

## **A Critical Look at Bilingualism Discourse in Public Schools: Autoethnographic Reflections of a Vulnerable Observer**

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### **Abstract**

A bilingual elementary school teacher and mother of a bilingual child, the author questions the presence of specific bilingualism discourses in two Southeastern public schools. Despite research that shows the acquisition and development of two languages actually augment language processing and problem solving skills, the perception of children's brains as buckets preprogrammed for the development of a single language is still commonly employed in these schools and serves to support the placement of English language learners in special education classes. In this study, Critical Narrative Analysis, a hybrid of critical discourse analysis and conversational narrative analysis, is applied to meld a macro and microanalysis of the author's own teacher journal entries and the narratives of a veteran special education teacher. The article shows how the bilingualism discourse continues to reflect a deficit orientation.

Many believe that our brains are just like our stomachs: To have room for dessert, we can't overeat. Just like an expanding balloon, some believe, our brains can only hold so much, and if we fill it too fully with the heritage language, there will be no room for English. This misconception leads many parents and teachers to advocate arresting development of the native language to leave ample room for the new language. (Tse, 2001, p. 45)

In recent years, the population of the United States has been experiencing significant demographic, linguistic, and cultural changes. In the Southeast, in cities and towns where 10 years ago English was the language that would almost exclusively be heard in grocery stores and on radios, Spanish has

become common. Immigration has peaked in states such as Georgia, with 300% Latino growth over the last 10 years (Center for Latino Achievement Success in Education, n.d.). Ninety percent of newcomers to the United States have come from Latin American, Asian and African countries (Seller & Weis, 1997). With the surge of immigration, more and more bilingual children will enter schools. Today, one in five children in the United States lives in an immigrant family (The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools, 2005).

As an elementary school teacher in a school district with urban characteristics in the Southeastern United States, I often wondered why so many second-generation immigrants did not retain their heritage languages. Many of my students whose parents immigrated from Mexico and other Latin American countries spoke very little Spanish. As a proponent of bilingualism, I often encouraged them to speak their heritage language at home. According to Caldas and Caron-Caldas (2002), “most second-generation Hispanics prefer to speak English, and by the third generation most Hispanic Americans are no longer able to speak Spanish” (p. 491).

I didn't realize how hard it was to raise a child bilingually until I became a mother myself and started the challenging task of raising my own child bilingually. I realized the misconception that the “brain effort required to master the two languages instead of one certainly diminishes the child's power of learning other things which might and ought to be learnt” (Jespersen, 1922, p. 148) is still widespread in schools today in many teachers' discursive repertoires. According to this view, a child's intellectual capacity is limited, due to the conception that bilinguals think less efficiently because the brain stores two linguistic systems (Lambert, 1990). Based on conceptions exposed above and articulated by Jespersen, Lambert, and many others, education is defined in terms of a banking system (Freire, 2000), in which a child's brain is a receptacle, ready to hold a pre-determined amount of knowledge, and can get too full if two languages are learned (Tse, 2001). From such a stance, learning two or more languages might be deemed detrimental to children and adults alike.

I was not fully aware of the prejudices towards Latinos until I gave birth to my son. As soon as he was born, still under the effects of medication to alleviate the partum pains, I was approached by a hospital worker seeking information about my newborn. She asked his name, my name and his father's name. She went on to ask his race. I looked at my blue-eyed son; he appeared White to me. I replied White, believing it was one of the possibilities. She immediately looked at me, a Latina immigrant, and said that he could not be “pure White,” after all, I was not White. I guess my brownness had polluted the white color of his father. “What are the other options?” I asked. She said, “African American, Pacific Islander, and Other.” I had no choice but to define my son as “Other.” Since then, I realized how the institutional discourse was already serving to otherize an infant.

Thinking that it was merely an issue of institutional discourse, I tried to get past that very uncomfortable moment, as a nurse pushed me in my wheelchair from the birthing room to the maternity room where I would spend my next 48 hours. As I arrived there, I could not help but write about the painful incident I had experienced, in hopes of removing it from my body. I wrote and wrote as my husband and mother watched the first baby bath and left me alone in the room. When my son finally returned to the room, I felt as if I could forget that experience and hoped that it had been an isolated case. I looked at his angelic face, and questioned whether anyone would have the courage to be prejudiced against such a lovable being.

Friends came to visit and shared with me some of their parenting tips. As I was a teacher in a local elementary school, many teacher colleagues came to visit, most of whom were English speaking. My mother, who had come from Brazil and is conversant in Portuguese, Spanish, and French, sat in the room without understanding much, smiling at the amusement of my friends, and at their coos as they tried to communicate with a newborn child. Many asked questions, but one particular interaction remained in my mind for much too long. Joyce (pseudonym), a friend of mine who taught special education at a local school, asked after hearing me answer my mother's questions in Portuguese, "You are not going to speak Portuguese to him, are you?" In framing the question in such a biased way, Joyce had hoped that I would avoid conflict (Briggs, 1996) in co-constructing talk (Ochs & Capps, 2001), and agree with her. My unexpected answer that I would speak Portuguese to him prompted a very quick answer drawing on her expert knowledge. Joyce lowered her voice, as she said, "You know, if you speak Portuguese to him, he'll end up in special ed." Joyce's advice was aimed at aiding me, not hurting or confronting me. I could not go any further at that point, so I smiled. As my face smiled, my heart cried. It cried for my son, and for all other children who spoke languages other than English.

Joyce, a White, middle-class, monolingual, middle-aged, very talented and well-intentioned teacher holding a Master's degree in education, had over 15 years of experience teaching special education classes at the elementary school level in high-poverty urban and rural areas in the Southeast. She had echoed the institutional discourse on bilingualism. Early studies of the academic, intellectual, and social achievements of bilingual children generally showed that they were "behind in school, retarded in measured intelligence and socially adrift" when compared to monolingual children (Lambert, 1977, p. 15). Joyce was agreeing with an understanding of bilingualism which was dismantled by research long ago but still has a strong hold on practitioners' minds in schools today.

To develop a better understanding of how bilingualism was defined in school settings, and the discourses shaping the educational experiences of bilingual children in elementary schools in the Southeast, I collected my own

journal entries and interviewed Joyce, a teacher who taught in another public school. I kept a reflective journal in which I documented my experiences as a bilingual mother and immigrant teacher and took detailed fieldnotes of incidents happening at the school where I taught. I engaged in “systematic sociological introspection” to understand and reflect on the incidents I experienced. The process of introspection emerges from social interaction, and “consists of interacting voices, which are products of social forces and roles” (Ellis, 1991, pp. 28–29). I used Critical Narrative Analysis to analyze my journal entries, recorded conversations and field notes.

I took advantage of “the absence of guidelines for doing nuts and bolts research” (Denzin, 1997, p. 216) to improvise methodologically. I employ autoethnographic research tools in hopes of striking a balance and representing the interdependence and blurry boundaries of self and other. When analyzing the data, I honor the textually reflexive nature of this study (Macbeth, 2001), and trouble objectivity. In order to get past the limitations typically associated with research grounded on experience, as Denzin suggested, I link personal and political issues and realms.

### **Bilingualism Discourses**

For more than 30 years solid empirical evidence has shown the positive relationship between bilingual ability and intellectual functioning. Although the evidence indicates definite cognitive advantages for bilingual children, the stereotype of negative consequences persists (Hamers & Blanc, 2000). Professionals in the area of education propagate these institutional discourses, as many regard bilingualism as a deficit in their philosophical beliefs and sponsor this idea by incorporating it in their narratives and advice giving, including my friend Joyce. According to Tse (2001), research in the area of language acquisition and development actually points to bilingualism as a resource, rather than a deficit: “Not only do we appear to have infinite capacity for language learning, but knowing one language may help a learner pick up a second better and faster because it means not having to start from scratch” (p. 45).

A recent study reported that a “problem confronting schools in the United States is the dramatically increasing proportion of students whose first language is not English” (Deno, 2003, p. 189), casting English language learners (ELLs) in terms of a problem. Despite seeing ELLs as problems, this same study recognized the inadequacy of current achievement tests in assessing ELLs. According to Deno:

Many achievement tests draw heavily on background knowledge of the American culture in structuring questions. Among other problems that exist because of the lack of technically adequate procedures is

how to distinguish ELL students who are having difficulty learning because of their lack of proficiency in English from ELL students whose struggles also stem from special disabilities. (p. 189)

ELLs have historically been overreferred to special education due to inappropriate assessments and assignment to lower-performing instructional settings. For at least the last two decades, multiple studies have been documenting this phenomenon (Cummins, 1984; Duran, 1989; La Celle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994; Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1990).

“The failure to recognize and learn from existing expertise regarding second-language learning, cultural influences on learning, and the program impacts on ELLs results in an unnecessary and unjustifiable ‘systemic ignorance’ about the potential and capacity of ELLs” (La Celle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994, p. 57). This “systemic ignorance” is exemplified here through the voice of one teacher, Joyce.

Multiple studies over the last two decades have pointed towards the likelihood that once a student is referred to special education, he or she will qualify to receive such services and be identified with a label (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Ysseldyke & Algozinne, 1983). Referrals are significantly influenced by teacher beliefs and attitudes towards a student. Teacher beliefs are partly based on content-area performance. ELLs tend to perform significantly lower than non-ELL White students in reading, writing, math and science due to lack of equity in achievement tests (La Celle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994). One aspect of this is the lack of concern for ELLs’ English proficiency. In fact, “academic achievement is a strong predictor of referral and eventual placement in special education” (Hosp & Reschly, p. 194). Consequently, “disproportionate representation of minority students in special education has been a constant and consistent concern for nearly 4 decades. National patterns of disproportionality have been documented and demonstrated to be robust and steady over time” (p. 186).

The excerpts analyzed in the Exploring and Analyzing the Employment of Bilingualism Discourses section demonstrate how common discourse in public education regarding bilingual development is reflected in these conversational excerpts. These excerpts are linked to a larger social-historical context, a context in which teacher beliefs regarding ELLs are directly linked to referrals and placement in special education (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Although based on personal data, this article addresses a broader societal issue that has been and will continue to affect the lives of many ELLs every day. This article puts a face to a systemic problem, making it personal and, hopefully, harder to dismiss or ignore. This is important, as “minorities remain highly over-represented in special education programs and the disproportionality has been well documented since the early 1990s . . . suggest[ing] that language minority students are placed in special education . . . due to their limited

proficiency in English” (Souto-Manning, 2005b, p. 126). Despite its apparently limited perspective, this article sheds light on a broader issue: the overreferral of ELL students to special education. Here, I do not argue that the opinions of a single special education teacher are representative of all teachers. Nonetheless, the values, attitudes, and beliefs conveyed by Joyce are situated within a larger sociocultural discourse (Gee, 1996) of bilingualism as a deficit that deeply affect referral of ELLs to special education, their subsequent labeling, and often inappropriate placement in special education classes.

### **Critical Narrative Analysis of Autoethnographic Data**

Drawing on autoethnographic research data (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Behar, 2003; Behar & Gordon, 1995; Freedman & Frey, 2003; Hernández & Rehman, 2002; Latina Feminist Group, 2001) and employing a more personal approach to educational research in which the line between the observer and observed is continuously blurred, I assume a vulnerable position as I work through my emotional involvement and name my investment with the topic and participant being studied. As an observer, I am not only visible, but vulnerable as I share my own story and reflect on my own actions (Behar, 1996). As a Latina immigrant mother, I discuss misrepresentations and cultural assumptions associated with bilingualism, and how the insights into these misconceptions have allowed me to rethink my location as a teacher and mother.

I question the separation of the personal and institutional discourses, and use a mostly macroanalytic perspective (critical discourse analysis, [CDA]) to inform a predominantly microanalytic perspective (analysis of personal/conversational narratives). In the combination of these two analytic approaches to data analysis, I explore the “link between macro-level power inequities and micro-level interactional positioning” (Rymes, 2003, p. 122). Critical Narrative Analysis (Souto-Manning, 2005a) is a combination of CDA (Fairclough, 2003; Rogers, 2004) and the analysis of conversational narratives (Ochs & Capps, 2001). In the data collected for this study, I examine the intertextual recycling of institutional discourses in everyday conversational narratives.

Critical Narrative Analysis allows interaction with real world issues in analyzing personal/conversational narratives. CDA views institutional discourses as colonizing. It assumes that institutional discourse has the power to transform social relations. Narrative analysis and CDA can productively inform each other. “Narrative analysis without CDA can remain at an uncritical level. If we only look at macro-level power discourse without looking at narrative construction at the level of conversation, we don’t know if it really is a power discourse” (Rymes & Souto-Manning, 2004, p. 1). An institutional discourse is powerful when it is recycled in stories people tell everyday. Here I employ Critical Narrative Analysis to assess institutional discourses recycled in two educators’ conversational narratives.

When someone is telling a story, it is difficult to engage in dialogue with that person. Because stories are often produced without the storyteller taking an explicit position, the listener is not in a position to disagree. However, narratives convey a deeper meaning than what the storyteller explicitly relates in the story. What is left unsaid can say as much. As a result, it is harder to challenge the ideology disguised in narrative formats. In addition to what is said, there are five dimensions to which stories orient (Ochs & Capps, 2001): (a) tellership, or who is telling the story; (b) tellability, or how interesting the story is; (c) embeddedness, or how the narrative is situated within other passages of text or talk; (d) linearity, the sequential and/or temporal ordering of events; and (e) moral stance, the moral values being conveyed through the telling. Narratives vary in degrees along the continuum within each of these dimensions. One or all of these dimensions may be analyzed in a narrative. In terms of tellership, a conversational narrative is often co-told by a narrator's listener. As an audience gives feedback and interacts (whether verbally or non-verbally), narrators engaging in conversations orient their stories accordingly. Although narratives vary along the five dimensions described by Ochs & Capps, all narratives function as "a vernacular, interactional forum for ordering, explaining, and otherwise taking a position on experience" (p. 57). Narrative analysis is a critical means to understanding not only the nature of narrative more broadly, but also society, and the relationship of everyday talk to the social construction of cultural norms and institutional discourses, which makes it difficult to detect ideologies and political views in a story. For example, narrators often seek to shape their stories interestingly while orienting to goodness (Taylor, 1989). Shaping stories according to such dimensions, narrators seek not only to get attention, but also to draw empathy from listeners.

As a result, disseminating political views through narratives and storytelling, gives the false impression of the absence of political stances and ideological concepts in stories. It positions the narrator as drawing on experiences, divorcing his or her utterances from ideology. Political materials and views get past the critical ear because they are framed within a narrative in the storied world (Chafe, 1980). As a result, political issues framed as everyday stories don't get broken down into parts and bypass rationality, as they are accepted on the level of emotion. Storied worlds are harder to break down; they are impenetrable in terms of critical questioning as long as the moral stances line up (Hill & Zepeda, 1992; Ochs & Capps, 2001).

In analyzing my own journal entries, after encoding episodes in narratized format, I go through reflective decoding as I problematize institutional discourses embedded in my own tellings, consider multiple perspectives of the same issue, and try to learn from my experiences and how language shapes my practices. I employ Critical Narrative Analytical tools to analyze my own journal entries, as well as my conversation with Joyce.



## Exploring and Analyzing the Employment of Bilingualism Discourses

After my anger wore off, about a year later, in November 2003, I decided to revisit the issue and asked Joyce to talk to me about her comments in the hospital. I explained to her that I wanted to record our conversation, so that I could study and write about it in order to understand her stance. The recorded conversation happened at Joyce's house, in a greatly unstructured manner. The informal interview lasted 138 minutes. Short excerpts from the transcripts illustrate larger stretches of conversation. I also use my personal journals, including entries which temporally lasted two years, from 2001 to 2003, to reflect on my feelings, and experiences with bilingualism related to myself, students, and son. By doing so, I employ autoethnographic data (Behar, 2003), and position myself as a vulnerable observer, breaking traditional paradigms that have "called for distance, objectivity, and abstraction" (Behar, 1996, p. 13) in social science research. I employ this data not for its trendiness, but in hopes that autoethnographic accounts will put faces to very pertinent and important issues and take us to places we wouldn't otherwise get to.

Autoethnography, "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9), has the potential to help us explore issues often overlooked, dismissed, or ignored, because of their uncomfortable nature or apparent irrelevance. I employ autoethnography as a site for problematizing and challenging "the binary conventions of a self/society split, as well as the boundary between the objective and the subjective" (p. 2), as this study contains both ethnographic and autobiographic components. By making this study personal, I hope that it will lead to a more humane look at bilingualism and at children who speak languages other than English.

As Joyce and I talked about our own children, their growth and development, we co-constructed the following interaction:<sup>1</sup>

Mariana: Remember:you went to visit [my son] and I in the hospital?

Joyce: Ye::s so precious

Mariana: I was thinking about::t you said

Joyce: What did I say?

Mariana: I shouldn't speak Portuguese =

Joyce: = I told you. You know, a student of mine who is in fourth grade. He's from Vietnam. He's in special ed. because he can't speak English.

Mariana: Special ed.? But =

Joyce: = I know. If you don't want [your son] to end up in a special ed. class, and I'm sure you don't, you better start teaching English to that boy.



Mariana: What do you mean?

Joyce: I know all those people at the university tell you that children can learn, whatever, but he will end up not learning English or Portuguese. I am telling you from my experience.

Mariana: But this child should be in ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] =

Joyce: = He was. And then when his time ran out, there was nothing but special education for him. And he still can't understand. He can't do the work. His fourth grade teacher gave him different work (.) easier (.) he started acting out. Then I tested him and he qualified. His behavior, Uhhh:::All the teachers know that if his parents had focused on English, he would be much better off. There isn't =

Mariana: = What do you mean? Much better off?

Joyce: Don't take up his brain with stuff he won't need. Like if he had spent the time he was learning Vietnamese learning English, he would do better in school. I'm just telling you. If you want him to do well, you better focus on English.

Joyce's narrative about her student in the above excerpt indicated the dissemination of the institutional discourse of bilingualism as a deficit. Her choice of making her point in a narratized format allowed her to use language as a colonizing device (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999)—as if what she said was the sole truth. This is one of those instances in which the listener is obligated to be a receiver of discourse (van Dijk, 2001). In this case, I was denied access to multiple understandings of the issue (Chouliaraki & Fairclough), and as a result, denied critical meta-awareness (Freire, 2000). But, I did not believe everything Joyce was telling me, and wanted her to come to understand her attempt at colonization. I wanted her to understand that this was one perspective sponsored long ago, around the time she was still a student in elementary school herself, and that it had been disproved by further research. I wanted her to be aware how important her stance was, as “professionals, such as doctors and teachers . . . are often the ones to counsel parents in decision-making” (Hamers & Blanc, 2000, p. 86).

Joyce sought to create empathy by her use of “you know,” attempting to involve the co-teller. She organized her narrative in an orderly and appealing way—high tellability. She used her story to create her image as an expert, someone who had seen it, rather than someone who had merely read or theorized about it. Drawing on her experiential expertise, she framed herself as someone qualified to give advice. She created her identity as a practitioner on the basis of experience, rather than the theoretical-philosophical university world. In *Rights to Advise*, Rymes (1996) has pointed out that advice and standpoints emerge from interaction and conversation. The fact that in the discussions

about jail, the students in her study ended up reaching the morally aligned verdict that jail is bad thereby showing that people commonly seek to align with morality in conversational narratives. As in Rymes' article, Joyce supported morally aligned conclusions that, to succeed in life, one must learn how to speak English exclusively. These beliefs, according to her were widespread in her school, among her colleagues and administrators alike.

Joyce used special education as a consequence for those who do not learn how to speak English, in almost a threat-like statement. She referred to this as the foreseeable consequence, what happened to those who try to learn more than one language. When she said, "If you don't want [your son] to end up in a special education class, and I'm sure you don't, you better start teaching English to that boy," Joyce was creating a collective moral framework and placing me in it. It wasn't about being bilingual, but whether I wanted my son to end up in special education. And if, as she was sure, I wanted to keep him out of special education programs, I better start speaking only English to him.

Even though, according to federal guidelines, a child does not qualify for special education services due to second-language development issues, this practice is still widespread, as Joyce's student was placed in special education because of his limited English proficiency. Joyce was not aware of the federal guidelines, when responding to my question regarding the student's placement and why he was not in ESOL classes instead. This led her to say, "His fourth grade teacher gave him different work (.) easier (.) he started acting out. Then I tested him and he qualified. His behavior :: Uhhh :: " So, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, he qualified for special education under the label of emotional and behavioral disorders. This makes it impossible for the child to continue receiving ESOL services due to structural constraints on individual agency (Archer, 2003). Consequently, the school structure shaped this child's identity and constructed him as a poorly-behaved student in the class (Gee, 2001).

In the state where this study took place, a child can only receive ESOL services for a pre-determined amount of time, regardless of need or individual differences. Additionally, most teachers in the school where I taught, as well as in the school where Joyce taught, had not received education regarding bilingual development, ELLs, nor did they know any language other than English. Empathy with these children was largely missing from the picture, as most teachers had not experienced contextual discontinuity in their lives, as had many of these children at such young ages (Archer, 2003). A majority of these teachers had never crossed the border of the United States, and most of those who had did so in very sheltered situations, as tourists, many times with private translator guides. According to the state-issued report card, out of more than 50 teachers employed at these two schools, three had professional training in ELL and two were bilingual. In terms of demographics, nine were

African Americans, two were Latina immigrants, and 42 were White. One teacher was male. All teachers of record labeled themselves middle class. Despite these two schools' high (over 65%) free/reduced lunch rates, and more than half of each of their student populations being comprised of students of color, employed teachers were mostly White, middle class, and monolingual.

Returning to the analysis of bilingualism discourses and looking back at my journal, while trying to understand the referral of an ELL in the beginning of second grade to special education services, I wrote:

I can't believe they want to test her. She is so smart. But she just stopped going to ESOL classes. They should give her at least a few months, and not try to put her in another place, away from her classroom. They say she is distracted, so she must have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Distracted? She is not an outspoken person, and the school year has just started? ADD? What do they mean? I guess I forget special ed. test scores. . . . Maybe that's why. It's not about her or her well-being. It's sad but it's really ALL about test scores. . . .

This illustrates the commonplace of such a practice—the discourse of bilingualism as a disability, as a deficit, rather than as a resource. In Joyce's student's case, he started “misbehaving.” In the case of the second-grade student I wrote about in my journal, it was distraction, which was assumed to be ADD. Institutional constraints and structures, such as the funding for schools being contingent on standardized test scores, allow for deficit discourses to proliferate even further within these two public elementary schools in the Southeast. Such constraints were reflected in teachers' thoughts and actions everyday. For example, if a child could not perform at or above the expected level, there was a rush to qualify the child for some extra services to assure that his or her test score would not count against the school making adequate yearly progress according to federal and state guidelines.

There is no time . . . no time to wait . . . no time to account for individual differences and interests. It feels that if a student does not initially fit in, like Lupita, she has to be put away, in another room for part of the day, under a label. Talk about discrepancy!!! Sometimes, it feels like schools are just calcifying larger societal injustices. If a child is bilingual, and bilingualism is not seen as the norm, the child is seen as deviating, as needing extra help, as less bright than English-only children.

According to the interview data, even though the student to whom Joyce referred was not raised bilingually from birth, Joyce was quick to apply her experience in supporting her role as advice giver. Further, knowing that many people disagreed with her take on this issue, she spoke about “those people at the university,” so as to separate herself and her public school colleagues, which she framed as practitioners, from her perception of the theoretical and

more abstract university world. By casually using “whatever” to refer to the beliefs sponsored by university faculty, she dismissed what they said, as it was not based on concrete experiences. The biblical saying, “seeing is believing,” was the institutional discourse employed as a resource to make her point. This is reflected in a journal entry, as I navigate both university and public school worlds:

It feels like there is a war. There shouldn't be. I hear from my colleagues all the time that the university people don't know what it is like to be in the classroom. This claim leads them to dismiss research studies, and not benefit from learnings that could positively affect the lives of children like Lupita.

Finally, Joyce ended this passage by echoing the very quote with which I started this article, by giving me advice not to fill my child's “brain with stuff he won't need.” The child's brain was conceived as a stomach (Tse, 2001), as a bucket with limited capacity for knowledge. This is a common misconception even today. For example, it is common in the United States “to find anecdotal evidence of teachers who counsel immigrant parents to abandon their mother tongue in favour of the school language, that is, the language of the host country” (Hamers & Blanc, 2000, p. 86). This was the bilingualism discourse sponsored by Joyce—couched in the idea that one language replaces the other and that the brain can only handle one language; at least one language at a time. This idea was clear in the other school as well.

I cannot believe that so many people think that teachers pass through the hallways saying “no Spanish,” and even tell parents not to speak Spanish (their NATIVE language) to the children at home.

. . . and what ends up happening is what happened to Jorge. So sad! Jorge and his mother can only communicate through mediation. His sister, who is bilingual, translates the few exchanges between Jorge (who only speaks English) and his mother (who only speaks Spanish). Beliefs about bilingualism as proliferated in schools and passed on to parents are affecting the very fabric of families.

As we continued our conversation, Joyce continued making indirect statements that upheld the English-only agenda heavily sponsored by Ron Unz and others (Moses, 2000; Rodríguez, 1998). The passage below illustrates my first attempt at openly acknowledging the institutional discourse she was recycling in her narrative: the English-only discourse, the discourse of assimilation as superior, as more appropriate than acculturation.

Mariana: So:::o, do you think everyone should speak English?

Joyce: Yes. If they chose to live here, they need to live like we do. Speak like we do.

Mariana: But, I don't =

Joyce: = You are different. You couldn't do anything about it, because you came here and you were an adult. But with the children we can help them =

Mariana: = Help them?

Joyce: Uh-huh. It's our job as teachers to get these parents to understand what's best for the children. They can't understand me.

Mariana: And what do you think is best for the children?

Joyce: Really, the best thing is not to confuse them with another language.

When I tried to make it personal, and asked about how I figured in her framework for language learners, as a bilingual adult, mother and teacher, she avoided direct narrative conflict (Briggs, 1996) by framing me as a victim of the process, someone who "couldn't do anything about it, because you came here and you were an adult." Then, she returned to her point of how the children's situation was different. She employed the collective pronoun *we* in "we can help them," as well as *our* in "our job as teachers" in seeking agreement from me. Again, when I asked her what's best for the children, she returned to the discourse of bilingualism as a deficit, as providing context for confusion in the minds of children.

Additionally, in this passage, she used the expression *these parents*, separating and otherizing them from the rest of the parents. She said, "It's our job as teachers to get these parents to understand what's best for the children," confusing English language skills and the ability to understand what is best for children. By framing herself in such a way, she placed the responsibility for change in the hands of the parents, who needed to understand her, the holder of absolute knowledge. Here, Joyce employed the discourse of the banking system of education (Freire, 2000), in which knowledge was to be deposited in the parents' brains. According to this approach, Joyce was the holder of knowledge, and the parents were receptacles. Such a stance posits language as colonizing (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), as parents have to comply to one perspective that is assumed to be representing the truth.

Within this position adopted by Joyce in the construction of the excerpt above, it was hard to advocate for and uphold the advantages of bilingualism. I, as a teacher and peer, familiar with the local culture, had a hard time. I could hardly imagine the situation of immigrant parents who were raising their children bilingually and came upon such an outdated and dangerous portrayal of bilingualism. The misconception of bilingualism makes it hard for "the child to have a positive self-concept about their two languages" (Baker, 2000, p. 49), which is extremely important for the development of heritage languages. It is very taxing to develop such a positive self-concept when others consider heritage language wrong and see it as a deficit, as taking away rather than

adding to one's cognitive development. Again, making an attempt at personalizing the issue, I engaged in the potentially conflictual exchange:

Mariana: But I'm gonna keep speaking Portuguese::se to [my son]

Joyce: I just hope you change your mind. He's not going to need Portuguese. He will need English. God knows I tried. I just hope [your son] will not end up all confused.

Mariana: He won't, I've read so much =

Joyce: = Honey, remember that what we live as teachers is more important than what's in those books. I have faith in God you will change your mind.

Mariana: I just hope you will rethink: and not tell parents that their children shouldn't speak other languages.

Joyce: ((laughter)) So, what are you doing for the holidays?

Mariana: Holidays?

Attempting to avoid conflict, Joyce used "I just hope" to respond to my determination, if not insistence, to raise my son bilingually. Then, she employed discourse suggesting Portuguese was not needed, which was coherent with the larger English-only discourse that if a person lives in the United States, he or she ought to speak English exclusively. Finally, she turned to the sacred, in "God knows I tried," which again strengthened her plea while avoiding direct conflict. She aligned her belief and faith in God with a mission she was meant to accomplish. She saw herself as trying to help me, and did not display an understanding of the importance of bilingualism.

When I tried to move away from the sacred, and mentioned books, she drew a dark line between books and teachers, as in "honey, remember that what we live as teachers is more important than what's in those books." This ignored the large body of work, the many excellent books written by teacher practitioners such as Bob Fecho (2004) and Karen Hankins (2004). Again, she brought in God in the third person as a larger discourse in this conversation that started to become uncomfortable, to avoid direct conflict. She was no longer expressing her personal views, as I was expressing mine, but she was relaying God's words. When I made a plea for her to rethink her location, carefully using "just" to soften my plea, she laughed, and completely changed the subject, asking me about my holiday plans.

In my experience as a Latina immigrant teacher and mother, in the United States, there exists tremendous pressure to conform to the linguistic norm of speaking English (Caldas & Caron-Caldas, 2002). This is even stronger in the South, as immigrant populations have grown tremendously in the last 10 years (Center for Latino Achievement Success in Education, n.d.). As in Joyce's voice and interaction with me, this prevalent discourse that pressures bilingual individuals to speak English as the only way, or the right way, represents a sort of American colonialism, a form of oppression, and needs to be problematized and reconsidered (Macedo, 2000).

## **Challenging Locations and Hoping for a Better Tomorrow**

Findings in this study, both from my own experiences, as well as the analysis of my interactions with Joyce, go against the proposition that “bringing up a child with two languages is not difficult” (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 1999, p. 125). Personally, I’ve found it to be extremely challenging to raise a bilingual child in the Southeastern United States. It’s not about teaching the language per se, but navigating socially constructed norms, and trying to introduce new discourses to an already established and familiar repertoire. This is reflected by the analysis of Joyce’s narratives above, which employed a plethora of discourses, even calling on God to mediate our conversation when other, more secular discourses failed to convince me to speak only English to my child.

Research from the 1980s and 1990s, when several scholars analyzed the development of bilingualism in relation to the development of linguistic awareness, has shown that bilingual children may have greater cognitive control of information processing than do monolingual children and that this provides them with the necessary foundation for metalinguistic ability (Bialystok, 1991; Bialystok & Ryan, 1985). Despite this research and findings “that bilinguals have more creativity and better problem-solving skills than monolinguals” (Tse, 2001, p. 48), the discourse of bilingualism as a deficit is still prevalent in schools in the Southeastern United States, as can be noted by my journal entries as well as by the analysis of the excerpts above.

Research proposes that the acquisition and development of two languages augments one’s language processing and that different processing systems develop to serve two linguistic systems (Hamers & Blanc, 2000). Nevertheless, the perception of children’s brains as buckets preprogrammed for the development of a single language is still commonly employed and espoused. Temporary delays in the development of expressive English language in early bilingual development have served as examples of how bilingualism hinders long-term cognitive development. This could not be further from the truth, as “bilinguals have an advantage because they have more than one way of thinking about a given concept, making them more ‘divergent’ thinkers and more effective problem solvers” (Tse, 2001, p. 48). Instead of thinking of bilingualism as a malady that affects part of the population, against which teachers need to fight, we, educators and parents, need to start promoting bilingualism as augmenting and sophisticating children’s thought processes, and serving as a resource for all children.

In the United States, bilingualism is still reticently associated with minority populations. Worldwide, however, bilingualism is the norm, rather than the exception, as over half of the people in the world are bilingual (Matlin, 2003). If bilingual children are not to be left behind, or stacked sideways in special



education classrooms, so that their test scores will not count against adequate yearly progress mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), parents, educators, and interested parties, must continue promoting bilingualism as a resource in schools. People need to consider that “negative consequences of bilingual experience are so far only evidenced in the schooling of minority children in Western countries” (Hamers & Blanc, 2000, p. 103), and recognize that bilingualism can add to, and not subtract from, the schooling and lives of all children, and ought to be viewed as multiplying possibilities (Baker, 2000), as broadening horizons, and contributing to a better future.

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> For the analysis of personal/conversational narratives, the notational conventions employed in the transcribed excerpts are as follows: colons indicate elongation of sounds; an equal sign indicates no break or delay between the words thereby connected; double parentheses enclose descriptions of conduct; a dot in parentheses indicates short pause. For additional transcription conventions, please refer to Ochs and Capps (2001).