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The Dual Language Education Program of Delavan-Darien School District: A Case of Latino Community Leadership

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Abstract

On May 19, 2014, the Delavan-Darien School Board of Wisconsin voted 5-2 in favor of installing a Dual Language Immersion Program. This victory of the Latino community in a small district was not easy and speaks of a valuable experience in advocacy and mobilization.

The district's student outcomes are worrying: the combined results in 2013-2014 of the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination and the Wisconsin Alternate Assessment are the poorest in the state. This situation has raised questions about the cultural and linguistic relevance of the education provided in the district. The monolingual model was not recognizing the diversity of the student population, and a large percentage of first- and second-generation immigrant students were failing in the school system. That is why a group of parents initiated a series of actions to establish a dual language education program.

The demand for dual language education in Delavan-Darien can be analyzed in three phases:

1. Raising awareness around the exclusion of the Latino community in regards to the available educational options: At this stage, the Latino community leaders got organized to push for dual language education in the context of the school district's 2011 strategic plan.
2. The political-administrative transition of the district and re-launching of the campaign: The change of leadership in the district and school board elections in 2012 meant that Latino leaders had to reinforce and build upon their progress made the previous year, and defend the priority to open spaces for the Latino community in the school system.
3. Opening and consolidation of an institutional setting for the Latino community: The Latino community's advocacy and lobbying was able to make progress towards their goals. This included the Board's approval to develop a dual language education program, the creation of the Director of Language Acquisition and Community Education (of Latino origin) position, and parent invitations to participate in interviews for the director and new teacher hires.

The installation of the program was in progress during the 2014-2015 school year, when there were 160 students participating in the first generation of the Dual Language Educational Program of the Delavan-Darien School District.

Keywords: dual language education, diverse school systems, Latino community engagement

Introduction

The school district for Delavan-Darien, Wisconsin, serves a population that is 50.2% Caucasian, 44.4% Latino, and 2% percent Black. Eighty-two percent of the students are eligible for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program. These figures differ markedly from those of the state of Wisconsin, where 88.1% of the population is Caucasian, and the average eligibility to participate in the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program is 39.79% (DPI, 2014). In the 2013-2014 year, the Delavan-Darien School District's academic results on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination and the Wisconsin Alternate Assessment were the poorest in the state. Given this reality, it is natural to question the relevance of the school district's educational approach. Given the context, Latino community leaders decided to start a campaign to generate significant changes in local school policies, seeking to strengthen them using linguistic diversity.

Educational Policies and the Latino Community

We understand policies as both written texts and the context surrounding the process of making the text (Rizvi & Lindgard, 2010). These processes involve the coordination of actors involved in the construction and regulation of policies, including confrontations, interactions, negotiations, and compromises that involve interest, logic, rationality, and different strategies (Barroso, 2006). Delavan-Darien School District (DDSD) emerges as a study of the transition of openness to governance by community actors in several networks related to the policy production process (Klijn & Koppenjam, 2000). The policymaking sphere is a space characterized by an imbalance of power and the resulting struggles and strategic actions carried out by different actors (Ozlack & O'Donnell, 1995).

Policies are written on previous texts and experiences. The Delavan-Darien School District (DDSD) had a language policy for four years (2004-2008). This policy required the district to pull newcomer, non-native English speaking students

out of the regular classrooms and place them into English classes. The program was designed to respond promptly to the problem of incorporating these students into regular classes in English. The program's goal was to teach the foundations of the English language for one year, after which students would leave the host program and continue regular education in the district. This program's approach comes from a perspective of the Spanish language as a handicap to achieving adequate performance that could only be overcome by assimilating newcomers to the culture and the English language (Baker, 2011). This program was discontinued in 2008 because it did not achieve the intended results; students of first and second generation Latino immigrants were failing in the school district.

In 2011, the debate on language teaching resurfaced in DDSD. Following the origin of the classification of language ideologies that guide bilingual politics proposed by Richard Ruiz (1984)—language viewed as a problem, resource, or right—we can analyze how two interest groups came together in the discussion of a strategic plan for language learning. First, part of the English-speaking community conceived the teaching of Spanish as a resource for the personal development of students. Second, the Latino community saw teaching Spanish as a right and a protection against any discrimination (Baker, 2011), including their exclusion from community representation in public spaces.

Thus, the community proposed in 2011 the creation of a bilingual or dual language education program. Dual language education programs use two different languages to teach core subjects such as math, reading, social studies and science. These programs have three fundamental objectives for students: 1) develop bilingual abilities, 2) achieve high academic performance, and 3) stimulate multiculturalism (Dorner, 2015). A dual language approach also implied overcoming the previous monolingual logic that understands Spanish as an impediment to student performance. To move this proposal forward, study commissions were created that involved interviews with experts, visits to schools with Dual Language Education (DLE) programs, and finding

scientific evidence and testimonies from community stakeholders in the district. Thus, a consensus was achieved on the need to include the DLE project within the strategic plan that would be voted on by the DDSD School District.

Political-Administrative Transition and Re-Launching of the Campaign

In 2012, the DDSD School Board elections led to the suspension of the discussion of dual language education in the district. This period of political and administrative transition created uncertainty regarding the progress that had been made the previous year. For the Latino community, it meant the need to design strategies that would re-launch and build upon the progress made in the school community by generating advocacy actions such as analyzing the scores of students who had English as a second language, presenting the analysis to the district school board, requesting meetings with the superintendent of education, and collecting signatures and lobbying. The objectives were twofold: implement the dual language education program and create the position of Director of Language Acquisition and Community Education within the school district to be filled by a Latino professional. The meetings with the superintendent were crucial because they finally allowed for the proposals that aligned with the families' demands to be presented to the school board. Some school board members were already familiar with dual language programs because they have family members who had participated in such programs and were thus aware of the benefits. Thus, after more than a year of further negotiations and studies, the DDSD School Board approved the implementation of a DLE Program on May 19, 2014. This victory was not easy and demonstrates the importance of mobilization and advocacy actions.

An Institutional Setting for the Latino Community

From 2014 to the end of 2015, we have seen progress in several areas of the original community

proposals established in 2011. The Dual Language Education Program began in the 2014-2015 school year with 160 students and seven teachers, six of whom are Latino. The students are in pre-school, kindergarten and first grade, and there are plans to add more grades in coming years. Also, the Director of Language Acquisition and Community Education has been featured in numerous initiatives related to language teaching (not exclusively Spanish) and community involvement in the school district. Moreover, families have been invited to participate in interviews to hire new teachers in the DLE Program. During the second year of the program (2015-2016), the number of courses has increased to 11, with 270 enrolled students and 12 teachers (10 of them Latino). Also, leaders of the Latino community participate as protagonists of the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) at the school that has hosted the DLE Program, helping its growth and cohesion.

Conclusion

The review of how this DLE program was implemented raises important theoretical and political challenges. This case shows that the local policymaking arena is a space in constant transformation and dispute. An important aspect developed by the DDSD community was the linking of the development of policies with the establishment of strong leadership in the Latino community, which helped maintain continuity in the push for a DLE program during the Board of Education elections. Likewise, Latino community leaders have advocated for the creation of spaces or positions from which to influence educational policies. Yet Latino leadership reports that more work is needed to build capacity in the Latino community to more effectively participate in decision-making and advocacy spaces such as the School Board and PTOs. It has become evident that there is a need to create training opportunities for Latino families in educational policy and understanding of the system.

A relevant piece is the emergence of new players in the regulation of dual language education pedagogy, including, for instance, the new teachers

in the DLE program. The relationship of these new players to the Latino community and their impact on the future of the program is not yet established. In this sense, a defined space for shared regulation between the community of teachers and Latino families has not yet been formed.

Furthermore, this local space is necessarily inserted into state and national macro-policies, leading to tensions between meeting the demand for immediate results and the time needed for a program to mature to demonstrate its effectiveness. Moreover, evaluation policies are unresponsive to the bilingual skills of the student population; current achievement tests prioritize determining the students' progress solely in English and have not adapted measures to capture students' Spanish advances.

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