

ON DANGEROUS GROUNDS: BILINGUAL TEACHERS OF BILINGUAL STUDENTS IN
ENGLISH-ONLY SCHOOLS ON THE DAILY RISKS OF EXERCISING ONE'S PROFESSIONAL
JUDGMENT

KIRSTIN RUTH BRATT

YOUNESS ELBOUSTY

PHONE: 617-650-3102

E-MAIL: ELBOUSTY@GMAIL.COM

2 JULY 2010

ON DANGEROUS GROUNDS: BILINGUAL TEACHERS OF BILINGUAL STUDENTS IN
ENGLISH-ONLY SCHOOLS ON THE DAILY RISKS OF EXERCISING ONE'S PROFESSIONAL
JUDGMENT

ABSTRACT

This study is based on a set of interviews at the Mexico-US border where bilingual teachers of bilingual students are prohibited by state law and district policy from using their home language in schools. These interviews demonstrate that teachers continue to exercise their professional judgment despite restrictive mandates. Unfortunately, however, rather than explore

their potential to become leaders and pursue innovations in bilingual education, these teachers must seek back-door methods to educate bilingual or Spanish-speaking students. The schools of southern Arizona have had to conceal their good work to continue it. One can only imagine what they would achieve with adequate community support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years and in almost every region of the country, teachers have been working with increasingly diverse populations of students, many of these students with home languages other than English (Miller-Whitehead, 2001). Fortunately for many of these children, our workforce in education is replete with resilient teachers who dedicate their energy to creative problem solving, to caring for every child equitably and thoughtfully, to challenging and engaging children with important ideas, and to encouraging them to grow toward responsible citizenship (Munro, 1996).

The United States has witnessed a great deal of prejudice directed toward people whose home language is not English (Tse, 2001), even as education research points to the need to maintain and support home languages so that children can move forward in the second language (Karabenick, 2004; Cummins, 2006). In Arizona, where bilingual programs have been dismantled in recent years, bilingual teachers of bilingual students are constrained to teach in English only, even though observations of effective practice continue to confirm recent education research findings: that a respect for the child's home language is necessary, and that successful teachers are adept at finding unique and innovative ways to bridge the

gaps for children as they move between home and school languages (Sarroub, 2007; Butler & Gutierrez, 2003; Meltzer & Hamann, 2004; Dong, 2004; Jimenez, 2005).

According to studies previously conducted regarding multi-lingual school contexts, many teachers lack preparation or training for their work in linguistically diverse classrooms (Lee, Adamson, Maerten-Rivera, Lewis, Thornton, & LeRoy, 2008; Hardin, Roach-Scott, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2007; Sarroub, 2007; Coggins, Krayin, Coates, & Carroll, 2007; House Committee on Education and Labor, Congress of the United States, 2007). Training for teachers has not kept pace with the increasing numbers of English language learners (Hardin, Roach-Scott, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2007; Dong, 2004; Meltzer & Hamann, 2004).

Children whose native language is not English have been disproportionately placed in special education classrooms (Hardin, Roach-Scott, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2007; Macswan, 2006), and the No Child Left Behind policies have not addressed the needs of English language learners (House Committee on Education and Labor, Congress of the United States, 2007). Many English language learners have been retained inappropriately in lower grade levels (Abedi, 2001), and special educators report that they lack training for their work with English language learners and that they are not able to serve the needs of English language learners due to lack of resources, administrative support, and communication barriers with parents (Mueller, 2006).

Unfortunately, local, state, and national policies are often punitive toward teachers and students rather than supporting their work. In Mexico-US borderlands regions like Arizona, English-only voter mandates create constraints against effective teaching practices

(Black, 2006; Mahoney, 2005; Stritikus & Garcia, 2005; Lopez, 2006). In 2002, Arizona voters decided to end bilingual education in schools, and schools have dealt with this voter initiative in different ways ever since. Just before the vote, Kotterman and Lentz (2002), leaders of the Arizona Educators Association, publicly argued against the 2002 initiative, explaining that learning in the native language is essential to the mastery of both academic content and English fluency, that the denial of the native language relegates children to a second tier of achievement, that parents rather than state government should be making decisions about the child's language of instruction, and that it is unfair to threaten state employees with jail for exercising their professional judgment. In spite of many protests from Arizona's educators, parents, and students, the proposition passed, and English-only became the law in Arizona schools.

While linguistic discrimination in public schools is the law in states other than Arizona, Arizona's linguistic discrimination is the most airtight, closing every loophole for English language learners and children who would most benefit from dual language instruction (Krashen, 2005). Arizona's voter propositions prohibit bilingual education, limiting formal support to one year of sheltered immersion (Krashen, 2005). Ironically, schools with dual language programs are located in affluent, urban areas rather than rural or borderland areas where they are more desperately needed. Bilingual education in Arizona is reserved for the elite and the privileged; indeed, children who wish to study in bilingual programs in Arizona must first prove, by passing three consecutive years of English exams, that they are fully fluent in English. Therefore, the children who could most benefit from bilingual instruction are marginalized in English-only classrooms where they often cannot understand basic instructions. And even though many of them have bilingual teachers who

could bridge the gap for them, these bilingual teachers, under threat of dismissal, are not allowed to assist the children in basic communication (Krashen, 2005).

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT

These interviews were conducted near the Mexico-US border with bilingual teachers of bilingual students addressing issues about the teaching and learning context in English-only schools. Of particular interest in the interviews was an exploration of the ways in which students and teachers have been affected by the passage of recent voter initiatives in Arizona: initiatives that have effectively eliminated bilingual education and that threaten teachers with jail for using Spanish in schools (Krashen, 2005).

The method of seeking interview participants was particularly difficult, as it was predicated on many factors out of the interviewer's control. The participants needed to be bilingual members of the local community; brave, courageous, flexible, and engaged in their work; and willing to talk to an outsider about the effects of local and state policies on their professional practice. But finding such teachers in a volatile local climate became a very arduous task. In my role as interviewer, I approached people I had known well for many years, and I spent about an hour in conversation with each of them, describing the type of teacher I was looking for. When I described to my recommenders the ideal participants for these interviews, I emphasized that I was looking for thoughtful, flexible, and engaged teachers, drawing upon the definition of "exemplary" teachers postulated by Peter Johnston and Richard Allington in *Reading to Learn: Lessons from Exemplary Fourth-Grade*

Classrooms (2002). I explained to them that I was looking for teachers who “Engage students, help them develop as thoughtful readers and writers, and bolster self-directed learning and literate conversation” (Allington & Johnston, 2002).

One of my recommenders was a white, female, retired teacher who had worked closely with the two teachers whom she recommended to me. Her recommendation was unequivocal, stating that the teachers were flexible, engaged, and committed to their students and that they fulfilled all of the criteria I described to her. The second person I approached was a leader in the local community: a bilingual, Mexican-American man who had worked with government leaders and educational leaders in several professional capacities, including as an aide to an elected official, a director of an educational institution, and a school board member. I knew that his primary agenda as a leader in the community was to be a vociferous advocate of bilingual education for bilingual students. Again, I described my research and my goal finding teachers who would serve as participants. He recommended three teachers to me, each of whom was willing to participate. Finally, I approached the director of English language learning, a white female who is fluent in Spanish and an advocate of bilingual education at the school district; again, I spent a great deal of time describing my research and my desire to find interested participants. She also recommended three teachers, each of whom was willing to participate.

The participating teachers all work in the same school district, close to the Mexico-US border. Their years of experience ranged from three to 30 years with the district. This school district reports that of its total student population, 71% is comprised of English language

learners (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008). None of these teachers was compensated financially for participation in the one- to two-hour interviews.

As I conducted these interviews, I was mindful of the limitations that are necessarily part of any insider-outsider dialogue, and I tried to categorize the interviews on the basis of perceived trust levels, documenting evidence and environments of trust between interviewer and participant and then examining the type and quality of information shared given these various levels of perceived trust. As a white researcher in a Mexican-American context, I was also mindful of Frances Kendall's recent book, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships across Race* (2006), in which Kendall reminds white researchers of the many obstacles that are inherent in cross-race dialogue. She explains:

It is essential to remember that we enter into interactions about our blind spots with enormous power and privilege imbalances. In a cross-racial conversation between a Latina and a white person, for example, the Latina is at greater risk because she has not been given the systemic privileges that the white person has... Being blinded by our privilege often keeps us from being able to see or to hear clearly, especially if the person with whom we are speaking is different from us (p. 128).

As Kendall explains, suspicion from subjects is to be expected in cross-race dialogue, thus I tried to account for levels of trust based on environmental and inter-personal factors. Rather

than try to minimize or deny the potential for distrust in the dialogue, I developed strategies to examine it. Kendall posits:

Expect suspicion from the person to whom you are talking, particularly if your conversation hasn't come up naturally. That concern is heightened exponentially when there is an even greater imbalance of privilege and power... I find that it is often difficult for white people to accept that a person of color would automatically be suspicious of any white person they are talking to... Because so many white people see ourselves as individuals and as relatively good people, we have a hard time imagining that we pose a threat to someone we work with or are talking to (p. 129).

In consonance with Kendall's theories, I sought to document how my conversations with Latina teachers and parents were governed by our power differentials. As a researcher, foreigner, and member of the dominant discourse group, I am aware that, while I may attempt to gain a critical distance from it, I am encircled by it and therefore cannot avoid a certain lack of clarity regarding it. As interviewer, this role as outsider excludes me from the group of participants. This is not to say that the participants were inhospitable; on the contrary, they were gracious, kind, and generous with their time. It is simply true that my ability to conduct interviews and to glimpse at the many realities they share is hampered by our differences. Rather than ignore these limitations, I decided to work with them,

categorizing the interviews based on perceived levels of trust and examining the results with that added consideration.

Throughout my life, and especially my adult life, my process of becoming aware of diversity in cultural expectations, religious thought, and cross-cultural communication has been an uncomfortable and yet exciting process. Having been born and raised in an all-white community, living in diverse communities has been a constant exercise in self-awareness. I am fortunate to have lived with or near many people of color who were not shy to call my attention to the limitations that my whiteness imposes on my ability to communicate or respond cross-culturally. I have tried to become a self-reflective person and to acknowledge my limitations, although I have also found that the many benefits of white privilege tend to lull a person back to the safety offered by whiteness, and I am certainly aware that I take advantage of such privileges.

During the bracketing process for this project, I came to realize once again how frequently my own work history has been punctuated by “lucky” surprises and opportunities that are actually more a reflection of my background than my luck. In October, as I interviewed bilingual teachers, I was struck by the way that my so-called "luck" has actually been the result of a practiced system of hegemony that is maintained by providing lucky opportunities to those who most closely comply with its rules, promoting and protecting its own membership while keeping non-members at a distinct disadvantage.

METHODS

The goal of phenomenological interviewing is to reach multi-layered understandings based on participant sharing and researcher interpretation. To this end, the research collects information about context, lived experiences, and outsider perceptions in an effort to find a shared construction of meaning (van Manen, 1990). Keeping in mind that these layers of experience and perception can be deconstructed and reconstructed, phenomenology also acknowledges that a complete picture remains ever elusive (Seidman, 1998).

In an effort to deconstruct the interviews most completely and to consider possible meanings most successfully, this project carefully examines trust levels, as they are perceived by the interviewer and as they affect communication between participants and interviewer. Keeping in mind Frances Kendall's ideas about power dynamics and ethnicity, I attempted to create a scale of perceived trust for each interview situation. This will be described in the next few paragraphs.

The participants for these interviews included three female Kindergarten teachers; one male and two female 5th grade teachers; and two female 8th grade teachers. All participants are bilingual; each of them speaks a mixture of English and Spanish both at home and within their local community. Their levels of formal literacy instruction in Spanish vary. All participants are life-long residents of the Mexico-US borderlands, some residing for a time on both sides of the border, all with family ties in both countries.

The first two interviews were similar in construction: both were individual interviews with female eighth-grade teachers of language arts and social studies; both took place in the participants' homes with no one present except the participant and interviewer;

and both participants were introduced to the interviewer by a retired teacher from the district.

The level of trust between the first set of participants and the interviewer might be rated as a medium level. Some trust might have been gained from the fact that the referring teacher (white, female) had worked closely as a team member with the teachers and had personally introduced these teachers to the interviewer. Further, the home environment for each teacher was perhaps the location most conducive to effective communication. Barriers to trust include, as Kendall explains, the fact that the participants identify as bilingual Mexican-Americans and the interviewer for this set, and all other sets of interviews, identifies as an Anglo American with some Spanish proficiency but not fluency. The content of these interviews included the teachers' life histories; descriptions of the curriculum and work environment at school; and the sharing of strategies for teaching English language learners in social studies and language arts.

The second set of interviews was a group interview with three female Kindergarten teachers. These teachers identified themselves as bilingual and either Mexican-American or Hispanic. The level of perceived trust in this set of interviews is considered lower, primarily because the teachers were asked to participate by a white, female district administrator who, despite her advocacy of bilingual education, is nevertheless charged with upholding the English-only policies in public schools; furthermore, the location of this second set of interviews was the school library, which, although empty of students or teachers, still felt like a public place with the potential for interruptions. Finally, a barrier to trust included the

dichotomy of cultural backgrounds between interview and participants (Kendall, 2006). Yet despite the conditions for the interviews, these participants offered a number of insights about the history of bilingual education in the district, as two of them had been teaching during the 1970s when bilingual education was the norm, and they reported very positive experiences with that model. They were also very open about sharing their own personal histories with language learning, their preferences about different basal reading programs, their communication with parents, and the history of district policy regarding English language learning. I found these interviews useful in terms of gathering information about the public face of teachers and their concerns about how to best respond to the needs of children within the limits of the law.

The third set of interviewees might be considered the most trusting group of teachers. These three fifth-grade teachers, one male and two female, all self-identifying as Mexican-American and bilingual, had been introduced to the interviewer by a Mexican-American school board member whose political activism is based in respect for teachers and is well-known in the area. Each of these teachers had received mentoring from a retired teacher who had been a strong, vocal, local advocate of bilingual education throughout his career; he had since moved away from the community. Furthermore, one of the teachers had been a community college student of the interviewer ten years prior to this interview and had reported a positive experience in the interviewer's classes. This teacher invited the interviewer to observe her classroom during the afternoon before the group interview. She

was the only teacher known to the interviewer, and her attendance in the group interview became a valuable asset for the interviewer in establishing a base of trust for the interview.

The participant I knew well encouraged her colleagues to trust in the interview process. When a question elicited an opinion, she would often begin the discussion, thus clearing the path for the other two teachers. Sometimes she would nod her encouragement or pose follow-up questions to the other interviewees. While the same cultural barrier existed between participants and interviewer, this one participant took on an extra role: that of proxy interviewer. With her assistance, then, the interviews became quite revealing, as the three teachers offered their honest, thorough, and courageous responses. Just as in the other two sets of interviews, the teachers shared life histories, curriculum, and strategies.

The interviews: a description

Interview set	Type	Self-descriptions of participants	Introduced by	Conditions	Interviewer's assessment of trust level
First set of interviews	Individual interviews with white female interviewer of some Spanish proficiency	Two female teachers of eighth grade: bilingual, Mexican-American	White, female retired teacher, former colleague of both participants	Two separate 90-minute interviews in private homes of participants	Medium
Second set of interviews	Individual interviews with white female interviewer of some	Three female teachers of Kindergarten: bilingual, Mexican-American or	White, female district administrator, director of personnel and coordinator of	Three separate 60-minute interviews in school library	Low

	Spanish proficiency	Hispanic	programs for English language learners		
Third set of interviews	Group interview with white female interviewer of some Spanish proficiency	Two female teachers and one male teacher of fifth grade: bilingual, Mexican-American	Bilingual, Mexican-American school board member	One group interview of three teachers in fifth grade classroom after school hours	High

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The participant interviews have as their goal the understanding of the lived experience of the participant as she or he teaches a linguistically diverse group of elementary or middle school students. To this end, the questions encourage the teacher to talk about the historical, cultural, familial, intellectual, ethical, and emotional factors that have a bearing on this work. Because Arizona law is so punitive toward teachers (Kotterman & Lentz, 2002), many districts have created additional policies to prevent any entanglements with the voter propositions. Therefore, in many districts, school personnel who are caught speaking in languages other than English are summarily dismissed. With this in mind, the interview questions were designed to elicit responses about how bilingual teachers function in a prohibitive environment and how they respond to the laws and policies.

Interview questions centered on the work that teachers do with bilingual (Spanish-English) or monolingual (Spanish only) students and how teachers respond to district policies that forbid school personnel from speaking in any language other than English with students at the school. The questions for the interviews were open-ended, also leaving room for the participants to share stories regarding literacy teaching in a multi-lingual context.

Framing questions for each interview:

- How do teachers who were once English language learners support English language learning students in a district that mandates English-only teaching?

•How do these teachers talk about the constraints of English-only policies in their classrooms?

•How do they create effective practice, and how does effective practice either work with or against voter mandates?

THEME 1, INTERVIEW FINDINGS: ON TEACHING THE CONCEPTS, THE NEED FOR HOME LANGUAGE

Just before the interview with the fifth-grade teachers, one of the participants invites me to visit her classroom. Here, I am struck by how intuitive the fifth-grade teacher seems to be when working with the children. Sometimes she approaches a child who has not indicated a need for help and offers a few words in Spanish to explain or clarify the instructions. During the interview, I ask the teacher about this, and she explains that she has non-verbal ways of communicating with the children. She describes a sense of knowing when a child needs a translation into Spanish by a subtle expression on the child's face. We discuss this form of knowing with her fifth-grade colleagues. They all say that they have a sense of when a child needs a few words in Spanish. They say that the district policy of denying the translation to the child is cruel; however, they are afraid to provide the translation because of the policy. One teacher says, "Am I nervous? Am I scared? Yes! Does that stop me? No."

The teachers say that the district allows them to use children as translators, but that the children aren't always reliable because they have both conceptual and linguistic limitations to their ability to translate technical concepts. One fifth-grade teacher describes a

child translator who tried to help her classmate: "It broke my heart because she looked so helpless, but she knew I couldn't say anything." She describes the child looking helplessly toward the teacher, knowing that the teacher is restricted by the law from helping and feeling the burden of responsibility for the classmate's success. The teacher describes this type of occurrence as frequent, uncomfortable, and unfair. An eighth-grade teacher says, "I could say that one word in Spanish that would spark a light bulb, but I'm afraid to do that now."

Most of the teachers express the belief that they need to rely on some use of Spanish with many of their students when they need to assess a child's degree of conceptual understanding or to challenge a child appropriately in conceptual learning. One teacher explains that her eighth-grade language arts students are "...bored, because they don't get it. They get frustrated as well. And I know most of my Spanish-speaking students are failing language arts right now." The teachers of eighth graders say their hands are tied, as they are unable to teach effectively without the home language. One eighth-grade teacher says that she uses Spanish occasionally to make the topics more challenging. She says: "I tend to water things down if I try to modify them for my non-English speakers. I want them to do grade-level stuff in their native language as opposed to English, where I water it down." This same teacher sometimes asks the children to translate their work into Spanish so that she can assess their conceptual understanding.

Furthermore, the three fifth-grade teachers explain that the rules against Spanish or other languages do not only affect language arts and language learning. The teachers explain

that concepts in math, social studies, and science require a fluent understanding of the language of instruction. For example, mathematics may rely on a universal system of codes, but it still requires that teacher and student communicate through a common linguistic system. An eighth-grade teacher expresses her frustration when she cannot communicate clearly with the children. When I ask her if she ever uses Spanish to clarify a concept, she says, “Yes. Yes, yes, yes, when I’m teaching to the whole group, no, but if it’s an individual, one-on-one, yes. Because it works, I mean, they need to know what I’m trying to say, and I can make sure they understand.”

THEME 2, INTERVIEW FINDINGS: WASTED OPPORTUNITIES: THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF THE BILINGUAL TEACHER

One fifth-grade teacher describes the importance of community membership and the resources that he, as a community member, brings to his work. He identifies very strongly with his students, as he was raised in the community. He says that he was never a top student, but that he learned a work ethic that he tries to transmit to his students. He says, “I would listen, I would work hard. Not necessarily that I was the smartest but I think I worked really hard. That, I bring to my classroom.” He says that he has to find ways of teaching concepts that go beyond what the textbooks offer: “If I want to teach something, I have to decide how. If I just go by the book there’s no way. How can I make it approachable to all my class? You have an awareness of their language, their culture, being sensitive to that kind of thing.” Also, he emphasizes the fact that his community membership augments his work

as a teacher, stating, "The kids see you like a cousin, like a neighbor, like an uncle. A lot of the success that I have experienced goes with that."

He says that he felt as a student, and still feels as a teacher, that the school district does not value or respect the home languages of the children. As a result of his own difficulties with language learning as a child, he says that he still feels unintelligent at times, citing faculty meetings as especially painful. He describes a sense of shame when he doesn't understand some of his colleagues. Because he can identify so strongly with his students, his goal as a teacher is to provide opportunities for children to experience success, yet he feels that he must rely on the native language to create these moments for children. He says, once they experience success, he can say, "See, you can do it in Spanish, so it's a matter of time before you can do it in English."

Yet the teachers say that the school and state policies denigrate Spanish. While all of the participants in these interviews are long-term residents of the area, some had been educated at universities in other cities. These teachers realize that bilingualism is valued in other parts of the country. One fifth-grade teacher says, "My friends from back east are impressed with my ability to speak Spanish, but here it's degraded."

Two of the Kindergarten teachers who participated in the interviews reminisced about the bilingual programs of the 1970s, when they were just beginning their careers as teachers. One explains that Spanish-speaking parents were skeptical about such programs, stating, "But you did have that mentality of parents who didn't want it because they were afraid students wouldn't learn English, so they saw it as a step back. I remember most of the

parents were Anglo. They saw the benefits of being bilingual. But the other parents, they worked in the fields, and they wanted their children to learn English. Spanish was taught at home; they saw Spanish as their job.”

The teachers say that many Spanish-speaking parents support the English-only law because they see the school system as the only place where their children might gain access to future economic opportunities. While many in the community, including many Spanish-speaking parents, support the policies of English-only in school, the entire community, outside of the school, functions completely in Spanish, including city council and school board meetings, businesses, and private homes. The school is, in fact, the only English-speaking location in the community. As one of the Kindergarten teachers explained, “If you go outside, you won’t hear anyone speak English. You go to the banks, they don’t speak English. You go to city hall, they don’t speak English. They don’t speak English. They come to our school, and it’s English, but they go out to the community and it’s Spanish.”

In terms of the social atmosphere of the classroom, the teachers describe a dichotomy of attitudes that children hold toward their monolingual, Spanish-speaking classmates. If the monolingual child is a recent immigrant, the classmates applaud and celebrate the immigrant’s new English words. Yet the more time that the monolingual Spanish-speaking child has resided in the area, the more likely it becomes that the bilingual classmates will degrade the child for his or her accent, limited English vocabulary, and mixed grammar.

One of the eighth grade teachers worked in low-paying, low-status jobs before applying to become an emergency-certified teacher in her late thirties. Because this teacher

is not fully certified, her salary is much lower than her counterparts, even though her work requirements are the same. Furthermore, because she is not certified, she teaches the least prepared and lowest achieving students. While this example demonstrates a system that is designed to perpetuate failure, this particular teacher, being both gifted and dedicated to her work, seems likely to be an exception in spite of the many obstacles she and her students face together. Her ability to become certified has been hampered by her poverty, her low self-confidence, and her family's history as undocumented immigrant workers.

This teacher immigrated to the US when she was fourteen. Her father had been working to organize unions in Mexico, and he was starting to feel a lot of pressure from the government. She says, "People wanted a change, but the PRI would come down pretty hard. My dad was involved there. I was just scared to lose my dad because it did create some problems. They were really, really aggressive and they didn't want to give up the power." She explains that her family began a week-long migration to the United States: "I came over here across the border. I came with my aunt and stayed at my aunt's house, then my mom crossed on the following Sunday. A few hours later my brother crossed. We all came through the gates. We didn't cross through the desert or anything like that. No papers. They didn't even ask for that. We were lucky because they didn't even ask for that. I can't remember anything bad happening."

After her arrival in the United States, it was several years before she felt comfortable using English. Recalling her early days in the US in high school, she says, "The teacher was mean to us. Not sarcastic but teasing. But I started working and seeing that I could do a lot of

things in school. I was passing my classes with As and Bs. I was not actually lost there; I was actually learning.” Because her parents didn’t understand the school system, she says, she was not encouraged to seek a higher education degree; rather, she began to work in the fields with her family during vacations and after high school. Her family was not aware of scholarship opportunities for her post-secondary education. She says, “You see, my language intimidated me, so I wasted those years. I wish I could go back and recuperate. Back then I could have gotten a scholarship, but now I have to pay for my education.” While this teacher’s previous experiences might serve as a resource for the children of the district, restrictions on the use of Spanish make it very unlikely that this teacher will explore her full potential to bridge the home-school connection for immigrant children and their families.

Not only this teacher, but all of the participating teachers express the idea that their membership in the local community makes an enormous difference in their effectiveness. Several indicate that the bilingual teachers are more likely to live in the community, while white, English-speaking teachers are more likely to commute from a larger city to the north. These teachers believe that living in the local community creates a closeness with the children of the school. One teacher talks about her conversations with children in the neighborhood; another says that the children see him as a family member, giving him a base of trust from which to work. Another speaks of passing a crowded baseball field at 9pm and realizing that many of the children will not have finished their homework for the next day.

Unfortunately, however, all of the bilingual teachers say that their ability to connect with the community is not valued at the district level. On the contrary, they feel they are

constantly under surveillance because they are seen as more likely to violate the English-only policy. The teachers in this district are monitored very carefully by principals and outside evaluators. Indeed, the district employs several observers whose job it is to travel from classroom to classroom, entering unannounced to collect data on the teacher's compliance with the English-only law and to assist with strategies for delivering instruction in English more effectively. One teacher says that these outside evaluators measure success based on how students are expected to perform on standardized tests. One teacher laments, "Since Proposition 203, your most effective teaching is cut off by the law. If you go strictly by what the state permits and what they expect of the child's growth, it's unrealistic. It's really hard for me. The law is tying your hands; all of a sudden you can't do your work anymore. The community in the classroom is gone, and the children's respect for the teachers and each other also. You don't have that home-school connection."

The loss of the home-school connection is noteworthy; likewise, these teachers cite the increasing prominence of standardized tests and external evaluators as a barrier to their productivity. Standardized tests and external evaluators disappoint teachers who can see a great deal of progress even though the tests and evaluations may mark the children as failures. One teacher says, "There are times when I'm thrilled with the progress of my students, even though the outside evaluator may not be. The outside evaluator only sees the deficiencies." Another teacher concurs, saying that a lot of the teachers are dropping out of the profession because the development and growth of the students is not acknowledged by any external evaluations or assessments. She says, "I'm happy that my kids succeed in the

state test, or whatever, but my most rewarding experiences are always based on my English language learners because that's where you see the most growth. I don't remember their end of the year scores, but I remember when they write their first paragraphs in English."

Frustrated by standardized tests and evaluations that fail to recognize the success of their students and their own work as teachers, the classroom teachers describe a continuum of self-validation. One eighth-grade teacher says, "I used to make excuses, but I finally decided I was tired of making these excuses. I've learned how to be better at teaching English language learners. It's sad because you always want to compete with your colleagues, but my own personal satisfaction is helping a child move from zero words in English to being able to hold a conversation." Other teachers seem less confident, however. In all three sets of interviews, the participants describe feelings of hopelessness and fears that their work is not effective.

THEME 3, INTERVIEW FINDINGS: CLANDESTINE TEACHING: THE TEACHER AS CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

While each of the participants was fairly cautious as the interviews began, most participants eventually shared their more clandestine strategies and their methods of resistance to what they considered overly restrictive policies. One eighth-grade teacher shared that her strategy for circumventing the English-only policy is to give the students a brief Spanish translation but then tell the students that the words are actually Latin, rather than Spanish. She says that she sees this as a legitimate resistance to an unrealistic policy, yet she also regrets these fabrications, feeling that her integrity as a teacher is at stake.

The fifth grade teachers, toward the end of their interview, decided to show me their contraband materials. Amazingly, they have retained a clandestine set of Spanish translations of their textbooks from the past, when bilingual education was the norm in the school district. One teacher starts by saying that she gives the books to the children to take home, saying, “Here, take it home, you can read it at home, you know. I don’t want to see the book here.” But a few minutes later, she admits that she lets the children use the books in the classroom also. When she admits to this, it is interesting to note her shift to second-person point-of-view. She says, “But then occasionally, you’re giving a test, and you see them struggling, and you are working with another student, and you say, ‘You know what, take out the Spanish book.’ Would I do it if someone else was in my classroom? No. It’s just sad that you have to go through all that and feel scared when you know that what you’re doing is the best for that kid.”

She goes on to explain that she allows the children to use these textbooks during their independent work time with the understanding that the books must be hidden quickly if the classroom door should open. These children know the laws and policies, and they know that their teachers can be fired for using these books. Their loyalty to the teachers, and the teachers’ reciprocal trust in them, exemplifies the passion for learning and teaching that guides these teachers, even as laws and policies fail to do so.

However, while fifth-grade teachers say that their students try their best to comply and use English when the teachers ask them to do so, middle school teachers report an opposite experience. The eighth-grade bilingual teachers state that, even though the students

understand the district policies against Spanish, or perhaps because they do understand and oppose these policies, they consistently approach their teachers in Spanish and typically initiate all conversations with school personnel in Spanish. These interactions serve to amplify the teacher's uncomfortable position between child advocate and public employee.

One eighth-grade teacher becomes uncomfortable when describing the experience of being approached in Spanish: a discomfort that becomes clear during her equivocal description. She says, "Does Spanish help me teach better? Because I'm in the community, probably, I should say yes. They know you speak Spanish and they start talking to you in Spanish. They don't think about it, they just do it. I use my, I don't speak Spanish. Oh you do speak Spanish. Not during class." Not only does she shift her answer between saying that she does or does not speak Spanish with the children, but she also shifts her pronouns from first-person to second-person in the middle of her answer. The shift in pronoun serves to distance her from the act she describes. The uncertain stance and discomfort illustrate very clearly the very difficult situation that the teacher is placed in when the law and school policies contradict her professional opinion and her professional knowledge of best practices.

CONCLUSIONS: THE NECESSITY FOR ACTION

In the sense that public schools must prepare all children for political and economic opportunity, Arizona's English-only laws are touted by proponents as humane and anti-discriminatory. In line with such reasoning, several of the participating teachers indicated

that many Spanish-speaking parents in the border region prefer that schools teach English, insisting that Spanish can be taught in the home.

In her exploration of the English-only debate, Skutnabb-Kangas explains that parents are ultimately practical in their desires for their children, and that their desire for an English-only education for their children does not indicate a desire for the loss of mother tongue so much as it indicates the parents' acknowledgement of their limitations and their willingness to make painful and debilitating sacrifices for their economic survival. Responding in a practical manner to a lack of options, therefore, must not be interpreted as compliance with discrimination (Skutnabb-Kangas, *Language policies and education: the role of education in destroying or supporting the world's linguistic diversity*, 2002; Skutnabb-Kangas, *Multilingualism and the education of minority children*, 1995).

Many researchers and theorists emphasize that bilingualism should be seen as a benefit and a resource for children and their communities. Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) writes, "High levels of bilingualism / biculturalism benefit every child, but for minority children, bilingualism is a necessity" (p. 55). Delpit (1988) agrees, saying, "Each cultural group should have the right to maintain its own language style" (p. 280). Juan Perea asks teachers to become activists for linguistic and cultural diversity, writing, "Educators who care about linguistic and cultural diversity must educate the public about why languages other than English matter, and why it is foolish to squelch, rather than nurture, the linguistic resources extant in the various heritages of Americans" (Perea, 137). Indeed, Pease-Alvarez & Samway (2008) explain in their study of teachers in California that, even though teachers are often hesitant to be vocal advocates for themselves, they can often be counted on to make professional decisions in based on their

experience and knowledge and that they may subtly employ productive strategies for the benefit of their students, even if these strategies contradict district curriculum mandates.

Juan Guerra's theory of transcultural repositioning begins to explain the Chicano or Chicana person's ability to see through various insider and outsider perspectives and therefore view complex situations with greater clarity and accuracy (Guerra, 2004). In their transcultural positions as child advocates, bilingual persons, and government representatives, these teachers have many opportunities throughout the day to reposition themselves in an attempt to make sense of their difficult circumstances. The Spanish-speaking children in Arizona, who are being left further and further behind by their state's English-only law, are fortunate to have teachers who are willing to risk their own livelihoods and their own personal safety to be child advocates and to engage in authentic teaching and learning in spite of state laws that would prevent them.

Various factors contribute to the problems in Arizona schools. Nationwide, Solorzano and Yosso (2000) write that Chicana and Chicano children attend schools whose "educational conditions are some of the most inadequate in the United States." And the situation can be worse in a border community, where predominantly English-speaking students are allowed to develop an unhealthy superiority over Spanish-speaking or bilingual students. Borderlands schools, when English-only policies are in place, are easier for English-proficient students because they understand the cultural and linguistic environment and are able to acclimate more easily to the classroom environment. Those who speak English at home, then, gain an unfair advantage over the other children. As Peggy McIntosh (1990) writes, the white students are given the benefit of

the doubt, while the non-white students must counter negative stereotypes designed to limit their success.

Additionally, it is typical that children become more oppositional toward adults at school as they grow from childhood to adolescence (Brown & Leaman, 2007); thus, while bilingual teachers of fifth graders can trust their students to cooperate with clandestine teaching and learning strategies, the natural growth into adolescence causes a precarious situation for the corresponding eighth-grade teachers. Because the fifth grade teachers trust their students with contraband materials, they find they are able to bridge the gap between home language and school language, even if such bridging is illegal, because they feel that the children are on their side and willing to cooperate in the classroom resistance of teacher and student against English-only policies. However, as the children become older, as in the case of the eighth graders, their emerging oppositional identity precludes them from cooperating with the teachers, and their resistance becomes directed toward the teachers. Clearly, these English-only policies are untenable at any grade level, and the danger that the teachers face by doing their best work makes it urgent that these punitive policies be changed.

The teachers that I met in the Mexico-US border region bear out the claims of education research, that the teacher's respect for the home language is a critical aspect of learning another language. The reality of their work with children demonstrates, on a quotidian basis, the real tragedy of these short-sighted voter propositions. It should be clear from their words and actions that teachers simply cannot do their best work in an

environment that prohibits the use of home languages and that a bilingual teacher, in particular, has an arsenal of resources that could be applied toward the needs of the children if only the restrictive English-only policies could be withdrawn. If bilingual programs and dual language programs were successful in the past, as these teachers claim, they can and should be allowed to be successful again.

Although the work of bilingual teachers is often de-professionalized and even criminalized when they attempt to bridge the home-school connection for their students, it is critical that the greater community begins to recognize their courageous work and support what they do for the children under their care. In their work with children, these teachers act responsibly toward the larger society while working against many obstacles imposed by a system of linguistic discrimination. Their critique of the state and its irresponsible approach to public education is implicit in their daily work, if not always explicitly expressed to the public. As for the rest of us, as members of the general public, it is incumbent upon us to recognize and support this work so that the teachers can imagine greater possibilities for themselves and the children they serve and therefore become even stronger and more vocal in their critique of linguistic discrimination.

Flexible and thoughtful teachers are often well-practiced and agile at developing individual practices to remedy immediate, specific, and short-term needs of students. Such practices, however, effective as they may be, are rarely replicated or documented because of their spontaneous nature and because teachers so often work in isolation from their colleagues. This study points to the need to discuss effective practices with bilingual teachers

and observe their classrooms with an eye toward witnessing, coding, and reporting small-scale best practices of bilingual teachers with bilingual students when the use of the home language is prohibited by public policy.

In various ways, the teachers who participated in these interviews have confirmed what education research has also found: that the only way a child can become proficient in a second language is by attaining a degree of comfort in the first language and by sensing that the school and its representatives honor the first language (Cummins, 2006; Dong, 2004; Jimenez, 2005; Karabenick, 2004; Krashen, 2007; Meltzer & Hamann, 2004; Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995, 2002; Tse, 2001). These teacher interviews near the border demonstrate that teachers still exercise their professional judgment in spite of prohibitive mandates and counter-productive policies. Unfortunately, however, rather than use their rich potential to become leaders in bilingual education, these schools have had to find back-door methods to educate bilingual or Spanish-speaking students. In many ways, the schools of southern Arizona have had to deny the productive work they are doing in order to continue it. One can only imagine what they would achieve if given adequate support for their work.

WORKS CITED

- Abedi, J. (2004, Apr). Validity of accommodation for English language learners. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Philadelphia, PA.
- Allington, R., & Johnston, P. (2002). *Reading To Learn: Lessons from Exemplary Fourth-Grade Classrooms*. New York: Guilford.

- Black, W. R. (2006). Constructing accountability performance for English language learner students: An unfinished journey toward language minority rights. *Educational Policy*, 20 (1), 197-224.
- Brown, D. F., & Leaman, H. L. (2007). Recognizing and responding to young adolescents' ethnic identity development. In V. A. Anfara & S. B. Mertens (Eds.), *The young adolescent and the middle school* (pp. 219-235). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Butler, Y. G., & Gutierrez, M. B. (2003). Learning climates for English language learners: A case of fourth-grade students in California. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 27 (2), 207.
- Coggins, D., Krayin, D., Coates, G. D., & Carroll, M. D. (2007). *English language learners in the mathematics classroom*. Corwin.
- Cummins, J. (2006). Multiliteracies and equity: How do Canadian schools measure up? *Education Canada*, 46 (2), 4-7.
- Dong, Y. R. (2004). Preparing secondary subject area teachers to teach linguistically and culturally diverse students. *ERIC Clearing House*, 77 (5).
- Guerra, J. (2004). Putting literacy in its place. In C. Gutiérrez-Jones (Ed.), *Rebellious reading: The dynamics of Chicana/o cultural literacy* (pp. 19-37). Santa Barbara: Center for Chicano Studies.
- Hardin, B. J., Roach-Scott, M., & Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. (2007). Special education referral, evaluation, and placement practices for preschool English language learners. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 22 (1).

House Committee on Education and Labor, Congress of the United States. (2007). Impact of No Child Left Behind on English language learners. Hearing before the subcommittee on early childhood elementary and secondary education of the committee on education and labor. U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). Common core of data. Retrieved from [tp://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=1&details=1&City=somerton&State=04&DistrictType=1&DistrictType=2&DistrictType=3&DistrictType=4&DistrictType=5&DistrictType=6&DistrictType=7&NumOfStudentsRange=more&NumOfSchoolsRange=more&ID2=0407890](http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=1&details=1&City=somerton&State=04&DistrictType=1&DistrictType=2&DistrictType=3&DistrictType=4&DistrictType=5&DistrictType=6&DistrictType=7&NumOfStudentsRange=more&NumOfSchoolsRange=more&ID2=0407890)

Jimenez, R. T. (2005). Moving beyond the obvious: examining our thinking about linguistically diverse students. Learning Point Assoc / North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.

Karabenick, S. A. (2004). Professional development implications of teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward English language learners. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 28 (1), 55-75.

Kendall, F. E. (2006). *Understanding white privilege: creating pathways to authentic relationships across race*. New York: Routledge.

Kotterman, P. & Lentz, C. (2002). Official ballot arguments against Proposition 203 from State of Arizona website. *English First Official Home Page*, [http://www.Englishfirst.org/ Be/ Arizona/ Az203anti.Htm](http://www.Englishfirst.org/Be/Arizona/Az203anti.Htm) (accessed April 20, 2007).

- Krashen, S. D. (2005). Did immersion triumph in Arizona? *The ELL Outlook*. Retrieved April 20, 2007, from http://www.coursecrafters.com/ELL-Outlook/2004/sept_oct/ELLOutlookITIArticle4.htm
- Lee, O., Adamson, K., Maerten-Rivera, J., Lewis, S., Thornton, C., & LeRoy, K. (2008). Teachers' perspectives on a professional development intervention to improve science instruction among English language learners. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, 19 (1), 41-67.
- Lopez, E. C. (2006). Targeting English language learners, tasks, and treatments in instructional consultation. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 22 (2), 59-79.
- McIntosh, P. (Winter, 1990). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Independent School*, 49, (2).
- Macswan, J. (2006). How language proficiency tests mislead us about ability: Implications for English language learner placement in special education. *Teachers College Record*, 108 (11), 2304-2328.
- Mahoney, K. S. (2005). Reexamining identification and reclassification of English language learners: A critical discussion of select state practices. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 29 (1), 31-42.
- Meltzer, J., & Hamann, E. (2004). Part one: Focus on motivation and engagement. In *Meeting the literacy development needs of adolescent English language learners through content area learning* (p. 68). Providence, RI: Education Alliance at Brown University.

- Miller-Whitehead, M. (2001). A Review of the Literature on Early Childhood Cognitive Academic Language Assessments Suitable for Use in Ethnically Diverse School Systems. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Education Research Association, Little Rock, AR, November 14-16, 2001. ED 459473.
- Mueller, T. G. (2006). Planning and language instruction practices for students with moderate to severe disabilities who are English language learners. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 31 (3), 242-254.
- Munro, P. (1996). Resisting 'resistance': stories women teachers tell. *JCT: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Curriculum Studies* 12 (1), 16-28.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle, & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: exploring the breadth of human experience* (pp. 41-60). New York: Plenum.
- Sarroub, L. K. (2007). I was bitten by a scorpion: Reading in and out of school in a refugee's life. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 50 (8), 668-679.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. New York: Teachers College.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1995). Multilingualism and the education of minority children. In O. Garcia & C. Baker (Eds.), *Policy and practice in bilingual education: Extending the foundations* (pp. 40-62). Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2002). Language policies and education: The role of education in destroying or supporting the world's linguistic diversity. *World Congress on Language Policies*, Barcelona.

- Solorzano, D. & Yosso, T. (2000). Toward a critical race theory of Chicana and Chicano education.” In C. Tejeda, C. Martinez, & Z. Leonardo (Eds.), *Charting new terrains of Chicana(o)/Latina(o) education (19-37)*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Stritikus, T. T., & Garcia, E. (2005). Revisiting the bilingual debate from the perspectives of parents: Policy, practice, and matches or mismatches. *Educational Policy*, 19 (5), 729-744.
- Thomas, S. P., & Pollio, H. R. (2002). *Listening to patients: a phenomenological approach to nursing research and practice*. New York: Springer.
- Tse, L. (2001) *Why don't they learn English? Separating fact from fallacy in the U.S. language debate*. New York, Teachers College Press.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. Albany: SUNY Press.