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

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Research Question

How do language policies and practices in Hamilton Heights impact student identity and perceptions of schooling?
Significance

- National pull away from 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 an “at risk” population. Spanish-speaking students are thought to come from dysfunctional families and their persistent failure in school is due to their lack of English. (Flores, p. 93)
The Bilingual Education Debate

• 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
Context

- Hamilton Heights: 71.7% Latino, 72% speak Spanish at home
- Ramos Community School
  - 82.7% Latino
  - 47.5% “Not fluent in English”
  - 46.4% English Language Learner (ELL)
- Santiago School
  - 85.6% Latino
  - 44.1% “Not fluent in English”
  - 43% ELL
Current Language Policy in Hamilton Heights

- Regardless of when a student comes to the U.S., he or she must take the math and science sections of the CMT.
- 10-month grace period before taking the reading section of the CMT.
- Immigrants are allowed 30 months (3 academic school years) of native language services in school.
- Immigrants in 10th grade or older receive no native language services.
- After the 30 month period, all instruction is in English.
Methods

- Observations - Ramos Community School
  - 2 Classrooms
  - 3 hours/week, each classroom (1 semester)
- Focus Groups
  - Nuestra Comunidad
  - 3 focus groups, 11 students

*All names in this project have been replaced with pseudonyms.*
Thesis

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 their students.
Inferiority and Invalidation in the Classroom

Elena

Age: 13
Ethnicity: Colombian
Time in U.S.: Since birth

- “I would like school if it was Spanish.”
- In her Spanish instruction class, Elena’s teacher “makes fun” of her Spanish by telling her that she is speaking incorrectly
Subtractive Schooling at Work

Izabella

Age: 14
Ethnicity: Puerto Rican
Time in U.S.: Several years (she did not specify)

- “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.’”
- “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.”
- Lost literacy in Spanish
Cultural Disconnect Between Teachers and Students

Nina

Age: 13
Ethnicity: Mexican
Time in U.S.: 6 years

- “How would they feel if they went to, for example, Colombia, 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.”

- “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.’”
Student Engagement Through Teacher Caring

Angel

Age: 14
Ethnicity: Puerto Rican
Time in U.S.: 6 months

- 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.”
Conclusion

- Implications for teachers
- Implications for policy makers
- Future research should investigate the implications of a dual-language approach in this area.
References

