

“Mi Hija Vale Dos Personas”:
Latino Immigrant Parents’ Perspectives
About Their Children’s Bilingualism

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Abstract

This paper presents the voices of 16 Latino immigrant parents whose children were upper elementary students in a bilingual education class in the southwestern United States. In interviews that focused on their children’s language learning and usage, the parents spoke of a commitment to a better life for their children. All believed that English proficiency and bilingualism were keys to social and economic advancement and that speaking Spanish represented an essential tie to familial and cultural roots, and all demonstrated awareness and involvement in their children’s education and language use. Many parents had begun to notice subtle signs of Spanish erosion and resistance, despite the fact that Spanish was the home language of all. To counteract the social and political forces drawing their children away from bilingualism, the parents were using a variety of strategies although most of them worked long hours simply to survive, and thus, had little free time. This study urges that educators take the time to listen and learn how parents are able and willing to assist their children.

Hace unos meses tuve un accidente en Lakewood. Y en el hospital, ella estaba hablando con las personas. Yo no les entendí nunca nada. Mi hija ha sido para mí muy importante. Para mí, mi hija vale dos personas. (A few months ago, I had an accident in Lakewood. And in the hospital, she [my daughter] was talking with the people. I didn’t understand a thing. My daughter has been very important for me. For me, my daughter is worth two people.) (Maricela’s father) (All names used in the paper are pseudonyms.)

Pues es muy importante porque, como ella es nacida aquí, y, este, pues, para el futuro, para que estudie y trabaje, tenga buen trabajo y llegue a ser algo más. . . . No hay como una persona que sepa los dos idiomas, para poder sobresalir. (Well, it's very important because, she was born here, and for the future, for her studies and work, to have a good job and to become something more. There's nothing like a person who knows both languages to be able to excel.) (Leila's father)

The quotes above reflect the common sentiments of a group of Latino immigrant parents, whom we interviewed about their children's bilingualism. The parents spoke about the importance of their children learning English while maintaining both the Spanish language and the culture of their home countries. In this paper, we focus on parents' views about the impact of English and Spanish on their children's present and future lives, their concerns about the gradual erosion of their children's home language and culture, and the roles they played in their children's language learning.

Bilingualism Among Immigrants in the United States

Learning English

Taking steps to learn the language of their adopted country is often the first course of action that many immigrants take upon their arrival. Reasons for wanting to be conversant in the language of the new country include simply surviving and getting around, gaining employment, sharing a sense of identity with other citizens, personal enrichment, and, in the case of parents, helping their children negotiate school matters (Lindeman, 2001; Pappano, 2002; Sataline, 2002). Unfortunately, many immigrants to the United States, especially those who live in poverty, often find intractable barriers to learning English (Wrigley, 1993). Despite valiant efforts, the vast majority do not learn enough to communicate functionally or secure jobs that promise anything beyond simple survival. Ironically, many immigrants are treated with scorn because they are perceived as taking jobs from citizens and as not wanting to fit in by learning English (e.g., Americans for Immigration Control, n.d.; Meyer, 2006)

Immigrant parents want more for their children. Orellana, Ek, and Hernández (2000) conducted ethnographic case studies of immigrant communities from Mexico and Central America in California after the passing of Proposition 227, which outlawed bilingual education in California. Their study found that parents believed that if their children were proficient users of English, they would be treated better, be more successful in school, and have better employment opportunities. Other studies of immigrants have found that parents have similar attitudes about their children's English learning (Craig, 1996; Lambert & Taylor, 1988).

Maintaining Home Languages

Although immigrant parents and their children have historically received contradictory messages about the value of their home languages, maintaining and continuing to develop home language proficiency is important to immigrant parents for a variety of reasons, including communication with immediate and extended family and community, ethnic pride, and cultural maintenance. In reality, however, few immigrant students continue to speak their home language into adulthood with proficiency and even fewer learn to read and write it. This comes as a shock to parents who have been given the impression that bilingualism is a key to social and economic advancement in the United States. Indeed, from their study of bilingual families, Ada and Zubizarreta (2001) concluded the following:

Unfortunately, most Latino parents do not understand how easy it is to lose a language. Since many learn their second language as adults when they are not at risk of losing their first language, and the second language is difficult to learn, it is not readily apparent that the situation for their children is quite the opposite. In fact, the preeminent status of English in schools and in the larger society, together with the social pressure to become “American” (i.e., speak English), is a tremendous pressure facing Latino children that makes it very difficult for them to maintain their native language. (p. 233)

The parents interviewed by Orellana et al. (2000) were embarrassed that their children were losing the ability to speak Spanish. Indeed, while students in the primary grades spoke mostly Spanish at home, in school, and in social situations, older students gradually began speaking more English and resisting Spanish.

Even temporary visitors to the United States may feel compelled to fit in to their host country by speaking only English at the expense of their home language, as Li (1999) found with her pre-adolescent daughter’s experiences. When Li temporarily moved from China to Hawaii for advanced study, she took her daughter with her. Li’s situation was different from immigrant families in the previously reviewed studies in that Li was highly educated, had more financial resources, and was in the United States temporarily. Even in this temporary situation, however, Li found that, as an outsider, her daughter faced internal and external forces (Fillmore, 2000) to fit in to her new school and to speak only English. All preadolescents must deal with powerful internal and external forces that shape the ways they react to and handle the world around them; the children in our study had even more complex factors to face. According to Fillmore (2000), “The internal factors have to do with the desire for social inclusion, conformity, and the need to communicate with others. The external forces are the sociopolitical ones operating in the society against

outsiders, against differences, against diversity” (p. 208). Li realized that it would take an intensive effort and a variety of strategies to help her daughter maintain and continue to develop academic proficiency in Chinese in the face of the tremendous pressures her daughter faced , she acknowledged the following:

They may find it very difficult to begin a new language and later find it very hard to maintain the primary language. They may find themselves at the intersection of two cultures while belonging to neither of them. Parents are on the front line in these situations and must be a tower of strength and understanding for their children and help them to sort things out. (Li, 1999, p. 123)

A number of researchers have suggested relationships between socioeconomic status and language maintenance. Portes and Hao (1998), for example, concluded that schools serving high-socioeconomic status (SES) communities with high concentrations of immigrants are the most conducive for home language maintenance. Similarly, students from high-SES homes, whose parents speak and value the home language, are most likely to retain it: “Such parents simultaneously promote English skills while providing a foreign-language environment at home and serving as role models of fluency in their own language” (Portes & Hao, 1998, p. 280). Most Latino immigrants, however, live in high-poverty communities, and do not have the social or economic capital described by Portes and Hao (1998) or Li (1999). These are the children most likely to be served in bilingual education programs and, ironically, the ones who may be least likely to retain bilingualism into adulthood.

Bilingual Education

The initial rationale behind bilingual education was that transfer of knowledge and expertise to a new language is best accomplished when the learner is cognitively proficient in the first language (Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 1981). In practice, this should mean that students develop academic proficiency in their first language before being expected to study cognitively demanding concepts and materials in their second language. However, bilingual education programs since the late 1970s have become more transitional in nature (Fitzgerald, 1993). Concurrently, the academic proficiency criterion line has been blurred to the extent that many children are moved to full English instruction prematurely. Moll (2001) said

. . . this innovation must be understood within its broader social context. The U.S. version of these programs serves almost exclusively working-class and poor children, precisely the children most neglected and stigmatized by the educational system. The primary goal of most bilingual programs has been to teach the children English in order to

accommodate them as soon as possible within the broader monolingual system, the very system whose faults motivate the development of bilingual alternatives in the first place. . . . And, like *all* programs addressing the education of poor children, they have produced mixed results. (p. 14)

It should come as no surprise, then, that despite the label “bilingual,” few programs provide instruction designed to help students communicate, read, or write beyond basic proficiency in their native languages. Most bilingual programs in the United States are, in effect, remedial or compensatory programs, as the primary objective is for students to “graduate” to English instruction. Students’ first language is seen as a vehicle for promoting English learning. As soon as this goal is realized, the first language has outlived its usefulness in the minds of many educators (Roberts, 1995; Valencia, 1991).

The loudest voices heard in discussions about bilingualism and bilingual education are typically those with a high degree of social and cultural capital—researchers, policymakers, and educators. We were interested in learning from immigrant parents with few social and economic resources about their perspectives on their children’s bilingualism. We also considered it important to learn from those who have a personal stake in the hotly contested issue of bilingual education. The parents were interviewed during a study about the language use of their children, who were fifth graders in a bilingual education program in an urban elementary school in the Southwest (Worthy, Rodríguez, Assaf, Martínez, & Cuero, 2003). In that study, we concluded that, although the students had been schooled in a relatively nurturing bilingual environment, they were beginning to experience societal pressures to assimilate and were aware that these pressures would greatly increase in the future. Although they were still in elementary school, they were beginning to show signs of language resistance (Fillmore, 2000; Portes & Hao, 1998) and subtraction of linguistic and cultural resources (Cummins, 1986; Valenzuela, 1999) that other research studies have found in older students. In this paper, we focus on the parents’ view about their children’s bilingualism and language learning.

Method

The Study Setting and Participants

Chavez Elementary School (a pseudonym) serves a high-poverty community on the edge of a large city in Texas. Almost 90% of the students are of Latino, predominantly Mexican, origin. Monica Reyes, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, was in her fourth year of teaching fifth grade in a transitional bilingual education classroom.

The primary participants for the original study (Worthy et al., 2003) were 15 of the 18 students, those with parent permission, in Mrs. Reyes’ classroom.

Nine of the students were born in the United States or had been in the country for most of their lives. Four had recently moved to the Chavez area from other states or school districts where they had been in bilingual classrooms and/or ESL resource classes. Two had attended schools in Mexico through third or fourth grade. Spanish was the primary language spoken in all of the students' homes.

In the original study (Worthy et al., 2003), we focused on the students' use of English and Spanish and their perspectives on bilingualism. We observed them daily in their fifth-grade classroom over a period of 8 months, as they participated in classroom instruction and activities, and interviewed them several times. At the end of the fifth-grade year, we invited parents to participate in interviews about their own and their children's school experiences, uses of language at home and school, and parents' goals for their children. By that point, one student had left the school, and one parent declined to be interviewed. Thus, we interviewed parents of 13 of the students.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish. In accordance with the parents' preferences, three interviews took place in families' homes; the others took place at school. Mothers were the primary interview participants in nine of the interviews; in three, both parents attended. In one interview, only the father was present, as the mother had recently given birth. Thus, the total number of parents participating in the interviews was 16. Of the 16 parents interviewed from 13 families, 15 were born in Mexico, and 1 mother was born in Central America. Five of the families were headed by single mothers, who were all employed. The other eight families included two parents. In five of the two-parent homes, both parents worked; in three, only the father worked, while the mother cared for the home and children. At the time of the study, the parents were employed in the following occupations: temporary laborer (3 fathers), school cafeteria worker (2 mothers), house cleaner (3 mothers), school custodian (1 mother and 1 father), restaurant dishwasher/table clearer (2 fathers and 1 mother), yard worker (2 fathers), homemaker (3 mothers), office cleaner (2 mothers), freelance cosmetician (1 mother).

Most parents were in their mid-to-late 20s. One father and 1 mother were in their late 30s, and 1 mother was in her early 40s—these parents, all from different families, had adult children living in Mexico or Central America. The families of Andrés, Berta, and David had been in the United States for 12 years or longer; Graciela, Roberto, Paulo, Yolanda, and Diana's families had emigrated between 6 and 12 years earlier; Sofía's, Maricela's, and Esperanza's families had lived in the United States between 3 and 6 years; Isabel and her mother had emigrated three years earlier, and Julio's family had moved from Mexico six months prior to the beginning of the study.

We believe the high level of participation was due to the trust that had developed among the parents and the classroom teacher throughout the year.

They had seen her caring ways with their children and had heard their children speak fondly and respectfully of her. Further, like her students, the teacher was the child of recent immigrants from Mexico; thus, she shared many experiences with the families.

The primary interviewer was the second author, a Mexican doctoral student, who had been in the United States for several years. She had participated in some classroom activities during the school year, but conducting the interviews were her major role in the study. The first author, an education professor of European American descent, was also present at all interviews.

Data Sources and Analysis

The parent interviews, which were used as supporting data in the original study, were the major data source for this paper. The interviews were semi-structured, in that we worked from a list of prepared questions about parents' own school experiences, their children's development and education, their views about bilingualism and bilingual education, and their thoughts about their children's future, but we also invited parents to talk about other issues. Supporting data included ethnographic field notes of more than 300 hours of participant observation in the students' classroom and school, analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), informal conversations with students, and formal and informal conversations with Mrs. Reyes.

As each interview was completed, we listened to the tapes and wrote initial impressions. When all interviews were transcribed, we each read through them and wrote phrasal summaries and reactions (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993) and then compared notes. More focused coding followed, in which we unitized the data into the smallest meaningful parts and then constructed categories that captured recurring patterns in the data, consisting of both comparable examples and examples of variation. After working together to construct initial categories, we again went through the interview transcripts with these categories in mind, seeking to refine and extend them, but also remaining open to new categories.

Findings

In this section, we begin by summarizing what the parents told us about their early lives and schooling in their home countries, reasons for immigrating to the United States, goals for their children, and their current lives in the United States. We then describe themes, supported by quotes from the interviews.

Reasons for Emigrating: "*Ojalá Que Ellas Lleguen a Ser Algo*"

Similar to other immigrants, the most common reason parents gave for emigrating to the United States was to provide their children with advantages

and opportunities, such as better education and more job possibilities than they would likely have access to in their home countries (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2000). All parents had attended school in their native countries. The average education level of the parents was sixth grade; one attended 1 year of high school and one completed trade school. All families had struggled financially in their home countries. While all said they were better off financially in the United States, most were working in one or more service or manual jobs, including laboring at construction sites, cleaning houses, serving food in school cafeterias, clearing tables at restaurants, and doing odd jobs. Parents viewed their children's future through the lens of their own lives, which included limited education, strenuous work, and poverty. They wanted a better life for their children, as illustrated in the following comment from Berta's mother:

Yo para ellas quiero lo más importante. Que sean profesionistas, que se formen, que tengan un trabajo seguro para su vida más adelante porque no quiero que anden como yo. Yo quiero lo mejor, ¿verdad? Siempre les doy muchos consejos. Que quiero que estudien y que ojalá que ellas sigan, lleguen a ser algo. (I want what's most important for them. For them to be professionals, to get a good education, to have a secure job in their future because I don't want them to have my kind of life. I want the best, right? I always give them a lot of advice. That I want them to study, and that I hope that they keep going and become something.)

To take full advantage of the opportunities offered in the United States, parents knew their children needed to do well socially and academically. Many of the parents told us that success was ultimately a personal and family responsibility—their own and their children's. Children needed to demonstrate that they were brought up well by being respectful and well behaved, especially to teachers and other adults, have high expectations for themselves, stay away from drugs and gangs, and be good citizens. They needed to study hard, stay in school, and prepare themselves for college and/or a career. Parents frequently reminded their children of the advantages of living in the United States. For example, when Isabel said she wanted to return to Mexico to live with her father there, her mother told her: “*Mira, a qué vas a México? Allí estábamos peor. Aquí estamos un poco mejor. Aquí sabes, estás aprendiendo inglés y estás aprendiendo otras cosas.*” (Look. What are you going to Mexico for? We were worse there. Here, we are a little better off. Here, you know you are learning English and other things.)

Parents also demonstrated their commitment to their children's education with frequent reminders of the high priority they placed on academics, as in the following comments from Andrés' and Berta's mothers:

Yo les digo [a mis hijos], “¿Quiéren trabajar como yo, bien pesado? Entonces no estudien. Pero,” les digo yo, “Pero si quieren un buen

trabajo y no sacrificar mucho, matarse tanto, tienen que estudiar.” (I tell [my children], “Do you want to work so hard like me? Then don’t study. But,” I tell them, “If you want a good job and not to sacrifice a lot, not to kill yourself so much, you have to study.”)

Yo les digo, “Mis hijas, estudien para que no estén, no anden limpiando casas como yo, no anden vendiendo tacos como su padre. Estudien. Estudien.” Su papá les dice eso: “No tienen nada que hacer—nomas que ir a escuela y estudiar. Su mama no les exige trabajo [en la casa].” El único trabajo de ellas es estudiar. I tell them, “My daughters, study so you won’t be cleaning houses like me or selling tacos like your father. Study. Study.” Their father tells them this: “You don’t have to do anything other than going to school and studying. Your mother doesn’t make you work [around the house].” Their only job is to study.)

Parents’ Perspectives on Language

Knowledge of English was seen as a visible and audible manifestation of learning, an integral part of advancement in the United States, and essential to the children’s education and future. All parents had entered the United States with the intention of learning to speak English and had enrolled in ESL classes shortly after arriving. Parents soon discovered that, while their children were expected to learn English relatively rapidly in schools, their own progress was slow. Between working long hours, taking care of children, and trying to attend classes with inconvenient locations and schedules, learning English was difficult. At the time of the study, none of the 16 parents felt comfortable speaking English, although several said they understood a bit. In their community, most services and stores had bilingual employees, and there were typically bilingual supervisors at their jobs. Thus, as Roberto’s mother said, “*Aquí no es tan necesario el inglés.*” (English is not so necessary here. Several continued to study on their own through videos, television, and informal networks (Worthy, 2006).

To be a citizen: “Lo que yo quiero es que aprendan el inglés”

Although parents were grateful for their own ability to survive without knowing English, they wanted more for their children than to simply get by. They wanted them to thrive, and for this English was seen as a necessity. English proficiency was considered essential for doing well in school, getting a good job, fitting into U.S. society, and leading a satisfying, successful life. Isabel’s mother shared that her older daughter, Elena, who was 13 when the family arrived in the United States, never learned English well enough to pass her classes and eventually dropped out of school. The mother had also observed Elena’s struggles to find a job and had concluded that English was an important commodity in the workplace:

Porque puede conseguir un trabajo mejor. Y si una persona va a una tienda y no habla español y no hay nadie que hable el inglés, pues se va a ir el cliente. Yaun así pues, si tienen alguien que hable inglés, se queda el cliente. Es mejor para un trabajo para ella [habla dos idiomas]. Cualquiera. (Because you can get a better job. And if a person goes to a store and doesn't speak Spanish and there's no one there who speaks English, then the client will leave. And if you have someone who speaks English, the client will stay. It's better for a job for her [to speak two languages]. Any job.)

Parents also mentioned that they wanted their children to learn English so they could help younger siblings, who were receiving English instruction at a younger age. It was becoming increasingly difficult for parents to help the younger children with their homework or read to them, and they counted on the older children to help bridge this gap. All were adamant, then, in their desires for their children to learn English well. As Sofía's mother said, "*Les digo yo, pues, 'Echele ganas.' Lo que yo quiero es que aprendan el inglés.*" (I tell them, 'Try hard.' What I want is for them to learn English.)

Being bilingual: "Para mí es importante los dos, el español y el inglés"

Parents also wanted their children to continue speaking Spanish, with the most common reason, being communication with their own families and maintaining the customs and culture of their home countries. Yolanda's mother explained: "*Si yo la hubiera dejado a puro inglés, no me podría comunicar yo con ella.*" (If I were to allow only English, I couldn't communicate with her.) David's mother remarked that she was happy to see that he was speaking Spanish as well as English at school. This was David's first year in the school and his first year in a bilingual class; he had been in ESL classes, where Spanish was not spoken, through fourth grade: "*Pues, yo creo que está bien [ser bilingüe] porque pues él tiene que mantenerlo [el español]. Como quien dice, 'educado aquí, pero es de México.' O sea, el tiene que mantener, como quien dice, dos culturas.*" (Well, I believe [being bilingual] is good because he has to maintain [Spanish]. As they say, 'Educated here, but he is from Mexico.' That is, he has to maintain, as they say, two cultures.)

Like other parents, Andrés' mother wanted him to be able to communicate with friends and family in their home country, and she gave him frequent reminders to keep up his Spanish: "*Le digo yo, 'Tienes que [hablar español] allá. Vas a andar hablando inglés con [amigos y familia] y ellos no saben.'*" (I tell him, 'You have to [speak Spanish] there. You're going to go there speaking English with your friends and family and they don't know it.') Sofía's mother related a cautionary tale of a family who had encouraged their children to learn English quickly and now regretted it because the children were unwilling, and perhaps unable, to communicate with their parents in Spanish.

Yo conozco una persona que se vino aquí también igual que nosotros y quería que sus hijos hablaran inglés, pero ya después ya no le querían hablar el español. O sea ya querían hablar puro inglés, y ya la mamá no sabía lo que decían tampoco. Ellos le decían “Tu dijiste que querías que habláramos inglés,” y ya no le querían hablar para nada el español. (I know someone who came here the same time as us and wanted her children to speak English, and soon afterwards, they didn’t want to speak Spanish to her. That is, they wanted to speak only English, and the mother didn’t know what they were saying. They told her, “You said you wanted us to speak English,” and they didn’t want to speak Spanish at all.)

Parents agreed that being bilingual was the apex of language learning. As Julio’s mother said, “*Se dice, ‘Se desenvuelve la persona que habla dos idiomas.’*” (They say, ‘A person who speaks two languages shows more confidence.’) Not only would bilingualism help them maintain their linguistic and cultural roots but, as Maricela’s father said:

“La persona vale más cuando está más preparada. Entonces no quisiera que perdiera su español. Al contrario, que lo perfeccione más, al igual que el inglés. Y pudiera hablar otro idioma [además del inglés y el español], pues sería mucho mejor.” (A better-prepared person is worth more. So I wouldn’t want her to lose her Spanish. On the contrary, she should perfect it more, the same as English. And if she could speak another language [in addition to English and Spanish], well, that would be even better.)

Every parent had heard or seen firsthand that jobs and pay were better for bilinguals. For example, Andrés’ mother found her job opportunities limited by her inability to speak English. In contrast, Andrés’ older sister was fluent in both languages. She worked as an interpreter and, despite being an undocumented resident, rarely lacked employment. And for those who were born in the United States (and thus, were automatically citizens), the opportunities were thought to be even greater, as Diana’s father explained: “*Porque creemos, y se ha comprobado, que los que son bilingües tienen un poquito más de oportunidades, y los que son bilingües ganan un poquito más.*” (Because we believe, and it has been proven, that bilinguals have somewhat better job opportunities and earn a little more.)

Parents as Language Teachers

Perhaps because they had struggled greatly to learn English, all parents reported vivid memories of their children’s first efforts to learn English. The first year was very difficult for all, and parents said their children were initially terrified about attending school and interacting in the community, as Esperanza’s mother recalled:

Ella, hace dos años, cuando la llevé [a la escuela], ella lloraba. Y ella decía que ella no podía aprender inglés, que ella se quería ir para México, que ella nunca iba a aprender inglés. . . . Yo veo que ahora el inglés, ya escribe ahí en el cuaderno. Yo no sé si está bien, pero, ya lo lee, ya lo escribe. (Two years ago, when I took her [to school] she cried. And she said that she couldn't learn English, that she wanted to go back to Mexico, that she would never learn English. I see now that she can write English there in her notebook. I don't know if it's correct, but she's already reading and writing [in English].)

Keeping a watch on English proficiency

Even though they knew very little English, parents seemed keenly aware of how well their children were managing English and were able to report with detailed descriptions of their children's progress, and surprising accuracy that was supported by our classroom observations. Their assessments demonstrated that they were closely monitoring their children's growth through observations and interactions and by watching and listening for signs of frustration or misunderstandings. For example, on her visits to the classroom, Paulo's mother took care to observe his behavior during English instruction:

Lo que me ha dicho, que no, no está muy muy bien en el inglés. Yo creo que es porque no lo practica demasiado. Nomás aquí en la escuela hablan, yo veo que hablan mucho inglés [aquí]. Si, ahorita que estaba en la clase, la maestra les estaba leyendo el libro en inglés. Y luego les hizo una pregunta, y él levantó su mano. Entonces sí, está entendiendo algo. (He's told me that he isn't doing very well in English. I believe it's because he doesn't practice it enough. It's only here in school that they speak English; I see that they speak a lot of English [here]. Just now when I was in class, the teacher was reading a book in English. And later she asked a question, and he raised his hand. So yes, he is understanding some.)

Despite assurances by the school that her English was fine, Isabel's mother demonstrated a more nuanced awareness of her daughter's English proficiency, which she gathered through observation and conversations with Isabel:

En la escuela me dicen que sí, [que] ella capta el inglés. O sea, que sí lo entiende. En la nota que me mandan, sí dice que el inglés lo ha captado y todo. Pero yo pienso que ella lo entiende poco, como que siento que no lo puede hablar. (At school they tell me yes, [that] she is grasping English. That is, that she does understand it. In the note that they send me, it says that she has grasped English and everything. But I think that she understands only a little, I feel that she can't speak it.)

Similarly, when children were translating for their families, parents astutely noted their children's behavior, fluency, and attitudes, using these situations as opportunities to judge English language proficiency. Sofía's mother described her daughter's battles with English in the community:

Cuando vamos a las tiendas, yo le digo, "Pregunta cuanto cuesta esto," porque a veces no tiene precio . . . y la mando, y ella es la que va y les pregunta. O cuando voy a una clínica y me la llevo, ella me dice que me están diciendo. Pero lo que sí luego me dice que es batalla y que no puede. (When we go to the stores, I tell her, "Ask how much this costs," because sometimes it doesn't have a price. . . . And I send her, and she is the one who goes and asks them. Or when I go to the clinic and I take her with me, she tells me what they're telling me. But what she does tell me is that she struggles and she can't do it.)

Sofía's mother saw other signs that her daughter was not learning English as rapidly as some of her friends. In contrast to her neighbor's children, she said hers spoke mostly Spanish in the house. She also noticed Sofía's frequent calls to more English-proficient classmates for help with homework in English.

Almost all of the parents had devised clever strategies for helping their children with English that helped them (parents) transcend their own limited knowledge of English. Three mothers, for example, required their children to explain to them in Spanish the English books children brought home. Two others set aside time every afternoon for their children to read and discuss books in English and Spanish and help each other with homework.

Evidence of Spanish erosion

Most parents saw evidence that their children were gradually becoming proficient users of English, as virtually all young immigrants do (Portes & Hao, 1998). A worry among many parents was the opposite problem—erosion of Spanish. Even though all parents spoke only Spanish to their children, more than half expressed concern that their children were forgetting or becoming less fluent in Spanish.

For example, Andrés was forgetting even simple words despite his mother's and his sister's reminders to keep up with Spanish. Andrés' mother lamented: "*Hay veces que las olvida. ¿Como qué día, qué es domingo? Y unas cuantas palabras, cosas que se le olvidan.*" (There are times that he forgets, 'What day, what is Sunday?' And some other words, things he forgets.) Leila's mother was also concerned: "*Hay veces que cuando le quiere decir algo a su papá y no sabe la palabra exacta en español. Le dice, '¿Ves, por qué te digo que hables español?'*" (There are times when she wants to say something to her father and she doesn't know the exact word in Spanish. He tells her, 'You see why I tell you to speak Spanish?')

David's mother said he tries to translate for her but doesn't know how to explain things or read well enough in Spanish to transmit important subtleties: "*Y él también me dice en español, pero no sabe explicarme bien todavía. O sea, todavía no sabe cómo, cómo escribir bien lo de inglés, en español.*" (And he also speaks to me in Spanish, but he doesn't know how to explain to me well yet. That is, he still doesn't know how to translate things written in English to Spanish.) Leila's mother made a similar comment: "*Hay veces que nos llegan papeles y le pregunto, '¿Qué dice en este papel?' Dice, 'Pues lo entiendo un poco en inglés, pero no puedo traducirles en español.'*" (Sometimes we get papers and I ask her, 'What does this paper say?' She says, 'Well I understand it a little in English, but I can't translate it to Spanish.')

All but two of the students, even some who spoke mostly Spanish at school, echoed their parents' concerns. Maricela said when she speaks Spanish, she sometimes feels strange "*porque a veces como que se te olvidan las palabras en español, se te olvidan. . . . Por ejemplo estás hablando con tus papás y no puedes decir una palabra de inglés a español.*" (because at times, it's like, you forget words in Spanish, you forget. . . . For example, you're talking with your parents and you can't translate an English word to Spanish.) Esperanza remarked in English:

Well, sometimes I have trouble with my Spanish. My mom says, "Don't ever forget your Spanish." Yeah, but sometimes I have trouble. Like I knew it years, many years ago, but now I kind of get stuck, and I have to make up another word to fix it.

Sofía lamented, "*No puedo creer que ya se me haya olvidado.*" (I can't believe that I have already forgotten.)

Perhaps due to the elevated status of English, negative messages about speaking Spanish (Olsen, 2000; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2000; Trueba, 2002), students' desires to assimilate (Fillmore, 2000), and efforts by the school and parents, developing English proficiency was not a major struggle for most of these students. While 11 of the 13 were considered to have limited proficiency in English at the beginning of fifth grade based on standardized language tests, all had progressed several levels by the end of the year. All but 3 had reached adequate English proficiency by the end of Grade 6, according to school tests. At the beginning of the fifth-grade year, all 13 of the students spoke Spanish when given the choice. Less than 2 years later, only 7 preferred Spanish to English. The remaining 6 were clearly showing a loss of Spanish vocabulary and fluency and were becoming resistant to speaking Spanish. One girl who less than 2 years earlier was extremely timid about English would now *only* speak English, even when interviewed in Spanish because, she said, her Spanish sounded "funny." These patterns of language use—relatively rapid growth in English accompanied by erosion of home language—are consistent with research findings that children of immigrants

typically begin to lose their native language by middle school (Fillmore, 2000; Portes & Hao, 1998), as described by Olsen (2000): “They and their families are saddened by the discovery, which comes too late, that becoming English fluent usually is accompanied by a loss of home language use, fluency, and development” (p. 197).

Some parents described purposeful strategies for keeping Spanish alive and for dealing with obstacles they encountered. All but two families attended church services in Spanish, and all said they were determined to keep their homes English-free because the children were getting plenty of practice in English at school. As Diana’s father said, “*Así en la escuela pueden hablar puro inglés, y aquí van a hablar el español. Así es que así no lo olvidan.*” (So in school they can speak English, and here they’re going to speak Spanish. So they won’t forget.) Maricela’s father agreed that it was up to parents to help children conserve Spanish: “*Bueno eso yo pienso que depende también de lo que uno como padre siempre les está comunicando. Que no se pierda este idioma.*” (I think that it also depends on what the parents are always communicating to them. Not to lose this language.)

Barriers to sustaining Spanish

Although all parents spoke only Spanish at home and wanted their children to do the same, this was often easier said than done. Two mothers mentioned that their children had begun speaking English when they didn’t want their parents to understand what they were saying. Other complications included pressure from family members, neighbors, and teachers who insisted that speaking Spanish would interfere with learning English. For example, Sofía’s uncles have lived in the United States for many years. Although they speak Spanish at Sofía’s house out of respect for their brother’s (Sofía’s father) wishes, they speak only English in their own homes. Sofía’s mother told us that Sofía prefers to speak in Spanish to extended family members, but her cousins don’t always understand her, and her uncles and aunts pressure her to speak English. Graciela’s mother said she has been arguing with her ex-husband’s family since Graciela was a toddler. The in-laws have tried to insist that Graciela speak only English: “*La familia de mi esposo dice, ‘No. Se va a confundir y no va a poder [hablar inglés]’*” (My husband’s family says, ‘No. She’s going to be confused and won’t be able [to speak English].’)

Economics in conjunction with recent political events also played a role in limiting the “interdependence” of families living on both sides of the U.S.–Mexican border that helps many Mexican-origin families maintain their home language and culture. Trueba and McLaren (2000), who worked with families similar to those in our study, found that families frequently return to visit relatives, where the children are immersed in home language and culture. Eight of the 13 families in our study had been doing this at least once or twice a year for several weeks at a time since arriving in the United States. Recently,

however, travel had become more difficult both because of the expense and because heightened security at the border threatened to make it difficult for undocumented immigrants to return. Some families had already cut back on the frequency of their visits.

Andrés and his brother persisted in speaking English together against their mother's wishes. She told us: "*Les digo que yo quiero solo puro español en la casa. Y le digo a Andrés, 'Agarra un libro en español.'*" (I tell them that I want only Spanish in the house. And I tell Andrés, 'Get a book in Spanish.' Andrés responds to her, "*No me gusta hablar en español, ni leer.*" (I don't like to speak or read in Spanish.) It was a struggle, she explained, because she was at work most of the time the boys were at home, and they spent much of their free time with English-speaking neighbors. This provides yet another example of the role of SES in language maintenance.

David, who was a highly proficient reader and writer of English, struggled with Spanish literacy because he had never received instruction in Spanish in the ESL classes in the school he attended before his arrival at Chavez in fifth grade. His mother, one of the few parents with a high degree of literacy in Spanish, said she had worked with him at home. For example, she frequently requested from the teacher Spanish translations of the books that were being read in the classroom. When they were available, she read them herself and discussed them with him in Spanish. However, David was becoming more resistant, and she was concerned that he would soon give up trying to learn Spanish.

The grand struggle for bilingualism

All students had varying degrees of proficiency in the two languages and 3 students, Graciela, Esperanza, and Berta, were fluent and literate in Spanish and English, and they alternated easily between both in school as well as at home. Although all parents demonstrated a commitment to bilingual development, the parents of these 3 students took more proactive stances and more radical measures to ensure their children's literacy as well as oral proficiency in Spanish. Despite her in-laws' constant criticism, for example, Graciela's mother stood her ground on the issue of Spanish:

Ellos querían que hablara puro inglés. Y les dije, "No. Espérame. Es que ella tiene familia aquí y tiene familia allá." Entonces, les dije, "No estoy contra de que hable inglés. No. Está bien. Que lo lea y escriba y todo," ¿verdad?" Pero, el español también. Porque no se mira bien que yo mexicana, y toda mi familia allá, y que le hablen y todo y no entienda nada." Y me van a criticar. Van a decir, "Ayyy, te crees mucho." (They wanted her to speak only English. And I told them, "No. Wait. She has family here and family there." Then I told them, "I am not against her speaking English. No. That's fine. She should read it and write it and everything. Right? But Spanish, too.

Because it doesn't look good that I'm Mexican and all of my family is there and that they speak to her and she doesn't understand anything." And they're going to criticize me. They're going to tell me, "Oh, you think too much of yourself.")

She also insisted on bilingual placements for Graciela: "*Cuando empezó la escuela les dije, 'Miren. Todos los grados que puedan agarrar bilingüe, yo la quiero en bilingüe.'*" (When she began school, I told them, 'Look. In all the grades that she can be in bilingual classes, I want her in them.')

Esperanza's mother wanted her to go to college but was worried about the expense of tuition in the United States, so she was considering sending her to Mexico to continue her education after high school. For this, she knew that Esperanza would need to have a high level of literacy in Spanish. Thus, even though she was unable to travel to Mexico, she regularly corresponded with family members and made sure that Esperanza did the same. She also read the bible and other books in Spanish daily with her daughter, as did Graciela's and Berta's parents. Berta's mother said, "*Si, creo que eso es lo que tratamos, su papá y yo, de conservar [el español], tanto que lo escriban, y que lo entiendan bien.*" (Yes, I believe that this is what her father and I are trying to do, to maintain [the Spanish language], both to write it and understand it well.) Berta's father refused to give in to the strong tide of English, insisting that his daughters speak only Spanish in his presence. As his wife proudly related:

Su papá dice, "No quiero ni una palabra en inglés." Inglés, [mis hijas] hablan bien el español porque ni siquiera en la casa permite que se hable el inglés. Mi esposo dice, "El inglés lo hablan con cualquiera. En la escuela, donde sea." Dice, "pero aquí en la casa el español." (Her father says, "I don't want a single word of English." So that's why my daughters speak Spanish well because he does not even permit English to be spoken at home. My husband says, "They can speak English with anyone. In school, wherever they are." He says, "But here at home, Spanish.")

She continued, "*Si las niñas hablan inglés cuando está su papa, les dice, '¡Español! ¡Español!'*" (If the girls speak English when their father is around, he tells them, 'Spanish! Spanish!')

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complexities and pressures involved in language learning and sustenance that new immigrants encounter when they arrive in the United States. Upon their emigration, learning English was one of the first priorities of the families in this study. Although there were

many barriers to their own English learning (Worthy, 2006), parents wanted their children to have all the academic, social, and economic success that their new country appeared to offer to bilingual citizens.

Parents demonstrated awareness of their children's proficiency in both languages and had observed that Spanish was becoming less necessary in their children's worlds (Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001; Li, 1999; Olsen, 2000). They had closely observed the experiences of friends and family members and were aware of the balancing act of bilingualism. All continued speaking Spanish in their homes, encouraging, supporting, and even nagging their children to do the same. Some went further by arranging opportunities for their children to visit family, read, and write in Spanish. Before parents realized it, however, some children were beginning to resist speaking, reading, and writing Spanish. Suddenly, it seemed, the balance had begun to shift too far for some children, and parents were swimming against a strong tide to keep their children speaking two languages. Although all of the children were still able to communicate in Spanish with their parents, most were gradually losing fluency and vocabulary, and only three were fluently bilingual and biliterate in both English and Spanish. The parents of those three students shared a sense of urgency that propelled them to actively and intensively intervene in their children's language use.

Some important lessons we learned from this study are that these low-income immigrant parents, most with very little education by U.S. standards, were aware, observant, and involved in their children's education. Despite not knowing English, they devised innovative ways to assess their children's knowledge and fluency and strategies for helping them improve in both languages.

However, in addition to the sociopolitical forces of English hegemony and assimilation, these children were under additional pressures to set aside Spanish in favor of English. First, their families were all recent immigrants and the children might have felt relatively undervalued even within a high-poverty, minority community. Second, the dire economic situations of these families made it necessary for parents to take whatever employment they could get, which sometimes meant one or both parents had to be away from the home for extended periods of time. In some families, this left less time for the active promotion or study of home language and culture.

These children of immigrants had the potential to become bilingual citizens with advantages that would be immensely helpful for them in the future. Consider some of the students in our study. David, who learned English quickly in ESL classes but never learned to read or write in Spanish. Yolanda, who struggled to learn English in third grade when she arrived in the United States but by sixth grade was resisting Spanish. Like most of their peers, they spoke, read, and wrote English with near-native proficiency and were doing well in school, but at what cost? Rather than going through a period of linguistic

loss and then trying to recapture what they have lost through Spanish classes in middle school and high school, they could have been bilingual all along. How much more attainable would this goal be if schools collaborated with parents? In this study, we found parents who were both willing and able to help but were a virtually untapped resource of positive, powerful, language models. Educators need to talk directly to parents like those in this study to understand what they want for their children and how they are willing to help. Too often, teachers wrongly assume that parents, especially those who come from low-income backgrounds, do not have the time, capability, or willingness to be involved in their children's education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). For the parents in this study, time was a challenge, but willingness and capability were not. A stronger connection would benefit parents, teachers, and children as Schecter, Sharken-Taboada, and Bayley (1996) suggest:

To build successful minority language maintenance programs, schools need to be sensitive to parents' aspirations for their children, and to appreciate that the aspirations impacting language maintenance are shaped by fluid contexts in which parents constantly confront choices. Thus, educators concerned with the linguistic development of bilingual children must do more than inform parents as to how the latter can most beneficially support the school's agenda. We need to include parent participation in the articulation of this agenda, tapping their experiences and insights as lifelong informants. By so doing, we also help to create supportive frameworks for parents' decisions and actions on behalf of minority language maintenance. (pp. 278–279)

Loss of a language is only the surface problem. If it were so easy to convince educators that bilingualism in young immigrants is a positive thing, it would have happened years ago. Deep-seated sociopolitical attitudes that cause people to be wary of differences and diversity are at work in schools as much as they are in society, and these attitudes must be confronted before real changes can take place (Fillmore, 2000; Valdés, 1998).

In addition to strengthening home–school connections, another positive arena for change is preservice teacher education. Most teachers are middle-class European Americans who have little experience in working with students whose socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds differ from their own. More teacher preparation programs are offering courses on culturally relevant pedagogy with information, experiences, and opportunities for discussion designed to help develop appreciation for diversity and differences. Other promising avenues include providing preservice teachers with carefully structured experiences in the communities and schools in which they will teach, and opportunities to develop personal relationships with students and families (Cruz, 1997; Worthy & Patterson, 2001). Similar experiences can be provided for inservice teachers. Whether or not one shares the language or

culture of the family, teachers can support bilingualism, biliteracy, and positive identification with home language and culture (Fránquiz & Reyes, 1998; Schwarzer, Haywood, & Lorenzen, 2003). Schools can help to instill the positive feelings about native languages that are so necessary for developing and maintaining bilingualism by creating conditions in which students' native languages are encouraged and celebrated (Moll & Dworin, 1996; Shannon, 1995).

Bilingualism and biliteracy are powerful advantages in academic, linguistic, personal, occupational, and social arenas (Cummins, 1977; Hakuta, 1986; Rumbaut, 1995). While many people have to work hard to learn a second language, the deterioration of a language one already knows is a shameful waste of a child's potential to be, in the eloquent words of Luis Cavazos from the opening quote, "*vale dos personas.*"

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