

Chapter 13

Words Were All We Had: Confronting Social Injustices Facing Hispanic Students in American Schools

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ABSTRACT

Language and identity are inextricably intertwined. Over the years, countless Hispanic students have been categorized dichotomously in schools in ways that marginalize their language practices and restrict their evolving identities. American public schools often unjustly force Hispanic students to deny who they are, stripping them of the ability to retain their self-claimed identity and linguistic freedom. This common practice in American schools is nothing short of social injustice. Therefore, the overall purpose of this study was to illuminate and more deeply understand Hispanic youth's experiences in schools and to examine closely through analysis of classroom discourse and interaction the identities and ideologies that come into play in FLL-HLL mixed classrooms. The analysis presented in this chapter reveals critical information about how these diverse students see themselves, information that might otherwise be constrained by schooling practices (i.e. labeling and categorization), which marginalize rather than empower diverse students.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my schooling, I refused to allow myself to be categorized as either 'a Spanish speaker' or 'an English speaker.' I spoke both; I was bilingual. I remained obstinate about retaining all of what I was and possessed. In spite of my insistence on linguistic freedom and success in achieving this for myself, English hegemony was the rule in schools and in the communities around me. That's how it was then and, sadly, how it is now (Halcón, 2011, p. 94).

As Halcón (2011) so poignantly proclaimed, his perceived obstinacy at school was simply rooted in an intense desire to retain, as he wrote, "all of what I was and possessed" as a bilingual in a world of English hegemony (p. 94). What distinguishes Halcón's tale from a U.S./Mexico border town in the 1950s

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to that of the scores of bilingual youth today is a sense of agency that Halcón held firmly on to amidst a restrictive environment that confronted him daily. While there are, of course, some ethnolinguistic crusaders like Halcón in American schools now, the voices of the vast majority are silenced by English-only policy and practices and powerful monolingual ideologies.

Over the years, countless Hispanic students have been categorized dichotomously in schools in ways that marginalize their language practices and restrict their evolving identities. Halcón (2011) desired a basic human right, afforded by his U.S. citizenship but which was not enacted accordingly in schools: to be exactly who he already was and to retain what he already possessed (culturally, linguistically, etc.) in spite of the outside world he encountered which attempted to strip him of that inalienable right. González (2011) underscored this point by coining the catchy phrase “words were all we had” to illuminate the notion that by forcibly eliminating the usage of Spanish from Hispanic students in impoverished communities, schools were in effect taking away the very last thing these people felt that had. He wrote of this very situation “nearly everyone in our border town was poor. Perhaps we imagined that words were all we had, and we were not about to give any of them up” (González, 2011, p. 27). With only a sliver of empathy, any human being would see the grave consequences of such a dire situation for Hispanic students, like González and Halcón (2011), who truly believed that schools forced them to give up the very last thing they had, the very essence of who they were and wanted to be. There is only one way to interpret a scenario whereby powerful institutions, here American public schools, unjustly force Hispanic students to deny who they are, stripping them of the ability to retain their self-claimed identity and linguistic freedom. This all-too-common practice in American schools is nothing short of social injustice.

Therefore, the overall purpose of this case-study of an American Spanish/English bilingual middle school (typically ages 11-13) was to illuminate and more deeply understand emergent bilingual youth’s experiences and to examine closely through analysis of classroom discourse and interaction the identities and ideologies that come into play in FLL-HLL mixed classrooms. The following research questions were developed with this goal in mind. The overarching question is: In a heterogeneous Spanish class of so-called heritage language learners (HLLs) and foreign language learners (FLLs), what does the classroom discourse reveal about students’ experiences as language learners and users? 1.) What positions, if any, do HLLs assume and in what ways are they positioned by other classroom participants? 2.) What positions, if any, do FLLs assume and in what ways are they positioned by other classroom participants? 3.) What do these positions suggest about the students’ local identity negotiation processes and ideologies they may subscribe to? As is customary in case study research, generalizations to other classroom contexts are not intended. However, there is much to be learned about what transpired in this culturally and linguistically diverse classroom that could benefit other ‘super-diverse’ schools around the globe, namely an acknowledgement of a disconnect between the dichotomous school classification system and students’ own self-claimed identities. Byrd-Clark (2010) also noted this disconnect in her study of Canadian youth of Italian origin who were studying French as a Foreign Language,

...many individuals find themselves in a perpetual tension between self-chosen, invested identities and the attempts of others to position them differently. This tension between a dominant ideology of national homogeneity and actual heterogeneity has important implications in liberal states for multilingual identities and social justice (p. 385).

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