

Reflections from the Classroom: Teacher Perspectives on the Implementation of Proposition 227

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Abstract

This study provides a cross-sectional analysis of 77 teachers' perspectives on the second-year implementation of Proposition 227. The paper considers three instructional settings: (a) teachers who continued teaching bilingual education, (b) teachers who switched from bilingual education to structured English immersion, and (c) teachers who remained in a structured English immersion or English-only setting. Within these three scenarios, we identify four key areas of concern related to the implementation of Proposition 227. This study reveals that teacher response to and implementation of Proposition 227 was mediated by multiple factors including high stakes testing and increased accountability.

The most difficult thing about Proposition 227 was having educational policies imposed without expertise. This policy is not informed by research. It is hard to accept that someone outside the classroom decides what happens inside, and I can't do what's best for students.
Structured English immersion teacher (former bilingual teacher)

The debate over educational policies aimed at improving schools has taken center stage in recent years. In California, this debate intensified with the proposal and eventual passage of Proposition 227 in 1998. As an educational reform, Proposition 227 represented an effort to "change schools in order to correct perceived social and educational problems" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 4). The perceived failure of bilingual programs to teach children English was cited as a reason to implement reform. As an initiative voted on by California voters, Proposition 227 departs from other past reform attempts and as such, poses an interesting case study in the discussion of school reform. Yet, like other reforms, Proposition 227 was experienced as a top-down mandate by teachers charged with implementation. Our interviews conducted with 77 teachers throughout California aim at understanding teachers' role in implementing Proposition 227. Their perspectives offer insight on the impact of Proposition 227 on their teaching profession, their instructional practices, impact on students, and impact on school culture and teacher relationships. Findings from this study of the second-year implementation of Proposition 227 reveal that teachers experienced Proposition 227 as a top-down reform. In addition, other factors such as high-stakes testing and teacher accountability played a role in the way teachers interpreted and acted on their district and school's plan for Proposition 227.

As the teacher's reaction to Proposition 227 in the opening excerpt illustrates, top-down reform strategies overlook the knowledge base of teachers who are responsible for implementing change within the classroom setting. This perspective echoes much of the research on school reform which suggests that top-down reform strategies often come into conflict with what Fullan (1991) terms the "subjective realities embedded in people's individual and organizational contexts and their personal histories" (p. 43). Reforms originating from outside the school context, in other words, ignore the culture of the school and the pedagogical beliefs of teachers who form a large part of the school's climate. Teachers constitute a critical component in the implementation of any reform, argues Fullan, since it is at the individual level that meaningful change will occur (p. 45). Given the critical role teachers play in the successful implementation of any school policy, it is important to take note of teachers' reactions to policy. Fullan argues that teachers' concerns revolve around four central areas: (a) effectiveness of change on students' learning; (b) clarity of implementation guidelines; (c) personal impact (time, energy, sense of fulfillment generated from the proposed change; and (d) impact on peer interactions. Teachers respond to change in diverse ways depending on the impact felt at these four levels. The nature of the teaching profession itself is also highlighted as a reason for the diversity of responses to change and the difficulty of implementing reform uniformly.

In their respective studies, Lorite (1974) and Sarason (1996) assert that isolation and independence characterize the teaching profession. These two qualities, according to Sarason, leave the teacher "constantly thrown back on personal resources, having little or no interpersonal vehicles available for purposes of stimulation, and change" (p. 196). The isolated nature of teaching results in teachers' varied and individualized responses to change. Yet, as Fullan indicates, teachers are constrained in how thoroughly they can implement a given reform due to the multidimensional nature of educational innovations.

Fullan lists three components at stake in teachers' successful implementation of school reform: (a) the possible use of new materials, (b) use of new teaching strategies, (c) a change in pedagogical beliefs. Interviews conducted with teachers reveal that many educators faced with implementing Proposition 227 faced many challenges, including lack of clear guidelines regarding implementation, and perhaps most importantly, in the case of bilingual teachers who switched to a structured English immersion setting, pedagogical conflict with the new law. Tyack and Cuban and Fullan all argue that changes in beliefs about what and how to teach are the most difficult to achieve, since they challenge educators' core beliefs about the goals of an education.

Literature on school reform suggests that, as the final line of the implementation process, teachers determine to a great extent whether reforms will become meaningful at the local or school level. Individual characteristics such as beliefs and practices and teacher biography represent key factors in teachers' individual interpretations and implementation of top-down policies.

Yet, theorists in the area of critical pedagogy take a different approach to analyzing teachers' relationship to school reform.

Carlson (1996) maintains that teachers can be important agents for transformative change by pulling their individual acts of resistance into a collective base. "Teachers' everyday resistances are important," argues Carlson, "but so long as they remain kept in the closet of the self-contained classroom, these resistances [can become] fragmented, and isolated from group effort" (p. 285). The analysis of teachers' reactions to Proposition 227 underscores this idea. Teachers in schools that collectively sought waivers (through active principal, teacher, and community leadership) were most able to resist Proposition 227 in their school community and classroom. On the other hand, teachers whose classroom assignment changed from bilingual education to structured English immersion described the absence of a collective apparatus to challenge Proposition 227. By considering teachers' perspectives of Proposition 227 implementation, we can assess the relationship between school reform and teachers' challenges to these policies.

Method

In order to provide a cross sectional analysis of the implementation of Proposition 227, the analysis draws from a random sample of data collected by researchers at the University of California at Berkeley (see García & Curry Rodríguez, this issue). Out of 77 teachers interviewed in the study, eight teachers from each instructional setting were randomly selected for this paper. Perspectives from the following three instructional settings are analyzed: teachers who maintained bilingual education, those who switched from bilingual education to structured English immersion, and structured English immersion or English-only teachers who continued in their setting. From the structured interviews, the paper focuses on four areas of impact: (a) impact on teacher profession, (b) effect on instructional practices, (c) impact on students, (d) impact on school culture and teacher relationships.

The following are the questions used to gather perspectives in these areas:

1. How does Proposition 227 affect your credential?
2. Thinking about your language and literacy lessons, how has Proposition 227 affected your teaching in your classroom?
3. How will Proposition 227 affect teachers such as you in the future?
4. What has been the most difficult thing about the implementation of Proposition 227 for you?
5. How have your students reacted to the changes of Proposition 227 in your classroom?
6. What do you think the effect of Proposition 227 will be on your students in the long run?
7. How do the implementation strategies employed by your school affect the relations among various members of the school community?

These questions aim at identifying key areas that concern teachers' implementation of any school reform. This paper also looks at how teachers were affected by their school's implementation procedures and the multiple challenges they faced in implementing Proposition 227.

Impact of Proposition 227 on the Teaching Profession

In this section, we will discuss how implementation procedures influence teachers' credentials and their own pedagogical views regarding bilingual education. This information is organized by type of instructional setting: (a) bilingual education, (b) structured English immersion (SEI) (formerly bilingual education), and (c) structured English immersion or English-only with no changes in instructional setting after Proposition 227.

Teachers who maintained bilingual education instruction

In regards to impact on their teaching credential, teachers expressed that Proposition 227 did not affect their credential. Of the eight bilingual teachers in this sample, six held BCLAD (Bilingual/Cross-cultural Language, and Academic Development) credentials and continued to teach primary language instruction. However, it is important to note that as part of a community of bilingual educators these teachers felt devalued and demoralized. These teachers projected that in the future, primary language instruction would eventually diminish. As one teacher expressed:

There probably won't be that much primary language instruction in native languages . . . specific to Spanish for me and I think that's not right. I think that if anything, we need more of them . . . they say you are educated if you know three or four languages. Our language is not as valued somehow.

This teacher felt devalued as a Spanish bilingual educator even though he was able to continue teaching bilingual education. As Fullan cites (1991, p. 36), educational reforms collide with the occupational identity (Marris, 1975) of teachers by challenging "the accumulated wisdom of how to handle a job derived from their own experience. Change threatens to invalidate this experience by robbing them of the skills they have learned and confusing their purposes." In the context of Proposition 227, bilingual teachers felt that implementation procedures questioned their expertise in teaching second language learners. This questioning of bilingual teachers' expertise significantly affected teacher morale.

Teachers who switched to structured English immersion

From the pool of teachers in this sample, some expressed no impact on their current credential. However, teachers on emergency credentials described having to get their CLAD (Cross-cultural Language, and Academic Development) certification much sooner than before the passage of Proposition 227. It is important to point out that in this second year of implementation of Proposition

227, districts are placing greater emphasis on CLAD certification, and less emphasis on BCLAD. These teachers were provided opportunities for training in English language development (ELD) teaching strategies. Although there is an overall greater emphasis on ELD, teachers in this scenario who have their BCLAD continue to use primary language for support in the SEI setting. Out of our sample, two out of the eight teachers in this setting lost their bilingual stipends as a result of Proposition 227.

While pedagogically opposed to Proposition 227, teachers in this sample did not express “outward defiance.” Teachers described following the school plan as a result of pressure to increase their students’ standardized test scores:

It has affected [us] in that it’s a domino affect. Its not just Prop 227, it’s all state standards. And that our district has multiple assessments. We give them reading and language arts assessments. It’s [through] a combination of all of this that we are more accountable.

High stakes testing played an important role in the second year of implementation as districts were pressured to raise test scores. Teachers have had to carry the burden of raising scores in order to meet standards. As a result of this climate, teachers in this sample did not project an outward defiance to implementing Proposition 227 in their classroom. Because of this high stakes testing environment teachers described feeling constrained in their field and excluded from any decision-making regarding the implementation of the proposition.

Teachers who remained in structured English immersion

In this sample, two of the eight teachers were in English-only settings and the other six were in SEI. Teachers who continued teaching in the structured English immersion setting expressed no effect on their teaching credential. However, similar to those teachers who switched from bilingual education to SEI, two of the eight teachers described a stronger push for CLAD certification after Proposition 227. In addition, Proposition 227 did not create any changes in their classroom assignment.

In terms of their pedagogical views toward teaching English language learners, SEI teachers expressed an overall awareness and consciousness about the benefits of bilingual education. As one teacher put it:

[Proposition] 227 makes me more conscious of policy and makes me more of an advocate for bilingual education. It has lowered my regard for politics in general and created a negative climate. I know many [bilingual schools] received waivers, so I think [its effect] is null but I think it makes them [teachers] feel like they are hanging by a string and it’s hard to continue on [when] their rug can get pulled out.

SEI teachers perceived that even those schools that secured bilingual education through waivers were vulnerable as well. Indeed, bilingual educators did experience the effects of Proposition 227 filtering into their classrooms, particularly in regards to changes in their instructional practices.

Impact of Proposition 227 on Instructional Practices

Teachers who maintained bilingual education

In describing their students' key language and literacy needs, teachers reported greater exposure to English, vocabulary development in both English and the primary language, and phonemic awareness. To address these needs, teachers have modified their language arts program to include more oral language development and phonemic awareness. Teachers rely on poems, songs, and phonemic awareness activities to encourage students' language growth. As Gándara et al. (2000) describe in their study of the initial impact of Proposition 227:

Even in the classrooms that have been designated as bilingual, and where principals contended that little had changed, teachers revealed that their teaching practices had indeed changed substantially . . . causing teachers to focus on form over meaning with an emphasis on teaching students how to respond to standard test- like questions in English. (p. 19)

As in the first year, the second-year implementation of Proposition 227 saw teachers placing greater emphasis on vocabulary development and phonemic awareness, and a greater emphasis on English in all the instructional settings.

Although bilingual teachers continued to teach primary language instruction after the passage of Proposition 227, they expressed concerns in two key areas: (a) difficulty in acquiring primary language materials, and (b) heavier emphasis on English language development and pressure to transition students into mainstream programs at an earlier age. The latter idea is well-expressed by the following teacher:

Because there is so much emphasis placed on standardized test results, which is another reason why we try to give them more English print and instruction besides just ELD and mixing time. Starting in second grade they are doing almost fifty percent in both. Fifty percent in Spanish and fifty percent in English maybe even more, depending on the teacher. So that when it comes to standardized tests it's not so awesome. I think they will come out low because that's not their total emphasis and their language is not where it needs to be.

Even though this school has remained bilingual we can discern that this program may be moving in the direction of SEI. Teachers did in fact express concern over this eventual change.

Teachers that switched from bilingual education to structured English immersion

Teachers in this setting described a great impact on their instructional practices as a result of Proposition 227. Some teachers lamented not being

able to instruct in Spanish and using Spanish only for primary language support. Changes in instructional practices included the absence of primary language materials in the classroom, and an increase in English materials. One teacher described her instruction as now “watered down” because the majority of the day is focused on English language development. Teachers also expressed difficulty in reaching students. One teacher described bilingual classes as faster paced and producing more results. This same teacher described having to spend more time on each unit, whereas in the bilingual setting, the teacher was given the opportunity to cover more material:

If it was a Spanish class it would go at a faster pace and I would see more results in their native language. They could understand it better. I wouldn't have to spend so much time with the lesson in each unit. I think it would be much faster and I would cover more.

Due to their inability to use Spanish on a consistent basis, teachers in this category have had to rely on visuals, music, manipulatives, and total physical response strategies to create a more interactive setting. One teacher described these new strategies as having to “act everything out” for students.

Additionally, teachers reported having to devise more effective ways to manage the classroom in order to maximize student interaction and learning. Although teachers do strive to increase student interaction, they expressed concern about not having enough English role models in the classroom. In schools with high limited English proficient (LEP) populations, there is limited opportunity for providing fluent English speakers in the classroom to serve as role models.

Teachers who remained in structured English immersion setting

When asked about Proposition 227 and its effect on their language and literacy lessons, teachers expressed no overt changes in their teaching. In this setting, SEI and English-only teachers continue to rely on strategies such as providing student-centered work, guided reading books, interactive activities and phonics based programs. As one teacher put it:

[Proposition] 227 is allowing from an administrative viewpoint, the standardized thinking, and now we have to test children on one playing field and it's okay because the state says we have to. I feel like it's promoting that, because we only have to teach in English now. Maybe in that sense, that's the negative effect because we're not looking at the individual child and how much they have achieved or recognize it in a structured way.

This can be interpreted as standardized testing guiding curriculum and instructional practices in the classroom. In July 2000, American Federation of Teachers president Sandra Feldman expressed that tests should be one aspect of the standards reform process:

Pressure to show big improvements on test scores forces teachers to spend weeks, and even months, drilling students on the tests. In effect, the tests become the curriculum. When tests are allowed to become the be-all and end-all, they deform, not reform, education (2000).

Thus, the intersection of high stakes testing and Proposition 227 implementation needs to be seriously considered and analyzed.

Impact of Proposition 227 on Students

Teachers who maintained bilingual education instruction

Teachers were asked what impact Proposition 227 might have on students in the long run. Interestingly, although teachers continued teaching in the bilingual setting, many expressed a negative impact on students as a result of the proposition. Teachers expressed that the 30-day SEI period proved to be the most difficult and frustrating:

Morally, when we have to place students in the classroom for 30 days, it's described as the holding time like they are in a cell or something . . . we have some students who recently immigrated from Mexico and who haven't been to school for a long time. And have to be in the class for 30 days and where the teacher may not speak their language they have to be in English the whole time. That's been real hard. It's not right! Seeing how scared they are, it doesn't seem like it's the right thing to do, it's not the ethical thing to do. That's been real hard. And also the amount of time wasted on the paperwork. That's ridiculous. The resource teachers can be working with the students much more instead of having to waste time forming classes. It can be put to something better like helping kids, reading or some other area.

For teachers in this setting, placing students in a structured English immersion class for 30 days took time away from meaningful instructional time that could have been spent in the bilingual setting. More importantly, teachers perceived that although students remained in a bilingual classroom, many have internalized negative ideological attitudes towards their native language. This may be due to the negative climate toward the primary language brought on by the proposition.

Teachers who switched from bilingual education to structured English immersion

Teachers perceived that Proposition 227 impacted students on two levels: self-identity, and academic achievement in the long run. In these two areas, teachers predicted a negative impact on students. One teacher, for example, described Proposition 227 as producing a "generation of subtractive bilinguals":

I'm afraid we're going to have a generation of subtractive bilinguals because when I look at what they can do and how hard they are trying, and how hard they really have come in English, I'm really

proud of them. But when you look at an English speaking kid, and where they should be at grade level, most of them are nowhere near there. On the other hand, I had a couple of kids last year who said, “How do you say that in Spanish?” So, they’re losing their own, but because of their family circumstances where they really don’t have practice outside school, they’re not really strong in English. I’m really worried about it!

In addition to losing their primary language, one teacher described the negative effect as a loss of cultural identity. For example, this same teacher foresaw students not being able to communicate with parents and losing ties with their community and family:

They are going to lose their language . . . and I see it now with the kids. How are they going to communicate with their parents? Do they communicate? Their communication with their parents is limited. They learn the basic stuff and the communication is not there. They will lose their primary language. I know they have to learn English and that’s okay. Once you learn two you can learn three. It will affect families and jobs.

SEI teachers repeatedly described a growing inter-generational gap between parents and their children. As a result of the emphasis on administering English tests, such as the SAT- 9, teachers described students as “frustrated” when taking these tests. Because students are not given a choice as to what language to use in the classroom, teachers described students as lacking self-confidence in their academic achievement. Another major concern among teachers in this setting was the inability of parents to assist their children with homework assignments as a result of the switch from bilingual education to structured English immersion.

Teachers who remained in the structured English immersion setting

In this setting teachers projected a wide array of impact on students ranging from no impact to possible impact on their cultural and linguistic identity. Teachers who projected no impact on students explained that their students had never been in a bilingual setting. This, however, poses a problem when we consider high student transiency rate. One teacher stressed the importance of learning English as essential to living in this country:

By all means I would hope that they keep their own language and they often teach me! But if they chose to live in California or America, I think we would be doing them justice by teaching them as much as we can in English. I mean, if that’s what they’ve chosen to do, to live here.

This teacher valued students’ primary language, but nonetheless believed that learning English took precedence over maintaining their first language. Teachers who expressed possible impact raised concerns over students’ self-esteem in

SEI or English-only classrooms; nonetheless, they reiterated the importance of learning English first.

Impact on School Culture and Teacher Relationships

Teachers who remained in the bilingual education setting

As a result of Proposition 227, teachers felt that there were divisions between bilingual education teachers and structured English immersion or English-only teachers. Similar to the findings of Gándara et al. (2000) regarding the first-year of implementation of Proposition 227, bilingual teachers attributed these divisions to monolingual teachers' misunderstanding of the waiver process. For example, monolingual teachers in schools that retained bilingual education saw the law as completely eradicating bilingual education and, therefore, questioned their school's continuation of bilingual education. The following bilingual teacher described these divisions:

You kind of notice what direction you are going in, just by who you sit with during lunch. We have one table with English immersion teachers and those who are still teaching bilingual education. It's not that we don't want to sit with them. Once in a while we intermix, but we pretty much stay with our own groups. This may be a downfall of it. We are a pretty strong group and they are not going to change our minds [about] how we teach. I think that's why [we] stay with our own.

The criticism was more from within our staff. That made it difficult sometimes. They felt like we were out there, promoting no on and fighting Proposition 227, and that we were telling parents to vote no . . . but it's not like I sat down with all the parents and told them to vote no. We knew we had to be neutral about the situation. But when we heard comments from teachers it was difficult to not respond. When we did respond we were . . . the way we responded made them not want to say anything else. The way I see it is that if you don't like it here you can go teach somewhere else that is not going to be teaching bilingual. You have the option, you are able to move and transfer to another school. But they haven't done that. They have the choice. Its ironic because those are the teachers who have been there the longest . . . It gets me frustrated when they go on these tantrums because look at the kids you are teaching. If you don't want to teach them the way which has been proven and researched, go to a district which has the perfect kids that have everything you want in a kid and not have problems. They all have different needs. Its usually the veteran Anglo teachers who have a problem with bilingual education . . . I wish their attitude was different because it reflects the way they are teaching. They are tenured, they can't fire them, they also have to work with them. There are only a couple who have not been very nice.

The picture that emerges from these perspectives is that Proposition 227 not only changed instructional programs for second language learners, but it also legitimized monolingual teachers' negative feelings toward primary language instruction.

Teachers who continued teaching bilingual education after the passage of Proposition 227 described strong support from principals. Principals at these schools provided moral support; however, teachers in this type of setting have expressed confronting obstacles when trying to purchase primary language materials since the passage of Proposition 227.

Teachers who switched from bilingual education to structured English immersion

In this setting, teachers expressed two scenarios: (a) clear divisions between monolingual teachers and former bilingual teachers who switched to structured English immersion, and (b) a supportive environment due to the principal's effort to facilitating teachers' transition to SEI. English-only teachers in these schools viewed SEI teachers as bilingual advocates and preferred all instruction to be in English with no primary language support.

Overall, there was a general consensus amongst SEI teachers that Proposition 227 had created frustration in the school community. English only teachers were frustrated with the continuance of bilingual education, while SEI teachers faced many challenges in their new instructional setting.

Teachers who remained in structured English immersion

Structured English immersion teachers expressed that the passage of Proposition 227 brought little changes to the school culture and teacher relationships. Some teachers asserted that bilingual education had never been offered at their respective school, and thus, that students had "always known SEI." Additionally, teachers did not perceive any impact on teacher relationships at the school.

Looking Ahead: The Intersection of Multiple State Policies and Pedagogy and its Implications

Data on the second-year implementation of Proposition 227 reveals that teachers continue to feel the effects of top-down reform. However, in this second year of implementation, there are other factors to consider. High stakes testing, in addition to the implementation of Proposition 227, created a tense environment for teachers to work in throughout the year. Teachers can be active agents of change in schools; however, in top-down reform, teachers are limited in the pedagogical decisions they can make in their classrooms. For example, in the schools that continued bilingual instruction teachers expressed being able to continue their instructional practice, but were expected to administer programs such as Open Court, Success for All, and Results. All teachers in this sample, across the three instructional settings, described a refocus on their ELD components and an earlier transition into English-only

classrooms. One may look at this trend as the push for the diminished use of bilingual programs.

Similar to Gándara et al. (2000), our second year data also suggest that it is too early to tell if these changes and adaptations best serve English learners. It is too early to evaluate the future outcomes of the implementation of Proposition 227 on student academic achievement for example. Yet, teachers' projections of the impact of Proposition 227 on students indicate that teachers have witnessed an overall negative effect on second language learners' cultural and linguistic identity and educational future.

Teacher impressions on policy provide a window as to how they perceive their surroundings and how their teaching environments have changed as a result of the implementation procedures. This analysis suggests that teachers have, and will continue, to face challenges in the implementation of Proposition 227. Moreover, this study reveals that the second-year implementation of 227 intersected with multiple variables, such as high-stakes testing and increased accountability to create a tense and in many instances, demoralizing environment for teachers. As the teachers in this study have suggested, the key to understanding the challenges educators face in implementing school reform lies in centralizing teachers' experiences inside the classroom, and considering the intersection of these multiple policies with pedagogy.

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