

Young Bilingual Children's Perceptions of Bilingualism and Biliteracy: Altruistic Possibilities

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Abstract

This article depicts thirteen bilingual children's perceptions of their own bilingualism and biliteracy by sharing conversations, drawings, and collages. Children expressed the notion that their bilingualism/biliteracy is embedded in altruistic helping relations while revealing issues of identity. The concluding discussion centers on issues of social justice and equity in a post-monolingual society.

How children perceive their identities as bilingual and biliterate subjects is complex but ultimately related to socio-political, socio-historical, and power relations. The need to share children's perceptions of their identities is vital because, as Freire (1985) reminds us, at no time can there be a struggle for liberation and self-affirmation without the formation of an identity. Cummins (1996) points out that, "one set of voices conspicuously absent from the educational reform debates are the voices of students" (p. 171). Walsh (1991) also notes that learners are the true expert voices since they are "the insiders who know what oppression is and feels like" (p. 93). The significance of children's perceptions can also be viewed within the draconian measures eliminating bilingual programs in the United States.

This piece shares a slice of ongoing research highlighting the conversations and drawings of thirteen young bilingual and biliterate Spanish speaking children (ranging from ages 7 to 13, six girls and seven boys) residing in a town in Pennsylvania. More specifically, the focus on child perspectives includes: (a) how children view issues of bilingualism and biliteracy in their community and in their school; (b) how children view their own bilingualism and biliteracy; and (c) what *consejos* (advice) children might share with teachers, parents, and other children about bilingualism and biliteracy.

The Soviet scholar Bakhtin (Holquist, 1993) wrote about the effect of other people's words in our lives. The main point of his analysis relates to the importance of our perceptions of ourselves through the lenses of another's words. The thirteen children who generously shared their perceptions have begun to shed light on how biliterate learners shape and negotiate their identities while creating meaning from their daily lived realities.

The Politics of Bilingualism/Biliteracy in Steeltown

The children and families of Steeltown (pseudonym) faced the dismantling of a twenty-year, award winning bilingual program by their school district superintendent and school board (Soto, 1997). The superintendent bragged about being a "bilingual education abolitionist" to the *Wall Street Journal* (April 10, 1996). The article was written by the vice president of the federal Center for Equal Opportunity, who applauded Tom Doluisio's role in dismantling the bilingual education program, "Steeltown, Pennsylvania provides a stirring example of how other school districts can challenge the bilingual education orthodoxy—and win." The school superintendent related how "meetings were very heated. I had to have cops in the back of the room to make sure that there was no trouble." James Miller went on to say, "At one point, a group of Latino activists physically surrounded the school board and, led by a priest from out of town, engaged in a prayer to save Steeltown's bilingual-education program."

One might note that the English-only forces provided armed police guards, while the bilingual education proponents were escorted by a minister and peacefully knelt and prayed before the school board. The use of the term "bilingual education abolitionist" is rather ironic, as conservative English-only forces attempt to portray themselves in a light of emancipation, even though their activities are aimed at dismantling programs beneficial for children.

For children, especially younger children, issues of language and culture are intertwined and directly related to the formation of a healthy identity as members of a family and a nation. How children fare can be viewed from studying their own perspective. Yazmin, an eight year old, confessed sadly in one of the interviews,

The school took away my language. In the Steeltown school, they took away my language. I don't like the school. I'm sad when I think about what they did to me (cries repeatedly). In the Steeltown school they took away my language. (interview, summer 1998)

Yazmin related how she dreaded attending school and felt that she was forced to see the world through a language and culture she did not understand. In addition, Yazmin was expected to shed her home language and culture if she expected to participate in the Steeltown school and community.

Issues of power can obscure the voices representing children's best interests. Bilingual families interviewed elsewhere (Soto, 1997), as in many communities across our nation, defy stereotypical notions that families are uncaring about their children's educational future. The families who presented petitions to their school board and school superintendent represented families who were passionate in their pursuit of a quality education for their children.

The children whose voices rang out in community meetings were also attempting to preserve their program. The more powerful elements in Steeltown dismantled the program anyway. As an English-only program was being implemented, Margarita indicated that in her school children were not allowed to speak in Spanish: "*En esta escuela no se habla espanol.*" Juan felt like he was walking into a "cage with lions, and then you put in a little goat." It was evident that the school district policy makers did not take a careful, close look at what bilingual children were experiencing in schools and what children needed in order to become cultural participants.

Children's Depictions and Narratives

The children of Steeltown telephoned me, asking, "*¿Cuándo va a entrevistarnos?*" [When will you interview us?] They recalled their parents' participation in previous interviews and were interested in a similar opportunity. The children, along with their playmates, were attending the Spanish Speaking Community Center's summer activities camp. Their narratives distilled complex theories into images drawn from daily lived realities. The conversations were tape recorded, and loosely based on James Spradley's ethnographic interview techniques, which understands that interviewing children differs considerably from interviewing adults. Collages, narratives, and drawings were also collected from my thirteen co-researchers.

We met at the community center where the elders played dominoes and watched soap operas, where young mothers came to sign up for health programs, where Puerto Rican artists' (such as Cajigas) posters hanged, including Agueybana, the fearless Taino warrior, and where twenty elementary school aged children participated in a summer enrichment program.

I first interviewed each of the children separately and tape-recorded our conversations. Then I asked each child to complete three assignments. The overarching question was: What advice might you give other children who are interested in becoming bilingual and biliterate like you? The three assignments were to (a) write your story, (b) draw a picture of your experiences, and (c) paste pictures from magazines or newspapers that will help to illustrate your story. Once the documents were completed I engaged each child in follow up questions to elicit additional descriptions and insights.

In this article I share children's identities on their and their parent's insistence that their names be a part of the narrative. The children convinced me that it is important to connect real names with the multiple issues and

processes faced by bilingual children, who are struggling with what it means to be a bilingual/bicultural subject in the United States.

The children were excited about being a part of the project. I struggled with the interview format and plan to continue to follow this methodological area in the future. The initial findings are intriguing, however, and merit being shared at this time. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on two themes emerging from the interviews and the documents:

1. The usefulness of becoming biliterate is based upon the need to aid compassionate love relations among families and the “other” (non-biliterate, monolingual speakers). This was especially true for the girls in the group.
2. Identity issues as United States citizens and Puerto Rican mainlanders surfaced for all of the children (“*los de aqui y los de alla*” [those who are from here and from there]).

Helping Compassionate Love Relations for Families and the ‘Other’

The children’s depictions inform us that becoming bilingual biliterate is based upon the need to aid compassionate love relations for families and for “the other.” I was impressed by children who I can only describe as ‘sensitive philosophers,’ whose depictions demonstrated love for their families and love for non-bilingual and non-biliterate populations.

Whitney

Eleven-year-old Whitney’s first piece was a collage entitled, “Let’s talk about languages.” The center of her collage had a set of red ruby lips surrounded by pictures of white families engaged in multiple home activities. The captions included, “Teaching your child two languages will help him get a better job!!”, “After you learn a little bit of Spanish try reading a book,” and “Spending time with those who want to learn two languages will get them through hard things.” In her crayon drawing, Whitney depicted her experience teaching Spanish to a non-bilingual child in her classroom. The dialogue bubbles are numbered over the heads of the two “big hair-do” girls state, “Me: Say *pero* (1); “Cassandra: *Pero* (2).”

Her third piece, a narrative sharing advice, was written mostly in English, with one Spanish sentence:

The advice I would give children Who would like to be bilingual and biliterate is that my first step was—don’t give up. work hard and you will achieve your goals. My second advice is after you have learned how to speak a little . . . you should try to read a book. My third goal is to talk to your teacher so that you can have a little time to have Spanish class or if not if you want to be a friend teach them some

Spanish. *Gracias por escucharme.* [Thank you for listening to me.]
Thank you. Whitney.

Jasmin

“Helping others be bilingual is great” was the title for eight-year-old Jasmin’s collage. The magazine depictions she chose included white children and adults in multiple activities at home and at school. Her captions were in English and included: “Helping others know another language will help them know names for other objects,” “Having quality time with those who want to become bilingual will help them,” “You should talk to your children (in) both languages”, “When kids know 2 languages it will make them happy to help others,” “Helping others when [they] are in trouble will do good with their learning’s,” and “Kids reading on their own is a great start to teach them another language.”

Jasmin’s crayon drawing was entitled, “I can. . . . I can read to other people in Spanish and English.” At the center of her illustration was a tablet stating,

I am proud to know 2 languages because I can help people translate;
y estoy orgullosa de saber 2 idiomas para así ayudar servir de interprete. Translate, interpret, make them champions of languages, encourage, help, help them with their studies, and make them useful to help others.

In addition, there was a small blue heart, a green flower, and a small rainbow as part of the background of this illustration. Jasmin’s brief English narrative included, “Advise that I will give to children who wants to become bilingual is that knowing two languages will help you through life, and you will be able to help other people as well.”

Christia and Yaunie were eleven and nine years old, respectively. Christia’s drawing depicted a hospital waiting room and was entitled, “Welcome to St. Luke’s.” Christia shared how valuable her interpretive skills became when her grandmother lived with the family and Christia accompanied her to the local hospital. She felt the importance of her bilingual/biliterate skills and may have even “saved my abuelita’s life!” Her written English narrative stated:

Being bilingual is very special. Not a lot of kids are bilingual. Being bilingual is very important . . . If your family knows Spanish. I’m going to tell you my story.

My name is Christia. I was born in Puerto Rico. I went to pre-K and kindergarten in Puerto Rico. We moved over here and I began school at Steeltown Elementary School, Pennsylvania. In first grade I had to take ESOL class. When I was in first grade my room teacher showed me how to talk English and I showed her how to talk Spanish. We had a nice time together. In the summer when my grandmother lived with

us I used to go with her to her appointments. I helped translate for her in Spanish. I like being bilingual. I helped a lot of kids each year to talk English. I would like for other kids to be bilingual and I would like for parents that know both languages to teach their kids both languages so they could help you and other people in the future. I think being bilingual is very important. Now I'm going to middle school and I would like to keep on helping others. I help my mom a lot when she doesn't understand things. I would like for other kids to do the same. Christia.

Yaunie depicted herself with a heart on her shirt. In her crayon drawing she wrote, "I am your friend," while her playmate replies, "*Que*, oh!" Both smiling "big hair-do" girls appear to be enjoying a sunny day in front of a large brown building. Yaunie's illustration of her heart on her shirt was in many ways reminiscent of the expression wearing one's heart on a (shirt) sleeve.

The paradox (in light of the findings from Soto, 1997) is to understand how young bilingual/bicultural children can, in spite of their colonized existence, express love-altruism for the "other." Bilingual/bicultural children face daunting challenges in educational settings that not only disregard their home language and culture, but also the wisdom of previous generations.

These children's voices are inspirational as subjects whose souls yearn for liberation and social justice in our lifetime. These sensitive philosophers demonstrated prosocial altruistic behaviors. Their willingness to advocate bilingualism and biliteracy offers a model for societies faced with multiple linguistic and cultural changes.

Altruism consists of voluntary actions intended to benefit others that are intrinsically motivate. Child rearing is a major component helping to shape children's dispositions toward competition or cooperation and prosocial behavior. The long-term impact of children's identification with altruistic parents is dramatically illustrated by the life histories of altruistic adults. Oliner and Oliner (1988), who studied 406 rescuers of Jews during the holocaust using a matched sample of nonrescuers, note:

It begins in close family relationships in which parents model caring behavior and communicate caring values. Parental discipline (is) almost imperceptible . . . includes a heavy dose of reasoning . . . parents set high standards, particularly with regard to caring for others. They implicitly or explicitly communicate the obligation to help others in a spirit of generosity, without concern for external rewards or reciprocity. Parents themselves model such behaviors, not only in relation to their children but also toward other family members and neighbors. (p. 249)

Intensive clinical interviews with "freedom riders" from the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and 1960s indicated that the fully committed, internalized, or autonomous altruistic participants described parents who

demonstrated prosocial behavior and concern with the welfare of others by working for altruistic causes, such as protesting nazi atrocities and other injustices, while discussing their altruism with their children (Rosenhan, 1970). Internalized and autonomous altruistic persons take social action without the expectation of external rewards.

Children cooperate if cooperation is rewarded; when only individual rewards are available, the competitive differences are quite evident. Moreover, when children are moved from traditional cultures to urban settings they tend to adopt the dominant group standards toward less cooperation and more competition (Mussen & Eisenberg, 1989). You can readily observe how notions of competition continue to be encouraged in U.S. schools, via selected oral and physical rewards for the fastest, foot races, privileged “show and tell,” and physical attributes and appearances. Modeling altruistic behaviors and prosocial behaviors has been uppermost on the minds of educators, yet it may be that the continued political pressures on teachers and schools from non-experts may be affecting the curriculum in ways that are proving deleterious to children. (See, for example, Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Weil, 2001, for a discussion on the standards movement in the United States.)

Puerto Rican Children’s Identification Issues as Islanders and Mainlanders

For colonial minorities such as Puerto Ricans the idea of affirming a separate identity constitutes a monumental challenge, especially for children who learn about a subordinate position during early childhood years. The outcome in such a climate of disregard is a lived experience of educational destruction documented by educators and statisticians. Data from the Children’s Defense Fund (Miranda, 1991) has documented that 50% of Puerto Rican children in the United States live below poverty level (in spite of having at least one full time working parent).

The history of the Puerto Rican people reveals a legacy of colonization, exploitation, and oppression both on the island and the mainland (Carrion, 1983; Scarano, 1993). We know that by 1968, 35.5% of women 15 to 45 years old who lived in Puerto Rico had been sterilized in an experiment that did not inform the women of their rights nor of the procedure (“La Operacion,” García, 1982). Pharmaceutical companies with federal tax breaks have polluted the Puerto Rican rivers (including with mercury), and while the U.S. Navy’s military training site on the island of Vieques continues to draw controversy, there is also a historical precedence for the imposition of English-only instruction on the island (Rodríguez, 1997).

As children experience the coercive power elements of communities, issues of language, culture, and power become evident in how we can and cannot benefit from, and contribute to our society. Children experience life conditions that are in conflict with the family’s cultural expressions while interacting with

the privileged sectors. The impact this has on identity can be viewed from a realm of overlapping spheres as meaning is negotiated about ourselves, our families, our communities, the island, and the mainland U.S. society.

The overlapping spheres intersect and interact where issues of identity confront dialectic tensions. Included in these daily experiences are issues produced by a migratory experience and a colonized existence. Puerto Ricans, like myself and the children I interviewed, find ourselves in a scene of displacement, filled with contradictions and reconfigurations that begin to influence the construction of our present identities. Yaunie, at nine years of age, revealed something of this difficulty in one of her interviews:

Yaunie: I can't read in Spanish because they took it away from me in school. I felt sad because I couldn't read in Spanish, and now my mommy is going to show me how to read in Spanish. My little brother is half Puerto Rican and half American because he was born here.

Interviewer: Are you American?

Yaunie: No. I don't want to be because I want to be Spanish . . . took it away. . . . No, I don't want to be American.

McLaren (1997) reminds us that “the struggle in these new times is a daunting one. I maintain that we are not autonomous citizens who can fashionably choose whatever ethnic combinations we desire in order to reassemble our identity” (pp. 7–8). Bakhtin's notion of “shared purview” also provides some insight about the implications of assumptions concerning cultural identity and bilingualism: “The utterance is shaped by speakers who assume that the values of their particular community are shared, and thus do not need to be spelled out in what they say” (Holquist, p. 61). It is evident from children's voices that there is tremendous complexity related to the bilingual/biliterate experience, including issues of identity, assimilation, and emotional pain in the space of uncertainty for “*los de aqui y los de alla.*”

Conclusion

What are the children telling us? This slice of the project raises multiple questions, including, but not limited to the themes discussed thus far.

First, initial findings on love-altruism—the children's altruistic behaviors as they relate to bilingualism and biliteracy—demonstrate possibilities for educators, parents, and policy makers. Will the children's example be allowed to lead the way toward a more equitable society? Is there knowledge that can be gained from families who have children with altruistic thoughts and behaviors?

Second, in the struggle for identity (“*los de aqui y los de alla*”), bilingual/biliterate children in this project are attempting to make sense of the word and the world (borrowing from Freire). It is evident that issues of power in the existing sociocultural political context continue to affect children’s daily lived realities.

What is our collective and ethical responsibility? Moraes’ (1986) vision for dialogic-critical pedagogy that incorporates both Bakhtin’s and Freire’s work calls for a dialogue of social “multi-voicedness” that is inclusive of the oppressed and the oppressors. She relates the Freirian perspective as providing the impetus “from the margins to the center,” while the Bakhtinian movement exemplifies a move “from the margins and from the center with the margins implying marginalized colonized groups.” In light of bilingual/biliterate children’s daily lived realities, the question remains, will the oppressive forces travel in any direction that will lead toward social justice and equity? An important question for educators is that we must not fall victims to standard developmental models but move toward understanding the cultural dimensions that permeate children’s lives.

Future Possibilities

The children have taught us that we can no longer remain detached scholars, but that our work needs to reflect emancipatory actions. Conducting this type of research is a life long journey requiring tremendous humility. I have learned that this work requires revolutionary courage, is dialectical, and is based upon democratic interactions. Humanizing the research process is not simple, yet just as the children and families have demonstrated courage, so can our inner being and our passion give us the ability to act.

As socially committed scholars we can explore the role of research in promoting social justice with current research methodologies as well as experimental ones. There is tremendous hope in the exploration of “decolonizing methodologies” (Smith, 1999) and “participatory action research” (Kaplan, 1997). We can also explore theoretical possibilities with newly evolving paradigms that move toward a deeper understanding of the multiple and complex daily realities of our co-researchers. It seems to me that participatory research paradigms and decolonizing perspectives can help us to move beyond traditional research models that fail to capture the economic, political, racial, feminist, and social dimensions.

If we work in this way, we offer the possibility that our research will include our own formation of agape, or love for the “other.” As Freire noted, “Love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. . . . As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation” (1970, p. 71).

The search for an emancipatory theory leading to egalitarian treatment of bilingual/biliterate subjects includes the notion of (not only the post-modern, but also) a post-monolingual society. The complexities of bilingualism and biliteracy call for a move beyond essentializing elements and toward a critical bricolage that begins to build upon communities of difference (rather than obliterating them). By relying on a critical bricolage, hermeneutics, and Freire's notion of reading the word and reading the world, it is possible to explore the multiple fluid layers affecting the bilingual/biliterate subject including (but not limited to) the emotional, racial, political, sociocultural, feminist, and the intersections with issues of ethics, love, solidarity, peace, the spiritual, and public responsibility.

Children's interpretations of their own bilingualism and biliteracy can help to illuminate the necessary new directions for a post-monolingual society. Young children's depictions move beyond dualisms and underscore how we can rid the world of oppression. Children's gifts of bilingualism are leading to an interpretation of agape love as opposed to a burden of bilingualism/biliteracy. Children's perceptions of their own bilingualism and biliteracy demonstrate the possibilities of altruism and are reminiscent of Kohlberg's highest levels of moral reasoning, Alfie Kohn's "brighter side of human nature," and Robert Coles' interviews with children.

There is tremendous wisdom that can be gained from diverse family groups. For example, Howard Zinn (1995) notes how children in Iroquois society, while being taught solidarity, were taught to be independent without harsh punishment. How many wise cultural traditions were lost as a result of slavery is difficult to determine, but we know that, as W. E. B. Du Bois indicated, "the problem of the color line" is still with us. How might we heal and end the madness? As we move towards a post monolingual world, beyond the binaries of power in solidarity, toward critically biliterate and multi-literate communities of compassion, it may be that ethnic minorities, monolingual Americans, our brothers and sisters of color, and the poor and disenfranchised may begin to experience elements of decolonization and liberation as we begin to explore our common wisdom, our common good, and the possibilities in altruistic behaviors.

Among educators it becomes increasingly evident that we must summon our courageous collective voices and continue to work with children and families to overcome oppressive forces. As scholars we can engage in critical knowledge production that comes from reflection, action, and popular participation. As Freire also pointed out, it is not enough to analyze the problem. It is a continual process of reflection, action, and further reflection that allows people not only to understand but also to act.

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