

Title of Project

Making Space to "Be Ourselves": Brazilian Immigrant Children as Two-Way Immersion Program Implementers and Transborder Thinkers

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TIRF Research Topic Investigated

Migrants and Refugees: Teaching and Assessing English

Final Report

Motivation for the Research

U.S. public schools are on the verge of a new demographic era, with projections showing that by 2050, more than one-third of U.S. children younger than 17 will be either immigrants themselves or the children of at least one immigrant parent (Tamer, 2014). Brazilian migration to the United States has tripled since 2018, with more Brazilian immigrant families being apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border than in prior years (Simas, 2021). Recent estimates suggest that 1.7 million Brazilians now live in the U.S. (Lellis, 2021), with Massachusetts being the U.S. state with the highest concentration of Brazilian nationals (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2016). Despite these figures, the lived experiences of Portuguese-speaking Latinx im/migrants in the United States have been understudied in the migration and education scholarship, and U.S. schools continue to base their instruction and curricula on available resources in Spanish as a false equivalent to Portuguese. With migration flows to the U.S. intensifying in response to political, economic, environmental, and social causes around the world, researchers must support schools in developing appropriate responses to the growing numbers of migrants from linguistic and cultural backgrounds that are less dominant and familiar to school personnel. This ethnographic study addresses this issue by centering the experiences of Portuguese-speaking, Brazilian immigrant children (5-8 years old) in a Two-Way Immersion (TWI) bilingual education program (Portuguese-English) in the U.S. state of Massachusetts.

Research Questions

Given the limited understanding of Brazilian immigrant children's educational lives and the importance of centering non-dominant students' funds of knowledge to support learning, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How are the educational experiences of a group of Brazilian immigrant children shaped by their participation in the newly-implemented TWI program (Portuguese-English) at a public elementary school?



- a. How does this group of Brazilian immigrant children contribute to the day-to-day implementation of the new TWI program? How are their contributions perceived by educators and school staff members serving at the school?
- b. How are the transborder experiences of this group of Brazilian immigrant children leveraged as they (co-)create knowledge in TWI classrooms?
- 2. How did remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic shape this group of Brazilian immigrant children's bilingual educational experiences in the 2020-2021 school year?

Research Methodology

This ethnographic study (Emerson et al., 2011) was conducted primarily at a Portuguese-English TWI program established in the 2018-2019 school year at Parker Elementary School (pseudonym), located in a city in Massachusetts with a long history of Brazilian im/migration. TWI programs aim to support the English development and native-language maintenance of minoritized students while allowing English-speaking children to learn a foreign language in the same classrooms (Cervantes-Soon, 2014). The study explored the educational experiences of 87 children across four TWI classrooms during three calendar years (August 2018 – May 2021), from the beginning of their studies in kindergarten and first grade until the end of their school year in second grade and third grade, respectively. From this cohort of 87 students, 70 children had a recent Brazilian immigrant background, being either first-generation (i.e., born in Brazil and later migrated to the U.S.) or second-generation (i.e., born in the U.S. to Brazilian parent[s]) immigrants. Data sources include: (a) three to four hours of weekly participant observations (Emerson et al., 2011) in person (August 2018 – early March 2020) and online (September 2020) -March 2021) (~500 hrs. total); (b) Participant observations at 10 school events and staff meetings (~30 hrs.); (c) 22 qualitative semi-structured interviews (Weiss, 1994) with 17 school staff members (~26 hrs.); and (d) life story interviews (Rios, 2011) with eight Brazilian immigrant caregivers (~15 hrs. of audio-recording).

Summary of Findings

In this section, I report three major findings of this multi-year dissertation study. First, I found that Brazilian immigrant students were key implementers of the new TWI program at Parker Elementary through the everyday practices of language brokering and by infusing (and thus enriching) the instruction they received with narratives of transborder ties and experiences. However, this study also documented the ambivalent relationship that the school personnel had with Brazilian immigrant students in the focal K-3 bilingual classrooms. On one hand, educators in the TWI program incorporated Brazilian cultural aspects in their teaching of Portuguese, which allowed immigrant students to take pride and ownership over their lessons. The teachers noticed and valued newcomer immigrant students for creating a Portuguese-rich environment and bringing stories from Brazil to class. On the other hand, the children of immigrants (secondgeneration students) were often constructed as trapped "in-between" languages and pinned by teachers as the ones who "unbalanced" TWI classrooms. Overall, Brazilian immigrant students were not seen by school staff members as key implementers of the TWI program. The children were also not seen in ways that recognized the multidimensionality of their experiences and identities, especially as educators prioritized ways to promote more Portuguese usage. School personnel's descriptions of Brazilian students as bringing behavioral issues to the school and the dichotomous ranking of newcomers and second-generation immigrants point to the colonial logic



and thinking (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020) that undergirded perceptions and practices in the day-to-day implementation of the new language program.

Second, this study found that elementary-aged, Brazilian immigrant students composed complex narratives about the different sides of the U.S.-Brazil "ponte aérea" in less supervised spaces of their TWI classrooms. I propose the term "ponte aérea" (air bridge) to recognize that border crossing into the U.S. for Brazilian im/migrants involves some degree of air traveling, often along well-established routes that connect these locations. Such narratives reflected and cocreated subaltern knowledge, as the students collectively shared their (hi)stories of straddling across space and time in contexts of liminality and power differences (Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016). However, while these students' narratives were noticed by classroom educators, they were not seen as a form of intelligence that connects to and can inform academic learning. In interviews, TWI teachers outlined a variety of obstacles that prevented them from centering learners' transborder experiences, narratives, and epistemologies in their teaching, including fear of parental pushback and the students' young age. Educators also expressed willingness to eventually approach narratives of im/migration—as long as they abided by the epistemological constraints of modern ideals of childhood (Arenhart, 2016). This reveals yet another layer of colonial logics that shaped the focal children's bilingual schooling.

Lastly, this study also reported on the focal Brazilian immigrant children's adaptation to remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. "Muted microphones" and the pervasiveness of teacher supervision/surveillance restricted the children's ability to spontaneously speak in class and interact with one another on their own terms. However, similar to pre-pandemic dynamics, the students resisted being positioned as mere recipients of their education and the hyperfocus on language in ways that are artificially detached to their identities. Young immigrant children in this study used playfulness to puncture through walls of monoglossic language policies, institutional demands, and epistemological borders during TWI remote learning. For example, the children used the chat box function on Google Meet, under their teachers' radar, to nurture relationships at a time of social isolation and engage in language and cultural brokering. This study also elucidates the crucial role of Brazilian immigrant parents in their children's everyday remote education, including through practices of redirection and getting them "ready to learn."

Implications

The major findings described above provide a nuanced portrait of a group of Brazilian immigrant students' educational experience before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The three major findings together contribute to one main argument: TWI schooling offered bilingualism to immigrant children at the expense of centering the complexities of their everyday practices, identities, knowledges, and lived experiences. This argument leads me to propose an emphasis on immigrant childhoods and pedagogies of border thinking in TWI programming. Pedagogies of border thinking are aimed at giving immigrant students the opportunity to recognize and cultivate their knowledges, critically examine their realities vis-à-vis power asymmetries, and develop identities as agents of change (Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016). Furthermore, in TWI programs with partner languages other than Spanish, there are exacerbated asymmetries (Amrein & Peña, 2000) that require specific policy considerations. Perceptions of the (lack of) utility of languages like Portuguese, compounded by the association of minoritized



languages with high levels of immigration into local communities, may further marginalize immigrant students and heighten tensions in the implementation of a new language program (Oliveira et al., 2020). The hegemony of the English language in the larger social context feeds into the challenges reported by school and district officials to recruit well-prepared bilingual teachers in languages other than Spanish. Additionally, while teachers in Spanish-English bilingual classrooms perform additional, unpaid duties in comparison to their counterparts in the general education strand (Amos, 2016), these dynamics are also exacerbated in programs with partner languages other than Spanish. From the inception of the focal program, there were no curricular materials available in Portuguese nor assessments, mentor texts, or books for classroom libraries. Brazilian bilingual teachers had to create or translate everything from scratch. These dynamics may have placed added barriers to educators' ability to listen to their students and incorporate their funds of knowledge into their curriculum and instruction.

As such, for the implementation of TWI programs in languages that are less dominant or perceived as less "useful" to U.S. Euro-American groups, policies are needed to increase the allocation of resources to these programs. There is also a need for policies that urge teachers and leaders to take on the responsibility to learn about the cultural practices and the community of the students they serve (Espinoza et al., 2021). This learning process must be accompanied by an assets-based framing of immigrant communities (Lowenhaupt & Hopkins, 2020) and geared toward the enactment of humanizing school-based practices that sustain communities' knowledge and ways of being (Paris, 2012). It is also crucial that TWI program policies encourage bilingual teachers' social justice advocacy for their students and communities as well as support these educators in enacting more holistic bilingual identities (Venegas-Weber, 2018), drawing on their cultural intuitions and lived experiences as immigrants.

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