the ECEs developed with the university partners are also noteworthy. It was evident that experiencing professional development as a partnership mattered, particularly among a collective of bi/multiracial and bi/multilingual partners working with White women and a White man towards equity and inclusivity in the classroom. Angie's facilitation of resources, questions, and her sharing of personal experiences encouraged Tamara to develop habits of reflection and planned translingual picture book instruction, along with the pairing of picturebooks in ways that resisted stereotyping. We believe it is significant that voices of Color were in a relationship of collaborative inquiry with White ECEs, and thus, we encourage more research in this area.

This analysis of the critical components of an ECE and university partner model of teacher learning has implications for future research on equity-focused ECE professional development. The use of SBDE as a method demanded that we consider the local context and humanize the partners and their needs rather than install an experiment without consideration of ECE capacity and aptitudes as educators.

Attending to ECE well-being and learning through relationships were central to the success of the work. In practice, we found that ECE development must consider the immense pressure educators of young children carry as they attempt to reconcile the complexities and burden of inequitable schooling experiences for their students and their families. When supporting ECE professional development, we must collaborate and, as Falchi and Medellín-Paz (2023) say, "we make the road to humanize professional relationships by walking together" (pp. 131-138). Holding up and supporting ECEs can occur through collaborations focused on uncovering, questioning, and resisting unequal systems of power and privilege that many ECEs experience themselves. If we desire to transform inequity in

schools, we must approach ECE teacher development in ways that humanize and receive ECEs as capable and worthy of doing it. The benefits of an ECE and university partner model of ECE development are evident and deserve to be examined more widely.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Angie Zapata, associate professor of Language and Literacies Education at the University of Missouri, is a longtime teacher, teacher educator, and researcher. Through collaborative inquiry partnerships with practicing and in-service PK-12 teachers. Her research publications highlight classroom experiences featuring picture books with diverse racial, linguistic, and ethnic representation, and how/what translingual and trans-modal literacies are produced in these moments. Dr. Zapata's research is guided by her experiences growing up bilingual in Texas as a daughter of immigrant parents from Perú, and deep commitments to center anti-oppressive and justice-oriented language and literacies experiences in the classroom that nurture more inclusive schooling experiences for racialized bilingual/multilingual/multidialectal children and youth.



Mary Adu-Gyamfi, PhD, is an assistant professor of elementary education in Learning, Teaching, and Curriculum at the University of Missouri with specific interest in social studies education. Her research examines methods of racial literacies development among preservice and early career teachers as well as conversations around race/racism between teachers and elementary students.



Adrianna González Ybarra is a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri (MU) in the Language and Literacies for Social Transformation program. She is a Gus T. Ridgel and Sharon Adair Cinelli Fellow at MU. Adrianna's research interests include working with and alongside Black, Indigenous preservice teachers of color. Her educational training in Ethnic Studies guides her research practices and frameworks. Theoretically, she draws upon critical race theories and women of color feminisms, and methodologically, she utilizes decolonial methodologies and testimonio to story their lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and language and literacy practices.