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# Identify the Cracks; That's Where the Light Slips In: The Narratives of Latina/o Bilingual Middle-Class Youth

In this qualitative study, I examine the intersections of learner identity, power, and language through the experiences and insights of Latina/o 2nd-generation middle-class children who occupy a unique positionality between the discourses surrounding bilingual education. Through narrative inquiry, emerging bilingual middle-class students actualize nonbinary thinking, able to depict identity as an inherently multifaceted process of construction. Their *ways of knowing* and experiences as language learners ultimately shape an *outsider-within* space, rupturing traditional binaries within bilingual education, namely EO/EL (English only versus English learner) and class binaries. They also proffer queer and cyber identities as additional salient variables that plow into language identity. In the end, these learners frame the contradiction and nuance of language learner identity, not as one of struggle, but as one of differential agency, the ability to move in and out of contradictory identities as both strong and advantageous tactics.

Against the backdrop of a post-Proposition 227 antibilingual society, middle-class Latina/o parents navigate the few bilingual options available for their children. One of these options is dual immersion (DI) education, which survives as an effective language program. The DI model differs from other models of bilingual education. Approximately half of the students are fluent English speakers and half of the students are fluent speakers of another language, in this case, Spanish. While many of the bilingual models focus on instructing in the native language to learn English, the DI model brings together students of varying backgrounds and ethnicities with

the goals of biliteracy, academic achievement, and intercultural competence (Lindholm-Leary, 2001.)

In middle-class Latina/o families with access to bilingual programs, the children occupy a distinct learner identity separate from the traditional groups associated with bilingual education:

1. Spanish speakers and low socioeconomic status (SES); and
2. English speakers and middle to high SES.

Although middle-class bilingual students represent a small percentage of students, I contend that their perspectives and experiences are critical for understanding the unique ways in which language, identity, and power intersect to inform the field of bilingual education.

### Language and Power in California

As the linguistic diversity of our nation continues to grow, the US Census Bureau estimates that 20% of the school-age population speaks a language other than English at home (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). Meanwhile, larger political debates and power struggles in recent decades shape the conversation that surrounds bilingual education. Conservatism, neoliberalism, and assimilationist and xenophobic ideologies represent a larger move to English-only policies in our schools. Anti-immigration sentiment in "bilingual wars," as scholars have called them, further fueled these contests of power surrounding bilingual education legislation (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

In the state of California—which has long been a destination for refugees, agrarian workers, and immigrants from areas including Mexico, Central America, and Asia—language issues entangle with race issues. With many non-English speakers living within the state's borders, the passage of Proposition 227 cemented monolingual, English-only ideology.

Against this backdrop, few bilingual options exist. Among these are DI language schools, which in recent years have increased in mostly middle-class communities (California Department of Education, 2016).

Research shows that DI language education is an effective instructional model for both English learners and English-only students (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Lindholm & Molina, 2000; Montecel & Cortez, 2002). First, DI programs do not view students' heritage (or home) language as a deficit. Students receive instruction in their primary language, thus beginning their academic journey in a language they are already familiar with. Cummins (1979) describes the access that these students develop from engaging with the curriculum

in their first language as "cognitive academic proficiency," and he argues that it leads to the acquisition of higher-order academic skills in the target language (in this case English).

Second, DI programs desegregate language-minority children from their English-speaking counterparts. This is important because research suggests that the presence of these two groups together can lead to more intergroup communicative competence and a stronger sense of cultural awareness for both groups (Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2003; Molina, 2000). Ultimately, DI language programs expand our nation's language resources by conserving the native language (L1) skills of minority students and developing second language (L2) skills in English-speaking students.

This study furthers research on DI language programs by paying attention to a third group of students—middle-class Latina/o bilingual youth. While research on the broader political power struggles at work in states such as California with restrictive language policies is abundant, research on the ways in which these power dynamics intersect and interact with student identity and language ideologies has been more limited. Identity construction and power cannot be understood in isolation from one another. A complex web of social relations interact and shape identity in a constantly evolving way. Individuals on the one hand shape, while they are shaped by, power dynamics at play and the tensions among these various actors. It is precisely this tension between power, self-identity, and language ideology that begs further exploration in this study. Darder (2012) suggests that an understanding of power must move beyond the polarizing, binary logic of power-ful and the power-less to understand the nuances and multiplicities of power. Power and language do not operate in isolation; rather, there is a set of relations interacting in relationship to that language.

## The Current Study

This exploratory research study attempts to address one overarching question:

1.  How do middle-class bilingual Latina/o youth understand and navigate language, identity, and power?

Exploratory research seeks to investigate an area that has been underresearched. The data garnered are preliminary data that help shape the direction of future research. There is a dearth of research on the understandings of bilingual middle-class youth of color in schools. As such, I relied on youth epistemology (the narratives of 13

youth) for the exploratory study. Data collection took place in two middle-class communities within large urban cities. These communities are characterized by race- and class-segregated neighborhoods. Moreover, both communities house a successful and long-standing DI school with a significant Latina/o middle-class population.

All bilingual youth ranged in age from 11 to 16 and attended a K-5 dual-language immersion school. They all self-identify as middle class and Latina/o. Of the 13 youth, 9 have a parent who holds a graduate degree. Parental professions include university professors, business owners, psychologists, and school administrators. There were interesting commonalities among the bilingual youth. They are well traveled, own individual phones and tablets with Internet access, and live in single-family residences.

During the course of 12 months, I conducted eight individual interviews with bilingual youth, one focus group interview with five bilingual youth, and participant observations at their school sites. I broke down the research question to facilitate the dialogue with youth. Interview questions included:

1. Who do you become through listening and speaking a particular language?
2. How do you feel in the moment when you are neither understood or understand?
3. What does being bilingual foreclose or open up?

To build relationships with the bilingual youth, I shared my own experiences as a bilingual child raised in a middle-class home and community. Developing these relationships over the course of 12 months facilitated detail and depth to the data.

The individual interviews were 45 minutes to one hour long, semistructured, tape recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. In the text, I eliminated youth overuse of the words *like* and *um* to ensure the flow of ideas for the reader. I also conducted informal interviews with five parents to further triangulate the youth narratives.

I interpreted the individual interviews and focus group interview using the constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The approach was inductive. Through this technique, the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them before data collection and analysis. This method of analysis is befitting, as there is limited research on bilingual youth of color and few preestablished categories on their experiences in schools. Moreover, by quoting study participants' accounts of their experiences, I used thick description

to keep the analysis consistent with the data. To ensure accuracy, I maintained an audit trail by keeping detailed records of all stages of the data collection and analysis.

To further maintain the integrity of the data, I conducted regular member checks. I selected a few youth to review and analyze working themes. They confirmed that the themes resonated with their individual experiences. I incorporated their feedback into the final narrative (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

## Findings

The research question is: How do middle-class bilingual Latina/o youth understand and navigate language, identity, and power? These youth depict language learner identity as a multifaceted process of construction: situated, temporal, and fluid. Moreover, these learners frame the nuance of language learner identity positively through differential agency, the ability to uniquely move in and out of diverse ways of being and thinking.

### Language Learner Identity: Situated, Temporal, and Fluid

Bilingual youth understand language and identity as a multifaceted process of construction. When they construct identity, Latina/o youth are aware of the situatedness of language. For instance, youth referenced that the learning of two languages in schools was hyper-controlled. In the 90-10 model, Spanish was rigorously protected and preserved during the majority of instructional time in the classroom. Eva, an 11-year-old sixth grader, attended her DI school from kindergarten through fifth grade and is fluent in both languages. Eva states,

> My teachers were super strict about only using Spanish in the classroom. They weren't mean about it or anything, but I knew I couldn't get away with English. So like if I didn't know a word, I would really have to think about a different way to say it. They never talked in English.

Ramiro is a sixth-grade student who attended a K-5 DI school and now attends a DI middle school. He also recalls the strict adherence to Spanish at all times in his 90-10 program.

> I remember thinking as a kindergartner that my teacher didn't know any English! The first time I heard her speak English, it just didn't sound right, I was shocked, and this was two or three years later after school.

Ten out of the 13 bilingual youth associate Spanish with academic language. At their school sites, Spanish prevailed inside the classroom walls, but outside of the classroom walls, in more social spaces such as recess, English prevailed. Interestingly, using Spanish in social situations with peers was uncommon, despite that their friends were also in these programs and also bilingual.

Tomas, who attends the same middle school as Ramiro, offers details:

> Yeah we go to the same school and we learn in Spanish and write in Spanish but we don't talk in Spanish. I mean we don't talk like in a relaxed way. In class if we have to do a presentation or something like that I use my Spanish, but like at lunch or after school, it's English. The teachers always talk to us in Spanish even outside the classroom and yeah we can answer them in Spanish, but with friends it's different.

At present, all the middle-class youth use programs such as Snapchat and Instagram, gaming platforms such as Minecraft, and texting to communicate with their families and peers. Interestingly, none of the students use Spanish to communicate with peers on social media. To communicate with family members such as grandparents and cousins who live in other countries, they do use Spanish. Eva asserts,

> It doesn't feel normal I guess. I mean my iPhone is already set up in English so I'm not really sure if I could go back and forth in Spanish, like with accents and stuff. I would have to go and forth with the settings every time.

Bilingual youth also spoke to the temporality of language learner identity. They did not see being bilingual as a fixed identity in their lives. Ramiro contends,

> I know my parents want me to learn Spanish so I can have more opportunities in life, like to travel or whatever. Don't really think I'll be crushed if I never use Spanish in my life when I grow up. It was a good experience, and the teachers are great and I had fun, you just never know if Spanish is gonna be so important in my life later on.

Eva states,

I think I'm obsessed with French culture. I know I'm going to live

in Paris and have a family there and everything. So I'll have to learn French for sure, and maybe I'll never speak Spanish again … I don't know. For sure the Spanish will help me learn French so Spanish is awesome. … I guess I could stay trilingual; all I know is I will live in France.

All the bilingual youth said that learning two languages was a great experience, a "good thing." That said, some youth did express a more nonattached perspective toward bilingualism in that they did not feel pressure to chase two languages forever or hold expectations to be biliterate for the rest of their lives. Moreover, they did not attach biliteracy to outcome (i.e., better job, more money). They enjoyed their bilingual learner identity in the present.

This nonattachment, if you will, facilitates a fluid language learner identity. Youth are aware of the situatedness and temporality of language identity. This awareness allows them to flow in and out of their identities. For instance, other identities were more pressing in their conversations with me. Pilar, a brilliant artist who feels very connected to Japanese culture, most notably through her anime illustrations, does not use Spanish in her drawings and does not feel pressure to do so. She was much more excited to discuss Japanese culture and how it related to her identity than her Chilean identity.

Fluidity was a significant theme in my interviews with bilingual youth. Daniel, a 12-year-old intellect, states,

I've traveled to countries like Mexico and Spain where I could use my Spanish, and it really made me feel powerful to understand what people were saying. I could go to the market with my mom, and I didn't feel strange or uncomfortable. I mean I wasn't completely comfortable but it was a tolerable comfortableness.

Alongside Daniel's appreciation for his bilingualism, he also identified London as his favorite city.

I felt at home in London. It was great. I would live there. I want to go to Oxford. I guess I probably wouldn't use too much Spanish, or maybe not at all, but that's okay. I'm okay with that.

The youth are at ease with fluidity. A particular language learner identity was not a permanent marker of their life goals, nor an all-encompassing marker. This openness toward other identities and ease of detaching from identities may offer insight into how language learner identity and other variables, such as class and sexual orientation, in-

form and plow into each other. During the focus group interview, five students who attended a progressive DI school that mainstreamed discourse around race, gender, and class shared their insights and experiences. Notably, this school in particular comprises a significant population of parents from universities in the surrounding area. Isabel, a 15-year-old photographer who self-identifies as queer, asserts,

> I don't know how to explain it but I think everyone was just more open at my elementary school with everything, like language, race, and gender stuff. It's like you're sending your kid to learn Spanish which isn't really common and you run into other people who think it's important, and I don't know maybe other things become important too.

Adam, a 16-year-old math intellect, emphasizes,

> There was so much diversity at the school. I appreciate it so much now looking back because there wasn't a norm. It was a freak school [laughs]. Everyone brought their freak on at this little bilingual school. It's like you're Latino, then you're bilingual, then you're a tech geek, and you just keep adding to the list.

Last, the bilingual youth actualized nonessentialist thinking in their rejection of the EO-EL (English only versus English learner) binary. None of the 13 students identified with either English only or English learner labels. All students self-identified as bilingual and emphasized the flowing in and out of English and Spanish.

I touched base with five parents to determine their views on language identification in schools. The parents reiterated that neither EL nor EO captured their children's linguistic background/experience. For these Latina/o parents, learning Spanish in a bilingual school was critical. As Latina/o parents, promoting bilingualism in the home was complicated for a variety of reasons. Namely, English was the "comfortable" language despite their bilingual abilities. As such, their children were exposed to both languages from the beginning. Miguel, a sixth grader who travels to South America every summer (since he was a toddler), said,

> I watched cartoons in Spanish all the time as a little kid. My mom would speak to me in Spanish and English all the time, in my house, when we left the house. I guess I remember knowing both English and Spanish when I started preschool. …Yeah I felt like both were with me from the beginning.

Critical studies in bilingualism support these parent and youth perspectives. The construct of *emergent bilingual* captures how bilingual students perform language learning in and out of school. When we ignore this bilingualism, these students become categorized under static labels of EL. These labels discount the bilingual nuances and richness of language learning (García & Kleifgen, 2010; García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008).

### Differential Agency: The Ability to Uniquely Move In and Out of Diverse Ways of Being and Thinking

The youth performed language in a variety of ways. They asserted that bilingualism allows them to engage with others more readily. Five of the 13 students are taking courses in a third language and attribute this to their newfound confidence and willingness to engage. Daniel states,

> I remember not understanding the teacher or knowing what was going on because I started the bilingual school in second grade. My mom's friend got me in. I remember feeling a little scared but my teacher was really nice so I learned really quickly. I have a strong brain for learning things fast … so I already know what it's like to feel uncomfortable and scared and if I ever have to learn another language and talk to people, I will be a lot wiser because I already had this experience.

Interestingly, some bilingual youth comfortably disengage with English-speaking communities. Several of the students have spent a considerable amount of time abroad in situations where English was barely used. As such, they exhibit a readiness to opt in and out of English-only spaces. Antonio sees biliteracy as a powerful means to opt in and out of situations. He frames this as being "sneaky." Antonio recounts,

> I was swimming in this lagoon. You could swim all the way out to the blue whale where kids could climb to the top and sit there, and then maybe jump off. That whale caught my eye and so I decided to swim out there. There were all these kids already sitting on top of the whale, and I think most of the kids needed help to climb up. So the kids would be nice to each other and give their hand to pull them up. I like doing things on my own. So I tried to climb the side of the slippery whale. It was so slippery and had all these barnacles on the bottom. But I like sea creatures so it didn't bother me. The kids wanted to help me but they were yell-

ing too so it was like this bossy help. I told them no. But they wouldn't leave me alone. So I started to answer them in Spanish. They couldn't understand me. It was sneaky and great. They were asking me do you speak English. I would answer them in Spanish. So they left me alone.

Bilingual middle-class youth also pointed to the ways that navigating contrasting situations resulted in different ways of being and thinking. For Carmen, a perceptive and articulate 15-year-old student, sensitivity is her guiding principle as she navigates the divergent class backgrounds of her peers and community. She attended a K-5 DI school as well as DI middle school. During that time she was hyperaware of class differences in that she was one of the few students with a large home and extensive travel experiences. In high school, she entered a world where she was positioned much more in the middle, between wealthy and financially struggling families. She elaborates,

> I have like two groups of friends. My Latina friends who I went to elementary school with, and my white friends who live in [a wealthy area by the water.] Some of my friends live in areas that are not so safe, like my mom won't let me spend the night there … they have a different life than me and they worry about money … like when my mom's friend who cleans houses lost her job. I don't know what that is like, to worry about those things. So I'm careful and sensitive about what I say.

As such, Carmen navigates her middle-class identity purposefully. She is careful to not talk about her summer trips, or recent gifts, with some friends. Instead, she simply posts on Instagram to share her news. Carmen recognizes that conversations around travel with her white, upper-middle-class peers are easier. Nonetheless, she expresses ambivalence.

> Yeah, I can talk about some things a lot easier with my white friends, but they're really into alcohol and marijuana, and that's not me. … And it can be more competitive, like a "one up you" game, when you talk about something and then kid says yeah well my uncle has a Bugatti. … I live in the middle. Like I'm not rich and I'm not poor. So I hang out everywhere. I'm comfortable with each group but I feel uncomfortable too. I don't know if that makes sense.

Almost all of the middle-class youth were enormously aware of

class dynamics in their experience with bilingualism. Some traveled to Mexico and countries in Central America, where differences between rich and poor are palatable. These bilingual youth navigate the *in-betweenness* of class, resulting in unique ways of knowing and being. Antonio articulates,

> When we go to Mexico, we always drive into this little town to get *paletas,* I see really poor families living in houses that are old and crumbly. The dogs look old and crumbly too. I feel bad and grateful. I feel bad because I don't have balance in my life. I have too much stuff. I think balance is good, like not too little and not too much. … I should have less and they should have more. I am grateful that all I need to do is get rid of stuff and to live a simple life so there's more balance in the world.

Access to different walks of life and experiences affects bilingual youth understandings of the world around them. On one particular trip to Europe, Carmen stepped out of a taxi, only to hear her aunt's partner shout, "God bless America" to the taxi driver, whom he perceived as a Muslim driver. Her response was loud and defiant, "That's really messed up!"

The bilingual youth articulate an understanding of the interplay between language, identity, and power. The youth strive to define for themselves how language and other salient markers connect and disconnect, and they reinforce and downplay particular positions depending on the situation. In addition, the youth embody the nuance of language learner identity positively through differential agency—moving in and out of identities to actualize diverse ways of being and thinking.

Specific understandings about their own positions within the larger web of linguistic racism and capitalism was limited, albeit there were moments of a budding consciousness, of a desire to discuss and contemplate these complicated issues. This points to a critical gap in the education of our youth: the lack of a critical space to engage in dialogue and activism to address the intimate dance between language and power.

## Implications for Bilingual Education

This study situates itself precisely at the crux of the intersection of restrictive language policies, a growing population of Latino middle-class families, and dual language immersion programs. This study complicates our understanding of bilingual youth identity in relation to language and power by sampling a group of bilingual middle-class

youth who move beyond more traditional binaries encountered in schools. The unique and different ways Latina/o middle-class bilingual youth perform language illuminate how language learner identity enmeshes with socially constructed positions. Bilingual youth exhibit a unique tolerance for ambiguity. This tolerance, rather than resulting in struggle or turmoil, facilitates their ability to live in the middle land between two worlds, *los intersticios*, or the space between identities (Anzaldúa, 1987). For some bilingual youth, this results in diverse ways of thinking and being.

Because language and identity are not static, homogenous entities—but rather fluid, ambivalent, and complex—bilingual schools must address their essentializing approach that defines bilingual youth in fixed terms. Bilingual schools need to become sites where the messiness and formidability of youth ways of knowing show the way to the conditions that make learning possible. For instance, when youth refuse certain identifications, they elicit conversation.

In the DI programs described in this study (and all DI programs in California, for that matter), the language allocation in classrooms is strictly controlled in top-down fashion by schools and educators. This is understandable in an antibilingual climate where the pervasiveness and dominance of English is almost inescapable. García and Kleifgen (2010) argue for dynamic bi-/plurilingual education, an education that actively recognizes the multiplicity of language identities and practices. "The challenge for educators in the 21st century will be to acknowledge that monolingual, and even monoglossic bilingual practices, are not sufficient" (García & Wei, 2014, p. 157).

We have an opportunity to expand and deepen bilingual education, even within a hostile English-only climate. A dynamic language education *hand in hand* with a critically just education may provide a point of entry. For instance, an education that addresses student multidimensionality at the same time it tackles privilege and position addresses the interrelatedness of language and power. Returning the locus of language control to students within a critical space to interrogate race, class, and other systems of oppression may erupt into a beautifully powerful space for bilingual youth to exhibit agency, to negotiate their linguistic repertoires, and to imagine possibilities we never would have known.

## Author

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