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**The Moral Ethic of Cariño: A Culturally Competent Approach to Working  
with Immigrant-Origin Students**

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**Abstract**

This study provides a portrait of Ms. Grace, a veteran English teacher at a high school in Silicon Valley. I examine how Ms. Grace's perspectives on her immigrant-origin Latine students informed her teaching, highlighting the perspectives and practices that guided her pedagogy. Analysis of the data demonstrates the cyclical nature of how this teacher's perspectives on her students led her to embody a cultural competence that demonstrated a *moral ethic of cariño*. Through Ethnographic Case Study methodology, this study highlights the importance of cultivating cultural competencies in the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine youth, and the ways in which teachers enact and embody such competencies. I highlight how a *moral ethic of cariño*<sup>1</sup> emerges in both the teaching practices and in the perspectives toward her immigrant-origin students, demonstrating the critical role that teachers play in providing a more inclusive learning space for the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine youth.

**Keywords:** *culturally competent teaching, cariño, immigrant-origin students, inclusive literacy, critical literacy*

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<sup>1</sup> "Cariño," a term of endearment, can be translated as love, sensitivity, gentleness, affection. It is well recognized among Latine communities, and was an intentional choice by the author, a native Spanish speaker, as it transcends the notion of care in the English language. In this theoretical framing, Cariño is embodied as a practice in one's approach to teaching.

Petite and soft-spoken, Ms. Grace had an almost magical command of her classroom. Her immigrant-origin Latine students were eager to learn and attentive to her instructions. She understood their challenges and treated their lived experiences as assets in learning how to read and write in an additional language, in this case, English. From my observations, she nurtured students' talents and, as a result, created a mutually respectful relationship where her students valued what she had to say. Ms. Grace, in turn, was deeply interested in her students and viewed their struggles in a particular light. She noted, "*I feel like no matter what they've gone through, there's hope and that's something that you have to continue to tap into. You have to find that hope and you have to just help it grow.*" In this reflection, she illustrates the importance of teacher perspectives in shaping the cultural competencies needed to effectively teach linguistically and culturally diverse students. In this study, I ask the following question: How do teacher perspectives shape culturally competent pedagogical practices?

When teachers develop perspectives about students' cultural ways of being and language and literacy practices (whether from a deficit- or asset-based orientation), these perspectives inform teachers' cultural and pedagogical competencies in ways that make them either more or less responsive to the learning needs of immigrant-origin Latine youth (Lomelí, 2020). Culturally competent teachers enact inclusive instructional practices that treat immigrant-origin Latine youth as critical and capable readers, writers, and scholars with important ideas that contribute to learning. In this study, I define cultural competence as the amount of careful attention that the teacher pays to her immigrant-origin students' lived experiences and the degree to which this knowledge informs her teaching practices (Lomelí, 2023).

The idea that educators bear the ultimate responsibility for creating the conditions under which students thrive and succeed in the classroom has a long lineage stretching back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dewey, 1904, 1916, 1986). Thus, the adults around children have the responsibility to create the conditions for students to cultivate and nurture their intellectual abilities (Hidalgo & Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Valdés, 2001, 2004). Central to those conditions is how educators perceive their students. Historically, educators in the United States viewed marginalized communities through a deficit lens, using notions like ‘verbal deprivation’ (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966) and a ‘culture of poverty’ (Lewis, 1959) to explain why these students often struggled academically. Recently, educational scholars such as Rosa and Flores (2017) have critically interrogated the assumptions of traditional deficit views regarding linguistic facility and the relationship between low educational achievements. Latine scholars have long been interrogating critical societal factors that impede the learning outcomes of Latine students, and they have been calling for more equitable practices in school contexts (Moll et al., 1992; Trueba, 1998; Gutierrez, 2008; Valdes, 1997a, 2001, 2004). This stance is particularly important as it relates to immigrant-origin Latine students. Too often, such students are seen as “the problem” because they are acquiring English as an additional language (Orellana & Gutiérrez, 2006). Rosa and Flores (2017) note that discriminatory systems and structures have been present long before the existence of immigrant-origin pupils in schools and are central to the educational inequalities that marginalized people experience. In other words, immigrant-origin students are not “what needs to be fixed” in schools, nor are they “the problem”—instead the cultural competence of educators is what needs to be addressed.

These cultural competencies are enacted in pedagogical practices that are shaped by, in part, by teacher's perspectives (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). A critical

approach to cultural competencies specifically refers to how teachers structure learning opportunities in the classroom for a more democratic project of schooling in which immigrant-origin Latine students can fully embody their multiculturalism and multilingualism (Watson et al., 2016). The culturally competent teacher actively seeks out ways to learn more about the student, their community and their lived experiences, and incorporates this valuable knowledge into the curriculum, so students will be able to see themselves in and engage meaningfully with curricular content (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). Such understanding is then reflected in the teacher's pedagogical practices. In short, teachers are better positioned to serve immigrant-origin Latine students when they perceive them through an equity-driven lens, have developed cultural competence regarding their students' lived experiences in relation to the immigrant narrative, and leverage those assets and experiences within the context of schooling.

If we recognize the important role teacher perspectives play in shaping culturally competent practices, it then becomes increasingly important to better understand how the cultural competence of teachers is influenced by how they approach their students and how that then informs teaching practices. This is especially important in cases where students have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, our understanding of how best to support immigrant-origin Latine students in meaningfully engaging them in our classrooms is limited because little research has closely examined how teacher perspectives inform cultural competence and the resulting impact it might have on such students. This study aims to address this gap by using qualitative analysis and ethnographic case study to examine the cultural competencies of one exemplary teacher committed to working with immigrant-origin students in her English Language Arts (ELA) classes. I examined Ms. Grace's perspectives on her

immigrant-origin Latine students to better understand how such perspectives informed culturally competent teaching approaches.

### **Cultural Competence in the Teaching of Immigrant-Origin Students**

Fields outside of Education, such as counseling psychology and social work, have developed *cultural competence* frameworks to assist professionals in the caring professions in providing a more inclusive experience to their patients (Sue, 2001), yet very little work has been done around advancing cultural competence frameworks that support teachers in teaching immigrant-origin students. Though scholars concerned with multicultural education and cultural diversity in schools have urged us for decades to embrace culturally-relevant, culturally sustaining, and culturally responsive pedagogies in the authentic inclusion of culturally diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Gay, 2002; Muhammad, 2020), very little work has explored how cultural competence might inform inclusive teaching perspectives to create pathways that seek to leverage the literacy skills that immigrant-origin Latine youth bring with them from their native language and rich cultural experiences.

The need for a cultural competence framework in the literacy teaching and learning of immigrant-origin Latine students stems from the fact that their experiences often differ significantly and in substantive ways from other students. As is the case for many transnational students, immigrant-origin students often have to navigate dual cultures and languages and negotiate their identities between nations. The inequalities they face manifest against a backdrop of wider disparities that pose challenges in their educational journeys (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). Among these are newcomer status (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008), language barriers (Valdés, 2004), and undocumented status of self

and/or caregiver (Yoshikawa, Kholoptseva, & Suárez-Orozco, 2013). These challenges expose immigrant-origin youth to particular vulnerabilities in schooling systems that require a deeper understanding of the obstacles they face. Bolstering their cultural competencies would help teachers to better respond to and include the experiences of such students in their teaching practices.

### **A Theoretical Framework for The Moral Ethic of Cariño**

Informed by the literature cited above, I propose a *moral ethic of cariño* as an additional theoretical framing of cultural competence in the praxis of teaching immigrant-origin students. Much work has been done around the conceptualization of the ethic of care in Education (Noddings & Shore, 1984; Noddings, 2012, 2013). In fact, many Latine scholars have long pursued a scholarly interest in the notion of cariño in the context of humanizing the learning experiences of Latine children and adolescents in schools (Valdés, 1996; Nieto, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999; Rólon-Dow, 2005; Bartolomé, 1994a, 1994b; Curry, 2021). These scholars have conceptualized cariño as a form of relational practice oriented towards humanizing the personhood of Latine students in schools. More recent scholarship has extended the concept of cariño to teacher perspectives and practices in the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine youth, moving the field to consider how teachers' perspectives might be embodied in pedagogical practices (Lomelí, 2020; 2023). For immigrant-origin Latine students, the *moral ethic of cariño* marks the difference between what teachers think about their students and how they intellectually approach them in the curriculum. This includes, but is not limited to, the authentic inclusion of their multilingual and multicultural identities. Particularly, the *moral ethic of cariño* is distinct in that it moves beyond relational practices of teacher-student interactions and is

concerned with the classroom practices that teachers enact in order to bolster the learning of immigrant-origin Latine youth.

A *moral ethic of cariño* does not focus exclusively on care and love, but rather urges educators to critically examine the perspectives that we embody and the practices that we enact in the classroom as we claim commitment to an equitable education for immigrant-origin Latine youth. Hence, a *moral ethic of cariño* (Lomelí, 2020; 2023) moves beyond the realization that adolescents of immigrant-origin need a humanizing learning environment and towards examining the practices and perspectives by which such an environment is created (or not). Ultimately, the goal of a *moral ethic of cariño* is to build on the work of previous scholars in order to expand our understanding of the kinds of practices that enact social justice commitments in the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine youth (Valdés, 1996; Nieto, 1992; Noddings, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999; Rólon-Dow, 2005; Bartolomé, 2008; Curry, 2021). This framework offers an expansive approach to critical pedagogies (Freire, 1998) in the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine students (Lomelí, 2020; 2023).

### Methodology

The data presented in this article were collected as part of a larger ethnographic study at Dreamers High<sup>2</sup> focused on teachers who were deemed by their community to be “effective” teachers of immigrant-origin Latine students. This paper highlights the ethnographic/case study of one of those teachers, Ms. Grace. In the following section, I describe the setting, introduce the research question that guided my inquiry, describe the focal participant of this study, and outline the methods I employed to collect and analyze the data.

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<sup>2</sup> Names of all institutions and persons are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

**Setting**

*Dreamers High* is a public high school in one of the largest school districts in the South Bay Area of Northern California. It was intentionally chosen for its schoolwide focus on the improvement of equitable conditions for learning, its explicit mission to help historically marginalized student populations, and the school's existing structures that support a college-going culture in a community where economic resources are scarce. Annually, the school enrolls approximately 1400-1500 students and serves a diverse student body: 78% of the students are Latine, 10% Filipinx, 7% Asian, 2% Pacific Islander, 2% African American, and 1 % White. The vast majority of the students (80%) come from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds and live in households where the average income is less than \$42,000 per year (by contrast, the median household income in the surrounding area is \$117,474 per year).

In this study, I ask the following question: How do teacher perspectives shape culturally competent pedagogical practices?

***Focal Participant: Ms. Grace***

At the time the data were collected for this study, Ms. Grace had been teaching for nineteen years. What is distinctive about Ms. Grace is that she teaches three sections of English in quite varied content areas: both college-level courses—Advanced Placement Language Arts and Advanced Placement Literature for 12<sup>th</sup> graders—and English as Additional Language (EAL) Level Two for recently arrived immigrant-origin students (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders). Ms. Grace was not only responsible for running the Advanced Placement Program at her school, but simultaneously worked with the district's English Language Development coordinator to create an engaging curriculum for newly arrived students.

Ms. Grace, who self-identifies as Filipina, was raised in the community in which she teaches, and she herself had a mixed educational experience while in the district's schools. Crucially, the struggles she experienced in this district motivated her to come back to her community as a high school English teacher. As a first-generation, woman of color, Ms. Grace poignantly recalled her personal challenges in the public school system that at the time viewed her through a deficit lens:

I thought the counselors at my high school had kind of typecasted me as someone who was not really going anywhere. They just put me in whatever classes. I remember not being talked to about where I wanted to go to college, so I ended up going to community college for quite a while.

Ms. Grace eventually transferred out of community college and into a highly selective university in the Bay Area, where she double-majored in English Literature and Native American Studies. She then pursued law school in Chicago, passed the bar exam, and earned a license to practice in the state of Illinois. Ms. Grace worked as a solo practitioner for a few years before deciding to transition to a teaching career.

### **Data Collection**

Primary data sources of this study include interviews with Ms. Grace focused on her perspectives and pedagogical practices. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 90 minutes. I visited the school weekly for 32 weeks and was in Ms. Grace's classroom for a total of 18-visits of 90 minutes per class, taking fieldnotes during each visit. The classroom visits (32) and interviews (12) were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Teacher interview transcripts and classroom audio recording transcript visits were open coded (Saldaña, 2009). Secondary data

sources included informal interview transcripts (10) with students and Ms. Grace during and after classroom visits, as well as conceptual memos (30).

### **Data Analysis**

Primary data sources for this study included interviews with Ms. Grace, audio recordings of classroom observations, conceptual memos, and field notes. I often relied heavily on Ms. Grace's words, including numerous—and often lengthy—quotes from interview transcripts. I further included her voice as a participant by beginning my analysis process with NVivo coding (Saldaña, 2009), a method that uses the participants' own words as codes. I engaged in this work with an inductive approach (Creswell, 2013). Coding was open, axial, and selective (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), and followed thematic patterning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 2006). Rather than looking for a list of identified “best practices” or a matrix of critical pedagogies, I actively searched for data that demonstrated Ms. Grace's cultural competencies and sought critical orientations to teaching immigrant-origin Latine youth. Across all data sources, I was looking for instances in which the teacher was enacting cultural competencies that affirmed and dignified her immigrant-origin students' lived experiences. Secondary data sources included informal interviews with students and Ms. Grace during and after classroom visits. To triangulate data, I actively sought to put interview data in conversation with my field notes and audio recordings. This process unfolded iteratively over time as I revisited the data for evidence to support and revise my emergent conclusions.

### **Findings: Culturally Competent Approaches to Teaching**

Analysis of the data revealed that Ms. Grace enacted cultural competencies that informed her inclusive teaching approaches with her immigrant-origin Latine students. Ms. Grace revealed herself to be a close study of her students' lived experiences, and she assigned

great value to what she learned about them. In the section below, I present interview data that demonstrates how Ms. Grace enacted teaching approaches that privileged her immigrant-origin students' lived experiences, hence embodying culturally competent approaches to teaching.

To begin with, Ms. Grace demonstrated a deep understanding of where her students were coming from and what they were experiencing outside her classroom walls. When describing her students, she did so from an informed stance that recognized the complexity of her students lived experiences:

Sometimes they're coming from homes where the financial burden is so great that the things on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the stuff at the base takes precedence. Every caregiver, every student, they just want the best life for themselves, and part of high school is discovering what that is. I've learned that some of my students are living with two other families, some are not living with their parents and are under the care of extended family members. Some of these things are things they have no control over as newcomers. However, that doesn't mean that they shouldn't have some control over those things that they can control... They want agency. They want to be in charge of their destiny, and they should be. In my class, I want them to have agency over their learning and that means they are the experts in the way that they make connections to the content learned in class.

Her response here reveals an ongoing generative approach to understanding her students' realities. I use the term generative to refer to Ms. Grace's ability to enhance her understanding by connecting what she learns about her immigrant-origin students to her professional knowledge in order to inform her practice as she designs her teaching approaches (Ball, 2009). According to Franke, Carpenter, Levi, and Fenneman (2001), "knowledge becomes generative

when the learner (in this case the teacher) sees the need to integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge and continually reconsiders existing knowledge in light of the new knowledge they are learning” (pp.655-656). In her response above, Ms. Grace not only demonstrates an understanding of the lived conditions that her students endure, but also demonstrates a culturally competent approach regarding how such material conditions might influence her students’ hope for agency. Ms. Grace’s ability to understand her students’ lived conditions leads her to add to her professional knowledge on how to approach them by inspiring hope in them through their human right to agency. Ms. Grace makes an attentive choice to focus on responding to the impact of her students’ material conditions and generates learning opportunities in her classroom in which her students might feel agency in their own learning.

Teachers play a critical role in the ways that they draw and build on their students’ lived experiences to create an inclusive and respectful learning environment. For Ms. Grace, this was made evident in the dignifying approaches that she demonstrated with her AP literature students, as well as with her newcomers in her English as an Added Language class. As a teacher, Ms. Grace was keenly aware of the kinds of obstacles and challenges that her immigrant-origin students (across all of her classes) were facing outside her classroom walls. In sharing about one of her AP students, she recalls:

I have a student in my AP lit class who just went through his father being deported.

They managed to, I dunno, he said get him back, I don't know what that means, and I

don't ask... Can you imagine the incredible amount of stress that child has been under?

And so, I can't afford to solely care to prepping him for his AP exam. It doesn't work that way.

Ms. Grace's conscious choice to refrain from probing about what the students meant, by 'get him back' demonstrates a generative understanding of her immigrant-origin student's experience and the impact that such experience has on his learning. In her brilliant ethnographic research, Mangual Figueroa (2017) highlights the ways in which undocumented students make decisions about what and when to share or withhold about their migratory status during conversations with peers and teachers. In the ongoing crisis of restrictive immigration policies and enforcement of such policies in school settings, immigrant-origin students – both documented and undocumented immigrant students born outside of the United States and or U.S. born children of immigrants—demonstrate heightened fear and distress of parent deportation and family separation (Turner & Mangual Figueroa, 2019).

For Ms. Grace's students, such fears were palpable to her, and she was attentive to them. 'They managed to, I dunno, he said get him back, I don't know what that means, and I don't ask...' Here Ms. Grace demonstrates cultural competence in the sense that she understands the distress that her students might be facing, and such understanding leads her to halt her questioning, reflecting her respect for the student's choice to privacy. Furthermore, Ms. Grace moves beyond the basic understanding of the importance of academics and is critically aware of the importance of seeing the whole child, as she is critically aware of the stressors that might be impacting her student. In her reflection above, Ms. Grace pauses to not just consider the learner in her student, but also the whole person, 'Can you imagine the incredible amount of stress that child has been under?' In seeing the whole child, Ms. Grace transgresses her teaching practice to an attentive inclusion of the intellectual and the emotional dimensions that are both simultaneously important in learning. 'And so, I can't afford to solely care to prepping him for his AP exam. It doesn't work that way.' Her response to this student's situation indicates that Ms. Grace

has a deep regard for her student, as she respected his privacy and made a conscious choice not to probe deeper about getting his father “back,” demonstrating an understanding of how not to heighten the constant stress and fear related to deportation that looms over many immigrant families.

In her teaching approaches, Ms. Grace demonstrated a deep understanding of where her students were coming from and what they were experiencing outside her classroom walls. When describing her teaching practices with her newcomers, Ms. Grace voiced the urgent need she feels to get kids to take a stance about the texts that they are reading in class. And this was reflected in the ways she spoke about her students. She shares:

*For me, it is important that students are able to promote their ideas about what they read in class. All of my students!... They need to be able to make connections to the text, create questions and talk about those questions and lead others to think deeply about the ideas that they are engaging with.... They are acquiring a second language, coming from another country to a new one, so their perspective on what they read has a unique lens. I'm interested to hear about their ideas. I want them to talk about those ideas, to craft questions from the text themselves in multiple languages. Help them get started on making their own connections to the text and teach them that their own interpretations and text connections are insightful and valid.*

When Ms. Grace thinks of bolstering her students' literacy skills, she frames their interpretations of the text as unique and valid, leveling the playing field by positioning her students' immigrant-origin experiences as valuable contributions and connections to the texts, regardless of the language in which they decide to make those text connections. This, in turn, demonstrates her belief in her students as competent readers, thinkers, and writers. When she

notes, 'I want them to talk about those ideas, to craft questions from the text themselves in multiple language,' Ms. Grace underscores her students' ability to draw on their lived experiences and make connections in a cross-linguistic format in which her students' multiple languages are framed as potential resources. She does not see this as a deficit, but rather as a strength that helps her students communicate their connections by drawing on the full range of their linguistic repertoires. Such an approach to teaching demonstrates yet another aspect of her cultural competency, as she signals her understanding that her immigrant-students are multilingual learners and might draw from their experiences in multiple languages. In addition, Ms. Grace displays a conscious choice to defy bureaucratic language levels that deem her immigrant-origin students as proficient or not in the additional language. Instead, she demonstrates greater interest in their lived experiences and their ability to read a text and draw on their personal connections and cross-linguistic use of their languages in the process of meaning-making, hence displaying the cultural competence she has acquired over time in becoming a respectful listener of her students' experiences and communicative practices.

This cultural competence was further made evident in her fourth-period English as an Added Language (EAL) class, in which she taught newcomers. Her newcomer students were expected to lead a class presentation in English as best they could, blending informational text structures with relevant research topics, such as important features of their country of origin. This project relied heavily on reading and writing in English, the open use of Google Translate, researching on the internet, and visiting the school library to check out books about the country that they originated from. Students were asked to conduct research about a valuable commodity produced in their countries of origin, geographical features, historical snapshots, and interesting features of their native homeland. Students were expected to work in groups to

make sense of their readings, peer revise their writing, and troubleshoot any issues with Google Documents and PowerPoint. Ms. Grace had clear and intentional goals for her students that surpassed mere language acquisition and encompassed learning skills that her newcomers would benefit from in other classrooms. As she explained,

When they go to another classroom, there may still be a language barrier, but at least the tools that a teacher may ask them to use, whether it's Google Docs or research, they will be familiar with the process. And they'll have some familiarity with research and presentations. And I think that's important!

The relevant content of the assignment (features of the students' home country) to students who had undergone the life-altering experience of migrating to the United States as adolescents provided them with familiar content in an unfamiliar language. Some of the students in this particular class had left their countries unaccompanied and arrived in the United States to reunite with their family members. Others had left their immediate family and were reuniting with extended family members. Regardless of the specific details of their individual journeys, they were all acquiring a new language, grieving the loss of what they had left behind in their native countries, and finding new ways of being in a new country. By selecting this very relevant topic as an area of classroom inquiry, Ms. Grace actively sought out ways to create a learning environment in which her immigrant-origin students' experiences were relevant and important to their long-term ability to become learners in a mainstream classroom. In the process, her newcomer students familiarized themselves with Google Classroom, a learning platform that the school relied on heavily.

As students prepared for their research projects during one of my visits, a group of three boys from three different countries in Central America collaborated in Spanish as they

prepared their presentation in English. Throughout the entire time that they worked together on this project, they fiercely debated which of their home countries had better food. The three boys became animated and loudly defended the “honor” of their native country’s preferred dish, occasionally slipping in a few curse words here and there in Spanish. Yet Ms. Grace did not seem to be bothered by any of this. She explained why she let them have such an animated side conversation:

I know that they are loud and here and there off task. I also know they curse. But listen, there are other battles I'd rather fight. That's not one of them. I want them to feel that they can express themselves freely here, a lot of them left so much behind. I don't want them to leave their linguistic expression behind either.

In her classroom, Ms. Grace is not interested in regulating her student’s communicative practices, expressions, or language use. Instead, her teaching practice embraces an approach to student autonomy in which students are invited to exert agency. This is a conscious teaching approach that demonstrates Ms. Grace’s cultural competence as she creates and holds space for students to engage in discussions that pertain to their experiences however they see fit. Notice that Ms. Grace is critically aware that her newcomer students are sometimes loud and off task, *‘I also know they curse. But listen, there are other battles I'd rather fight. That's not one of them.’* Martínez and Morales (2014) refer to such language, the use of *groserías* (cursing), as a transgressive language practice that often signals ethnic solidarity, nudging educators to not just dismiss such language use as inappropriate. In the case of Ms. Grace, she understood this and decided that this was not a ‘battle’ she was going to fight.

Ms. Grace expects her students to demonstrate deep thinking about social issues that require a degree of immersive study into the topic; therefore, she found value in her student’s

commitment to recall their home land's cultural foods and assert their discursive voices with great command, even if this meant using *groserías* (cursing) to defend the beautiful features of their native land. At the end of this project, the three young men presented their work successfully, and their side conversation did not present itself as an impediment to their learning in Ms. Grace's classroom. Instead, Ms. Grace perceived their classroom interactions as critical communicative practices that complemented and enriched their learning. This has to do, in large part, with how Ms. Grace understands her students' need to experience community and a sense of belonging, another marker of her culturally competent approach to working with immigrant-origin Latine students.

### Discussion

At the intersection of Ms. Grace's practices and perspectives is a culturally competent outlook that centers on what I call a *moral ethic of cariño*. The cultural competencies enacted as part of a *moral ethic of cariño* may benefit teachers of immigrant-origin students in steering them to think about embracing practices that are attentive, responsive, inclusive and critically conscious of their students' particular needs. A *moral ethic of cariño* aims to view "the material, physical, psychological, and spiritual needs of Latine youth" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 110) from an equity-driven stance, resisting all notions of deficit that historically have been invoked to frame Latine students in American K-12 schools. In previous scholarship, the term *cariño* has emphasized the manifestation of caring grounded in Latine cultural values. As Hidalgo and Duncan-Andrade (2009) explain, *cariño* is often translated as caring, affection, or love, but much is lost in this translation. As a concept, *cariño* is the foundation of relationships among the poor and working classes—often the only thing left to give in families raising children on substandard wages. There is a considerable body of research demonstrating the educational importance of

teachers who forge meaningful connections with students, and of school cultures where all interactions between students and adults authentically embody *cariño* and a concern for the well-being of students (Bartolomé, 1994a; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). While the concept of *cariño* is not new, the theorization of the *Moral Ethic of Cariño* is in that it presents a framework that unpacks teacher perspectives and practices in working with immigrant-origin Latine youth. The moral ethic of *cariño* urges educators to constantly revisit their perceptions of students and revise their teaching practices so that authentic inclusion is achieved. For immigrant-origin Latine students, this generative approach to teaching plays a critical role in how students feel in our classrooms.

In Ms. Grace's case, her positive perspective on her students directly and profoundly informed her teaching practices. It was important for Ms. Grace that her students were deeply engaged with texts, communicated their ideas with familiar content in an unfamiliar language, and drew on their full linguistic repertoires (including when this meant talking about their ideas in "less-than-perfect" English) with autonomy. For Ms. Grace, a *moral ethic of cariño* was enacted in her careful examination of—and attention to—her students' struggles and lived experiences as they navigated their duality in languages and cultures and, in the case of some of her students, their duality in the complexity of being U.S.-born with undocumented parents. Ms. Grace maintained that affirming her students' lived experiences—and positioning herself as a student of such experiences—informed her curricular choices, facilitating the authentic inclusion of her students. Ms. Grace felt the moral imperative and the ethical duty to provide her students with skills necessary to read the world around them long after they left her classroom and. Another critical component of her teaching craft was to allow her students to assert themselves in communicative practices that felt authentic to them. Her teaching

approach demonstrated a series of deliberate choices that signaled her cultural competencies as she educated her students in such a way that granted them the right to critically think, question, and explore, and in doing so, she embodied the ultimate manifestation of a *moral ethic of cariño*.

### Conclusion

Ms. Grace's teaching stance defies easy categorization or analysis. Ms. Grace has developed a cultural competence that allows her to understand the experiences of her students, and such understanding deeply informs her teaching approaches. Rather than perceiving their experiences as disruptive or deficient, Ms. Grace perceived them as opportunities to bridge the learning happening in class. Providing immigrant-origin Latine students the autonomy to just "be" as they work on an assignment turns out to be a critical step towards creating a classroom environment that is conducive to high levels of engagement and learning, one in which teachers can enact cultural competence by embodying a *moral ethic of cariño*.

Though this study is a singular case and is limited by its sample size, one thing is certain: Ms. Grace has mastered the ability to demonstrate a *moral ethic of cariño* for her students through her culturally competent practices and perspectives. She affirmed her students for who they were and what they brought to her classroom both culturally and linguistically. In recognizing the importance of creating a curriculum that was relevant to their experiences, she did not lose sight of pedagogical practices that were responsive to their needs. Her most valuable data point was her students' lived experiences, which directly informed her generative practices. I argue that a *moral ethic of cariño* requires not merely that teachers positively perceive and care for immigrant-origin Latine youth, but also that teachers enact culturally

competent practices that intellectually engage and include students in meaningful ways. As noted in previous scholarship, the practice of meaningfully engaging immigrant-origin students in content area curriculum has the potential to act as a form of transformational resistance in their lives (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Central to such a stance would be the authentic inclusion of linguistically-diverse students evidenced by a moral *ethic of cariño* that centers the lived experiences of immigrant-origin Latine youth. Such a moral *ethic of cariño* is a stance that embodies cultural competencies and that intentionally aims to understand the narratives that immigrant-origin youth encounter as they strive to navigate learning across multiple languages and cultures.

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