

# **Understanding and undermining the racio-economic agenda of No Child Left Behind: using critical race methodology to investigate the labor of bilingual teachers**

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Language education for students of color is a neutral process. The education of linguistically diverse students is situated in larger issues concerning white supremacy and the distribution of wealth and power. In this article, I argue that the English-only language policy contained within No Child Left Behind (NCLB) justifies a hierarchical racial order in which subordinate language status is still represented in racial and economic terms. As such, there is a pressing need to understand how language policy (specifically, NCLB) affects teachers and how teachers respond to and influence the enactment of such policies. The research suggests that Latina/o teachers understand NCLB's language policy to be a convergence of race and class interests and, in view of that, mediate and undermine English-only policy in the classroom. Through the work of bilingual educators, I hope to expand the discussion about preparing teachers for educating linguistic minorities to go beyond the methods fetish and to reconsider the professional identities of teachers as extending beyond the classroom role, to include that of political agent.

## **Introduction**

On day two of my Spanish-speaking son's first week of preschool, the director of the preschool made it a point to request that I begin to speak English at home with my son. The subtext of this request is that there continues to be a hegemonic racial project in education that defends white racial privilege—in this case, the English language.

Language education for students of color is not, and has never been, a neutral process. The education of linguistically diverse students is situated in larger issues concerning white supremacy and the distribution of wealth and power. In the United States, English becomes a gatekeeper to education, employment, business opportunities and popular

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culture, maintaining linguistic imperialism to the detriment of mother tongues (Darder, 1991; Macedo, 2000; Phillipson, 2000).

On 8 January 2002, the Bilingual Education Act was eliminated as part of a larger school reform measure known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). By effectively eliminating even the suggestion of bilingualism, NCLB effects the linguistic assimilation of immigrant and other language minority children and perpetuates the English-only hegemony of the school systems in this country (Wiley, 2002). In more detail, the word 'bilingual' was edited out from the legislation, as well as from the names of offices previously connected with Title VII (the Bilingual Education Act). The name of the 'Office for Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs' was changed to the 'Office of English Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students,' and the 'National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education' was changed to the 'National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs' (Wright, 2005).

Wright (2005) also notes that absent from Title III (reauthorized Bilingual Education Act under NCLB) are any recognitions of the benefits of bilingual education and bilingualism, issues of cultural differences and needs for multicultural understanding, and acknowledgement of factors which have negatively impacted the education of second language learners. In fact, the dismissal of macro-level systems (i.e. poverty, institutional racism) at odds with second language learners confounds claims of an 'achievement gap.' For instance, most second language learners are concentrated in high-poverty and low-achieving schools—these schools receive about \$1000 less per student than do schools with fewer minority students (US Senate HELP Committee, 2002).

Further, second language learners are segregated by language (Orfield, 2001). Second language learners are much more likely than their English-only peers to attend schools with large concentrations of English learners. In 2005, more than one-third of California English learners attended just 15% of the state's public schools where they comprised more than 50% of the student body. At the elementary level more than one-half of California English learners attended 21% of the state's public schools where they comprised more than 50% of the student body. According to Rumberger *et al.* (2006), this information is significant for several reasons. For one, linguistic segregation ensures that English learners are not exposed to English language role models. In addition, schools with high concentrations of English learners are less likely to have fully certified teachers than schools with high concentrations of native English speakers, even after accounting for differences in school poverty.

Title III's focus is exclusively on English, failing to recognize the larger systemic variables at play in the education of linguistic minorities. Although Title III funds and programs are 'to ensure that LEP [Limited English Proficient] students attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and meet the same challenging State academic content and students' academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet,' the lack of corresponding measures to correct the

social and economic inequities that plague 'English learner' communities raises the question whether or not English is the real objective. Case in point, in California, the results of Proposition 227 were dismal.<sup>1</sup> Less than half of non-English-speaking students enrolled in English immersion programs had attained proficiency in English. There was no tangible evidence that English immersion programs improved English skills of students faster or more effectively than students in bilingual education courses. Meanwhile, nearly half a million limited-English-speaking students were not 'mainstreamed' into English programs. That meant they received no special help in learning English, and consequently their English language skills remained poor to non-existent.

Does it matter if second language learners retain their mother tongue? The current hegemony of English monolingualism insists that students give up their first language, despite the evidence that demonstrates monolingualism is neither natural, necessary or beneficial. To the contrary, bilingualism is an asset to the student and actually contributes to increased cognitive flexibility and adaptability. When children are thrown into an English-only situation where they are expected to learn unfamiliar content in an unfamiliar language, their chances of achieving academic success may be severely reduced (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Zentella, 1997; Macedo *et al.*, 2003).

In addition, the enactment of monolingual language policy deprives children of the many social advantages resulting from using the mother tongue. Evidence indicates that even after controlling for socioeconomic status, students who are bilingual tend to have larger information networks, have higher grades and higher graduation rates than those who speak only English or Spanish (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Ginorio & Huston, 2001). According to Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study, a decade-long research project involving about 5000 students of 77 nationalities in South Florida and Southern California, second generation students who became fluent bilinguals reported better relations with their families, greater self-esteem and higher educational aspirations than those who became English monolinguals (Portes & Hao, 2002).

In sum, there is no empirical evidence indicating there has been any benefit to language minority students from the passage of monolingual language policies. Ten empirical studies, conducted by research institutes and scholars affiliated with major California universities at the Arizona State University Bilingual Education Institute, conclude that monolingual language policy significantly disrupts the education of language minority students with no demonstrable benefits in terms of improved teaching and learning conditions or academic achievement.

Language policy today must be pushed beyond linguistic interpretation and into the broader socioeconomic arena. In the present political climate of NCLB, racism and classism hide behind seemingly neutral discourse surrounding English language in schools. This study attempts to build on the work of scholars who further a rigorous analysis of the power struggles and the ideological markings behind the current supremacy attributed to English. McCarty (2004) asserts, 'As ideological constructs, language policies both reflect and (re)produce the distribution of power within larger society' (p. 72). By describing policy and ideology as social constructs, McCarty

contends that they reflect the interests of the dominant group(s) and serve to maintain unequal relationships of power and access within larger society. Education and schools become primary sites where language ideology and power materialize (Apple, 1990; Crawford, 1992, 2000; Cummins, 1996; Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). Cummins (2000) explains language ideology as ‘coercive relations of power’ that are realized in the everyday practices of the education system (p. 15).

Ultimately language politics are determined by material interests—struggles for social and economic supremacy—which normally lurk beneath the surface of the public debate (Fishman, 1991). The covert goal of economic and cultural perpetuation can be masked in terms of English-only. This hegemonic process works against the maintenance of language and culture among students of color.

Bilingual teachers are on the front lines of language policy. As such, there is a pressing need to understand how NCLB’s language policy affects teachers and how teachers respond to and influence the enactment of such policies. ‘The ambiguous federal guidelines related to English as a second language and bilingual education have made local districts and teachers the major shapers of language policy and educational policy for immigrant students’ (Varghese & Stritikus, 2005). This article addresses the rift between theory and practice, highlighting the crucial decisions that many teachers make in responding to, enacting and undermining racist language policy in the classrooms and schools. In many cases, racio-economic analyses of educational practices and policies have not resonated with teachers’ classroom experiences despite the realities of teacher political activity in K–12 classrooms.

Through the work of bilingual educators, I hope to expand the discussion about preparing teachers for educating linguistic minorities to go beyond the methods fetish (Bartolome, 1994) and to reconsider the professional identities of teachers as extending beyond the classroom role, to include that of political agent.

### **Approach and process of engagement**

This study underscores the epistemology Latina/o bilingual teachers put forward to understand the conditions that impact Spanish-speaking students. Although teachers of color represent a small percentage of the teaching population, I contend that their perspectives and insights are critical to further understand how language policy impacts the education of students of color. Carmen Montecinos (1995) asserts that the ideology of racism creates, maintains and justifies the use of a ‘master narrative’ in storytelling. It is within the context of racism that ‘monovocal’ stories about the low educational achievement and attainment of students of color are told. To offset, I use *critical race methodology* to expose alternative explanations to majoritarian stories on the subject of language policy vis-à-vis linguistic minorities.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define critical race methodology as a theoretically grounded approach to research that: (a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. However, it also challenges the separate discourses on race, gender and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms to explain

the experiences of students of color; (c) offers a liberator or transformative solution to racial, gender and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the radicalized, gendered and classed experiences of students of color. Furthermore, it views these experiences as sources of strength; and (e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, humanities and the law to better understand the experiences of students of color. Ultimately, research grounded in critical race methodology views the life experiences of people of color, in this case, Latina/o bilingual teachers, as valid and acknowledges both the individuality and connectivity of those experiences through methods like counterstories, narratives, testimonies and oral history (Dillard, 2000). This 'call to context' insists that the social, experiential context of racial oppression is critical for understanding racial dynamics (Parker *et al.*, 1999; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The study described here was part of a larger two-year inquiry into teacher resistance. The two research questions that guide the study are: (1) How do bilingual teachers understand connections among class, race and language policy? and (2) How do bilingual teachers mediate NCLB's language policy? For my discussion in this article, I will be drawing on the interviews and observations of five bilingual Latina/o teachers. The teachers have at least three years of teaching experience working with Spanish-speaking students and possess a track record of advocating for the needs of bilingual students.

The study was conducted in four schools in Southern California made up of predominantly Latina/o students. These schools are located in economically under-resourced communities and are characterized by English-only or Structured English Immersion classrooms. In either case, the use of Spanish is discouraged. The majority of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. My active involvement in these schools has enabled me to observe first hand the education of Spanish-speaking students.

I used qualitative methods including unstructured interviews, a focus group interview and classroom observations. Each teacher was interviewed three times. The first interview delved into how the teachers understood connections among class, race and language. The second and third interviews were directly developed from incidents and discussions observed in the classroom that related to the topic of bilingualism, race and class. In addition to interviews, I conducted a focus group interview with four teachers. These teachers were interested in discussing the topic of bilingual education and class issues with a group of like-minded educators. This was an important space for the teachers to connect and form alliances with other teachers who advocate for linguistic rights in their classrooms. Lastly, classroom observations allowed me to triangulate my findings by evidencing how bilingual educators mediate language policy at their school sites. I observed each teacher for five full school days, including recess and before and after school.

All of the interviews and observations were coded for analysis. Through this process, recurrent patterns throughout the interviews were discovered and grouped into major themes that form the assertions of this article. The experiences of the Latina/o educators along these themes are presented through direct quotations and vignettes, and tied together through interpretive analysis (Erickson, 1986; Emerson *et al.*, 1995).

## Findings

### *NCLB reinscribes English and white culture as superior*

The bilingual educators pointed out that one of the central aims of NCLB's language policy is to reinscribe English and white culture as superior. One teacher states,

English only to me means white only. That only white students and the language they bring to school are considered valuable. And if all you hear is that you have to learn English, then I think students will begin to think that English is the better language, the superior one.

Another teacher recounts,

After NCLB, I remember how quickly my school responded to this new English only push. At our first teacher meeting, there was a new sign posted inside the faculty lounge that read, 'English only.' I remember always speaking Spanish with my bilingual aide in the lounge, and I couldn't help but wonder if this new law was now an okay way to silence me.

During the focus group interview, the teachers articulated a clear connection between language policy and white supremacy. A fifth-grade teacher argues,

I can imagine that white people feel that California will soon be a brown state. Going to supermarkets and banks and seeing so many Latinos and hearing Spanish in so many places is going to scare some people. I think holding on to English and forcing all students to learn it in a way that at the same time forces students to lose their Spanish sends a very strong message to us. We have limited resources to support Spanish, which means we don't want second language learners to continue to learn their first language. That to me means that school is a place to lose a part of yourself so that those in power can remain powerful...Spanish is empowering...it's just way too threatening to have bilingual Latino children.

Another teacher adds,

I agree with what you are saying. It's not enough that the students learn English, but they are being denied the opportunity to continue to build on their Spanish. My students come to me with incredible skills in their first language, and NCLB sets it up where I feel all this pressure to get them to learn English quickly without supporting bilingual education, which we know is the best way to master two languages.

Gutierrez *et al.* (2002) argue that this political backlash is rooted in white discontent over recent trends in California, notably the 'increasing political influence and social presence of people of color, particularly immigrant Latinos and Asians coupled with a perceived loss of entitlement, and in particular a perceived decrease in access to elite educational institutions and to the marketplace' (p. 338).

Spolsky (2004) also suggests that the xenophobic sentiments felt towards Latina/os might have to do with the overall population in the United States. According to the 2000 census, Latina/os constitute 10% of the population, even though the census also notes that only 3% of the population admit to speaking English 'not well' or 'not at all,' which makes it difficult to substantiate any claim that English is in danger of being overtaken by minority languages. These teachers concur that English-only policies can be viewed as nothing more than attempts at using language as a proxy for race.

The teachers were generally convinced that NCLB not only chips away at bilingual education, but that it enables English to maintain its superior status. One teacher recognizes the realities of language loss in monolingual settings. She recounts,

I suffered from language loss because I was only taught in English, from Kindergarten on. Even though my parents spoke Spanish at home and I watched novelas with my mom, this exposure to Spanish didn't matter, English is too powerful to balance out...I never worry that my students will learn English, I worry that they will lose Spanish.

The teachers' observations about the threat to Spanish resonates with Rumbaut *et al.*'s (2006) study which shows that within two generations Mexican immigrants in California stop speaking Spanish at home, and within three generations they cease to know the language altogether. They conclude, 'Like taxes and biological death, linguistic death seems to be a sure thing in the United States, even for Mexicans living in Los Angeles, a city with one of the largest Spanish-speaking urban populations in the world' (p. 459). What is endangered, say the authors, is not the dominance of English but the survival of the non-English languages immigrants bring with them to the United States. The threat masks not only a hierarchization of language, but linguistic genocide for language minority students.

#### *NCLB reifies class exploitation*

English-only policy demands a more complex analysis of US racism that takes into account another Enlightenment legacy: capitalism. For Spanish-speaking students, the teachers all recognize that the doing away of bilingual education reifies class exploitation. One teacher points out,

Not being bilingual means not having a lot of choices when it comes to getting a job. Yes I think being bilingual is about cultural identity, but I also think it's about class. I work with students whose parents work 15 hours a day and who are barely making it. I know they are making these sacrifices so their own children will have more options. You cannot tell me that knowing Spanish and English will not give you more options out there in the job market.

By hamstringing immigrants with a linguistically irrelevant English-only education, immigrants are relegated to a limited role in the capital-driven market economy due to their limited English. According to the Latino Labor Report (2005), the vast majority of new jobs for Latina/o workers were in relatively low-skill occupations calling for little other than a high school education. Low-skilled immigrants are disproportionately represented in the expanding service and construction sectors, with occupations such as janitors, gardeners, tailors, plasterers and stucco masons. In contrast, white workers secured large increases in employment in higher-skill occupations requiring at least some college education.

In the focus group interview, the teachers concur that NCLB's lack of support for bilingual education is an attempt to track their students into low-paying jobs. One teacher stated,

We all know that knowing more than one language will probably give you more options when applying or looking for a job. But that's not what California and all these anti-bilingual

laws are pushing. They are saying to my students that you should just learn English and that alone will be enough. We all know this is a lie, so it makes me feel that society doesn't want them to have good high-paying jobs. I mean my doctor is bilingual. All the teachers here are bilingual. You, a university professor are bilingual.

The teachers contend that eliminating bilingual education and discouraging bilingualism in schools undermine the potential of non-English-speaking students to participate in multiple linguistic and labor worlds. The teachers view bilingualism as an accurate predictor of social mobility. This resonates with Tollefson's (1991) claim that policies limiting the use of languages other than English must be viewed as an effort to restrict immigrants' access to economic resources.

During classroom observations, teachers consistently portrayed bilingualism as a form of economic capital—'Knowing Spanish means having a better job'—was frequently heard in one seventh-grade classroom. At one of my visits, this same teacher handed me something he shared and printed out for his class, the Korn/Ferry International Executive Recruiter Index (2005).<sup>2</sup> The report shows that 88% of executive recruiters say the ability to speak more than one language is critical to international business success. Seventy-nine percent of North American recruiters cited Spanish as the additional language most in demand by employers. The teacher states,

Of course I make sure to show this to my class, to show them this kind of knowledge about their first language. The odds are stacked against them that they will maintain their Spanish. This might give them an incentive.

The bilingual educators also suggest that it is difficult or impossible to separate the question of English-only from the question of economic discrimination. A fifth-grade bilingual teacher pointed out that a prominent dual immersion program in Southern California, less than five miles away, comprises a significant number of white upper-class students. She continues,

I think we are saying that bilingual education is okay for rich white kids, but not for poor brown kids. You take a school like El Marino in Culver City. Blue Ribbon, all this recognition, but look at the stats, 33% white and 18% Latino. There are a lot of white kids going to that school, and yet we can't offer these same opportunities to kids who already know Spanish, who can easily master two languages!

The teachers could identify with the idea that NCLB's language policy and preparing students for the labor force go hand in hand. They conclude that the vast majority of their students have very limited access to dominant economic spheres as a result of monolingual policies.

### *Language from below*

The awareness that language is contested, disputed and reinterpreted by speakers touches on the porous nature of language. Language policy is also porous as bilingual teachers turn English on its head and make language policy respond to pressures from below.

All the teachers affirm that they rely on their students' primary language in their teaching. These educators admit that they overtly resist the demands of administrators

to silence the use of Spanish in the classroom. The oppositional act of reinstating bilingualism in classroom instruction stems from a critical awareness that bilingualism has the potential to counter racist and classist ideologies in the classroom. One teacher views bilingual education as a means for interrogating the concept of linguistic imperialism. She acknowledges that some of her students internalize the hierarchy of English as the language of choice. In response, she safeguards the Spanish language in her classroom, explaining,

What is difficult about bilingual education is sometimes not the actual teaching of it, but convincing some students it is just as important to learn as English. Some students already bought into the idea that English is the better language, and reversing that is no easy task, but we spend almost every day watching or reading or listening to something in Spanish...just maybe those attitudes might change.

In addition, the teachers emphasize bilingualism to counter the diminished economic capital that monolingualism guarantees for economically disenfranchised students of color. The teachers prioritize bilingual education in spite of their schools' enforcement of English-only policy. As one teacher states,

NCLB is basically saying that learning English is the most important thing to learn for my students. And the way to learn English is not to maintain your home language but to completely ignore it in school and to focus on basic level dumbed down English curriculum.

For these teachers, reinserting bilingual education means making critical decisions about what and what not to teach. Two of the teachers who work at the same K–5 school site decided to inform their parents of their rights to waive their students out of standardized tests. They both discovered an organization online which advocates for alternative anti-racist assessments.

They have sample waivers you can download and information about parent rights. It is obvious at my district they do not want this information out there because schools can be penalized if too many students opt out. But I learned through this website that a lot of upper-class students and their parents are opting out of standardized testing because of their inutility. So if they have this right and option, then my parents should as well.

Teachers are under immense pressure to raise test scores of their second language learners. As a result they could feel pressure to narrow their instruction to the English content on the tests, rather than providing the kind of instruction which focuses on the linguistic, cultural and education needs of second language learners. Many schools are adopting scripted one-size-fits-all curricular programs (often with federal support) which takes up large amounts of instructional time. Since many underperforming school districts with large numbers of English language learners rely on phonics-based commercial products, these teachers make a concerted effort to replace drill and kill curricular programs with intellectually rich content.

My students are working twice as hard, and I have the parents' support in this. They do their homework in English and Spanish, I read to them in Spanish...award-winning books and poems by famous authors.

Another teacher adds,

Even though I spoke Spanish at home that didn't mean that the kind of literature I was exposed to in the classroom was at a lower level. I remember books like the *Lion*, the *Witch*, and the *Wardrobe and A Wrinkle in Time*—these amazing books that captured my imagination. High quality literature is not what we're giving these kids. I make sure that I read to them this level of literature, I mean you can order all of these novels in Spanish now... For some reason, learning a language somehow means you can't think. I just don't teach that way.

Not only is the content of instruction creating impediments to the students' academic and economic potential, but the way in which these programs are implemented signals a shift in what linguistic minority students ought to learn. Three of the teachers are required to teach reading and math for most of the day, leaving little room for other subjects.

One fifth-grade teacher explains,

What's even worse about this is that my district tells me I have to spend three hours on phonics and reading and two hours on math and science, and with lunch and recess, that leaves me almost no time for art, science, or history. How are you going to go to college with a narrow education like this. I went to private school and I can tell the difference between the education I received and the education my students are being offered. What put me on the track to a top university wasn't just reading and math. My intellectual development and my critical thinking skills were just as dependent on top-notch curriculum I received in history and science.

Accordingly, all of these bilingual educators refuse to implement English language scripted curricular programs, arguing that they do not help with language acquisition and have the potential to track their students into low-paying jobs. One teacher even has a monitor who signals the class when an administrator is approaching so that the students can tactically take out their Open Court books.<sup>3</sup>

The bilingual teachers offer rich and varied biliterate/bicultural curricula. All of the teachers incorporate activities and projects that are meaningful for their students, including culturally relevant stories, documentaries, pop culture media activities, and dialogues and discussions on a variety of political issues.

## **Conclusion**

Jose Gutierrez recalls his school experiences 40 years ago in Crystal City, Texas:

We were not allowed to speak Spanish. We could be given an option. Three days suspension, or three licks with a paddle for speaking Spanish. In the American school they wanted to make Anglos out of all of us. And they [wanted] to take our Spanish away and teach us English. Well, you don't make anybody greater by making them less. (cited in Patton & Mondale, 2001)

Unlike Title VII, NCLB's Title III has an exclusive focus on English, and makes it clear that 'language instruction educational programs' are to teach second language learners English and move them into mainstream English-only classrooms as quickly as possible. While allowances are made for bilingual education programs, the fact that the Act avoids 'bilingual' altogether demonstrates that developing and promoting

bilingualism is no longer a goal. The recognitions of the linguistic resources second language learners bring to school, and the benefits of bilingualism to society, have been stripped from the federal law.

For these bilingual teachers, political decisions about how to mediate English-only policy are day-to-day battles in the field. Rikowski (2001) suggests that teachers are the most dangerous of workers because they have a special role in shaping, developing and forcing the single commodity on which the whole capitalist system rests: labor-power. Teachers are intimately connected with the social production of labor-power, equipping students with skills, competences, abilities, knowledge and the attitudes and personal qualities that can be expressed and expended in the capitalist labor process. Hence, the State becomes much more forceful in controlling the process of teaching, to ensure that 'modes of pedagogy that are antithetical to labor-power production do not and cannot exist' (Hill, 2005, p. 33).

These five bilingual teachers confirm that teachers may in fact have the potential to be the most dangerous of workers. Their critical understanding of monolingual language policy and subsequent mediation and undermining of English-only in the classroom reconfigure the power dynamics between teaching and policy-making.

## Notes

1. In 1998, California voters approved (61%) Proposition 227, the so called 'English for the Children Initiative' also known as the Unz initiative named after its author and chief financial backer. This initiative placed restrictions on bilingual education programs, and mandated that LEP students 'be taught English by being taught in English,' be placed in 'English language classrooms' and 'be educated through sheltered English immersion.'
2. See [www.kornferry.com/Library/Process.asp?P=PR\\_Detail&CID=879&LID=1](http://www.kornferry.com/Library/Process.asp?P=PR_Detail&CID=879&LID=1) (accessed 14 February 2007).
3. Open Court is a scripted language arts reading program adopted in Los Angeles Unified School District.

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