

Paths to Empowerment Among Latina Students and Teachers in Lawrence Township

Sophia Muston

Indiana University

Author Note

This paper was prepared for Latinas In the U.S., L104, taught by Dr. Sylvia Martinez.

Abstract

Historically, native speakers of Spanish have faced linguistic repression in the U.S. through legal sanctions and punishment. Previous research has shown that Latinx students in traditional classrooms additionally face lack of support and cultural insensitivity, which constitute a “subtractive schooling” approach. One-way and dual immersion programs emerged as ways to promote bilingualism and cultural exchange, but in the process have also fostered agency among Latina students and countered the effects of traditionally subtractive classrooms. My K-12 schooling was done at a one-way immersion program in Lawrence Township, on the North side of Indianapolis. The program has since transitioned to dual immersion. Through interviews with a selection of my teachers, administrators, and Latina classmates, I reached several conclusions. Latina students, particularly first-generation immigrants, are empowered to claim access to educational spaces (specifically in the Lawrence Township immersion program, but also in a wider context) through three key factors: presence of meaningful role models, presence of administrative/political resources, and fostering of linguistic and cultural exchange.

Keywords: Latinas, K-12 schools, immersion, role models, empowerment, exchange

In the ten days following the 2016 presidential election, the Southern Poverty Law Center recorded that nationwide, 280 anti-immigrant hate incidents occurred, with aggressors often stating immigration status and national origin as the motivations for their attacks (2016). Meanwhile, populations of Latinx and recent immigrant students are growing in school systems like Lawrence Township, situated on the North side of Indianapolis, where the percentage of Hispanic students at one high school has risen steadily from 6.2% to 17.5% over the past decade (INDOE 2016). More than ever, it is imperative for administrators and educators to recognize and cater to the needs of these populations. This paper focuses mainly on the educational experiences of students who are first-generation immigrants and whose native language is Spanish, though certainly not all Latinx students fall into this category.

U.S. classrooms have historically been spaces of linguistic repression for Spanish speakers, whether advertently or inadvertently. For instance, “No Spanish” rules prohibiting utterances in Spanish on school grounds were common through the 1970s (Valenzuela 1999, p. 172). They were enforced through corporal punishment and humiliation, even by educators who themselves were Hispanic (MacGregor Mendoza 2000). Until the landmark *Mendez v. Westminster* decision in 1946, segregating Mexican American students from white students was legal (Moll 2010). Though legal segregation and No Spanish rules have technically fallen out of practice, Valenzuela argues that students in U.S. classrooms are still vulnerable to “subtractive” practices like cultural tracking, which segregates native speakers of Spanish from native speakers of English through ESL programs (1999, p. 180). One teacher I interviewed said that, even if Latinx students are not explicitly told that they are not allowed to speak Spanish, traditional classes are a place where they feel they have to assimilate and ignore their roots (K. Vega, personal communication, December 12, 2016). Immersion programs provide a contrasting

educational setting for students, where the power balance can be shifted in favor of Latinx, and especially Latina, students.

The Lawrence Township immersion program started as a full immersion program. In this incarnation, immersion students are mostly native speakers of English, especially at the outset, and the percentage of instruction using the target language of Spanish starts at 100% in early grades and decreases in subsequent grades (J. Lahlou, personal communication, November 26, 2016). I grew up learning Spanish in a full immersion context. In kindergarten, only a couple of my peers were native speakers of Spanish. By middle school, six Latina students had joined the cohort, five of whom graduated in 2015 with an immersion diploma. These five included Aracely, Sara, and Gabriela (pseudonyms used throughout for students), all first-generation immigrants from Latin America, whose perspectives were gathered through semi-structured interviews for this paper.

While we were in secondary classes, my elementary school transitioned the program from full immersion to dual immersion. Dual immersion differs from full immersion mainly in that each cohort contains about an equal number of students for whom Spanish is and is not their native language. Time is divided between English and Spanish instruction, but the makeup of classes is meant “for all students to reach high levels of academic proficiency, bilingualism, and self-esteem, as well as to develop positive cross-cultural attitudes” (Potowski 2004, 75). Though the rate of Spanish spoken by students in immersion programs, especially in social interactions, is not as high as educators might believe, I posit that the structure and practices of these programs, and particularly of the program in Lawrence, are nonetheless less explicitly subtractive as traditional classrooms (Potowski 2004, 76). Thus, they foster confidence and belonging among Latinas, who are in turn able to attain high levels of post-secondary achievement.

One hallmark of the immersion program in Lawrence is an emphasis on recruitment of educators from Spanish-speaking countries, even hiring teachers who “don’t speak a lick of English” to teach the youngest students (K. Vega, personal communication, December 12, 2016). All three students I interviewed cited immersion teachers as important parts of their personal and educational growth. Most of the teachers they mentioned are native speakers of Spanish, though some showed a preference for Sra. Grossling, a U.S.-born teacher whose first language was English. Sara indicated that teachers like Señorita Camarasa and Señor Vega taught her life lessons about the importance of going after her dreams (personal communication, November 21, 2016). Gabriela considered one Puerto-Rican teacher a role model and advisor, and became his student assistant even after she was done being his student (personal communication, November 28, 2016). Aracely succinctly wrapped up her reasoning behind preferring immersion teachers over non-immersion ones: “I felt more connected to them since their first language was also Spanish...I felt like I could talk to them about anything” (personal communication, December 10, 2016)

The importance of teachers who respect and relate to students’ cultural backgrounds is well documented. Lopez refers to this respect as the “politics of caring” (2003, p. 93). In Valenzuela’s study of a school whose majority population was made up of Mexican American students, 81% of the teachers were white (1999, p. 63). Though these teachers had the opportunity care for Latinx youth authentically, their privileged upbringings often created too wide of a cultural gap to bridge (66). Even students who skipped other classes “chronically” showed up to classes taught by teachers, usually Latinx, who they felt authentically cared for them (102). Monzó and Rueda suggest that even schools lacking Latina teachers can tap into the lived experiences of Latina paraeducators, helping other educators view students in the context

of their cultural experiences rather than against a presumed standard (2003, p. 90). As Valenzuela writes, the presence of even one person with a shared ethnicity gives “legitimacy to identity-related concerns” by students (1999, p. 172). This effect can be increased through dual immersion programs, where not just teachers but also peers have some shared experiences and background.

According to the principal of Forest Glen Elementary in Lawrence Township, Latina teachers like Mabel Ramos (who is Puerto Rican) and Liliana Núñez (who is Colombian) do not stop at understanding and providing comfort to students. Instead, they also serve as “exemplars of achievement” to their Latina students, models of what they can one day achieve (J. Lahlou, personal communication, November 26, 2016). Thus, Latinas who have created spaces for themselves in educational spaces also model ways students’ they can do the same, and a positive cycle is created.

It’s important to note that Latina educators in turn benefit from role models and mentors of their own. Often, these role models are the educators’ parents (Méndez-Morse 2004, p. 577). Both Forest Glen and Lawrence North (the immersion high school in Lawrence) are making active attempts to fill those needs through hiring practices. A Latina assistant principal was recently hired at LN, and Mabel Ramos recently moved into a role as Immersion Coach at Forest Glen, providing assistance to new and existing immersion teachers (B. Crousore, personal communication, November 23, 2016; J. Lahlou, personal communication, November 26, 2016).

Research and interviews also indicate that the presence of resources and administrative support greatly impacts the ability of Latina educators to perform their duties. Students did not mention this, but educators did: “The easiest part of being an immersion teacher is the support of the program, school, and families. The hardest part is the lack of understanding in the community

and the scarcity of resources that are sometimes given to the program” (Mabel Ramos, personal communication, December 3, 2016). In some schools, resources are not created to help Spanish-speaking families stay engaged in their children’s education, like at Seguí High School where not even a Spanish translation of the school handbook existed (Valenzuela 1999, p. 174).

Lawrence North principal Brett Crousore prides himself on the fact that such resources exist and are constantly created at his school. Because the Sunday evening announcements sent to families are translated for the hundreds of families who only speak Spanish at home, the school has more Spanish-speaking families attending events and calling the school for information than ever before (B. Crousore, personal communication, November 23, 2016). These resources allow Latinx students to feel like their families and linguistic culture are valued, which in turn boosts self-confidence.

Financial support by the government is also important. Lopez’s book represents a too-common account of schools with predominately Latinx student populations that receive far too little funding: “UHS is emblematic of ‘ghetto schooling’—the grossly inferior education available to stigmatized racial groups, such as low-income Latinos and Blacks” (2003, p. 68). Through studies like this one, it is evident that though segregation is technically illegal, it still persists in urban schools. Lawrence differs from UHS in a few key ways: though many students in the township, and indeed in the immersion program, are Latinx, its schools are located in suburban, not urban, neighborhoods. And though many of the township’s students qualify for a free and reduced-price lunch program, one part of the township contains some of the richest white families, who have political ties and financial influence hard for legislators to ignore. Furthermore, parents of students in the immersion program have to enter their students in a lottery so they can gain a spot in the program; this system shows a great deal of involvement and

influence by immersion parents in their children's lives. Thus, the township and immersion program in particular do not lack for resources that can help shape the experiences and learning opportunities available to all students. Latina students like Aracely and Sara, by simple virtue of the township in which their families chose to settle following migration, have access to all the same educational resources (at least within school hours and buildings) available to students whose families owned expensive property on the township's reservoir.

Role models and resources are not the only benefits of the Lawrence immersion program for Latina students. They pale in comparison to the important sense of belonging and cultural exchange felt by Latinas in the program. It is not an insignificant issue, according to researchers who concluded, "sense of school belonging significantly predicted academic outcomes" (Sánchez, Colón, & Esparza 2005, 619). Each of the students interviewed mentioned their perception of the immersion cohort as a family to which they belonged, despite the fact that all of them entered the program in middle school. Sara stated a stronger sense of belonging in immersion classes than in any other non-immersion classes of which she had been a part (personal communication, November 21, 2016). Each mentioned pride that the immersion program had allowed them to stay in touch with their Latin American roots and retain Spanish language skills. In many ways, the immersion program in Lawrence represents an attempt to build the "cultural- and language-affirming curricula" advocated by Valenzuela (1999, 25).

Teachers like Ramos and Grossling integrate lessons about culture into their curricula. For instance, Grossling brings *dulce de leche* and *mate* into class for students to try, and Ramos builds on state educational standards to teach about Latin American culture, like when she teaches about the animals of Venezuela instead of just animals generally (M. Grossling, personal communication, November 21, 2016; Mabel Ramos, personal communication, December 3,

2016). Teachers and students alike regarded these lessons as a springboard for Latinx students to share information about their own family cultures. Karolina Vega is now an immersion teacher, who started as a student in the program and daughter of two immersion teachers. Because she arrived in the U.S. from Puerto Rico when she was just five months old, she says the program was a “safe zone” that helped her maintain ties to both of her cultures and languages (K. Vega, personal communication, December 12, 2016).

The students felt a connection to culture because of their immersion experience, but also reflected on times in which they were able to help classmates master certain linguistic concepts. And other research backs this up: “English speakers [in dual immersion programs] reported learning new vocabulary and accurate pronunciation through listening to Spanish speakers interact with their teacher” (Ballinger & Lyster 2011, 291). Even though native speakers sometimes use linguistic forms that technically constitute formal errors, teachers like Mary Grossling and Karolina Vega try to help students understand that language is contextual, and informal speech often differs from formal. Grossling, a high school immersion cinema teacher, commented that she always deferred to Latinx students to help explain linguistic variations, saying, “language is not black and white—it is not right and wrong. All experiences are valid” (M. Grossling, personal communication, November 21, 2016). It is important to note that this deference might sometimes be misplaced, especially if students were born as third- or fourth-generation members of Hispanic families, and do not wish to speak Spanish (K. Vega, personal communication, December 12, 2016). However, for first-generation students and others who do speak Spanish as their primary language, there is quantitative evidence suggesting that non-native Spanish speakers tend to try to accommodate them, that the presence of students like Sara, Aracely, and Gabriela is “associated with greater Spanish production from other students” (Ballinger & Lyster 2011, p. 290).

When they teach their peers Spanish, Latina students like these are imparting more than just linguistic knowledge. They bring their funds of knowledge to the table, passing on

information about the intersections of culture, ethnicity, migration, and gender to which their peers might not otherwise be exposed. Sara said that sharing her story of migration helped her classmates understand the trials of migrations and reasons that families go through it (personal communication, November 21, 2016). As Aracely put it, “an immersion class is a melting pot, full of different ideas and perspectives. [My peers] got to learn about how a person like me got to the USA. They got to learn about my culture, thanks to immersion” (personal communication, December 10, 2016). And this is how my Latina classmates carved the biggest spaces for themselves through our immersion program, by serving as teachers to peers like myself. But a K-12 education was only the beginning for them.

Sara credits this experience with giving her the confidence to “take part in big projects and compete to be the best.” She now performs translations for a large company in Indianapolis (personal communication, November 21, 2016). Gabriela credits immersion as her inspiration to choose a major in International Studies (personal communication, November 28, 2016). Sara and Aracely both graduated on schedule in May of 2015, even after each had a child in late middle school or early high school. Now, Sara’s daughter is five, and a student in Sra. Kents’ dual immersion class at Forest Glen. Sara says she can’t wait to see how much more her daughter will be able to do because she is starting off with an immersion family from day one (personal communication, November 21, 2016).

References

- Ballinger, S., & Lyster, R. (2011). Student and teacher oral language use in a two-way Spanish/English immersion school. *Language Teaching Research*, 15(3), 289-306.
- Bender, S. W. (1997). Direct democracy and distrust: The relationship between language law rhetoric and the language vigilantism experience. *Harv. Latino L. Rev.*, 2, 145.
- Indiana Department of Education (2016). [Graph illustrations of Enrollment Trend by Ethnicity 2016]. *Lawrence North High School (5276)*. Retrieved from <http://compass.doe.in.gov/dashboard/enrollment.aspx?type=school&id=5276>.
- Lopez, N. (2003). *Hopeful girls, troubled boys: Race and gender disparity in urban education*. Psychology Press.
- MacGregor-Mendoza, P. (2000). Aquí no se habla español: Stories of linguistic repression in southwest schools. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 24(4), 355-367.
- Méndez-Morse, S. (2004). Constructing mentors: Latina educational leaders' role models and mentors. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(4), 561-590.
- Moll, L. C. (2010). Mobilizing culture, language, and educational practices fulfilling the promises of Mendez and Brown. *Educational Researcher*, 39(6), 451-460.
- Monzó, L. D., & Rueda, R. (2003). Shaping education through diverse funds of knowledge: A look at one Latina paraeducator's lived experiences, beliefs, and teaching practice. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 34(1), 72-95.
- Potowski, K. (2004). Student Spanish use and investment in a dual immersion classroom: Implications for second language acquisition and heritage language maintenance. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88(1), 75-101.

Sánchez, B., Colón, Y., & Esparza, P. (2005). The role of sense of school belonging and gender in the academic adjustment of Latino adolescents. *Journal of youth and Adolescence*, 34(6), 619-628.

Southern Poverty Law Center (2016). *Ten Days After: Harassment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election*. Retrieved from <https://www.splcenter.org/20161129/ten-days-after-harassment-and-intimidation-aftermath-election#introduction>.

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.