



The Construction of Parent and Teacher Identities in Bilingual Settings

Jorge Inzunza*¹, Meredith Byrnes*², Rafaela Albiter*¹, Cynthia Bell-Jimenez*¹, Mary Crist*¹, Catherine Jesberger*³, Katrina Liu*⁴, and Berenice Solis*³

*¹*Turtle Creek Elementary School, Wisconsin*

*²*Rutgers University*

*³*Parent Teacher Organization of Turtle Creek Elementary School, Wisconsin*

*⁴*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

Abstract

The implementation of dual language programs, also called bilingual education, in a community not only involve pedagogical and didactic changes, but also offer important and often not measured cultural transformations. In this study, we found that both families and teachers who were involved in a dual language program experienced tensions in building their roles and identities in contexts of discrimination and supremacy of Anglo-Saxon culture. We suggest that these factors should be taken into account in the design of local language policies.

Keywords: Dual Language Education, Bilingualism, Biculturalism, Social Identity, Resilience

Introduction

In the 2015 Cambio de Colores Conference, we presented a work that aimed to recount and analyze the experience of a small school district in Wisconsin. In that presentation and article (Inzunza, Solis, & Bell-Jiménez, 2016), we highlighted the leading role that the school community of parents of Latino origin took in the promotion of a strategic plan that included the installation of a Dual Language Program (DLP) that teaches in both English and Spanish. Theoretically, we noted that the community participation in the district, and its various strategies to create pressure, framed the search for a role in building local education policies. In this article, the research team opened a new focus of analysis of this experience with a research question that investigates the depth of the changes that subsequently occurred in the district following the installation of the DLP.

As a theoretical framework of reference, we use the concept of social identity, which helps us understand the subjects' social actions and attitudes (Ochs, 1993). Following Ochs & Capps (1996), we understand that social identities are constructed narratives that occur in the context of the relationship with others. Narratives that express social identity are always partial and structure our experiences.

In the context of Latino communities in the United States, these narratives have historically been shaped by subtractive policies in both linguistic and cultural terms, specifically, where English is added and Spanish is subtracted from students' linguistic repertoires. This compensatory vision has meant that the use of a language other than English in schools is only a stage in the adoption of the dominant language/culture: English (Nieto, 1993).

These policies have involved the rejection of the legacies of Latino families' identities, with the school being seen as a privileged place for the execution of colonization processes and stigmatization of linguistic and cultural heritage (Gonzales, 2015). Thus, raising demands for an education in Spanish can be understood as a strategy of resistance to assimilation – that is, the imposition and reproduction of dominant cultural practices onto minority cultures.

In this perspective, the district studied has made progress in the recognition of Spanish as a legitimate language within the space of the school district, as seen in actions that include, among others, the establishment of an English-Spanish Dual Language Program (Dorner, 2015), and working to facilitate communication between families and schools. This policy change entailed cultural transformations that we want to start exploring. In general terms, we have observed a cultural and ideological shift in this community that dislodges the dominant heritage and makes possible the emergence of an intercultural public sphere.

We used a variety of data sources to triangulate our analysis, including two group interviews with parents of DLP students, semi-structured interviews with two school district officials, a survey of 33 teachers (monolingual and DLP program), special-ists, and school administrators who had been implementing the new program, and ethnographic field notes taken by the researchers.

The population of the city is 8,443 people (2014), a 97% urban population, with a median household income of \$44,706. The primary occupations include production (19%), sales (11%) and material moving occupations (9%). Some 82% of the students in the school district are eligible for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program, and 44.4% are Latinos -- most of them with roots in Mexico. In 2015-2016, the school's Dual Language Program had 270 students distributed in eleven classrooms from 4K (for four year olds) through 2nd Grade, all of them located in just one school. The DLP starts with a 90-10 model in 4K, which means 90% of the teaching is in Spanish and 10% in English. In 5K the distribution of time is 80-20, first grade 70-30, second grade 60-40, reaching 50-50 by third grade (projected for 2017-2018).

Identities of Dual Language Program Teachers: Values and Disputes

The implementation of the Dual Language Program brought about various changes in the school district. Representatives of Latino families

were invited to participate in interviews for hiring a Director of Language Acquisition and Community Education, who was required to be of Latino origin. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish, reflecting the recognition of the Latino community as a valid stakeholder and voice in the administrative processes related to the new DLP. From this first selection, a deeper restructuring of the faculty began. During the first year of the dual language program implementation in 2014-2015, there were only seven teachers in the program, six being Latino. In the 2015-2016 school year, three additional teachers joined the team, which then had a total of seven Latin American nations represented, in a school district where most Latino families come from Mexico. Moreover, it was required that candidates for school administration be bilingual. The changes went even further as they also encompassed changes in the area of didactic methods. From the first year of the DLP, the dual language teachers were invited to participate in trainings in bilingual literacy, scientific literacy, and strategies in Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD). Moreover, teachers along with literacy and language specialists and district administrative staff participated in trips to the Harvest Conference in New Mexico. These trainings cited scientific research findings in affirming that dual language education programs were the best choice for the development of bilingualism, and that this in turn fostered neural plasticity and connections.

This growing role of DLP and Spanish-speaking teachers in some ways disrupted the school culture, initiating a second-order change. A second-order change is a profound transformation that dramatically altered the foundations of the system, forcing a change of course and ways of thinking and acting (Marzano & Waters, 2005). This fracture involved the deterioration of communication, team spirit, cooperation and common language (Marzano & Waters, 2005). In this perspective, the monolingual school culture shifted from the privileged position it had previously. Two of the teachers of the monolingual program expressed a feeling of being less valued:

My feelings have not changed toward our students;

I enjoy the population at the school. As a professional in this building I feel less valued (monolingual teacher).

At times, teachers have felt that there is more value placed on the dual language program. This has created some friction (monolingual teacher).

This perception was based on an association between the DLP and the idea of an innovation imposed vertically, which goes beyond the mere installation of a new program, but also directly threatens the political and educational status quo of the current school institution:

I do feel that animosity does exist between some monolingual teachers and the DL community. I think some monolingual teachers feel underappreciated (monolingual teacher).

In the last quote, the DLP is seen not only as a new group of teachers and teaching practices for bilingual education, but also as a community in itself. DLP teachers recognize the support at the administrative level, but report tense relationships with monolingual colleagues:

I feel much appreciated by the administration and the department of DL, and respected by most parents. I feel highly honored by the Hispanic community. Unfortunately, still I feel I am in constant defense of the program, and discriminatory comments. Educating the monolingual staff has been very hard work (DLP teacher).

The DLP teachers seek to deepen the changes initiated, demanding an even greater presence of the program and the Spanish language at school:

I think that as teachers of the program we need greater presence in the daily life of the school. We should seek greater presence of Spanish in each of the areas of the school (DLP teacher).

This prerogative could continue to cause conflicts at school. However, we observed that monolingual teachers, especially those who are newly hired, have started to open up to the idea of creating a bridge between the two programs:

I am jealous of those already teaching within the program as I eagerly await my turn to join. I do not feel animosity toward any DL teachers/ the program (monolingual teacher).

There is considerably more collaboration and respect between mono and dual programs. It's important to know every teacher brings value and provides a unique, useful educational experience to students (monolingual teacher).

The Identity of the Community: Passing through Corridors and Walls

DLP implementation has brought to light divergent positions in the city. The School Board meetings emerged as privileged spaces for disputes between those who defend the exclusive teaching of English and those who pushed the implementation and maintenance of the DLP. This division represents opposing views found not only in the school but the various institutions of the city. One of the Latina mothers expressed this suppressed conflict:

They sat in front, the Americans, and I saw them very upset by the program. I do not know whether to call it racism. They looked very angry. They could not believe why Spanish has to be taught in a school district in the United States. They want all English and zero Spanish, because it is America, and you cannot speak Spanish because you are in America, and this is going to be what you see wherever you are - in the villages, in the parishes, no matter what your religion, there is that division (Latina mother of a first grade student).

In the city there was always that tension, not as much today. That was 20 years ago. There is that kind of stress, I do not know how to label it ... non-cohesive (Anglophone Dad, kindergarten).

This tension between the Anglo and Latino communities has been challenged by the project of dual language education. However, the socio-political context continues to affect the relationship between the two communities. One of the Anglo mothers interviewed recounted how in the context of the campaign of Donald Trump, Latino students were insulted in a women's soccer match in a neighboring town:

They were chanting "Trump, build that wall," They were chanting terrible, terrible things. There was

an African American girl, and they said derogatory things against her, to the point that some of the teammates left the game before it was over, because it got that bad. That is an ongoing thing, and that is a concern for me. I feel this city as a whole is getting better... (Anglophone Mom, second grade).

The 2015 referendum of the city proposed raising taxes to fund the education sector. The proposal had to highlight that it would not allocate funds to the dual language program, but rather to all students, in order to alleviate any concerns about equity. Moreover, this separation between the communities of the city is also expressed in some form within the school district housing the DLP:

Even within the school, I feel like the dual language kids are not included in some things. For example this year the Battle of the Books information was given very late. There are several programs that are school-wide; I do not understand why there is such a gap in the level of communication or why they are not included. There is this almost non-cohesiveness throughout the school (Anglophone Mom, second grade).

However, changes are also observed in the community that goes in the direction of opening spaces for the Latino community. In this sense, Latina mothers point out that several churches have opened community services and activities in Spanish. From the perspective of the Latino community, the school that is implementing the DLP is also changing positively, legitimizing the use of Spanish in the hallways and classrooms. A Latina mother with several children in the school district highlights how monolingual teachers and school staff are incorporating the Spanish language:

As I was walking down the hall, I noticed a few of the monolingual teachers in the hallways and I heard them speaking to some Spanish-speaking students. I heard one of them say "ven." Also when I was in the cafeteria with my daughter and her class, I heard different monolingual aids talking in Spanish to students. They would say things like, "espera" or "ven." Simple, one or two-word phrases in Spanish. The monolingual aid also talked to the kids in

Spanish, she would say things like, “*siéntate*”, etc. I was really amazed at the change that I am seeing in the school. Two or three years ago, this was not happening at all. And even some years back, one of the teachers who has been there for over 10 years, told me that the teachers and students were instructed to NOT speak Spanish. Speaking Spanish was discouraged because they felt it was the reason why the kids were not learning English quickly and not testing well. (Interview with Latina mother of several children in the district).

This kind of change is only observable with a historical perspective and a deep understanding of the local politics. Thus this Latina mother identifies the transformation from a denial of Spanish in schools, towards an acceptance and promotion among monolingual teachers and staff.

Conclusions

Recognition of Spanish in schools, incorporating Latino staff in the school district, the inception of the Dual Language Program, and the leadership of the Latino community in general are unmistakable signs of a profound change in the identity of the school district studied. This transformation appears to have activated resistance and other factors of various kinds, which must be taken into account in the process of the construction of educational policy.

The DLP represents a resilient human rights struggle (Skutnab-Kangas & Phillipson, 1998) of the Latino community to open a path to a linguistic plurality in the school district (Taylor, 2013). However, a major challenge is the creation of spaces for the expression of cultural diversity. In this sense, the mothers and fathers interviewed envision a long-term impact. The education of a bilingual and bicultural generation helps to break the divisions within the community of the city. Awareness by families about the beginning of this road is crucial, as each new stage of the DLP will have this major objective: promoting a citizenship inspired by diversity.

References

- Dorner, L. (2015). What is dual language education? Cambio Center eBrief. University of Missouri. Columbia. Missouri.
- Gonzales, S. M. (2015) Abuelita Epistemologies: Counteracting Subtractive Schools in American Education, *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 14:1, 40-54.
- Marzano, R. & Waters, T. (2005). Responsibilities of a School Leader, in *School leadership that works from research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Nieto, S. (1993). We speak in many tongues: Language diversity and multicultural education, in Díaz, C. (ed) *Multicultural education for the Twenty-first Century*, 112-136.
- Ochs, E., & Capps, L. (1996). Narrating the self. *Annual review of anthropology*, 19-43.
- Ochs, E. (1993). Constructing social identity: A language socialization perspective. *Research on language and social interaction*, 26(3), 287-306.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. and Phillipson, R. (1998). Language in human rights, *Gazette*, 60 (1), 27-46.
- Taylor, J. (2013). The power of resilience: A theoretical model to empower, encourage and retain teachers, *The Qualitative Report*, 18 (70), 1-25, retrieved from: <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR18/taylor70.pdf>