

Racial Justice in Multilingual Education



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The Letter Was the Lesson: Queer, Multilingual, and Racialized Teacher Letter-Writing as Pedagogy and Method

Brendan A. Kachnowski

Abstract

In a time of resurgent political hostility toward Queer, multilingual, and racialized students, this article explores letter-writing as a radical methodology of resistance, care, and knowledge production. Grounded in the lived experience of a Queer, Brown, multilingual educator, the piece centers a personal letter written to a multilingual student who came out during class. Through a multimodal, Spanglish-rich narrative that draws from abolitionist pedagogy, testimonio, and counterstory, the article examines how such letters can function as acts of healing, affirmation, and scholarly intervention. It interrogates three interwoven themes: intersectionality as pedagogical praxis, the emotional and political labor of educator visibility, and letter-writing as a decolonial method of scholarly inquiry. The piece also addresses the real risks marginalized educators face in practicing this method, particularly under legal and institutional regimes that criminalize inclusion, and provides concrete, justice-centered guidance for educators from diverse identities. Ultimately, the article reframes letter-writing not as peripheral or sentimental but as a method for reimagining what scholarship and education can be when rooted in love, presence, and collective survival.

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Introduction

As the Multilingual student population becomes the fastest-growing student demographic in the United States, projected to increase by 2.6% annually, the number of certified, licensed Multilingual educators has declined by 10.4% per year

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between 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 (Education Week, 2023). This growing mismatch highlights a systemic failure: While the number of multilingual students with intersecting marginalized identities rises, the support structures intended to serve them are shrinking. Notably absent from current educational discourse and reform is a critical examination of how Queer identities intersect within multilingual classrooms; a gap that becomes more urgent given the ongoing teacher shortage.

Recent data from the Human Rights Campaign (2023) shows that 97.9% of LGBTQIA+ youth in K-12 settings have disclosed their sexual or gender identities to peers, educators, or family, with most coming out between the ages of 12 and 13. Despite this, current research often treats Queerness and multilingual education as separate domains, ignoring the lived realities of students whose identities span both. In light of increasingly hostile political climates, where the BBC (2024) and ACLU (2024) predict that Donald Trump's return to office could result in the defunding of the Department of Education and the rollback of LGBTQIA+ protections, both of which have already begun unfolding in 2025; the stakes for marginalized students and educators are especially high.

These intersections are not only theoretical; they are lived through racialized experiences. Queer multilingual students of color, especially Black and Brown youth, often encounter layered exclusions rooted in both linguistic racism and heteronormativity. As Rosa and Flores (2017) argue, language is racialized, and multilingual students of color are frequently positioned as deficient, deviant, or dangerous. These racialized narratives amplify the vulnerabilities already faced by LGBTQIA+ youth, making the need for culturally sustaining, intersectional pedagogies all the more urgent. Without naming race and its role in these processes, we risk reifying the very silences we seek to disrupt.

As a Queer, Brown, and Multilingual educator with experience teaching in both K-12 and higher education, I have long recognized how my identities are politicized in different educational contexts. Personally and professionally, I have chosen to center my Latinx and LGBTQIA+ identities in my research, pedagogy, advocacy, and mentorship, not only as acts of resistance and defiance but as deliberate efforts to provide students with mirrors of themselves within the classroom. Yet, as Harris et al. (2022) caution, for LGBTQIA+ and POC educators and students, visibility often comes with profound isolation. In the absence of institutional support, we are left to rely on one another.

Acknowledging this isolation, I became more intentional in creating affirming classroom environments, practices that also served as a form of self-witnessing and private healing (Antonelli & Sembiante, 2022). By centering students' identities and narratives, I adopted an approach grounded in possibility, positioning students as the authors of their own stories (Reilly, 2007).

This article examines one such moment: when a student in my high school multilingual classroom came out to me. In response, I wrote a letter offering solidarity and support. This act of letter-writing became a roadmap for healing, not only for the student but for me. It addressed the lack of representation and affirmation that Queer students often face post-disclosure, especially in multilingual classrooms (O'Neill, 2020; Nelson, 2010). Rather than being a site of exposure or vulnerability that invites harm, the letter became a space for agency, connection, and communal knowledge. Through this agency, connection, and communal knowledge, this letter is written in 'Spanglish,' acknowledging the students' current knowledge of vocabulary around themselves, as well as honoring their native language, further affirming my positionality.

In the context of resurgent far-right political ideologies, symbolized but not limited to Trump's 2024 re-election (Rosa & Bonilla, 2017), the ongoing threats to inclusive education have intensified, and marginalized educators must be afforded both safety and authenticity in their work. This includes emotional outlets and reflective practices that sustain resilience and advocacy. Through analysis of the letter, I reflect on what this moment meant during my transition from K-12 to higher education and how it continues to resonate in the current political climate, as both an act of resistance and a tool for transformative meaning-making.

Ultimately, I argue that letter-writing between marginalized educators and students is not only a valid subject for scholarly inquiry but a vital practice of survival and resistance. By moving beyond the content of the letters themselves and into their broader sociopolitical contexts, this work contributes to ongoing conversations about racial and social justice. When marginalized educators reflect collectively and intentionally through writing, especially in moments marked by isolation and the need for representation, they reinforce the advocacy efforts that sustain our communities in the face of systemic oppression.

The Letterⁱ

Dear [Redacted],

Thank you for trusting me with this part of who you are. Estoy muy contenta de que hayas venido a mí para compartir esto. I know it takes incredible strength to share your truth, and I want you to know how deeply honored I am to receive it.

I can't claim to fully understand how you feel in this moment, but I can tell you a little about how I felt when I first shared my identity. I came out to my family when I was in middle school. I didn't know how they would respond, and the uncertainty was overwhelming. Funny enough, I first told a few friends and one trusted teacher. That teacher became a pillar of support for me throughout middle school, and we still keep in touch to this day.

Si bien mi familia reaccionó bastante bien a que yo fuera gay, también fui intimidado mucho por mis compañeros y perdí mucho apoyo del personal de la escuela y los maestros. My hope is that you will not have to endure similar pain at [Redacted School Name], and I want to be someone you can count on every single day I'm here.

Aunque nunca tuve un maestro gay yo mismo, sé lo que significa representar a mis estudiantes que son gay o LGBT. You are important to me. All of my students are. I hope to be a mirror for you; to reflect not only what is possible, but what is beautiful and already present in who you are. I hope this letter offers you some of the joy, love, and acceptance I know you deserve.

I was once in your shoes. I know how scary it can be, and how heavy the silence can feel. But I promise you: living authentically, while not always easy, has been the most rewarding experience of my life. It's brought me joy, resilience, and connection. Yes, there were moments of loneliness. But I found people, friends, mentors, chosen family, who saw me, loved me, and believed in me.

También encontrarás comunidad en ser LGBT, con muchos más amigos que quieren verte prosperar y vivir tu mejor vida. En esa comunidad, yo encontré gran parte de mi alegría en la escuela secundaria, la universidad, y ahora incluso en mi vida adulta. Aguanta por ellos, porque ellos te están esperando.

Siempre te apoyaré; tu vida, tu historia, y tu camino. I'm so excited to see all that you'll do, not just in this class, but far beyond it. Once again, thank you for sharing this with me. It means more than you know. I'm grateful to be someone you felt safe enough to come to, and I hope I can continue to be that for you.

Si necesitas algo más, apoyo, conversación, o simplemente alguien que escuche, por favor, comúnicate conmigo. Siempre estaré de tu lado.

With lots of love and care,

Mr. Kachnowski

Analysis And Discussion

Intersectionality as Pedagogical Praxis

The multilingual classroom is often imagined, and thus constrained, as a space concerned solely with linguistic development, a site where language acquisition is prioritized above all else (Norton, 2014). Yet, such a narrow conceptualization flattens the complexity of language itself, erasing the sociopolitical, cultural, and deeply personal dimensions through which it is lived and learned (Norton, 2014). Language is never neutral; as Janks (1993) and Barkhuizen (2016) remind us, to teach language

is also to teach identity, power, and belonging. Every word spoken, every silence held, every accent policed or celebrated carries with it the imprint of social hierarchies and cultural narratives. For students whose lives unfold at the intersections of language, race, and gender/sexual identity, pedagogy cannot afford to be apolitical (Janks 1993; Barkhuizen, 2016; Walker, 2019). In these classrooms, teaching becomes an act of ethical urgency. It demands an intentional recognition of how these layered identities shape and are shaped by students' experiences in school and beyond (Walker, 2019).

Intersectionality, in this context, is not merely a theoretical lens we glance through; it is the ground on which we stand; it is praxis (Jibrin & Salem, 2015). It is how we listen: carefully, relationally, humbly. It is how we respond with attentiveness to power, with commitments to solidarity, and with a refusal to fragment students' lives into manageable pedagogical parts. Intersectionality demands that we engage in education as a relational and justice-oriented practice, one that does not treat identities as additive checkboxes but as dynamic, intersecting sites of meaning-making and resistance.

In the letter I wrote to my student, the use of Spanglish was not an incidental or stylistic flourish; it was a deliberate act of affirmation. It was a recognition that for many multilingual youth, language is not a singular entity to be mastered but a terrain of fluid negotiation, a way of being in the world that defies binaries (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Spanglish, in this case, became a linguistic bridge, a site where both of us could be fully present. In choosing this hybrid language form, the letter resisted the deficit framing so frequently imposed upon both Queer and multilingual youth, who are too often seen through lenses of risk, remediation, or resilience, rather than joy, brilliance, and futurity (Nguyen & Yang, 2015; Nelson, 2010; Kaiser, 2017; Wozolek, 2018 & 2021).

This letter did not seek to protect or tolerate my student; it sought to celebrate them. It enacted a pedagogy in which no part of a student's identity, linguistic, racial, gendered, sexual/sexual orientation, needed to be hidden, simplified, or bracketed at the classroom door. In this moment, teaching became an act of refusal: a refusal to separate the personal from the pedagogical, a refusal to reinforce structures that render some identities invisible, and a refusal to imagine education as anything less than transformative. This is what it means to center intersectionality in pedagogy. It is not only about naming the systems that marginalize, but it is about actively creating spaces that disrupt those systems, that make room for joy, love, complexity, and full selfhood. It is about teaching as if our students' lives and their whole selves matter. Because they do.

The Politics of Educator Visibility

To write a letter like this, to be entrusted with such a deeply personal disclosure from a student, is to occupy a space of radical visibility, one that is as profoundly vulnerable as it is undeniably powerful. It is to be seen not only as an educator but as a whole person navigating the layered contours of identity within a system that often demands erasure. For Queer and BIPOC educators, this visibility is rarely benign (Weeks, 2024). It is scrutinized, politicized, and too often pathologized. It is read through suspicion, refracted through risk, and rendered volatile under the gaze of institutional surveillance (Weeks, 2024). It becomes entangled in the broader sociopolitical fabric that governs whose lives are deemed acceptable and whose are rendered deviant (Weeks, 2024).

In the aftermath of Trump's re-election, a moment that did not originate but rather exemplifies the deep-seated forces of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and settler nationalism, the backlash against inclusive and justice-oriented education has grown increasingly aggressive. Trump's political resurgence is not an anomaly but a symptom of long-standing cultural and legislative movements aimed at preserving dominant power structures. The classroom, once imagined as a site of possibility, is now increasingly weaponized through legislation that seeks to sanitize curricula, erase LGBTQIA+ and racial justice discourses, and criminalize the mere acknowledgment of students' diverse identities (Pinckney, 2024; Powers & Duffy, 2016). In states where "Don't Say Gay" laws and anti-CRT bans converge, educators must now navigate what it means to be "out"; not just in terms of sexuality, but in terms of pedagogy, values, and embodiment. What does it mean to affirm Queer and trans students when such affirmation risks legal reprisal? What does it mean to speak the truth of students' lives in a context where truth-telling itself has become an act of resistance?

Yet, even amidst such conditions, visibility cannot and must not be dismissed as mere self-expression. It is not an indulgence; it is a lifeline (Pinckney, 2024; Powers & Duffy, 2016). Visibility, in this context, is not about individual performance; it is about collective survival. I write from a positionality that understands visibility as a relational, political, and pedagogical act. To stand before students as Queer, Brown, and multilingual is not only to offer a mirror, but to intervene in the silence that has too often suffocated possibilities for self-recognition. It is to say: you are not alone, and your existence is not up for debate. This is the quiet revolution of being present in our wholeness. It refuses the dominant script that says educators must check their identities at the schoolhouse door to be seen as "professional."

The emotional labor required for this kind of work is immense and often goes unacknowledged in scholarship. But it is precisely within this labor that resistance lives (King, 2017; Evans & Moore, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021). It lives in the care we extend to students, and in the care we learn to extend to ourselves. In writing the

letter, I was not simply responding to a student's truth; I was participating in a moment of shared vulnerability that became a site of mutual recognition. It was not only a pedagogical exchange; it was a moment of healing. For many educators at the margins, such moments are rare and precious. They allow us to recover parts of ourselves that institutions have long sought to fracture.

To engage in letter writing as a Queer, multilingual educator of color is to do so with an acute awareness of risk. In states where gender-affirming language is criminalized and where teachers are surveilled for expressions of care, such acts may invite professional, legal, or physical harm. As such, letter-writing must be framed not only as pedagogy but as a political and deeply courageous act. This risk, however, cannot solely be borne by the most marginalized educators; it also demands allyship and structural intervention. Those with institutional privilege must take up this labor, not as saviors, but as co-conspirators in the project of educational justice.

This is the unspoken cost and profound gift of teaching while marginalized: the dual burden and privilege of showing up whole, even when systems ask us to fragment. It is a pedagogy of presence, of embodied resistance, of love made visible. It is the knowledge that, despite the risks, visibility can be a sanctuary for students and educators alike. And in that sanctuary, something transformative becomes possible.

Letter-Writing as Methodology

What, then, does it mean to write a letter and call it scholarship? It means to trouble the boundaries of what counts as academic knowledge, and to make a radical claim: that care is not only an affective posture but a valid epistemology (Dalmiya, 2002). In invoking care as a mode of knowing, I position this letter within a lineage of scholarship that recognizes knowledge production as embodied, relational, and deeply contextual. This is not an abandonment of rigor, but a redefinition of it; an insistence that rigorous scholarship can also emerge from moments of intimacy, from emotional labor, and from the sacred, everyday exchanges that too often go unrecorded in the academic canon.

To write a letter is to insist that theory is not confined to the pages of peer-reviewed journals or locked behind institutional paywalls; it breathes in classrooms, in whispered disclosures, in the pauses between a student's words and an educator's listening (Tynan & Bishop, 2023). The letter featured in this work is not merely a pedagogical artifact; it is a methodological intervention. Rooted in the traditions of testimonio and counterstory, it speaks from the margins to challenge the authority of dominant narratives and knowledge structures (Vega, 2018). It rejects the fallacy that legitimacy requires emotional detachment, and instead asserts that passion, care, and personal narrative are not only relevant; they are essential (Butler, 2009).

In writing to my student, I did not merely teach; I entered into a long-standing tradition of narrative resistance, one that centers storytelling as a vehicle for healing, affirmation, and political critique. This exchange was not a “teachable moment” to be extracted and instrumentalized for professional growth. It was a mutual act of witnessing, a shared recognition of vulnerability and strength, of language and longing. Such moments defy traditional methodologies not because they lack value, but because they refuse the logics of objectivity and hierarchy that so often underpin them.

I offer letter-writing, then, not only as a reflective pedagogical practice, but as a research method that places vulnerability, relationality, and resistance at the center of scholarly inquiry. It demands that we see educators not simply as conveyors of curriculum, but as cultural workers engaged in emotional and political labor. In a time when educational spaces are increasingly dehumanized, where metrics supersede meaning, and where legislative violence seeks to erase the complexities of students’ and teachers’ lives, writing letters to and with our students becomes more than a tool. It becomes an act of survival (Goodland, 1968; Sayin, 2011; Olugbenga, 2022). A methodology that produces knowledge not only for policy or publication, but for community, for justice, and the preservation of our shared humanity.

This moment between educator and student, a moment shaped by trust, shared language, and intersecting identities, asks us to reimagine what education can be. What if schools were designed to cultivate these moments, not just accommodate them? What if our scholarship didn’t merely describe them but honored them as sites of knowledge production? What if teacher preparation programs trained future educators not only to write lesson plans, but to write letters; letters that witness, affirm, and resist? In a climate where the very act of loving our students can be construed as subversive, to write such letters is to engage in abolitionist teaching. It is to create conditions for liberation in spaces structured by constraint (Love, 2019; Rodriguez, 2010).

For educators interested in incorporating letter writing, this practice must be rooted in relational trust and cultural responsiveness. While no teacher can replicate another’s identity, all educators can create affirming spaces by listening deeply, writing intentionally, and honoring students’ full selves. Letter writing may look different across contexts; anonymous affirmations, shared journaling, or co-authored reflections, but what matters most is the ethic of care that undergirds the practice. Teachers must also reflect critically on their social location to ensure that the letters do not reinforce power hierarchies, but rather serve as bridges of solidarity.

To love our students in the face of state violence is not naïve; it is revolutionary. It is to risk ourselves for the sake of their wholeness. It is to say, with every word written

and every truth named: we are still here. We are still learning. We are still loving each other into freedom.

Conclusion

This article began with a letter, and in many ways, it ends with one too. A letter to the student, yes, but also a letter to the field: a call to reimagine what scholarship, pedagogy, and resistance can look like in our current educational landscape. In a time when both Queer and multilingual identities are being policed and erased through policy, discourse, and curriculum, letter-writing emerges as a methodology of refusal. It resists the fragmentation of identity and insists that care, visibility, and vulnerability are not antithetical to scholarship but foundational to it.

By analyzing the letter as both artifact and intervention, this work demonstrates how seemingly small acts of relational engagement can carry profound political weight. These moments, rooted in language, intimacy, and intersectionality, challenge us to rethink the purpose of education itself. What if we made space for emotional labor, for narrative resistance, for connection as method? What if our scholarship started not with research questions, but with love?

To teach under threat is to resist. To write a letter is to insist that our students deserve wholeness, joy, and truth. And to share that letter here is to declare that these acts are not peripheral to academia; they are what keep us, and our communities, alive.

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English Translation of Letter

Dear [Redacted],

Thank you for trusting me with this part of who you are. I'm so glad you came to me to share this. I know it takes incredible strength to share your truth, and I want you to know how deeply honored I am to receive it.

I can't claim to fully understand how you feel in this moment, but I can tell you a little about how I felt when I first shared my identity. I came out to my family when I was in middle school. I didn't know how they would respond, and the uncertainty was overwhelming. Funny enough, I first told a few friends and one trusted teacher. That teacher became a pillar of support for me throughout middle school, and we still keep in touch to this day.

While my family reacted quite well to me being gay, I was also bullied a lot by my peers and lost a lot of support from school staff and teachers. My hope is that you will

not have to endure similar pain at [Redacted School Name], and I want to be someone you can count on every single day I'm here.

Although I never had a gay teacher myself, I know what it means to represent my students who are gay or LGBT. You are important to me. All of my students are. I hope to be a mirror for you; to reflect not only what is possible, but what is beautiful and already present in who you are. I hope this letter offers you some of the joy, love, and acceptance I know you deserve.

But I promise you: living authentically, while not always easy, has been the most rewarding experience of my life. It's brought me joy, resilience, and connection. Yes, there were moments of loneliness. But I found people, friends, mentors, chosen family, who saw me, loved me, and believed in me.

You'll also find community in being LGBT, with many more friends who want to see you thrive and live your best life. In that community, I found much of my joy in high school, college, and now even in my adult life. Hold on for them, because they are waiting for you.

I will always support you; your life, your story, and your path. I'm so excited to see all that you'll do, not just in this class, but far beyond it. Once again, thank you for sharing this with me. It means more than you know. I'm grateful to be someone you felt safe enough to come to, and I hope I can continue to be that for you.

If you need anything else, support, conversation, or just someone to listen, please reach out to me. I will always be on your side.

With lots of love and care,

Mr. Kachnowski