

# “I Used To Know That”: What Happens When Reform Gets Through The Classroom Door

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## Abstract

This article places Proposition 227 in the context of the policy web formed by a series of legislative acts and policies at the national, state, and local school board levels; federal judicial decisions; state and local elections; changes in the local school district board and superintendent. We draw on our ongoing ethnographic study of a fifth-grade classroom to illustrate what happens when policies get through the classroom door. Through this analysis, we illustrate how policies constrained the bilingual teacher’s ability to make learning opportunities available to her linguistically diverse students in 1998-99.

“I used to know that.” This comment by José, a fifth-grade student, provides a local context for the discussion of what happens in the classroom when reforms *get through the classroom door*. While students in almost any classroom might make this comment, this particular child was referring to what he once ‘knew’ in Spanish and what he believes he no longer ‘knows’ now that he is in a monolingual English environment in the post-Proposition 227 world. In this paper, we present a telling case (Mitchell, 1984) of the ways in which the policy context, in and outside of the classroom, shaped the opportunities for teaching, and in turn learning, for José’s teacher and her linguistically and culturally diverse students in the fall of 1998. This case is designed to illustrate in a principled way how policies become intertextually (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993) tied across time, actors, and policy contexts, creating a larger environmental press (Chrispeels, 1997). Through this analysis, we show how a series of policies at the national, state, district, and school level, not a single policy (i.e., Proposition 227), formed an intertextual web that was, and continues to be, consequential for José’s teacher and her students.

Our goal in taking this approach is to identify ways in which policies are consequential for the lived experiences of teachers and students in classrooms, in ways anticipated or not. The complex web of policies that converged in the beginning of the 1998 school year (post-Proposition 227) established an environmental press for potential change. We use the concept of *potential change* for three reasons. First, Stritikus & García (2000, this issue) showed

that districts and individual teachers have differentially taken up the implementation of Proposition 227. Second, policy tracing research has shown that policies are often intertextually tied; that is, one builds on or is influenced by others previously put into place (Chrispeels, 1997; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). Third, Barr and Dreeben (1983) have argued that decisions at one point in a district are products of the actions of people at one level of a school system, and along with time, become resources that people at other levels use to accomplish their work. They argue that from this perspective, the classroom is the *hand that the teacher is dealt*; that is, who she/he will teach, what resources will be available to the teacher, and what is viewed as possible to be done are the results of decisions of people at differing levels of a school system, not merely a decision by the teacher.

### **The Historical and Local Policy Contexts: Creating an Environmental Press**

To understand what brought about the changes we identified, we must examine the ways in which the actions of actors in the policy contexts shaped the learning opportunities for José and his peers. The fact that the policy actions in José's district varied from those in surrounding districts suggested the need to begin our analysis by reconstructing the historical web of intertextual ties across a range of policies, rather than focusing solely on Proposition 227. The analyses presented in this section are intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive, examples of elements of the policy web in which José's teacher found herself in 1998. We view the nexus of these policies as constituting a telling case, one that makes visible both theoretical issues for study of policy impact and consequences for practice.

To illustrate this process and how it influenced the policy context in which José and his teacher found themselves, we present a series of patterns that shaped what José and his peers had access to. These patterns included shifts across time in policies and practices at the federal, state, and local levels. To identify the patterns of policy shift that were consequential, we drew on ethnographic research data over a 10-year period in two school districts on the central coast of California. Then, using a backward and forward mapping approach (Chrispeels, 1997; Green & Meyer, 1991; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; Tuyay, Floriani, Yeager, Dixon, & Green, 1995), we examined policies for references to other policies or for convergence with observed impact on the local classroom settings in 1998. Through this approach, we identified five types of policy activity (Chrispeels, 1997; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987) that led to changes in bilingual education at the local classroom level. These included court cases shaping policy directions, federal and state legislation, local and state school board decisions, election results, and national reports. Each of these policies was the result of actions of groups of policy actors across potentially systems. The intertextual web of policies, then, can

be viewed as the result of policy actors' interpretations of past policies and what they saw as socially significant to their particular context (cf., Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993).

Two key reform national reports, *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and *Becoming A Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scoot, & Wilkinson, 1984), crystallized the message that we are a "nation at risk," a message that has been, and continues to be, a moving force in the dominant discourse related to school access and national character. These reports make visible the "tone" of the discourse (Gee, 1990) and ideological context (Fairclough, 1992) surrounding education in general, and bilingual education in particular. The state and local policy decisions which shaped what José's teacher could do in September of 1998 were made within this widely believed negative discourse of risk.

The backward mapping process (Green & Meyer, 1991) led us to the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court. This decision set the stage for civil rights actions in relationship to schools and still serves as an intertextual base for legislation and other forms of policy activity today. This ruling is viewed as a landmark ruling that declared that "compulsory racial school segregation and its principle of 'separate but equal' was unconstitutional" (Applewhite, 1979, p. 3). It set the stage for three key pieces of federal legislation in the 1960s: the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, Title VII), and the 1968 Bilingual Education Act. The Civil Rights Act served to formalize in law the Supreme Court ruling and provided the basis for future legislation. The 1965 ESEA, Title VII Act "legitimized federal intervention in public schools—an intervention that was unknown prior to passage of ESEA . . . [and] committed the federal government to assume responsibility for the education of linguistically different children" (Matute-Bianchi, 1979, p. 18). The 1968 Bilingual Education Act "initiated federal responsibility for assuring equal educational opportunity for linguistically different children and defending the legitimacy of their native language and culture in the school" (Matute-Bianchi, 1979, p. 19).<sup>1</sup> Since these policies were first enacted, there have been shifts in policy related to shifts in elections that have placed more responsibility for implementation and monitoring at the state and local levels, changing the range of possibilities for both policy actors and local appeals. The impact of similar shifts will be seen in later sections.

The need to consider intertextual ties as interactionally accomplished, recognized, and socially significant, proposed by Bloome and his colleagues, (Bloome & Bailey, 1992; Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993) can be seen further in two court cases related to bilingual education, one historical and one directly related to 227. The first, *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), is the landmark court case that "established the notion that equality of educational opportunity does not mean equality of treatment" (Matute-Bianchi, 1979, p. 12). This case was based on Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Applewhite, 1979). Federal and state court cases such as *Lau v. Nichols* often contain clearly visible

intertextual references to other cases and laws, suggesting that to understand any given case, it is necessary to consider the texts of other cases. Taken into the policy and practice world, this principle of practice in the legal realm makes a strong case for researching intertextual relationships among policies. Tracing these relationships lays a foundation for understanding why an individual act or policy cannot be viewed out of context and why the actions of those constructing, and impacted by, the policy or change in policy need to be examined.

A second court action makes “the case” for such links in relationship to issues surrounding Proposition 227. In her article on *Valerie G. v. Wilson* (Escobedo, 2000), staff attorney for Multicultural Education, Training and Advocacy (META) Deborah Escobedo, reports on the chain of actions and actors involved in the case against 227. She described the courts’ response to the request for an injunction against the implementation of Proposition 227, reporting that the court:

expressed its reluctance to ‘impose on the people of California its view of which is the better educational policy.’ The court further concluded that until the ‘State adopts a regulatory scheme and school districts actually implement programs pursuant to the initiative, it is unlikely that this court will have the facts necessary to resolve plaintiffs claims under the EEOA [1974]. . .’ (Escobedo, 2000, p. 38)

The inscription of this act led us to locate the updated version of EEOA (1999, January 5) in the section of the U.S. Code entitled, *Denial of equal opportunity prohibited* (Escobedo, 2000). This section states that:

No State shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, [through] the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs. (p. 39)

Judge Legge’s (the judge in *Valeria G. v. Wilson*, 1999) actions and his ruling make visible how he viewed the intertextual web of different types of policies and practices that he needed to have in place in order to make his ruling. His ruling further shows that there are other issues involved in determining adherence to the U.S. Code and whether or not Proposition 227 constitutes a denial of access.

While other legislation and judicial rulings could have been considered, these key policies and court cases were central to the policy web that resulted in José’s previous educational experiences in bilingual classrooms. They provided the vertical (i.e., historical), intertextual traces that were still visible even in the face of changing state legislation such as Proposition 227 and local district policies (Fairclough, 1992; Kristeva, 1986). This web also includes legislation related to teacher credentialing, school funding, class size, and length of school day and year, among other aspects, which have not been

changed directly through Proposition 227, but are part of the environmental press created by the policy web. As this mapping approach shows, no single policy shapes practice or even the potential for practice; rather, a complex web and set of actors shape, interpret, and oversee policy-in-action.

Since Proposition 227 was the pivotal or key piece of legislation related to our analysis of policies getting through the classroom door, we will not consider further particular policies related to bilingual education (see also Evertson & Murphy, 1992). Rather, we shift our discussion from specific policies to identifying ways in which particular relationships among and between the actions within the state and local policy arena were consequential in contributing to the environmental press. To explore how the local was influenced by, and in turn influenced, the webs of policy forming the environmental press on José and his teacher, we shifted our focus to the state election context and local school board actions. For this analysis, we began by examining how changes in the state superintendent of education and local school board membership shaped particular literacy reform policies related to textbook adoption and instruction, an issue that surfaced as important during our 10-year ethnographic research project.

A review of documents, videotapes, and newspaper articles showed that reform of literacy instruction was a dominant theme which co-occurred with the assault on bilingual education. While a full discussion of educational reform related to literacy is beyond the scope of this article, a recent National Research Council Report (Snow, Barns, & Griffen, 1998) demonstrates that this is still an ongoing issue at the national level, one that may potentially create an even greater environmental and policy press on teachers and students in this and other districts.

To understand how the policies about literacy instruction relate to the issue of bilingual education, and how they served to limit further what the teacher could offer to her students instructionally, we needed to examine another court case. This court case, *State Board of Education v. Honig* (1993), had the effect of shifting the authority for deciding on the educational policies from the California State superintendent of public instruction (the only elected education official) to the state board of education (a body appointed by the governor for 12-year terms). Following Chrispeels (1997), we began our exploration by locating the case within the larger political context. Between 1992 and 1998, the state superintendents of education, Honig and Easton, were from one political party, and the governor (Wilson) was from another. Further, during this period, the governor appointed new members to the State Board of Education who represented his ideological position.

By examining who was superintendent under which governor and the political affiliations of appointees to the State Board of Education, we were able to identify reasons for the period of conflict. Through this analysis, we were able to understand how the state's political structure led to the challenge to the state superintendent of public instruction's authority represented by this case. The state court's ruling that the authority for setting educational

policy rested with the State Board of Education (*State Board of Education v. Honig*, 1993) resulted in a change in previous practice within the state, the State Board of Education taking a more active role in the adoption of standards and materials. For example, the Board ignored the recommendations of the Reading Textbook Review Panel and constructed a new list, removing particular materials that had an ideology this board did not value. As a result, state funds could no longer be used by school districts to purchase particular reading materials, although these materials could be purchased through other funding sources. This analysis made visible that shifts in who controls what policy decisions are consequential in terms of what resources are made available to teachers and students, who has access to these materials, and what is available to be known (See also Ogbu, 1978).

A second key influence, identified through these analyses and through our observations of the policy actors across contexts, was a shift in the relationship between curriculum frameworks and curriculum standards. To examine further why the change in relationships became a significant force within the environmental press in 1998, we undertook a contrastive analysis of the relationship between standards and frameworks across time (Green, Dixon & Zaharlick, in press). This analysis enabled us to locate when standards and frameworks became critical players in re-shaping instructional practices and how changes in these policy documents impacted what and how teachers taught at different periods of time.

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, California had a series of state documents that emphasized individual skills (e.g., one for reading, one for writing, and one for oral language) that guided the instructional approach that teachers were to use (Levin, personal communication 1999). After searching traditional sources for a written history of the framework-standard relationship in California, we contacted Diane Levin of the California State Department of Education, who provided information on this. She stated that:

Prior to the 1987 framework, California published separate curriculum frameworks and handbooks for reading and for writing. The 1987 framework, however, embraced reading and writing and oral language skills all under one language arts umbrella, emphasizing a more coherent instructional approach. (Levin, personal communication 1999)

The 1987 framework remained in place until the summer of 1999, with a draft of the new framework being available in late 1998.

In 1985, the State instituted the *first* standards document for English Language Arts. This curriculum document created a statement about what to teach. The 1985 standards remained in place until 1991, at which time they were replaced. In turn, the 1991 standards were then replaced by a new standards document in 1997. When these documents were juxtaposed, and the issue of their relationship examined, what became evident was that, prior to the most recent standards and framework adoptions, frameworks focused on *how to*

*teach* and the standards on *what to teach*. However, the most recent adoptions bring these two sets of policy documents into alignment by shifting the emphasis in the framework so that it now matches the standards. In their present form, these standards and the aligned framework have the effect of limiting what can/is likely to be taught.

Further, since 1997, the process of aligning tests with the standards has been undertaken to build an accountability approach based on standardized tests alone. This alignment is likely to constrain what can be taught even more, given the movement at the state level to provide comparative performance indicators by school and district. When state funding for resources and school programs was considered (policy inducements), the pattern of limitation was even clearer. For example, the state has moved to identify a group of approved inservice providers for use of certain state funds, where in the past, the districts could choose their own. Thus, through a web of policy decisions, the state has shaped an environmental press that, along with English Only, has shifted the opportunities for teaching and learning for José and his teacher.

### From Federal and State to the Local Context

These state actions only tell part of the story. The local context of policy actions must be considered to understand the local and situated environmental press that explicitly constrained how José's teacher was expected and required to take up the new policies. Our analysis of the state and national context made visible ways in which the actions of members of the local school board were supported by patterns of policy activity at the state and national level. In the analyses that follow, we show how local actors took action in particular ways that produced a series of policy decisions that limited and constrained what the teachers had available and how they were to implement the *required* changes. These actions heightened the nature of the environmental press in ways that insured that the changes valued by the local board of education would get through the classroom door.

Through our sustaining relationship and ethnographic research we observed three major periods of policy change in the local district. The first period encompassed 1990-1994. During this period, a new superintendent, hired from outside of the state, encouraged a site-based management approach to school administration that was taken up by José's principal. However, this superintendent, with board approval, also decided to create a middle school in place of the junior high school that the district had in place. This decision changed José's school from a K-6 school to a K-5 school, requiring teachers in the sixth grade to move to another school or to change grade levels.

During this time, the CLAS (California Learning Assessment System) was also administered for the first time, and those with sufficient English took this test. José's school ranked as one of three in the district above state norms. At the same time, the CTBS (California Test of Basic Skills) was given and the school ranked well below the state norms. This pattern is similar to the

one reported in Chrispeels (1997). The difference in the test performance reported by Chrispeels, and experienced by the students at this school, reflects a difference in curriculum focus. José's school had a clear focus on writing and reading for interpretation, skills assessed by CLAS. CLAS also involved students in reading and discussing texts before writing about them and responding to test questions. In contrast, CTBS is a test of basic skills, requiring responses to multiple choice items. The tests, therefore, assessed a narrower range of academic content and skills and represented different models of learning and curriculum (Chrispeels, 1997).

The elimination of CLAS occurred simultaneously with the selection of a new district superintendent, one who had a long history within California. With the demise of CLAS, the school's strengths were no longer visible to the school board, district administrators and community, an important point to consider when we take into account that the new superintendent reviewed the performance of the schools in the district. Thus the "death" of CLAS in 1994 had great consequences for teachers, students, and the administrator at the school site, since the standardized test now became the sole measure of school performance. This became even more significant in the next phase as test scores began to be more prominently displayed in the newspapers and comparisons of schools across the state became the norm.

With the selection of the new superintendent in 1994, a second phase of policy activity became visible. This phase lasted until a shift in the composition of the school board occurred in November, 1996, with the election of three new members. During the 1994-1996 period, two advisory committees were formed. One, composed of teachers, community members, and administrators was charged with undertaking a review of textbooks and making recommendations on a new adoption for reading. The second advisory committee (BEST—The Bilingual Education Study Team), also composed of teachers, community members, and administrators, was charged with the task of reviewing the bilingual education program and recommending a new plan. The Bilingual Education Study Team completed its work and reported to the board that had appointed them in May, 1996. Their plan was approved by the school board in June 1996 and was implemented in September, 1996. However, in November three new members were elected to the school board. These members had not been involved in hiring the superintendent, had no relationship with him, and had strong views on the role of school boards in directing policy. Their ideological differences from the previous board made the significance of the change in the board's composition visible in both the district's approach to bilingual education and to literacy instruction.

In June, 1997, the textbook adoption review panel, appointed by the previous board, reported their recommendations. The new board decided in July, 1997 to ignore the recommendations of this committee and to go with the Open Court phonics program for K-2 and Macmillan Reading Program in grades 3-6. These actions were parallel to those taken by the State Board of Education,



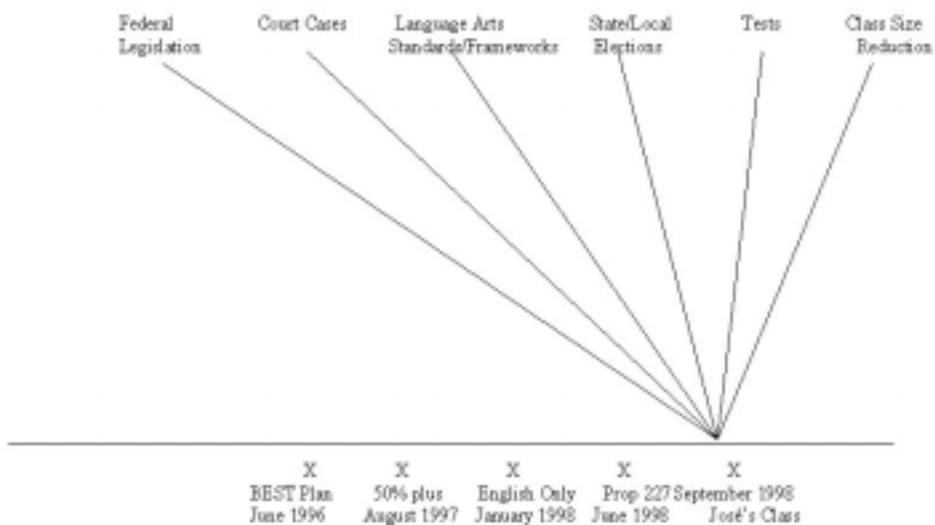
as described previously. Macmillan had been the review panel's choice for all grades. Since Open Court did not have a Spanish version, the board elected to keep Macmillan for the Spanish reading program. This action was part of a larger state movement to institute phonics-oriented literacy programs, and an accompanying movement to reduce class size to 20:1 in K-3 for the first time. Further, the local school board was offered a grant from the Packard Foundation to hire coaches at each school to support the correct implementation of the Open Court Program. Open Court was subsequently adopted for third-grade implementation in the 1998-1999 school year. Thus, two different adoptions were made within a very brief time frame, each with an expensive price tag (\$335,000 for the first according to the newspaper articles of the time). These changes were significant in that the teachers were required to learn and implement two different approaches to teaching reading within a three-year period. These periods of change brought about a shift in the program within José's school and instituted a period in which the opportunities for learning to be literate were changing almost yearly.

This period of disequilibrium was compounded by the local school board's decision in August, 1997 to request a new plan for bilingual education, and to implement a policy which required that at least 50% of all instruction had to be in English. These two actions set aside the BEST plan developed by the committee appointed by the previous board and the program that had been implemented under this plan for the 1996-1997 school year. In December of the 1997-1998 school year, the superintendent proposed elimination of bilingual education. This plan was approved in January, 1998, over the strenuous objections of many teachers, community members, and parents. These two actions, the elimination of bilingual education and the adoption of a new approach to literacy instruction, formed a synergy that led to increased pressures on school administrators, culminating in two actions. First was the publishing in the newspaper of a statement of goals for each school, with a particular focus on improved literacy test scores. Principals were required to promise at least a 5 point increase in grade level scores and were promised, and subsequently given, rewards for these increases. Second, administrators' jobs were put in jeopardy if their school failed to meet the reported goals. These actions created a chain reaction at the local school site. For example, José's principal shifted to a top-down decision frame about the school's reading program. While the district required Open Court for K-3, the principal elected to use it for K-5, making it necessary for the teachers in grades 3-5 to engage in intensive inservice for a second time in three years. The adoption of Open Court also introduced "coaches" into the school culture, primarily in grade K-3 for the first time. The rationale for the principal's actions was that this would align all curriculum, even though grades 4-5 were already making steady improvements in test scores according to the test results published in the local newspapers.

This analysis makes visible the weight of environmental forces that converged on José and his teacher and peers in September of 1998. Figure 1

provides a graphic representation of these converging policy issues and contexts. Had we only looked at Proposition 227, the story that would be visible would be only one of adherence to this new policy. However, given the presentation of data in this section another story unfolds. This story shows the agency of the local policy actors and the shifting nature of influence on what is possible to be done at any given point in time in a school, a classroom and/or a district. As described in this section, the policy changes brought with them changes in instructional practices and material resources available to members.

*Figure 1. From bilingual education to English Only in less than two years: The converging forces of policy actions*



### **Restraining Opportunities for Learning**

To explore how the policies we identified had an impact on students, as well as the teacher, we asked the teacher, who has been a research partner in the ongoing ethnography for more than 10 years, to reflect on the effects of Proposition 227 and local policy changes. Given her role as a co-researcher, we have elected to present segments of her reflective essay with only transitional comments as a way of concluding this article. Her observations were made through a theoretical lens. She is a well-published teacher/researcher, and thus, we view her comments as a form of oral history:

Under the new language policies implemented in our school district following its elimination of bilingual education, a teacher may not use Spanish in whole class instruction. Students are to write in English only. It has been explained in District memos that writing first in Spanish will confuse children and they will not learn to write in English.

There should not be any Spanish printed material on walls, because that also might serve to “confuse” children, particularly primary children. Students may receive “Spanish support,” which has been interpreted to mean, at our school, the preview and/or review of particular lessons and concepts in small group settings for those students who continue to need that support. . . . Parents have been told that students may read in either Spanish or English at home, but actual practice by many teachers is to encourage parents to speak and read English with their children. English language learners are to receive thirty minutes of instruction per day in second language development. “Newcomers” (those who are new arrivals in this country) are to be enrolled in a newly funded after school program where they are to receive thirty additional minutes of English as a second language at the introductory level.

This part of her reflections provides a broad overview of the 1998 context. In the next segment, she shifts her reflections from the impact of the policies on the structure of the school program to a description of student actions within her classroom, resulting from such changes.

What is most noticeable is the silence of three fourths of the class during whole group discussion. Only about five children participate in these discussions. Some of the *newly silent students* (emphasis added) were described by teachers (on cards that follow children from one grade to the next) as being actively verbal and responsive as third graders (when they were receiving instruction in Spanish and English). Angela has indicated to me that she is no longer smart, because she feels she doesn’t speak enough English or read well (even though she has scored at the fluency level in oral English development). The willingness to risk within the whole group seems to be much less than it was before; therefore, who has opportunity to interact with others and with content in order to construct disciplinary knowledge in the whole group setting depends not on what one knows or thinks about the discipline, but upon the perception of one’s ability to function at a particular level in English. It is in this context that the student quoted at the beginning of this paper stated, “I used to know this.” The same thing appears to be happening in small group work, as students are asked to work together collaboratively.

These observations go beyond test performance to make visible how the changes have had personal and social impact on student performance in the classroom, have silenced students in unanticipated ways, and are narrowing the choices that students can make and the resources they can draw on (e.g., knowledge learned in their first language). The developing consequences of these observed changes become more evident in the following segment:

In student/parent/teacher conferences in the fall of this year, several students expressed the frustration that they could not remember

important words in Spanish, but didn't know the English words to explain the concept well either.

This observation led her to ask a key question, one that is tied to the issue of access to academic knowledge, an issue that has not been part of the policy dialogue that led to the environmental press. This issue, however, is central to the "access denied" part of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act that we presented previously:

If they were in an English immersion program last year, with no Spanish support, were they able to access cognitive academic language and could they bring that to bear on the construction of new knowledge this year? When discussing the nature of scientists or what it is that scientists do, for example, many students could not draw upon prior knowledge as they had in previous years. The ability to use linguistic clues for coming to understand content vocabulary appears to be newly limited as well. Using cues from one language in order to help one understand new vocabulary in the second language is not specific to science/social science, of course, but the inability to do so does reflect on what kinds of resources students have available to them in accessing content. . . . I wonder whether this interim language place is an example of the narrowing of what is available to know in terms of content knowledge. . . . The issue of what is available to know becomes more complex when viewed in the context of changes in literacy curriculum and instructional policy that are coupled with the elimination of bilingual education. What impact do those changes have on the kinds of opportunities I can provide for learning and accessing disciplinary knowledge and practices?

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of additional court cases related to bilingual education rulings (e.g., *Cerna v. Portales*, 1974) see articles in Padilla, R., (1979), *Ethnoperspectives In Bilingual Education Research: Bilingual Education and Public Policy in the United States, Vol. 1*, Ypsilinti, MI: Department of Foreign Languages and Bilingual Studies, Eastern Michigan University.

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