



Bilingual Education and Bilingualism

Honoring Richard Ruiz and his Work on Language Planning and Bilingual Education

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Richard Ruiz and Bilingual Education

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Richard Ruiz often wore many hats. One hat that he never removed was that of a steadfast supporter and advocate for bilingual education. His support, however, was nuanced by his incisive and keen insights into how policy in bilingual education was shaped by political exigencies rather than the research base on how English learners could become truly emergent bilinguals. One short story illustrates this point. The Dean of the College of Education at the University of Arizona, Ron Marx, relates the following:

Richard had apparently attended a series of meetings at the state capital regarding bilingual education. The State Superintendent of Education at the time was not a supporter of bilingual education and had enacted a series of provisions that many found to be harmful to English learners. Dean Marx related that 'At one point the State Superintendent said to me something like: There is a faculty member in your college who comes to these meetings, sits in the back, and has an inscrutable look on his face. I don't think he agrees with what we are doing and I don't think he likes me very much. What is he doing and what can I do about him?' The Superintendent clearly was nervous about this faculty member attending these meetings and acting as a foil to the Arizona Department of Education policies and practices on bilingual education. After a little back and forth to get an idea about who this might have been, Dean Marx responded. 'That is most likely Richard Ruiz. You are right, he does not agree with what you are doing in bilingual education, and I suspect he does not like you very much. He is a tenured faculty member with expertise in this area and he is doing what he is supposed to be doing.' Without question, Richard's attendance at the meetings was a burr in the Superintendent's side, and Richard's demeanor evidently made him nervous. He would have preferred that Richard not be present.

But present he was, not only in a physical presence, but in his extensive and penetrating scholarship on how students best acquired a second language while developing their first language.

Richard's scholarship led him to pinpoint early on (see his 1984 article) that there are several paradoxes in what we call bilingual education. First of all, bilingual education is really not about *bilingualization* (his term for the development of bilingual proficiency in students – see his 1997 article) and the acquisition of two languages. It was first and foremost a vehicle for the acquisition of English. This assertion was confirmed with the 2001 Reauthorization of ESEA which eradicated all mention of bilingual education in favor of the terminology of English acquisition. The second paradox, which is the basis for his 2008b 'Paradox of bilingualism,' is that 'Other languages are to be pursued by those who don't have them, but they are to be abandoned by those who do.' This paradox is brilliantly illustrated by his painstaking and detailed scholarship into the historical documentation of publically funded bilingual education in the United States, most dramatically exemplified by the contrast between German language programs in the Midwest and Spanish language programs in the Southwest. Ruiz traces the paradox to underlying ideologies that fall into two categories:

- (1) A highly instrumentalized view of language that views language as a tool and an instrument for obtaining social goods. 'To the extent that it does that, we see language as valuable; to the extent that it does not, we devalue it' (Ruiz, 2008b).
- (2) Language as a part of the identity, history, tradition, culture and personality of a community.

These two perspectives on the role of language in the life of communities belie widely divergent expectations on how language is learned and the policies that undergird language learning in schools. The paradox restated is then: Spanish (or French or German or any other non-English world standard foreign language) is to be pursued by those who do not have it, but Spanish (or French or German or any other 'little' non-English community language) is to be abandoned by those children and youth who do. Spanish uplifts and enhances and builds up; Spanish tears down and fragments and holds back all who maintain it (Ruiz, 2008b).

With great clarity, Richard's work cinches together an array of topics that comprise significant tenets of bilingual education; nowhere is this more evident than in his review of the *Encyclopedia of Bilingual Education* (2008a). His emphasis on the politicized nature of language minority education can be seen as a conceptual hub that guides his perspectives on the complex facets of bilingual education. Ruiz used his review of the *Encyclopedia* as a platform for discussing themes like language acquisition, medium of instruction, culture, family engagement, and assessment. Although not explicitly stated in his review, Ruiz's stance on these topics resonates with his paradoxical view noted above. By looking at the dichotomous relationship between the predominant trends in academic research versus policy development, Ruiz

penetrated the prevailing ideological assumptions about language minority communities that continue to drive programmatic responses to shifting demographic landscapes in education.

Richard used a policy narrative to highlight strengths in language minority communities while calling attention to weaknesses in political decision making processes. His advocacy for language minority students is reflected in his points on providing bilingual support programs for students at any age, and for an extended timeframe. He raises multiple forceful points about the contradictory nature of promoting additive language programs for students from privileged backgrounds around the world (usually in private school settings) while restricting opportunities for programs that promote bilingualization in the US. In his discussion of federal education policy developments, Ruiz mentions how increased standardized assessment requirements adversely affected language minority students and communities (e.g. increased dropout rates, special education placements and remedial compensatory programs). Although ever aware of the weightiness of the significance of bilingual education programs, his keen and wry humor was one of his weapons in skewering programs and policies that purported to be something they were not (see Parable of the Fig).

On a state level, living in Arizona provided Richard with extensive exposure to the anti-bilingual education policies promoted by Ron Unz's group, English for the Children. As an ardent opponent of these types of policies, he indicates the fallacies of the one-year timeframe for acquiring English, as fabricated by opponents of bilingual programs. While his refutation draws from scholars from the field of language acquisition, he is also quick to point out the role of the political ideologies espoused by anti-bilingual education groups. In this case, these opponents to bilingual education align with an instrumentalized view of language that not only posits English as the *sine qua non* for success in school, it simultaneously discredits the inherent value of minority languages, essentially targeting them (as vehicles of cultural transmission) for eradication. Again, the paradox rings true: abate minority languages within minority communities while promoting foreign language learning in majority language communities.

While much of Richard's work on bilingual education is dedicated to foregrounding the political nature of language policies as driven by broader social forces, he consistently prioritizes the important role that cultural practices play in working with language minority students. This slant is twofold. First, educators and politicians operate within an educational framework that prioritizes certain sets of knowledge and skills – resulting in the development of programs, curricula and classroom practices that serve to perpetuate and advance the interests of those in positions of power within a given cultural context. By recognizing systemic inequities, educators can potentially modify their own professional practices to honor language minority students' background knowledge and experiences. Secondly, Richard's

perspective emphasized patterns of 'home-school isomorphism' that abound in American schools. So important is this particular topic that Ruiz dedicates a substantial part of his review to illustrating the need for re-conceptualizing how educators engage language minorities and communities with a view toward acknowledging their strengths, resources and resiliency.

Ruiz's discussion of the underlying home-school isomorphism that has molded educators' perceptions of minority communities reflects his profound understanding of the cultural dynamics inherent in the process of schooling. This is particularly noteworthy considering that the *Encyclopedia* does not contain an entry solely focused on this topic. Instead, he uses this publication as a venue to caution us to be mindful of the cultural assumptions entailed in the loaded, yet predominant, notion of 'parental involvement.' The prevailing perspective of parents who are unable to attend school functions or dedicate time to tutor their children with homework every night tends to cast such family practices in a negative light – i.e. something that requires intensive remediation. More often than not, this view of families parallels a mindset that minority students' background knowledge is of little value in school settings. Ruiz urges educators to push back against the deficit orientations that perpetuate asymmetrical relationships between schools and the minority families and communities they serve.

Rather than seeing language minority students' background experiences as incongruous with academic contexts, Ruiz endorses the opposite – i.e. 'that the children bring many strengths with them to school, having learned a lot from home and community about how to learn and act' (Ruiz, 2008a). Once again, this claim is grounded in understanding the way cultural practices shape interactions between teachers and students, teachers and parents and, most importantly, between parents and their children. Richard underscores the concept of cultural capital to illustrate the potential for valuing students' Funds of Knowledge as a means of enhancing academic experiences. Not only does espousing a Funds of Knowledge approach in the classroom contribute to the students' academic progress, but home-school partnerships are strengthened and wider avenues of communication allow 'mutual sharing of valuable knowledge that leads to an enhanced learning environment for children' (Ruiz, 2008a).

Ruiz's passion for bilingual education is evident in the way he describes minority students' (and families') lived experiences as assets. The way he chronicles political processes sheds light on the broader forces that ultimately affect children, families, communities and educators. His historical accounts of bilingual education policies in the United States demonstrate how particular language orientations are manifested out of deeper, underlying tensions between different cultural groups. Richard's writings are a powerful reminder of the significant role that schools play, especially when language policies are developed, in expediting the assimilation of minority groups at the expense of academic progress, and more disturbingly, their cultural identities.

Honoring language minority communities, rather than disparaging them, is among the most significant threads woven throughout all of Richard's work on bilingual education. His fervent defense of bilingual education at all levels was a source of strength for those demoralized by the political contexts of language policy in Arizona. He was unwavering and unbroken in seeing the promise.

Resources

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