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# Aspen Daily News

## From bilingual student to researcher: Dr. Alvarez to tell her story at TACAW tonight

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By Jacqueline Reynolds Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

Dr. Adriana Alvarez grew up in the border community of El Paso, Texas. As a bilingual student going through the education system, she can recall many moments where her language was punished and her identity not accepted — in fact, “devalued,” she said, recounting memories of a teacher who charged 25 cents every time she was caught speaking Spanish and a high school counselor who tried to discourage her from attending college.

Tonight, Alvarez — now with a Ph.D. in educational equity and cultural diversity from the University of Colorado Boulder and a M.Ed. in bilingual education from the University of Texas at El Paso — will share her story with the Roaring Fork Valley community.

She is coming to The Arts Campus At Willits to speak about her own experiences as a bilingual student, teacher and researcher in the field of educational equity. The conversation will center around the importance of affirming students’ cultures, languages, experiences and families as levers of equity and belonging.

Before beginning her doctoral program at CU Boulder, Alvarez spent 11 years as a bilingual teacher in the same El Paso school district



A group of Glenwood Springs sixth graders smiles while holding up their self-made children's books during an author celebration held at their former Glenwood Springs Elementary School in May. The Renée Crown Wellness Institute at the University of Colorado Boulder instigated the project as part of their efforts to promote equitable family-school partnerships for Latinx communities. Dr. Adriana Alvarez, a leading researcher involved in the project, will speak at The Arts Campus At Willits tonight. Photo by Mónica Lozano

that she grew up in.

“I was very purposeful to go back to the same district where I was a bilingual student,” Alvarez said. “Because I wanted to share this message of, bilingualism is an asset; it is something to be celebrated; it is something that we should embrace and elevate in our classrooms and especially in our kids — who, unfortunately, internalize these moments in which their language and their identities are devalued in schools.”

Fueled by her own experiences as a bilingual student, Alvarez has dedicated the past two decades to her professional trajectory in the field of bilingual education and educational equity.

Alvarez is currently an assistant professor for the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education program at the University of Colorado Denver, as well as a Faculty Fellow at the Renée Crown Wellness Institute at CU Boulder — where her

research centers around biliteracy development and pedagogy and family-school partnerships, with a focus on equity-oriented and strength-based approaches in Latinx communities.

"I feel that I'm coming full circle," Alvarez said. "My own experiences led me to this desire to affirm students' languages and diversity, grow understanding around peoples' experiences and to really advance our pluralistic environment in schools."

Her presentation at TACAW — which starts at 6:30 p.m. and is free and open to the public — is part of the Equity Speaker Series. Co-launched by TACAW and MANAUS, the Equity Speaker Series is an ongoing program to provide the entire community with access to experts in the realm of equity and antiracism.

The first Equity Speaker Series session took place in April and featured award-winning poet and educator Alejandro Jimenez. Tonight's discussion with Alvarez marks the second.

From one experience to the next, the series is aiming to create a space for people in the valley to listen and understand the voices and perspectives of those who have typically been marginalized. And much of Alvarez's work centers around exactly that aim.

"We must have these real conversations — real, open conversations that can lead to changes grounded in compassion and in the empathy of understanding each other's experiences," Alvarez said. "If we don't listen and understand some

of these experiences, they remain invisible. They remain silent."

Through her involvement at the Renée Crown Wellness Institute, Alvarez has been working to bring Latinx families' and students' experiences to the forefront. And for the past few years, her work has been focused on Latinx families and students in the Roaring Fork School District.

She's been a principal investigator for the Institute's "Belonging and Trust" research study — which, "engages Latinx families and public school educators with the aim of developing and enhancing systems and programs that promote equitable family-school partnerships in the Boulder Valley and Roaring Fork School Districts," according to the study's webpage.

In connection to this larger — and still ongoing — "Belonging and Trust" study, Alvarez has been in a partnership with Glenwood Springs Elementary School to work with teachers and a group of students on an evolving book-making project centered around identity. There was an author celebration for this group of now sixth grade students at the elementary school this past May, where the kids had the opportunity to read their books in classrooms as well as with their families and teachers.

"It was an incredible experience for the students, the teachers and the school for them to share their books, and we're currently analyzing the themes that they decided to write about," Alvarez said. "And so why is this important to share? Because we need to understand the experiences of our kids and our families in our

community in order to really have an impact on practice and change."