

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN PRACTICE



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6 Issues of Equity in Dual Language Bilingual Education

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Because the United States is a country of immigrants, children bring rich, complex ways of speaking into our schools. Students arrive to classrooms with varying levels of competency in their native language, English, and other communicative patterns that utilize their native language and English, such as “Spanglish.” A long tradition of educational scholarship demonstrates that sustained native language education increases children’s self-esteem and confidence, enhances motivation for learning, increases cognition and academic achievement, strengthens family relationships, and provides a strong basis for learning a second language (Callahan and Gándara 2014; Cummins 1984). More recent education research demonstrates the importance of valuing *all* kinds of student language practices, including non-standard vernaculars, in classrooms for academic success and socio-emotional well-being (García, Johnson and Seltzer 2016). Bilingual education is a social justice issue because of its potential to provide a meaningful, equitable education for linguistically diverse children, promote the status of minoritized languages, discontinue segregation, and improve appreciation of diverse cultures (García 2009). However, schools in the U.S. continue to struggle with responding to the linguistic complexities children bring to classrooms and implementing programs in a socially just way.

Numerous education policies seek to assimilate linguistically diverse children—often referred to as English Learners (ELs)—by prohibiting, limiting or devaluing the use of their native language in schools. ELs did not receive legal support until 1974 when the Supreme Court decided in *Lau v. Nichols* that schools violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964 because classroom instruction and curriculum did not serve ELs effectively. This decision paved the way for the development of bilingual education programs across the country in which teachers provide academic instruction in both English and the ELs’ native language. Nonetheless, the goal of many bilingual education programs still aims to “transition” students to the exclusive use of English as quickly as possible (García 2009). In contrast, *Dual Language Bilingual Education* (DLBE) programs seek to promote student bilingualism, biliteracy, and biculturalism. DLBE programs consider speaking multiple languages as a right, rather than

a problem (Ruiz 1984). "One-way" DLBE programs (also called maintenance programs) serve ELs only while "two-way" DLBE programs integrate ELs and native English speakers. DLBE represents an approach to education with considerable potential for social justice, specifically the valuing of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Although DLBE programs have proved successful in many contexts (Collier and Thomas 2004), historical and current events continue to create challenges and tensions. In 2002, the U.S. Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which removed the term "bilingual" from national educational legislation. Around the same time, California, Massachusetts, and Arizona passed propositions banning bilingual education. The election of Donald Trump and an increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric creates new challenges for DLBE programs. Furthermore, bilingual education researchers continue to discover ways in which two-way DLBE program implementation disproportionately serves native English speakers, and, in some instances, reproduces and reinforces societal inequalities rather than disrupts them (Cervantes-Soon 2014; Valdés 1997). Now, more than ever, it is imperative to protect and promote DLBE programs and ensure that they are implemented in equitable and socially just ways.

Social justice promotes the examination of the learning conditions and barriers that students from low-income and racially/ethnically minoritized backgrounds encounter at school in order to effectively promote all students' active and full participation in a democratic society (Villegas 2007). Unfortunately, there are multiple obstacles and issues of equity in DLBE. High-stakes standardized testing often undermines two-way DLBE programs because ELs have to take the same English language assessments as their native English-speaking classmates, which results in skewed perceptions of ELs' knowledge and abilities" (Menken 2008). Additionally, enrollment and admission policies disproportionately favor white English-speakers (Palmer 2010; Pimentel et al. 2008).

Furthermore, ELs do not usually receive equal access to instruction and instructional materials in their native language (Torres-Guzmán et al. 2005), which increases English speakers' ability to dominate classroom conversation (Palmer 2009), and decreases ELs' opportunities for bilingual development (Bears and de Jong 2008). Finally, not enough DLBE teachers are bilingual themselves, nor sufficiently trained in how to critically understand and serve their linguistically diverse population or provide equitable instruction to all of their students (Palmer and Martínez 2013). Teachers often limit classroom spaces for the use of non-standard varieties such as Spanglish or African American Vernacular, which devalues students' home, family, and community languages (García 2009). In sum, DLBE programs are at high risk to reinforce the very societal inequalities that bilingual education sought out to diminish.

Here, we seek to illuminate social justice issues in DLBE from a teacher-oriented perspective. We address the following question: How do DLBE teachers identify and discuss issues of equity in a DLBE program implementation?

The Case: Issues of Equity in District-Wide DLBE Implementation in Texas

Our case takes place in a large urban district in Texas in its fourth year implementing a district-wide DLBE program in over 60 schools. We surveyed, interviewed, and observed teachers in the DLBE programs in their schools and recorded/documentated their theories about language. Several equity issues emerged in our data, which we categorize into four main themes: (a) student participation; (b) parent involvement; (c) assessment; and (d) language standardization. We discuss each of these themes in the section below.

Student Participation: "The Dual Language Classrooms had the Crème de la Crème"

A central issue of equity in DLBE is the method by which educators place children in the programs (Pimentel et al. 2008). Some teachers expressed concern that student placement practices in DLBE can be problematic and lead to segregation. Two-way DLBE pre-K teacher, Janice, noted the unfair selection process, "pre-K dual language was not open to everybody. Students were pulled from the population who had 'good' verbal skills, who had no behavior issues, who were not Special Ed." Janice warned her principal that this selection process promoted segregation.

A third grade teacher, Rose, similarly recognized that the native English speakers participating in the two-way DLBE program at her school were predominantly white and wealthy, which resulted in inequitable treatment of different classrooms in the same school, "he [the principal] specifically planned to have this group excel and didn't worry about the other ones." Students scored higher in the two-way DLBE classroom than all other classrooms. Rose explained, "all of a sudden their scores got skewed. The dual language kids, the dual language classrooms had the crème de la crème of the population." Educators intended to improve student academic experiences with DLBE implementation, yet segregationist placement practices exacerbated existing differences in student performance.

Parent Involvement: "Some of the Parents Feel that They are Being Pushed Out"

Parental involvement in a child's education is crucial for academic success. For culturally and linguistically diverse students, parental involvement is highly contingent upon the school's ability to make parents feel as if they are valued members of the school community (Nieto 2010). While one teacher in our study noted administrators' concerted efforts to include and value parents of ELs, a majority of the two-way DLBE teachers observed some form of parental exclusion or "benevolent racism" by the white, English-speaking families reflecting a "we-know-what's-best" attitude, positioning the language minoritized parents

as lacking and inferior or needy (Villenas 2001, 4). Third-grade two-way DLBE teacher Tammy grappled with the effects of the economic dichotomy DLBE brought to her school:

A lot of our parents don't feel as welcomed here as they used to. They are not as involved as they used to be . . . It used to be a more even playing field despite language, and now there is a lot more disparity socioeconomically that has brought a whole bunch of new challenges for us as a campus.

Tammy reported that several teachers and parents felt the wealthy families were not understanding of the socioeconomic differences.

Pre-K teacher, María, celebrated her school's efforts to value Spanish-speaking families by organizing ESL classes and Hispanic Heritage Nights; however, upon closer examination of María's comments and the schools' practices, we detected the same sense of benevolent racism as English-speaking parents controlled the events. Despite the efforts, María reported a decline in Spanish-speaking parent involvement: "I've noticed that the lower income, Spanish-speaking parents have kind of fallen to the side." This case demonstrates that mere event planning does not create a fully inclusive community.

Assessment: "The Test Wins, Period"

Multiple studies demonstrate the harmful effects of standardized testing as results are often used to make punitive decisions such as decreasing school funding, decreasing teacher salary, or preventing student graduation (Delgado 2014). Standardized testing is entirely in English and, thus, it can have a particularly harmful effect on ELs (Shohamy 2011). The participants in our study repeatedly claimed that testing was the main obstacle to the program and hindered the potential for equity in DLBE. Second grade teacher, Samantha, supported this assertion: "I think a lot of people would like it [DLBE] if we were truly doing what we needed to do for these kids, but it doesn't happen, and it never will, because the test wins, period." Also, teachers reported that DLBE was not being implemented the way it should be because of assessment pressure. Chrissy, a second-grade teacher, described her frustration with testing-related modifications: "They want me to go ahead and teach everybody in my class English for the rest of the year, and I think it's wrong." Teachers described additional harmful effects of testing on the program, including premature test emphasis (i.e., from Kindergarten), transition to English, concerns about punitive consequences, mismatches between language of instruction and language of assessment, and the generally unfair nature of ELs' assessments. Only one teacher, Samantha, a second-grade teacher, mentioned refusing to increase English instruction. The majority of teachers in this district identified negative effects of standardized testing, but felt no agency to change it.

Language Standardization: "You Can't Use Spanglish"

A more nuanced finding involved teacher beliefs about the role of nonstandard language varieties in equitable instructional practices. Most teachers felt that the program could only serve students justly by providing access to standard forms of English and Spanish. For example, Jill, a pre-K teacher, stated: "If you are going to teach Spanish, you need to the right way. You can't use Spanglish with the kids, you shouldn't . . . You want them to compete in the job market, right?" Jill's comment reflects the concern that using non-standard language practices will inhibit standard language acquisition, which research has thoroughly debunked (García 2009; Martínez 2010). Jill was dedicated to teaching Spanish "the right way," but this perspective implies the oppression and diminishment of students' home language variations. Indeed, more than three-quarters of the teachers interviewed described code-switching as something that needed to be "corrected." Three teachers articulated the perspective that students who engage predominantly in code-switching or Spanglish have "no language," calling into question these students' linguistic competency in their home language, and only legitimizing school-based language patterns.

While negative perceptions of non-standard languages were dominant in the district, some teachers displayed critical language views, and recognized the importance of valuing student home and community language practices, including Spanglish, for equity in DLBE (Sayer 2013). Maria, a Pre-K teacher said:

They [DLBE programs] are designed for communities that already have a mixture of languages in the community, and want to try to include everyone, and make sure that this idea of an official language of the country or that you only need to speak English is not present.

Maria recognizes the "mixture of languages" in her school's community and directly challenges assimilationist ideologies. Third grade teacher, Michael, positions himself as a "major fan of code-switching" and deliberately uses Spanglish in the classroom to develop skills that allow students to analyze language. In Maria and Michael's opinion, the DLBE programs, and consequently, teachers, have the social responsibility to include all kinds of languages and language varieties in academic and social practices.

Implications for DLBE and Social Justice

The social justice issues that teachers identified in our research support prior work on issues of equity in DLBE. Student participation, parent involvement, assessment, and language standardization were central themes in our data that researchers have found as issues in other studies (Cervantes-Soon et al. 2017). Our work illuminates ways that these issues operate at the local level from educators' perspectives. The issues teachers identify in our study have the following policy implications for DLBE and social justice.

Fight for Equitable Student Participation

DLBE program implementation must deliberately address student participation from a social justice lens. Some teachers felt that certain students were systematically denied access to the program; this is illegal according to Chapter 89 in the Texas state policy and should be dealt with accordingly through legal avenues. Yet, in other cases, the inequitable student participation appeared to be based on variation in parent treatment and interest. In order to ensure that DLBE programs serve all students equitably, attention should be focused on recruitment practices and program implementation strategies that target to serve traditionally marginalized children, involving ELs and heritage language speakers.

Confront Familial Disparities and Break Down Barriers

The socioeconomic and racial disparities that often exist between families in DLBE programs need to be consciously confronted from a social justice perspective. Instead of assuming how minoritized parents should be involved, members of dominant groups need to be challenged to reflect critically on how their actions and attitudes, no matter how well intentioned, can silence and marginalize families. The definition of parental involvement must be expanded, and dominant group members need to listen carefully to minoritized families' concerns, as well as value and validate families' funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992). School community members must collaboratively problem solve on how to break down participation barriers, such as through home visits or using a participatory approach to parent workshops, to create a more inclusive, just community.

Recognize and Challenge the Monolingual Norms of Standardized Testing

Teachers in our study know that standardized testing is unfair, but many felt disenfranchised and unable to do anything about it. Teachers can investigate local opt-out testing policies and family rights to provide options to families. Teachers can also be introduced to Literacy Squared, a research-based teaching model that promotes biliteracy, and up-to-date research on bilingual theories to assess ELs on the combination of their language skills, rather than in just one language (Escamilla et al. 2014). Perhaps introducing the vision of a more equitable assessment format can provide a pathway to channel frustration and promote advocacy.

Promote Critical Language Awareness and Respect for Language Variation

The majority of teachers in our study believe that teaching standard academic language forms to EL students requires correcting and discouragement of the

use of vernacular language varieties. Yet, fostering this linguistic environment in classrooms does not reflect students' sociolinguistic reality, particularly in the context of Texas (Sayer 2013). Professional development can empower teachers to reflect on their own language ideologies by introducing educators to research-based techniques that value and use language variation as a resource. A free, online handbook is available with instructional strategies (www.nysieb.ws.gc.cuny.edu) as well as teacher-oriented guides (García, Johnson and Seltzer 2016). Furthermore, teachers such as Mariana and Michael who value linguistic diversity can be identified in a school or district community to share ideas and approaches, which should be disseminated not only through meetings and informal conversations, but also publications and conferences.

Empower DLBE Teachers

One avenue to empower DLBE teachers is through continuous professional development rooted in a bottom-up approach that positions teachers as change agents to act upon the injustices they have detected. Professional development should emphasize teachers' central role as policymakers who interpret, negotiate, resist, and (re)create language policy (Menken and García 2010). In order for teachers to address inequalities in their classrooms, they need to develop a critical consciousness, which involves problematizing the history, culture, and societal configurations that brought particular students together in the first place and interrogate the role of power in the formation of oppressive conditions (Cervantes-Soon et al. 2017). Creating spaces for teachers to critically reflect on how to serve linguistically, socioeconomically, and racially diverse parents and students is of vital importance to provide equitable DLBE implementation and instruction for all students.

In the Texas district described here, access to instruction in more than one language was not always equitable, nor did it always result in educational equity or the creation of transformative spaces. In order for DLBE programs to disrupt existing power structures, policy makers must continue to listen to practicing DLBE teachers and empower them to critically reflect and take action.

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