

Scapegoating Bilingual Education: Getting the Whole Story from the Trenches

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Abstract

This paper argues that the debate over bilingual education in the United States has been shortchanged, in that many prominent theorists, researchers, and public speakers, both proponents and opponents, have limited their arguments to which language of instruction is best for a child to learn and prosper. As such, there is general disregard for the harsh symbolic and material conditions that language teachers and their students are often forced to live and work within on a daily basis. After deconstructing the ideologies of both sides of the story of language instruction in the United States, the subsequent dialogues with three language teachers focus on the need to recognize and analyze the larger antagonistic economic, racial, and political relations that are reflected in this nation's schools. Instead of simply dismissing the potential of multilingual programs, as do the advocates of the English-only movement, the public needs to explore what ensures that so many of these progressive undertakings don't succeed.

The on-going debate over bilingual education in the United States has been limited in that many prominent theorists, researchers, and public speakers, both proponents and opponents, have focused their arguments on which language of instruction is best for a child to learn and prosper, the native tongue and/or English. Unfortunately, both sides of this fence far too frequently disregard the extremely harsh symbolic and material conditions that language teachers and their students are often forced to live and work within on a daily basis. Subsequent to an examination of the goals of mainstream opponent/proponent sides of the story of language instruction in the United States, I wish to emphasize a third space that clearly reveals that bilingual education does not take place in a vacuum and it, thus, cannot be

understood outside of a recognition and analysis of the larger antagonistic historical, economic, political, and social relations that are reflected in the classrooms and hallways of the nation's schools.

On the one hand, anti-bilingual advocates (e.g., Hirsch, 1996; Unz, 2001; U.S. English, Inc., 2001) have argued that in order to promote effective nationwide communications and meet the demands of modern technology, as well as bureaucratic and economic structures, the United States is compelled to use a linguistic standard. These political voices thus call for a mandatory English-only approach for all children throughout public schooling. At the forefront of this cause is Ron Unz (2001), the chairman of the national advocacy organization "English for the Children," and the originator of California's Proposition 227, which in 1998 effectively outlawed bilingual education in that state. As similar efforts led to the same result in Arizona, Unz is currently focusing on Colorado, New York, Massachusetts, and Oregon, again demanding that the United States replace bilingual education (which he often reduces to a monolithic entity and describes as "a disastrous experiment") with a one-year sheltered immersion program. As the "English for the Children" publicity pamphlet states:

Under this learning technique, youngsters not fluent in English are placed in a separate classroom in which they are taught English over a period of several months. Once they have become fluent in English, they are moved into regular classes.

When asked by a reporter (2001), "Won't immigrant kids fall behind in other subjects besides English if they aren't taught in their own languages?", Unz replied, "The vast majority of the students involved [in linguistic transition] enter school when they're just 5 or 6, and at that age, it takes just a few months to learn English" (p. 2). Without reference to any specific theory or research, he asserts that:

Human brains at a young age are designed or wired up for language acquisition. And that's what all the neurological science indicates. It's what every ordinary person in the world believes, but it's contrary to the theory of bilingual academics. (p. 2)

Echoing this sentiment, the "English for the Children" pamphlet states that "Learning a new language such as English is easier the younger the age of the child."

As no specific research literature is cited, it is unclear if Unz is attesting to the validity of Noam Chomsky's (1965) structuralist notion of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), or if he is laying claim to Steven Pinker's (1994) idea that language is a human instinct that is wired into the brain by evolution. Unz could also be referring to the most recent research that identifies FOXP2, a specific human gene that affects the brain circuitry and makes possible language and speech (Lai, Fisher, Hurst, Vargha-Khadem, & Monaco, 2001).

There is strong evidence to suggest that human beings are biologically predisposed with certain cognitive structures that facilitate language growth and logical thought. It is probable that, as Chomsky has argued, there is a language specific organ of the mind that provides an in-house abstract blueprint known as universal grammar, against which language acquirers can test hypotheses and develop surface language syntax. If Unz is situating himself in this Innatist school of thought, he neglects to elaborate on the details of the theory that informs his political motivations toward English-only. The fact that he doesn't offer up recognition that such psycholinguistic tools do not predispose humans to knowledge, communicative competence, paralinguistics, literacy, critical inquiry, or to learning in another language, is evidence of his lack of expertise in this area. It is thus not surprising that English-only advocates do not detail their explanations of how children actually acquire language or develop literacy skills, or how to assess such growth. Unz's diatribes do not differentiate speaking from reading and writing—two inter-related but very different abilities (Bartolome, 1998; Cummins, 1988; Edelsky, 1991).

Worlds apart from Unz's claim that "It's what every ordinary person in the world believes, but is contrary to the theory of bilingual academics," I find that it is very easy to introduce Innatist concepts to bilingual educators in my Applied Linguistics Graduate Studies/teacher education program, but very difficult to explain to the general population. Most people unknowingly subscribe to a behavioralistic stimulus-response-reward explanation of language development. That is, they readily believe that children learn language by mimicking their parents. In addition, in my experiences, the public easily falls prey to the logic that the more time on task (the more English that you speak) the more that one will learn. Within this realm, there is little patience for the counter-intuitive logic that quality education in the first language facilitates the growth of the target language. Unz contributes to this reluctance as he rejects the theory of common underlying proficiency, which allows for the transfer of cultural and linguistic capital of children of all ages from the first to the second language experience, including those that are five and six years of age, as they too are already deeply immersed in the linguistic and cultural codes and behaviors of the groups to which they belong (Au & Jordan, 1981; Cummins, 1979, 1981; Heath, 1983; Moll, Díaz, & Lopes, 1991). Unz simply dismisses the theory and research in this area as "false."

Insisting on focusing on very young children (indicative of the organization's title, "English for the Children"), Unz tells the public nothing about what to do with learners who are older than five or six years of age. In fact, by stating that "human brains at a young age are designed or wired up for language acquisition," it sounds as though he embraces the notion of the critical period.¹ The critical period hypothesis basically states that by puberty, lateralization of the brain takes place in which functions are assigned and

fixed to the left and right hemispheres. After this period, the theory proposes that learners no longer have access to the powerful neurolinguistic tools that they are endowed with (Bickerton, 1981; Lenneberg, 1967). Countering this position, researchers (Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978), measuring vocabulary development and comprehension, speech discrimination and production, syntax and sentence construction, and the recall of stories, showed that older learners were actually better than children in acquiring language and that the most productive period appears to be around 12–15 years of age. This should come as no surprise given that, unlike younger children, these more mature learners bring to the challenge more sophisticated cognitive styles and strategies, learning techniques, metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness, life experience, literacies, and knowledge.

Even if the critical period were valid (which I do not believe that it is), the theory suggests that cognitive damage is not severe until puberty. Is Unz thus working the numbers to his advantage so as to justify disregarding students' needs past the first grade, those who are already neurologically, culturally, and perhaps politically mature? If older learners do not have the same neurolinguistic tools as young children, then obviously they would have to rely on other cognitive abilities and develop alternative strategies to accomplish the task of language acquisition. So why would one embrace a one-size-fits-all pedagogy, a one-year Sheltered Immersion Program for everyone? If older learners are troubled, as Unz seems to suggest, then they would need special support services, which is the heart of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1974 Decision. In the guise of concern and protecting youth(s) who do not pick up the language with the ease that he predicts, Unz's pamphlet states, "It [the organization] will not throw children who can't speak English into regular classes where they would have to 'sink or swim.'" So, instead of supporting bilingual education's simultaneous development of knowledge and language and literacy skills, students will remain in a segregated holding tank in English.

Capitalizing on the public's general discontent with K–12 schools, proponents of English-only have worked tirelessly and effectively to scapegoat bilingual education, creating legal constraints on the daily lives of educators by ensuring that languages other than English (with the exception of "foreign language instruction") are stomped out of school life entirely.² They have also capitalized on public fears over national unity. For example, E. D. Hirsch Jr. (1988) insists that linguistic pluralism on a national level would bring about "cultural fragmentation, civil antagonism, illiteracy, and economic-technological ineffectualness" (p. 92). Echoing this sentiment, the U.S. English Foundation, Inc. (2001) believes "that a shared language provides a cultural guidepost that we must maintain for the sake of our country's unity, prosperity, and democracy" (p. 1). Beyond the ethnocentric assumption that literacy and economic and technological effectiveness can only take place in English (or that being multilingual could in any way be equated with being illiterate),

proponents of the English-only movement assume that the fundamental reason that the country potentially faces internal turmoil is because of the failure and/or unwillingness of linguistic minorities to assimilate. Not only does this dehistoricized position presuppose that the country has at some point been united, but its ideologues say nothing about a system within which people are relegated, and not by choice, to live on the margins of economic, social, and political power.

With no discussion or call for public understanding of the dialectic of domination and resistance, the general population is made to believe that balkanization of racial and ethnic groups in the United States is a choice and a real danger. As Arthur Schlesinger (1991) asserts in an article that informed his popular book *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*: “The cult of ethnicity exaggerates differences, intensifies resentments and antagonisms, drives ever deeper the awful wedges between races and nationalities. The end game is self-pity and self-ghettoization (p. 29).”

Such statements gravely misrepresent how subordinated groups within the racial/economic/cultural hierarchy in the United States survive by combating oppression, resisting the forces of domination, and transforming the status quo through group solidarity. Politicians, educators, and historians such as Schlesinger reduce the complexity of capitalist social relations, sexism, homophobia, and white supremacy to a simple response, ‘Why don’t you just join us?’ However, this superficial invitation is merely a victim-blaming mechanism that obfuscates the realities of discrimination and those responsible, consciously or not, for its perpetuation.

The leading voices of English-only say virtually nothing about the socially-sanctioned and systemic practices that discriminate against certain groups of people and that generate antagonistic social relations and economic exploitation and abuse. Nor is there adequate public concern for, or media coverage of, the fact that schools throughout the country remain profoundly racially segregated (Orfield, 2000). In addition, there is little to no discussion of the hidden agenda of conservative support for bilingual education that embraces improper implementation so as to ensure that racially subordinated children are segregated from privileged Whites. Only when put on the spot, during an interview, does Unz (2001) himself admit to this reality: “Although this is a touchy point, there does seem to be some anecdotal evidence that it’s sometimes true. . . . Under this analysis, bilingual education represents mandatory racial segregation, which makes it even stranger that it’s become part of liberal orthodoxy (p. 4).”

In the first half of his statement, Unz makes no effort to excoriate the racist implications of such actions. On the contrary, the logic in the second half of his response implies that simply because racists work to misuse a program (which is not designed to be about segregation during the entire

school day), then supporters should simply give up on it. That's the equivalent of saying, because so many corporations abuse democracy, then we should all abandon such a political process.

Unz's own racism can be clearly heard in his comment to the *Los Angeles Times* (1997) when he stated about his Jewish grandparents who were poor and emigrated to California in the 1920s and 30s: "They came to work and become successful . . . not to sit back and be a burden on those who were already here!" (p. 1). When asked by a reporter, "Isn't your crusade anti-immigrant?", Unz (2001) simply retorts, "That's just silly" (p. 1). Instead of seriously addressing such issues as xenophobia and white supremacy, the English-only coalition serves up myths of meritocracy and life in a melting pot where the patterns of a "common culture" and economic success miraculously emerge. However, this unnegotiated foundation of values, ethics, meaning, histories, linguistic standards, and representations is actually the imposition of a homogenizing social paradigm that severely limits the possibility of a participatory democracy within a pluralistic society.

Ironically, some anti-bilingual advocates, such as former President Ronald Reagan, insist that instruction in languages other than English is un-American. This paradoxical twist disregards that the Constitution of the United States protects linguistic pluralism, and that the U.S. Supreme Court's 1974 *Lau vs. Nichols* decision was intended to protect the rights of linguistic-minorities in public schools from existing and failing immersion programs. It also seems more unpatriotic for a democracy to exclude (or mark as 'foreign') languages that are now indigenous to the United States: the native tongues of Puerto Rico, Native America, Hawaiians, African Americans, and Mexican Americans.

In addition, as democracy and commonality are a contradiction in terms (i.e., democracy requires difference, participation, and dissent, rather than conformity through coercion), it is the proponents of English-only and common cultural literacy that in fact embrace social fragmentation. In other words, their academic canons and linguistic standards exclude by their very nature. Unz (1999b) himself is implicated in the fracturing of society with divisive journal article titles such as "New Yorkers Hate Bilingual Ed." In a cover story in *Commentary* (1999a), with the shock-value title of "California and the End of White America," Unz is able to maintain the existing and balkanizing fear in many Whites that they are being overrun, while at the same time scaring racially and ethnically diverse peoples with the "inevitability" that there will be White backlash against them in the form of "White Nationalism." He warns:

Our political leaders should approach these ethnic issues by reaffirming America's traditional support for immigration, but couple that with a return to the assimilative policies which America has emphasized in the past. Otherwise, whites as a group will inevitably

begin to display the same ethnic-minority-group politics as other minority groups, and this could break our nation. We face the choice of either supporting “the New American Melting Pot” or accepting “the Coming of White Nationalism.” (p. 1)

What is particularly interesting about this rhetorical strategy that calls for “assimilative policies” is that the mainstream that supports U.S. English-only is not the least bit interested in the assimilation of racially subordinated groups into their neighborhoods, places of work, educational institutions, clubs, and communities (i.e., in equal rights and universal access). As has been the case historically, under a xenophobic climate clouded with anti-immigrant sentiments (e.g., Proposition 187), the main concern of whites (and others who have bought into the purger) is with “unwelcomed outsiders” taking over of jobs and affordable housing, and flooding public schools and other social services.

The harsh reality is that beyond the concocted hype about usurping quality employment by “outsiders,” the job opportunities that are intended for migrant workers, the majority of immigrants, and the nation’s own down-trodden, consist of manual labor, cleaning crews, the monotony of the assembly-line, and farm jobs that require little to no English—as with the Bracero Program (1942–1964), through which more than 4 million Mexican farm laborers were “legally brought” into the United States to work the fields and orchards. In 1964, when the Bracero Program was finally dismantled, the U.S. Department of Labor officer heading the operation, Lee G. Williams, described it as “legalized slavery.”

In 2001, there is a new scramble by big business and politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, to “legalize” undocumented workers. According to government data, as cited on CNN.com (2001), “By 2008 the U.S. economy will have some 161 million jobs but only 154 million workers to fill them. The biggest need will be in the low-wage, low-skill jobs.”

In response, George W. Bush’s White House is looking into another guest worker program. Thus, being pro-immigrant, as Unz (2001) claims, “Nearly all the people involved in the effort [English-only] have a strong pro-immigrant background” (p. 1), does not necessarily mean being pro social justice.

As the founder and chairman of a Silicon Valley financial services software firm, Wall Street Analytics, and the 1994 GOP nominee for Governor of California, Unz’s (2001) insistence that an English-only approach will ensure “better jobs for their [linguistic-minority children’s] parents” (p. 3) does not seem to ring in solidarity with organized labors’ concerns with the systematic exploitation of workers, both documented and undocumented (CNN.com, 2001). Simply shifting to a one-year sink-or-swim Sheltered Immersion Program for what would now be “legal” workers (who will not be going to school as they will be working long hours) will not eradicate the problems of economic

abuse and subjugation. In fact, David Spener's (1999) work clearly reveals that U.S. educational policies and practices reflect an implicit economic need to socialize immigrants and members of oppressed groups to fill necessary, but undesirable, low-status jobs. Debunking the myth of meritocracy, Spener exposes how conservative programs, including English-only and transitional bilingual education (which is assimilationist subsequent to a student's transitioning—erasing one's primary identity to the extent that that is possible in order to take on another), provide limited access to language and learning and prevent most linguistic-minority children from attaining academic fluency in either their native language or in English. A one-year Sheltered Immersion Program is surely designed to fail in developing both fluency and literacy.

Taking away the native tongue while never really giving access to the discourse of power is a common practice in any colonial model of education (Fanon, 1967; Memmi, 1965). Such a deskilling process creates what I refer to as bridge people: people that are miseducated in a way that connects them to two worlds but works vigilantly to make certain that they belong to neither. This strategy effectively works to deny oppressed peoples access to the mainstream, while simultaneously taking away any tools that can be used to build the cultural solidarity necessary to resist and transform dominating forces. It is thus clear that assimilationist agendas are really about segregation. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concepts of "ambivalence" and "mimicry" shed light on how the myth of assimilation works.

In the operations of colonial discourses, Bhabha (1994) theorized a process of identity construction that was built on a constant ideological pulling by a central force from contrary directions in which the "other" (the colonized) is positioned as both alien and yet knowable, i.e., deviant and yet able to be assimilated. In order to keep the colonial subject at a necessary distance, unable to participate in the rights of full citizenship, stereotypes are used to dehumanize the oppressed, while benevolence and kind gestures are simultaneously superimposed to rehumanize them. To use a current example, Latino/as in the United States are represented as lazy, shiftless, violent, and unintelligent, dehumanized by the press as "illegal aliens" and "non-White hordes," and yet they are deemed by English-only advocates as worthy of good education, the "gift" of standard language skills, employment, and advancement. From this perspective of ambivalence, it begins to make sense why conservative politicians and organizations such as the U.S. English Foundation, Inc. (2000) make claims to disseminating "a vehicle of opportunity [English] for new Americans."

As an essential part of this process of maintaining ambivalence, colonizers need members of the subordinated classes that can speak the dominant tongue, and express its values and beliefs as superior and benevolent "gifts" (this is exemplified in the work of Richard Rodriguez, Dinesh D'Souza, and Jaime

Escalante who served as the honorary chairman of Proposition 227). Bhabha refers to these agents as “mimic men,” but adds (referring to the British in colonial India), “to be Anglicised is *emphatically* not to be English” (p. 87).

The position of flux that ambivalence invokes could lead to political resistance inside the ranks of the colonized. These “mimic men” (and women) can be a menace to the colonizers as they have access to the cultural capital and strategies used by the colonizer (language being just one part of this) to maintain the material and symbolic system of oppression. As John McLeod (2000) explains, “Hearing their language returning through the mouths of the colonized, the colonizers are faced with the *worrying threat of resemblance* between colonizer and colonized” (p. 55). Unlike the bridge people described earlier, these forces of resistance that are able to effectively navigate both worlds can work to transform the inhumane conditions that so many people are forced to live in on a daily basis.

Not surprisingly, anti-bilingual proponents tell the public virtually nothing about the horrific realities that so many children and young adults face in this discriminatory society and in the schools that reflect that larger social order. There is no sign of the one-in-five children—one-in-four racially subordinated youth—who grow up below the national poverty level (Collins, Hartman, & Sklar, 1999). Instead, when poverty is acknowledged, bilingual education is identified as one of the culprits. Unz (2000) states that bilingual education is a place where children “remain imprisoned” (p. 1) and thus is about “guaranteeing that few would ever gain the proficiency in English they need to get ahead in America” (p. 1). Making claims to English as the “language of success,” the “English for the Children” pamphlet adds, “Children who leave school without knowing how to read English, write English, and speak English are injured for life economically and socially.” The implication here is that a pedagogical format can in and of itself create high levels of national poverty. However, it is absolutely ridiculous to assume that theories of education cause racism, poverty, and all the other forms of social injustice. It is equally irresponsible to assume that illiteracy alone causes poverty, rather than the opposite way around—poverty contributes to illiteracy. This alternative perspective calls for a more in-depth macro-examination of the unequal distribution of wealth and power in the United States, far beyond severely limited micro-explanations (including those of some bilingual educators) that are based on whether or not students acquire a language.

Furthermore, Unz neglects to recognize the fact that even in the cases where English is one’s primary language, it does not guarantee economic, political, and integrative success. For example, Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, Chicano/as, African Americans, women, and the disabled have been speaking English for generations in this country, and yet the majority of the members of these groups still remain socially, economically, and politically subordinated. Thus, the issue is not simply about language. White supremacy,

sexism, heterosexism, classism, discrimination against persons with disabilities, and so on, play a much larger role in limiting one's access to social, economic, institutional, and legal power.

What is interesting is that the national "debates" over bilingual education have very little to do with language. The general public that Unz claims has such a profound grasp of language acquisition theory seems much more inclined to talk about the people that speak particular languages, rather than the languages that they speak. As witnessed in the controversy over Ebonics, the mainstream discourse has focused on images of African Americans rather than the historical, cultural, and linguistic developments of Black English. The popular debates thus have more to do with dominant racialized representations of the pros and cons of particular groups, especially Blacks and Latino/as. Such a focus disregards the multiplicity of other linguistically-diverse groups that are at the mercy of powerful anti-bilingual proponents. For example, the "English for the Children" publicity pamphlet poses the question, "What is bilingual education?" To which it eagerly responds, although "bilingual education" may mean many things in theory, in the overwhelming majority of American schools, "bilingual education" is actually Spanish-almost-only instruction.

The word "Spanish" is often strategically used as a code word for the largest, and demographically growing, political force in the country: Latino groups. This racialized marker creates fear among Whites that English-only advocates not only perpetuate, but manipulate to their advantage.

Politicians such as Unz rely on massive media coverage in order to shape public consciousness. When asked, "Where do you want your movement to go after these next states?" Unz (2001) responded, "New York is a political center and certainly the media center, so events there might help drive a national debate on the issue and nationalize the whole matter" (p. 5). His effective use of the media has won him an enormous amount of attention. In fact, the Harvard Graduate School of Education recently invited Unz to participate in an educational forum entitled "Bilingual Education: A Necessary Help or a Failed Hindrance?"

As the well-publicized anti-bilingual camp talks little about language acquisition in any edifying depth, it is no wonder that the general population is misinformed. Instead of looking to the plethora of scholarship in the area of language acquisition, and encouraging people to do so, Unz's (2001) anti-intellectual demeanor invoked the following response to a reporter's question of, "Do young children learn English faster?" (p. 2):

In fact, it seems to me that if you ask voters that question, I'd guess that probably about 98 percent would say that children learn faster than adults. The only people who would say otherwise are the ones who have read the bilingual textbooks. (p. 2)

Instead of looking to the experts in the area, and reviewing the research, Unz celebrates popular opinion. It is then easy to publicly dismiss bilingual education as having “no valid theoretical base and certainly no empirical base either,” as he did (2001) at the Lesley College Forum in Massachusetts. He argued that there has been “no single example anywhere in America, in thirty years, of a large-scale successful bilingual program.” When educators present from the town of Framingham, Massachusetts (with a population of 67,000 people, and 2,500 LEP students) showed that its bilingual programs were producing up to a 90% success rate on the state’s standardized tests in English, and over twice the results of California’s English-only approach, Unz simply rejected the data. Embodying academic dishonesty, he surely will not mention such successful results the next time he speaks and makes the very same claims to the total failure of bilingual education.

In order to counter this outright dismissal of any scholarship that supports multilingualism, the debate over bilingual education should not be left in the hands of a savvy politician who is strategically vying for misinformed populous clout through unanswered questions, theoretical ambiguities, and representational manipulations of what is best for children. As one Massachusetts teacher expressed at an Unz forum, “You must win by ignorance!” She also explained that the English-only petition was being dishonestly presented by paid solicitors: outside of a major department store, the representative was saying to passers by, “Please sign this petition, it will enhance bilingual education.” Of course, Unz claimed no knowledge of this, nor did he reveal concern.

There are a great many supporters of bilingual education who have made important contributions in the theory, research, and practice necessary to clearly establish multilingualism as the road to democracy. Many pro-bilingual academics have focused on the importance of understanding neuropsychological aspects of bilinguality, cognitive models of processing and storing information, assessment, code-switching, phonemic awareness, and conceptual representations of words (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1998; Bialystok, 1991; Wei, 2000). Some supportive researchers have concentrated their energies on the variety of programmatic approaches to bilingual education and the importance of community outreach efforts (e.g., Faltis & Hudelson, 1997; Genesee, 1994; Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997; Torres-Guzman, 1995). Other educators and organizations have set forth research agendas for improving schooling for language-minority children (e.g., National Research Council, 1997). In addition, pro-bilingual scholars have worked to humanize pedagogical and methodological considerations when teaching linguistically diverse students (e.g., Ovando & Collier, 1997; Perez & Torres-Guzman, 1995; Whitmore & Crowell, 1994).

It is certainly important for educators to understand and explore psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of language acquisition and cultural identity, and to infuse culturally responsive approaches that can accommodate the diversity of students in their classrooms. However, such explorations and responses to the problems of language instruction and learning in the United States also need to name and interrogate the economic, material, and ideological forces that create hunger, discrimination, internalized oppression, and resistance to learning.

The following dialogues with language teachers and descriptions of a school system illustrate how harsh material conditions, constant harassment of children and ESL/Bilingual faculty, exclusionary school activities, insufficient classroom materials, oppressive teacher attitudes, limited teacher professional development, faulty and unenforced policies, and weak leadership, play a significant and detrimental role in the everyday lives of linguistic-minority students in the city of Changeton.³ This abusive state of affairs also effectively neutralizes any potential of programs like bilingual education.

As a response to conservatives who purport that simply changing the language of instruction to English will mitigate any social problems and obstacles faced by disenfranchised students, both ESL and bilingual educators in Changeton will testify that this is simply not true. The appalling conditions faced by both types of language teachers and their children are by no means conducive to assimilation, let alone selective acculturation, and by no stretch of the imagination, to social transformation. At the same time, illustrating the conditions in Changeton reveals that well-intentioned studies of reading styles, for example, will not mitigate the antagonistic social relations within which reading takes place in public schools and the society at large.

It is important to note here that this is not an argument supporting monolingual education, that humanizing conditions would make an English-only pedagogical format work. Any humanizing pedagogy necessarily includes a student's primary language, a vehicle through which people culturally read the world around and within them. As such, developmental and two-way bilingual education programs are essential to democratizing public schooling in this country. However, the daunting question remains, what gets in their way?

Contextualizing the Site

At the time this research was initiated, the city of Changeton's estimated population was 74,449 White, 12,028 Black, 1,589 Asian/Pacific Islander, 5,860 Latino, 269 Native American, and 4,453 designated "Other." In addition, there were more women than men, over 13,000 people living in poverty, and the annual crimes committed in the city totaled 6,895, with 1,156 acts of violence. The student population in Changeton was as follows: Asian 3.3%, Black 35.3%, Latino 12.4%, Native American 0.5%, and White 48.6%. Additionally,

13.8% of the students were in special education, 6.9% were limited English proficient, and 28.5% of students' first language was not English. The incoming first-grade class was expected to be 48% racially diverse, with many bilingual, poor, and single-parent children.

The educational system in the city was comprised of fifteen elementary schools, four middle schools, and one high school. Adding to the system's status of probation with the state because of its inability to effectively desegregate the schools, Changeton had high annual "drop-out" rates (forced out rates), especially among racially subordinated, linguistically diverse, and low-income youth: 9.9% (or 296 students). The high school lost nearly a tenth of its population the year that the research began, and the "dropout" rate for ninth graders was estimated at 12% to 14%. The retention rate (those held back) in high school was 11.5%. The academic standings throughout Changeton's school system were also bleak: the percentage of high school seniors performing at grade-level goals in math was 25%, and in science, 27%. In addition, 13.5% of the students throughout the school system, overwhelmingly poor and racially subordinated boys and linguistic-minorities, were in special education.

Getting the Whole Story

Under pressure to respond to racial, social class, and linguistic segregation throughout the school district, a report entitled, "A Long-Range Voluntary Desegregation and Educational Equity Plan" for the Changeton Public Schools was commissioned by the city's School Committee and the interim superintendent, and assembled by the New England Desegregation Assistance Center (NEDAC) at Brown University.

When local citizens were interviewed by the research team about desegregation and a politics of difference, they mentioned such goals as: diversify the faculty and staff, have multicultural professional development, improve the conditions for culturally diverse children, allow parents access to policy decisions, and have a better distribution of the number and location of bilingual education programs "to avoid bilingual ghetto schools."

The use of the descriptor "ghetto schools" in this last statement points not only to the realities of linguistic ghettos where language-minority students are relegated and overly concentrated, but it also begs questions of the material conditions of such schools. The researchers not only documented the fact that there was a serious problem with discrimination and segregation in the Changeton Public School System, but they also discovered that the schools that were in the worst physical condition in the city "are also the most racially imbalanced." These dilapidated buildings also house most of the bilingual education programs where the overwhelming majority of linguistic-minority children reside during the school day.

These schools, in which up to 53% of the elementary students enrolled and were receiving free or reduced-cost lunch, were described by the desegregation planning team. Some of the most horrific details include:

1. Most of the windows are in extremely poor condition—opaque;
2. Students have had to move to other classes or wear coats and gloves;
3. They have a very small book collection;
4. Improvements to this facility would include repointing the bricks, re-roofing the entire building, and adding a smoke detection system;
5. The building needs painting throughout after significant plastering repairs take place;
6. The electrical system is inadequate;
7. Eliminate the constant infiltration of water into corner classrooms;
8. There is no ventilation system;
9. The playground is unsafe;
10. There are staff concerns regarding slightly elevated radon levels;
11. The faculty and students are unable to take full advantage of basic audiovisual instruction equipment because each classroom has just one duplex outlet near the classroom clock which leads to unsafe use of extension cords;
12. Lighting in the classroom is extremely poor and needs to be completely replaced . . . the lighting system is also unsafe due to occasional ballast failures . . . the pungent PCB-laden fumes from failed ballasts have led the fire department to call for evacuation of the school during the removal process;
13. Most classrooms contain exposed cast iron steam radiators . . . this creates a safety problem for children who sit nearby;
14. It lacks a gymnasium, an adequate library, and functional office space . . . most importantly there is no cafeteria; children eat lunches at their desks in the classroom;
15. Students eat their lunch in the basement within fifty feet of the lavatories and boiler room;
16. Replace the 100-year old chalkboards and the green shades;
17. The library also serves for music instruction;
18. The hot water/steam pipes and valves are showing deterioration to the point of imminent failure.

While the list goes on, this is enough to clearly depict the actual material conditions within which teachers and racially subordinated, linguistic-minority, and economically oppressed students work. With the state's educational reform bill, it was unclear as to why renovation of these schools had not been

undertaken, especially given that Changeton was eligible to apply for up to 90% reimbursement of the costs for new school construction and renovation projects if these costs were essential in implementing a comprehensive school desegregation program.

Not long after the first systemic review, a major research report, called the “Central Office Assessment, Reorganization Option and Recommendations,” was conducted and released in Changeton by the Williams Associates. The report consisted of interviews with 115 people at the central office—including all its administrators and support staff. In addition, all school principals and curriculum personnel were interviewed in small groups. The assessment team concluded that, in large part, Changeton school officials were “out of touch,” and that the “central office is not perceived as providing the leadership the system needs, but rather, as creating barriers and protecting turf.”

According to the researchers, “We received multiple disturbing reports that there are teachers in the system who believe some children can’t learn, who behave in ways that encourage truancy, and who discriminate against children of different races or socio-economic class.” They noted that, “In the process of creating system-wide values, some schools could not agree on a value which embraced, honored, and respected diversity.” In addition, “Interviewees felt there should be more of a team approach between special education, bilingual education, and regular education—a seamless continuum of services.” However, the report concluded that, “In general, the system does not seem to want to take on the underperformance issues which exist at every level.”

A subsequent report entitled, “Administrative Reorganization of the Central Office,” was compiled and released by the New England School Development Council (NESDC). Interviewing all Central Office Administrators and School Committee members, as well as two multi-hour focus group sessions with principals, observations, and an analysis of administrators’ logs, this study also sought to identify areas that were not being adequately addressed throughout the school system. The researchers concluded that the problems in Changeton’s schools were “systematic and organizational in nature.”

The consultants agreed that, “There needs to be a seamless flow of support services for all pupils and especially effective coordination between regular and bilingual programs.” The report also contended that the “overall culture of the system is not conducive to higher pupil achievement and elevating the overall performance level of this demographically diverse system.” NESDC insisted that:

School Committee members must be advocates for all of the city’s children and should create and foster an atmosphere which emphasizes what is best for the entire system without allegiances to specific wards. . . . This is especially important when one considers the demographic diversity evident in Changeton schools.

Teachers working with linguistically and culturally diverse students, both bilingual and ESL educators, are baring the brunt of these materially and symbolically oppressive conditions. The following testimonies are from three Changeton language teachers in the trenches. The two bilingual educators teach first grade Cape Verdean students in the same building. Susan is white, Irish, U.S. born, and married to a Cape Verdean man. Ally, who is brown skinned and of Cape Verdean descent, was born in the United States and raised here for most of her life. I then spoke with Liz, a white ESL teacher, to see if she were treated any differently in an English-only setting, in a separate building, than those in the bilingual education program.

Author: As bilingual educators, are you treated differently?

Susan: Most educators and staff talk down to all of us. We are typically referred to as “You bilinguals,” or “That’s the bilinguals.” The department office is in the basement of the administration building—that’s indicative of our status right there.

Author: Are you and your children openly excluded?

Susan: Sure, for example, the head of reading does not want to order materials for the bilingual classes. Students in the monolingual program receive handwriting books while my students get copies of the page to be done. These kinds of incidents of inequity and racism are numerous. I remember when the bilingual teachers were not invited to a party that was being held for the assistant principal. We were the only ones left out. When we are invited to such events, it is as if it is an act of charity. At one picnic for the sixth grade, the Cape Verdean teachers and their kids were assigned to pick up the trash.

Ally: When the Mayor’s wife asked if she could come to the school and sing for the children, only the second grade monolingual students were invited. When I found out about this injustice, I approached the vice principal. I was told that she thought that “they would not be able to handle this musical event.” They were “incredibly complicated” musical masterpieces such as Old MacDonald Had a Farm, and Bingo. These injustices just reaffirm for my students that they are not part of the dominant culture and that the power structure in the school really does not want them to become participating members—certainly not to transform it in any significant way.

Susan: We’ve had a lot of trouble with the lunch people. When our kids go through the line the lunch ladies won’t give them vegetables. On one occasion, I went down to the cafeteria and asked, “Is there a problem here with feeding all the kids?” The lunch lady responded, “The bilinguals don’t eat vegetables!” I demanded an explanation as

to how the service could possibly know what the kids do and don't eat when they are not at the table with them. I have to go down there all the time now with my kids.

Ally: This type of harassment is on-going. One time a little Cape Verdean boy forgot to get his milk when going through the line. When he returned, a lunch lady refused him access to the fridge. She said to him, "If you forgot your milk the first time, then tough luck, those are the rules!" As I was approaching this woman to reprimand her for such harsh behavior, I saw a young white boy, who had just returned to the line, being given a bag of potato chips by the very same person.

Author: How do you think that all of this stigma affects the kids?

Ally: The kids are young, but they feel it. They are treated as if they have a defect or something, that they are less than the other children in the mainstream. The mainstream teachers use very aggressive body language and talk loudly with our children—very different than with the other kids. Just recently, a black student, who was in the bilingual program, graduated and received a college scholarship. Teachers were mumbling under their breath that he probably got the award because he is black. These kinds of attitudes have a dramatic affect on the kids' self-esteem and confidence, on how they see themselves and learning—especially in learning English as a second language. Some block out the harsh treatment, but most can't.

Susan: The mainstream teachers don't even want to deal with the bilingual children that are in the mainstream now. If the child is a behavior problem they send him or her back to us and say that it has to be a language proficiency problem. I had a student who was mainstreamed and the teacher called me almost every day. "This child's behavior is outrageous!" she would say. Teachers like this never question the uninviting atmosphere in their classroom that may incite such behavior, or inspire a lack of English language usage. I try to explain this correlation to them, but I can never get through. There is an awful lot of prejudice in the school that we are in, and the overwhelming majority of teachers, including those in the bilingual program, don't stand up and challenge the oppressive acts that are taking place all around them. I say to my colleagues, "These are the things that need to be challenged, why are you people sitting back!" They often respond, "Because we don't want to make any waves." Well sometimes you have to! The more that I think about this the angrier I get. You begin to understand why some of these kids, especially the black kids, get up and are violent. It's like some kind of water torture and they incessantly drip on you. At a certain point you've got to let it go—explode! While this is happening all around

us, we have people saying, in the name of multiculturalism, “We are dressing up for character day at the end of the month and everybody has to be a character from their favorite book.” This one woman looks over at the bilingual teachers and says, “Well you colored people should dress up to be like the folks from Black history.” We just had Black History Month. And everyone just sits there.

Ally: All of this makes learning very difficult for children, especially when the subject is the language of the group that is treating you so poorly.

Faced with the conservative public contention that the problems that these two bilingual teachers describe has to do with the language of instruction, and that an English-only environment will lead to academic success and social harmony, it was important to dialogue with a white, English-as-a-second language teacher, working in the same school system, to see what she had to say about how she and her students are treated. Liz is an ESL teacher for low-incidence populations, grades one through six.

Author: What’s it like for ESL faculty in Changeton Public Schools?

Liz: We are in such a hostile environment. Number one, mainstream teachers don’t want our kids in their room, period! We have a kid from Angola, a second grader. He is a nice little boy who smiles and says “good morning and how are you” when he sees you. He is obviously really well brought up, from a good family—not that the school knows anything about his background. He’s black. Well, in the second grade there is no one who is tolerant, let alone enlightened. He ended up in this ESL classroom and the teacher has made no secret about the fact that she does not want him there. In order to get rid of him, she got him into a first-grade math class even though he can do math. She claims that he can’t. So he leaves her room for math. When the math teacher sent him back because the class was not an appropriate level, the teacher complained to the school principal. She’s doing anything that she can to get rid of this child. When I asked the principal if she was aware of what’s going on, she told me to go down and address the issue. I said, “No, it’s not my place!” When I petitioned a third time that the student was being mistreated, she said, “Yes, I understand what you are saying, but I’m telling you that the best thing for this kid is to keep him in the first grade math class.” Basically what she was saying is that this teacher is a problem, she is near retirement, and there’s nothing that I can do at this point. This was seen as the best solution for the kid because we cannot protect him from this teacher, or from teachers like her for that matter.

You should see how the kids are segregated in this school. With this one teacher you go into the classroom and there are two reading groups, the high reading group and the low reading group. There are no non-white students in the high reading group.

We had a kid come from Jamaica. They put him in the ESL program and I had a fit. I said, “You can’t take a kid from an English-speaking country and put him in an ESL track. I don’t care if he has an accent or speaks a dialect.” They did, they railroaded it through when the director was out sick. Why? Because he couldn’t read and no one wanted to teach him so they put him in ESL. Everybody in the school was saying that they couldn’t understand when the Jamaican child talks. He does speak differently from how you and I do, but if you have half a brain you can follow and detect language patterns to work from and on. The principal of the school that he was supposed to go to didn’t want him because, as she said, “We’ve had Jamaican kids before and they haven’t done well.” It’s like saying “so let’s solve the problem by bouncing him into ESL.” I went nuts and said, “Do you know that this is illegal!” But, they did it anyway. The first grade teacher that got him, she was young with all kinds of methods, but she is also racist like you wouldn’t believe. She made no attempt to use the kid’s background to enhance her own understanding and teaching, and would say things in the teacher lounge like, “Oh yaa mon, let’s light up some ghanga,” mocking a Jamaican accent and demonstrating stereotypical attitudes.

Author: What was the rest of the faculty’s reaction to her racist jokes?

Liz: They all laughed. The kid is very dark-skinned. If he were a little kid with a Scottish accent and red hair I just don’t think that people would react in the same way. The only big concern that the school community had with this kid, revealing their deep-seeded, coded racism, was his smell—a huge issue was made about his body odor.

Author: Aren’t there policies in place to protect against these kinds of injustices?

Liz: Rhetoric perhaps, but practice is a different ball game. Before, there was no written policy for assessing who of the low-incidence populations was going to go into the ESL classes. They were just selecting all the kids who didn’t speak English at home and putting them in ESL. Well a lot of the selected children can read and write as well as I can.

There is this one ESL teacher who is a Neanderthal, a real throw back. He took all the advanced courses for ESL teachers and learned absolutely nothing from them—in one ear and out the other. He is

still deciding whether or not it's true that you can't require the ESL students speak perfect, grammatically correct English before you mainstream them. We finally developed a policy for screening first graders for the ESL program. This same guy wasn't doing his job. He was supposed to test the kids in the fall and then again in the spring. He was testing them only in October for the following year's placement. The progress that they made during the year was totally discounted.

Author: Do these types of overt and more subtle forms of manipulation of policy and mandates happen a lot?

Liz: Definitely! Or they will act as if they are implementing progressive policy when it's obvious that such practices aren't intended to succeed. For example, the Haitian Bilingual Program was placed in an all white school in an attempt to appear on paper as though the school system was complying with the desegregation laws. They put this Haitian program in this all-white racist school. Imagine what it has been like for the Haitian kids and teachers. I mean, these black kids in a sea of white. There are no other minority people in the school except for this one health teacher. The non-white kids are isolated, and they are readily picked on by the mainstream students. Naturally, as anyone would, they react to such unwarranted abuse. Well guess what, the Haitian students are getting suspended from school all the time by an assistant principal who is a real S.O.B. Every week they have been getting suspended.

Author: Is there any collaboration between the ESL and the mainstream teachers?

Liz: We can't collaborate with mainstream teachers, they won't do it. They are not interested in what I do. They don't see that what we do has any relevance or application to what they do. Two colleagues of mine and I have offered, like five different times, a workshop on working with second language learners in your classroom. We have never had anybody, not a single person, interested in coming.

Author: Dedicated teachers must burn out.

Liz: Uggg! I've had such an awful, awful year. I can't stand to even go there anymore. I don't even eat lunch with the teachers. It's like turning over a rock and seeing what's underneath. I've seen what these people are really like, so have other ESL teachers, but they have a lot more invested here in terms of retirement and such.

Author: Are there other forms of professional development around diversity issues?

Liz: All of the people in my building have had this nationally known workshop—several times, where you learn not to pat an Asian student on the head (laughs). All of that is really pretty irrelevant if we are talking about racism. Unfortunately, teachers, especially those in the mainstream, have been doing what they've been doing for so long that they don't even recognize what their role is in reproducing the current system. They need to be made aware of it if we are going to effectively teach anything, especially a second language.

While these dialogues (supported by the audit reports), only represent the social realities of one city in the United States, they nonetheless beg bigger questions as to why so many of this country's racially subordinated and linguistic-minority youth(s) are not succeeding in public schools. Trying to name, understand, and address these complex issues is a far cry from the English-only rhetoric that bilingual education simply does not work. Such an understanding is also a needed extension to the more abstract psycholinguistic and methodological concerns of pro-bilingual scholars.

As witnessed in this school system and in the voices of language teachers, bilingual education does not take place in a vacuum and thus cannot be understood outside of a recognition and analysis of the larger political landscape and social antagonisms which are reflected in the classrooms and the hallways of this nation's schools. Unfortunately, the larger historical, ideological, economic, and material conditions out of which today's social and institutional crises have grown generally go unquestioned. It is precisely this lack of inquiry, analysis, and agency that a critical philosophy of language learning and teaching should work to reverse (Beykont, 1999; Crawford, 2000; Darder, Torres & Gutiérrez, 1997; Edelsky, 1991; Gee, 1996; Ovando & McLaren, 1999).

Educators, administrators, parents/care-givers, local organizations, businesses, and politicians (in dialogue with students) need to honestly address the harsh material conditions, incessant harassment of children and ESL/Bilingual teachers and staff, segregated school activities, limited classroom materials, teacher attitudes that belittle students, weak teacher professional development, poorly designed and unenforced policies, and indifferent leadership that dramatically disrupt the academic lives of linguistic-minority students on a daily basis. Instead of uncritically discarding the potential of programs like bilingual education—which come in multiple forms to meet the needs of children, this country needs to discover what ensures that such undertakings do not succeed. As the Changeton outside audits emphasized, and the language teachers corroborated, a good way to start transforming public education is with critical multicultural professional development for teachers, administrators, and staff.

However, substantive professional development requires support from strong leadership, which, as attested to in Changeton's sanctioned audits, is a major problem. The Williams Associates, hired to evaluate the Changeton Public Schools, revealed that, "There appears to be very little accountability in the system at any level." To counter this laissez faire attitude, the auditors suggested that:

Each individual should have job expectations, be held accountable for their performance, receive regular supervision and performance coaching. Failure to perform should be followed by the establishment of a professional improvement plan. Failure to improve on that plan results in the non-renewal of the contract.

But, where are the larger political voices that could enforce such goals and hold people accountable to public policies like desegregation and bilingual education?

Because the Changeton school system's top personnel had contracted consultants and were developing a desegregation plan (as they were on probation because of their inability to do so), the local Superintendent of Schools received a supportive letter from the state's Department of Education. In short, the letter read:

I [a Civil Rights specialist] would like to commend you. . . . In fact, because of Changeton's cooperation and the excellent progress you have made to date is why the State Department of Education did not see any reason to formally cite you this past spring for non-compliance with the law.

With the superficial support of the state, it is no surprise that efforts to desegregate Changeton schools has languished. In addition, state and federal support cannot just be in the form of funding. Leadership needs to be watching where the money goes, how it is used (or misused), so as to be able to hold people accountable.

The most significant place to begin these debates over bilingual education is to inform the general population of the spectrum of issues at hand when dealing with language acquisition and teaching. People need full access to information about these complex issues, as well as the necessary encouragement to explore them in depth. Until politicians such as Ron Unz back up their cause with elaborated theory and research, they should not hold center stage in this debate over language policies. Unz has every right to be publicly vocal. But, putting him at center stage in this effort to find out what is best for linguistic-minority children is like letting a bilingual teacher be the keynote speaker at an aerodynamic engineering conference on human safety and the flight capabilities of a jumbo jet. Instead, as Susan Dicker (1996) argues, "Together we must turn the tide of hatred around, and show those

outside our profession that the ills of society will not be solved by making the already challenging lives of immigrants and language minorities even more difficult and devoid of human rights and dignity” (p. 2).

Until public awareness comes to fruition, bilingual education will continue to be scapegoated as contributing in large part to linguistic-minority students’ lack of academic and economic success. Unz is right when he stated at the Lesley College forum that the theory of bilingual education “just doesn’t work in practical reality. . . . It could be that these programs do work under ideal controlled laboratory conditions.” Given this logic, should we not focus our energies on democratizing and transforming “practical reality,” rather than accommodate the current exclusionary, discriminatory, and abusive public practices that neutralize the potential of such programs as bilingual education? What is key to our failure as a nation in achieving quality and effective education, democracy, social justice, and unity in diversity, is how we systematically deny so many people’s language, culture, and humanity.

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Endnotes

¹ There is evidence of a critical period when it comes to the psychomotor skills and pronunciation (Fledge, 1987; Thompson, 1991). But accent does not play a role in one's intellectual abilities; that is, unless one resides in a discriminatory society like the United States where accents act as stigmatized markers of particular social identities. These markers invoke public consciousness about what values, beliefs, and capabilities people have. What's interesting about the interview with Unz (2001), is that the reporter asked, with an obvious anti-bilingual bias (the use of "dragging out"), "Does bilingual education's dragging out of the number of years a student is being taught in Spanish, for example, have an impact on the student's accent" (p. 3). Why should an accent make any difference? No one has ever questioned Henry Kissinger's national loyalty or intelligence, even though people should, given his track record with U.S. foreign policy. But, the crucial difference is that his accent is European/white. This reporter targets specifically a Spanish accent, indicative of a racialized debate. One question what Colin Powell's position would be if he were marked by a noticeable Jamaican accent. These types of antagonistic social relations initiated by marked accents should be part of the national conversation.

² It is curious that so many mainstream politicians concerned with public education work so hard to eradicate multilingualism among racially and economically oppressed students, while simultaneously working to make certain that the middle-class is able to speak French, Japanese, German, etc. In addition, as Macedo (2000) points out, there is conservative silence when it comes to the well-documented failure of these “foreign” language classes.

³ As agreed in the research contract with the school system, to protect the identity of the city, the name “Changeton” is a pseudonym. All the names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants in this dialogue. As far as the methodology of this research is concerned, the Changeton school district has been creating a system-wide multicultural education program to combat the racism, cultural strife, and exclusionary practices that plague the local public schools. A volunteer group, referring to itself as the Multicultural Central Steering Committee (the CSC for short), had been established in order to shape and direct what the seventeen members hope will provide a foundation for working toward what they describe as “the affirmation of diversity through educational equity and social justice.” Their work has focused on professional development, curriculum and pedagogy, staff diversification, and community outreach. I was contracted by the school system to document, from the very beginning, the efforts of the CSC, and I did so for seven years.

In terms of the more longitudinal analysis, in order to see if the first three years of the CSC’s multicultural efforts were having a positive impact on academic success and community harmony, external audit reports of the Changeton school system were collected and analyzed. In addition, a group of Changeton teachers were solicited for input and insight. The ESL/bilingual teachers in this longitudinal analysis were randomly chosen—they were the only students from Changeton who were matriculated in a local ESL/Bilingual Graduate Studies Program at the time. All three of the participants agreed to partake in the informal, open-ended dialogues so long as their names remained anonymous—out of fear of reprisals from colleagues and the administration.