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Bilingual Education in Frog Hollow: Constructing Student Identity Through Language Policy

Amanda Shifreen

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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 situations where there is a restrictive languages policy and practices implemented, these students do not have the same access to their educations - which makes this a human rights issue. In Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood, the English-only curriculum invalidates students' linguistic and cultural identities, influencing them to resist their schooling. Classroom observations and focus groups were utilized to understand the student perspective of the language policies and practices in Frog Hollow. Student testimonies show that restrictive language policies both suppress linguistic identities and inhibit academic success. However, when teachers engage cultural and linguistic identities in the classroom, students respond positively.

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. The restrictive language policies and practices for Spanish speaking immigrants is especially problematic in Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood. Overtime, this neighborhood's Latino population has increased steadily to 71.7%. Additionally, 72% of Frog Hollow 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). 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 ELL services, receiving some native language instruction. 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 at their sophomore year of high school, he or she does not receive any native language instruction. How do these language policies and practices in Frog Hollow impact student identity and perceptions of schooling? I am looking to students to discuss the language policies and practices that they face at their respective schools and to analyze the policy's implications of their attitudes towards schooling and perceptions of their academic achievement.

Research Question

How do these language policies and practices in Frog Hollow impact student identity and perceptions of schooling?

Current Approaches to Bilingual Education

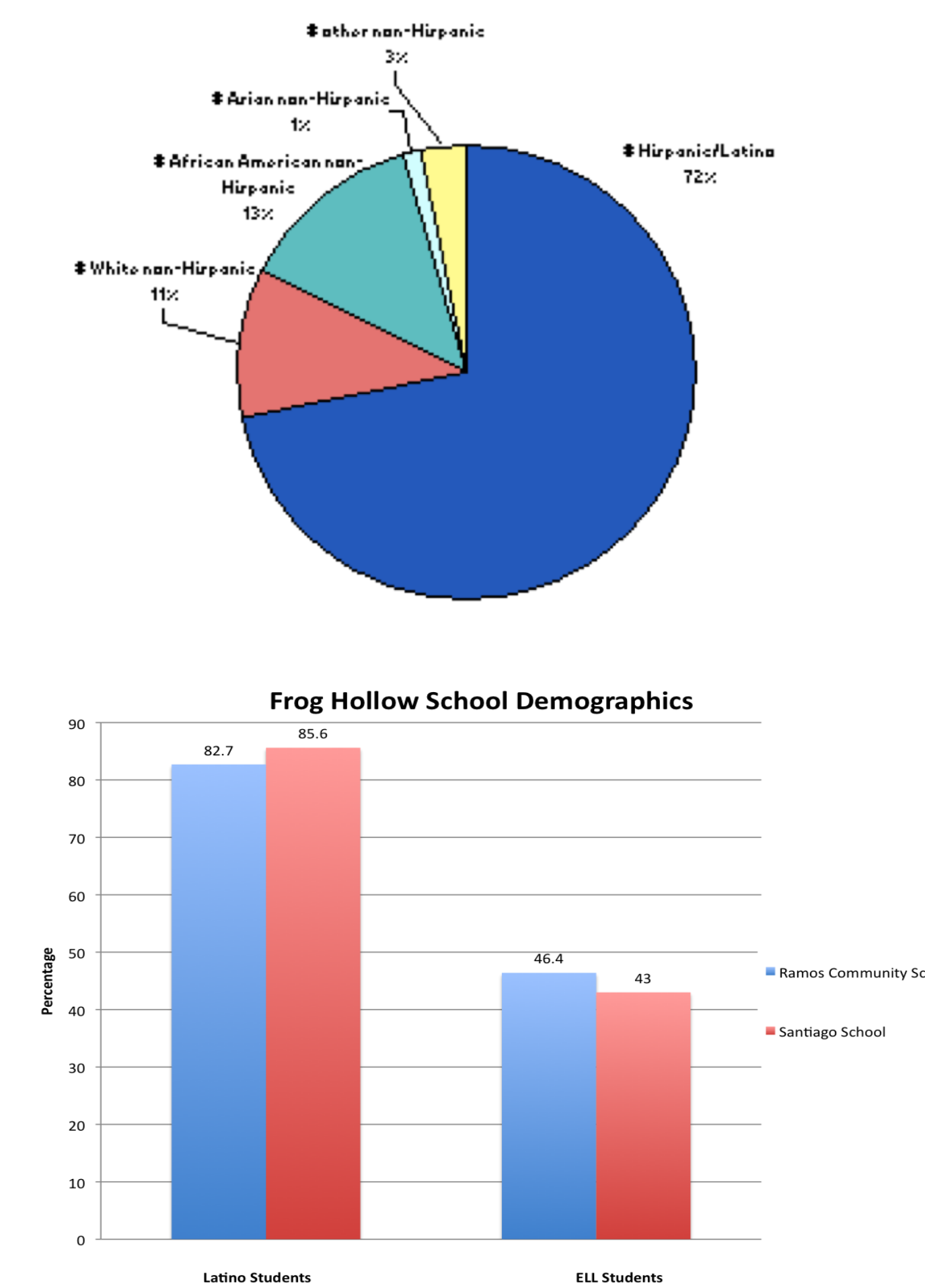
- “Subtractive schooling” removes resources that Latino youth have such as their cultural definition of education as well as strip them of their culture and language through assimilationist policies. (Valenzuela, p. 20)
- Throughout the 1990's and 2000's Spanish-speaking students been seen as a problem because they are “at risk” and they have a lack of English. Spanish-speaking students are thought to come from dysfunctional families and their persistent failure in school is due to bilingual education. Most importantly, their lack of English is what prevents Spanish-speaking students from success. (Flores, p. 93)
- Arguments against bilingual education:
 - Tacit compact: Foreign languages should be given up as a right of passage into the U.S.
 - Take and give: Immigrants tend to be more successful in their new country, therefore they should give up their native language
 - Antighettoization: Native language keeps immigrant groups isolated from the dominant groups
 - National unity: Maintaining native languages can create division among national unity

Methods

This study was conducted using qualitative methods. Instead of looking at test scores, I chose to hear directly from students to capture the implications for their identities and attitudes towards schooling – two variables that test scores do not. I observed two classrooms at the Ramos Community School for eight weeks, about three hours per week in each classroom. Both were fourth grade classrooms, one classroom's teacher is a native English speaker, and the other classroom's teacher is bilingual in English and Spanish. Although observations reported in this study were from an eight week period, I have been tutoring in the Ramos Community School for about two years, and draw on those experiences in this study. I also conducted 3 focus group discussions (11 students total) with middle and high school students at a local community organization, Nuestra Comunidad. Focus group discussions lasted from fifteen to thirty minutes, and discussions were recorded and transcribed. Focus Group Questions:

- When do you hear people speaking Spanish at school? Who is speaking Spanish, and when?
- How is Spanish used in the classroom?
- 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?
- Do you like the class work that you do in school? If you could make any changes what would they be?
- How would you like Spanish to be used at school?

Results



Elena

Age: 13

Ethnicity: Colombian

Time in U.S.: Since birth

“I would like school if it was Spanish.” Elena 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.

Izabella

Age: 14

Ethnicity: Puerto Rican

Time in U.S.: Several years (she did not specify)

Izabella 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.

Results

Nina

Age: 13

Ethnicity: Mexican

Time in U.S.: 6 years

“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.” With this explanation of why Spanish is not allowed in the classroom, Nina's teacher ameliorated her feelings of inferiority within the school. “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.’” Nina explained that in this instance, she was speaking in Spanish in order to help her classmate who had recently immigrated from Dominican Republic. 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.

Angel

Age: 14

Ethnicity: Puerto Rican

Time in U.S.: 6 months

As a recent migrant from Puerto Rico, Angel 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. “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. Angel shows that even if a dual-language program is not feasible in a school system, teachers can engage students by showing interest in their identities and cultures.

Conclusions and Future Work

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. If the district of Hartford considered revising the dominant curriculum, or even providing cultural and linguistic sensitivity workshops, 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 to understand if that model is a better option for our students.

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