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“We Are Not Asking to Be Saved—We Are Asking to Be Seen." Dominican Students’ Visions for Linguistically Affirming, Culturally Sustaining, and Humanizing Schools

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Abstract

Dominican students are frequently absorbed into broad labels such as “Latino/a/x/e,” “Hispanic,” or “multilingual learner,” categories that can conceal the histories, racial formations, language practices, and migration experiences shaping their education. This ethnographically informed qualitative study examined how 10 Dominican high-school students described schooling in classrooms led by white, female, monolingual teachers. Students’ accounts revealed three connected patterns: uneven language access shaped by raciolinguistic hierarchies; partial and repetitive curricular representation of Dominican life; and disciplinary and relational practices that made belonging conditional.

Keywords: Dominican students; culturally sustaining pedagogy; raciolinguistic justice; belonging; teacher–student mismatch; translanguaging

Across the United States, the racial, cultural, and linguistic composition of public-school enrollment has changed far more quickly than the teaching workforce. National data show that roughly eight in ten public-school teachers identified as non-Hispanic white in 2020–2021, while Black, Latino, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and multiracial educators remained sharply underrepresented (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020; Schaeffer, 2024). The pattern is pronounced in Massachusetts. State staffing data indicate that white educators continue to dominate lead-teacher positions even as Black and Latino students constitute a substantial share of enrollment (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2025). Demographic difference alone does not determine teaching quality: White monolingual teachers can build strong, sustaining relationships, and shared racial or linguistic identity does not automatically produce just practice. The concern emerges when structural

mismatch is compounded by limited preparation, unexamined bias, monolingual norms, and institutional routines that position dominant cultural practices as neutral (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Howard, 2003; Sleeter, 2001). Teacher–student mismatch is therefore best understood as a relationship among demographics, power, knowledge, preparation, and institutional expectations. Teachers influence not only test scores but also attendance, confidence, identity development, disciplinary exposure, and students' willingness to participate (Dee, 2004; Jackson, 2018). When educators lack the historical and linguistic resources needed to interpret students' words and behavior, ordinary classroom moments can become sites of misrecognition. Educators may interpret humor as defiance, view self-advocacy as disrespect, perceive Spanish as avoidance, or read family responsibility as irresponsibility. The educational issue is not difference itself; it is whether schools have built the capacity to respond to difference with skill, humility, and justice.

Latino students are often grouped under broad categories such as "Latino/a/x/e," "Hispanic," or "multilingual learner," categories that can obscure differences in national origin, race, migration history, generation, language repertoire, and local context. For Dominican students, those broad labels can conceal the histories, racial formations, language practices, and migration experiences that shape schooling.

This study therefore asked, "How do Dominican students describe and experience the pedagogical practices of their white, female, monolingual classroom teachers?"

Literature Review

Latino Educational Access, Opportunity, and Counternarratives

Research on Latino students consistently shows that educational opportunity is shaped by more than individual effort or English proficiency. School structures distribute access through course placement, language policy, teacher expectations, disciplinary practices, and relationships

with families and communities. Valenzuela's (1999) account of subtractive schooling demonstrates how institutions can devalue students' language and culture while interpreting disengagement as an individual deficit. LatCrit scholarship similarly challenges explanations that detach educational outcomes from race, language, immigration, and institutional power and instead treats students' counterstories as evidence about how schools operate (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). These perspectives shift the analytic question from what Latino students lack to how schools organize access, recognition, and opportunity (Skiba et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2020; Pasternak et al., 2020).

This literature also cautions against treating Latino students as a homogeneous population. Differences in national origin, race, migration history, generation, language repertoire, socioeconomic position, and local context shape how students encounter U.S. schools. Research on teacher preparation and raciolinguistic ideology further shows that educators may enter culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms without sufficient opportunities to examine whiteness, race, culture, language, and power (Howard, 2003; Sleeter, 2001), while racialized language practices may be heard as deficient even when students communicate effectively (Flores & Rosa, 2015). A useful account of Latino educational access must therefore capture common structural patterns alongside meaningful within-group differences (López, 2002; Hernández, 2023).

More recent scholarship cited in this manuscript extends these concerns by examining how culturally responsive pedagogy can be misappropriated when reduced to good intentions or decontextualized strategies and how culturally based pedagogy in teacher education can lose its sociohistorical and structural grounding (Evans et al., 2020; Pasternak et al., 2020). Hernández

(2023) further shows why analyses of Latino educational experience must remain attentive to anti-Blackness and racial innocence rather than treating Latino identity as racially uniform.

Language, Dominican Specificity, and Afro-Latino Educational Meaning-Making

For newcomer and emergent bilingual students, access to academic content is inseparable from access to language, relationships, and institutional knowledge. Bilingual and translanguaging scholarship challenge the assumption that home-language use delays learning; instead, students' full linguistic repertoires can support comprehension, identity, participation, and the development of academic ideas (García & Wei, 2014). Research on bilingual education likewise documents the costs of subtractive approaches that position English as the only legitimate language of schooling and the possibilities of additive models that develop English without requiring students to abandon existing linguistic resources (Bartlett & García, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999).

Dominican immigrant youth are especially important to this literature. Bartlett and García's (2011) ethnographic study of Gregorio Luperón High School documents an additive bilingual model designed around Dominican and other Latino newcomer youth. Their work shows that successful schooling depends not simply on translation but on treating bilingualism, community knowledge, and students' migration experiences as educational resources. This counter-narrative matters because it resists depictions of newcomer youth as linguistically deficient and shows that institutional design can create conditions for academic participation and belonging. At the same time, access remains vulnerable when bilingual support depends on individual teachers rather than coherent school structures.

Dominican-specific educational research remains comparatively limited within the literature reviewed here. The studies cited in this manuscript emphasize additive bilingual

schooling for Dominican newcomer youth, migration and generational context, and the ways race and gender shape schooling across Dominican and Caribbean youth experiences (Bartlett & García, 2011; López, 2002).

Newcomer and U.S.-born children of immigrants may share transnational family and community contexts, but they do not encounter schooling from the same generational position. Bartlett and García (2011) show how recently arrived Dominican youth navigate language transition and institutional unfamiliarity, whereas López (2002) demonstrates how U.S.-born Dominican and other Caribbean youth negotiate race, gender, and schooling across generations. Read together, these studies caution against treating newcomer status, nativity, and generational status as interchangeable. Terminology also varies across research traditions; this article retains the source study's label "first-generation U.S.-born" as demographic context and does not use it as a universal definition or as a proxy for Dominican identity.

Dominican students are often absorbed into aggregate categories such as Latino/a/x/e, Hispanic, English learner, immigrant, Black, or student of color. Those categories can be politically and analytically useful, but they can also obscure the histories and racial formations that shape Dominican educational experience. Dominican identity is produced through African, Taíno, European, Caribbean, and diasporic histories; migration and transnational family life; U.S. racial classification; and the Dominican Republic's histories of colorism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Haitianism (Candelario, 2007; Torres-Saillant, 1998). Dominican youth may identify as Dominican, Spanish, Hispanic, Black, moreno/a, or through other context-dependent terms while negotiating racial categories that do not map neatly across national settings (Bailey, 2002; López, 2002).

This specificity has direct educational consequences. López (2002), for example, demonstrates that race and gender shape schooling among second-generation Dominican and other Caribbean youth, while scholarship on Dominican immigrant students highlights the interaction of migration, bilingualism, and institutional opportunity. These studies make clear that findings about "Latino students" cannot simply be transferred to Dominican students without attention to phenotype, language variety, migration history, generation, and national identity. The literature available for this manuscript does not support a simple one-to-one comparison among Puerto Rican, Colombian, Dominican, and other Latino groups; the more defensible analytic move is to disaggregate Dominican experience while locating it within broader Latino and Afro-Latino scholarship.

An Afro-Latino lens adds another layer of complexity. Dominican racial identity has long been shaped by tensions among African ancestry, color hierarchies, anti-Haitianism, and national narratives that privilege Spanish and European ancestry (Candelario, 2007; Torres-Saillant, 1998). In U.S. schools, students encounter these histories alongside a racial system that may classify them differently than they or their families classify themselves. Racial innocence helps explain how anti-Black hierarchies can persist while institutions present their practices as neutral (Hernández, 2023). For Dominican students, curriculum, language correction, discipline, and representation can become sites where racial meaning is produced rather than merely reflected.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy offers a counter-position by asking schools to sustain students' linguistic and cultural practices while supporting academic learning and critical engagement with power (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017). Funds of knowledge scholarship similarly treats families and communities as holders of historically accumulated knowledge rather than collections of deficits (Moll et al., 1992). Together, these traditions

suggest that Dominican and Afro-Latino students should not be positioned only as recipients of culturally responsive strategies; their language practices, histories, interpretations, and community knowledge can shape classroom intellectual work.

Taken together, prior scholarship establishes several important points: Latino educational experiences are structured by unequal access and institutional power; newcomer and bilingual students benefit when linguistic resources are treated additively; Dominican youth navigate distinctive migration, linguistic, and racial formations; and culturally sustaining approaches challenge deficit interpretations of students and communities. Yet these bodies of scholarship are not always brought together. Much of the literature either aggregates Dominican students within broader Latino or multilingual categories or examines dimensions—language, race, migration, or school belonging—in relative isolation.

This study addresses that gap by centering Dominican high-school students' own interpretations of classrooms led by white, female, monolingual teachers and examining language access, curricular representation, discipline, and belonging as connected institutional processes. Rather than asking whether demographic mismatch is inherently harmful, the study asks how students interpret the pedagogical and institutional practices through which difference becomes consequential. Their testimonios provide a Dominican-specific counternarrative that identifies both barriers and the conditions students associate with rigorous, linguistically affirming, culturally sustaining, and humanizing schooling.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework brings together Latino critical race theory (LatCrit), culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), and racial innocence, while raciolinguistic scholarship functions as a sensitizing concept across these lenses.

Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit)

Latino critical race theory (LatCrit) attends to the intersections of race, language, immigration, culture, and institutional power and recognizes counterstories to challenge dominant explanations (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). In this study, students' testimonios are treated as knowledge rather than anecdotes, consistent with testimonio methodology that links personal accounts to broader relations of power (Pérez Huber, 2008).

Racial Innocence, Raciolinguistic Power, and Belonging

In this study, teacher–student mismatch is examined through four connected components: demographics, power, knowledge and preparation, and institutional expectations. Teacher–student demographic mismatch is not inherently harmful. Its consequences depend on how educators and institutions interpret difference, distribute access, and respond to students' cultural and linguistic resources. Research on teacher preparation warns that limited opportunities to examine whiteness, race, culture, and power can leave teachers underprepared for culturally diverse schools (Howard, 2003; Sleeter, 2001). Research on raciolinguistic ideology further shows that language practices associated with racialized communities may be heard as deficient even when speakers communicate effectively (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Racial innocence helps explain how institutions can present practices as neutral while anti-Black hierarchies remain intact (Hernández, 2023).

These processes are relational and instructional. Teacher expectations shape feedback, opportunity, and participation, while subtractive approaches to language and culture can weaken trust between students and schools (Valenzuela, 1999). Conversely, relationships grounded in care, contextual understanding, and high expectations can support engagement across racial and linguistic differences. The analytic focus, therefore, is not an individual teacher's identity in

isolation but the interaction of teacher preparation, institutional norms, pedagogical choices, and students' lived experiences.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) offers a response that moves beyond surface-level representation. CSP asks schools to sustain students' linguistic and cultural practices while supporting academic learning and critical engagement with power (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017). This stance builds on culturally relevant and responsive traditions but resists reducing culture to celebrations, engagement techniques, or isolated curricular additions (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014). (Evans et al., 2020; Pasternak et al., 2020). Funds of knowledge scholarship similarly treats families and communities as holders of historically accumulated knowledge rather than as collections of deficits (Moll et al., 1992). Together, these traditions suggest that linguistically and culturally affirming practice must shape classroom discourse, curriculum, assessment, discipline, and family relationships. They also establish the gap this study addresses: limited scholarship has examined how Dominican high-school students themselves interpret these practices in classrooms led by white, female, monolingual teachers.

The literature identifies a need to examine teacher–student mismatch without treating demographic identity as destiny and to disaggregate Dominican students' experiences from broad panethnic categories. An ethnographically informed design centered students' testimonios as knowledge rather than anecdote, positioning young people as analysts of the institutions they navigate (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2008).

Method

This study used an ethnographically informed qualitative design to center Dominican students' accounts of schooling and examine the social, linguistic, racial, and institutional meanings embedded in those accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The approach drew on qualitative and ethnographic traditions that emphasize firsthand accounts, context, culture, power, and meaning-making. Data were generated through participant-selected individual interviews and small-group conversaciones/testimonios. Testimonio methodology recognizes participants as holders and creators of knowledge and links personal accounts to broader relations of power (Pérez Huber, 2008). Using both formats allowed private, in-depth reflection and collective meaning-making while maintaining a feasible, ethically protected community-based research setting.

The research design focused on four related questions: (a) students' perceptions of racial, cultural, and linguistic differences between themselves and their teachers; (b) how those differences shaped educational experiences; (c) how students described and responded to pedagogical practices and instructional strategies; and (d) what challenges or barriers students encountered in relation to their racial, cultural, and linguistic identities.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted during summer 2025 through two established community-based organizations, referred to here as Youth Community Organization and Dominican Cultural Foundation. Pseudonyms are used to reduce the possibility of deductive identification. Youth Community Organization provides Latino youth and families with educational support, leadership development, after-school and summer programming, college and career preparation, and arts and cultural enrichment. The Dominican Cultural Foundation supports Dominican

students and families through scholarships, educational workshops, adult language and citizenship programming, and community cultural events. Both organizations shared information about bilingual study with students and families. One organization also gave the researcher opportunities to build rapport during summer classes and field trips, while the other distributed recruitment materials to eligible students and families. Participants attended two Massachusetts public-school districts, Metro City and River Valley, that serve substantial Dominican communities.

Two community-based organizations supported participant recruitment and engagement in this study. **Youth Community Organization**, a pseudonym used throughout this manuscript, was established in 1968 and is a longstanding Boston-based organization that serves approximately 5,000 youth and adults annually, primarily youth of color and Latine youth and families in the City of Boston. **Dominican Cultural Foundation**, also a pseudonym, was formally established in 2003 and serves Dominican communities across Massachusetts through educational scholarships, English-language and citizenship programming, cultural and civic activities, and programs for youth, adults, families, and older adults. An organization-wide annual service count for the Dominican Cultural Foundation is not publicly reported.

In the context of this study, Youth Community Organization was associated with students attending schools in the pseudonymized **Metro City** district. The organization facilitated sustained rapport building between the researcher and prospective participants by providing opportunities for the researcher to participate in summer classes, field trips, and informal interactions with youth. Dominican Cultural Foundation was associated with participants attending schools in the pseudonymized **River Valley** district and supported recruitment

primarily by distributing study materials to eligible students and families, including scholarship recipients and their families. Although participating students connected through Dominican Cultural Foundation attended River Valley schools, the organization itself was not based specifically in River Valley and should not be characterized as a River Valley organization, as its programs serve Dominican communities throughout Massachusetts.

All organization and school district names presented in this manuscript are pseudonyms used to protect the confidentiality of participating individuals and community partners.

Two Massachusetts urban districts, referred to here as Metro City and River Valley, make the stakes visible while protecting participating students' identities. Metro City enrolls approximately 50,000–55,000 students, with Hispanic/Latino students comprising roughly 40%–50% of enrollment. River Valley enrolls approximately 12,000–14,000 students, more than 90% of whom are classified as Hispanic/Latino. In both districts, the educator workforce remains disproportionately white and female relative to the communities served (Boston Public Schools, n.d.; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], n.d.-a, n.d.-b). These contexts matter because Massachusetts has long-established Dominican communities, yet district-level categories such as “Hispanic/Latino” do not isolate Dominican enrollment and may conceal within-group differences. Purposeful eligibility criteria required current high school enrollment, affiliation with one of the participating organizations, experience in classrooms led by white, female, monolingual teachers, and parent or guardian consent for minors. Both island-born and U.S.-born students were included to capture variation in migration and generational context without treating nativity as a measure of Dominican identity or as a predetermined analytic category. Following organizational outreach, interested students and families contacted

the researcher directly. Recruitment materials and consent/assent documents were available in Spanish and English. Exponential discriminative snowball sampling supplemented organizational outreach: participants could refer other potentially eligible students, but the researcher independently determined eligibility (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Parents or guardians provided consent for minors, and bilingual consent/assent procedures explained the study's purpose, voluntary nature, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality protections, and limits of confidentiality associated with participant referral.

The sample consisted of 10 Dominican high school students enrolled in Grades 9–12. Participants ranged from 14 to 18 years old and self-identified as Dominican during recruitment. All participants were enrolled in high school during the study; the final sample included no recent graduates.

Seven participants attended Metro City schools and three attended River Valley schools; see Table 1 for participant-level details.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Student Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Grade	School District	Generational Status
Starlyn	17	M	12	Metro City	Island-born
Luis	14	M	9	Metro City	U.S.-born (2nd generation)
Mariel	16	F	11	Metro City	Island-born
José	15	M	10	Metro City	U.S.-born (1st generation)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Grade	School District	Generational Status
Yaneli	18	F	12	Metro City	Island-born
Carlos	16	M	10	Metro City	Island-born
Kiara	16	F	10	Metro City	Island-born
Miguel	17	M	12	River Valley	U.S.-born (1st generation)
Génesis	15	F	10	River Valley	Island-born
Rafael	14	M	9	River Valley	Island-born

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Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom, depending on participant location and preference. Most Metro City sessions took place in a familiar public setting near Youth Community Organization, while River Valley interviews occurred via Zoom or during community visits. These locations supported accessibility, familiarity, privacy, and participant comfort.

The study used individual interviews and semi-structured small group *conversaciones/testimonios* with open-ended questions. Participants selected one format rather than completing both automatically. Individual interviews supported private, in-depth reflection, while small-group *conversaciones/testimonios* supported collective remembering, response, and meaning-making. The interview protocol invited students to describe teacher–student interactions, language barriers and supports, cultural relevance, classroom behavior and

discipline, power dynamics, curriculum, family communication, and their visions for better schooling. Participants could communicate in Spanish, English, or both; we retained Spanish-language quotations and translated them as needed.

In this study, conversaciones/testimonios functioned as small-group spaces for collective remembering, response, and meaning-making, consistent with testimonio methodology that recognizes participants as holders and creators of knowledge and links personal accounts to broader relations of power (Pérez Huber, 2008). In this study, all 10 participants completed individual, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions designed to elicit reflection on their educational experiences, including teacher–student interactions, language barriers and supports, cultural relevance, classroom behavior and discipline, and power dynamics. In addition, Metro City participants took part in small-group conversaciones/testimonios during the summer data-collection period. These sessions were possible because the researcher had greater access to Metro City students through sustained engagement with the community organization, and they provided additional spaces for collective remembering, response, and meaning-making. Consistent with testimonio methodology, the conversaciones/testimonios positioned participants as holders and creators of knowledge and connected their personal accounts to broader relations of power (Pérez Huber, 2008). Individual and small-group sessions occurred weekly from July 5 through July 22, 2025, either in person or via Zoom, depending on participant location and accessibility.

Data Analysis

Interview and small-group data were transcribed and organized in NVivo. Analysis began with open coding of significant statements, words, and recurring ideas. Descriptive coding identified what participants reported was happening, while interpretive coding examined the

meanings students attributed to those experiences (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher then conducted thematic analysis across individual interviews and group conversations, comparing codes and patterns across participants and data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The small-group *conversaciones/testimonios* were analyzed both as collective meaning-making spaces and in relation to patterns identified in individual interviews. This iterative process produced three overarching themes: raciolinguistic schooling and uneven language access; curriculum, identity, and partial representation of Dominican life; and conditional belonging alongside youth visions for humanizing schooling.

Researcher Positionality and Trustworthiness

Researcher positionality was treated as part of the analytic process. The researcher is Dominican, migrated from Santo Domingo to Boston as a child, experienced English-only schooling as a newcomer, and has worked in education and community partnerships in Massachusetts. These experiences supported cultural and linguistic access but also created responsibilities to avoid if shared Dominican identity produced identical experiences. Reflexive practice therefore focused on how the researcher's identities, professional authority, migration history, and commitments to culturally sustaining education could shape questioning, rapport, interpretation, and representation.

Trustworthiness was supported through a documented interview protocol, consistent coding procedures, comparison of individual and small-group data, reflexive attention to researcher influence, and transparent reporting of sampling and study constraints. The goal was not universal generalization but contextually grounded interpretation and analytic transferability to educational settings confronting related raciolinguistic, curricular, and relational dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Three Findings, One Institutional Pattern

Students' accounts clustered into three connected findings: (1) linguistic access was uneven and shaped by monolingual and raciolinguistic expectations; (2) Dominican life appeared in the curriculum through partial, repetitive representation that limited intellectual belonging; and (3) discipline, attendance, and family communication often made belonging conditional. Across all three, students offered a counternarrative to deficit explanations of disengagement. They described the institutional conditions that constrained participation and, just as importantly, the conditions that made rigorous learning possible.

Language Access Was a Lifeline—and a Site of Control

For newcomer students, Spanish was more than a translation tool. It supported comprehension, emotional safety, peer connection, and continuity during migration. Students remembered teachers who used translation applications, attempted Spanish, checked for understanding, and made it safer to ask for help. Peers also translated instructions and routines, but students' reliance on bilingual classmates revealed an institutional weakness: access to instruction could depend on whether another student was available.

Support was inconsistent. Some students encountered English-only expectations that equated rapid English acquisition with effort. One newcomer reported being told that she had been in the country long enough to complete the work in English; Kiara explained, "Yo no entiendo nada de lo que ella dice. Yo estoy perdía en su clase." "I do not understand what she says. I am lost in her class." Students' accounts show how a language-development challenge can become academic and emotional exclusion when scaffolding is withheld.

Students also described linguistic hierarchy within Spanish. Dominican vocabulary, pronunciation, and expressions were sometimes corrected against supposedly "proper" forms, and two participants reported that Spanish—their home language—was the class in which they earned their lowest grades. The issue was not whether schools should teach academic register; students' accounts distinguished additive instruction that expands repertoire from correction that frames Dominican Spanish as defective. Yaneli recalled, "La maestra me dijo que nuestro español no es apropiado" ("The teacher told me that our Spanish is not appropriate"). The statement shows how correction can communicate judgment about Dominican identity as well as language form.

Representation Without Depth Limited Intellectual Belonging

Students described Dominican history as present but narrow. They repeatedly encountered Trujillo, the Mirabal sisters, and occasionally Mamá Tingó, often during heritage-month instruction, while broader histories of African ancestry, Haiti and Dominican Haitian relations, migration, labor, art, political struggle, and contemporary Dominican life were largely absent. Students did not ask for an easier or more celebratory curriculum. They asked for greater historical range and complexity: "Yo quiero aprender de mis raíces"—"I want to learn about my roots." Another participant contrasted this limited inclusion with the curriculum's dominant focus: "En la escuela estamos acostumbrados a la cultura americana, la cultura blanca, porque eso es lo único que uno aprende en la clase de historia" ("In school, we are accustomed to American culture—white culture—because that is all we learn in history class").

This partial representation also shaped how students made racial meaning. Students expressed strong Dominican pride while using racial terms that reflected both Dominican and U.S. systems of classification. Some distanced themselves from Blackness or associated

Blackness primarily with Haitians. The finding is not that students were individually confused; rather, curricular omissions left limited structured space to examine African ancestry, colorism, anti-Blackness, anti-Haitianism, migration, and the production of racial categories across national contexts. Students' requests point toward intellectual belonging: being recognized as learners whose communities and histories warrant sustained, rigorous study.

The pattern therefore involved both representation and interpretation: what was included in the curriculum shaped the conceptual tools students had for understanding Dominican racial, historical, and diasporic complexity.

Belonging Became Conditional, but Students Articulated an Alternative

Students described belonging as negotiated through everyday correction, discipline, attendance responses, requests for help, and communication with families. Several felt singled out, publicly corrected, or judged through labels that persisted after disciplinary events. Attendance concerns were similarly experienced as punitive when schools did not ask about transportation, work, or caregiving responsibilities. Calls home could feel like threats when students believed adults contacted families before gathering context. Carlos summarized the disciplinary climate directly: "Esta escuela se siente como una prisión" ("This school feels like a prison").

Yet students' testimonios were not limited to critique. They asked for emotional support, adults who sought context before judging, respect for Spanish, meaningful representation, joy in learning, and broader access to sports, vocational programs, and enrichment. They did not ask schools to lower expectations. Their alternative vision joined dignity, relationship, linguistic access, cultural recognition, and opportunity as conditions for sustained intellectual effort. Across the findings, belonging emerged not as a reward for compliance but as the reliable experience of

being seen, heard, challenged, supported, and included without surrendering language or identity. As one student stated, “Nosotros necesitamos apoyo emocional” (“We need emotional support”); another added, “Deberíamos divertirnos y reírnos más mientras aprendemos” (“We should have more fun and laugh more while learning”).

Discussion

The findings confirm, extend, and complicate broader scholarship on Latino educational access. Consistent with LatCrit and subtractive-schooling research, students located participation within institutional conditions rather than individual motivation alone (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Their accounts also support culturally sustaining scholarship by showing that language, curriculum, discipline, relationships, and opportunity are not separate “supports”; together they communicate whose knowledge and ways of being are legitimate in school (Paris & Alim, 2017). This study shows how these processes converge in Dominican students’ accounts and how students themselves theorize an alternative.

The first finding confirms research showing that newcomer and emergent bilingual students need access to academic content through, rather than despite, their full linguistic repertoires. Bartlett and García’s (2011) work with Dominican immigrant youth demonstrates the possibilities of additive bilingual schooling, while translanguaging scholarship conceptualizes multilingual practices as resources for thinking and participation (García & Wei, 2014). Participants in this study similarly described Spanish as supporting comprehension, emotional safety, and connection. Their accounts challenge deficit narratives that interpret limited English output as limited cognition or motivation.

The finding also extends this literature in a specifically Dominican direction. Students experienced hierarchy not only between English and Spanish but also within Spanish itself, when

Dominican forms were measured against supposedly proper or prestigious varieties. Flores and Rosa's (2015) raciolinguistic framework helps explain why this matters: language is evaluated through racialized listening practices, not only through neutral standards of correctness. The Dominican counternarrative is therefore more complex than a call for translation. Linguistic access requires schools to affirm variation within Spanish while explicitly teaching register and academic language without positioning Dominican speech as deficient.

The second finding confirms critiques of culturally responsive practice reduced to symbolic inclusion (Evans et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Students recognized Dominican figures in the curriculum, yet repetition without historical depth did not produce intellectual belonging. Their requests complicate the assumption that representation is achieved when students can simply "see themselves" in a text. They wanted sustained inquiry into Dominican history, migration, African and Taíno ancestry, Haiti, political struggle, and contemporary life.

This finding also adds an Afro-Latino dimension that broader Latino literature can obscure. Dominican students' negotiations of Blackness, moreno/a identity, Spanish ancestry, and Haitian difference reflect histories of colorism, anti-Blackness, anti-Haitianism, and migration documented in Dominican studies (Candelario, 2007; Torres-Saillant, 1998). The study therefore contributes evidence that curricular access is also racial meaning-making. When schools omit the histories needed to interpret Dominican racial formation, students are left to navigate multiple racial systems without sustained academic tools for doing so. The counternarrative is not a request for celebratory ethnicity; it is a demand for a rigorous curriculum capable of holding Dominicanidad and Blackness, pride, critique, island and diaspora together.

The third finding aligns with research showing that discipline and teacher interpretation are not race-neutral and that relational trust shapes participation and belonging (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Skiba et al., 2011). Participants described correction, attendance responses, and family communication as moments when adults decided whether they were credible, responsible, or worthy of support. Their accounts complicate explanations of absenteeism or disengagement that focus only on student behavior by foregrounding transportation, work, caregiving, linguistic vulnerability, and prior experiences of judgment.

These testimonios add coherence to students' alternative vision. Students linked dignity, emotional support, language access, family partnership, curricular depth, joy, and opportunity as mutually reinforcing conditions for rigorous learning. This counternarrative challenges rescue-oriented or deficit-oriented accounts of Dominican and Latino youth. Participants were not asking to be saved or excused from academic expectations; they were identifying the institutional conditions under which they could participate fully. In this sense, the study extends prior scholarship by positioning Dominican students not only as people affected by educational structures but also as analysts of those structures and producers of knowledge about how schools can change.

This study makes three related contributions. First, it disaggregates Dominican students from broad Latino and multilingual categories while still locating their experiences within shared structures of racialized and linguistic inequality. Second, it brings language access, curriculum, discipline, and belonging into one analytic frame, showing how these processes can reinforce one another in everyday schooling. Third, it centers students' testimonios as a source of institutional knowledge. The resulting contribution is not a claim that Dominican students share one experience; rather, it demonstrates why Dominican racial, linguistic, migratory, and

diasporic specificity matters when schools interpret behavior, design curriculum, provide language access, and define belonging.

Taken together, the discussion suggests that teacher–student demographic difference becomes educationally consequential through the interaction of language access, curricular recognition, disciplinary interpretation, and relational trust rather than through demographic mismatch alone. This synthesis reinforces the study's central claim that students' testimonios illuminate institutional conditions that can either constrain or support rigorous participation.

Implications

Teachers do not need to speak every student's home language to create a linguistically affirming classroom. They do need a stance that treats multilingualism as a resource. Translanguaging recognizes that multilingual learners draw from an integrated linguistic repertoire to think, communicate, and make meaning (García & Wei, 2014). In practice, students might annotate in Spanish, discuss a complex idea with a peer before responding in English, consult bilingual resources, produce multilingual drafts, or demonstrate learning through multiple modes. Schools should make these options ordinary, not exceptional. Translation applications can support immediate access, but they are not substitutes for qualified interpretation, bilingual educators, or thoughtfully designed materials. Leaders should set clear expectations for language access across content areas, ensure newcomer support isn't confined to a single specialist, and protect time for educators to plan scaffolds together. Assessment practices deserve particular attention. Educators should identify whether a task is measuring content knowledge, English development, or both, then interpret performance accordingly. Rubrics can separate conceptual understanding from language conventions. Students can be offered planning time in a home language and opportunities to revise as English develops. In Spanish courses, instruction should explicitly

address language variation and register without framing Dominican Spanish as defective. Finally, schools should monitor whether support is applied consistently in practice. Policies may authorize home-language use while individual classrooms continue to prohibit it. Student listening sessions, classroom observation, work-sample review, and family feedback can show whether multilingual learners can access instruction. The goal is not an occasional accommodation but an institutional guarantee: no student should have to remain lost in class because linguistic support depends on a teacher's discretion.

Curricular transformation begins with moving beyond token inclusion. Schools can conduct a vertical audit of whose knowledge appears, how often, in what roles, and with what complexity. For Dominican content, the audit should look beyond repeated units on Trujillo and the Mirabal sisters and ask whether students encounter African and Taíno histories, Haiti and the border, migration and diaspora, labor, literature, music, gender, social movements, contemporary politics, and local community knowledge. Students should participate as co-designers. Listening sessions can identify recurring content, missing questions, and relevant texts without turning individual students into representatives of an entire culture. Educators can partner with families, local scholars, artists, cultural organizations, and libraries to expand materials. Such collaboration honors community expertise and reduces the risk of a curriculum assembled from stereotypes or internet fragments. Race-conscious inquiry must be developmentally appropriate but should not be postponed indefinitely. Students already encounter colorism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Haitian narratives. Curriculum can provide vocabulary, evidence, historical context, and structured dialogue so that students can analyze rather than merely inherit those narratives. Teachers need preparation to facilitate disagreement, interrupt dehumanizing language, and maintain students' dignity while confronting harmful ideas. Success is not measured by the

number of cultural references added. It is whether students gain deeper disciplinary knowledge, stronger analytical tools, and a more expansive sense of who can produce knowledge. Curriculum should enable a Dominican student to feel affirmed and challenged—and enable every student to understand Dominican histories as part of local, national, Caribbean, and global history.

Restorative language can be layered onto punitive institutions without changing their underlying logic. A circle held after a humiliating public confrontation does not repair a system that still interprets the same students as threats. Restorative practice becomes transformative only when it redistributes voice, examines harm and power, protects dignity, and creates meaningful pathways for repair. Teachers can begin with small but consequential habits: correct privately when possible; ask what happened before assigning motive; describe observable behavior rather than character; pause before escalation; and invite students to explain how an interaction affected them. After conflict, adults should be prepared to acknowledge their own contribution. Professional authority is strengthened, not weakened, when educators model accountability. At the school level, leaders should review referrals, removals, suspensions, nurse referrals linked to suspicion, and family contacts for disparities. Quantitative patterns should be paired with qualitative review of incident narratives: What language is used to describe students? Which behaviors depend most on subjective judgment? Are self-advocacy, tone, or language differences being coded as defiance? Student and family perspectives should inform policy revision. Relational accountability also requires supportive attendance and family-engagement systems. Communication should occur before problems arise, in families' preferred languages, and include positive information. When concern emerges, the school should gather context, and coordinate supports rather than deploy the possibility of a call home as a threat. Discipline,

attendance, and family partnership should share one aim: restoring access to learning and strengthening the relationships that make accountability credible.

Teacher preparation and professional learning must move beyond generalized cultural competence. Educators need sustained opportunities to study raciolinguistic bias, anti-Blackness within and across Latino communities, migration, transnational racial identity, disability, discipline, and the history of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies. Without theoretical depth, equity frameworks can be reduced to compliance strategies or test-score gains (Evans et al., 2020; Pasternak et al., 2020). Preparation should connect knowledge to practice. Candidates and experienced teachers can analyze classroom discourse, examine whose language is corrected, rehearse multilingual scaffolds, study disciplinary scenarios for bias, design historically substantive units, and receive coaching based on student experience. Reflection on identity and positionality is necessary, but reflection without changed practice is insufficient. Programs should require evidence that teachers can build relationships, interpret behavior contextually, and create rigorous access for multilingual learners. Leadership determines whether this work becomes an initiative or an institutional commitment. Leaders allocate bilingual staffing, protect collaboration time, select curriculum, define discipline expectations, respond to family concerns, and decide what counts as evidence. They should establish accountability measures tied to students' lived access—not simply training completion. Equity goals can include consistent home-language access, reductions in subjective disciplinary disparities, broader participation in enrichment, curriculum-audit findings, and disaggregated measures of trust. Diversifying the workforce is also indispensable. Recruitment must be paired with retention, mentorship, equitable advancement, and working conditions that do not ask educators of color to carry all cultural and relational labor. The goal is both a more representative profession and a

profession in which every educator is prepared and accountable for race-conscious, linguistically sustaining practice.

Limitations

Several limitations shape the interpretation of these findings. First, the study involved a small, purposively recruited sample of 10 Dominican students connected to two community organizations. Snowball recruitment through overlapping social networks may have produced a relatively homogeneous group of participants and may have amplified experiences shared within those networks. The sample is therefore not intended to represent all Dominican students, whose experiences vary by race, gender, disability, migration history, documentation status, language proficiency, socioeconomic position, neighborhood, school placement, and other intersecting conditions. Second, the study centers on students' perceptions and testimonios. This is an intentional epistemological strength because students are often excluded from analyses of policies and practices that structure their schooling; however, the study did not triangulate each reported classroom interaction with teacher interviews, administrative records, or direct classroom observations. The findings therefore establish how participants experienced and interpreted schooling rather than adjudicating every event from multiple institutional perspectives. Classroom observation was initially considered but would have required additional district-level approvals and timelines beyond the community-based study design. Third, data collection occurred during a relatively brief summer period and involved both in-person and Zoom interactions. A longer longitudinal design could show how belonging, language access, racial identity, teacher relationships, and curricular experiences change across school years. These constraints call for careful transfer rather than broad generalization. They do not diminish

the value of students' recurring accounts; instead, they define the evidentiary boundaries within which readers should interpret the findings and recommendations.

Conclusion: Policy, Research, and the Invitation to Transform

State and district agencies should examine the distance between equity language and classroom experience. Terms such as belonging, restorative practice, and culturally responsive teaching can become depoliticized when translated into checklists. Policy should preserve their structural purpose by connecting guidance to resources, preparation, implementation evidence, and accountability. For agencies such as DESE, a central question is whether priorities produce measurable changes in multilingual access, curriculum, discipline, teacher learning, school climate, and student trust.

Future research should center Dominican students who are racialized, multilingual, disabled, newly arrived, or navigating multiple intersections. Broad categories can obscure patterns of identification and misidentification in special education, within-group differences, and the effects of anti-Blackness and language bias. Participatory and longitudinal designs can position students and families as co-constructors of knowledge and trace how belonging, identity, opportunity, and relationships change over time.

"The students in this study were asking not to be saved but to be seen, heard, and respected."

The students' testimonios ask readers to reconsider what schools teach through language rules, curricular omissions, disciplinary routines, and everyday interactions. Their disengagement was not a personal deficit; it was often a response to environments that marginalized their language, culture, and humanity. Yet their accounts also carried possibility. They imagined schools with emotional support, joyful rigor, meaningful history, restorative relationships, and

opportunity. Education justice does not depend on "fixing" Dominican students. It depends on transforming structures so that their *orgullo*, brilliance, and right to belong are treated as foundational to learning. The invitation is both ethical and practical: listen to students as analysts, build with them, and make belonging an institutional promise rather than a reward for compliance.

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Statements and Declarations

Ethics Approval

The University of Massachusetts Boston Institutional Review Board oversaw the study. Recruitment, consent/assent, confidentiality, anonymization, and data-collection procedures were designed to protect minor participants. [Carminia L. Castillo: IRB protocol 3863]

Consent to Participate

Participation was voluntary. Bilingual Spanish/English recruitment and consent/assent materials were used. Parents or guardians provided consent for minor participants, and students participated through the study's assent/voluntary-participation process.

Data Availability

The qualitative interview and small-group conversation data are not publicly available because they involve minor participants and contain potentially identifiable contextual

information protected by confidentiality commitments. De-identified excerpts necessary to support the article's analytic claims are presented in the manuscript. Any additional access must remain consistent with the approved ethics protocol and participant protections.

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The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

Carminia Lissette Castillo conceived and designed the study, conducted recruitment and data collection, analyzed and interpreted the data, and prepared the manuscript.

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