

Book Review

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Trujillo, A. (1998). *Chicano empowerment and bilingual education: Movimiento politics in Crystal City, Texas*. New York: Garland Publishing.

Covering a 20-year period and beginning in 1969, *Chicano Empowerment and Bilingual Education* is a multilevel ethnography that provides a historical perspective of Chicano Movement politics and ideology in Crystal City, a southern Texas agricultural community. Spearheaded by the Raza Unida Party (RUP) — a grassroots political party which had grown out of a largely student-led battle during the 1960s for more equitable schooling — a political takeover of the school board, city council, and county-level offices occurred. Once politically empowered with a majority of Raza Unida candidates voted into office, the Crystal City Independent School District inaugurated an unprecedented districtwide policy that called for maintenance bilingual and bicultural education. For the first time in Crystal City's history, a distinctive "Chicano view" of the self and society, and a bilingual and bicultural philosophy, found expression in the school curriculum.

During his 16 months of field work, Trujillo examines change by not only re-visiting the past through extensive documentary analyses and retrospective interviews with pertinent individuals (not all of whom participated in the earlier struggle), he also fleshes out the present in a relevant manner. He conducts extensive observations of Crystal City classrooms and relies on structured and unstructured interviews with key informants to construct an explanation for what turned out to be a gradual unraveling of *movimiento* ideology. Regarded two decades earlier as a "die-hard Chicano stronghold cultivating radical ethnic consciousness through schooling" (p. 6), there are few, if any, better places than the Crystal City Independent School District to study the challenges that face those seeking a sustainable, culturally additive alternative to historically subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999). Although this account raises a number of still unanswered questions (to which I shall turn shortly), I highlight below the main points made by Trujillo.

From a theoretical standpoint, Trujillo situates the ethnic brand of insurrectionist politics that unfolded by invoking both critical theory in education, sociology, anthropology (Apple, 1979, 1982; Giroux, 1983; Ogbu, 1981; Willis, 1981), and scholarship on ethnic mobilization and ethnoterritorial movements (Hechter & Levi, 1979; Foley et al., 1988). These combined literatures critique the dominant narrative of meritocracy and acknowledge instead the reproductive functions of schooling and other societal institutions that unduly impact ethnic minorities. Armed with huge doses of idealism, political theory, and university-level educations, members of student activist

organizations embodied this critical perspective, and they did so before the bulk of this literature had been written. Notwithstanding students' awareness of Third World de-colonization movements throughout the early decades of the century, theirs was only partially an academically-derived venture.

Student activists deliberately left the urban centers to promote Chicano self-determination and empowerment through a calculated seizure of governmental institutions in one of several pre-selected south Texas counties—a strategic plan dubbed the Winter Garden Project. Since discontent with schooling in Crystal City serendipitously surfaced from the grassroots level at this very juncture, the site for this “social experiment” became quickly obvious to the students. Upon having successfully accomplished this control through successful campaigning and elections of RUP candidates on school board and city council—an interesting account itself—culturally additive schooling based on a philosophy of maintenance bilingual and bicultural education was inaugurated into Crystal City schools. Hence, against a conceptual backdrop of critical theory, meshed with understandings about ethnic mobilization and a lived minority experience (Acuña, 1972; Almaguer, 1971; Barrera, 1979), Trujillo provides a fresh, focused perspective on bilingual education.

Discord within the RUP and resistance from within the community to bilingual/bicultural education were major factors that plagued the prospect of unity throughout this time period. Aside from disenchantment with his allegedly “dictatorial” leadership style, party leader José Angel Gutiérrez neglected to appoint local leaders to such high-level positions as principals and administrators. This penchant to appoint outsiders fueled feelings of resentment toward the Raza Unida Party internally and set into motion an emergent class divided within the community itself. Moreover, these feelings were exacerbated by pre-existing differences. For example, because some Mexican-American, Crystal City “natives” (or locals) had obtained college degrees before the takeover, they possessed a divergent, more “accommodationist” worldview. Seeing the students as outside agitators, support for the goals of the RUP was never unanimous.

Beginning in 1976 and throughout the 1980s, the less radical leadership of RUP II gained control of the school board. While RUP I still had control over county government, and intermittently over city council, RUP II consolidated its power within the school district proper. This was a significant achievement for RUP II since the school district was also one of the largest employers in the county. RUP II sought to smooth over the divisive politics of the earlier era by ironing out differences that had been created both within and between the native Chicano and Anglo populations, respectively.

From 1975 to 1980, the two factions debated in a cultural nationalist sense, which was “more Chicano,” with both factions nevertheless expressing support for maintenance bilingual education. However, without the benefit of a large research base in bilingual education, as well as a lack of sufficiently trained teachers and materials for Spanish language instruction, the program was,

since its inception, on shaky ground. Specifically, concerns were raised by natives that it was taking too long in the primary grades for them to transition their children out of the bilingual education program into the all-English curriculum. In addition, natives were concerned that since Spanish is the language of interaction outside of school in business transactions, as well as informal social gatherings, what their children needed was more exposure to English than Spanish.

Natives also observed a rapid transitioning of the outsiders' children out of the bilingual program that led them to question the latter's commitment to bilingual education. Rather than extending opportunities to natives equally, this gave the appearance that the outsiders wanted the mobility for themselves. Trujillo suggests that the natives may have also drawn an incorrect inference since the socioeconomic status of the outsiders was a moderating influence. In other words, their rapid transitioning may have been less tied to their commitment than to their children's facile mastery of the bilingual curriculum, precisely because of their emerging class status. Trujillo does not dwell on this, however, and tends to concur with the natives' views that despite the earlier rhetoric, the outsiders ironically pursued a distinct set of class interests that reflected their successful attainment of mainstream Anglo cultural capital.

If ideological issues haunted the Raza Unida Party since its early days, the demise of the Raza Unida Party both at local and state levels in 1979 compromised its effectiveness. In particular, changes in national and state policy during the 1980s also exerted a significant impact in the direction that bilingual education took at the local level. At the national level, the 1968 Bilingual Education Act (Title VII) changed by the mid-seventies in a way that discouraged the development of maintenance bilingual education programs. Its new rendition emphasized equity through English language mastery and transitional bilingual education.

Another development during the 1980s under the Reagan administration was a transference of authority to the state, coupled with an ideological bent that emphasized excellence over equity. This emphasis was abetted by the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), which alleged, among other things, that because of the nation's schools' lack of emphases in advanced technological arenas, the United States risked losing its competitive edge globally. This framing of educational improvement from the perspective of human capital development resulted in a significant representation of business interests at the state level as policymakers in the educational arena (McNeil, 2000). In fact, Texas was among the first states to establish a system of accountability involving standardized testing in order to determine the percentage of students functioning above, below, or at grade level.

As outlined elsewhere (McNeil, 2000; McNeil & Valenzuela, forthcoming), the concept of "accountability" is misleading when the matters of eliminating tracking, segregation, the states' high dropout rate, and overcrowded conditions are not taken into account. Besides issues of fairness that accompany a "one-size-fits-all" approach to educational reform embodied in standardized testing, Trujillo does an excellent job of explaining its impact on

the Crystal City curriculum. With school ratings periodically published in full-page spreads in the state's newspapers, the district's schools falling consistently below state averages, and finally, with most testing taking place in English, Crystal City administrators felt compelled to align their curriculum with state demands. For example, at the junior high school level, their innovative, Spanish language arts component was replaced with a required English reading course.

Against this backdrop of macro-level policy shifts and factional local politics, support for maintenance bilingual education, alongside the cultural nationalist ideology that justified it, became more difficult to sustain in Crystal City schools by the early 1980s. When RUP I was further bereft of Jose Angel Gutierrez's charismatic leadership in 1982, the critical discourse that accompanied the earlier decade of reform toned down considerably. During the early 1980s, coalitions between conservatives and moderates also developed in a way that contrasted with the divisive politics of the previous decade.

Shifts in discussion among ethnoregional politics, developments in leadership within the *movimiento*, bilingual education policy, and day-to-day experiences of schooling (as remembered by teachers and former teachers who witnessed these transformations) provide readers with a vivid and complex portrait of curricular innovation and implementation in Crystal City schools. An unfortunate, yet realistic, sidebar is resistance from the established old-guard, Mexican-American faculty and community members who resisted these changes virtually every step of the way. At the conclusion of this account, the reader remains with a number of unanswered questions.

Had the tactics of the RUP been less divisive, and had their strategy been more slowly paced and inclusive, would the natives have been less resistant to the changes that took place? While Trujillo sways the reader to respond in the affirmative, the anti-establishment, cultural nationalist *movimiento* discourse would have likely persisted as a point of contention (Limón, 1981). Indeed, generational divisions between the young and old in the Mexican-American community were persistent. The older generation practiced accommodationist politics, preferring working through the system and pursuing integration. In contrast, the sixties' generation was radical, vocal, and ideological. In light of these differences, widespread unanimity and harmony were likely, under most circumstances, unattainable goals.

While it would be accurate to suggest that *Chicano Empowerment* is a story about a heightened sense of political consciousness and self-efficacy that movimiento Chicanas and Chicanos translated into a progressive schooling agenda, the larger, determining bureaucratic processes force the reader to soberly reflect on the following: Had the Crystal City leadership and membership achieved an agreement in philosophical outlook and vision, could such change have been sustained alongside the state's emerging system of accountability? My guess is that within the context of historically unequal schooling and the state's transitional, or subtractive, policy on bilingual education, such sustainability would have been difficult. The implicit prescription here is not that the *movimiento*

should have abandoned either its goals or idealism, but rather that grassroots efforts need to extend more fully and in a proactive fashion into educational politics at both state and national levels.

A final question that remains concerns the relationship of schooling to identity, a theme that is increasingly addressed in scholarship (e.g., Trujillo, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Vigil, 1997). What kind of person was created during that era of culturally relevant schooling? And what kind of person was created in the aftermath of RUP I? The answer to the latter questions is the answer to the kind of Mexican-American being, or subject position, that is currently being created in our predominantly subtractive assimilationist schools (Valenzuela, 1999).

Trujillo reminds us that bilingual education is so much more than linguistic development. It is also potentially about community empowerment. When framed as such, bilingual education links directly to the level of consciousness-raising and critical thinking in the curriculum. To the extent that current reform efforts focus on basic skills and human capital acquisition, Trujillo's work reminds us that an ability to think critically often gets sacrificed in the process. The greatest irony with which the reader must contend is that while the Raza Unida Party and Crystal City schools were once heralded as icons of *Chicanismo* and the Chicano Movement itself, their diametrically opposite turn away from maintenance bilingual education is astonishing and illustrates the fragility of social movements. On a positive note, given what scholars and practitioners now know to be the benefits of research-based bilingual education programs (Cummins, 2000; Crawford, 2000), it is inspirational to see through Trujillo's account that time has vindicated the activists' claims to its benefits. If the experiment that took place in Crystal City ultimately fell short of the mark, we are nevertheless all indebted to their vision and faith in things not seen.

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