

Deficit Perspectives and Bilingual Education in a Post-Civil Rights Era

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It is common for US history to be discussed in terms of progress from racial inequality toward racial equality. The typical narrative states that while racism was an unfortunate reality in US society, it was an aberration from the democratic ideals that characterized the founding of the nation and has for this reason gradually been dismantled. The culmination of this progress toward racial equality is seen as the Civil Rights Movement that is characterized as destroying the final remnants of US racism and paving the pathway toward the future envisioned by Martin Luther King where everybody is judged by the content of their character as opposed to the color of their skin.

Critical race theorists have raised questions about this narrative of progress toward racial equality. These scholars argue that rather than being an aberration, racism shapes the very fabric of US society and permeates all of its institutions, including schools (Bell, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1998). These scholars have raised questions related to the limits of the institutionalization of demands of the Civil Rights Movement in

dismantling this institutional racism. Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the institutionalization of the demands of the Civil Rights Movement did not mark a break with the racism of US society but instead marked a new racial formation that reconfigured racism in ways that could accommodate the demands of the Civil Rights Movement while maintaining the racial status quo. Under this post-Civil Rights racial formation, racial inequality is seen as rooted in the cultural deficiencies of racialized communities rather than the racism that has shaped mainstream institutions since the founding of the country. From this perspective, the solution is to fix these cultural deficiencies rather than to dismantle institutional racism (Aggarwal, 2016).

One example of this post-Civil Rights racial formation can be found in the institutionalization of bilingual education. In response to demands from Latinx community activists and their allies, the federal government passed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968, which offered federal funding to public schools to offer bilingual education programs (San Miguel, 2004). This institutionalization of bilingual education was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this institutional support was vital in supporting the work of pioneers in bilingual education working to implement these programs across the country (Cahmann, 1998). On the other hand, this institutionalization of bilingual education distanced it from broader racial

and economic equity struggles by refocusing on technocratic issues related to the implementation of these programs (Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000).

A particularly salient technocratic issue was related to how to assess the bilingual proficiency of students in bilingual education programs. In order to determine eligibility for bilingual education programs and to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs, students were administered language proficiency assessments in both English and Spanish that included tasks that were disconnected from their daily communicative practices. Many students performed poorly on these decontextualized assessments in both English and Spanish. As a result, many of these children were labeled “semilingual” or not fully proficient in either English or Spanish (Heath, 1984). Scholars attributed this semilingualism to the fact that many of these students came from homes that did not offer them systematic access to any language and advocated for schools to provide structured linguistic experiences that would support Latinx students in developing an independent sphere of influence for each of their languages in ways that would lead them toward more abstract language and thought processes (Cummins, 1979/2001). Discussions of semilingualism disconnected conversation around bilingual education from broader political struggles that sought to dismantle the institutional racism that

marginalized Latinx students by re-framing these programs as compensatory programs intended to fix their linguistic deficiencies (Flores, 2016).

Though the term semilingualism has disappeared from scholarly discussions of the language practices of Latinx students, its specter remains firmly entrenched in dominant framings of bilingual education. What was once term semilingualism is now referred to as lacking academic language (Cummins, 2000). As was the case with semilingualism, the determination of one's mastery over academic language is determined through language proficiency assessments that often have little to do with the actual language practices that Latinx children engage in on a daily basis. Various terms have emerged to replace semilingualism in order to describe Latinx children who are positioned as lacking academic language in either English or Spanish based on these language proficiency assessments. Some of these terms include non-nons, clinically disfluent (Veladez, MacSwan, & Martinez, 2002), and Long Term English Learners (Flores, Kleyn & Menken, 2015). All of these terms place supposed linguistic deficiencies of Latinx students as the root cause of their academic challenges, leaving unaddressed the institutional racism that continues to marginalize these students.

The consequences of this focus on linguistic solutions can be illustrated by a recent ESL program evaluation of a small US school district with a large and growing number of children of migrant farmers from Mexico and Central America. During the evaluation, educators reported to me that many of the Latinx students—even those who were not officially designated as ELLs—were academically underachieving. The consensus was that this academic underachievement was primarily a linguistic problem, in that the majority of the Latinx students had failed to master the “academic language” that was needed for school success. It was striking to me that the educators, who were predominantly monolingual and White, did not consider to be relevant a myriad of other factors that may be contributing to the academic challenges confronting their large and growing Latinx population, including in-school issues such as the lack of Latinx and/or bilingual educators and teachers, or out-of-school issues such as the high poverty of migrant families. Instead, these larger sociopolitical factors were ignored in favor of a focus on the perceived linguistic deficiencies of their Latinx student population with the implication being that somehow improving their linguistic skills will ensure social mobility outside any structural changes that work to combat institutional racism.

This need for structural change to address the marginalization of Latinx students can be illustrated by parent meetings I once attended as part of consulting work I was doing with a district related to their dual language bilingual programs. At one of these meetings, a White mother came up to me and asked me what I thought about the possibility of having her children grow up trilingually. Her plan was for the children to get English from her, Spanish from the new dual language program, and Chinese from their nanny. At another one of these meetings, a Puerto Rican mother reported that she and her daughter had been homeless for some time. She was worried that this situation had affected her daughter, and though she didn't know what a dual language program was, she was looking for any program that could provide her daughter special support when she came to the school the following year. Both of these mothers were trying to navigate a large and complex urban school district in ways that ensured that their children receive the best education possible. Of course, the vast differences in their life circumstances made their attempts at getting a quality education look extremely different. Being confronted with these stark inequalities, I began to realize that although I had been prepared in my doctoral work to provide professional development for teachers related to the latest thinking in bilingual education, I was completely ill-equipped

to address the larger political and economic inequalities that prevent these programs from reaching their full potential.

Both a look at the history and the contemporary state of bilingual education in the Latinx community suggest that promoting bilingual education outside a broader effort to dismantle institutional racism will continue to reinforce the racial status quo. The first step in connecting bilingual education advocacy to these broader efforts would be to completely reject deficit framings of the bilingualism of Latinx students and re-focus attention on the racist ideologies that make these deficit perspectives possible. This re-framing of the bilingualism of Latinx students must be situated within calls for larger structural transformation that seek to combat institutional racism. This movement means situating calls for bilingual education programs in low-income neighborhoods within larger efforts to enact comprehensive revitalization of these neighborhoods. Similarly, this shift means situating calls for bilingual education programs in affluent and gentrifying neighborhoods within a larger effort to create mixed-income neighborhoods through the development of affordable housing within the catchment areas of these programs. This advocacy work entails a more comprehensive approach to bilingual education advocacy that engages a range of stakeholders, including social service agencies along

with advocacy groups focused on addressing issues such as income inequality, housing segregation, and immigration policy. The goal is to work to push bilingual education into the conversation in all of these areas of advocacy work while bringing insights from these other areas of advocacy work to shape the agenda of bilingual education advocacy.

Some might object that engaging these broader political and economic processes may serve to distract from the core focus of bilingual education advocacy. Others might object that politicizing bilingual education in this way would make these programs vulnerable to attack. Such statements stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of the history of bilingual education in the post-Civil Rights era. It was precisely broader political struggles associated with the Civil Rights Movement that paved the way for bilingual education to become a reality in US public schools. It was the divorcing of bilingual education from political struggles through re-framing them as compensatory programs designed to fix the linguistic deficiencies of Latinx students that made them vulnerable to attack. This re-framing also limited their potential to contribute to social transformation. It is time that we reject this deficit perspective of Latinx students that frames their language practices as the root cause of racial

inequality and shift the focus back to the institutions that are the primary culprits in maintaining these racial inequalities.

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