COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN BILINGUAL EDUCATION
AS PART OF LANGUAGE POLICY

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Introduction

The relationship between bilingual education and community participation in education has often been a close and reciprocal one. In some areas, local participation in education led to consideration of bilingual education as a possible remedy for educational problems. In other areas, federally mandated bilingual programs made local participation in the running of the schools a reality, and more than one community organized itself around the issue of bilingual education. However, overall, the reluctance of parents to interfere with the perceived task of educators, combined with the even greater reluctance of schools to have their authority threatened, has resulted in community participation of a limited and uneven nature.

The ethnographic study reported here (carried out between 1979 and 1983) investigated the nature of participation in two contrasting bilingual programs serving the Puerto Rican community of East Harlem in New York City. Of particular concern to the researcher were the attitudes of the parents toward the goals of the bilingual program, the roles they wished to play in their attainment, and the forces within the community that bolstered or conflicted with these goals. Another set of concerns included the degree to which the schools fostered community involvement in the bilingual programs, the relationship between community language attitudes and levels of participation, and the consequences of having or not having community participation.

Historical Background

At the time of the investigation, East Harlem was the seventh smallest school district in New York City, providing instruction in 20 schools for less than 12,000 students, approximately 60% Hispanic (mainly Puerto Rican), 35% Black, and 5% other. The district had a long history of low levels of academic achievement. However, as a result of changes in leadership and increased attention to improving student performance, it rose from the very bottom in terms of reading scores in 1973 to a position of 16th out of 32 districts in 1982, higher than any other predominantly Hispanic district in the city. As of 1984-85, there were 1,515 elementary school students entitled to bilingual services. About half were enrolled in bilingual programs. The bilingual programs began after the decentralization law of 1969 shifted responsibility and control of elementary and junior high schools from the Central Board to the community school boards. However, it should be noted that bilingual education had been proposed in East Harlem as early as 1965 when programs were first established in Florida.

The struggle for decentralization was particularly fierce in East Harlem as it became clear that the formation of a new district run from within would result in unprecedented political power which could help develop the area. This was also the case for bilingual education which aimed at providing working class and poor communities with academic services and opportunities for involvement in the educational process never before possible, while simultaneously creating a number of jobs. Without a doubt, bilingual education was on the agenda of every Puerto Rican
school board candidate or politician, and a great deal of early support came from the community corporation and other local organizations which saw bilingual education as a source of patronage, political control, and ethnic cohesion, as well as pedagogical reform.

In June of 1974, the district office of Bilingual Education organized a centralized system of bilingual instruction from the largely independent programs already in existence. Ten bilingual centers were established as semiautonomous units headed by directors and governed loosely by the district office. The overall philosophy was to utilize a maintenance approach to educate children throughout their school careers to be bilingual and bicultural as well as economically, socially, and politically able to function in U.S. society.

Methodology

The investigation reported here examined the involvement of Puerto Rican parents in bilingual programs via ethnographic comparison of two neighboring schools with distinctive histories of school-community relations. The data consisted of detailed field notes of more than four years of participant observation in community and schools, information obtained in formal and informal interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators, responses to standardized questionnaires, unobtrusive measures of activity, and analysis of primary sources like school board minutes, school-community correspondence, project reports, regulations, etc. The details of the fieldwork and the content of the interviews and questionnaires can be found in Pousada (1984).

The Schools

The two schools investigated were located only six blocks apart and served the same general population. Yet they differed in a variety of ways which had certain implications for the degree and kind of community involvement which existed in the bilingual programs.

School A was in a long-time Puerto Rican neighborhood. The bilingual program, which was physically integrated into the main school, serviced Spanish dominant Hispanic children almost exclusively. School B was in an ethnically more heterogeneous neighborhood. The bilingual program was isolated from the rest, one of several virtually independent programs in the school. It serviced Black and other non-Hispanic children along with both English and Spanish dominant Hispanics.

School A had a parent association (PA) functioning for a long time. However, until 1983, the PA was dominated by parents whose children were not in the bilingual program, and the leadership had a limited appreciation of and often hostile feelings toward bilingual education. At the close of the study, the PA was led by a group of young, inexperienced bilingual parents who experienced difficulty in getting organized. In School B, the PA responded most directly to the concerns and needs of the main school, and few bilingual program parents participated. The perception of the bilingual program parents was that the PA was for Black parents, despite the fact that the PA president was Puerto Rican. Thus participation of bilingual program parents was primarily at the classroom level.

The school administration’s role in supporting and providing opportunities for community involvement also varied in the two schools, although the end results were the same. In School A, the Puerto Rican principal was well regarded by parents and supportive of the PA and the bilingual program, but he had a limited view of what parents could do. In School B, the principal (also Puerto Rican) had a hostile relationship with the PA, although he did support the bilingual program. He felt that parents should be agents for change and progress for their own children, but that in groups, parents set themselves up as adversaries to the administration.
The coordinators of the two programs were also quite different. In School A, there was a single coordinator who had been there since the program's inception. This coordinator made varying efforts to get bilingual parents involved, primarily via informative workshops and orientation sessions, but aside from that, parent involvement was left up to individual teachers. In School B, there had been several coordinators over the years, none of whom had a strong commitment to parental involvement. The general feeling was that parents were most supportive when children did well, and emphasis was therefore placed on academics.

The Parents

Without exception, all of the parents consulted in both schools were greatly concerned about their children and anxious to help them succeed. Because of cultural traditions, the responsibility for educating children and dealing with schools fell primarily to the mothers. However, more and more of the women were entering the work force, and school related tasks were increasingly being carried out by other relatives and even fathers, or put aside completely. Despite these shifts, events (such as the Puerto Rico Discovery Day celebration) and meetings continued to be scheduled during work hours. Teachers and administrators were reluctant to come into the barrio on weekends or stay late in evenings, feeling that any improvement in parental participation was not worth the extra effort.

The majority of the bilingual program parents were very supportive of bilingual education and said that they wanted their children to be adept in both languages in order to get ahead. Each year more of the parents were able to describe with some degree of accuracy the program's goals and practices; however, relatively few of them came to school other than to pick up their children or check on them at lunchtime. The PAs in both schools depended on the same small circle of women who did all the work, while 30-40 mothers hovered over their children in the cafeteria or playground.

The numerous reasons offered by the nonparticipating mothers included: too many responsibilities, no time, too many children, physical illness, etc. However, the most telling reasons were that they honestly did not think they had anything to offer the school and if they did, they did not really think it would change anything.

Although there were formal structures in place for involving the community in bilingual education, these were not viewed as critical to school or program functioning by either administrators or parents. A small core of regulars (generally nonworking mothers of lower grade children) showed up for meetings and carved out a social niche for themselves in the school. They did not, however, represent the totality of parents, nor were there well-organized efforts to unify parents behind common goals and needs.

Since administrators did not take the community's role in school affairs seriously, they did not assist parents in organizing themselves and in acquiring the skills necessary to become truly functioning partners in school-community dialogues. As a result, school administrators were constantly trying to initiate activities and then despairing about lack of interest or follow-up on the part of parents.

In general, bilingual program parents became better informed about bilingual education as their children progressed through the grades. However, given their low attendance at meetings, it appears that word of mouth and life experience had more to do with this than occasional workshops. Parent association members who did not have children in bilingual classes still had many misconceptions about bilingual education, although there was a general attitude among the Puerto Rican parents that all children should have the right to learn in Spanish and English if they needed or wanted to.
Both administrators and parents tended to be limited in their views of the roles of community people in the school, citing fundraising, general support, help with homework (but not classroom teaching), presentation of community skills and resources, sharing of child-rearing and informal education techniques, serving on personnel or curriculum committees, etc. Aside from signing off on proposals, parents did not have a real sense of forming policy, and less of evaluating it. Input was restricted to individual complaints or crisis oriented issues rather than consistent long-term efforts to change and improve school conditions.

**General Assessment of Involvement in Programs**

Bilingual education's unique contribution to the area of parent involvement is its utilization of community language resources. Before the advent of bilingual education, there was little possibility for any real parent involvement among limited English speaking Hispanic parents. By providing teachers and coordinators who could deal with parents in their own language, explain their children's goals, and enlist their help in achieving the programs' goals, the bilingual programs greatly improved the likelihood of parent participation.

However, is there in actuality more participation in the bilingual programs, or is this potential for the most part unrealized? At least in the cases of School A and School B, we would have to conclude that there is no clear-cut, one-to-one relationship between a particular program and the level of participation of the parents.

In primarily Puerto Rican School A, participation of parents in the running of the bilingual program depended upon characteristics of the parents themselves, and varied from year to year. In heterogeneously populated School B, where there was a great separation between bilingual and other programs, the bilingual program parents were not part of the organized parental structure at all. In both cases, however, there was a definite separation between parents of children in bilingual versus monolingual programs and relatively little cooperative effort in improving the school as a whole.

**Formal vs. Informal Structures of Participation**

Figure 1 summarizes the different structures of participation found to be operative in East Harlem. The figure reveals a discontinuity between the official and unofficial structures. The official structures are tied to institutional entities and are distant from the home and family. The unofficial structures are more intimate and linked to interpersonal relations. While the two pyramids are similarly constructed in their ascent from the most broad based community structures to the most focused school structures, they do not map directly upon each other. There are no official classroom level structures, and there are no unofficial district level structures. The community level (interpreted electorally) does not correspond to the family level (interpreted socially).

What does this mean for the articulation of a community involvement policy? If we take the upper pyramid as the reflection of the official view and the lower pyramid as the community's view, we unearth the roots of conflict.

The official paradigm is an organizational one which considers community involvement as the establishment of organized bodies dealing with broad educational issues, in which parents are represented either directly through physical presence or indirectly through their vote. "Improving" community-school relations then becomes a question of getting more people to attend meetings and vote—i.e., increasing the quantity of participants increases the quantity of community participation.
The unofficial paradigm sees involvement in education on an interpersonal basis. Community and school people interact face-to-face around individual children's needs and problems. Involvement is one-to-one and motivated by specific concerns related to specific children. Viewing community involvement in this manner means that relations are improved by improving the quality of the interactions, e.g., improving understanding, mutual respect, overcoming fear and mistrust engendered by social class and power relations, etc.

A more productive approach would be to combine the official and unofficial into one cohesive policy, recognizing different kinds of contributions. A revised model might look like Figure 2.
Figure 2 is a step forward in that it integrates the existing structures in a more productive way; however, it does not address a vital issue—the content of the relationship between school and community. While some of these structures do indeed bring parents into the schools or school people into the community, for the most part the contact is brief, superficial, and with little bearing on the nitty gritty policy issues of education for working class language minority children.

Lightfoot (1980:58) put it well when she summed up the nature of most school-community interaction:

There are very few opportunities for parents and teachers to come together for meaningful, substantive discussion. In fact, schools organize public, ritualistic occasions that do not allow for real contact, negotiation, or criticism between parents and teachers. Rather, they are institutionalized ways of establishing boundaries between insiders (teachers) and interlopers (parents) under the guise of polite conversation and mature cooperation.

At no time did the parents in either of schools investigated feel that they were truly instrumental in making decisions or concretely altering the way their children were schooled. And at no time did the school people seriously consider allowing parents to do so.

Policy Findings

The evidence provided in this investigation points to a number of sad truths about community participation in bilingual education, at least in East Harlem. Chief among these:
1. The potential of bilingual education programs for promoting community participation has been for the most part unrealized. Although particular structural features of bilingual education programs make community participation more necessary and more possible, perhaps, than in monolingual programs, these features have not been utilized in a systematic way to incorporate parents into program operations.

2. Great divergences exist between expressed attitudes toward bilingual education and levels of actual participation in the programs. While the Puerto Rican community of East Harlem in general strongly favors the concept of bilingual education for its children, these positive attitudes have not been translated into action—the existence of the programs has not overcome the obstacles to participation on the part of the community.

3. These obstacles are not being seriously addressed by the school authorities who are not truly interested in having parents participate actively because of the threat this poses to their position of authority.

This last appears to be key to understanding the real problems underlying efforts to increase parent/community involvement in bilingual or other school programs.

What’s Really at Stake—Power Relationships

Education is per force political because the decisions made by educators affect people’s present and future living conditions and their ability to realize their aspirations for their children. It is therefore critical to examine the conflict between school and community as an issue of power and politics.

In terms of Fantini’s (1975) typology of parent participation, the parent participation in Schools A and B clearly falls under the category of client-related participation, in which school people seek to please and appease parents through public relations techniques while still running the show themselves. There are also elements of producer-related participation, in which parents provide certain services for the school. But there are very few aspects of the school/community relations in the two schools which could be termed consumer-related or governor-related, in which power rests in the hands of the community. This is not surprising given that the school represents a highly developed political and ideological system accustomed to shaping its own operations, while the community is considerably less organized and unused to controlling events.

The hierarchical structures of the school system and the political system have tremendous power over community residents and their children but are linked to the individual only at the lowest rungs. Most community people do not regard either school or government structures as belonging to the community proper. For internal cohesion, they turn instead to sources of power of their own making, e.g., block associations, social clubs, numbers parlors, churches, settlement houses, and above all the family.

Life in East Harlem subjects residents to a great many pressures and pulls from different kinds of power. Within such a situation, it is extremely difficult to know how to resist effectively and how to take power when necessary. The complexity and rigidity of the power relationships make them seem immutable and eternal. This is especially true with the power relationships between the middle class institution of the public school and the poor, working class community where the factor of the mystique and authority of education is involved. There is no question in community people’s minds as to who runs the show in the schools—they know they do not. And this is brought home to them in a thousand ways each time they come in contact with school people.
It will come as no surprise to most readers that there is an unequal distribution of power and resources in our society which results in numerous social, political, and economic inequities. What may be less clear is that schools participate in the perpetuation of these inequities by controlling access to information and knowledge and by legitimizing (through subtle ideological means) the existing class relations. In a working class, minority community like East Harlem, parents are effectively left without the means of organizing themselves to resist the situation.

Without a drastic change in the structure and organization of our society such that a tiny minority cannot exert power over and exploit the majority of people as is now the case, there can be no real equality between parents or community people and institutions like the schools. Knowing this, and also understanding the reaction such proposals often generate among those who have invested much in the status quo, it seems necessary (for the time being) to seek ways to go beyond the current situation without deferring to total revolution as the only solution.

Community Participation as Part of Language Policy

Based upon the lessons learned in East Harlem, we can develop strategies for building effective community participation in the bilingual programs as a necessary component of language/education policy.

1. To begin, there must be a clear and well understood definition of “effective community involvement.” This will vary from community to community. One possible conception refers to a situation in which there is a large number of parents and community people involved in planning, evaluating, and implementing the school program, a large number of opportunities for contribution, increased interaction and cooperative effort, and evidence of a comprehensive plan for involving the community (Ochoa 1979). We could add to this the establishment of a mutually beneficial relationship between school and community.

2. From the outset, there must be mutual respect among all involved parties. Regardless of who initiates the interaction, there must be a feeling that parents appreciate teachers and that teachers care about children and understand parents’ needs. Above all, school people should not view community people as free labor, a rubber stamp for administrative actions, a shock absorber in controversial situations, a promotional agency, or a bail out team in cases of fiscal or institutional crisis.

3. There must be clear evidence that, as a result of participatory efforts (which may involve extra work for all concerned), there will be demonstrable payoffs all around. Parents will see benefits in terms of their children’s educational preparation and their own opportunities for self-enrichment, and teachers will see benefits in terms of student progress and greater understanding of community norms, expectations, and capacities. To quote Moser (1973:313):

   ... participation is a function of the perceived rewards, sanctions, inducements, and contributions of participants, with the tangibility and visibility of the service acting as a prime source of motivation.

4. Another necessity is time for all parties to participate. For the teachers this involves release from school duties, salary increments, or other incentives to allow for wholehearted participation. For the parents, it means flexible, sensitive scheduling so that they can be fully involved at all times. The money necessary for these measures should come from basic tax-levy funds so that it is permanent and institutionalized in the school budget, and so that its provision comes ultimately from the public it seeks to assist.

5. The only way the necessary time can be given to cooperative ventures is if they are given priority. Community involvement in bilingual education can only be achieved if the school gives
it as careful attention as it does to in school instruction (Andersson 1975). Care must be taken to ensure that the school doesn’t merely graft parent participation onto the standard procedures in order to legitimate these procedures without changing them.

6. Training must be provided for school and community people. The teachers need to learn to respect the parents as the primary educators of the children. The parents need to learn what will be transmitted in the schools and how to manipulate the system so that they can obtain what they want for their children from the literate tradition represented by the schools. Together, teachers and parents can learn how to reinforce and mutually adapt the curricula of family and classroom for the benefit of the child. Outside assistance from committed researchers and educators should be utilized (see Cervantes, Baca and Torres 1979).

7. Utilization of existing organizational structures and networks within school and community will help ensure that all already motivated individuals are incorporated into the planning efforts. In this way, a solid core can be constructed to begin reaching out and educating other not-presently-involved individuals. This would mean utilizing the school committees, family assistants, bilingual coordinators, as well as the various community influentials (activists, small business people, church leaders, social clubs, etc.).

8. Finally, there must also be a full-time person in the school whose sole function is to coordinate parent involvement in the bilingual or monolingual programs. Such a person would do home visits, channel information through community leaders, use media to broaden awareness of school program and community events, develop and give support to voluntary groups like PAs and PACs, organize after school activities for students and parents, stimulate community involvement in school board elections and operations, etc. Precedents for this can be seen in the School-Community Agents introduced in Detroit in the 1960s (Deschler and Erlich 1968) and the Parent Involvement Coordinators established by the Latino Institute’s Parent Leadership Training program in Chicago in 1975 (Cerda and Schensul 1979).

The Future

In recent years, bilingual education has come under attack for deferring money from more “worthy” educational efforts, for perpetuating native languages among immigrants at the cost of English, and for lowering overall educational scores. The big push is toward “strong” and “effective” (read “transitional”) bilingual education or even English only “alternatives” so ethnic children can learn English and get on with competing as “real Americans” (cf. Bethell 1979, Hayakawa 1981).

Within this hostile climate, the findings reported here may be taken as an attack upon bilingual education by some who construe them as further evidence that the concept of bilingual education was flawed from the outset. Certainly the findings are sobering to bilingual education advocates. However, they should not be seen as destructive or defeatist. Rather, the findings underscore the difficulties faced by the bilingual education movement and the need to engage in critical analysis of the realities of social class relationships in the process of furthering that movement.

The reality of life in East Harlem and other poor and working class communities is that the community has interests intrinsically different from those of the school. It is not within the interests of the school as an institution to have working class parents in charge of schools or programs any more than it is within the interests of large corporations to cede power over production to the masses who produce and consume their products. The essential tension between school and community mirrors the class conflicts in our society.
The school establishment resisted bilingual education and community control since it (correctly) viewed both as encroachments upon its power base. It only accepted the concepts when forced to by mandate, and then sought ways to subvert and co-opt these ideals to serve its own interests. Compliance was halfhearted and superficial. The divergence of opinions regarding bilingual education within the community was utilized to divide and discredit the programs. Community participation was watered down and manipulated and, like school decentralization, became a sham. Thus the sad situation depicted here.

What this all points to is not the lack of viability of the idea of community participation in bilingual programs, but rather the need for constant vigilance and struggle on the part of communities once concessions are won. The present investigation can serve as a call for renewed action rather than as a death knoll.

These are clearly times for organized community participation in education at every level, particularly in bilingual programs. Almost without exception, the reports condemning American education and solutions proposed have been generated by political candidates, industrial spokesmen, and educators, not community people or students. Yet, it is the interests of the latter that are at stake. They best know (whether or not they can currently verbalize it) the local situation and the needs of their communities. Only they can instill in their children the value of education, supervise their homework, demand that the school deliver an effective education (in whatever language or combination of languages deemed necessary), and work with the schools to achieve that end.

The struggle for minority language rights has been a key feature of the overall struggle for minority representation and cultural maintenance in the U.S. This report has attempted to provide basic information necessary for the participation of bilingual parents in this struggle. It can only be hoped that as a result a strong, politically sensitive language/education policy will emerge that will fundamentally alter, for the better, the way in which language minority children are schooled, and that will finally allow these children to see their parents as active agents in their own destinies, rather than objects of manipulation from on high.

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Notes

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2 The New York City Board of Education did not introduce bilingual schooling until a bilingual program had been set up in one of the community controlled experimental districts (see Fantini, Gittel, and Magat 1970), and bilingual education was instituted in Crystal City, Texas only after La Raza Unida Party came to power in 1971 (see Hirsch, Gutiérrez, and Hinomosa 1976).

3 See Wasserstein (1975) and Collier (1980) for the Puerto Rican struggles in Delaware and Washington, DC; Vorih and Rosier (1978) for the Navajo struggle; and Guthrie (1982) for the Chinese struggle in California.

4 The Aspira Consent Decree requires that bilingual education and/or English as a Second Language be provided for limited English proficient Hispanic students in N.Y.C. schools. Eligibility is determined via the LAB test. At the time of this investigation, only students scoring below the 21st percentile were legally entitled to bilingual services, but in East Harlem, the programs were open to others who desired them as well. For a detailed account of the development of the Aspira suit and decree, see Santiago (1977). See Johnson (1975) for a report of the monitoring efforts.
5For comparisons of the relative merits of participant observation, interviewing, and document search, see Madge (1965), Becker and Greer (1969), Schatzman and Strauss (1973), and Conway, Jennings and Milstein (1974). Whyte (1941) and Liebow (1967) are good examples of ethnographic writing.

6Corporations and businessmen (even Hispanic ones) are indeed making demands for effective education, but they are most interested in increasing their supply of trained workers and their markets. They are not interested in increasing the community’s capacity to determine its future except in commercial terms. My personal opinion is that parents and community people have the necessary experience, opportunity for direct observation, and the vested interest necessary for supplying the input into policymaking, even if they cannot at present express their knowledge in terms accepted by the schools. Helping them verbalize what they know is what concerned researchers can do.

References


