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Public Education for Democracy: Teaching Immigrant and Bilingual Children as Equals

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Public Education for Democracy: Teaching Immigrant and Bilingual Children as Equals

Objectives

Public education in the U.S. should be for all, although, when we look at public education through a genealogical or historiographic lens the tensions that are at play today have been at play from the start. These tensions arise from the very problem of the idea of “public.” The historical development of the U.S. was driven by a Manifest Destiny that meant white settlers and their government displaced all Native peoples in their way from coast to coast. This displacement included the genocide of millions. Those who have survived have been relegated to and then neglected on reservations (Brown, 1970). The children were deculturized and their languages were torn away from them in forced boarding schools (Spring, 2016). Millions of Africans were kidnapped and sold into slavery and men, women and children were systematically denied any form of education including literacy (DuBois, 1994 (1903); Douglass, F, 1995 (1845; Washington, B.T., 1995 (1901)). The War with Mexico ending in 1848 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo forced Mexico to “sell” and cede its entire northern territory which included the now states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Colorado, Utah (Galeano, 1971). This opened the West to expansion and further exploitation of Native people, the Mexicans and the Chinese laborers who came to build the railroad and work in mines. Native people, African Americans, Latinxs, and Chinese were all systematically denied the public education reserved for the progenitors of the white settlers, particularly those whose language is English, leaving much of the public denied.

The focus for us in this paper is on immigrant and bilingual students. Wiese & García (2001) provide a useful genealogy of federal legislation aimed to improve what was well established as failed education for

immigrant and bilingual students. With the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 (BEA) and its subsequent reauthorizations up until 1994, they point out how the education of bilingual students was framed primarily as a problem (Ruiz, 1984). The point became moot with the ratification of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) which did away with the BEA entirely and introduced standardized testing in English for all public school students without differentiation.

Standardized testing in English has become the central measure of school quality and student academic achievement. These testing regimes are onerous upon schools, teachers, and of course, students themselves, whether tests of English Language Arts and Math administered universally to gauge achievement or tests of English language proficiency administered solely to students identified as “English Learners” (EL). Prior research has noted concerns about validity in administering such tests to emergent bilingual students (Abedi, 2002; Solano Flores, 2006), as well as the ramifications of such tests, including most notably an implicit discouragement of bilingual instruction (Menken & Solorza, 2014), the tracking of EL-classified students into academic pathways with less engaging curriculum or college preparatory content (Callahan, Wilkinson, & Muller, 2010), and the inculcation of low self-efficacy among students who persist in this category (Dabach, 2014).

We contend that these various impacts are but stems growing from the single pernicious root that is the hegemony of English as a raciolinguistic project of American identity (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Shannon, 1995). Bowing to it, educators adapt to the testing requirements rather than questioning and resisting them (Freire, 1974). We argue that testing as currently constituted in the United States - atop a mountain of standards for academic content, teacher preparation, and teacher practice that minimally engage with the sociopolitical realities of immigrant and bilingual children - cements language hierarchies rooted in ethnoculturalist (racist) constructions of American identity that prize whiteness, Christianity, and English proficiency (Schildkraut, 2003). They do so by instilling “a surveillance that makes it possible to quantify, classify, and punish” (Foucault, 1975, p. 18) those acquiring English in schools. In a system that

supports white privilege and English monolingualism, testing in and of English thus distorts the education of bilingual students including the efforts of their teachers.

Our objectives in this work are twofold. First, we draw from observations from prior empirical work in elementary school classrooms to show how teacher practice and teacher-student relationships were constrained by the inescapable requirements of testing and accountability into *adaptation* (Freire, 1974), or the resignation of individuals to their circumstances. In turn, these requirements and the anxiety they instill minimize opportunity for *engaged pedagogy*, in which “teachers must be actively committed to self-actualization that promotes their own well-being...to teach in a manner that empowers students” (hooks, 1994, p. 15). Secondly, we reflect upon and offer insights from our trials and triumphs as teacher educators with the objective of presenting suggestions for preparing teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to engage alongside students in what Freire (1974, p. 39) characterizes as *critical consciousness*, a state of not only adapting to one’s realities but rather of questioning and seeking to change them for the better.

Theoretical Framework

This work draws on two separate theoretical foundations. The first is the concept of societal surveillance, particularly in education, advanced most notably by Foucault (1975) with his theorization of panopticism and the ever-present gaze of the powerful upon the powerless through observation, sorting, and discipline. Drawing on this early framework, various scholars have argued that mechanisms such as high-stakes tests, teacher observations, and rigid curriculum pacing guides serve to mechanize and standardize teacher practice as means of surveillance (Bushnell, 2003; Webb, Briscoe, & Mussman, 2009). The field of surveillance studies, however, has elaborated upon panopticism to more contemporary conceptualizations that offer much more pervasive and hegemonic versions of surveillance occurring not only in vertical

top-down fashion, but also horizontal and intrapersonal dimensions whereby teachers and students in fact police each other and themselves (Page, 2016). Moreover, these post-panoptic theorizations of surveillance note that while the panopticon oversaw present behaviors and addressed infractions reactively, current iterations rely on models and frameworks to anticipate negative outcomes (e.g.: poor scores on internal interim assessments as predictors of poor scores on high-stakes tests, low English proficiency scores as predictors of likely inability to participate in mainstream academic courses) and are thus predictive rather than reactive (Page, 2016). With respect to the education of immigrant and bilingual learners, we argue that testing, and its subsequent regimentation of curriculum and teacher practice, serves as a means by which to surveil and constrain teachers and students from questioning and resisting hegemonic English and its affiliated racist, classist, and jingoistic ideologies (Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000).

The second theoretical underpinning of this work is Freire's (1974) notion of critical consciousness. In *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1974), Freire posits that a major distinction between humankind and other living species is the ability to place the present into a temporal narrative that considers both causality and future outcomes. By viewing circumstances temporally, humankind is capable of perceiving critically, that is, with an inquisitive lens about the present conditions and with the potential to enact change upon them. Freire here distinguishes between *adaptation* and *integration*, with the former consisting of human-as-object that is merely adapted to its condition and adjusted to circumstance while the latter posits a human-as-subject with the "critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality" (p. 4). Teaching, Freire argues, must foster integration among students such that they are critically engaged with their realities and agentively seeking to improve conditions for themselves and others. This framing of "education as the practice of freedom" (Freire, 1974) has been taken up repeatedly, notably by bell hooks (1994), whose *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* advances a framework for engaged pedagogy rooted in her experiences attending segregated schools in the Jim Crow

South. Both seminal thinkers attest to a vision of teaching that engages with students dialogically, facilitates their self-actualization, and promotes a critical stance against societal injustices and hierarchies. These frameworks have likewise been adopted in the fields of bilingual and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teaching, which add that teaching in these contexts must also bring students' attention to linguistic and other social hierarchies that marginalize them for not mastering the dominant language, and relying upon tactics of dialog, resistance, and generativity to both support students in their learning and in becoming transformative agents for their own lives and realities (Flores, 2013; Shannon, 1995; Valdés, 1998).

Methods

We make our theoretical case through genealogy, a method of historiography and cultural critique that considers current circumstances and debates not merely through chronology or sequences of events in singular fields, but rather thematically and in attempts “to understand how various independently existing vectors of practice managed to contingently intersect in the past so as to give rise to the present” (Koopman, 2003, p. 107). This method of cultural study was pioneered by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, which sought to understand how prisons and criminal penalties had evolved over time from Medieval public torture practices to their present state of surveillance and incarceration. Foregrounding his study, Foucault (1975) explains that the work explores “a common history of power relations and object relations” (p. 24) and abides by the rule to “make the technology of power the very principle both of the humanization of the penal system and of the knowledge of man” (p. 23). In short, genealogy approaches historical analysis with an eye toward mechanisms of power and, for our present purposes, considers how changes in policy and practice in the education of immigrant and bilingual youth correspond to enduring social relations between these students and dominant groups.

Data Sources and Warrants for Argument

We include the genealogical review of the “public” in public education and how one group, immigrant and bilingual Latin@ students came to be sorted out from the public. From there we examine how testing fixes a white gaze (Yancy, 2017) on these students with testing. Data and evidence for testing as means of surveillance and constraint upon teachers and students relies on observations from empirical study of elementary school classrooms in the US, observations and artifacts from our work with practicing teachers as teacher educators in a university. Specifically, we turn to classroom observations as examples of teachers’ *adaptation* to regimes of control, whether through the expectations of testing or the rigid guidelines of prescribed curriculum, that in turn curtails’ students’ abilities to leverage their bilingual repertoires, explore weighty themes such as immigration and discrimination that press upon their lived experiences, and otherwise learn through meaningful and authentic engagement with their surroundings.

We draw upon our work with practicing teachers to highlight coexisting realities:

- 1) The lack of awareness of historical and contemporary marginalization of immigrant and bilingual children in US schools and society and,
- 2) Even in the presence of such awareness and a desire to change conditions for students, impediments ranging from antagonistic school administrators to scarce or inadequate resources to legitimate fears of testing and evaluation.

Significance

This work serves as a reminder and clarion call for the fields of bilingual and second language education. Through professionalization and incorporation into the academy, these fields concerned with the well-being of immigrant and bilingual youth risk co-optation into the very power relations that produced their marginalization (Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000). Moreover, through discourses of equity, regimes of accountability reinforced through high-stakes testing have gained support across the political spectrum

and even from advocacy organizations working on behalf of Latina/o communities. By revisiting seminal works and ideas about the emancipatory potential of education, our hope is to shift the discourse from the improvement of accountability systems and teaching practice to more fundamental transformations of schooling that compel teachers to be mindful of the vision of society toward which they are teaching and assume the role of transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1985). We imagine this transformative stance to be inclusive of all in public education, where we can “create an environment where everyone can be ‘smart’” (Gutierrez, et al, 2017, p. 39) and where determining smartness is not a selective and punitive system reserved for the oppressed and marginalized immigrant and bilingual Latinx students.

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