



Title of Project:

Language Policy and Multilingual Identity at Home and in School

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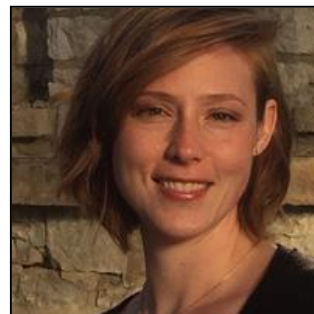
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TIRF Research Topic Investigated:

Language Planning & Policy

Final Report

Motivation for the Research

In non-urban contexts of public education across the United States, school systems are seeing rapid demographic change and growth in the numbers of students labeled English Learners (ELs). In these contexts, schools are tasked with serving these students and their families equitably and language policy infrastructure must rapidly adapt in order to do so. The purpose of this critical ethnography of language policy was to examine how language policy, as implemented in a Midwest school district with rising numbers of students labeled ELs, interacts with social identity development and educational opportunity for newly-arrived Latina mothers and their school age children. Primary goals of the work were to center the voices and experiences of the people whose language practices policy is designed to regulate and to identify implications both for families and the schools who serve them towards increased educational opportunity and access for multilingual students.

Research Questions

1. How is language policy (a) created? (b) interpreted? and (c) implemented in the school district?
2. Which social identity positions can be observed in school interactions? How do these relate to and interact with identity positions observed in interactions at home?
3. What connections can be made between policy implementation and social identity construction across these layers of social activity?

Research Methodology

To examine the ways that educational language policy shapes access for families and that families shape educational language policies, I conducted a two-year critical ethnography of language policy (Johnson & Hornberger, 2011) across homes, schools, community centers, and



district offices in the Midwest town of Riverbend. Ethnographic methods, such as participant-observation, document collection, and interviews, were gathered in a critical, community-based ethnographic design, which prioritized the questions and concerns of the multilingual families themselves about the language policy practices they were experiencing, as well as the questions of actors in the educational system who were working to improve equity (Madison, 2005; Stoeker, 2005). A discourse-centered analysis (Farnell & Graham, 2011) was utilized to trace the relationship between policy documents and policy implementation and practice, as well as to understand how macro and micro social identity construction unfolded in educational language policy processes.

While the focal family participants consisted of three predominantly Spanish-speaking, multilingual mothers who had arrived in the United States within 15 years of the study's start and their school-age children, the district's Equity Director and Equity Committee, classroom teachers (six ELL teachers, ten mainstream teachers), six interventionists and staff members, four principals, various interpreters, and a number of other newly-arrived mothers and community members who were involved with a community organization and interested in participating in dialogue around educational equity for multilingual, immigrant students.

Data sources in the larger study included field notes; photo data; transcribed recordings of classes, meetings, and events; and interviews collected across multiple classrooms and administrative offices in four schools, the District office, monthly Equity Committee meetings, the homes and communities of four families, and in a local community organization which advocated for immigrant and worker's rights. Data were collected over the course of two years. Data were recorded and transcribed during meetings between educators and parents where educational policies, more specifically, educational language policies, were communicated, explained, implemented, and negotiated.

In working with school and family participants through a critical ethnographic design (Madison, 2005; Paris & Winn, 2014), research goals were constructed with a higher degree of co-collaboration. I positioned myself as a co-researcher and research partner both with families and with district actors who were looking to learn about improving the experiences of language minoritized families in the district. I worked to connect participants across different levels of the policy process in response to findings. When barriers to educational access, such as interpreting policy implementation, emerged that were under the purview of the district office, I met with the Equity Director to identify potential action steps at the district level and worked to create space for parents to represent their concerns at this level. Similarly, I shared findings that emerged in Equity Committee meetings with all committee members. At the study's end, parents, the Equity Director and I co-planned a community dialogue between the Equity Director and all families involved in The Center. I acted as facilitator and interpreter, the parents drove the conversation, and the Equity Director responded to questions about families' rights, listened to their concerns about interpreting and other areas of education access, and let them know about avenues available or through which the District could work to address their concerns.

Summary of Findings

A major finding from this study is that educational equity, access, and social identity development for multilingual students is best conceptualized within a framework that considers not only language education programming (such as EL programs) but takes into account the mainstream language policies and de facto language policies that shape access to language and literacy learning conditions and to the educational system. These policies include access to



interpreting and translation services, gifted education policy for ELs, special education policy for ELs, Title I reading policies, as well as state policies about grade advancement or retention based on literacy assessments. During the two years of the study, the language policy for EL services put forth in the district's *Lau Plan* did not emerge as a topic of discussion of concern from the perspectives of participating families. EL services were not their primary concern, and the topic rarely arose in their questions and conversations with me. These mothers were, however, concerned about whether their children would have access to appropriate services, such as special education, gifted education, advanced coursework, and appropriate instructional supports for grade-level academic achievement. They were also concerned about whether they could advocate for their children effectively through the interpreters (or lack thereof) provided by the school district, and they had questions and concerns about their children's academic progress as measured by standardized test scores.

A second major finding is that interpreting and translation policy emerged as an overarching, powerful language policy in education that permeates parents' access to policy and identity negotiations for their children. In terms of interpreting policy structure in the PSD, there were obstacles related to finding and training interpreters in accordance with federal policy guidelines. These challenges foreclosed multilingual parents from accessing their right to meaningful participation in their children's education on various occasions, and the interpreting services in the PSD were not implemented in accordance with federal civil rights guidelines. Because of the growing population of ELL students and families, the district struggled to find interpreters who could speak the languages of the families, let alone interpreters who were trained to handle the murky territory and social role of interpretation and mediate the educational jargon utilized by school staff. Though federal and state policy mandate meaningful access to education through interpreting and translation for parents (DE & DoJ, 2015; ESSA, 2015; state Department of Education, 2015), policy for interpreting and translation was under-developed in the local context (e.g. PSD, 2014).

Interpreters are a vital part of the language policy process and their role has not been adequately considered in language policy research. Interpreters mediate language policy implementation for families; they bridge the policy, on one hand, with families' responses to and participation in the policy on the other. Borrowing language from Flemmer (2018), interpreters, through their translation choices, were actually policy brokers with the power to mediate access to the educational policy negotiation table for the mothers in the study. Though not typically conceptualized as a vital part of the language policy process, interpreters in the present study became both policy actors—shaping implementations and negotiations of policy—and political mediators of social identity development between parents and school (Flemmer, 2018, Hanks & Severi, 2014; Jacquemet, 2011).

Another third major finding is that mothers are powerful advocates on behalf of their children, and their role is not often acknowledged in the school system. The mothers in this study engaged in the cultivation of their children despite tremendous stress and obstacles related to their national status, economic conditions, and experiences as racialized women. One mother, Roxana, sat in the school hallway every day after school, and all the school staff knew her name and had relationships with her even though she did not speak English. Another mother arranged weekly tutoring, social work, hospital help, and the researcher's help in the service of her daughter's academic achievement. When she had concerns about whether her daughter qualified for special education services in addition to EL, she persisted in stating her case over and over around an educational policy negotiation table where she was positioned as the least powerful.



Another mother ran her children to soccer, violin, and community activism events—she was raising a child who appeared in the newspaper before the age of 12 as a voice for social justice in his community and who does it all in the face of trauma related to her migratory status. When teachers told her that her son was distracted in class, she argued that he was gifted. When her immigration status prohibited her from feeling safe to fill out the paperwork to volunteer officially at school, she organized her community of mothers to prepare a Mexican dinner for school staff as an entry point into school and relationship-building. Together, these mothers and others organized efforts to dialogue with the Equity Director and subsequently addressed inequities they learned about through this study with their children’s teachers. These actions demonstrate that while deficit ideologies about the involvement of language minoritized, immigrant parents in school engagement persist, the evidence is to the contrary.

Implications

Research has called for higher education policy for ELs to move away from a preoccupation with language remediation and into more comprehensive policies that address structural, economic, and linguistic factors (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Results of the present study suggest the same approach is needed for equitable language policy and planning for K12 education. As language educational policy is increasingly conflated with standards-based educational reform, and there is an implicit push towards achievement in mainstream classes for ELs. Those wishing to create more equitable access for multilingual students must take into account the weight that mainstream educational policy bears for EL students’ social identity development and educational access alongside the set of de facto and official language policies that shape their language learning opportunity. Focusing solely on educational language policy and programming without this perspective is not likely to lead to language policy structures that are equitable and impactful in EL education.

Given the powerful roles that interpreters play in educational access, policy negotiation, and social identity development, I call for more theoretical, empirical, and applied work to address this overarching language policy. Demonstrated in this dissertation in the cases of various family and community participants, the under-studied language policy of interpreting and translation, as well as the under-theorized role of interpreters and interpreting in shaping language policy in schools, merits further empirical mapping. It also merits policy consideration because it impacts students and families’ access to all other policies and services in the school system. Finally, training and support is needed not only for interpreters, many of whom expressed their commitment to better educational access for students and families in this study. Educators who bear institutional power and work with interpreters regularly should be trained in what interpretation is, and in how to work with interpreters to ensure that that their words (and accompanying social actions) are made clear to the families they serve.

Mothers in this study were often construed through a deficit lens in the district and their advocacy was thwarted by institutional barriers, including that of access to interpreters, but findings suggest that the system, not the mothers, displayed deficits in hearing the advocacy and honoring the rights of the mothers in the study. While there were some powerful steps toward transformation generated by the Equity Director, one multilingual EL teacher of color, and the families, findings suggest that the maintenance of White cultural dominance (i.e., Whiteness) was constructed at the community, district, classroom, and interpersonal levels in home-school meetings with the mothers and school staff in ways that silenced the voices and advocacy efforts on behalf of language minoritized students and parents. This bears theoretical implications for



the broader field of Applied Linguistics and for actors at each level of the educational policy process. Findings suggest that the role of Whiteness in equity and access at all levels of language policy and teaching should be carefully and critically interrogated and deconstructed. Schools must wrestle with, identify, and address structural forms of racism that paint deficit perspectives of language minoritized parents, who, in actuality, are deeply engaged in the educational system. Finally, transformation of systemic inequities in language education should be centered in the experiences of those individuals whose language practices educational policy is designed to regulate.



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