The gentrification of two-way dual language programs: a commentary

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The articles on the gentrification of two-way dual language (TWDL) programs included in this special issue call important attention to the many ways that good educational policies can be subverted, either through direct actions or by the failure to remain vigilant of the social justice intentions of the policies. Two-way bilingual programs (in which half the students speak English and the other half speak another language at home) hold the promise of a “win–win” situation in which both groups come to know and support each other in becoming fluent bilinguals. In strong programs there are also opportunities for parents to share their assets and their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) for the benefit of all the students. However, the authors of these articles point to a number of ways in which these programs can become instances of “win–lose.” They report cases where middle-income English speaking parents in gentrifying communities crowd out the children of immigrants, providing a nice “extra” for their children, while depriving the English learners (ELs)¹ of programs and teachers that can best support them educationally and socio-emotionally. Immigrant parents, as described by Chaparro in this issue, can also lose their voice, having to compete with white² parents who, consciously or unconsciously, exert their race and class privilege over the program. This can be

¹ I do not like the term “English learner” as it characterizes these students by what they lack rather than the assets they possess, but most alternative terms have limitations as well. One of the options offered in the collected papers is “transnational language learners,” but this suggests that all or most of the students learning English are from somewhere else, while in fact, they are overwhelmingly born in the US, an important fact for establishing their political rights. “Dual language learners” unfortunately has been adopted by early educators and is generally considered to refer only to young children. “Emergent bilinguals” is attractive, but in two way programs both groups of students are actually emergent bilinguals, so it does not distinguish which group one means. So, I reluctantly use the term English learner, as it is established in the literature, with the sincere hope that the field soon comes up with better terminology.

² There is an assumption in most of the literature that the English speaking parents are white, but they may, in fact, be from different racial groups, or the same racial group and also middle class. We limit the discussion in important ways when we cast these situations as only Latino parents versus white parents. Blanton et al. in this issue also alert us to this problem.

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especially damaging when the curriculum is undermined to meet the English speakers' perceived needs, as when the partner language (e.g., Spanish) is watered down to assure English speaking parents that their children's test scores won't suffer from limited English instructional time (see Freire & Delavan, this issue). As Guadalupe Valdés (1997) reminds us, the quality and quantity of home language instruction is not just a "nicety" for EL students, it is a cognitive imperative to which their whole educational trajectory is tied.

Whether in the form of developmental bilingual education, in which all students are from the same non-English group, or in two-way programs, that mix English learners with English monolinguals (ideally with 50% of each), it has been a hard fight to gain recognition for the value of bilingual instruction in the U.S. When the Bilingual Education Act was first being implemented in 1968, there were some attempts to mix English speakers in with the English learners, but English speaking parents complained about their children being "held back" in these classes and those attempts were mostly abandoned. In fact, the Spanish speaking children in the Southwest were often segregated from their English speaking peers, nominally because they needed to focus on learning English. However, this has often been a ruse for racial separation (Powers, 2008). As a survivor of the "bilingual wars" of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, I am keenly aware of the strong forces against bilingual instruction and, in fact, against bilingual people: it was (and still is) all too common to hear the assertion that "real Americans speak English." In past decades even the word *bilingual* sometimes became a mildly derogatory adjective applied to students who did not speak English fluently. And "bilingual programs" often were/are programs designed for students to NOT become bilingual, but in fact, to lose their primary language in favor of English, as quickly as possible. Bilingual education research came under attack because "everyone knew" that bilingual education was a costly experiment that harmed children whose first language was not English and left them woefully behind academically. At least, that was the language used to convince voters in California, Arizona and Massachusetts two decades ago that they should ban bilingual education in those states.

I would argue that one reason those state propositions were successful was that there was not a large enough constituency outside of the immigrant community and the teachers who taught these students, to raise their voices against these xenophobic measures. And, as Chaparro (this issue) points out, even in the immigrant community, many parents who did not speak English feared their children would never learn English well if taught in their home language, an idea that too often was not dispelled by the education establishment that should have known better. The mounting evidence that showed just the opposite, that students in strong bilingual programs were outperforming their peers in English only classes, was not breaking through the anti-bilingual messaging that conveniently coincided with anti-immigrant sentiments. Nothing has been more effective at erasing the cultures and languages of so-called English learners than the prohibition against teaching these students in their home language. As such, I tread lightly on programs that purport to have full biliteracy as a goal for their students.

Unfortunately, the erasure of students' language and culture is not the only challenge they face in the education system. English learners are the children of

immigrants and they are under attack by immigration enforcement, even though most of these students are themselves native born Americans (Gándara & Ee, 2021). The type of language instruction they receive is overshadowed by the daily fear they experience about losing their parents to an immigration raid while they are at school. The children of immigrants are also extremely segregated, often triply so, by race, poverty and language, in low-performing and heavily challenged Title I schools (Gándara, 2010). Segregation from the mainstream of society, in schools that are not able to prepare them for college, leaves these students with very limited post-high school options. Segregated schools typically have less qualified teachers (Clotfelter et al., 2005; Jackson, 2009), higher teacher turnover (Clotfelter et al., 2010) and student mobility (Rumberger, 2003), less advanced curricular options, and inadequate resources (Yun & Moreno, 2006). Outcomes at segregated schools include lower academic achievement (Mickelson et al., 2013, 2016), higher dropout rates (Balfanz & Legters, 2004), and lower graduation rates (Swanson, 2004). Gándara and Contreras (2009), in their overview of the myriad challenges facing Latino students, concluded that this subgroup was not likely to gain educational parity with more advantaged peers until and unless they were desegregated from low-performing schools and exposed to greater opportunities. Segregation in under-resourced, low-performing schools is as much of a threat to children of immigrants as are their language challenges.

For all of these reasons scholars and some policymakers have begun, once again, to focus their efforts on desegregation strategies. The Supreme Court, however, has made these efforts particularly challenging as it has ruled as unconstitutional any efforts to desegregate schools that actually target race (Orfield et al., 2010). In other words, it is not permissible to explicitly assign or enroll students to schools on the basis of their race or ethnicity. But it is permissible to desegregate them according to language. Two-way dual immersion programs and schools turn out to be one of the few ways to legally desegregate students. It is also worth noting that desegregation has significant benefits for more socio-economically advantaged students in fostering more positive intergroup relations through life and increasing their desire to live and work in more diverse settings (Stuart Wells, 2009; Genesee & Gándara, 1999). In other words, these two-way programs can promote greater social cohesion—a basic civic good.

When well-implemented, TWDL programs also tend to produce high levels of measured academic achievement; in some cases, demonstrating outcomes in English language arts and math at the secondary level that are superior to all other programs (Valentino & Reardon, 2015; Steele et al., 2017; Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Genesee et al., 2006). Some researchers speculate that the reason for these superior outcomes is both the consistent building on native language and the strong support provided by the community for these programs. They tend to have an invested constituency that monitors the quality of instruction and contributes time and resources to the program. But it must also be noted that outcomes are almost always measured in English. Less is known about the comparative outcomes in Spanish or any other language. This is, indeed, a major red flag and gives rise to the claims of commodification of the language and culture of the children of immigrants (see particularly Dorner et al., this issue). Cohen and Lotan (2014) established long ago that racial

equity in the classroom could only be achieved in equal status situations. Every student must be valued equally for what he or she brings to the classroom, and educators must ensure this principle is always enacted in the curriculum. When the partner language is not valued as much as English, then the speakers of that language are not valued equally. And if the expectations for the two languages are not equal, evaluated and reported, then there is no educational equity. This is certainly an aspect of these programs that needs to be challenged. But is it reason enough to give up on the programs? I think not.

Our research has established that bilingualism is a substantial asset for the children of immigrants, especially for Spanish speakers (Gándara, 2018), who are the least likely of all major subgroups to achieve a college degree. Latino students who emerge from high school as strong biliterates go to four-year colleges at higher rates than their peers who lost or only maintained weak knowledge of the home language. They also have greater opportunities in the labor market and earn more. The research has also demonstrated that students in desegregated settings with middle class peers make connections to opportunities that students in segregated and low-income settings do not (Gándara, 1995). These are critically important outcomes for the Latino community that suffers disproportionately from poverty and lack of opportunity. One does not have to subscribe to a neoliberal view of the world to appreciate the “market value” associated with biliteracy for English learners. But to achieve these outcomes we must provide strong and equitable bilingual programs that have powerful advocates supporting them. They need a broad constituency that is invested in these programs and in these students. As Bernstein and her colleagues (this issue) point out, the neo-liberal paradigm can be turned on its head. Competition can be used to promote highly effective and socially just schools, under the right conditions. It may be uncommon to find schools that have all the attributes that support superior long-term outcomes for the children of immigrants—strong dual language programs, that are well-resourced, racially and socio-economically integrated and respectful of all the families’ cultural and linguistic assets—but this is what we should strive for. Our students deserve nothing less.

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