

# **Latino Parents' "Choice" for Bilingual Education in an Urban California School: Language Politics in the Aftermath of Proposition 227**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the choices parents have made regarding language of instruction in their children's classrooms, particularly in California after the implementation of Proposition 227. The data for this study are drawn from a 2-year ethnography of eight Latino families from an urban immigrant Latino community. The parents in the study held a high value for bilingual education, particularly in the elementary grades. However, parents' choice for language of instruction was not always a choice but rather determined by lack of access to information and school-community power relations.

## **Introduction**

Given the recent volume of publications on parent involvement, there is presumably a growing interest in increasing parent involvement in education. Some of this work places an emphasis on treating parents as "partners" in decision making. There is a suggestion in this literature that the parents who are most in need of such programs are working-class minority parents who are perceived as not being "involved" in their children's education. However, ethnographic research with Latino families has shown that parent involvement (i.e., interaction with schools and children around schooling issues) can take forms other than those normalized in ways characteristic of the dominant group (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; López, 2001; Monzó & Rueda, 2001). Other work provides very real examples of how in some urban schools much of this talk regarding parent involvement is merely lip service rather than a real attempt to give voice to parents regarding their children's education (Shannon, 1996;

Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). This is most apparent with respect to parental rights to make decisions or at least to be part of the conversation regarding the language issues that so critically impact their children.

The passing of California Proposition 227 in 1998, which severely restricted use of languages other than English in instruction, was strongly opposed by many bilingual education researchers and educators who supported sound bilingual programs as a means to educate children in content matter both in their primary language and in English (Cummins, 2000). However, the proposition passed under the slogan “English for the Children,” which was successful in stirring fears among some immigrant parents that their children may not be learning English in bilingual programs (though the existing evidence regarding those who voted in favor of Proposition 227 suggests that it was predominantly passed by Anglo and middle- and upper-class immigrants whose children were not directly being served by bilingual programs at the time [Crawford, 2000]). Proponents also contended, after a loophole was found in the way the law was written, that Proposition 227 met the needs of all families by offering parents greater choice with respect to language of instruction. That is, parents who wanted their children to remain in a bilingual program would be able to sign a waiver from the new immersion program and, thus, remain in a bilingual program. However, no provisions were made to account for the disparity in access to information that many immigrant families face, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds who do not speak English.

An important concern for educators in California now in this post-227 era is to learn whether and how parental choice regarding language programs is instantiated, especially with respect to the Latino parents who have traditionally been kept out of school decision making. In this paper, I show how eight working-class Latino immigrant families made choices regarding their children’s language program and the contexts under which these “choices” were produced. Specific research questions guiding this paper were: How did parents make choices regarding language of instruction? Did parents have access to information regarding the language options available? How was the school responding, if at all, to parents’ choices for language of instruction?

## **Literature Review**

### **A Sociocultural Perspective on Agency**

Most people would like to think that individuals have agency to make their own choices. As such, cognitive perspectives that focus on the individual as the unit of analysis have dominated attempts to understand the actions of people. In education, this perspective has often led to deficiency perspectives (that is, beliefs that some minority groups are cognitively or culturally deficient

[Villenas, 2001]) toward minorities who may not always make the choices that will lead to academic achievement and school success. Although broader factors that limit the choices that people can make are acknowledged, these are thought to be of secondary consequence, and the belief that individuals always have agency to make the best choices prevails.

A sociocultural perspective based on the work of Vygotsky (1987) positions the individual within a broader system of activity developed as a result of numerous cultural, historical, and political factors (Cole, 1996). Personal agency exists but is produced and shaped in social context. From this perspective, the choice of language program made by Latino parents is, thus, a result of numerous cultural, historical, and political factors. Some of the factors would be the information that parents have regarding the various language-program options, beliefs regarding language-learning opportunities and the value and status of Spanish and English in this country, and the school's efforts and willingness to comply with parental requests.

Additionally, when dealing with groups perceived as powerless by schools, even limited choices may be unavailable due to what Villenas (2001) has termed *benevolent racism*s. With respect to parental choice, benevolent racism may take the form of school personnel ignoring parental choices or not making such choices available to them due to a belief that Latino parents don't know enough about the educational system to make appropriate choices and do not have the power to have their rights guaranteed.

### Parent Perspectives and Passing of Proposition 227

Proposition 227, passed in California in 1998, called for a transitional program of "structured English immersion (SEI)" that would normally not exceed 1 year. After a year in SEI instruction, which focuses on the development of English-language skills rather than subject-matter competence, students would be mainstreamed into classes where the language of instruction was only English. This program has been called by many educators "sink or swim." It fails to provide speakers of languages other than English with the social and academic benefits that primary-language use has been shown to provide (Cummins, 2000).

Ethnographic research on SEI programs conducted since implementation suggests serious negative consequences for students related to having access to curriculum, loss of confidence in their own academic abilities, and shame in seeking language support (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Asato, 2000; Monzó, 2003). In addition, although some proponents of the SEI approach have suggested that a rise in standardized scores indicates the success of Proposition 227, the complexity involved in understanding what standardized test scores represent for language-minority students and the inability of such tests to indicate anything about language learning clearly invalidate such claims (Butler, Orr, Gutiérrez, & Hakuta, 2000). Indeed, among researchers who

study language-minority communities, there is a strong agreement about the benefits of using the primary language: It can serve as a tool to learn academic content and English, and to counteract some of the identity conflicts that arise from growing up as an ethnic and linguistic minority (Cummins, 2000; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Although many language-minority parents may have been swayed by the slogan, “English for the Children,” into voting for the proposition out of fear that their children may not be learning English in bilingual programs, this voting pattern seems indicative of the lack of and/or inaccurate information that was generated by Ron Unz and the media about bilingual programs (Crawford, 2000; Krashen, 1996). Research with low-income immigrant families, by far the majority of families impacted by this proposition, is clear that parents want their children to be bilingual and to maintain their primary language and culture (Schechter, Sharken-Taboada, & Bayley, 1996). Krashen showed that when parents polled were asked about bilingual education in general or given its definition that included learning both the primary language *and* English, parents’ responses were favorable. Evidence of this is that even after the passage of Proposition 227, which severely reduced the number of bilingual programs, bilingual programs in California are still an important part of the educational context (Amaral, 2001). If anything, this shows the extent to which bilingualism is valued among immigrant families.

Proposition 227 was an initiative that specifically sought to eliminate bilingual education (García, 2000). Although it made provisions for parents to sign waivers that would allow children to continue to receive bilingual instruction, it did so only under limited conditions. These conditions included: (a) the child already knew English, (b) the child was over 10 years of age and school staff believed that another approach might be better suited to the student, or (c) school staff determined that the child had special needs that could be better met in an alternate program. These conditions severely limit parental choice, leaving the decision to a large extent to school staff. In addition, waivers need to be signed on an annual basis.

Upon passage of Proposition 227, the California State Department of Education (1998) immediately put out guidelines for school districts in response to the waiver provision in the law. These included (a) a directive for local governing boards to create specific guidelines for granting waivers unless the school principal and educational team determined that it should not be granted, (b) a directive to inform parents that children would be placed in an English-only class for at least 30 days before a waiver request could be acted upon, (c) a directive to provide parents with a written description and, if requested, an oral description of language programs, (d) a directive to provide a reason in writing for denials to waiver requests and a process of appeal to the governing board, and (e) a directive for principals to act upon any request for waiver within 20 days.

Two years after the implementation of Proposition 227, the *Bilingual Research Journal* published an important volume dedicated to studies on the early implementation of Proposition 227. These studies found that there was significant variation among school districts and even schools on the implementation of both the instructional component and the waiver component of the law. For example, Maxwell-Jolly (2000) reported on a study of seven school districts and schools, and concluded that there was important variation among school districts in the ways they went about implementing Proposition 227 and how they handled waivers. Specifically, one school district did not offer a waiver option, another district offered a waiver option in name only since the district actively discouraged parents from choosing that option, two districts chose to leave the decision up to the local schools, and three districts were in support of bilingual programs and worked cooperatively with schools to inform parents. Factors found to cause these differences in district responses included community values and beliefs regarding language of instruction, values and beliefs of district staff and school board, history of primary-language programs in the district, and the availability of bilingual education teachers. However, principals at schools were found to have an important influence on local implementation that did not always result in straightforward implementation of district guidelines. Principals were also influenced in making local decisions by teacher beliefs and relationship with the community, besides their own personal beliefs on primary-language instruction. This was especially the case at the schools in which the district supported local decisions. For example, Maxwell-Jolly found that at one school, the principal had a strong commitment to bilingual education and actively informed parents about waivers, whereas at another school, the principal believed children should all be taught in English and did not do anything to inform parents about their rights to sign waivers. Even in school districts that clearly laid out policy for schools to follow, principals may have an important impact on implementation. Maxwell-Jolly found that in schools that were significantly pro-bilingual, the principals with experience were able to lobby to maintain bilingual programs in Grades K–1, although the district had decided to drop bilingual programs altogether. On the contrary, in a similar school where the principal believed in bilingual programs but was new, district guidelines were followed and waivers were not offered.

In another study of other districts and their implementation efforts (García & Curry-Rodríguez, 2000), findings concurred with the study described above. Schools with a longstanding tradition of offering bilingual programs received district support for continuing their bilingual programs. Also, these schools were active in informing parents of their waiver rights. The strategies used by these districts included principal-led meetings with staff and parents; letters from the superintendent or district-level staff to each school principal requesting his or her urgent action to implement the parental waiver process; letters to parents translated into the appropriate language; and schoolwide

meetings with parents. In contrast, districts with limited bilingual education programs in their schools were more likely to convert to the new English-immersion model and made little, if any, effort to inform parents of their waiver rights.

In another study that focused primarily on teacher implementation at the classroom level, Stritikus & García (2000) found that teacher beliefs and experiences with bilingual education as well as the level of support they received from their school principals and districts had much to do with how they implemented Proposition 227. They found a number of teachers who indicated willfully disobeying the law in order to provide their students with the needed primary-language assistance. However, these teachers who were willing to stand up for their beliefs were found in schools and districts where they felt supported in their pro-bilingual stance. An interesting paradox is that although the failure of Proposition 227 as stated to provide for specific avenues for informing parents seems to be having the desired effect of making it difficult for parents to access information regarding waivers without school assistance, an unanticipated reality is that bilingual education is not as undesirable to parents or school personnel as proponents of the proposition assumed. The studies cited above show that indeed many school personnel are willing to take the necessary steps to provide parents with the needed information regarding waivers and ultimately to secure for their English language learner (ELL) students what they believe to be the best language option.

Many parents also have proven to be resourceful in seeking information and making their voices heard. Schirling, Contreras, and Ayala (2000) documented how parents from one school site were able to mobilize in large numbers to protest Proposition 227 at their school board meeting. Although these parents were unable to thwart the passing of Proposition 227, they were effective in securing the continuation of bilingual programs at their school. They documented that the school board had initially expected not to continue providing bilingual programs once Proposition 227 passed. However, upon seeing the large number (500) of vocal parents in favor of bilingual education, they were afraid of legal repercussions if they did not take the necessary steps to inform parents of their waiver rights. Indeed, although bilingual programs have been curtailed or abandoned in many schools, bilingual education is by no means a thing of the past in California.

As can be expected, the controversy over bilingual education in California has not ended since the law passed. Implementation issues did not just need examination in the years immediately following the passing of Proposition 227. Variation in the way the law has been interpreted and implemented across school districts, schools, and even classrooms persists.

In perhaps an extreme case, Oceanside Unified School District (OUSD) has been found in violation of almost all state and federal laws with respect to educational services for ELLs. Upon the passage of Proposition 227 the district

dismantled virtually all bilingual programs; implemented for a short time a no-Spanish policy directed at students, bilingual teachers, and parents; failed to notify parents of language-program options; and failed to grant waivers in accordance with district policy. Although there is some indication that since then OUSD has resolved its violations regarding informing parents of program options and providing and responding to waiver requests, this is still in question given that the district claims it has not received sufficient waiver requests in any one grade to form any bilingual classes (for more on the case of OUSD, see Barron, 2000; Diehl, 2000).

Although initial studies all dealt with how Proposition 227 was being implemented, including whether waivers were being granted, more recent research on the impact of Proposition 227 has tended to focus on classroom-level implementation and/or the impact of SEI on students. However, more research is needed that addresses whether the initial implementation kinks continue, particularly with respect to the granting of parental exception waivers. This article exams this issue during the 2001–2002 and 2002–2003 school years.

## **Method**

The data used in this paper was drawn from a larger ethnographic study examining how Latino immigrant children and parents negotiated new cultural practices and ideologies learned by children at school. The 2-year ethnography involved participant observation and interview methods with eight Latino families who had children in the neighborhood public elementary school.

### **The Community and the School**

The study took place in an urban, predominantly Latino immigrant community in the Los Angeles area. The eight Latino families' parents were immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala. However, many of their children were U.S. born. Spanish was the primary language of the homes among both parents and children in the eight families. However, all but the youngest of the children in these families used some English at home, and some of them were beginning to use more English than Spanish.

The public elementary school that the children of the eight families attended was 99% Latino, with a 100% student population receiving free or reduced lunch and with a majority of students classified as ELLs. The school was known throughout the district as having had one of the strongest transitional bilingual education programs and seemed an oasis of English-only during the post-227 years. Although the ethnography extended to the culture of the school, one fifth-grade class was targeted for the study. I chose a fifth-grade class because I was interested in selecting focal children who were old enough to be articulate about their experiences. I selected eight focal

children who were representative of the various levels of English-language proficiency in the class.

## Sources of Data and Collection

### *Participant observation*

I visited the school at least 2 times per week. My interactions there ranged from being in the office making copies of children's records, talking with teachers whom I knew in the hallways and in the teachers' lounge, and observing classrooms. Prior to beginning this study I had worked at this school site as a coordinator for student teachers and thus knew a number of new teachers at the school. However, it is a large school, enrolling over 1,700 students, and there were many more teachers whom I did not know. However, my familiarity with some teachers, the office staff, principal, bilingual coordinator, and some teaching assistants allowed me significant access at the school. I was treated as an insider. I was allowed inside the office where the staff worked, was given a code to make copies as needed, knew the cafeteria staff and could ask for snacks even when the cafeteria was closed (an allowance that even some teachers did not have), and had virtually open access to meetings, field trips, and school resources such as books. I attended an information session provided to parents related to their options for language of instruction and three bilingual council meetings in which the topics of discussion included language of instruction, waivers, and access to information.

The bulk of my school observations and interactions took place in one specific fifth-grade class; I went in each time I came to the school and observed an average of 3 days per week. I was usually engaged with students rather than the teacher during these visits, sitting next to students, talking to them informally, helping them with work, sometimes joining in and doing some of the worksheet assignments that they were required to do. I also made a point of eating with them at lunch or playing and hanging out with them at recess at least 3 times per week.

The eight children from this fifth-grade classroom were selected to be part of the family study. Selection took place after I had been observing in the classroom and interacting with the children in the classroom and at recess and lunch for 2 months. I spent most of my time with these eight children at school and followed them into their home contexts. I visited their families at home and participated in routine family tasks, including homework, dinner, play, and community outings. The family was the unit of analysis. I made over 200 visits with the eight families. Although one family was visited over 50 times, another was visited only 10 times due to its busy schedule. Field notes from home visits were written up after leaving the site. Field notes from school observations were often written in the classroom and contextualized after leaving the site.



## *Interviews*

At least one formal interview was conducted with each of the eight children, their parents, and their older siblings, separately. Since the study was broader in scope, the various interviews included a range of topics, but among these were language use, values and beliefs regarding language of instruction, knowledge of bilingual education and Proposition 227, and children's language-program placements. The interview protocol identified topics to explore rather than specific questions, in order to allow for a natural conversation to take place. In addition, since I got to know families quite well through home visits, interviews often took place spontaneously. Usually, I would arrive to a home visit to find that the children were staying a little later in school or had gone to run an errand with their older siblings or father; spontaneous interviews with parents took place in these types of situations. Conversations would often turn to issues about children's schooling. At these times, I would interrupt our conversation briefly and ask if I could audiotape it. Other times, I just took brief notes and later reconstructed conversations using these notes.

Interviews were also conducted with the classroom teacher, additional community members, and other teachers at the school. These interview protocols included topics such as instructional practices after implementation of Proposition 227, outreach and information provided to parents regarding waivers, and the school climate regarding bilingual education. These interviews were all recorded on audiotapes and later transcribed.

In addition, informal conversations took place frequently between teachers and myself as I ran into them at the school cafeteria or walking down the hallways. I had numerous extended conversations with the bilingual coordinator and other support personnel. The topics of these conversations were invariably related to the learning and teaching of ELLs under the new law and the school's policy regarding implementation.

## **Analysis**

Although the larger study is ethnography, I analyzed the data from home observations and interviews with family members through a case-study approach (Hamel, 1993). For the purposes of this article, a multiple case-study approach (Hamel) allowed me to make sense of family language values and beliefs. I aggregated themes on parent ideologies and practices related to language at home and at school, bilingualism, their understandings of Proposition 227 and language-program placements, as well as their interactions with the school related to language issues.

School field notes and interviews with school personnel were primarily related to instructional practices and school ideologies and were thus coded separately from family data. A grounded approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

was used that produced numerous themes that are not all discussed in this paper. Here I focus on themes taken from all the data that directly informed me about parents' choices for language of instruction, including avenues of information to parents and the school's approach to implementing Proposition 227. For this article I arranged findings into three sections. The first section discusses parents' beliefs about bilingual education and their program placements. The second section examines the way in which parents were provided information about language program options and shows that choice is not always an individual matter but impacted by available information. The third section describes specific ways in which parents' choices were not honored at the school.

### Parent Perceptions of Bilingual Education and Program Placements

All of the eight families' parents (I interviewed both mothers and fathers in seven families, and only a mother in the eighth family, for a total of 15 parents) expressed a high priority in having their children become bilingual. They wanted them to be fluent in English, especially as they moved up the grades. However, they were adamant about their children maintaining their Spanish. Parents expressed a desire for children to have a sense of identity that was rooted in their own countries of origin, and they believed that their ability to speak Spanish was tied to this sense of identity. In the following quote, one mother explains how she has tried to instill in her children the customs she brought with her from Mexico:

*Nosotros queremos que ellos aprendan lo de aquí pero también lo de allá [México]. Nosotros somos de allá, no de aquí. Luego cuando sean grandes, ellos van a decidir si van a seguir nuestras costumbres pero si las dejan por lo menos no será por falta de nosotros haberles enseñado. Yo les digo que aquí en la casa deben de hablar en español para que no se les olvide. Ya ve su primo casi ya no habla el español.*

[We want them to learn that things from here but also the things from there (Mexico). We are from there, not from here. Later when they are older, they are going to decide if they will follow our customs but if they leave them behind at least it won't be for lack of us teaching them. I tell them that here at home they should speak Spanish so that they won't forget it. You saw his cousin, he almost doesn't speak Spanish anymore.]

Similar concerns were expressed by another mother, who explained that she moved back to Mexico when her daughter, who was born in the United States, was 5 years old. "*Me la llevé otra vez para México. Yo quería que creciera con su familia, que aprendiera su lengua natal, que es el español* [I took her back with me to Mexico. I wanted her to grow up with her family, to learn her native tongue, which is Spanish]."

Members of a third family explained that although they knew some English, they purposely chose not to use it at home in order to encourage their children to speak more Spanish. “*Nosotros podemos defendernos bastante con el inglés. Pero no, no lo usamos aquí en la casa para que no se les vaya a olvidar a ellas el español* [We can defend ourselves a lot with English. But no, we don’t use it here at home so that they (daughters) won’t forget the Spanish].”

All of the parents also expressed some understanding of bilingual education based on personal experience with their children. They seemed to understand that children in the early grades would not be able to do well in school if they could not understand the language of instruction. Two of the parents shared their own experiences with having initially placed their children in an English-only program. They had felt at the time that their children were distraught by having to attend school where they could not understand the language and had removed them from the all-English program and placed them in a bilingual program. One of these mothers explains how she came to this conclusion:

*A mí me hubiera gustado ponerla en puro inglés y yo aquí le iba a enseñar el español. En la pre-escuela era todo en inglés y me gustaba porque le decían, “Esto es lápiz. Así se dice en inglés. O esto es tal cosa y así se dice.” Pero cuando entró al kinder ya le empezaron a hablar como si ella ya supiera bien el inglés y no. ¡Se trauma! No quería ir a la escuela y lloraba. Entonces yo fui y le pedí a la maestra que si me podía quedar a ver que estaba pasando con ella. Entonces vi que todo era en inglés y que le hacían preguntas en inglés y ella no decía nada, se quedaba callada por que no sabía lo que le estaban diciendo. Entonces yo y otras mamás fuimos y pedimos que nos cambiaran mejor al programa bilingüe.*

[I would have liked to place in English-only and I here was going to teach her Spanish. In preschool it was all in English and I liked it because they would tell her like this is a pencil and this is how you say it in English or this is such thing and this is how you say it, but when she entered kinder they started speaking to her as if she already spoke English well and no. She was traumatized! She didn’t want to go to school and she would cry. So I went and asked the teacher if I could stay to see what was happening with her. This I saw that everything was in English and they would ask her questions and she wouldn’t say anything, she would stay quiet because she didn’t know what they were telling her. So me and other mothers went and asked to be switched better to the bilingual program.]

Not surprisingly, given their strong desire and commitment to bilingual education, parents in the eight families believed that their children were still in the bilingual program. However, my examination of school records revealed that only half remained in the bilingual program after implementation of Proposition 227. The other four focal children had been placed in the SEI program. The school district's implementation approach had been to create two types of SEI program: one in which there was no use of the primary language allowed at all and a second type in which minimal use of the primary language was allowed for clarification or explanation purposes only. The parents who believed their children were in the school's bilingual program had mistakenly signed to have their children placed in the second type of immersion program. However, this should not be thought to resemble the bilingual program in place. Although some minimal use of the primary language was allowed in this second type of immersion program, all content, activities, books and other instructional resources, and discussions were to be in English. Only when it was clear that children did not understand could clarifications or explanations of content be provided in Spanish. This, however, was evidently not made clear to parents who confused this type of structured immersion program with the bilingual program in place prior to implementation of Proposition 227, which was still available for those families who signed waivers. The following excerpt taken from my field notes of a conversation with one mother reveals this misconception:

I asked the mother which language program her daughter was in. She responded, "*A ella siempre se la puso en bilingüe desde que empezó en la escuela.* [She was always placed in bilingual since she began school]." I then asked if they had any previous report cards handy, explaining that some of the other families had thought their children were in the bilingual program as well and that the language option would be indicated in the report cards. The focal child went quickly and brought me the report card that had been given to them at parent conferences the previous week. It indicated placement in Structured Immersion, Type 2. When I showed this to the mother she said she did not understand because she had put her in bilingual. The child said, "*Ah, por eso es que todo es en inglés . . . A mí no me enseñan nada en español* [Oh, that's why everything is in English. They don't teach me anything in Spanish]."

Parents did not recall that changes with respect to language of instruction had been made 2 years previously and were unfamiliar with the various language programs available.

Another important factor influencing parents' beliefs and activities related to language-program placement was their concern for their children's English development. Although all parents wanted their children to maintain their Spanish and had attempted to place their children in the bilingual program in elementary school, they believed that English fluency was necessary for school

achievement, and economic and social mobility. They pointed to their own difficulties with limited English proficiency as evidence of the need for English in this country.

Although they were very much in favor of bilingual education in the primary grades, they expected their children to have strong English skills by fifth grade and sometimes commented incredulously that their children still did not speak English fluently in fifth grade. As children in this study moved into middle school, they were placed in either beginning English as a Second Language (ESL), intermediate ESL, or advanced ESL before being mainstreamed into English. Parents as well as children were very concerned with children moving up these levels as quickly as possible. Although I was often concerned that children were not receiving sufficient language scaffolding at the middle school level in content-matter classes and that the ESL or English classes were primarily dealing with grammar, parents were insistent that the children be taking these classes in English for their English development, rather than being put in ESL classes, which are different from elementary-level bilingual programs. The following quotes from two parents reveal their concern for English fluency:

*Cuando iba mi niña a entrar en cuarto grado, ella no sabía nada de inglés y a mi me preocupa eso porque cuando llegue a la [name of the middle school, withheld for anonymity] va a tener que saber el inglés. Yo no quiero que la vayan a poner en esas classes para los que no saben el inglés [ESL].*

[When my daughter was going to enter fourth grade, she did not know any English and that worries me because when she gets to the (name of the middle school) she is going to have to know English. I don't want her to be placed in those classes for students who do not know English (ESL).]

*Yo he tenido suerte, gracias a Dios, que mis hijas a las dos les ha podido ir bien. Fijese, la mayor que estuvo en México hasta el tercer grado, llegó y si pudo aprender el inglés bien. Usted sabe que aquí sin el inglés no se puede salir adelante.*

[I have been lucky, thank God, that it has gone well for both my daughters. You see, the eldest who was in Mexico until third grade, arrived and was able to learn English well. You know that here without English you can't move forward.]

### The Contexts for Making “Choices”

Information about language programs at this school was difficult to access for most families. According to a number of teachers and support personnel, the administration discouraged teachers from discussing language options

with parents. Instead, the school held large information sessions on language-program options for each school track that were led by the coordinator of services for ELLs. There were three tracks at the school. Since the school enrolled over 1,700 students, each session was supposed to inform over 500 parents.

I attended the session for the track in which the families I worked with were invited. It was held in the school auditorium. The large room was very crowded. I took turns sitting and observing from different areas of the room. The information was provided in the form of a lecture supplemented by overheads. In the back, it was very difficult to hear, and the speaker was not visible in the crowd. I noted that toward the back, there were several side conversations going on between parents. They talked about what programs their other children had been in and how they were now doing academically, relying on personal experience or the experiences and information of other parents to make decisions about whether or not to ask for a waiver, rather than the information session that they could not adequately hear.

The overheads describing the different language programs were in Spanish, but they used technical language. They were presented in a table format that took me a few minutes to decipher. I had bumped into one family just before the session started and noted that the family sat up front in the second row of the auditorium. While visiting that family's home later that day, I asked the mother if she had understood the presentation. She said that she had, but as she explained her understanding of the presentation, it was evident that she had not quite understood. She explained to me that there were two language programs, the bilingual program and the English-only program. However, the information session had discussed that the school had four language-program options (two types of SEI program, the bilingual program, and mainstream classes) available.

There were other ways at the school to access information about the options. One way was through the administration, which was available usually when a new family attempted to enroll its children. However, at a parent council meeting it was discussed that many parents were complaining about not having received any information when they enrolled their children. Their children had been automatically placed in an English-immersion class. Since placing children in the bilingual program required a signed waiver from parents, when this waiver was not signed, children were automatically placed in the immersion program.

Another option was to make an appointment to speak to the coordinator of services for ELLs, who would take the time to explain in detail the language-program options available to families. However, the coordinator was only one person and unable to provide this individual attention to all the parents, if they had wanted it. In addition, most parents did not opt to have the information explained individually. Of the families I worked with, only two parents knew

the coordinator. Although they expressed great respect for her and said she had always been very helpful to them, they resisted going to the school to ask for assistance, believing it an imposition or not knowing that she was the person whom they should speak to about the matter. As mentioned previously, the parents in the study believed that their children were in the bilingual program, so they did not see any reason to make an appointment to clarify. Only after I explained to them that according to school records their children were not in the bilingual program, did parents have questions on the matter. However, given that their children had already been placed in this program for 2 years, parents did not seek to make changes at this time, explaining that in less than a year their children would be going into middle school, where the instruction was all in English.

### When Choice Is Denied

One of the major concerns heard among pro-bilingual teachers and support personnel at the school was that the new administrators who had taken over the same year that Proposition 227 passed were underhandedly trying to do away with the bilingual program. Prior to Proposition 227 and the change in administration, the school had been known as having one of the strongest bilingual education programs in the district. The principal at the time was a vocal advocate of bilingual programs, and the community was familiar with the benefits of bilingual education and strongly supported the bilingual program.

After Proposition 227, the number of bilingual classes had been significantly minimized, especially in the upper grades. There were discussions about having bilingual classes only in one of the tracks, which would create a situation in which those students would be segregated from non-waivered students. Numerous examples show evidence that parental choice regarding language options was minimal at this school. Rather, parents were either left without the option by not being provided adequate information regarding the availability of the bilingual program, as shown above. Even some measures were taken by others, such as the administration, to undermine teachers' efforts to implement a bilingual program for students whose parents had placed them in the bilingual program by signing the waiver. Some examples follow below.

One of the ways in which bilingual education was thwarted was through the mixing of students from various programs in the same class. This occurred in all of the upper-grade (Grade 4–5) classes, including the class that was observed. Children placed in the bilingual program as well as the immersion programs were placed in the same class. The bilingual coordinator said that this was not appropriate according to district guidelines, but the coordinator's attempts to address this situation were consistently ignored by the administration. The teacher in the fifth-grade class where I did most of my

observation was a new teacher in her first year of teaching and did not know how to provide a bilingual program to half the class and an SEI program to the other half of the class.

In addition, the entire school was requested by the administration to begin using the English version of Open Court, which is primarily a whole-class program, making it difficult to separate the class. As such, all materials, books, and assignments were in English. The teacher was flustered over how to manage the different language placements of students. She said she had been told by the administration “to just use English since the students were in fifth grade and they needed to leave that year knowing sufficient English to do well in the middle school where everything was in English.” Although the teacher started out as pro-bilingual with a bilingual credential, she was quickly immersed in the mindset of those she saw as her superiors and whom she believed were more experienced than she. Thus, her concern for English grew throughout the year, and she was heard scaffolding in Spanish only on two occasions.

Given the inappropriateness of placing students in different language programs in the same classes, the administration’s response was to have the teacher give parents the form for placing their children in the immersion program and “have them sign it.” The teacher explained that she was taken aback by this request, which she knew to be inappropriate and perhaps illegal, but she did not know whom to go to or what to do. She said that as a new teacher, she did not feel in a position to argue with the principal and thus did what she was told. Parents were given the form to sign during parent-teacher conferences.

Although students from different language programs were all mixed in the upper grades so that there were not any fully waived classes in those grade levels, this was not the case in the primary grades (Grades 1–3), where many of the classes formed were fully waived. However, there was a tremendous push even in these classes for the use of Open Court, at the time available only in English. One second-grade teacher explained that because she had refused to do her language arts curriculum in English, she was being forced to do her content-area instruction in English. In this waived class, which was to follow the bilingual program available, a transitional model, the class should have been doing all content-area instruction in the primary language, and the materials (books) should also have been in the primary language. At this level in the transitional program, art, physical education, music, and English Language Development were to be taught in English and all other content in Spanish. The teacher explained to me that she had been given math texts in English and that although she attempted to use them while scaffolding significantly in Spanish, the children were still having difficulty, particularly with more complex math tasks such as word problems. The teacher attempted to check out the same adopted math text in Spanish, which was stacked in the back of the bookroom, but she was denied access to these books.



## Discussion

In the previous section, I showed that various factors contributed to these parents' "choices" for language of instruction and that contextual factors, particularly the ways in which information was and was not provided to families and how parents' choices were weighed at this particular school, shaped the language experiences of the children.

Parents wanted bilingualism, English and Spanish, for their children. Although concerned about their children's development of English, given that they saw it as the means for economic and social mobility, they also saw a true value in Spanish maintenance, both to support their children's identity development and for practical educational benefits. All parents seemed to understand that if their children did not understand the language of instruction, they would not have access to the curriculum. As the children grew older, however, they expected that their children would know sufficient English to be able to access English curriculum, and they sought to have their children mainstreamed rather than placed in ESL classes at the middle and/or high school levels.

Of particular concern is that although parents seemed to have clear ideas of what they wanted for their children in terms of language of instruction in elementary school, they were not able to access the necessary information to make choices that reflected their interests. That half the families believed their children were placed in the bilingual program when they were not indicates a lack of communication between the school and community, which leads to the trampling of parental rights. Even when attempts were made to provide information to families regarding language-program options, these attempts were poorly designed, so parents did not leave information sessions with an accurate understanding of the material presented.

To make things worse, children who *were* placed in the bilingual program were not being provided the language scaffolding that the program (as implemented at the school) promised. This indicates a lack of respect toward the community on the part of the school, and this is unacceptable, particularly since such lack of respect and dismissal of parental rights is unlikely to occur in communities that have the cultural capital to make schools serve their interests. Although every community, including this one, has cultural capital, it is not always the kind of cultural capital needed to maneuver effectively within the educational system. This community had many resources, but knowledge of their rights regarding Proposition 227 and SEI waivers was not one of them.

Although administrative decisions at this school level seemed to support an anti-bilingual education agenda, it is important to place these findings in a broader context. The increasing push for schools to increase scores on standardized tests may have an important impact in the extent to which

administrators attempt to push an anti-bilingual agenda. These tests are in English and are given to all students regardless of their levels of English proficiency. California has created an Academic Profile Index (API) that uses results from standardized tests to rank schools. Schools with low API scores are expected to meet a target growth rate. Newspapers publish API rankings, subjecting schools and school districts to public scrutiny as well. Thus the lowest performing schools in California are confronted with the need to quickly raise test scores. That these schools are generally those with large numbers of ELLs should be expected, creating a no-win situation since these students are not likely to do well on tests that they cannot understand. Wright (2002) explored teachers' perceptions about high-stakes tests and the role they played at their school. Teachers indicated an overwhelming emphasis on raising the API score at their school. They discussed how incentives such as monetary rewards were being used to increase scores, and field trips were promised to classes with no absentee students on test days. They discussed that a tremendous amount of time and energy goes into preparing teachers and students for the test. The study reports that at that school the major reason for adopting Open Court, a scripted curriculum for reading, was because it claimed to raise test scores. In another study, Alamillo and Viramontes (2000) indicated that the push for increased standardized test scores was such that even in bilingual classes, teachers were being pushed to increase the use of English reading and writing skills and to transition students into mainstream English classes early.

An important note is that the attempted eradication of bilingual education through Proposition 227 should not be interpreted as an isolated political maneuver. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Asato (2000) point out that Proposition 227 was introduced on the heels of other anti-immigrant legislation, including the initiative that ended affirmative action in the University of California system and Proposition 187, which attempted to deny schooling and other social services to undocumented immigrants before it was ruled unconstitutional. In addition, implementation of Proposition 227 coincides with the new mandates to teach literacy through reductionist approaches using scripted curricula that are generally available primarily in English.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The findings of the present study have important policy implications. Although efforts toward improving school-community relations appear on the surface to be increasing, given discussion and research on the topic in education circles, the present study suggests that such efforts may only be an attempt to appease community organizations and/or to create the sense among voters that there is a real interest in serving the needs of working-class and immigrant communities. In this way, educational policy that is detrimental

to these communities, such as Proposition 227, can be perceived by the public as a real attempt to support academic achievement. This approach cloaks the underlying assumptions of deficiency that continues to be attributed to Latino communities. However, the present study reveals this deficiency perspective, which presumes that the language of the Latino community, Spanish, is inadequate to serve as a resource to students and that Latino parents' choices for language of instruction cannot be taken seriously.

Although the present study is based on one school, it is likely that the activities thwarting parental choice related to language of instruction occur in other schools serving similar communities. It points to the need for systematic policy that protects language-minority communities from school administrators and teachers who perceive members of the language-minority community as not sufficiently knowledgeable to make choices for their children's education, and/or not sufficiently powerful to make demands of schools and assure the protection of their rights and their children's rights. Such policy must include a provision of multiple opportunities for all parents to access information regarding language programs, based on sound theories of learning and instruction. For example, a special committee can be created at each school site that includes parents and bilingual teachers to organize and oversee the information dissemination process. This process can include creating a brochure, explaining the different language programs, that is written in the minority language and is particular to each school. It could be disseminated in a variety of ways, including having it prominently displayed in the office for parents to take, sending it out via mail, and passing it out at information sessions. It should be written in a way that could be understood by parents, rather than in technical jargon, and include brief references to research studies that explain bilingual education theory. Teachers should be trained and supported in providing this information to the parents of the children in their classes, since they are especially respected by parents and may have formed a relationship with them. Information sessions need to be prepared for a small audience so that asking and answering questions can be facilitated. Finally, there should be a system in place for parents of new students who enroll at different times of the school year to access this information in a face-to-face situation with teachers and other parents, rather than merely through written documents.

In addition, a system for checking how school practices related to appropriate handling of language issues as well as community-school relations must be established. Community agencies (not affiliated with schools) could be set up for these purposes to minimize conflicts of interest. As explained previously, in this school there was a person who was supposed to coordinate programs for ELLs, and supervise and support the implementation of Proposition 227. However, this person was also under the direction of the principal at the school and the district, and she felt conflicted over her ability to expose the ways in which implementation was being handled.

A practical implication of the present study is the need to create strong community organizations that focus on supporting parents' understandings of U.S. education systems, schooling practices, and strategies to maneuver within schools and have their rights respected. The work of Delgado-Gaitan (2001) with a parent-developed organization can be a good resource in creating programs that support these efforts. Although the present study tended to focus on teaching parents about how to interact with teachers and the types of activities rewarded in schools, a similar approach to building and drawing upon social networks can be used toward more transformative agendas. I would envision that such an organization would not only help parents to better manage interactions with school personnel, but also to understand laws and policies impacting their children and the role that schooling practices sometimes play in maintaining disparities in educational opportunities. Furthermore, these organizations could help parents with practical ways in which to become activists so that they can demand that their rights and those of their children be protected.

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