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Educational Language Policy and the New Latino Diaspora in Iowa

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Abstract

The New Latino Diaspora is a demographic phenomenon that describes the immigration of Latinos from across Latin America to small cities and towns in the United States, which have historically not been popular destinations for Spanish speakers. As a result of this demographic shift, Iowa has experienced a 452% increase in its population of English learners (ELs) in public schools over the past 20 years. Thus, communities throughout Iowa (and the rest of the New Latino Diaspora) have struggled to put a support network in place for newcomers, including educational programs that provide educational opportunity for non-native English speakers. The purpose of this study was to examine how Iowa's educational language policy has adapted to growing numbers of ELs.

Findings suggest that policymakers and educators alike have struggled to develop coherent plans for accommodating native Spanish speakers and leverage resources to enact what plans exist. While there is support at the state-level for a diversity of educational programs, including English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual education, there is very little guidance or financial support for districts. In other words, while educators have a lot of agency in determining how to educate non-native English speakers and some very industrious individuals have opened dual language schools, a more robust (funded) structure for language education is needed. We argue that the new language ecology is a linguistic and cultural resource, for both non-native English speakers and students who are currently English monolingual. Our results have implications for the future of linguistic accommodation and educational opportunity for Latinos around the Midwest.

Keywords: ESL, English learners, educational language policy, dual language schools

Introduction

Like other states in the United States Midwest, Iowa has experienced a sharp increase in its Latino population in recent years, engendered in part by employment opportunities with agricultural companies and meatpacking plants (Hamman & Harklau, 2010). This type of demographic shift is often referred to as the New Latino Diaspora (NLD), a process whereby Latinos move to unfamiliar places without longstanding Spanish-speaking populations. Some of these new workers plan to stay in the area and establish a permanent residence; however, many migrate back to their country of origin after they have earned enough money for their families who are waiting at home (Grey, 1999).

As a result of this demographic shift, Iowa has experienced a 452% increase in its population of English learners (ELs) in public schools over the past 20 years. Thus, communities throughout Iowa (and the rest of the New Latino Diaspora) have struggled to put a support network in place for newcomers, including educational programs that provide educational opportunity for non-native English speakers. The purpose of this study was to examine how Iowa's educational language policy has adapted to growing numbers of ELs.

Demographic Shifts: English Learners in Iowa

According to surveys and needs assessments conducted in Iowa New Latino Diaspora communities (Raffaelli & Wiley, 2012; Lowenhaupt, 2014; Riffe, Turner & Rojas-Guyler 2008), Latino respondents report feeling alienated and discriminated against due to language barriers and lack of familiarity with the agencies in the town. For example, in an examination of workplace relations between the Anglo and Latino workers in one Iowa meatpacking plant, Grey (1999) argues that ethnic tensions and resentment are common feelings between the two groups.

School districts in NLD communities have utilized different methods for educating newly arrived immigrant children and in encouraging

their parents to be more closely involved with the school. For example, Paciotto & Delany-Barmann (2011) report on the challenges and successes in a dual language school. Other approaches involved using Spanish translators in order to ensure parents' participation in school activities (Lowenhaupt, 2014; Hamman & Harklau, 2010; Colomer & Harklau, 2009). A common challenge among schools is accommodating children of migrant workers who often are only in school for a few months at a time due to the parents' work schedules (Green, 2003). In some cases, families' school involvement has been adversely affected by parental immigration status (Figueroa, 2013). Another challenge is the different expectations for parental involvement between schools and Latino parents. Gallo & Wortham (2012) found that despite providing materials and meetings in Spanish, the teachers in their study did not seem to understand the level of involvement and type of interaction parents preferred to have with the schools.

Given demographic shifts across NLD contexts, educational language policies and practices will be crucial in providing minority language speakers with equal educational opportunity. Given the 452% increase in English learner enrollments in Iowa schools, our analysis focuses on how Iowa language policy has responded to this rapid shift in the linguistic ecology.

Iowa Language Policy

We used intertextual analysis of language policy (Fairclough, 1992; Johnson, 2013, 2015) to explore how Iowa language policies have adapted to increasing numbers of ELs in Iowa schools, and the public perception of these changes. The data included Iowa's Administrative Code (280.4), Iowa Law (IAC, Ch. 60), the Department of Education's English Language Learner (ELL) policy, and 40 Iowa newspaper articles about bilingual education dating from the year 2000 to May 2014. We traced the connections between macro-level Iowa language policy texts and their local implementation. This type of intertextual analysis helps uncover the ways that discourses about language policy at higher levels of policy align

with, interact with, or diverge from local practices and perceptions.

The language of Iowa's Administrative Code (280.4) uses the deficit-oriented term "Limited English Proficient" in its definition:

Limited English proficient means a student's language background is in a language other than English, and the student's proficiency in English is such that the probability of the student's academic success in an English-only classroom is below that of an academically successful peer with an English language background.

Limited English Proficient focuses on limitations, or deficits, and here a connection is made between being an EL student and having a lower probability of academic success. This text sets up monolingual English proficiency as a standard for success and characterizes bi- and multilingual students as "limited."

The language of the Iowa Code suggests an orientation towards monolingual English education, but Iowa language policy does not explicitly prohibit bilingual education and some texts open implementational space (Hornberger, 2005) for multilingual education. For example, the Iowa Administrative Code (280.4) explicitly names two program options for ELL Education: English as a Second Language (ESL) or Transitional Bilingual Instruction (TBI):

The medium of instruction in all secular subjects taught in both public and nonpublic schools shall be the English language, except... when the student is Limited English proficient... [program options] shall include but need not be limited to English as a second language (ESL) or transitional bilingual instruction until the student is fully English proficient (Iowa Code 280.4; emphasis added).

The code designates English as the medium of instruction, and for English learners names two programs that both have English proficiency rather

than bilingualism as their goal. However, the text does not limit other program options, stating that program options "need not be limited to" the two programs mentioned. Iowa Law (IAC Chapter 60) opens up the possibilities further: "A program of transitional bilingual instruction may include the participation of students whose native language is English." This declaration would seem to contradict the idea that only transitional bilingual education (which usually only educates English learners) is acceptable and suggests that two-way or dual language education is allowed; however, it may also create some confusion if these texts are interpreted as suggesting that dual language education is a type of transitional bilingual education.

Along with official policy texts, we analyzed media reports of bilingual education in Iowa to examine public perception, public discourse, and media portrayal. The search was not restricted to a particular newspaper or year, yet only 40 articles were found. We argue that 39 of the articles represented bilingual education in Iowa "positively." Positive representations were defined by articles that: (1) included intertextual connections to research showing the benefits of bilingual education; (2) highlighted awards and academic achievements in bilingual programs; (3) depicted local residents expressing satisfaction with bilingual education; and (4) showcased academic gains by students in the programs. The one remaining article that could be interpreted as negatively portraying bilingual education was a story about Mitt Romney's visit during his presidential bid. He is quoted as saying that he would vote against bilingual education because, "to be successful in America, you have to speak the language of America" (Gallegos, 2007). This ostensive public tolerance towards bilingual education, as depicted in Iowa media discourse that positively represents bilingual educations, stands in contrast to other contexts, such as Arizona, which often reflect the contentious nature of national political discourses (Johnson, 2005).

In our analysis of policy language and local media discourses, we find that schools in Iowa lack official support for EL-focused educational programs.

Policy language perhaps creates space for language education options, and currently there are three dual language education programs in Marshalltown, Sioux City, and West Liberty. However, the Iowa Department of Education Handbook also makes clear that the responsibility for developing these programs lies with the schools:

Inherent in a school district's obligation to take "appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students (Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974, Point F) is the obligation to finance these programs...The primary responsibility for meeting the needs of ELLs lies with the local school district.

Indeed, educators report feeling "on their own," which is not surprising considering the educators in these schools must design the programs themselves with no guidance from the Iowa Department of Education (DOE).

Conclusion

A theoretical debate in language planning and policy revolves around how much agency educators have in interpreting and appropriating macro-level language policies (Tollefson, 2013). In the state of Iowa, educators have a great deal of agency in adapting instruction for their ELs; however, they need more support. The Iowa DOE is unofficially supportive of educational programs that help promote educational opportunity for ELs – notably dual language education – but they do very little to support these local initiatives. For example, a recent bill (IA House Bill 2162) that would have increased funding for EL education and "emphasized research-based instruction" was not passed. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Iowa DOE department devoted to EL education consists of one person! Educators need a more robust policy infrastructure across diverse levels of institutional authority that clearly outlines roles and responsibilities and establishes systems of support for educating ELs.

Therefore, the state really needs a larger political will and ideological sea change, which will influence policymakers to come to terms with changing demographics in Iowa schools. Without political and financial support, it is difficult to see how schools will receive the resources they need to provide an equitable education for rapidly increasing numbers of English learners.

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