

Fifth-Grade Bilingual Students and Precursors to “Subtractive Schooling”

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Abstract

In this paper, we present a yearlong ethnographic study of fifth-grade students who are either immigrants or the children of immigrants from Latin American countries, predominantly Mexico. We examined how they used their two languages at home, in the community, and at school. We also examined their perspectives, and those of their parents and teacher, about bilingualism and their awareness of barriers they may face in the future.

Interviews and observations suggest these students were in a supportive bilingual environment. Their teacher provided materials and instruction in both languages. As a fluent Spanish speaker and cultural insider, she believes that proficiency in Spanish is important and serves as a strong foundation for acquiring English. The students' parents all valued maintenance of Spanish, and several were proactive in trying to ensure their children remained fluent Spanish speakers. At the time of the study, most students could speak, read, and write Spanish fluently and were concurrently learning English. At first glance, it appeared that the students in this study had been largely sheltered from the pressures to assimilate and that their prospects for maintaining their native-language proficiency were favorable. However, contradictory messages about bilingualism soon became apparent. Students demonstrated awareness of the pressures they will face in the future and acknowledged they must be prepared to struggle to maintain their language and culture. This study's findings help to explicate the conflicts that students in upper elementary grades feel about being bilingual within the dominant English monolingual culture.

Introduction

In the children's book *Pepita habla dos veces/Pepita Talks Twice* (Lachtman, 1995), a young bilingual girl grows tired of translating for people who speak only one language and decides to stop speaking Spanish. Unswayed by arguments of the value of being bilingual, she continues with her resolve until a close call convinces her to change her mind. *Pepita Talks Twice* illustrates the conflicted feelings that some bilingual students have about speaking two languages; however, the story ends with the implication that Pepita will continue "talking twice" happily ever after.

In reality, Latinos in the United States face many more challenges than Pepita in maintaining their home language and culture. These include pressures to assimilate, devaluation of the Spanish language and Latino/a heritage, and limited support for learning and maintaining Spanish language and literacy. These challenges and barriers increase as children grow older and tend to be more removed from their family roots, and can have devastating consequences for many students. Aside from losing their home language and culture or having them diluted, and becoming figuratively if not literally estranged from their families and communities (Fillmore, 2000), Latino/a students have a well-documented and ever-increasing gap in achievement, as well as an increasing risk of school dropout (Cummins, 1986; Valencia, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999).

The rise of bilingual education seemed a giant step in the direction of valuing students' home language. However, despite what the label implies, the primary goal of most U.S. bilingual education programs is to develop proficiency in English. Maintaining home language and culture is at best a secondary goal (Valencia, 1991). Thus, traditional bilingual education models tend to be assimilationist and subtractive in nature (Roberts, 1995), with long-term social, academic, and, ultimately, economic effects (Cummins, 1986). Valenzuela's book *Subtractive Schooling* (1999) powerfully illustrates the negative consequences of the U.S. educational system for many Mexican and Mexican American students. From her 3-year study in a Texas high school, Valenzuela concludes: "I came to locate the 'problem' of achievement squarely in school-based relationships and organizational structures and policies designed to erase students' culture. . . . I became increasingly convinced that schooling is organized in ways that subtract resources from Mexican youth" (p. 10).

Purpose of the Study

In this paper, we present a yearlong ethnographic study of fifth-grade students who are either immigrants or the children of immigrants from Latin American countries, predominantly Mexico. These students have been and are currently receiving bilingual instruction in a supportive environment. We examined, through observations and interviews, how they use their two

languages at home, in the community, and at school. The students will soon enter middle school, where they will not have content or language support in Spanish, and most will attend high schools similar to the one described by Valenzuela (1999). Thus, we also examined students' perspectives and those of their parents and teacher about continuing to maintain and develop their bilingualism, and their awareness of barriers they may face in the future.

Review of Literature

Advantages of Being Bilingual

Individuals who can fluently use two or more languages are advantaged in many ways. Numerous studies have found strong cognitive, academic, linguistic, and social benefits in being bilingual (Cummins, 1977; Hakuta, 1986; Portes & Hao, 1998, Rumbaut, 1995). Further, there is an increasing demand in the United States for a multilingual work force. Yet, balanced bilingualism is rare. Even when children of immigrants retain some ability to speak their native language, few learn to proficiently read or write it. According to Portes and Hao (1998): "The United States is a veritable cemetery of foreign languages, in that knowledge of the mother tongues of hundreds of immigrant groups has rarely lasted past the third generation" (p. 269). The proportion of children of immigrants who remain fluent in their native language is shockingly low and steadily decreasing. Portes and Hao surveyed more than 5,000 second-generation immigrants from Latin America, Asia, Haiti, the West Indies, and other countries about their use and knowledge of English and their native languages. Few of these middle school students considered themselves fluent in their native language. Portes and Hao point out the irony that "many Americans spend long years in school to satisfy [the growing demand for a multilingual work force] by acquiring the very languages that the children of immigrants are pressured to forget" (p. 270).

Reasons for Language Loss

According to Fillmore (2000), language loss occurs in immigrant children because of both internal and external pressures. External pressures emanate from a society that sees cultural and linguistic differences in a negative light and generally treats immigrants with hostility. Almost daily, newspapers and other media report U.S. sentiments and policies against immigration, bilingual education, affirmative action, and any language other than English. Policies such as Unz's initiatives (propositions outlawing bilingual education in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts), high-stakes testing (Gutiérrez et al., 2002), and increasing support for English as the national language have led to the designation of the Spanish language and those who speak it as "pariahs" in school (Trueba, 2002, p. 13). Olsen (2000) states, "How quickly, how well, and in what manner immigrants learn English has become the major public issue in the socialization of immigrant children in the United States" (p. 197).

The influence of English-only advocates is increasing (Portes & Hao, 1998), perhaps partly due to the mistaken belief that continued use of the primary language at home and in schools will interfere with English language learning. There is no argument that proficiency in English is a necessary skill for life in the United States. However, many researchers have shown that even the children of recent immigrants learn English relatively quickly and demonstrate a preference for English over their native language, regardless of whether they have been in bilingual education programs (Fillmore, 2000; Orellana, Ek, & Hernández, 2000; Portes & Hao, 1998). Furthermore, students who develop strong linguistic and academic skills in their native language are better able to learn academic content in a second language (Moll & Dworin, 1996) and to achieve academic success (Reyes, 2001b). Thus, while most children who attend American schools learn English, the potential for language loss is enormous. This situation is not recent. Throughout the 20th century, until the 1960s, use of a language other than English was regarded as evidence of retardation and a major obstacle to success in U.S. society (Hakuta & Díaz, 1985). The ability to speak standard English is still regarded as a sign of intelligence and key to success (Shannon, 1995). Earlier immigrant groups, including southern and eastern Europeans and Asians, also lost their languages, but the process took place over two generations. Now this process is shorter; most children of immigrants lose their first language by the time they reach middle school (Portes & Hao, 1998).

Immigrant children who attend school, socialize with other children, and become language brokers for their families begin to internalize pressures to assimilate and to speak English exclusively (Fillmore, 2000). The immigrant children studied by Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2000) were aware of hostile feelings toward immigrants and saw negative images of themselves everywhere they looked, including at school. According to Olsen (2000), children learn quickly that being accepted depends on learning English and forsaking their home language: “The laughter that greets the newcomers with imperfect English, and the scorn that greets them when they are overheard speaking their native tongue are daily occurrences for most immigrant teens” (p. 198). Such experiences often have a cumulative, negative psychological effect on the identities of immigrant children, leading to self-hatred and inner turmoil, which are carried into adulthood. In interviews with bilingual education teacher candidates, Martínez (2000) found that these negative perceptions are not easily forgotten. One participant, looking back on her schooling as an immigrant child recalled, “You don’t fit in, and so you try everything you *can* to make yourself un-Mexican, or un-Hispanic, and make yourself more mainstream” (p. 99).

Disruptions in Family Relationships

Typically, parents receive mixed messages about the learning of English and maintenance of the home language and thus have conflicted views of their children's language use. Immigrant parents interviewed by Orellana, Ek, and Hernández (2000) believed that if their children were proficient users of English, they would be treated better and would gain more satisfying employment in the future. They were proud of their children, who were able to act as successful language brokers for the family by learning English quickly. At the same time, they were embarrassed that their children were losing their ability to speak Spanish. Indeed, while children in the primary grades spoke mostly Spanish at school, at home, and in social situations, older students gradually began to speak more English and to resist speaking Spanish; some even said they "hate" Spanish (Orellana et al., 2000). When children and their families cannot communicate fully, family values and cultural knowledge are not passed on to children; thus, some children may not develop a crucial sense of belonging and connectedness that comes through family relationships (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001). As Fillmore (2000) concluded from her study of an immigrant family whose children were becoming disconnected from the family language and culture, "It is not easy to socialize children in a language one does not know well. It takes thorough competence in a language to communicate the nuances of a culture to another" (p. 206).

Factors that Promote the Maintenance of Home Language and Culture

According to Portes and Hao (1998), schools and families play the most important role in fostering bilingualism. In areas with a high concentration of immigrants, schools serving communities with high socioeconomic status are most conducive to additive linguistic outcomes. Students from high-socioeconomic status bilingual homes whose parents model and value the home language while promoting English learning are also at an advantage in retaining their bilingual proficiency. Trueba and McLaren (2000) point to the importance of sociocultural factors, including a "critical mass" of immigrants in the community who speak the language, maintenance of close ties and frequent contact with family and friends in the mother country, and "the interdependence of families living on both sides of the border" (p. 65).

Changing what the general public feels and knows about learning two languages is essential. "Those who control schools," Halcón (2001) states, "still treat Spanish as a deficit to be eliminated if Latinos are to succeed in school. In contrast, Latinos argue that affirming the primary language is a necessary component of academic success" (p. 75) and that promoting bilingualism helps rather than hinders English development (Reyes, 2001b).

Martínez's (2000) longitudinal study following Latino/a bilingual teachers from their preservice preparation into their first years of teaching shows the inroads that can be made by individual teachers who are determined to help their students develop and maintain pride and proficiency in their language and culture. When she interviewed them about their experiences in school, participants recalled being called names, spit upon, and made to feel shameful about their identity. Several had rejected their home language and culture in an attempt to blend in and had to make great efforts to regain what they had lost. All teachers had vowed to make schooling a positive experience for their own students, instead of the negative one they themselves had experienced. When Martínez observed and interviewed the participants 2 years later, she found that as classroom teachers, they treated their students with love and respect as they worked to instill cultural awareness and pride, and to enhance students' sense of self-worth.

Studies of elementary students in bilingual programs demonstrate the successes that can occur when students are supported in developing and maintaining proficiency in Spanish. The teacher at the center of Shannon's study (1995) made her classroom a "site of resistance" to what she called the *hegemony* of English, and students in the classroom spoke, read, and wrote proficiently in both English and Spanish. Reyes (2001a) described several cases of spontaneous biliteracy among second-grade bilingual students, whose teachers fostered and supported the cultural and linguistic resources that each student brought to school. According to Moll and Dworin (1996), the key to "mediating external social constraints is that teachers create conditions in which both languages are treated, to the extent possible, as unmarked languages" (p. 240).

Method

Setting and Participants

Chavez Elementary School (a pseudonym) serves a low-income community on the edge of a large city in Texas. The vast majority of neighborhood residents as well as students at the school (89%) are of Mexican origin. Spanish language and culture are present in both the community and the school. Most employees in stores, restaurants, and other businesses are bilingual. Spanish and English signs and student work are posted in the school hallways, all written parent communication is in both languages, and Mexican cultural events are celebrated. Virtually all of the school staff and administration are bilingual, as are almost half of the teachers. There is one bilingual classroom at each grade level, from prekindergarten to sixth grade.

The primary participants in this research were 15 of the 18 fifth-grade students in Monica Reyes's (a pseudonym) bilingual education classroom. Almost half of the students were born in Mexico (one was born in El Salvador);

the others were born in the United States to parents who had recently immigrated from Mexico. Spanish was the dominant home language of all the students, and they were bilingual and biliterate to varying degrees. At the beginning of the school year, 10 of the 15 were stronger readers, writers, and speakers of Spanish than of English. Two were dominant Spanish speakers who had achieved grade-level scores on standardized tests of English oral language and literacy. The remaining three spoke primarily Spanish at home but used mostly English for reading, writing, and speaking at school. The teacher, Ms. Reyes, was a certified bilingual teacher in her second full year of teaching; she also taught fifth grade the previous year at the same school. She was a recent graduate of a traditional university teacher preparation program. Like many of her students, Ms. Reyes was the child of immigrant Mexican parents; her parents are now naturalized U.S. citizens. Her parents spoke Spanish; thus, Spanish was her first language. She learned English in primary school and considered herself a dominant English speaker, although she spoke Spanish frequently with friends and family.

Data Sources

The primary sources of data were transcripts of two sets of interviews with the students (focused on students' attitudes and beliefs about being and staying bilingual). The interview questions were asked in English and Spanish; students answered in either or both languages according to their proficiency and preference. The parents of 12 students were interviewed in Spanish. Data also included more than 300 hours of participant observation in the classroom and in the school with ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), informal conversations with students, formal and informal conversations with the classroom teacher, and interviews with two bilingual teachers in the school. As described by Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993), the relationship among data sources was interactive: "Through observations, the researcher gains a partially independent view of the experience on which the respondent's language has constructed those realities. The interview provides leads for the researcher's observations. Observation suggests questions for interviews" (p. 112). One example of this interactive relationship was an interview question that asked students, "How do you decide which language to use in different situations?" Through the use of field notes, we were able to show specific instances in which students used one language and/or switched languages (e.g., at lunch, during discussions of teacher read-alouds). Similarly, students' responses to interview questions led us to observe certain situations more closely (e.g., students' subtle "put-downs" about language use and pronunciation).

Using grounded theory methodology (Erlandson et al., 1993), we examined students' language use in various contexts, as well as students', parents', and teachers' ideas on bilingualism. Data analysis began at the onset of the study and continued through the final report-writing process. After 3 months

of observation and interviews, when a large body of data had been gathered, we began to read through the data in chronological order. In this open coding process, we wrote phrasal summaries and reactions while reading carefully through notes and transcripts and then wrote analytic memos (Erlandson et al., 1993). More focused coding followed, in which we unitized the data into the smallest meaningful parts (phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) about one topic and then constructed categories that captured recurring patterns in the data, consisting of both comparable examples and examples of variation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The two major categories were: (a) valuing of bilingualism and (b) pressures that work against maintaining bilingualism. After constructing initial categories, we again went through the data with these categories in mind, seeking to refine and extend them, but also remaining open to new categories. Through this process, we delineated subcategories and themes that will be explained in the following sections.

Results and Discussion

From our analysis of the interviews and field notes, we saw that there are many ways in which bilingualism is valued in this classroom and in students' homes. Students were explicitly and implicitly supported and encouraged to maintain Spanish language and culture.

As a cultural insider, Ms. Reyes shared her own experiences as a Mexican American and invited her students to do the same. She read culturally relevant texts, which affirmed her students' cultural identities, and she used cultural references to clarify concepts and teach vocabulary. Although English gradually became the major language of instruction in the classroom, students were never required to speak, read, or write exclusively in English. Spanish was used as an instructional tool—not only as a support for learning English, but so students could continue developing their proficiency in Spanish literacy. The classroom included books of high quality in both languages. On a regular basis, Ms. Reyes provided instruction in which students were encouraged to read, write, and speak in Spanish. In class discussions, she alternated languages and extended students' talk in both Spanish and English. While most students had a dominant language they used most of the time for academics, almost all did some reading and writing in Spanish, and several alternated almost equally between the two languages. Most spoke Spanish in informal situations. Research suggests that this classroom environment of language choice and valuing was a major factor in helping these students to learn English and to maintain Spanish (Fránquiz & Reyes, 1998).

In individual interviews and observations, the students demonstrated pride in their cultural heritage and language through their actions and words. When asked how they felt about being bilingual, all answered positively (e.g., "I'm proud of me," "I'm happy"). Although several spoke of the frustration and embarrassment they sometimes felt when playing the part of language

brokers for their families, they also expressed intense pride in their ability to speak both English and Spanish and to help their families. Students gave a number of reasons for wanting to continue their bilingualism, including gaining better and higher paying jobs, communicating with family members in the United States and Mexico, maintaining their cultural and linguistic roots (*raíces*), and helping people who speak only one language. For the same reasons, the students' parents were unanimous in their desire for their children both to learn English and to maintain Spanish.

Is a Supportive Environment Enough?

Despite the valuing of bilingualism shown in interviews and observations, students, their parents, and teachers demonstrated awareness that this supportive environment was temporary. There were implicit and explicit pressures pushing the students toward becoming monolingual speakers of English and barriers to maintaining Spanish that were not apparent on the surface. Students were already bracing themselves for a future that they knew would be coming soon and, in some cases, had already arrived. For example, several students expressed concern that some of their friends and relatives were "losing their Spanish." Isabel, who spoke mostly Spanish, and Diana, who spoke mostly English, were interviewed together. Isabel initiated a conversation about her younger cousin. She explained, "*El sabía más español, pero se olvida el español* [He knew more Spanish, but he's forgetting Spanish]." Later in the conversation, Isabel, referring to Diana, said, "She don't speak much Spanish." Diana hung her head, looked embarrassed, and then explained, "Sometimes, um, I'm forgetting the Spanish." Losing her Spanish was also distressing to Yolanda, who explained that she was becoming increasingly uncomfortable speaking Spanish, "[Be]cause I think that, that, I speak funny in Spanish." Paulo expressed regret that he was losing the ability to read and understand in Spanish: "*Cuando leo un libro en español, no lo entiendo* [When I read a book in Spanish, I don't understand it]." Continuing, he said, "Like easy books. Like my brother[']s little books like he's reading to me, and sometimes I read to him, and I don't understand the story."

There were several other students whose Spanish proficiency had eroded despite being in bilingual classrooms and living in Spanish-dominant homes. Indeed, more than half of the parents interviewed commented that their children were forgetting or becoming less fluent in Spanish. For example, despite her own and her daughter's reminders to keep up with Spanish, Andrés's mother lamented that her son was forgetting even simple words:

Hay veces que las olvida [palabras]. Como qué día, qué es domingo? Y unas cuantas palabras, cosas que se le olvidan. Y que ya, ya está dejando eso. Por eso, "no, no," le digo yo, "No, mi hijo" le digo yo. "Tienes que ver, cuando vas para El Salvador allá querías. Allí vas a andar hablando inglés con tu amigo y tus hermanos y ellos no

saben,” le digo yo. “Hable puro español aquí,” le digo yo. Y le dice [su hermana].

[Sometimes he forgets even the names of the days of the week and other words. He’s already leaving it behind. So I say, “No, son. You have to see that when you go to El Salvador, you will want to speak Spanish. If you speak English there, your friend and your brothers don’t know it,” I tell him. “Here (at home), speak Spanish,” I tell him. And his sister (tells him), too.]

Observations, as well as interviews with students, teachers, and parents, pointed to a number of reasons why students felt pressured not only to learn English quickly but to give up speaking Spanish. Some of these pressures were subtle; others were more explicit.

Factors that Work Against Maintaining Spanish

Social and peer pressures

Students described many instances in which they had felt uncomfortable speaking Spanish. Maricela, who arrived at Chavez in the middle of fifth grade, spoke about her experiences in the U.S.-Mexico border town where she lived with her family when she was in primary school. Maricela recalled students making fun of her and her brothers on the bus and in school because they spoke Spanish and did not understand English. She remembered how she felt and how she reacted: “*Ibamos calladitos ahí sin hablar con nadie, nada más nosotros. . . . Me sentía mal porque no tenía amigas. No tenía a nadie. Nomás mis hermanitos. Estuvimos como meses así* [We just kept quiet, not talking to anyone but ourselves. . . . I felt badly because I didn’t have friends. I didn’t have anyone, only my little brothers. We went for months like that].” Listening to his daughter’s memories, Maricela’s father empathized, speaking from his own experiences in trying to communicate with English-only speakers in his work: “*Se siente muy mal cuando uno quisiera hablar con alguien y poderle decirlo que uno quisiera decirle, y no puede* [It feels very bad to want to communicate with someone and you’re unable to].”

Yolanda, also a recent arrival to the school, had similar experiences in the schools in the midwestern United States, where she attended a bilingual education resource class for 1 hour per day. According to her mother, Yolanda was very unhappy in school and would often complain of stomach pains and headaches, begging to stay home. She told her mother that she did not have any friends and that the students made fun of her. The teacher informed Yolanda’s parents that, although her work was adequate, she rarely spoke in school and was afraid to ask questions even when she did not understand something. The teacher hypothesized that Yolanda was simply shy. Her mother had a different explanation:

Pero yo pienso, como era, casi siempre eran puros niños que hablaban puro americano, porque hablaban puro inglés, y como ella nomás hablaba español, se sentía ella como más mexicana. Que se sentía ella menos que ellos. Y le daba vergüenza hablar porque pensaba que todos le iban a apuntar o algo.

[But I think it was that almost all the other children spoke just English and since she just spoke Spanish, she felt more Mexican. She felt beneath them. And she was ashamed to speak because she thought that everyone would single her out or something.]

Even within their relatively insulated environment, students in the fifth-grade class had already begun to speak almost exclusively English and to exert peer pressure on their classmates. Andrés was notorious for teasing others about their Spanish accents and relatively limited knowledge of English. As Esperanza said, “Yes, Andrés is one of those. He makes fun of you: ‘Ha, you don’t know how to spell this. You don’t know how to write this.’” Isabel concurred: “Andrés, he always makes fun of us. Yeah, he say[s] that we are retarded.” Mrs. Cruz, a first-grade bilingual teacher who taught about half of the current fifth graders, said she had often observed this phenomenon of tremendous peer pressure during her many years of teaching at Chavez. As she explained, it intensifies as students move through the grades:

That is another thing I see. When the kids are here [in the primary grades] they are talking, they are using both languages and everything is fine. But once they get to a higher grade, for some reason, I don’t know if it is they are embarrassed or they start losing their language. They don’t want to speak Spanish anymore. I don’t know. They just want to forget their language. Why I don’t know. . . . They may speak it at home, but they feel embarrassed to speak Spanish among their peers.

On a more personal note, Mrs. Cruz described how peer pressure had influenced her nephew:

I remember my oldest nephew, he would refuse. And I would purposely speak to him in Spanish. And he would say, “Don’t talk to me in Spanish.” And I would say, “What do you mean? You are a Mexican American. You need to learn your language.” And . . . if he was by himself then it didn’t matter, but if his friends were around he would say, “Don’t speak to me in Spanish. Tell me in English.” And now he is trying to [learn to speak Spanish] but he says, “I should have listened to you.”

Family influences

In interviews, all of the parents in this study said it is important for children to know English well and to maintain Spanish so they can continue to communicate with their families, secure better jobs in the future, and be more

formally educated in general. At the same time, students were aware of subtle pressure from their parents or other family members. In an individual interview, Graciela commented: “Esperanza’s doing very well with her English. Most of our parents want their children to learn English.”

One way in which many children maintain Spanish language and culture is through contact with Spanish-speaking relatives in their home countries (Trueba & McLaren, 2000). However, given the expense of international travel and the economic challenges that all of these families faced (and in some cases because of undocumented status in the United States), some visit their homelands infrequently or not at all. For example, since his parents separated, Andrés’s family has had to cut back on trips to their homeland, and Isabel’s and Maricela’s families have not returned in many years.

Some family pressures were not so subtle. Sofía’s uncles have lived in the United States for many years. Although they speak Spanish at Sofía’s house out of respect for the wishes of their brother (Sofía’s father), they speak only English in their own homes. Sofía’s mother told us that Sofía prefers to speak in Spanish to extended family members, but her cousins do not always understand her, and her uncles and aunts pressure her to speak English. Graciela’s mother spoke at length about a running battle she has had with her husband’s family since Graciela was born. Graciela’s father’s family wants her to speak only English; her mother wants her to be bilingual:

“Es que todos mis nietos hablan puro inglés,” me dice [su abuela]. Y le dije, “Esta también lo va a hablar. Pero va a hablar el español también. Y la familia de él dice, “No, pues, se va a confundir y no va a poder.” “Y que no” les dije. “No, no es la primera ni la última. Es que ella habla bien los dos, y sí, los hablaban bien desde chiquita.” Voy a batallar mucho.

[Her grandmother tells me, “It’s just that all of my grandchildren speak English only.” And I told her, “She’s going to speak it, too. But she’s also going to speak Spanish.” And his (Graciela’s father’s) family says, “She’s going to be confused and is not going to be able to do it (speak both). And I told them, “No, it’s neither the first nor the last. She speaks both languages well and has since she was a child.” It’s going to be a struggle.]

Most parents considered it the job of the school to teach English and took the responsibility for maintaining Spanish themselves. Leila’s mother believed that her children would not forget Spanish (“*no creo que se les olvide el español*”), but she also expressed doubt (“*pero tal vez que sí*”). Indeed, from their study of bilingual families, Ada and Zubizarreta (2001) concluded that “most Latino parents do not understand how easy it is to lose a language” (p. 233). Research has shown that losing a language is far easier than maintaining one (Fránquiz & Reyes, 1998). The rapidity of language loss was even more apparent in the younger siblings of the fifth graders. In

prekindergarten, Sofía's brother was already beginning to identify himself as an English speaker and to insist on speaking English at home. As Sofía's mother said:

A veces me pide las cosas, me las pide en inglés, pero no lo entiendo. [Le digo]: "Dime que quieres. Pero dime en español. Es que yo no sé en inglés." "No," él dice, "tú tienes, te voy a decirlo en inglés para que aprendas tú también."

[At times he asks me things in English, but I don't understand it. (I tell him), "Tell me what you want. But tell me in Spanish because I don't know it in English." "No," he says, "you have to, I'm going to tell you in English so you can learn, too."]

According to Mrs. Cruz, many recent immigrants to the United States want their children to learn English "right away. That is their first question. 'Is my child going to learn English?'" Furthermore, according to Mrs. Cruz, many second- and third-generation parents were punished for speaking Spanish in school, so they not only want their children to learn English but do not want their children to speak Spanish at all. "I guess they had bad experiences growing up. . . . So they don't want the same thing for their child," she said. Children of second- and third-generation parents face even greater pressure to become monolingual than do students in bilingual programs.

Influences of school

Some students saw school as the major site of pressure for current or future loss of Spanish. For David, this push came early. He was the only student in the class who did not have any reading or writing instruction in Spanish because he was in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms until he arrived in our city during the year of the study. David virtually never read in Spanish, and it was a great source of frustration for him that he had never learned to write in Spanish. He said, "If I had been here in school [in a bilingual program], I coulda learned how to write Spanish." He said that although he is trying to teach himself, it is difficult: "I'm kinda learning how to write Spanish. I know how to write . . . words, but some parts I don't know how."

Diana began school in California and attended bilingual classes until the passage of Proposition 227, which outlawed bilingual education in California, in 1998. Diana went from mostly Spanish instruction in K-2 to all-English instruction in third grade. As a result, according to her father, "*Ella perdió un año*" [she lost a year] and was so far behind that she was again placed in third grade, in a bilingual classroom, when she moved to Texas. Speaking of Diana's schooling in California, her mother said: "*Si, tenían bilingüe, pero cambiaron unas leyes allá. . . . Y se atrasó ella porque tenía que estar en puro inglés*" [Yes, they had bilingual education, but they changed some laws there. And she regressed because she had to be only in English]." Furthermore, when the law changed, Diana's homework assignments were suddenly all in English,

and her mother was unable to provide support. She explained: “*Pues fue un poco difícil porque yo no sé inglés y no podía explicarle bien lo que ella quería, de la tarea no podía explicarle bien* [Well, it was a little difficult because I don’t know English and I couldn’t explain well what she wanted to know. I couldn’t explain her homework well].”

In a conversation with Diana and Isabel about their cousins’ loss of Spanish, the girls hypothesized that a predominately English school environment was responsible:

Diana: Um, my cousin, when she was little, she knew Spanish a lot. And then when she’s big, she doesn’t know any Spanish.

Author: Oh, why? What do you think happened?

Isabel: That’s the same thing that happened to my cousin—

Diana: I don’t know. And she doesn’t even understand.

Author: How did that happen? Do you know? Did they just quit speaking Spanish to people?

Isabel: I think they forgot like that because, um, the school my cousin, I think in their school they only talk in English.

Diana: That’s how they learn more in English than in Spanish.

The students seemed aware that bilingualism was important and was valued in their school, homes, and communities. However, interviews and observations reflected the contradictory messages received throughout their lives in the United States. They have been told that most middle school and high school teachers will not speak much if any Spanish, that they will be expected to do all work and pass high-stakes tests in English, and that they will be largely left on their own to continue learning Spanish. Future schooling was a source of obvious anxiety for the dominant Spanish speakers; they were already bracing themselves for a future they knew would come soon. Paulo, a U.S.-born student who prefers to speak Spanish, explained that he will soon have to change his ways because Spanish will not be tolerated: “Because in high school they talk mostly in English and write and they don’t know . . . Spanish. If I write in Spanish, they[’re] only going to say, ‘What do you write here?’” Esperanza, who is bilingual and biliterate, had a similar comment:

Yeah, because we know that in middle school there [are] not gonna be so much people that speak Spanish, so we try the *best* to express ourselves! Because at the university . . . a lot of students [who] go mostly are Americans and they are, they know a lot of English. They maybe . . . laugh at you or something.

Spanish-dominant Maricela added that she had been given a warning by her previous teacher: “*Mi maestra en Dawson me dijo que tenía que usar más inglés en la escuela donde estaba, porque no hablan [español] en seis* [My teacher . . . told me I have to use more English at school because the teachers don’t speak (Spanish) in sixth grade].”

The students’ comments about their school experiences prompted their teacher to reflect on her own schooling. The first child of Mexican immigrants, Ms. Reyes attended school near a large midwestern city. Officially, she was in bilingual education classrooms in kindergarten and first grade, although the regular classroom teachers did not speak Spanish and the majority of instruction was provided in English. A bilingual teacher’s aide supported the Spanish-speaking students. In second grade, Ms. Reyes “somehow tested out of the bilingual program.” At the time, she remembered feeling “very proud of myself because, you know, in second grade to be exited out of the bilingual program, which meant I was ready. But right now I just wish I had stayed. I wish they had continued giving me both.” In retrospect, Ms. Reyes realized that being bilingual was not valued in her school and that the purpose of the bilingual education program was simply to develop proficiency in English. Even within the bilingual program, as soon as students began showing signs of learning conversational English (and often before), Spanish instruction ceased. Although she spoke of her school experience fondly, she realized that she “would never have thought of speaking Spanish in school once I learned English.” In fact, she had to relearn much of the Spanish she once knew in order to become certified as a bilingual teacher: “Because since I’ve grown up it’s kind of been on my own, reading. My fluency, I’ve had to develop it on my own. Writing strategies. I really do wish I had continued [in the bilingual program].”

Barriers to bilingual instruction

In talking to the two bilingual teachers—Ms. Reyes and Mrs. Cruz—and Mrs. Guajardo, the school’s bilingual coordinator, we learned that teachers have their own pressures from the district and state. Even though the bilingual education teachers we interviewed at Chavez were committed to the idea that students should be proficient in both English and Spanish, each also spoke of the pressure to transition students to English quickly so that they could take the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in English before leaving elementary school. District guidelines only address ways for teachers to prepare students to pass the test in English; no mention is made for maintaining the home language.

Another major barrier to providing bilingual instruction, as Mrs. Cruz pointed out, was limited support for bilingual teachers. There was typically only one bilingual classroom per grade; therefore bilingual teachers rarely met together. In addition, they rarely received concrete guidelines, supervision, or feedback. Mrs. Cruz saw bilingual teachers in other schools “doing their own

thing” and instructing predominantly in English “because it is easier. You don’t have to deal with—you just do one lesson for everyone and that is that.” Another issue was the lack of instructional materials in Spanish. Although the situation had improved, finding quality materials in Spanish remained difficult. Mrs. Guajardo added that “the biggest problem is the sixth-grade level and beyond. Because the district provides Spanish materials up to fifth grade, but they don’t for sixth.” She continued:

I guess they figure by sixth grade they should really be getting English. But you still get some in sixth grade that are coming straight from Mexico. . . . [T]hey are not going to get that help in middle school because all they have is ESL. They do not have bilingual classes.

The Bilingual Teacher’s Dilemma

As a relatively new teacher, as well as a bilingual teacher who shares her students’ home language and culture, Ms. Reyes felt intense pressure for her students to achieve. Her dilemma, the major theme that characterized her talk throughout the school year, was how best to instruct her children in the present while preparing them for what they would face in the future. She worried that if they did not learn English in the supportive environment of elementary school, they would be lost when they moved to middle school, where there would be no Spanish-language instruction and no academic support in Spanish. In our very first meeting with Ms. Reyes, she described her worries that many of her students hardly spoke a word of English and that she felt she needed to “have them speaking, reading, and writing English” at grade level by the end of the year, when they would be expected to take the achievement test in English. She lamented the effect of this pressure on students and said many times, “It breaks my heart to think about it.” She felt tremendous conflict between these pressures and her personal goals for her students—maintaining oral and written Spanish and cultural pride.

Conclusions and Implications

This study examined the perspectives of fifth-grade students, their parents, and their teachers about bilingualism. These students were fortunate enough to be in an atmosphere at school and at home in which bilingualism was valued and fostered. The teachers whom we interviewed believe proficiency in Spanish is important and serves as a foundation for learning English. Students’ parents valued the maintenance of Spanish, and several were proactive in trying to ensure that their children maintained Spanish fluency. Their teacher spoke Spanish fluently and was a cultural insider. In their classroom, students could speak, read, and write in Spanish if they chose, and they had access to instruction and materials in both languages. An environment more conducive to bilingualism would be hard to find. At the time of the study,

most of these students were able to speak, read, and write Spanish fluently and were also learning conversational and academic English. At first glance, then, it appeared that the students in this study were largely sheltered from the pressure to assimilate and that they had positive prospects for maintaining their native language. Despite the predominance of cultural and linguistic pride evident throughout the field notes and interviews, however, students demonstrated awareness that they must be prepared to struggle mightily to maintain their language and culture. Several students described plans for maintaining Spanish even without instruction, including communicating with their relatives and friends in Mexico; reading and writing on their own; and maintaining friendships with other bilingual students. All were aware of the great effort this would take, and some had already begun to give up.

Thus, the findings of this study suggest that even when school and family situations are generally supportive of bilingualism, sociopolitical conditions exert tremendous pressures to speak, read, and write English only. Throughout the interviews, examples of contradictory messages about bilingualism were evident. One message is that knowing two languages is important, but a louder message says that learning English is more important (Orellana, Ek, & Hernández, 2000).

Research in preschool, primary, and elementary school classrooms describes teachers who make a difference in promoting the value of native language and culture. Students in these classrooms can maintain native language proficiency and even develop biliteracy (Moll & Dworin, 1996; Reyes, 2001a). Although these studies represent great hope, research with middle school and secondary students portends a dismal future for the survival of native language and literacy among immigrants and their children (Fillmore, 2000; Portes & Hao, 1998; Quiroz, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

The findings of the current study help to shed light on the contradictions between these divergent bodies of research by explicating the conflicts that students in upper elementary grades feel about being bilingual within a dominant English monolingual culture, even while they are in a supportive bilingual education environment. We plan to follow these students through middle school, high school, and beyond to trace the social, familial, political, and educational influences on their language and culture over time. How many will continue to speak, read, and write in Spanish and to identify with their families' communities in the face of academic and sociopolitical pressures? And to what extent? When they reach middle school and high school, they will not have access to instruction in Spanish. Furthermore, their home language and culture, and thus their identities, will likely be subject to implicit and explicit contempt (Olsen, 2000; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2000; Valencia, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). The future looks uncertain at best.

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