

# Community-Engaged Scholars' Boundary-Spanning Roles and Intersected Identities: Korean Dual Language Bilingual Education Program in a Public Elementary School

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## Abstract

Neoliberal ideology and an overemphasis on generating quick results dehumanizes higher education community engagement by overlooking the multiple roles and identities of boundary spanners, individuals engaged in community-based scholarship. If university-community partnerships are to prosper and be sustained, their human aspect deserves more attention. We contribute to the literature by framing this research project as the collective stories of our research team, nine community-engaged scholars who have established a partnership with a public elementary school's Korean-English Dual Language Bilingual Education program in the U.S. Southeast for the last 3 years. By drawing on pertinent literature about boundary spanners in higher education community engagement, we construct our narratives around how our fluid identities as females, immigrants, multilinguals, mothers, and professors have intersected with our boundary-spanning roles. Our nuanced stories provide insights and lessons to other boundary spanners in different partnership contexts.

*Keywords: boundary spanning, Korean, bilingual education, elementary school, humanizing partnership*



**D**riven by a belief in bilingual education within the public school system for students of immigrant origin, Jayoung (the first author) had attempted to be involved in the Korean Dual Language Bilingual Education (KDLBE) program at a large public elementary school in the U.S. Southeast since its inception in 2019. Initially, the school of approximately 800 students introduced two kindergarten KDLBE classes, where students were immersed in math and science classes in Korean, and other subjects were taught in English. Each school day is split between Korean and English instruction, accommodating students from both Korean heritage and nonheritage backgrounds. The program

aimed to expand by adding two classes at a new grade level annually, with fourth grade marking the highest grade offered at the time of this writing. Aligned with the school district's other elementary schools that host a DLBE program in other languages, Peace Elementary School (pseudonym) also integrated a Korean specials class into its curriculum, ensuring that all students, irrespective of their enrollment in the KDLBE program, learn about Korean culture once a week.

What particularly drew Jayoung's attention was the program's inception, which stemmed from a response to the needs of the local Korean community within a wider school community. With a desire to contribute to the program's growth, Jayoung

persistently sought access to the school and ultimately gained entry when she proposed the school and its KDLBE program as the focus of a research study with college- and university-level research seed grants. Since 2021, nine of us who are faculty members across five different universities and three different regions have collectively been building a relationship with our school partners by (a) assisting in small-group instruction, (b) conducting individual interviews of multiple stakeholders (i.e., teachers, students, parents, and administrators), (c) building bilingual instructional materials for STEM in second and third grades, (d) solidifying the curricula in the KDLBE program and Korean specials class, and (e) implementing two virtual, global exchange projects with an elementary school in South Korea funded by two small external grants.

### **Boundary Spanners in Higher Education Community Engagement**

Our essay is positioned within the large literature concerning boundary spanners in higher education community engagement. Boundary spanners, also known as boundary brokers, are individuals who traverse boundaries and facilitate connections between groups (Farrell et al., 2022; Neal et al., 2021; Wegemer & Renick, 2021). Considering boundaries as sociocultural differences between practices leading to “discontinuity in actions” or interactions (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 133), boundary spanners enter unfamiliar domains; forge relationships across communities and partners; and connect people, resources, and ideas.

In the realm of higher education community engagement, boundary spanners make institutional boundaries penetrable, bridge the gap between theory and practice, and create dialogue spaces among diverse partners (Akkerman & Bruining, 2016; Farrell et al., 2022; Green, 2023; Green et al., 2021; Janke, 2019; Jusinski, 2021; Miller, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010; Wang & Wong, 2017, 2019). Boundary spanners, who may be (pre- and in-service) teachers, graduate students, teacher educators, university researchers, or school leaders/administrators in varied educational contexts (e.g., Ikpeze et al., 2012; Freire & Alemán, 2021; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013; Waitoller et al., 2016), cross boundaries to interact, negotiate, and collaborate with others as well as acquire new knowledge (Wang & Wong, 2017, 2019, 2023). Scholars such as Janke (2019) and

Dostilio and Perry (2017) conceptualized scholar-administrators as hybrid professionals with diverse responsibilities, whereas Ravitch (2014) and Salipante and Aram (2003) emphasized practitioner-scholarship in integrating theory and practice. These insights underscore the pivotal role of scholar-administrators as critical agents of practice, adept at navigating the intersection of theory and real-world application.

Boundary spanners within universities navigate tensions, contradictions, and other issues to sustain successful school-university partnerships, particularly in contexts where competing or conflicting ideologies emerge (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Perceiving boundaries as a source of tension yet also as transformative learning opportunities, boundary spanners need to adapt their roles and practices to suit the specific context and needs of the partnership, addressing power imbalances and fostering a more democratic approach to leadership and learning opportunities (Wang & Wong, 2019).

Boundary spanning inevitably requires reflexivity (Fear et al., 2001) and continual examination of partnership dynamics to cultivate more inclusive educational experiences (Waitoller et al., 2016). Moreover, it facilitates knowledge transformation and enhances overall educational practices (Wang & Wong, 2019). For instance, Ikpeze et al. (2012) conducted a self-study to reflect on their collaborative research group, which investigated a professional development school partnership. The researchers consistently negotiated to mediate ideological and pedagogical differences between their teacher education courses and preservice teachers' field experiences. Similarly, Dallmer (2004) explored the concepts of equality and parity in school-university partnerships through a narrative inquiry approach. In her discussion, she addressed her conflicting roles as both an insider and an outsider in these collaborations, highlighting the challenges she faced as a graduate student, faculty member, and administrator. Dallmer's study raised questions about the disparities between schools and universities and the complexities of cross-institutional roles. Her collaborative relationships were demanding, difficult, and required a lot of patience. Her study highlighted that achieving equity and collaboration in all aspects of such partnerships can be challenging and may not always be realistic. The stud-

ies by Ikpeze et al. and Dallmer exemplify how acts of boundary spanning deepen our understanding of the intricate intersections of positionalities within school-university partnerships across diverse education contexts.

Despite advancements in higher education community engagement literature, a significant gap persists in understanding how individuals with multidimensional and intersected identities collaborate to transform teaching and learning in diverse school-university partnerships (Hernandez & Pasquesi, 2017). Therefore, we envision our reflective essay as providing a practical and contextual backdrop to this literature, taking a step toward humanizing community engagement activities amid the era of accountability and neoliberalism (O'Brien et al., 2022). By sharing our collective stories, which lend faces and voices to abstract concepts and illustrate real-world scenarios, we aim to encourage educators to critically engage with and explore the complexities of school-university partnerships.

### **Overview of Our Reflective Essay**

In this reflective essay, we share the collective stories of our research team members, who serve as boundary spanners (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010), deeply engaged in this community- and school-based scholarship. We constructed our narratives around the intersection of our fluid subjectivities as females, immigrants, multilinguals, mothers, and professors with our boundary-spanning roles (Crenshaw, 1991). Centering our own identities, experiences, and reflections in this collaboration through reflexivity (Fear et al., 2001) feels appropriate for our first potential publication, as it humanizes the school-university partnerships we continue to foster (Cheuk & Morales-Doyle, 2022; Macias et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2021). If university-community partnerships are to thrive and endure, prioritizing the human aspect is imperative, given that the complex roles of boundary spanners and their multifaceted identities are foundational to any partnership.

Our nine individual stories are woven throughout this reflective essay. Utilizing an online shared document (Google Docs), each team member responded to prompts regarding our experiences in this collaboration. These prompts covered topics such as our motivation for initiating the collaboration, what has been effective or ineffective, les-

sons learned, and our vision for future partnerships. Following the documentation of responses, we held several online meetings to delve into our thoughts and emotions. These meetings were enlightening, revealing the impact of our differing subjectivities on our shared professional identity and commitments as community engagement professionals (Dostilio & Perry, 2017). We have structured our composite narrative on four themes: (1) our motivations and emotions as advocates for educational justice and diversity, (2) our boundary-crossing roles as engagement facilitators, (3) our boundary-crossing roles as community-based problem solvers and technical experts, and (4) navigating conflicting roles and responsibilities. Concluding the essay, we encapsulate lessons learned for fellow boundary spanners engaged in university and school partnerships.

### **Our Collective Stories as Boundary Spanners**

All of us as faculty in universities span boundaries by building bridges in multiple spaces, between the K-5 school community, universities, and different stakeholders in the K-5 community. Doing so, we have found ourselves facilitating engagement, crossing boundaries as community-based problem solvers and technical experts, and navigating conflicting roles and responsibilities. In performing each of these roles, which are fluid and overlapping, we have experienced various emotions, such as joy, pride, discomfort, uncertainty, and envy. Here, we bring all our lived experiences as mothers, former classroom teachers, professors, immigrants, multilinguals, and community members to this partnership and collaboration space.

### **Our Motives, Our Emotions, and Advocating for Educational Justice and Diversity**

For too long, the language and practices in the school have not been aligned with those of our students' homes and communities, a discrepancy that has been linked to problems with educational outcomes and students' well-being (García & Li, 2014; Heath, 1983). We contributed to addressing this problem by partnering with the KDLBE program, which demanded considerable attention. Each member of our team, particularly those with Korean heritage, harbored a profound sense of pride for and commit-

ment to this important work in our local school community. Immersing ourselves in the KDLBE classroom, where the Korean language was used to learn content knowledge and conduct class routines, evoked a sense of liberation, empowerment, and surrealism. Witnessing children and educators utilizing Korean, a minoritized language distinct from English, for the instruction of mathematics and science (rather than solely language-focused lessons) within a U.S. public elementary school (rather than in a peripheral weekend community language school) was an impactful experience. Having lived in the United States for 10–20 years, many of us could never have imagined that public elementary schools would be teaching Korean to their students. The unique aspect of this program, originally established to support the educational needs of the local Korean community rather than a broader demographic, further imbued our advocacy for multilingual education with profound meaning and purpose. Beyond affirming students' linguistic identities, this program also fostered the validation of their cultural identities within the school context. While participating in cultural enhancement activities during major Korean holidays at the school, we witnessed the non-Korean administrators dressed in Hanbok (Korean traditional dress) warmly greeting students and parents in the morning carpool line. We appreciated their efforts and welcoming attitude.

As members of this collaborative partnership, we seized the opportunity to translate advocacy endeavors into tangible outcomes, transcending mere written support through publications for multilingual learners. For example, our team members shared cultural aspects of the holidays during morning announcements and activities throughout the day, strengthening our ongoing relationship and commitment. Thus, one prominent boundary-spanning role that we have played is advocating for educational justice, particularly for transnational students, and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity for all. This shared interest and passion is our foundation and a catalyst for our partnership and collaboration.

However, we often feel a pang when we think of so many other children with Korean heritage in the United States who have not had this inclusive and identity-affirming educational experience to this day—a missed opportunity for all. As par-

ents raising bi- and multilingual children, with Korean as a heritage language, most of us also feel envious of the students in the program. Those of us with older children wished that a program like this existed when our children were younger, and some with young children even considered moving to this school district to enroll them. Such a program would support our efforts to emphasize the importance of our children's Korean heritage, and the children themselves would feel prouder of their heritage language and culture. Our feelings led some of us to proactively engage with our children's school administrators, advocating for more substantive measures to affirm the linguistic and cultural identities of students with immigrant backgrounds. Regrettably, we have yet to witness tangible changes within our children's schools, even those located a mere 10 miles from the progressive KDLBE program. Our own children's identities in public schools continue to be silenced and ignored.

Our experiences gave us greater appreciation for the imperative of upholding educational justice and recognizing and respecting the diverse linguistic backgrounds of all students within the educational landscape. Collaboratively and intentionally, we directed our efforts toward "more equitable learning environments as social justice teacher educators" (Leonard et al., 2021, p. 23). Although we welcomed the linguistic and cultural validation of Korean heritage students in the program and school, we found ourselves contemplating the situation of students who we identified as speaking other heritage languages, such as Mandarin and Arabic. We were concerned that the dominance of Korean, along with English, would further minoritize other languages that those children bring to this space. DLBE programs are intended to center multilingualism, rather than English, in the curriculum. However, we have felt that there is not much room for celebrating linguistic and cultural diversity in this KDLBE program. This worry is particularly resonant for one of our members, who strongly advocates for this issue, as her own children are heritage speakers of a language even more minoritized than Korean within their home environment (Choi, 2022a, 2022b). Additionally, two of us felt more sensitive to the way this dominance of Korean silenced linguistic identities of other non-Korean heritage students, given another research study they conducted where children from immigrant

families living in South Korea are not given the opportunity to grow as bilinguals (Lew & Choi, 2022, 2023).

As advocates for educational justice and diversity, we believe that this collaborative effort aligns seamlessly with our mission as minority university faculty to make distinctive contributions to the community, providing tangible and substantive resources and support to students, teachers, and the school at large. Engaging in this endeavor with a profound sense of fulfillment and pride, we have contributed to the maintenance of heritage languages and cultures within the United States. As female minority faculty members in a U.S. higher education system that is not inherently linguistically inclusive, we acutely understand the significance and impact of authentically representing minority languages and cultures within public sectors. With this understanding, we play a pivotal role in advancing educational justice and promoting diversity in the academic landscape.

### **Crossing Our Boundaries**

#### ***As Engagement Facilitators***

As advocates for educational justice and diversity, one of our crucial roles in traversing boundaries was that of engagement facilitators, forging connections and fostering relationships with various stakeholders. Several of us are former K-12 classroom teachers, as well as currently being Korean language instructors and teacher educators at the university level, so we deeply empathized with the Korean teachers. Spending more time with the teachers at the school and through individual interviews, we started recognizing the immense dedication, investment, and internal pressure that they faced in validating the success of the program. We also empathized with their pride and confidence that their position as regular faculty members teaching content areas in Korean is irreplaceable, that their unique contribution forms the core of the KDLBE program, and that the full repertoire of their abilities is essential. Furthermore, as Koreans, we could also understand why they work so hard and feel pressured to make this new program thrive. We not only appreciated the external pressures these educators faced for the program's survival but also acknowledged their internal identification with the program, compelling them to strive tirelessly. We took the position of *knowledge broker teachers* (Jusinski, 2021) since we en-

gaged in relationships through open communication, negotiation, and empathy. This approach helped us see the needs and challenges through their eyes while reinforcing our approachability or reliability.

Regarding the responsibility to teach, we deeply understood the teachers' frustration with the underresourced curriculum and the lack of knowledge about the KDLBE program throughout both the school and the district. Therefore, we decided to address the systemic disparities that contributed to such challenges. We presented these issues and challenges as scholars through conferences, while simultaneously offering immediate assistance in areas of urgency, such as curriculum development or course material creation. Leveraging our scholarly and past experiences, we approached with expertise, always respecting the authority of the teachers and fostering close collaboration.

However, our concern goes beyond the technical aspects of education. We also appreciate the crucial role of representation, inclusiveness, and cultural understanding within the context of the KDLBE program. We as advocates, and also as mothers of immigrant children, formed personal connections with parents and students, particularly those from Korean heritage backgrounds. Moreover, we acknowledge that a diverse research team, including members from different cultural backgrounds like Türkiye, contributes to a more inclusive educational environment. Our Turkish team member witnessed one KDLBE student's pride and happiness when the student approached her to introduce herself, emphasizing that she was also from Europe. This small anecdote gives a rich insight, a sample of how understanding the cultural nuances within the program, as well as racial and cultural diversity in our research team, can create empowering connections and validate students' identities even in the program's Korean- and English-dominated context. These connections we have made with students serve as a foundation for our advocacy for educational justice and diversity.

#### ***As Community-Based Problem Solvers and Technical Experts***

In order to break down the traditional boundaries between the university and the school, we actively engaged in bridging the gap between our university and the K-5 school. In particular, we embraced a dual role as community-based problem

solvers and technical experts, facilitating the implementation of a wide range of educational practices. According to Weerts and Sandmann (2010), these two roles are typically categorized separately. Problem solvers maintain closer social ties with community partners; technical experts are often university researchers with specialized field expertise who may lack social closeness. We challenged this distinction by assuming both roles simultaneously. We assisted our K-5 partners in solving practical problems while fostering deeper connections with them and providing technical expertise as university researchers. One primary request addressed by both school administrators and teachers at the beginning of our partnership was assistance in developing differentiated reading, math, and science teaching materials in Korean. Initially, we utilized our institutional and external grants to purchase instructional resources and Korean books to build classroom libraries. The administrative and logistical aspects of building these libraries proved to be cumbersome and time-consuming for classroom teachers. Therefore, our research team intervened to mitigate barriers in purchasing materials and enhancing the libraries within the school. Furthermore, district leaders invited us to participate in a teachers' retreat aimed at developing assessment rubrics for students' reading abilities in Korean. Leveraging our expertise in utilizing well-developed and detailed language proficiency levels from the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) field, we applied this knowledge to the Korean reading context to support the teachers effectively.

The teachers were also spending a significant amount of time developing instructional materials, especially as a new grade is added to the program every year. To alleviate this burden, we actively participated in the development of curriculum units, specifically contributing to a second-grade science unit about the moon and a third-grade habitats unit. In both units, we created assessments, bilingual vocabulary lists, and instructional materials, including read-aloud videos in Korean based on available English stories. Additionally, we introduced an instructional innovation in the third-grade unit by acting as brokers of educational experiences. As one of our global exchange projects, we facilitated the virtual exchange of completed videos and digital books about local habitats between students in our program and fifth graders in a South

Korean elementary school. In this externally funded project, we guided students in brainstorming ideas about local animals and plants, empowering them to research and write bilingually for their creation of digital books. We used this experience to break down traditional educational boundaries by incorporating technology and cross-cultural exchanges.

Another need identified by the teachers was the widening gap in Korean language proficiency between Korean heritage and nonheritage students. Students who lacked exposure to Korean at home or in the community, particularly over the summer break, faced challenges due to limited language use and resources. Their low proficiency level in Korean resulted in the possibility that some students would withdraw from the KDLBE program, where half of the subjects are taught almost exclusively in Korean. We even observed some students losing motivation to learn Korean and subjects taught in Korean. Recognizing this critical issue, both the teachers and the research team felt an urgent need to address it to maintain program stability and prevent attrition.

During one academic year, several of us made weekly visits to a second-grade classroom to provide Korean language instruction to a small group of students. As former and current Korean language professors in universities, we were positioned as experts in Korean language education by the teacher. The students and parents also seemed to accept us as linguistic figures, relying on our inputs as native speakers and experts in language education. In our role as boundary spanners, we ensured transparency and care by sending bilingual letters to parents requesting consent with detailed information, emphasizing our academic specialty and the benefit for the children. Later, we learned from the teacher that our presence and assistance as university professors with language and literacy expertise, particularly with struggling students, helped change the minds of parents who were considering withdrawing their children from the program due to lower proficiency in Korean. This anecdote illustrates that our presence at the school to support the program and the teachers was impactful since it increased our credibility. We served as a bridge between the language needs of the students and parents in the program and the educational goals of the curriculum.

In addition to assisting teachers in the

KDLBE classes, we also played a crucial role in curriculum development and implementation in the Korean specials class, which aims to teach Korean culture to all students at the school. Through interviews with parents and frequent school visits, we discovered that this unique specials class, newly added by the district at the start of the KDLBE program, was largely unnoticed within the school community. To better publicize this resource, we created a website to showcase the class curriculum. Conversations with the former and current Korean specials teachers also highlighted the need to develop two units: one on the Korean alphabet, and another on critical perspectives and identities for better cultural understanding. Collaborating closely with the teachers, we codeveloped and co-taught the identities unit with the teacher. Additionally, funded by the same grant, we facilitated a virtual exchange where students shared stories about who they are and what their school is like with peers who also created vlogs about their identities as part of the global exchange project with the partner South Korean elementary school.

Despite the usual distinction between technical experts and community-based problem solvers, it was through technical expertise that we were able to address identified needs and challenges while maintaining close ties with our partner. Specifically, we acted as knowledge translators (Jusinski, 2021; Wang & Wong, 2017, 2019) to support curriculum development and to create bilingual materials that could enhance students' understanding of abstract science vocabulary and content. Similarly, our language expertise gave us credibility with parents whose students were struggling, so our support served to stabilize program participation. The exchange project with the South Korean elementary school, which offered an unparalleled form of enrichment, would have been beyond teachers building a new program or administrators who do not speak the language. Thus, by bridging fields, such as TESOL, bilingual education, and foreign language education, as well as connecting the university and K-12 schools within and beyond national boundaries, we facilitated meaningful cross-cultural exchange and learning opportunities for students. Our multifaceted roles as boundary spanners demonstrated a more integrated and collaborative model than the traditional form of collaboration in which community closeness is separate from technical expertise.

### **Navigating Conflicting Roles and Responsibilities**

We navigated the dual roles of community problem solvers and technical experts, endeavoring to fulfill institutional duties while meeting the expectations of the community and our research goals. However, we experienced the need to balance time commitments between university responsibilities, motherhood, and community engagement, leading to feelings of exhaustion and internal conflict. Time constraints on our community-engaged scholarship posed challenges, defying our initial expectations that we would visit the classroom every week and "hang out" there. The reality of our full-time faculty positions, necessitating carved-out quiet time for research, publications, and grants, alongside our role as mothers, made spending time at the school both rewarding and draining. We always felt we should be spending more time building the relationship with the K-5 school.

We are accustomed to the discourse of enumerating and naming our "accomplishments" in a way that could easily and mistakenly place us, university faculty, as experts and service providers while situating our school partners chiefly as persons from whom we procure data (Clifford, 2017; O'Brien et al., 2022; Silbert, 2019; Trent & Lim, 2010). We have many times been asked by funders and our universities to report our outcomes this way, although this methodology goes contrary to the foundation of higher education community engagement. Our progress with our partners has enabled us to present our work at several conferences. However, we have not had a single publication nor a large-scale external grant till now, in our third year of partnerships. Because we have been taking the time to build our relationships with our school partners and among ourselves, as university researchers, we have not produced enough according to the pervasive neoliberal narratives in higher education (O'Brien et al., 2022).

Securing funds and resources for the projects was among our responsibilities to our school partners. As a result, we often felt concerned that we would be perceived as contributors only when we brought external grants. As O'Brien et al. (2022) acknowledged, tensions arise between the desire to sustain relationships and the practical need for funding, creating a complex dynamic in the partnership. The grant-funded projects,

facilitating virtual exchanges between the KDLBE program in the United States and an elementary school in South Korea, enhanced the purpose and motivation of science learning, meeting the criteria of “no harmful results” as defined by our IRB. However, we sometimes felt worried, conflicted, and uncomfortable about imposing an additional burden on students and teachers with these projects.

As university researchers, we faced pressure to fulfill our institutional duties by completing the project within expected time frames and generating results quickly. Receipt of internal and external grants was an additional source of pressure to produce outcomes for the partnership and research. Further, we felt that the funding from these grants served as our primary justification for our presence in the school. Without ongoing grant-supported projects initiated by our research team, sustaining the relationship with the school would have been challenging. However, bringing grants to the partnership also meant demanding more work from our partners, such as interviews and additional projects in their classes.

We also acknowledge that there were moments of dissonance with various stakeholders. At times, we felt frustrated as the responsibility for initiating and sustaining projects with the school and teachers typically fell on the research team. Maintaining this partnership demanded considerable time and energy, with much of the relationship-building effort resting on our shoulders. Additionally, we felt that our expertise was sometimes overlooked, particularly in providing Korean language support for struggling language learners. Admittedly, the DLBE programs in the elementary school context are a brand-new area for us, one in which we lack specific expertise. Our knowledge in TESOL, bilingual, foreign language, and literacy education needed to be more localized to this particular context to yield more fruitful results in our partnership.

Similarly, we sometimes felt that our scholarly, critical-stance-based knowledge regarding DLBE programs was not fully utilized in our partnership. We believe that DLBE programs, which have been sprouting up in the state, offer an innovative solution to address the English-only ideologies and practices that have been a disservice to immigrant students. However, we are also aware of the political nature of the term “Dual Language Immersion,” which can

disguise and undermine bilingual education originally intended to serve immigrant-origin students in the local community. The larger DLBE literature has made us aware of such issues as DLBE programs primarily serving White middle-class students, language policies that force the separation of languages (Delavan et al., 2021), and recruitment of non-Asian-heritage teachers as the English side of the DLBE program (Flores & García, 2017). Therefore, we grappled with the desire and need for teachers and administrators to maintain a balance of Korean and non-Korean students so the program would not skew toward more Korean heritage students as it matures. On the one hand, we struggled to raise critical awareness among multiple stakeholders and enact our critical stance toward DLBE programs in their everyday reality. On the other hand, the partnership’s focus on practical aspects, such as curriculum building and language instruction, made it challenging to fully engage in critical discourse. We have navigated between moments of dissonance with stakeholders and a sense of fulfillment in collectively investing in making the program work.

### Lessons Learned

Our partnerships presented both challenges and opportunities as we engaged in research and education projects. Our experiences mirrored those of boundary brokers in other partnerships, characterized by intersected identities, collaborative efforts, and the establishment of trusting relationships (Dallmer, 2004; Miller, 2008; Wang & Wong, 2019). The narratives of our partnership highlight valuable lessons and insights with recommendations for systemic, structural changes. In this discussion, we emphasize two overarching lessons that we learned, which may benefit other community-engaged scholars: (a) the importance of familiarity with higher education community engagement literature and (b) that humanizing partnerships is essential.

#### Familiarity With Higher Education Community Engagement Literature

We learned the importance of familiarizing our research team with higher education community engagement literature and partnership models. Although we possessed expertise in our respective disciplines, we lacked prior knowledge about engagement scholarship in higher education. For in-



stance, we were unaware of the distinction between engagement and service or outreach (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). From the start, we were certain that we were not merely service providers or data extractors from our partners (O'Brien et al., 2022). However, we did not realize that our approach aligned more with engagement, differing from service or outreach, as both our research team and our school partners aimed to address mutually identified needs by generating knowledge.

If we had entered the partnership with this foundational knowledge, we could have provided a clearer answer to a question that some teachers raised. They often inquired about our presence in their school and our purposes. We typically stated that we were there to assist; however, we struggled to articulate that, as advocates for educational justice and diversity, we shared the same goals as our partners: to enhance the KDLBE program's effectiveness and success, address the socioeducational issues associated with monolingual education in the United States, and foster program stability and student progress. Although we recognized these questions as genuine inquiries rather than doubts about our intentions and roles in the partnership, they occasionally made us feel undervalued and not appreciated. If we had embarked on this project with knowledge about this larger literature, encountering these questions from our school partners could have been a great opportunity to "demystif[y] research among community partners" (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010, p. 643) and to talk about our shared goals of promoting the program's stability, reducing dropout rates, and enabling students to progress smoothly to the next grade.

In addition, a prior understanding of higher education community engagement would have enhanced our preparation for the time, energy, and emotional commitment required in healthy, longitudinal partnerships. We did not fathom how long it takes to build a relationship and trust with school partners. Having been familiar only with short-term classroom-based research studies, we did not have a model for longitudinal engagement spanning more than 3 years involving so many researchers. We are still left with questions like how to sustain this long-term partnership and how to pace partnerships to avoid exhausting ourselves.

Furthermore, we have also learned that we should do a better job of recording the his-

stories of our collaboration and partnership. Over the years, we have seen key personnel changing in our partnering school. For example, teachers and administrators with whom we closely worked relocated to other spaces, threatening the preservation of our partnership history. Instructional materials that we have codeveloped and purchased, as well as the class website, can easily be forgotten. As a result, we felt the burden of having to restate the purposes of our presence and reestablish our relationships. Knowing the literature and being familiar with other partnership models would help us better cement our partnership histories.

We agree with Day et al. (2021) that partnerships can lead to positive changes in the consideration of our partnership roles as educators and the overall educational environment. Knowing the larger literature about long-term partnerships would have informed us that as the partnership matures our roles evolve, and that we need to be ready to adapt and grow too. At the beginning of our partnership, we focused on building classroom libraries, codeveloping materials, and providing small-group language instruction. However, as the program has become more stabilized and established, we realize that its needs have changed. We also recognize that we have reached a critical turning point for reflecting on our directions and paths.

### **Humanizing Partnerships as Essential**

Every higher education community engagement endeavor must be centralized around humanizing partnerships. We have invested time in building relationships with different stakeholders by frequently visiting the school and conducting individual interviews. Specifically, our team listened to and learned about the various experiences and needs of the teachers, parents, and administrators instead of assuming authority or overstepping boundaries (Wegemer & Renick, 2021). We empathize with the stakeholders' challenges, frustrations, and unique experiences. This understanding enables us to build trust and rapport within the educational community and to remain grounded when encountering challenges and conflicts. We have sought to establish relationships "built upon an infrastructure of trust, communication, listening, empathy, negotiation, diplomacy, and conflict resolution" (Williams, 2011, p. 29). Therefore, we emphasize the importance of centralizing higher education community engagement efforts around hu-

manizing partnerships. Building relationships, conducting interviews, and empathizing with the experiences and needs of stakeholders must contribute to trust and rapport within our educational communities.

Furthermore, we learned that recognizing the complexities of our personal and professional roles, especially when multiple identities intersect, was crucial for effectively managing our partnership and addressing issues within the community. We now understand that various emotions, challenges, and tensions are inevitable when crossing boundaries. In partnerships, power struggles manifest through diverse cultures, norms, and expectations (Dumlao & Janke, 2012). We need to develop a nuanced understanding of these complexities and distribute power equitably among partners, which involves “teachers’ ability to become knowledge brokers by shapeshifting into different personas and engaging in brokering processes to build and share knowledge” (Jusinski, 2021, p. 189). Our commitment lies in advocating for a fair distribution of power among partners. By embracing the role of knowledge brokers as we engage in processes to construct knowledge, we aim to advance our understanding and application of successful and equitable partnership management.

It is imperative to address existing tensions through candid and open dialogue. In our capacity as boundary spanners, we have adeptly acknowledged and navigated the multifaceted challenges, encompassing power imbalances and the nuanced intersection of personal and professional identities. Ensuring that every team member possesses a voice and the potential to assume leadership roles, irrespective of their academic position, is a fundamental commitment. To foster a conducive environment, we advocate for the facilitation of regular meetings and constructive discussions within the research team and between researchers and practitioners. Our stance aligns with the perspective put forth by Waitoller and Kozleski (2013), wherein inclusive education necessitates sustained endeavors toward equitable opportunities, the acknowledg-

ment of differences, and the empowerment of marginalized groups in decision-making processes.

Recognizing the power imbalances within our research team, with some members in tenure-track research positions and others in teaching roles, we advocate for a more democratic approach in which each team member is content with their roles and contributions to make this partnership sustainable and successful. Moreover, as we have many members, we were able to secure enough participants to consistently assist with the partner school’s needs and requests, even when institutional duties placed time restrictions on some individuals. We believe that it is important to act with resilience and adaptability to achieve our ultimate goals in the partnership.

In conclusion, our journey in higher education community engagement has unveiled valuable lessons that resonate with the broader context of collaborative scholarship. As boundary brokers, we came to recognize the significance of familiarizing ourselves with higher education community engagement literature, shedding light on the need for a comprehensive understanding of partnership models and communication frameworks. The importance of humanizing partnerships emerged as a central theme, emphasizing the value of building relationships, conducting interviews, and empathizing with the diverse experiences and needs of stakeholders.

As we embark on future endeavors, we invite reflection on these lessons, urging stakeholders to consider the transformative potential of nuanced understandings, empathetic partnerships, and the continual pursuit of equitable collaboration in the landscape of higher education community engagement. We also recommend systemic and structural changes within higher education institutions, such as creating clear guidelines and manuals for higher education community engagement endeavors and reducing institutional workload of faculty and staff who take additional time to build scholarship with the community.



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