Chapter 1
Sustaining the Sociopolitical Spirit of Bilingual Education:
Assessment Practices and Evaluative Policies for Students Minoritized by National Background and English-Language Proficiency

Saúl I. Maldonado
San Diego State University, USA

Margarita Machado-Casas
San Diego State University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors contribute results and recommendations from a study featuring the assessment perspectives of school and district administrators of bilingual education programs from two regional areas in the United States. They also present research literature that informs how teaching and learning environments structure membership and belonging as social desirability factors for students from diverse national and English-language backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

Although teachers can communicate thoughts and concepts to students without using language,[1] (e.g., images, gestures), language is the primary tool for learning (Vygotsky, 1986), particularly in schools (Téllez, 2010). Teachers' and students' diverse language background experiences contribute to continuous negotiations of teaching and learning. Halliday (1993) suggests three distinctive categories to describe the relationship between language and learning: (1) language learning, (2) learning through language and (3) learning about language. Halliday also offers a taxonomy of language functions: *instrumental*, for the work of life; *regulatory*, for social control; *interactional*, for establishing social relationships;

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personal, for creating "self-texts;" *imaginative*, for expressing and fantasizing; *heuristic*, for learning about the world; and *informative*, for conveying information. In sum, learning is dependent upon the "limitless flow of language to negotiate our roles, test the limits of each other's power, and express love and affection" (Tellez, 2010, p. 100).

In the United States, students developing their English-language competence are minoritized by their language and background. The U.S. Department of Education defines students who have "not yet attained proficiency in the English language" as both English Language Learners (ELLs) and people "for whom English is a second language" (NCES, 2011, p. 351). The current federal designation of ELLs is not associated with: (a) measurable objectives for defining what attaining proficiency looks like in U.S. schools, (b) whether English is a student's first, second, third or fourth language; or (c) whether students were born, or have experienced schooling, internationally. Moreover, whether students' schools are situated in environments where languages other than English are dominant also influences students' speaking, reading, writing, and understanding of the English language (Gándara & Orfield, 2010; Gifford & Valdés, 2006; Olsen, 2010). Considering such complexities requires the use of a term broader than the federal definition of ELLs; we use students minoritized by their language background (LM). In certain classrooms, schools, and states, students whose primary or home language is not English, and who may or may not be proficient in English, sometimes comprise a numerical majority; however, one affordance of the LM term is its explicit connection between language background and sociopolitical realities, such as likelihood to live in poverty, attend underperforming schools, and achievement disparities on standardized tests, relative to non-LMs (Abedi & Gándara, 2006; Mosqueda & Maldonado, 2013).

LMs comprise a sizable population of students in U.S. schools. Recent demographic data calculates that 22 percent of children and youth ages 5 to 17 in the United States (or 12.1 million children and youth) spoke a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). LMs represent a wide variety of national backgrounds that include Native Americans, recent immigrants, U.S.-born children and grandchildren of immigrants, as well as citizens of the commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Schools sometimes use students' language and national backgrounds as social and cultural assimilation mechanisms to disconnect students from their family and community cultural affiliations (Darder & Uriarte, 2012). Particularly, language policies and practices in schools are structured to allow "the dominant culture to continue to hold power" (Téllez, 2010, 48). Although objects, events, and processes can be represented and communicated using complex gestures, the receptive and productive derivatives of language—reading, listening, writing and speaking in English—are used to exacerbate social and racial-ethnic inequities in schools (Hernández, 2017).

Understanding the processes and complexities of LM and immigrant students requires the integration of sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives. Sociocultural concepts such as communities of practice, and learning as belonging, are distinctive but synergistic, with sociopolitical concepts such as social justice and transformation (Bunch, 2003; 2013; Kanno & Harklau, 2012). Gutiérrez (2010) describes a sociopolitical stance as "uncovering the taken-for-granted rules and ways of operating that privilege some individuals and exclude others" (p. 4). Politicians in the U.S. use language to communicate racial-ethnic privilege and discriminatory exclusion based on national origin (Saul, 2017). Educators in schools and districts serving LM and immigrant students labor in a social context where political rhetoric and discourse promote patriarchy, white supremacy, and xenophobia. Societal priorities are reflected in schools via policy mandates, instructional curricula, and the myriad of student achievement measures such as grade point averages and standardized test scores. The language of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in public schools is the primary tool for learning and a socialization mechanism that influences