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Amanda Shifreen
Trinity College

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Bilingual Education in Hamilton Heights: Constructing Student Identity Through Language Policy

Amanda Shifreen

Senior Research Project

Educational Studies

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Abstract:

This research is motivated by the inequity between native Spanish speaking students in the United States and their English-speaking counterparts. In districts where there are restrictive languages policy and practices implemented, Spanish-speaking students do not have equal access to the public education system – making this a human rights issue. In the small New England city of Applesville’s Hamilton Heights neighborhood, classroom observations and focus groups were utilized to understand the student perspective of the restrictive language policies and practices in the classroom. It was discovered that such language policies invalidate students’ linguistic and cultural identities, influencing them to resist their schooling. However, when teachers engage cultural and linguistic identities in the classroom, students respond positively. Additionally, all students echoed a desire for Spanish to have a greater role in the classroom. Future research should investigate the success of a dual-language approach to language acquisition in this area.

Introduction

Nationally, there has been a general pull away from dual-language approaches to bilingual education. Three states, California, Arizona and Massachusetts, have gone so far as to pass legislation to severely restrict the amount of native language instruction that students receive in school. These policies for Spanish-speaking students are especially problematic in Applesville's Hamilton Heights neighborhood. Overtime, this neighborhood's Latino population has increased steadily to 71.7%. Additionally, 72% of Hamilton Heights residents speak Spanish at home. There are two public schools that serve this neighborhood, the Ramos Community School and the Santiago School. The majority of students in both schools are Latino (82.7% and 85.6% respectively), while almost half of the student population in both schools has been defined as English Language Learner (ELL) (46.4% and 43% respectively). Additionally, 64.7% of Ramos students speak a language other than English at home, and 64.8% of Santiago students speak a language other than English at home ("Strategic school profile," 2010). District policy states that only new arrivals to the United States can receive native language instruction in school. A recent immigrant has a ten-month "grace period" before he or she must take the reading section of the state standardized test (CMT or CAPT). Additionally, this student has a thirty-month period where he or she is eligible for native language services. After this period, only English instruction is permitted. The district goal is for students to be fluent English speakers by high school graduation, so if a student immigrates in their sophomore year of high school, he or she does not receive any native language instruction. Ramos students in the third through the sixth grades score significantly lower on the CMT than do students in the rest of the district. Only 4.6% of third grade students are proficient in math compared to the district's 20.3%. Only 8.9% of fourth grade students are proficient in reading compared to the district's

20.3%; and only 13.8 of Ramos students are proficient in writing contrasted with the district's 38.2%. Santiago students show very similar trends with their CMT scoring. Only 6.0% of third graders are proficient in reading compared to the 26.9% in the district; 20.5% of fourth graders are proficient in writing compared to the 29.5% in the district. Only 10.3% of fifth grade students are proficient in reading compared to the 18.0% in the district, and only 16.7% of sixth graders are proficient in writing compared to the 38.2% in the district ("Strategic school profile," 2010). It is clear that there is an achievement gap in this area, which can most likely be attributed to the language barriers between the students' native languages and the dominant curriculum in this neighborhood. However, these test scores are not an accurate depiction of these students. Because the test is only administered in English, it is unreasonable to assume that the students who are designated as ELL, or who do not speak English at home will be able to understand this test as well as a student whose first language is English. Therefore, I question how do these language policies and practices in Hamilton Heights impact student identity and student perceptions of schooling? I argue that the use of restrictive language policies and practices in school suppresses a student's linguistic and cultural identities, making them feel inferior and invalidated in the classroom. Students feel disconnected from both their American and Latino/a identities and are commonly misunderstood by teachers. However, student engagement is possible when teachers show genuine interest in and care to their students.

Literature Review

One of the most highly debated issues in the fields of educational research and practice today is bilingual education. There are four common arguments against bilingual education. The tacit compact argument states that foreign languages should be given up as a right of passage into the United States. The take and give argument states that because immigrants tend to be

more successful in the new country, they should give up their native language in order to achieve that success. The antighettoization argument states that native language keeps groups isolated from the dominant group, therefore groups should give up their native language in order to assimilate. Finally, the national unity argument states that maintaining native languages can create divisions among national unity (Wiley & Lukes, 1996). However, between 1995 and 2005, there was a 56% increase in English Language Learners (ELL) in public schools. Moreover, the ELL enrollment rate is increasing seven times more rapidly than the entire school enrollment (Garcia, Kleifgen & Falchi, 2008). Because of the huge increase of bilingual students in the United States public school system, and due to the inequalities that exist in this society, Latino students attending public schools tend to be at a higher disadvantage than their white counterparts. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of bilingual students enrolled in United States schools increased from 2.0% to 32.2% (Garcia, 2005). Unfortunately, these students are not spread equally throughout the United States, but concentrated in areas of racial and ethnic isolation and poverty. Because of these general inequalities, achieving educational equity for these students is much more difficult than it should be. Unfortunately, educational equity is coupled with other issues of linguistic and cultural identity for these students; leading to my research question, how do language policies and practices impact student identity and perceptions of schooling?

Lopez and Lopez (2010) discuss the issues that undocumented Latino students face in school. Undocumented students not only deal with issues of inequality based on their language and ethnic identities, but also must deal with issues related to the legal system, as they constantly fear deportation. Due to the fears and preconceived notions of inferiority regarding Spanish-speaking populations, Arizona developed a new piece of legislation, Proposition 203, which

aimed to replace bilingual education with an English immersion program. This sought to eliminate any teaching materials in Spanish (or any other native language) therefore, placing all non-English speakers in a “sink or swim” environment. Regardless of the overwhelming evidence base that depict English Immersion programs to be unsuccessful, many people still feel that bilingual education threatens national unity and fragments the United States’ linguistic identity. Unfortunately the discourse surrounding Spanish-speaking people is completely based in deficit theory. Additionally, it is easy for native English speakers to ignore the racial, ethnic, economic and political issues that keep all underrepresented students in a subordinate position in society. It is also important to note that knowing English does not automatically give Latino immigrants success in the United States –the Chicano population has been speaking English for generations, yet they are still marginalized in today’s society.

Unfortunately, the historical view of Latinos and Spanish-speaking youth is based in deficit theory. Beginning in the 1920’s, Latino youth was seen as being “mentally retarded.” Latino youth would repeatedly score very low on I.Q. tests due to language difficulty, and mental retardation was attributed to these low scores. Through the years, the deficit views of Latinos have adapted. As recently as the 1990’s this population was seen as “at risk” because these youth come from dysfunctional families, parents do not care about their children, and children are commonly neglected. Moreover, since the 2000’s, Latino youth’s main problem is their inability to learn English. Persistent Latino failure in society is due to this (Flores, 2005). The deficit view of Latino students is displayed in the laws regarding bilingual education. Laws like Arizona’s Proposition 203 are attempting to control these populations by “fixing” their language deficiencies (Lopez and Lopez, 2010).

Following the lead of California and Arizona, Massachusetts also passed a law stating that all instruction of bilingual students had to be in English. Uriarte, Lavan and Diez (2010) conducted a study where they compared data on all Boston Public Schools' students. The researchers compared three groups of students: the entire student body, students who are not native speakers of English in general education, and students in English learner programs. The researchers found that students in English learner programs had the highest grade-level retention rate, increasing from 8.6% in 2004 to 13.1% in 2006. There was also an increase in the student drop out rate; by 2006, 40.2% of students in general education were dropping out in high school, and 46.4% of students in EL programs were dropping out (Uriarte, Lavan & Diez, 2010). The presence of an English only curriculum in Massachusetts also displays how this curriculum is not as helpful to Latino students as people expect, and unfortunately, the national trend has been to utilize these English only curriculums. Quantitative studies like this are extremely important in understanding the deficiencies in the education of Spanish-speaking students in the United States, however these statistics fail to understand how students feel, and their experiences in the schooling process. My research seeks to understand just that – the achievement gap between native Spanish-speakers and their English-speaking counterparts is obvious, but what are these student experiences like, and how does that shape their educations?

Lopez and Lopez (2010) also discuss the implications of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation for undocumented and non-English speaking students. “No Child Left Behind” attempts to enforce high standards for United States public schools. In order to do this, public schools are held to administer standardized tests to their students. Standardized testing is extremely damaging to students of color residing in urban areas. Due to institutional racism, concentrated poverty and inadequate resources, urban schools resort to teaching to these

standardized tests, which then shows the students that test performance is the only aspect of their school performance that is valued. “No Child Left Behind” allows non-English speaking students a one year grace period in which they do not have to take the standardized tests in language heavy content. However, this exception is not acceptable in the subjects of math and science – because these subjects are seen to be universal and less language dependent. However, many questions in math and science are in the form of word problems, so it is unreasonable to expect that students who do not speak English will be able to read these questions with only a year’s (or less) exposure to the English language. The Applesville school district utilizes the ten-month grace period law for new arrivals to the United States. However, they also allow immigrants a thirty-month period where they have access to native language services. After this period, all instruction must be in English. If a student in tenth grade or older begins school, that student has no access to native language services because the district’s goal is that students will be fluent in English by graduation.

Valenzuela (1999) discusses the implications of restrictive language policies for Latino youth. In her ethnography, Valenzuela (1999) coined the term “subtractive schooling.” This term refers to curriculums that remove natural resources from Latino youth, such as their language and culture, focusing these students on assimilationist policies (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 20). One important concept that is lost to Latino youth in their schooling is that of *educacion*, which includes more than the simple learning in the classroom. Additionally, *educacion* includes learning how to treat others and respect one’s elders. However, these students are “powerless to exert [their] definition of education in the schooling process” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 81). Because the Latino definition of education is not valuable in the school setting, these students often resist the schooling process. “What may come across as youthful rebelliousness

may be nothing more than youth exploring and finding ways to negotiate their lived experience as ethnic, bicultural human beings” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 84). Because students are seen as being “rebellious,” this displays the cultural mismatch that occurs between Latino youth and their teachers. Valenzuela (1999) points out that these students are simply trying to navigate their cultural and linguistic identities to include them in the mainstream culture. Valenzuela (1999) states this phenomenon best, “with their *educacion* model of schooling, they reject not education, but the content of their education and the way it is offered to them” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 226).

DeJaeghere and McCleary (2010) investigate how students’ cultural identities are affected through curriculum. They studied two schools: one in a rural community and the other in an urban community. The rural school was a mostly white environment, with little integration of Latino culture. However, the urban school aimed to integrate Latino studies into a mainstream curriculum, even though only half of the student population was Latino. With many recent Mexican migrants attending, the school’s bilingual education program aimed to have a bicultural component, however, in practice the focus was on English learning. The researchers noticed how important language was in the construction of the Mexican youth’s identities. Due to the disconnect between the curriculum’s aims and what actually was played out in the classroom, the youth were left to construct their own civic and cultural identities. They did this by utilizing both their Spanish and English skills in public forums, as well as joining soccer teams – a space where both of their languages were valued. The researchers conclude that the construction of these identities is critical for transnational youth, and that educators must understand how essential they are in the process. Additionally, it is important for these students

that Spanish be utilized in their curriculum, and that they have access to Spanish speaking teachers.

Garcia (2005) discusses the dual-language approach to language acquisition. These curriculums have three major goals:

To help language-minority children learn English and succeed in U.S. schools; to help language-majority children learn a foreign language without sacrificing their own success in school; and to promote linguistic and ethnic equity among the children, encouraging children to bridge the gaps between cultures and languages which divide our society. (Garcia, 2005, p. 47)

The fact that it is not the minority languages that divide our society, but the gaps between cultures, is extremely important to recognize. There are two different approaches to a dual-language program: a 50:50 model and a 90:10 model. The 50:50 model is designed for students to spend half the school day given English instruction, and the other half in Spanish instruction. The 90:10 model is designed so that students in kindergarten receive Spanish instruction for 90% of the day, and gradually increasing their English instruction to be 50% by the fourth or fifth grade. Studies of these curriculums show that students in these programs show achievement in both languages. In Arlington County, Virginia all of the native Spanish-speaking students attending a dual-language school were completely fluent in English by the third grade. Moreover, writing samples from both native Spanish and native English speaking students were impossible to differentiate from each other – both being high quality. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, students in a dual-language program outperformed students in a more standard bilingual education program. These students performed better in reading and math in both Spanish and English. In California, students in a dual-language program not only scored better than control groups on standardized tests, but also scored higher than the state averages in both reading and math. These examples of dual-language programs across the country display the

immense academic achievement that both Spanish speaking students and English speaking students display in these programs. These programs do not hinder the learning of the English-speaking students, and greatly increase the learning of the Spanish-speaking populations. There are also social benefits to these programs, because students are taught that both languages have an equal value in the classroom, students of the different cultures are more likely to become friends with one another.

Methodology

I have been observing two fourth grade classrooms at the Ramos Community School for 7 weeks, with three hours of observation in each classroom per week. One classroom that I observed was taught by a native English speaker, who did not speak Spanish. The other classroom I observed was taught by a native Spanish-speaking teacher. Both classrooms were instructed to teach an English only curriculum. I took on the role of “participant observer” in both classrooms, as when the teachers or students needed assistance with anything was there to help. This role was not new to me, as I have been tutoring at Ramos for two years – which was another reason why this school was a perfect site for my research; I was a familiar face in the school, gaining a sort of insider knowledge of the community there. Originally, I was planning to conduct focus group discussions with the students in the classrooms that I was observing; however after submitting an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to the school district of Applesville several times, my research request was denied. District administrators were aware that I had already obtained ethical approval from the college’s IRB. Specifically, I was told that, “the possible findings from the study are not significant enough to justify any interruption to the teaching and learning process.” (E-mail correspondence, 2011) To be clear, I was not planning on interrupting the teaching and learning process at all. On the contrary, I was hoping to aid this

process and as stated previously, my role in the classroom was to assist the teachers and students with anything they might need. If my proposal had been granted, I was planning to conduct focus group discussions during the lunch and recess period, which would be completely voluntary. However, because I was denied access to Ramos from the district, I was able to utilize Nuestra Comunidad, a community center, and talk with the students in their after school program. I was able to conduct three focus group discussions with eleven students total. All of the students were residents of Hamilton Heights; however, they attend various schools around the Applesville district. All focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed, and all names of people and places have been replaced with pseudonyms.

I must address my role as the researcher in this study. As I was studying Latino youth, I had to acknowledge my privilege as a Caucasian female undergraduate student. This was not as much of an issue in my role as participant observer in the Ramos Community School because I have been tutoring there for almost two years. I felt that I had earned the role of “insider” in that site, as I am easily recognized by students, faculty and staff. However, at Nuestra Comunidad, I was a newcomer to the program. The first day that I went to Nuestra Comunidad, the leaders of the program asked me to explain my research process and the goals of my study to the students. At one point, the leader asked me why I was so interested in this topic, as I do not speak Spanish, and have never been affected by issues related to language policy in the classroom. I explained to the group why I felt so strongly about bilingual education, and how I was interested most in the implications for student identity and perceptions of schooling. As I answered, the leader and students nodded their heads in agreement. The fact that they group questioned my role as the researcher to understand my intentions and biases. Because they accepted my answer to the question, I felt that I gained their trust and honesty in explaining their schooling experiences.

Context

Applesville is a small, New England city comprised of several neighborhoods; this study focuses on the Hamilton Heights neighborhood in particular. The majority of the population in Hamilton Heights comes from a Latino/Hispanic descent (71.7%). There are also 14.1% blacks, 11.1% whites, and 0.8% other. Between 1980 and 2000, there were significant changes in the racial composition of the neighborhood. In 1980, there were 3.6% blacks, 49.0% whites, 1.8% other races, and 45.6% Latino/Hispanic (Hartfordinfo.org, 2011). Analyzing these trends, it is clear that in this twenty-year period there has been white flight out of Hamilton Heights and a pouring of Latino/Hispanic people into the neighborhood, with a significant increase in the black population. Additionally, in 2000, only 11.9% of residents were foreign born. This was a significant decrease from 1970 when 31.5% of the residents of Hamilton Heights were foreign born. Although there a low percentage of foreign-born residents, 72% of Hamilton Heights residents speak a language other than English in their homes (Hartfordinfo.org, 2011).

To an outsider, one may think that this neighborhood struggles with poverty; however Hamilton Heights has several economic assets that they use to their advantage. In 2000, 45.2% of residents lived below the poverty line – which was a significant increase from 36.0% in 1980. What is interesting about this statistic is that the neighborhood increased its poverty level as there was also white flight in the neighborhood. This is a prime example of how structural inequalities have affected this neighborhood. In addition, the median household income in 2000 was \$17,333; compared to the state median income of \$53,935 and the national median household income of \$41,994 (Hartfordinfo.org, 2011). The comparison between Hamilton Heights and the state median income is appalling in itself. However, Hamilton Heights has

assets that may not be found in other areas of the state. Lincoln Street, the center of the Hamilton Heights neighborhood is lined with different bodegas, restaurants and clothing stores. Also on Lincoln Street is the *Mercado*, which is a small shopping center. The Mercado and the rest of the bodegas and shops are all assets to the neighborhood because they are all owned and operated by people in the community. Therefore, when the residents of Hamilton Heights shop at the Mercado and other shops, they are helping their neighbors by supporting local shopkeepers. As I've been told, some outsiders will criticize the neighborhood for this, explaining, "All the Puerto Ricans will only spend their money on Lincoln Street." (Personal Communication, 2010) On the other hand, this is actually economically beneficial to their neighborhood, and it can be seen as a form of resistance. As wealth is associated with whiteness, there is a lot of agency that is shown in starting businesses and maintaining them, especially in the recession that the United States is in.

Because Hamilton Heights is an urban area, one wouldn't expect much of the housing to be owner occupied. This assumption would be correct. In 1970, only 13.1% of housing units were owner occupied. This number actually decreased consistently to 2000, where only 7.1% of housing units were owner occupied (Hartfordinfo.org, 2011). Most of the houses in Hamilton Heights are two or three family houses. A living trend seems to be that in these two and three family houses, actual families will be living in the different apartments together. For example, in a two family house, there might be a family downstairs and a cousin's family upstairs. It's so powerful that families live together in the same houses because not only can they be together and raise their children together, but they can also pool their resources together and it is easy to help each other when they are in need.

In Hamilton Heights, 48.6% of residents have a high school diploma, yet only 10.3% have graduated from college. In the state, 88.2% have graduated from high school, and nationally 84.6%. Additionally in the state, 35.1% of people have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to the national average of 27.5%. Again, inequalities in Hamilton Heights are expressed so bluntly in these statistics. The state actually exceeds the national average in both high school graduates and college graduates, yet Hamilton Heights falls far below both the state and national averages (Hartfordinfo.org, 2011). In a setting of educational inequity, such as the situation in Applesville public schools, students typically resist – and unfortunately this resistance comes in the form of dropping out and doing poorly in school.

Despite these institutional inequalities, there are programs within the city that try to eliminate the discrepancies between the Hamilton Heights neighborhood and the rest of the state and country. The Ramos Community School in particular, has an after school program called Ramos Achieves, gives the students time to do their homework and then they are able to do a variety of activities including different sports and dance classes. Additionally, there is another organization, Nuestra Comunidad, that is similarly an after school program that offers the children time to do homework as well as time to relax, play games, and play sports. There are also programs for the children at the Applesville Public Library Branch on Lincoln Street.

Data and Analysis

Inferiority and Invalidation in the Classroom

Elena, a thirteen-year-old Colombian student, discussed how frustrated school makes her because of the lack of Spanish included in her curriculum. In her school, there is a Spanish instruction class aimed at non-native speakers. Even in this class, Elena becomes very upset and feels as if her teacher “makes fun” of her Spanish by telling her she is speaking incorrectly. The

Spanish teacher is not a native speaker and is not sensitive to her students' Spanish identities. Elena feels invalidated because she speaks Spanish the way that her family taught her, and the teacher does not value their linguistic identity.

Two students, Izabella and Carmen, discussed not receiving the help they need in the classroom. Izabella discussed how when her teacher presents a new lesson to the class, all of the Spanish speaking students are asked to move to the back of the classroom. Because of their difficulty understanding English, these students frequently need help with their class work, and although they ask for help several times throughout the lesson, the teacher conveniently does not get to their section of the room until the very end of the class when there is not enough time left to give them the help that they need. Because the teacher can not find time to help Izabella and the other students that speak Spanish, she feels as if she does not deserve to learn as much as her English speaking counterparts. Carmen also expressed difficulty with her class work. In her school, worksheets are the most common tool utilized by the teacher. Carmen explained that these worksheets are very difficult, and she does not feel that they help her learn. She stated, "sometimes I ask the teacher [for help] and she ignores me." Because her teacher ignores her, Carmen does not feel like it is necessary for her to work hard in school. Her feelings of invalidation are causing her to resist the schooling process and therefore keep her from being successful.

Nina, a thirteen-year-old Mexican student, explained that she is not allowed to speak Spanish in her classroom because the teacher does not understand the language, and also because the teacher assumes that the students are gossiping with each other. Because she is not allowed to speak Spanish in the classroom, Nina describes feeling uncomfortable and incompetent in her work. She stated that she easily gets confused, which causes her to feel embarrassed. Because

of her embarrassment, she rarely asks the teacher for help at all, however she will feel comfortable asking her classmates for help if she needs it. The fact that Nina feels too embarrassed to ask her teacher for help shows that she perceives her teacher to care less about her than she does the English speaking students in the class.

A common explanation for why students should not speak Spanish in the classroom is that the teachers want everyone in the room to understand what is going on at all times. Therefore, not only do they feel uncomfortable because they do not speak Spanish, but they speak for the non-Spanish speakers in the classroom and request that students use English so that those students understand them. However, all of the students I spoke with grew up with Spanish as their first language. Even if they were born in the United States, none of them speak Spanish at home. At what point does their ability to understand the happenings of the classroom become important? Currently, they all expressed a frustration with being able to understand their teacher, understand their class work, and feel comfortable speaking English. By teachers explaining to them that they should not speak their native language on behalf of the English speaking students in the class further shows them that their English speaking peers are more important in the school than they are.

Subtractive Schooling at Work

Izabella, a fourteen-year-old Puerto Rican student, expressed that Spanish was prohibited in her classrooms: “I had a math teacher, and she wouldn’t like us to speak Spanish for nothing. Me and my two friends would sit together and talk Spanish together, and the teacher would say ‘don’t talk Spanish’ and I said why, and she would just say ‘don’t talk Spanish.’” She also discussed difficulty with her class work because she experiences difficulty with the English language. “I used to live in Puerto Rico for a little while, and I used to be really good at math,

but when I came back over here I started failing, it was harder for me cause I couldn't process it." Not only does Izabella have difficulty with her class work in English, but she also mentioned that because she has not practiced her reading and writing in Spanish, she feels as if she has lost those skills as well. Because she has not excelled in school in her English, and she feels as if she has lost her literacy in Spanish, she feels inferior in both her linguistic identities.

At the Ramos Community School, I walked into Ms. Taylor's classroom to find her reprimanding the students about their previous behavior. The students had just finished their Spanish class, which is a language instruction class aimed at non-native speakers that the students have for forty-five minutes once a week. Ms. Taylor told me that the students had been very disrespectful to the teacher. Although I did not see the actual Spanish lesson, Ms. Taylor was explaining to the students that Spanish is very important for them to learn because being bilingual is an advantage in today's society; in addition, students should not misbehave during their Spanish lesson because it makes it very difficult for the teacher to teach them. The students resist the Spanish class that they have once a week because it is not a culturally engaging curriculum. Many of the students have some fluency in Spanish, if that is not their primary language at home. Because this Spanish class is not aimed at students with these skills, it is as if the school is asking the students to forget the Spanish that they already know and begin learning it again from scratch.

Cultural Disconnects Between Teachers and Students

"How would they feel if they went to, for example, Columbia, if like American people go there and they speak English, how are they gonna feel if they can't speak English, just speak Spanish, they're gonna feel bad, like we feel," Nina stated at the end of the discussion. After this explanation of her feelings about not being allowed to speak Spanish in her classroom, she gave

an example of her teacher's reactions when she did this. "Sometimes, the teacher scream at you, like 'stop talking because I don't understand.' Once, I was talking like that and the teacher came to me and she was like 'oh, stop talking cause the only thing that I hear is gobble, gobble gobble.'" With this explanation of why Spanish is not allowed in the classroom, Nina's teacher ameliorated her feelings of inferiority within the school. Nina explained that in this instance, she was speaking in Spanish in order to help her classmate who had recently emigrated from Dominican Republic, because this student did not know any English. This is an example of a cultural disconnect between Nina and her teacher, as the teacher just heard Nina's Spanish without considering the context of why she was speaking.

Nina and Angel also both mentioned that people within their respective schools that do not speak Spanish often assume that Spanish is used to gossip in the presence of the person that is the subject of the conversation. Both of them stated that most likely, this is not the topic of the common Spanish conversation in their respective schools. Both students expressed that Spanish is commonly used for the students to help each other understand their class work. It is clear that in Nina and Angel's schools the teachers do not contemplate the circumstances under which the students speak Spanish. The teachers' inability to understand this context not only shows the cultural disconnect between the teachers and their students but it also shows their lack of willingness to try to understand these students.

Elena also expressed several instances where she had experienced a cultural disconnect with her teacher. She expressed a lot of frustration and anger because of her inability to speak Spanish in the classroom. In particular, she described a class where her she was doing her class work and her teacher told her to show her the paper. Elena felt like the teacher did not give her the respect that she deserved, and she would not show her the paper until the teacher said

“please.” Instead of understanding that Elena was looking for respect, the teacher decided to physically force the paper out of her hands. After this, Elena told me that she cursed at the teacher and was subsequently sent to the office. If the teacher had recognized why Elena was resisting her request, there would have been no need for the conflict that ensued.

“The schools here are so bad,” So We Go Back to Puerto Rico

Victor, a Puerto Rican student who has only been in the United States for three years, attends a school in a mostly black neighborhood of Applesville. When he first came to the United States he was in tenth grade, and knowing very little English, he found comfort in meeting ten Latino friends at his school, and being able to speak to them in Spanish. After tenth grade, Victor and his friends were separated in different classes and rarely saw each other. Since then, Victor said that seven of his ten friends have moved back to Puerto Rico because they were not learning anything here. Now, there are only three Latino students in the whole program and he is rarely able to see or speak to them. After hearing about Victor’s experience, I asked the rest of the group if their friends often return back to Puerto Rico because of the school quality in the United States. All of them nodded their heads. Carlos explained that “the schools here are so bad,” and how difficult it is to learn as a native Spanish speaker.

Push For a Dual-Language Approach

When prompted, “how would you like Spanish to be used in the classroom?” all three focus groups discussions yielded very similar answers. Students express a desire for a dual-language curriculum in their schools. Xiomara, a Puerto Rican student who has always lived in the United States stated that she felt that Spanish should be used appropriately, the same way that English is used. “In my school, they don’t talk Spanish appropriately... the way it is supposed to be talked.” She, and the other students all want to be able to speak Spanish in school as a way of

learning. As stated previously, Nina and Angel need Spanish in order to learn, therefore, utilizing a dual-language curriculum would be especially useful for them. The use of a dual-language curriculum may also decrease the amount of resistance that students show. Elena stated “I would like school if it was Spanish.” Students all expressed a desire for more Spanish classes, not only for students that needed to learn English, but they thought that it would also be beneficial to students that want to learn Spanish.

Student Engagement Through Teacher Caring

As a recent migrant from Puerto Rico, Angel, a fourteen-year-old Puerto Rican student, expressed comfort in the resources that he has found in his school. He explained that he has a Puerto Rican teacher that will help him translate his work into Spanish, not only in this teacher’s class but in Angel’s other classes. Additionally, he referenced other figures in the school that spoke Spanish that were able to help him translate his work; for example, he said there is a Puerto Rican security guard and the vice principal’s secretary is Puerto Rican, and both of these people have been able to help him. “In my last class, the teacher is not Puerto Rican, he is white...the teacher knows some words in Spanish, and everyday he asks me to show him some things in Spanish.” Angel explained that this teacher motivates him to speak English more frequently. Valenzuela (1999) mentioned how important teacher caring is to the engagement of Latino youth. “Their precondition to caring about school is that they be engaged in a caring relationship with an adult at school” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 79). Angel’s story shows how this statement is true, because of the caring nature of the relationship he has with this teacher, he is more engaged in the schooling process. Xiomara also mentioned that some of her teachers like it when the students speak Spanish because they want to learn the language. In these cases, students feel more comfortable in school and they are more motivated to learn.

Conclusion

Through the testimonies of these students, when teachers utilize restrictive language policies in the classroom, Spanish-speaking students feel invalidated and inferior to their English-speaking counterparts. Because these implications are so severe, it is important for school and district administrators to consider this research (and others like it) when making decisions regarding language policy. Students mentioned that they would like school more if Spanish had a greater role, and national research shows that dual-language curriculums foster higher achievement in Spanish-speaking students than the standard bilingual education program. If the district of Applesville considered revising the dominant curriculum to a dual-language approach, students would engage more in their schooling and foster more positive feelings regarding their identities and perceptions of schooling. If, for whatever reason, the implementation of a dual-language program is not feasible, it would be beneficial to provide cultural and linguistic sensitivity workshops to teachers. These workshops would inform teachers to stories similar to those of the students that I spoke with, and cause them to understand how students feel when their identities are invalidated in the classroom. With these changes, the Latino population would not feel as inferior in the school setting, and therefore be more engaged in the schooling process. Future research should investigate trials of dual-language approaches in Hamilton Heights to understand if that model is a better option for our students. This research should include both quantitative and qualitative methods of research to test if the dual-language curriculum would not only improve their perceptions of their identities and schooling, but also improve their standardized test scores.

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Appendix

Focus Group Questions

1. When do you hear people speaking Spanish at school? Who is speaking Spanish, and what are they saying?
2. How is Spanish used in the classroom?
3. Are you allowed to speak Spanish in the classroom? If not, is there a reason why, or do you think there is a specific reason? What about in the cafeteria? Or in the hallways?
4. Do you like the class work that you do in school? If you could make any changes what would they be?
5. How would you like Spanish to be used at school?