

# **LATINA/O TEACHER INSURGENCY AND NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE TO ENGLISH-ONLY POLICIES IN URBAN SCHOOL CLASSROOMS**

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Teacher insurgency is on the rise as critical educators refuse to accept the authoritarianism of English-only reforms by struggling to undermine current educational policies while at the same time advancing alternatives. Federal hijacking of language policies - presently manifested by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) - is being met with opposition from many teachers, some of who engage in subversive acts aimed at transforming the schooling experiences for their bilingual students. Although teacher resistance is often overlooked in educational research, it is imperative that we understand how critical educators engage in resistance strategies that counteract toxic educational practices. Teachers' subversive acts in taking ownership of their labor - using their own curricula, contesting and undermining administrative authority, and forming political alliances with parents - provide a theoretical starting point to explore teachers' labor as transformative political resistance.

As English-only policies weigh heavily on the backs of teachers, now is the time to explore oppositional acts of resistance by critical educators committed to safeguarding bilingual education. As a teacher educator, I provide a political space in my courses for teachers to develop oppositional consciousness and engage in political acts that can serve as manifestations of resistance. Informal and fluid political communities are established whereby teachers form alliances with peers to corroborate, support, and engage in both clandestine and overt acts of resistance. Here, I expose the work of five Latina/o bilingual teacher insurgents with whom I worked closely and who I supported throughout their teacher education program in actively practicing oppositional acts of resistance.<sup>1</sup> These teachers identify and define their work as radical pedagogy. Although each teacher practices resistance in different ways, they all consider themselves radical change agents, allowing me to group them under the umbrella term, teacher insurgents.

These bilingual teacher insurgents are actively engaged in counteracts in urban schools to oppose the primacy of monolingual education as articulated in NCLB. Through their counterstories I demonstrate that teacher insurgents are: (1) actively resisting English-only policies and promoting bilingualism; and (2) undermining scripted programs and testing raids geared for language minority students and infusing their classrooms with student-centered curricula.

I would like to highlight that this is an ongoing study to explore teacher insurgents' labor. Through this work, I hope to connect with other teacher educators interested in fueling a mass mobilization to shut down oppressive English-only policies. I propose a fluid framework for teacher education programs that can better meet the needs of critical educators invested in resistance vis-à-vis monolingual language practices in schools. By developing oppositional consciousness and activism in teacher education programs, we can better prepare teachers to undermine oppressive English-only policies currently promoted by NCLB.

## **Politics of Resistance vis-à-vis English-Only Policies**

Federal implementation of NCLB reaffirms the supremacy of monolingualism for language minority students. NCLB has replaced the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, formerly Title VII, with the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act, or Title III, of No Child Left Behind. The words bilingual have been taken out of the title and students formerly identified as English Language Learners are now labeled Limited English Proficient (LEP), giving way to deficit-thinking attitudes about students whose native language is not English. Although NCLB does not prohibit federal funding for bilingual education, it forcefully ends federal support for bilingual education. It emphasizes the "rapid acquisition" of English and the "quick exit" from Title III programs, which ultimately contradict strong research claims of the benefits of longer-term developmental bilingual education programs (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Slavin & Cheung, 2003; Cummins, 2000).

The relentless chipping away of bilingual education has immediate consequences for language minority students. Wright (2005) argues that NCLB is failing to meet the needs of language minority students. He states that the goals of "LEP" programs are simply to mainstream students as soon as possible and to teach them the content of the state standardized exam. This pressure of raising scores discourages instruction focusing on the true needs of "LEP" students. In addition, the majority of "LEP" students are being forced to take standardized tests in a language in which they are not yet proficient. Teachers are being pressured to abandon what they recognize as good instruction for "LEP" students to prepare them for tests.

In California, the effects of Title III interact with Proposition 227 (the 1998 "English for the Children" law which dismantled bilingual education programs and replaced them with English immersions models) and other policies and practices highlighting standardized testing and new reading curricula. Implementation of Proposition 227 coincided with a state-wide phonics-based reading reform, the California Reading Initiative. As a result, curricular programs, most notably Open Court, materialized in large districts like the Los Angeles Unified School District. Highly scripted lessons with a sizeable amount of de-contextualized skills practice became common practice in urban classrooms. Scripted programs compounded with increased testing requirements in English forced teachers to emphasize de-coding skills and abandon meaningful literacy teaching (Gandara, 2000; Gutierrez et al., 2002).

In California, federal and state policies coincide to reaffirm English as the superior and sole language to be learned in school. Putting an end to bilingual education reasserts monoculturalism and monolingualism as central principles governing school instruction. In California, Gutierrez et al. (2002) argue that this political backlash is rooted in White discontent over recent trends in California, notably the "increasing political influence and social presence of people of color, particularly immigrant Latinos and Asians coupled with a perceived loss of entitlement, and in particular a perceived decrease in access to elite educational institutions and to the marketplace" (p. 338). Ultimately, monoculturalism and monolingualism uphold White privilege by silencing multiple voices and perspectives, reinstating the learning of English as the primary vehicle for assimilation.

Although we can expend much research energy on the shortcomings of anti-bilingual education measures, whether manifested in Proposition 227 or NCLB, the reality is that teachers are facing increasing pressures to abide by these mandates. It is imperative then, to document and expose the work of teacher insurgents who actively engage in oppositional acts to undermine these policies. Although NCLB impacts all language minority students and teacher insurgency can be found across all groups of teachers, in this space I document the work of Latina/o bilingual educators who work with Spanish-speaking students.

### **Transformational Resistance, Insurgent Acts, and Latina/o Bilingual Teachers**

Resistance theories and transformational resistance provide appropriate lenses for researching oppositional acts by Latina/o teachers working with Spanish-speaking students. Critical education scholars are revisiting theories of resistance in light of oppressive educational practices. Resistance Theories grew from a response to social reproduction models of education that provide a deterministic explanation of the roles of schools in reproducing the economic goals of society. Although resistance theorists confirm the idea that socio-economic structures do work through culture to shape the lives of students, they also recognize that cultural attitudes and practices do not necessarily reflect structural determinants or dominant ideologies. Resistance theory proposes a dialectical relationship between structure and agency. Dominant ideology and structures of oppression do affect cultural practice, but the difference here is that individuals do not necessarily respond in a passive manner. Although social reproduction may ultimately occur, resistance forces one to see culture as undefined, fluid, and contested (Apple, 1995; MacLeod, 1987; Willis, 1977).

Equally important, a theory of resistance embodies not only political and social implications but moral and ethical ones as well because it "takes the notion of emancipation as its guiding interest" (Giroux, 1983, p. 290). To that extent, schools can and do serve as sites of resistance and struggle against domination whereby educators concerned about social inequality can encourage forms of opposition that lead to the eradication of inequalities in schools and in society (Giroux, 1983).

The idea of transformative resistance is integral to our discussion of teacher insurgency. Critical race scholars have tapped into this idea of transformative resistance by exploring oppositional acts by people of color (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Covarrubias & Revilla, 2003; Yosso, 2000). For instance, Delgado Bernal's (1998) reexamination of the 1968 East Los Angeles Blowouts illuminates the transformational potential of resistance. Building on Giroux's description of resistance, Delgado Bernal rearticulates the characteristics of oppositional behavior and suggests four various types of oppositional behavior: reactionary behavior, self-defeating resistance, conformist resistance, and transformational resistance. Although oppositional acts by Latina/o educators fall within various categories of oppositional behavior, the idea of transformational resistance "offers the greatest possibility for social change" because it combines both a deeper level of understanding and a commitment to change (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 319).

Building on the work of Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), I concur that transformational resistance allows one to look at resistance among teachers of color that is "political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change are possible" (p. 320). This article incorporates a model of transformational resistance that comprises the dialectic between structure and agency in examining the oppositional behaviors of Latina/o teachers working with historically marginalized students. Here, I extend the framework of transformative resistance to include the concept of insurgency. This distinction allows me to encapsulate acts that are distinctly conscious, overt, aggressive, and guided by a sense of urgency. Below I present some strategies Latina/o insurgents use in the struggle to create a less oppressive learning environment for

their Spanish-speaking students. These strategies do not constitute an exhaustive list of oppositional acts aimed at changing the schooling experiences for Spanish-speaking students. In addition, these examples are not limited to certain groups. Instead, our discussion of oppositional acts points to some forms of transformational resistance that some Latina/o teachers engage in. This description serves as a starting point as we start to think about supporting teacher insurgents who are committed to making available a more socially just learning environment for Spanish-speaking students and other language minority students.

## **Resisting English-Only Policies and Safeguarding the Spanish Language**

The bilingual educators in this study work in elementary schools characterized by strict English-only policies. All of the teachers contend that their schools discourage the use of Spanish and provide minimal English Language Development (ELD) resources and support. For instance, at one school site, there are no individual student ELD portfolios that contain information on language levels in reading and writing to better prepare teachers at the beginning of the year. In spite of this, all the teachers affirm that they rely on their students' primary language in their teaching. These educators admit that they overtly resist the demands of administrators to silence the use of Spanish in the classroom.

The oppositional act of reinstating bilingualism in classroom instruction stems from a critical awareness that bilingual education benefits English language learning students. All of the teachers possess Bilingual, Crosscultural, Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) certification and argue that in their teacher training programs they were exposed to research that pointed to the benefits of bilingual education. Bilingual education programs that emphasize a gradual transition to English and offer native-language instruction in declining amounts over time, provide continuity in children's cognitive growth and lay a foundation for academic success in the second language. By contrast, English-only approaches and quick-exit bilingual programs can interrupt that growth at a crucial stage, with negative effects on achievement (Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 1992). One 2nd grade teacher concurs:

I was trained to use Spanish in the classroom. I know what the research states and so of course I'm going to use their primary language. But here I am in a school that says the exact opposite. I ask, "Why do you think English-only is the way to go?" They can't answer me, or they don't want to because it's just not that important whether or not these kids succeed.

All of the teachers point to increasing pressure to use English in the classroom. The schools outline specific language immersion models that limit the use of the primary language. For these bilingual teachers, school policies and practices contend that the primary language is only to be used for clarification purposes. These policies ultimately discount the benefits of native language instruction in the content areas. As a result, the students' learning becomes focused solely on language acquisition over content area knowledge. One 5th grade teachers expounds:

My principal doesn't care if I don't teach Social Studies or Science, it's always about the language, the reading, the writing. We are asked to spend most of the day on phonics instruction, reading comprehension, and drill stuff like sight words and vocabulary. This is not a good education. They need to know about history and the solar system, things that my kids get excited about learning.

The teachers contend that the education their students receive is dismal and limiting because it is focused on decontextualized phonics-based instruction. To counter this trend, the teachers and students incorporate a more wide-ranging literacy program into their classes - one that includes among other things, reading stories and novels in Spanish. In the focus group interview, teachers talked about their main objective: offering their students a rich and varied literacy environment. One 4th grade teacher claims:

My students come from cultural backgrounds that are rich in literature. So reading them stories written by Mexican writers, for example, is letting them know that knowledge of their language is a part of cultural identity. I know they watch TV in Spanish with their families and I know their families can help them read these stories and poems at home, so I have to make the most of that teaching opportunity.

These bilingual teachers also utilize Spanish videos, songs and TV shows to further infuse the classroom with the students' native language. The teachers know that the students are watching TV shows in Spanish, so they capitalize on this and incorporate this knowledge into the classroom. One 5th grade teacher states:

Of course I know these students are watching novelas every night with mom and dad. I am too. I tape some of the episodes and bring them into class. The kids can't believe that I'm doing this, since they are so used to the other kind of learning. But I know I can have some really good conversations with my kids if I start with what I know they are

doing at home. They're interested in the characters, the climax, the plot, so this is maybe how we're going to learn about the parts of a story.

In addition, the bilingual teachers make sure to use their students' native language so students have access to grade-level content. This sometimes involves recruiting parent volunteers so that elaborate lesson plans and projects can take place. One 2nd grade teacher explains:

I find that if I involve my parents, my principal feels like he can't really say something to me. When he sees me outside with my kids doing a lesson on murals, and he sees that there are 4 or 5 parents really getting into it with the children, what is he going to do...remind me about Open Court and what page I should be on?

Using Spanish in the classroom, despite administrative pressures to curtail its use, provides a more just learning experience for language minority students. As advocates for bilingual education, these teachers are making sure that their language minority students develop a strong Spanish language base. By safeguarding the primary language, these teachers make the case that their students receive a more challenging and meaningful educational experience. Using Spanish, for example, prevents their students from falling behind in content area knowledge. Professional risk-taking, in the form of defying monolingual school policies, is a daily reality for these educators.

### **Undermining Scripted Programs and Testing Raids and Infusing Classrooms with Student-Centered Curricula**

Scripted reading instruction is reading instruction where the commercial reading program, not the classroom teacher, determines what the teacher says during instruction and/or the particular lessons and the pace at which the lessons are taught (e.g., so many lessons taught in so many days). The teacher's role is to execute the plan of the commercial program without making adjustments for the instructional needs of the children in the classroom. As a result, scripted teaching with students results in limited educational learning opportunities (Coles, 2000; Moustafa & Land, 2002; Taylor, et al., 2000). For instance, Moustafa & Land (2002) found that there was no evidence that Open Court fosters higher early reading achievement among economically disadvantaged children. They also found that there was no significant difference in the average SAT 9 reading scores between schools using Open Court and school using the non-scripted programs serving similarity disadvantaged children.

Accordingly, these bilingual educators refuse to implement scripted curricular programs, arguing that they do not help with language acquisition and are detached from the lived experiences of their students. Instead, these teachers offer rich and varied student-centered curricula. All of the teachers spend most classroom instruction on developing literacy skills by incorporating activities and projects that are meaningful for their students. This might include reading stories that are culturally-relevant, watching films about their histories, current events, pop culture, or having discussions on issues of identity and family. As one 2nd grade teacher explains, "I know my kids because we do things that give me those opportunities to understand them and to create an intimacy that I couldn't do with the books and the lessons that the district gives me."

All the teachers argue that their students find it difficult to engage with curriculum like Open Court. One 4th grade teacher, however, co-opts the Open Court curriculum to advance critical thinking. He states, "Okay so you tell me I have to use these books, well I guess then I will, but maybe not in the way you intended." This teacher uses Open Court stories as a starting point to develop critical thinking skills. The students engage in activities that allow them to deconstruct the text in light of racism. He consistently asks his students, "Who is missing in this story? And why do you think so?" His students also participate in letter writing campaigns targeted toward the companies that manufacture these curriculum packages.

For one 5th grade teacher, there are simply other more pertinent issues that need to be addressed in her classroom. She works in an inner-city school where racial tensions between African-American and Latinos run high. She states:

My kids are dealing with some heavy stuff when it comes to race. They are in the middle of this race war at school, when they walk home, everywhere. So this is what I am going to spend time on. We need to talk about this and figure out what's going on. What I end up with is a curriculum that's probably more sophisticated and critical than the Open Court stuff. [Open Court is] so watered down and completely oblivious to the real world these kids live in. I mean are they going to read a story about how to make tortillas, or are we going to talk, read, and write about what's going on right now.

For one 3rd grade teacher, the decision to resist prepackaged curricula stems from a commitment to ensure that the learning space is protected and centered around student interest. She states:

The same message being sent to my students is being sent to me. You're not a critical thinker, you cannot decide what's best for you, do as you're told. I'm tired of it. My students and I are going to decide what's best for us, not some outside agent developing these one-size fits all program...I can guarantee rich students in rich schools would not put up with Open Court.

Teachers resisting scripted curricula parallels struggles with the testing raids that attack their language minority students. Pressure to teach to the test is undermined in these teachers' classrooms. One 5th grade teacher adamantly refuses to spend time on test preparation. "They expect me to walk into the classroom everyday and look these kids in the eye and subject them to this drill routine that insults their intelligence. I just won't do it." Another 5th grade teacher argues:

My students can't read in English and now they have to sit through a week of this stuff. They just sit there and bubble stuff in. Some of them get creative and make pictures with their scantron bubbles. They know this is not meant to help them. It sends them the message again that they are deficient because they cannot speak English and that they don't measure up.

During the focus group interview, the teachers strategized on how to help other teachers and students resist taking these exams. Although these teachers all encourage their parents to request waivers that exempt them from taking these exams, they are in the process of devising more confrontational appeals to their district so that children in other classrooms can be spared the unnecessary assault of having to take standardized tests in a foreign language.

Resistance to scripted curricula resulted in student-centered and innovative learning experiences for language minority students. Classroom observations of these teachers revealed motivated and engaged students who worked on activities and projects that never required the "motivation" that is so often required in formalized lesson plans. The students were animated and captivated, giving me a sense that the classroom space was truly theirs. In one class, I observed the teacher use MTV Spanish videos to discuss images of beauty in the media. The students learned new vocabulary and new forms of oral and written expression to develop critical thinking skills. This stands as a stark contrast to other classroom observations where teachers desperately try to sell repackaged lessons to uninterested students.

### **Possibilities of Teacher Insurgency in Teacher Education**

Teachers are at the mercy of a system in which their teaching has become increasingly prescribed and monitored by external agencies. Accordingly, teachers are increasingly ill-prepared to contest the conservative and oppressive attitudes and policies that permeate schools. We know that educators who conscientiously practice empowering and autonomous teaching practices are often marginalized. Critical and responsible teachers too often find themselves treated as pariahs, outsiders who risk banishment with their "bad attitudes" and their reluctance to become "team players." Resistance is viewed negatively, and so the work of many critical educators remains unsupported in our teacher education programs.

Teacher preparation programs must support teachers in developing oppositional consciousness aimed at resistance. Developing and supporting oppositional consciousness prepares teachers to undermine, reform, or overthrow oppressive policies impacting language minority students. Courses should provide reflective and collaborative spaces for students to explore oppression and resistance and to develop concrete strategies for creating change. It is critical, then, for teacher insurgents to build alliances with other educators who resist and change what often seems a hegemonic system of power relations. For instance, instructors and students could explore examples of organized resistance by grassroots organizations and make contacts with individuals and organizations committed to protecting the language rights of students in our schools. Ultimately, tapping into oppositional consciousness and activism enforces the idea of teachers as political agents of change.

If we are committed to addressing monolingualism, equity, and social justice in a substantive way, then teacher education programs must encourage and support insurgent acts that create a more just learning environment for marginalized students. Concretely, this means overtly supporting our teachers to implement bilingual instruction, coordinating mass demonstrations and protests during periods of standardized testing, institutionally and systematically defending teachers who corroborate with parents to sign waivers on behalf of Spanish-speaking students and other language minority students, and backing teachers in undermining scripted programs that do not meet the needs of language learners.

Documenting the political acts of Latina/o teachers initiates a dialogue of how change can take place. I hope that through their voices and perspectives, readers have learned something about the possibilities of teacher insurgency.

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## Endnotes

1 - In-depth qualitative research for this study began in 2002 at four urban school sites in Southern California. The five bilingual teachers work in classrooms comprised of only Spanish-speaking students at school sites characterized by language policies that push for the rapid acquisition of English, obligatory use of scripted reading programs and rigorous testing preparation curricula. Qualitative methods included individual interviews, group dialogues, classroom observations, and discussions. All interviews and observations were coded for analysis. Through this process, recurrent patterns were discovered and grouped into major themes that form the assertions of this study. The experiences of the critical educators along these themes are presented through direct quotations and vignettes and tied together through interpretive analysis (Emerson et al., 1995; Erickson, 1986).

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