**Positioning Emergent Bilingual Students Through a Language as Deficit Lens:**

**An Ethnography of Language Education Policy**

Submitted for the Thematic Thread: Cultural Constructions of Identities and Subjectivities

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**Abstract**

Schools are spaces where students are socialized to embrace the sociocultural, sociopolitical, and sociolinguistic ideologies of those in power (Alim, 2010) authorizing and normalizing particular ways of knowing and being in the world while marginalizing and restricting others. Dual language bilingual education has been shown to resist dominant hegemonic framing of linguistic hierarchies (Collier & Thomas, 2004;Freeman, 1998) yet recent the gentrification of programs (Valdez et al, 2015) has repositioned emergent bilinguals through a deficit lens (Ruiz,1984).

This four-year ethnographic study (Bloomert & Jie, 2010; Canagarajah, 2006; Creese, 2008; Garcia & Menken, 2010; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2013) explored the symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) of language education policies and practices through discourse analyses (Bloom et al, 2005; Fairclough, 1992; Gee 2011; Johnson, 2011) within dual language educational contexts in the United States. Data sources included whole-class video, individual audio, photographs, field notes, and material artifacts. The data were organized and coded by themes and relevant data were transcribed and analyzed using holistic and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013). Participants included: one bilingual Spanish-English district administrator, one bilingual Spanish-English building administrator, one bilingual Spanish-English veteran teacher; 23 students ages 8 and 9. There were 10 Latin@s, 2 African Americans, and 11 European-Americans.

The language education policy in the Pacific Northwest presents a series of contradictions that negatively impact students’ identity formations. The policy notes that districts should “use two languages [to] build upon and expand [students’] language skills [in order for them] to achieve English competence.” The use of two languages was recommended as a scaffolding tool positioning students’ language skills as a valuable asset to their learning. The language in the policy acknowledged bilingual instruction as the most effective programming model. However, later on, the policy described linguistically diverse students’ language skills as, “sufficiently deficient or absent to impair learning” and called for the need to “rectify the language deficiency [of] these students.” This deficit framing contributes to the social construction of identities in both the teacher and students’ lives, see Appendix A and B for a teacher and student sample respectively.

As we think about the ways in which we confront and challenge the struggle for public education we must work tobridge communities together, we must acknowledge the deficit framing of our language education policies, and we must work to understand the profound ways in which the nature of deficit frames are played out in the context of the social and cultural construction of identity for linguistically and culturally diverse students. Evidence from this study challenges us to reframe and normalize bilingual ways of knowing in dual language contexts from a social justice and educational equity position. To bring about justice and human dignity we cannot continue to keep bilingual students, teachers, and families framed through deficit lenses.

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**Appendix A**

Teacher Sample:

In a discussion around how language policies impact her dual language bilingual 3rd-grade classroom, the classroom teacher noted:

Here I was learning to be an agent for social change, yet I am dealing with this systematic oppression of a dominant culture…you know there are always boundaries… You know that struggle becomes so real to the kids as well. They know that they have to fear immigration; they know they have to fear when they are out and about they know they have to fear discriminatory, they know they have to fear racism and all those aspects of being a child of color.

**Appendix B**

Student Sample:

As students were tasked to negotiate and renegotiate the cultural and social constructions of their bilingual and bicultural identities through the lens of these contradictory and often repressive policies, they were often feeling stuck and unsure. One student noted in his interview:

It’s easier to talk in Span- in English, but in Spanish it’s harder because I talk a lot in English in school, but when I am talking to my dad I forget what to say in Spanish so I say it in English and he tells me to say it in Spanish. When I was little, I used to only talk in Spanish.