Critical advocacy and bilingual education in the United States

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Abstract

Comparing data from two ethnographic studies of bilingual teachers and their students in the United States, the authors present a cross-case analysis that illuminates how issues of language are inextricably linked with issues of race, class, and socioeconomic status. The authors show how portraits of teachers' practice help to examine some of the challenges urban, bilingual educators face including questions about teacher identity, bilingual proficiency, networks of support and activist training. Such portraits of bilingual practice shed light on the complexities that include and go beyond language and show the nexus where pluralist and assimilationist goals inform and contradict one another in public schooling. The authors suggest the current political climate places bilingual education at a new and challenging crossroads in the United States with opportunities to re-examine what bilingual education means within specific local and national contexts.
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1. Introduction to the field "Formerly" known as bilingual education

On January 8, 2002 Title VII, also known as the Bilingual Education Act, was eliminated as part of a larger school reform measure in the United States known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA). The law as of 2002, Title III, carried with it a new name, "Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students," and with it, new meaning. After 34 years, the word "bilingual" had been deleted from all government offices and legislation—a not so subtle message concerning the assimilationist, English-only orientation of the Bush administration. This

name-change has not only come from the right. Advocates of bilingual education, largely from the political left, have also engaged in re-naming, passing over the politically charged, compensatory associations with "bilingual education" and choosing to re-name programs according to stated pluralist and biliteracy goals. In other words, rather than viewing instruction in a non-English language as a type of special-education, advocates have emphasized renaming bilingual programs to reflect goals to maintain and develop students' home language while adding English fluency. "Dual immersion," "maintenance bilingual education," "two-way programs"—these are just a few of the labels used to describe programs with additive rather than subtractive orientations (Lambert, 1980).

The re-naming phenomenon has been significant in many ways. First, in the way new names make the U.S. national identity split between assimilationist and pluralist goals even more clear (Schmidt, 2000). On the one hand the assimilationist goal follows a tradition of Americanization, maintaining the English stronghold. From an assimilationist's perspective, immigrants' shift to English, leaving heritage languages behind, is considered a necessary and beneficial sacrifice for immigrants' successful integration and support for national unity and security. On the other hand, a pluralist orientation finds unity within diversity (Giroux, 1994), seeking justice and equality for racialized language minorities amidst a history of oppression and exclusion. Additionally, renaming bilingual education to identify assimilationist (i.e."English only" or "English immersion") or pluralist goals (i.e. "two-way bilingual" or "dual immersion") draws our attention to explicit program structures and classroom instructional methods, identifying how languages are used in classrooms and schools, by whom, and for what purpose. Lastly, this re-naming allows us to ask fundamental questions about the degree to which "bilingual education" has to do with language and the extent to which exclusive discussion about bilingual education solely as *language* education overlooks larger political dimensions of bilingual teachers' and students' work (Darder, 1991).

As researchers in the field formerly known as bilingual education, we compare data from two ethnographic studies of bilingual teachers and their students. We also reflect on our own perspective on bilingual education. We examine some of the challenges that these two teachers in our respective studies faced in their careers as bilingual classroom teachers, teachers who ultimately left their positions in the classroom. These vignettes of bilingual teachers' experiences shed light on the complexities that include and go beyond language and show the nexus where pluralist and assimilationist goals inform and contradict one another in public schooling. The critical ethnographic approach we took for both studies was beneficial in illustrating these complexities.

Our analysis of two bilingual teachers' work leads us to argue for re-naming that explicitly discusses bilingual education alongside race, class, educational level and other political dimensions that have an impact on teaching and learning with bilingual populations. We argue that researchers in this field should take on the role of "critical advocacy," alongside progressive bilingual educators. In our two studies and in our work, in general, being critical advocates meant simultaneously identifying with and critiquing stakeholders within the field of bilingual education. We have been concerned that this stance should not appear as diminished support for bilingual education as an educational and social practice. The tensions between a researcher's documentation and her political support and critique are a part of what Eisenhart (2001) describes as the "muddles" of contemporary educational ethnography: how to provide a critical portrait of stakeholders who are part of a marginalized community? In our case, a critical portrait of bilingual education might be (mis)interpreted as making a case against its very cause—to support strong forms of bilingual education (Levinson & Holland, 1996). We subsume these under the general tension of being researchers as well as critical advocates for "strong forms" (Baker, 2001) of bilingual education