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Counteracting Epistemicide: Social and Cultural Capital of Teachers in a Dual Language Program

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Counteracting Epistemicide: Social and Cultural Capital of Teachers in a Dual Language Program

Abstract

This case study explored the social and cultural capital of teachers in a rural Midwestern Spanish-English dual-language immersion (DLI) program as they overcame an Anglocentric epistemological hegemony in their daily practice. Working from Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital and Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama's (2012) approach to funds of knowledge, this research demonstrated that DLI teachers faced challenges ranging from resistance by non-DLI teachers in the school afraid of losing their jobs, to a broader fear of the DLI program taking resources away from the monolingual anglophone classrooms. To overcome these challenges, the DLI teachers drew extensively on their global social networks to resuscitate knowledge systems under attack from an Anglocentric epistemology, leveraging their existing social and cultural capital to benefit the community as a whole through an authentic Spanish-language epistemology.

Keywords

Dual Language Immersion, epistemicide, student diversity, equity, social capital, cultural capital

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Introduction

K-12 education in the United States is based on an Anglophonic epistemology of Whiteness that conditions the decisions teachers, schools, districts, and teacher education programs make regarding what to teach, how to teach, and how to assess student learning through language bias (Gerald, 2020). With very rare exceptions, the languages, literacies, and cultural practices of non-English speaking populations exist in the curriculum primarily as enrichment for the dominant Anglophonic students. Any other use of a non-English language, such as the majority of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, is treated as a deficit if not a sign of disability (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021). The result is an educational system that perpetrates a curricular epistemicide, annihilating and killing the knowledge systems of many families and communities where students come from (Paraskeva, 2016). However, within this context, the Dual Language Immersion (DLI) or two-way immersion approach to education represents an effort to focus on the development of biliterate and bicultural students rather than forcing language and culture annihilation on those who speak languages other than English (Thomas & Collier, 2003). An example of culturally responsive teaching that elevates the status of the non-English language, and in doing so elevates the status of the culture and native speakers of that language (Thomas & Collier, 2003), DLI has also been credited with disrupting the unrecognized Whiteness (Leonardo, 2004) of educational systems that negatively affects students of color. This Whiteness perpetuates the educational debt and opportunity gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2010) owed to students of color, and forces them into the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma et al., 2014). As such, DLI provides a potent model to resist the epistemicide threatened by an Anglocentric epistemological hegemony that equates academic success with English Only.

Nevertheless, DLI programs represent a relatively small subset of EL teaching in K-12 schools and teacher education programs. Compounding this situation is the fact that many DLI programs have been developed in suburban areas to serve the dominant majority of White students, a form of educational enrichment and an outcome of interest convergence (Morales & Maravilla, 2018). In addition, research has shown that the pedagogy and curriculum of DLI programs are sometimes themselves Anglocentric, employing White teachers who speak the non-English language but are not bilingual or bicultural, using teaching methods such as student-centered teaching that are unmodified from their development for the White majority, “pausing” non-English instruction during periods of standardized testing to drill the students in test subjects, and employing curriculum resources translated from standard English-language K-12 materials into the target language (for a thorough critique, see Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). Some of these issues are grounded in the harsh realities of schooling, including the role of high-stakes testing in determining educators’ career paths, and the general lack of funding that encourages quick, inexpensive solutions to problems such as using materials translated from English instead of authentic Spanish-language materials. Nevertheless, the result is some DLI programs represent another example of epistemicide in spite of the potential of the approach to counter the Anglophonic epistemological hegemony. As Paraskeva (2017) cautioned, some so-called counter hegemonic curriculum platforms are so connected with Western epistemologies that they colonize the field by imposing “a classed, raced, and gendered philosophy of praxis that drives the field to an ideological surrealism and collective suicide” (p. 199).

However, not all DLI programs reproduce the epistemicide described above, proving that complicity with the Anglophonic majority is not a requirement for such programs. A case in point is the DLI program in this study: When the program was first launched, six out of the seven teachers were of Latinx origin hired from Latin American countries, and the program continued this hiring tradition as it expanded to more grade levels. Each of the DLI teachers brought their own knowledge systems and practices into their work. Thus, having multiple DLI teachers in a program brought the diversity within the non-English language into the curriculum, which not only enriched the curriculum but addressed the diversity of cultures in the student body. To accomplish this work requires DLI teachers who are equipped and authorized to set aside the dominant Anglophonic curriculum and pedagogy and draw upon their own social and cultural capital and knowledge systems to establish a new, bilingual curriculum and bicultural pedagogy. However, little, if any, research has been conducted on how DLI teachers take this Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach to cope with the challenges of program and curriculum development, nor how they handle the inevitable pushback by individuals and groups in the dominant majority who feel threatened by their work. Developing a better understanding of the process by which DLI teachers use their social and cultural capital to build an alternative to the Anglophonic epistemology of U.S. schooling will help teacher education programs, school and district administrators, and community members better support DLI programs and teachers, recognize when such programs are under threat of epistemicide, and generate transformative solutions to better support DLI students and families.

To address this need, this case study has explored the social and cultural capital DLI teachers developed and deployed in a two-way DLI program (all subjects taught in both Spanish and English using materials authentic to each language) in an elementary school in a rural district in the Midwestern part of the United States. When it was first implemented with preschool through first grade, it included 160 students and seven teachers, six of them of Latin American origins. Two years later, the DLI program had expanded to 11 classes with a total of 300 students and 12 DLI teachers, 10 of them of Latin American origins. The program shared building and principal with the regular elementary school, but also had its own program director. From the beginning of the program, friction occurred both inside the school and out in the community from opponents of the program. The authors examined the following two questions:

- 1) What challenges did DLI teachers encounter on a daily basis?
- 2) What social and cultural capital did DLI teachers draw on to overcome the challenges and serve the students and the community?

Theoretical Framework

The term social capital was defined by Lyda Hanifan (1916) as “those tangible assets [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit” (p. 130). He wrote about social capital to advocate for community involvement for successful schools, further stating that

the individual is helpless socially, if left to himself... If he may come into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social

potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors. (pp. 130-131)

Hanifan pointed out the mutual beneficial relationship between an individual and the community, treating each individual in his concept of social capital as enjoying an equal opportunity to join a community and benefit from it. Some 80 years later, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) refined the notion of social capital and then posited a parallel idea of cultural capital, which is to a great extent determined by social capital:

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 251)

Bourdieu pointed to education as the locus for the development of social and cultural capital. However, he also argued that educational systems tend to be socially and political conservative, serving to reproduce class relations while simultaneously appearing to be the neutral conveyor of “common” cultural and social knowledge (Bourdieu, 1977). For example, some groups of people are marginalized within—if not excluded from—educational contexts. In that case, their cultural capital is also excluded, preventing them from activating and mobilizing their funds of knowledge in the educational enterprise. In such cases, Bourdieu’s theory of social and cultural capital does not help understand how marginalized communities and individuals such as the DLI teachers in this study develop and use these forms of capital to achieve success. Therefore, we combine Bourdieu’s theory of social capital with Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama’s (2012) theory of funds of knowledge, the social and cultural capital based in family and community from which individuals draw in developing their professional capital. Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2012) argued that, in most educational contexts, people of color are systematically prevented from activating and mobilizing their funds of knowledge—their community-grounded social and cultural capital. This prevents them from developing socially relevant capital, such as the professional capital needed to have a successful career. Therefore, success in teaching as well as in the teachers’ professional development depends upon their ability to activate and mobilize both social and cultural capital, a process that can be hindered by institutional and broader societal factors. It is this process in the context of a particular DLI program that we investigated in this study.

Methods

This research adopts the qualitative case study method (Stake, 1995) to examine the challenges DLI teachers encountered on a daily basis and the social and cultural capital they drew on to overcome the challenges to serve their students and the community. The case study was situated in an elementary DLI program in a rural school district in the Midwest with 47% Latinx students, covering children in kindergarten through second grade. The DLI program was defined as a single case in this study. Five bilingual teachers and the director of the program who were hired from Latin American countries were the primary participants in the study. Also included in the study was the superintendent of the school district. Table 1 provides summary of

the participants' pseudonyms, positions, countries of origin and education backgrounds. Data sources included interviews with the teachers, triangulated with district policy documents, curriculum materials, and interviews with school administrators. Data were analyzed through methods of open coding and memoing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify challenges the DLI teachers experienced and a priori coding (Liu, 2020; Saldaña, 2015) that applies existing codes developed from the theoretical framework to categorize the DLI teachers' social and cultural capital to overcome the challenges.

Name	Position in the DLI Program	Country of Origin	Education/Profession in Home Country
Diego	Director	Guatemala	Mathematics Teacher
Adrianna	Teacher Curriculum Developer	Costa Rica	Masters in Psychology and Masters in Education
Paul	Teacher	Colombia (Grew up in New York)	Teacher
Fernando	Teacher	Chile	Teacher, Editor, Ph.D in Education
Valerie	Teacher	Mexico	Teacher
Romina	Teacher	Mexico	Teacher
Superintendent		United States	

Table 1: Participants' Positions, Countries of Origin, and Education Backgrounds

Results

Challenges the Dual-Language Teachers Encountered on a Daily Basis

First, the findings show that since the inception of the DLI program, friction developed both inside the school and out in the community with opponents of the program, primarily White, monolingual English speakers. DLI teachers faced social challenges including White supremacist views of students from families speaking languages other than English, resistance by monolingual Anglophonic teachers in the school afraid of losing their jobs to bilingual teachers in the future; complaints from both monolingual Anglophonic teachers and local community members that the DLI program took resources away from the monolingual English classrooms; and general pushback from a subset of the monolingual teachers and the White community, growing from their White supremacist belief that the United States is an English speaking country and therefore everyone should speak English. For example, one of the DLI teachers, Adrianna, noted in an interview that some White teachers blamed Spanish speaking students for dragging the school's test scores down:

We have 50% of the students [who] are Hispanic and for many years, we neglect those students the opportunity to be bilingual or bicultural. Whenever we talk about student test data, we hear a lot of teachers saying, "He's Hispanic and he doesn't know any English and that's why he is performing this bad in a specific subject. We have many students [who] are like that and that's why our test scores look bad." (Adrianna, Interview)

This general deficit view of Spanish speaking students was reflected in White teachers' negative attitudes toward the DLI teachers as well:

We heard a bunch of comments like, those are the brown kids, the brown teachers, the brown buses. Why do we need to hire those teachers from outside our country? How much do they know about teaching here? Why don't they speak English if we are in the United States? They should all speak English since they are in the United States. (Valerie, Interview)

Although the DLI program constantly sent letters to parents and gave them calls inviting them to attend regular meetings offered in the school to share the vision and practice of the DLI program, White opponents from the community and the school chose not to be informed but "made sure they talk very poorly about the program" (Adrianna, Interview).

Second, the program and the teachers faced structural challenges based on the relative paucity of DLI curricula and materials as well as teacher training programs. These structural challenges are consequences of external social and political forces, such as the predominantly White, monolingual Anglophonic nature of the national teacher corps (Dedeoglu & Lamme, 2011; Liu & Ball, 2019), the small number of EL teacher education programs that include a DLI approach, and the general hostility within the U.S. toward non-dominant languages and cultures (Liu, 2020). Taken together, these factors contributed to a lack of authentic DLI teaching resources. As a result, the DLI teachers in this study often found themselves developing curriculum materials and collecting resources from outside the U.S. in addition to maintaining their daily classroom teaching. The DLI teachers believed that this intuitive approach was a very powerful idea, and that "contents and materials should relate to the diversity and the reality of the students and their families" (Fernando, Interview). However, the process of locating authentic materials and developing new curricula was an extra burden, and often done on a volunteer basis without scheduled time or financial compensation. For example, Adrianna, who was leading the curriculum development, shared this challenge as well as her philosophy of authentic DLI curriculum:

There was a discussion about maybe we can buy this or buy that resource. I was the only one and that was the first time that people heard somebody asking, is that in Spanish? Does that come in Spanish? If it's not in Spanish, it's not going to do well for dual language. We should not spend the money in that. That was pretty much my role last year. (Adrianna, Interview)

Multiple DLI teachers reported similar challenges in finding and developing authentic resources for their DLI students. Romina commented,

Now we are working very hard in putting all the resources for the library because we don't have many here. In the summer, we have to write the unit for second grade. We are very busy but we are happy to do it because we are creating things meaningful for our kids here. (Romina, Interview)

Similarly, Paul explained the challenge and the actions he took to bring in authentic experiences in his teaching:

We are very big here in the dual language program about using authentic literature in Spanish. It is hard to find. A lot of it is just translation from English to Spanish and so the quality is not as good. We try to use as much as the authentic literature we have when it comes to literacy. (Paul, Interview)

In addition, because most of the DLI teachers were newly hired from outside the U.S., they had to obtain an official teaching license while teaching full-time with a short-term license, adding their own study for licensure onto their teaching and curriculum development duties. In response to the challenge of working while obtaining licensure, Fernando commented:

I think it was a stressful year because of all the tests...it's too much. It's full time here teaching and full time with taking courses for licensure. I don't think I've had any holidays or weekends. I hope I don't burn out before I can get the official license. (Fernando, Interview)

Finally, DLI teachers spent considerable time and energy advocating for their program in order to obtain the support they needed to further develop it. They organized family nights and celebrations with the local Latinx families, sought the support of their local community leaders, and also reached out repeatedly to the White families and community leaders. Although the DLI teachers were fully aware of the rejection and hostility from some White families, they successfully demonstrated the strength of the program, their commitment to it, and their belief it would benefit all students:

Definitely we have a lot of kids here, and we need to think about them. It's not just thinking about me. Think about the parents. How do you consider yourself and your role to communicate the programs to people who still have the doubt and questions and sometimes even anger? I try to explain to them that this is a good program, this is a good opportunity for their kids. I try to explain to them that this is beneficial to all kids, no matter [if] they are bilingual or not. (Romina, Interview)

Social and Cultural Capital Dual Language Teachers Drew on to Overcome the Challenges and Serve the Students and the Community

The program growth over the first three years of its existence demonstrated that the DLI teachers in this case successfully met many of these challenges. As reported earlier, the DLI teachers encountered great challenges in building authentic curriculum and materials. They rejected the idea of translating the standard curriculum in English to Spanish because they strongly believed that real bilingual education should not just teach the native language to students, but also embrace the talents, histories, and cultures embodied in the native language. Therefore, they worked painstakingly to create a DLI curriculum and relevant pedagogy that represented the knowledge systems of the students and families who speak Spanish. Diego, the program director, commented enthusiastically:

Why should we translate children's books that are written in English and represent White faces? We need to bring in stories about people in Latin American countries written in their own language. What we don't want to do is to teach the students to use Spanish to learn the White curriculum; we want to teach them the language and use the language to learn about the histories, the cultures, and the experiences embodied in the language. (Diego, Interview)

Our research indicates that, in spite of being located in a relatively isolated, rural community, the DLI teachers were dedicated to create authentic materials and were able to draw on their social networks in their home countries, the school district, and local Latinx communities. They brought their resources and knowledge systems into the Midwest to build curricula, create teaching materials and pedagogy addressing the diversity within the local Latinx community, and develop teacher professional development programs, all which served to counteract the curricular epistemicide common in K-12 schools. Incorporating the lives and identities of the students and their families into the curricular materials was not an easy task, and it enabled members of the community to express identities more specific than simple *Latinidad* (Padilla, 1985). As Fernando observed,

There is a lot to do [in terms of authentic curriculum development], because just thinking of my students from Mexico, every state/city is very different, and having their own character-history-culture is important.... I remember that, in a contest about flags, a student made the Mexico flag with something about [the state of] Michoacán. A leader mom said to me, "That flag will win, because we have a lot of people from there." And that student won the contest. (Fernando, Interview)

The process of developing materials addressing the diversity among the Spanish-speaking students and families provided the impetus for the teachers to reflect on their own identities both in the United States and in their home countries, learning more about their own histories and cultures. For example, Fernando made the effort to teach about Latin America as part of a required unit on Wisconsin:

I was looking for materials for the fourth grade because it was a new grade. The first unit is Wisconsin. In theory, I don't need materials from my own country (Chile). But I changed the focus a little bit to include Latin American countries. We don't have anything in our previous years about Latin America. The most materials I found was in English. I decided to make some connections. I started to look for information anywhere and I found some stuff in Mexico. It is important because we have lot of students from Mexico and it is important for them to make the connection. I took a critical point of view about Colonization. For example, when teaching about the Columbus Day, I integrated some criticism and talked about what really happened there. (Fernando, Interview)

Fernando continued to explain how his cultural and social capital enabled him to teach with critical pedagogies, and in the process learned about the Indigenous populations in his home country:

I use different approaches in teaching, ranging from visual or text because of my ethnographic research background. Critical pedagogy may be easier when you see all the cultures and differences through travels. Through my education and research in difference countries, I have already seen so many differences and it's easier to become more critical and inclusive. When I know what is good for the kids, I have the drive to learn new things cross culturally so that I can teach the kids better. For example, the experiences of being Latinx is different from being in Chile and therefore I was motivated to learn about migration and natives in Chile when I teach Native Americans in Wisconsin. (Fernando, Interview)

Both Fernando and Paul made use of their social and cultural capital in finding and developing authentic resources in their teaching. Paul actively integrated resources such as different types of clothes and food from families in the local Spanish speaking community in his teaching in order to acknowledge real-life experiences of the students. Fernando used his social networks to collect books in Spanish with critical perspectives and invite guest speakers to his class to connect teaching with students' life experiences.

In order to find books in Spanish with critical perspectives that I can read with my students, once I put a note on Facebook. A lot of my friends from Latin America and Europe responded and gave me ideas. One example is connecting my class with guest speakers. He is a chemistry teacher in Chile and studied in the United States too. I met him before because he was writing in Chile. We were writing about policies in education in Chile so we started to write together. He sent me work he worked with National Geographic. I invited him to speak with my students and we spoke authentic Spanish. I told him we need authentic Spanish books for our program and we don't want books just translated from English. I always ask my friends about the the important books in their country. I also went to a conference with Diego and got some catalogs. I found some books from there. With these approaches, I found many books that were written by people from Latin America and or descendants of Latin Americans. For example, we are now reading *Historia de una gaviota y del gato que le enseñó a volar (The Story of a Seagull and the Cat Who Taught Her to Fly)* by the Chilean writer, Luis Sepúlveda. As a writer, Sepúlveda engaged in social struggles and political change. This commitment meant his exile from Chile, and the start of *periple* [sojourn] in Europe. This connection with traveling not for pleasure, but for need and survival, establishes a connection with several family histories of my students. The story itself talked about migration, tragedy and solidarity—wonderful themes for discussion. (Fernando, Interview)

In addition, the DLI teachers used their cultural capital as bilingual and bicultural professionals to build a trusting relationship with students and parents, increasing their support from the community. They also used their cultural capital at faculty and community meetings to demonstrate to their monolingual Anglophone colleagues as well as the community as a whole the value of their language, their culture, and the DLI program for all the students as well as the community at large, not just for the Latinx students. We identified strong social capital within and beyond the DLI program. The DLI program director, originally from Guatemala, advocated strongly for the program, and won the support of the district superintendent, who acted as liaison between the program, school, and district. In addition, there was a supportive network of local

community members who have advocated the program from the beginning, initiating the idea of a DLI program, lobbying at different district levels, and pushing through a plan to hire as director a native Spanish speaker. Within the DLI program itself, all the bilingual teachers, the majority hired from Latin American countries, formed a collaborative network to support each other, two of them immediately assuming leadership when the program started.

Finally, the DLI teachers used their cultural capital to establish themselves as experts and deal with opposition to the program. Their cultural capital as bilingual and bicultural enabled them to build a trusting relationship with students and parents, which helped them obtain more support from the community. According to Romina,

I am bilingual, I am bicultural, so I think that just gives me the connection with parents. I can definitely understand where the kids are from and why they do things in the classroom the way they do because I understand their backgrounds. That's definitely the asset and benefit of having a bilingual and bicultural teacher. Definitely your background or your culture enables you to make connections and gain the trust of the parents.
(Romina, Interview)

Drawing on their cultural capital also enabled them to present the benefits of DLI programs to all students, not just Spanish-speaking ones.

I love to work with parents too and with all my students. It's not just the Hispanic pupils, but all students. (Romina, Interview)

Last year, we made sure that we had, I don't know, 15 meetings in the community and parents to inform about dual language. (Adrianna, Interview)

In summary, the social capital represented through a strong network of supporters including community members, the superintendent and the dual language director, and the collaborative community within the DLI program coalesced with the cultural capital of the bilingual and biliterate teachers to make the program itself an element in the teachers' cultural identity, maintaining the distinctiveness of a program initiated to serve a diverse community. This commitment, as the program director and all the DLI teachers constantly articulated, "Black, White, or Brown—we serve them all," has been central to the teachers' success.

Discussion and Implications

The findings suggest that the success of the program was not just a function of social capital (the depth and breadth of the social network) as Aldrich (2012) and others argue, but actually a function of the teachers' total funds of knowledge (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012), cultural capital, and social capital grounded in their knowledge systems situated in home communities. As teachers with ready access to robust funds of knowledge from their home communities, they were better able to overcome challenges coming inside and outside their schools. Moreover, such teachers were better able to use their social and cultural capital to advance their careers, developing strong friendships and understanding of each others' cultures at the same time. Their persistence in developing the dual-language education curriculum based on authentic resources created by native speakers represent an inspiring example of how teachers can strive for

epistemological and ontological diversity in the process of knowledge production in dual language instruction. This praxis is much needed in K-12 education in general, and dual language education in particular, where episteme beyond the Anglophonic terrain is often wiped out.

In order to address the epistemicide of non-dominant languages and cultures in K-12 classrooms, teachers, administrators, and teacher education programs need a paradigmatic shift to actively include knowledge systems outside of Western traditions. One alternative and effective solution, as demonstrated by the DLI teachers in this study, is for teacher educators, teachers, school administrators, and communities as a whole to build solidarity to first raise important questions: Whose knowledge is represented in the program?; Whose knowledge is missing and whose voices are silenced?; and Whose knowledge and experiences should be included? They then take transformative and generative actions (Ball, 2009; Ball et al., 2021; Liu, 2015) to deliberately use the languages, literacies, and cultural practices from underrepresented communities to resuscitate their knowledge systems and include them in the official curriculum in their local and regional diversity—recognizing that there isn't a monolithic Spanish, but a plurality of Spanishes reflecting the many places and peoples in the Latinx community. In addition, the resilience and successful experiences of the DLI teachers in this study serve as counternarratives (Miller et al., 2020) to the deficit model and xenophobia toward teachers whose primary languages are not English or whose primary teacher education is from outside of the United States.

This research has provided both a theoretical lens and data-grounded results to understand the challenges the dual language teachers face in innovative program implementation to disrupt epistemicide. The pushback they experienced from White parents, White teachers, and administrators represents processes of domination and oppression, in which a White Anglophonic epistemological hegemony is maintained and perpetuated through curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Paraskeva, 2017). The results offer teachers and school administrators strategies to help participants build strength to retain both their identity and the integrity of DLI programs in the face of White supremacy and curricular epistemicide.

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