A Dual Immersion Strand Programme in California: Carrying Out the Promise of Dual Language Education in an English-dominant Context

Deborah Palmer
University of Texas, Austin, TX, USA

This paper uses ethnographic observation and in-depth interview to look at the ways in which an English-dominant school in California, USA inhibits the fulfilment of the goals of its dual immersion ‘strand’ programme. Taking a Bakhtinian perspective on discourses, and leaning on Bourdieu’s concept of ‘linguistic capital’, the paper examines discourses around language, race and power, and discusses the implications of these discourses for the construction of a biliterate, bilingual, equitable academic programme for Latino language minority students in an American context. The dominance of English, the prevalence of mainstream dominant discourses of race and power, and the English-speaking staff’s deficit framing of the Latino and African American communities at the school all manifest as obstacles to the dual language programme’s ability to fulfill its mission. The paper raises questions about the subtle forms of ‘benevolent’ racism that can invade schools, undermining the ability of students of colour to construct positive identities as learners and find routes to school success.

doi: 10.2167/beb397.0

Keywords: California, discourses, dual language, English only, language-power

Overview

Background and conceptual framework

Dual immersion education, also known as ‘Two-Way Immersion’ (TWI; these two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this paper), is an increasingly popular form of bilingual education in the USA in which English-speaking children and minority language speakers learn together in the same classroom, with the three goals of bilingualism/biliteracy, cross-cultural understanding and high academic achievement for all (Gomez et al., 2005; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Pérez, 2004). Dual immersion classrooms typically divide their days or weeks between the two languages of instruction, expecting all students to interact in only one language at a time. An effort is made to ensure a balance of students between minority-language and English native speakers in each classroom. Teachers teach both languages through content according to preset programme design decisions. While there are a wide variety of programmes, the two most popular programme models are known as the ‘balanced’ or 50:50 model, in which instruction for all grade levels is balanced evenly between the two languages; and the ‘minority
language dominant’ or 90:10 model, in which instruction begins in kindergarten with 90% of the day in the minority language and 10% in English, and English instruction gradually increases each year until by 4th or 5th grade the percentages are equal. The vast majority (although certainly not all) of dual immersion programmes in the USA involve Spanish as the minority language, and Spanish is the target language of the programme that is the focus of this study.

Even as traditional bilingual education programmes are under attack in the USA and particularly in California (Unz & Tuchman, 1997), dual immersion education is on the rise (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2007). While there have been some critiques of the model (Valdes, 1997), researchers, practitioners, parents and students almost universally applaud this relatively new model for bilingual education, and encourage its expansion (Christian et al., 1997; Cloud et al., 2000; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2003).

While many dual immersion programmes eventually take over entire school sites, the programme that is the focus of this paper is a ‘strand’ programme. This means that it is situated in an English-language mainstream public school (that I will call Medgar Evers Elementary) much as a traditional bilingual education programme might be, with one classroom out of two or three at every grade level dedicated to Spanish dual immersion, and the other classes conducted entirely in English. The programme is a ‘strand’ because the dual immersion programme at Medgar Evers was designed to replace, year by year, the transitional bilingual education programme that existed previously (Interview, former school principal). It was only in the year of this study that the first cohort of dual immersion students reached fifth grade, and the transitional programme was finally phased out completely.

Because this programme is a ‘strand’, its place at the school and its effectiveness for Latino language minority students are subjects of a great deal of debate among parents, school staff and district personnel, both within and outside of the TWI programme. This debate is framed as questions such as: should there be a separate dual immersion school? Where should it be situated, on this school site or elsewhere? Who is the dual immersion programme really serving, the language minority students or the English speakers? Much of this debate revolves around the concept of equity, and how best to create an equitable environment for all students at this school.

This paper examines issues of language and power in the discourses both within and surrounding the dual immersion strand programme, posing the question, ‘How does the English-only context of the dual immersion programme influence its ability to carry out its mission?’ The main purpose of the paper is to discuss the influences of context. As such, I envision the many layers of influence as concentric circles: individual interactions, participant frameworks within classrooms and other settings on the school site, school site dynamics, district and community politics, and state and national sociopolitical influences. With each layer of context, the paper examines the meta-discourses around language, race and power, and the implications of these meta-discourses for the ‘symbolic field’ in the school (Bourdieu, 1991).
**Theoretical framework**

I approach the discourses of this setting from a Bakhtinian perspective. Thus each member of this community simultaneously constructs and is constructed by the discourses that surround him/her through ongoing ‘dialogue’. Such communally, dialogically constructed discourses define not only the group dynamic and the understandings that are salient within the specific context, but also the individual identities of group members (Bakhtin, 1998).

The presence of a majority of students and staff teaching and learning in English has an effect upon the place of Spanish in school-wide contexts, and thereby on the overall amount and quality of Spanish and English students in the dual immersion programme are exposed to, which is an important aspect of the ‘programme model’ of dual immersion. Yet beyond the issue of language choice and dominance, my analysis of the discourses surrounding the dual immersion programme will look at the ways that teachers and school leaders use language to construct positive or negative identities for Latino students of colour as bilingual learners. This school setting by its very nature is a site of struggle that allows us to witness the ongoing construction and destruction of these discourses as a community goes about the business of doing school.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991) offers two concepts that help us to understand the role (and limitations) of individuals and groups as they deliberately attempt to alter the landscape and disrupt the dominance of mainstream power discourses. Drawing an analogy with the role of capital in an economic system, Bourdieu describes ‘linguistic capital’ as the monetary-like embodiment of the status connected with the various choices we make while communicating – which language to speak, which register to use, whether to speak or remain silent, how assertive to be – when attempting to maximise our power within a certain context. For Bourdieu, exchanges take place within a defined ‘linguistic field’, which can be understood as our landscape or context. His assumption, that as human beings we naturally attempt to maximise our ‘linguistic capital’ within our ‘field’, can help explain why teachers, from their positions of relative power over children but relative insecurity within the larger context, may re-voice dominant discourses of inequity and deficiency while fully intending to promote equitable, enriched learning environments for children.

**Methods and data sources**

This analysis draws on interview and observational data from a year-long study conducted in a small, multiethnic, urban elementary school of approximately 350 students in Northern California. The school has 18 classrooms: three at each grade level kindergarten through third grade, two fourth grades, two fifth grades and two special education classes. Having previously been a part-time member of the staff, I entered the site as a participant/observer for the school year 2002–2003. Initially, my interest was in the internal functioning of dual immersion education, in the minute conversations within one particular classroom – the second grade dual
immersion classroom – and the ways in which these exchanges did or did not promote equity. For this reason, the overwhelming majority of the data collected were conversational recordings in that classroom. Yet as data collection progressed, it became increasingly clear that this unique school context figured prominently in the function of dual immersion for these second graders. It was clear I needed to look at the larger context in order to come to meaningful answers.

Therefore, I also spent at least three hours per week volunteering and observing in the classroom and throughout the school, including in the lunchroom, on the playground, in the teacher’s room, in several school and district meetings, and in the office. I recorded my observations in field notes, using audio recordings as a back up whenever permissible and possible. In addition, during the spring, I conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with a total of seven children’s parents and eight staff members. I interviewed the parents of four Spanish-speaking students and three English-speaking students, all members of the second-grade dual immersion classroom that was the main focus of the study. Staff members interviewed included the principal, a former principal, two resource teachers, both second grade dual immersion instructors (English teacher and Spanish teacher), a third grade teacher in an English-only classroom and the instructor in the school-wide science magnet programme.

This paper will examine the role of the school-wide context in the enactment of the dual immersion programme. Using primarily interview and observational data, I will demonstrate several ways in which the larger school negatively affects the creation of a unified environment for meeting the three main stated goals of dual immersion education.

**TWI Goal 1: Bilingualism and Biliteracy for All . . . English Dominates at Medgar Evers**

A stated goal of dual immersion education is to develop balanced bilingualism and biliteracy in all participating students, whether they enter the programme speaking English or Spanish at home. However, because this dual immersion programme is a strand programme at an English-language school, Medgar Evers School’s primary language of instruction and general interaction is English on almost all levels and in almost all settings. The large name on the front of the school is in English only. Interestingly, permanent labels on doors of classrooms and other school facilities such as ‘library/ biblioteca’ are in both English and Spanish. Yet, while all official notices that go home with children are bilingual (or sent in the child’s home language), PTA and administration bulletin boards near the central office are largely in English only. Some attempts are made to include Spanish, but this is not consistent. A prevalent discourse around language among members of dual immersion staff involves the campus dominance of English, the need for more focus on and status attributed to Spanish, and the role this imbalance plays in weakening the TWI programme.

Currently, only a fraction of school staff are bilingual, including the TWI teachers, the new principal and three part-time support staff members, two of
whom are funded by Title VII grants specifically to support language learners. The office manager is not bilingual, although she has a part-time assistant, clearly in a lower status position, who is bilingual and integral to the Spanish-speaking parent community at the school. Likewise, a small portion of the student body speaks Spanish (the approximately 1/3 who are in the dual immersion programme, and some of the Latino students in the English-only programme). Nearly two thirds of the students speak only English, with a small number (approximately 20) who come to Medgar Evers speaking languages other than English or Spanish.

In addition, state and national accountability policies place a great deal of importance on the outcomes of certain English-only standardised tests (California Department of Education, 1999; United States Congress, 2002). Thus, even as parents and teachers value students’ learning of Spanish, this value is not reflected in policies in the society at large.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Spanish is rarely heard on the playground or in the lunchroom. The language shift between classroom and playground for dual immersion students is so dramatic that I noted several times the tendency for students to shift from Spanish to English upon walking out the classroom door into the courtyard, as on this occasion:

As the table groups line up for lunch, I listen to hear what language they are speaking. As the line begins to move out the door, Eric and Roberto (who have been chatting softly in Spanish) codeswitch gradually into English so that by the time they are outside, they are entirely operating in English. (Field Note, 3/24/03; also noted on 4/16/03)

As soon as TWI students step outside their classroom door, they hear only English – not just during recess, but also during all other instructional events beyond their classrooms. All speciality teachers, including their librarian, science teacher, and cooking, garden and PE teachers, address them and expect them to respond in English. School assemblies are usually conducted in English only, and translation is generally not offered to students.

Family events outside school hours, such as Back-To-School night, Open House, holiday festivals and fundraising events generally occur in English and offer simultaneous translation to Spanish-speaking parents wearing head phones. There were three notable exceptions to this during the 2002–03 school year; three attempts to disrupt the dominance of English and assert the Spanish language publicly. First, during the Back-To-School night staff introductions, the principal – at that time brand new to the school – introduced herself to the families in English and then publicly translated her own introduction. The other bilingual staff members followed her lead (informal observation, Back-To-School Night). This did disrupt the normally monolingual event, making it suddenly impossible to ignore the presence of native Spanish speakers in the room. Second, the English Learners’ Advisory Committee (ELAC, required by state policy for any school with English Language Learners) meetings, which are attended mainly by Spanish-speaking Latina mothers, occur in Spanish with translation into English for those requiring it. Third, for school-wide PTA meetings during the school year of this study, a group of dual immersion (mainly English-speaking or English/
Spanish bilingual) parents fought to have the language of the meetings alternate month to month between Spanish and English with simultaneous translation into whichever language was not being spoken. This was a direct attempt to manipulate the overall balance of power away from the dominant English, in an effort to enlist the engagement of Latino families in school-wide decision-making – to include disempowered voices in the power ‘dialogue’. It was met with limited success; for at least one Spanish meeting, the PTA was forced to shift back into English because no Spanish-speaking parents attended (personal communication with PTA parent leader, 2/03).

Both the public translations at Back To School Night and the purposeful role reversal at PTA meetings are, I would argue, purposeful manipulations of the ‘linguistic field’ by those in relatively high status positions, acting as allies to lower status Spanish-speaking community members, in order to place Spanish in a position of increased power. In this way, they were very important events in terms of their contribution to the discourse of the importance of Spanish in this community: each one stated clearly that ‘Spanish matters’, not just to accommodate the immigrant and Latino community in their adjustment to an English-only society, but to help create a more equitable linguistic balance and allow all voices to be heard. Unfortunately, all three manipulations operated with limited overall influence on the school-wide ‘linguistic field’; many more such events would need to occur in order to tip the balance. In addition, it would be important for the school to address low numbers of bilingual staff and the normative placement of Spanish as the second language in print materials and public presentations. None of these suggestions would be new to members of the staff of Medgar Evers; as is any school community, Medgar Evers is a community in transition, engaging in ongoing dialogue to better address the needs and voices in its midst. Interestingly, however, in general, Spanish-speaking immigrant families are not pushing for more emphasis on Spanish.

To my participant-observer (and white educator’s) eyes, and in the opinion of several staff members I interviewed (the TWI teachers, the current and former principals, and the TWI coordinator in particular mentioned this in their interviews), the TWI classrooms on this campus function as small oases of Spanish in a vast desert of English-only. Yet, when speaking with Latino parents of second grade TWI students, I discovered that their perception is quite different. Pleased to hear Spanish spoken at all on their son’s school campus, Braulio’s parents explained that they feel ‘comfortable there - ... There’s always someone to translate for one into Spanish when one doesn’t understand things (ahí estamos a gusto... Hay siempre quien le traduce a uno el español cuando no entiende uno las cosas’), (Interview, Braulio’s parents, 8.12.02). As Laura’s mother explained to me, Spanish is the language of her daughter’s home and family, and important for communicating with her own community, but ‘for school, and for other places, English is the important language (En la escuela lo importante es el inglés. Para la escuela sí, y para los demás lugares, el inglés), and she is glad that her daughter is having the opportunity to learn both languages at school (Interview, Laura’s mother, 21.11.02). Proud of their son’s ability to speak in both languages, Oswaldo’s parents told me they felt that the school’s programme was well balanced between English and Spanish
instruction, and that their son appeared to them to be learning well in both languages (Interview, Oswaldo’s parents, 24.4.03).

While there may be a tendency among critical educators and theorists to second-guess parents’ understanding of this situation, arguing perhaps that these parents are burdened under colonising discourses that portray themselves, their language and their culture as second-class (Gee, 1996; Perez, 1999; Yosso, 2005), I think it very important to note that these parents have deliberately placed their children in dual immersion classrooms expressly for the purpose of maintaining their heritage language through their schooling. This is not an easy choice to make in California, where statewide discourses emphasise the importance of English-only education and where since 1998 the state Education Code explicitly forbids the use of any language other than English in public elementary schools (Unz & Tuchman, 1997). Most schools and classrooms in this city are in fact taught solely in English; these parents’ decisions for their children have been deliberate. They know the issues involved in placing their children in bilingual programmes, and appreciate the politics of language in the USA. As Laura’s mother explains, ‘I know that here it’s important to speak English. But I – for me both are important. (Yo sé que aquí es importante hablar el inglés. Pero yo para mí es importante los dos)’ (Interview, Laura’s mother, 21.11.02). From their perspective, the balance of languages at Medgar Evers is just about right. Thus, while it seems clear to school staff members that Spanish is the second-tier language on campus (as it is spoken less often, by fewer members of the community and with less importance behind it), this fact does not appear to disturb Latino parents. Perhaps they see that Spanish occupies a similar second-tier position in the larger society, and are just as interested in their children coming to terms with this reality in a safe and challenging way as they are in working to change it. It would appear that there is a need for additional dialogue at Medgar Evers in order to address TWI staff (and English-speaking parents’) concerns about improving the status of Spanish and increasing the involvement of immigrant families in schoolwide governing, without disrupting the linguistic balance that Latino immigrant parents seek for their children.

TWI Goal 2: Building Cross-cultural Understandings...Linguistic and Cultural Connections are Localised: Barriers Remain Between TWI and ‘Mainstream’ Children, Classes, Families and Teachers

Another one of the explicit goals of TWI is to offer students a chance to build bridges between their own culture and the culture and language of their classmates. The discourse surrounding this process involves creating a connection between language and equity: those involved in the dual immersion programme speak of a process whereby learning from diverse students in effect helps create a more equitable learning environment for all. It is, to use Bakhtin’s terms, through embracing the omnipresent ‘heteroglossia’ that we enrich the ‘dialogue’ for all. In this programme and its schoolwide context, there is broad diversity in culture, class and race. Within the TWI, students and families appear to build bridges locally. Students and their
parents reach out to one another within their classroom context, on some occasions developing cultural understandings or creating friendships that carry over into their home lives. Latina second grader Laura’s mother speaks of the opportunities her daughters have had to form friendships with ‘American’ children, and of these children’s mothers reaching out to her. Anglo student James’s mother talks of bringing baby shower gifts to Laura’s mother, and of watching her older daughter laugh at a Spanish-language joke when passing by a couple of employees at a Mexican restaurant. Latino Oswaldo’s father describes his son’s enthusiasm about friends who are both American and Latino, and Latino Braulio’s parents talk proudly of their son’s ability to translate for his grandfather in American stores and public spaces during a recent visit. African–American dual immersion student Aaron’s mother talks proudly of watching her son play easily with Spanish-speaking peers at a recent weekend party, and English-speaking Nancy’s parents describe their wonder at seeing how ‘smoothly’ Nancy has adjusted to interacting in both languages at school.

When asked how much their children interact with students from classrooms outside the immersion programme, the families’ reactions were more ambivalent. Unlike many TWI programmes, which serve English-speaking Latino students, almost all of the 38% Latino students in Medgar Evers School are Spanish-speaking (English-learning) students. English-speaking students in the school are split between 28% white, mostly middle-class students, and 30% African–American working class and poor students. The white students are over-represented in the TWI classes at approximately 45%, leaving the African–Amercians over-represented in the English-only programme at approximately 43%. This striking difference between the two programmes in terms of race and class make-up appears to lead to tensions between the programmes. James’ mother, knowing that the school as a whole contains nearly 30% African–American children (while his classroom has only one African–American student), expressed her disappointment that James was not experiencing the African–American culture as much as she had hoped. Braulio’s parents did not know whether he had friends beyond his own classroom, and asked him whether he did during the interview. He didn’t know. Oswaldo’s parents commented that they had relatives in the English-only programme, and that these children were losing their Spanish and thereby losing touch with their own heritage. Latino student Roberto’s mother expressed fear about the dangers of the neighbourhood immediately surrounding the school, a predominantly African–American neighbourhood. Nancy’s parents speculated that if their child were not safely in the dual immersion programme, they might have pulled her from the school; the ‘mainstream’ students just did not seem as well behaved. Aaron’s mother said that, as the only African–American family in the second-grade dual immersion class, she often heard from others in the African–American community, ‘Why did you do that to your son? Isn’t it going to be harder?’ Thus, there was much negativity resounding in their impressions of – and contact with – the ‘mainstream’ classes and the African–American community that shared their school and neighbourhood.
Because there is only one dual immersion class at each grade level, the same group of 20 students stays together throughout their years at Medgar Evers. This also means that the ‘mainstream’ classes, although there are two groups, tend to stay relatively self-contained as well. Apart from recess and lunchtimes, there is little to no interaction between dual immersion and mainstream children. There is no doubt a natural tendency for children especially in the early years of school to form friendships within their own classroom. The fact that the dual immersion class stays together year after year reinforces this tendency, as one mainstream teacher pointed out in an interview. Yet while there is a certain kind of diversity within the dual immersion class, dual immersion students do not have the opportunity to experience the full range of diversity in their community. It appears to be not altogether accurate to claim that the programme assists children in building bridges with other cultures.

Literary theorist Mary Louise Pratt describes the ‘contact zone’, a space in which people from different cultures and communities, often differentiated by histories of oppression or power imbalance, come together in authentic attempts to build bridges. Contact zones are ‘unsafe’ places, and while the rewards are great for entering them, our tendency is to avoid them at all costs (Pratt, 1999). It could be argued that some families in the Medgar Evers TWI, even as they seek authentic integration and cross-cultural contact for their children, avoid the more dangerous-feeling contact zones of race and class diversity, preferring instead to engage in what appears to be seen as a ‘safer’ diversity along cultural and linguistic lines, generally within the confines of their own classrooms. It could even more strongly be argued that the school and district create institutional barriers and encourage families towards certain types of integration and away from others, as they place children into the TWI and English-only strands at Medgar Evers. Again, there is a very apparent difference in the race/class make up of the two programmes, with the TWI containing a much larger percentage of white, middle-class students and the English-only programme containing almost all of the school’s African–American students. Regardless of the origin of the problem, a strong tension exists between the two programmes, undermining the TWI’s goal of building bridges across diverse communities.

While this situation may be unique to Medgar Evers’ particular combination of contextual factors, it is likely that any school with a ‘strand’ programme has some separation between the programmes; much like a magnet ‘school within a school’, a strand TWI programme is prone to developing internal segregation, and must work consciously to avoid these tensions and separations. This requires a willingness to develop policies for admittance and balance in programmes that take not just language background, but race and class into account, and that consciously open programmes to all members of the communities they serve.

When I asked members of Medgar Evers’ administration about the internal segregation and the tensions it creates, there was much agreement about the existence and nature of the problem; yet, there was a lack of will to overcome the very real barrier between the programmes. Integrating African–American
students into the TWI programme appears to run up against institutional, political and attitudinal blocks on many levels in this school community.

**TWI Goal 3: High Academic Achievement for All . . . Alternative Discourses within TWI Classrooms Only**

The third stated goal of dual immersion education is to bring all students to high levels of academic achievement. This implies closing the well documented ‘achievement gap’ that exists between white and Latino students (Garcia, 2001), and developing in all students the skills to participate in high-level academic discourses. Dual immersion programmes demonstrate success in this area, as language minority students’ standardised test scores in reading and mathematics are generally much higher than scores of comparable students in other educational programmes (Christian *et al*., 1997; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2003). In addition, a much larger percentage of their graduates are shown to go on to graduate from high school and pursue higher education (Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2001). Ethnographic discourse analysis research in dual immersion settings has further demonstrated that successful dual immersion teachers are often aware of inequitable discourses in the outside society that impose negative identities upon their language minority students. These teachers actively promote ‘alternative’ educational discourses to help students nurture identities in order to enhance their academic achievement (Freeman, 1998; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2001; Palmer, 2008).

In conformance with the discourse around dual immersion pedagogy, the dual immersion programme at Medgar Evers was developed as an explicit attempt to counter inequitable expectations for Latino students, building in their place ‘alternative discourses’ of academically successful minority and language minority students, and of white middle-class students challenged and learning from their minority peers (Interview, Former Principal, 7.3.03). As the school’s principal explains:

**Principal:** We see it as a big advantage for [Latino] children to not only be successful academically but also provide the modelling to English-speaking so that we sort of tip the scales a little bit. And so then our Spanish-speaking children become the power agents in the classroom. And English-speaking kids traditionally and historically . . . learn to be power agents early on. Our Spanish-speaking children are not brought up that way. They’re supposed to be submissive. They’re supposed to be quiet . . . And so for us to put them in the dual immersion setting and say we want you to be the power agents because you’re going to be able to communicate more to the English-speaking kids than ever before. So I don’t think our programme is servicing more English kids than Spanish-speaking.

**Researcher:** It’s almost like a manipulative game . . .

**Principal:** Yeah. But it’s a good manipulation. Because we’re producing Spanish-speaking bilingual children that become more confident
in school. They are more assertive and they state their needs. The same way that historically English-speaking kids state them in middle-class schools. So it’s a good thing. You know. It’s kind of like it’s a deliberate thing we’re doing here at Medgar Evers but it’s a very good thing . . . (Interview, Principal, 10.3.03)

Second-grade TWI teacher Ms Melanie reported that she explicitly tries to offer students an alternative to the mainstream discourses that surround them. She explains that dual immersion will not be successful for children if the teacher ‘isn’t aware of the whole problematic inequity issue, the power dynamics, and teaches still in a very white . . . cultural style,’ (Interview, Spanish Teacher, 4.4.03). (It is important to note that this school’s English-speaking students in the dual immersion programme are almost entirely white and middle-class, while the majority of the Spanish-speaking students come from working-class immigrant families. This is of course not always the case; in many schools, English speakers are Latino or African–American, and often there is more class diversity among both English and Spanish speakers.)

However, Ms Melanie points out that once her students leave her classroom, not only do they not hear the Spanish language spoken; they also do not receive the messages of empowerment she and the other dual immersion teachers work so hard to send them. While they are generally well prepared and hard-working professionals, teachers outside the TWI programme at Medgar Evers are not specifically prepared for or interested in issues specific to English language learners, and they do not share the commitment of dual immersion teachers to providing alternative and empowering discourses to language minority students. In Ms Melanie’s words:

I have a hard time when we’re with (the science teacher) or other teachers where they allow the English speakers to totally dominate the whole discussion. They keep calling on (English-speaker) James constantly . . . and they let him interrupt and other kids interrupt . . . and allow them to have the complete power of the learning process – that goes especially during discussion. (Interview, Spanish Teacher, 4.4.03)

In contrast to the ‘alternative discourses’ Ms Melanie attempts to construct, the mainstream discourse that surrounds students at this school, as in many others, can involve stereotypes for behaviour and academic performance based on race, class, home language or culture, and a strong deficit framing of students, their families, cultures and communities. This is not surprising in the context of the American culture of schooling (Maeroff, 1994; Payne, 1984; Valencia, 1997). According to the stereotypes that often prevail in this school, African–American students exhibit poor behaviour; Latino students are respectful and well behaved, but they struggle academically and suffer a linguistic ‘disadvantage’; white students, particularly middle-class white students, display desirable behaviours and excel academically (Interviews, ELD Lead Teacher; Mainstream Teacher).

Even with strong and well intentioned teachers, these stereotypes can emerge in the form of expectations of different students during lessons and discussions. For example, during their weekly library time, the English-only
speaking librarian reads stories aloud to the children. On one occasion when I was observing the class in the library, I noted that Spanish-speaking children were seated in back and appeared prepared to tune out if stories grew too difficult for them to comprehend. By contrast, English-speaking children bunched together in front and responded readily to the teacher’s questions. The librarian made no effort to alter this (rather predictable) pattern, and in fact did not seem to notice that students were falling into stereotypical roles. Ms Melanie, however, did notice it, and commented to me that she does not know how to explain to the librarian what is lacking in her instruction:

I think all the time in science and in library I’m just cringing at the back of the room . . . I feel like saying it, you know, like ‘No, [librarian’s name], they’re not following. That’s why they’re rolling around on the rug.’

(Interview, Spanish Teacher, 4.4.03)

Another, more subtle example occurred during science time. The science teacher, a fully credentialled teacher with many years’ experience, has worked hard to develop a rich, inquiry-based hands-on science curriculum for the entire school. She meets with each class once per week for an hour. Below is a small segment of an extended conversation that occurred during the opening whole class lesson one day in the science lab. Of the students participating in this conversation, James and Daniel are white English native speakers, while Braulio is a Spanish-speaking Latino child:

Ms B: One at a time, we have to move on to table activities soon but before we do that, James?
James: I think it should be called earth because under the water there’s sand and dirt and rocks and it’s part of earth.
Ms B: So what James is saying is that underneath all this water is solid earth. It’s not water all the way through. So maybe we should call it earth.
Daniel: Why is there more water than earth?
Ms B: Our planet evolved the way it did, and I really can’t tell you why, but the way it is it supports a tremendous amount of life, and if it weren’t for the water, it wouldn’t be able to do that. Other planets don’t have water. Maybe a little bit of water on Mars, maybe it used to. But the other planets and moons don’t have water and they don’t have life. So there’s something to the fact that we have a tremendous amount of water and a tremendous amount of life.
Braulio: I know why there’s so much water.
Ms B: Why?
Braulio: Because you know how all the animals have to have a place to swim and live?
Ms B: Yeah. And we also have a tremendous amount of water in our bodies. James.
James: 3/4 water (said in a bored tone of voice)
Ms B: right, 3/4 water in our bodies just like the surface of the earth.
James: Can I say something?
Ms B: Ok go ahead.
James: Even if the earth was made of mostly gold and there was water over most of the planet, I think it would still be more earth because all the hills are filled with earth. And I just want to say an important thing about gravity.
Ms B: Ok, one thing about gravity.
James: I think you men-sended it – but
Ms B: I men-sended it??
James: mentioned
Ms B: Oh, I mentioned? Ok.
James: Um if there wasn’t gravity the water would just go pouring off into space.
Ms B: The water and the air. Gravity is a natural force.
James: It’s also our atmosphere.
Ms B: The gravity holds our atmosphere. You’re right. It does.
Daniel: Which is the closest planet to the sun, Mercury or Venus?
Ms B: Mercury.
Daniel: But why is Venus hotter than Mercury?
Ms B: Because of all that acidic atmosphere, holding the heat in. Mercury doesn’t have that. (Field Note, 22.4.04)

For those students who participate, this conversation represents a rich, reflective exploration of several related scientific concepts, including: why our planet contains such an abundance of water; how dependent we and other living creatures are on water; the function of gravity in containing the water and the atmosphere on our planet; and the function of the atmosphere in heating our own and our neighbouring planets. The teacher works hard to validate the contributions of the students, engaging authentically with them in a curiosity-driven conversation about the wonders of the water-world we live on.

What I find most compelling about this segment however is that only three students participate. In fact, in the entire 15-minute lesson, only eight students participate – all boys. James alone enjoys fourteen turns to speak, and Daniel enjoys five. Braulio speaks seven times. Willing as the science teacher is to allow the class to explore different topics, she does nothing to bring non-participating students into the conversation. She makes no effort to assert a turn-taking structure on the conversation; students raise their hands and she nods or points to acknowledge them, or they just call out in response to her comments or questions. She does not seem aware of who has spoken and who has not. The rest of the class sits quietly, listening and watching the conversation, without benefit of engagement with the rich scientific concepts the participants are tossing around. The pattern of participation does not appear to fall particularly along race or language lines; in total, Anglo students make approximately 23 contributions (with 14 of those belonging to James) and Latino students make 16. Braulio, Eric and Oswaldo, all Latino students, participate in the conversation nearly as much as James, Daniel and Jonathan, all white students. Yet something inhibits a majority of the class from participating. The teacher is not working to manage this conversation for
equity, making this classroom a very different setting for students than their own classroom.

After this class session, the second-grade English teacher, Ms Emma, for whom this lesson was her first exposure to the class’ science instruction (science was not typically scheduled on Fridays, which was her instructional day), commented to me, ‘I’ve never seen some of the kids so shut down before. It’s all about James. Why does she let him go on that way? Some of the kids didn’t say a word the whole time!’ (22.4.03). Interestingly, the second-grade dual immersion classroom teachers both independently noted a difference in their students’ engagement between science class and their own instruction. While Ms Melanie (see above) notes that certain children are allowed to dominate the conversations during science, Ms Emma notes that certain children hardly speak. Throughout the year, during the numerous observations I made of the class during science instruction, I noted a similar pattern of rich, inquiry-based discussions in which only a few class members participated.

Thus, by and large, the English-only teachers who work with the dual language students in their enrichment classes – library, garden, physical education, science – do not consistently share Ms Melanie’s and Ms Emma’s priority to empower students through alternative discourses, to carefully manage classroom talk to allow for all students to build academically oriented identities. Although they are dedicated and well prepared in their disciplines, these teachers do not have any special preparation to work with English learners. They do not appear to notice the ways their own practices influence the participation (and identity construction) of their students, and they do not necessarily see such awareness of the special language and cultural needs of diverse students as part of their jobs. Indeed, their jobs are challenging enough, managing the lesson plans and curricula for all the grade levels and classrooms in the school for weekly lessons. Yet it is unfortunate that the culture of this setting does not lend itself to a rich sharing of this type of awareness and a collective responsibility for ensuring equitable access to learning for all of the school’s students. Instead, children learn to manage the discourse shift that occurs as they move between the TWI programme and the other classrooms at the school. According to Ms Melanie, this shift is jarring to the students in TWI, and undermines the ultimate goals of the programme.

**Conclusion**

As dual immersion students at Medgar Evers leave the safe boundaries of their classrooms, there is therefore a shift in language from Spanish to English; a shift in emphasis from building bridges across cultures to fearing and shying away from difference; and a shift in discourses from alternative and empowering scripts to mainstream deficit-framing stereotypes. The dual immersion programme’s explicit efforts at creating ‘equity’ for its students appear threatened on all fronts by the school around it.

In so many ways, the programme at Medgar Evers Elementary manifests as a strong 90:10 model Two Way Immersion school: the dual immersion teachers are of high calibre, fluently bilingual and well trained; the curriculum is rich
and highlights the diversity on the campus; language is taught through rich, grade-level content; all students in TWI classes are held to high academic standards and are expected to achieve bilingualism and biliteracy. These are all highlighted as ‘Best Practices’ for immersion education because of their power in re-orienting a school community towards an enrichment, rather than a deficit, view of linguistic and cultural diversity (Christian et al., 1997; Cloud et al., 2000; Lindholm-Leary, 2001). Yet because of the English-only school that surrounds this programme, in a sense boxing it in on all sides, there remains significant deficit framing of language minority students at the school, and their language and culture remain underappreciated. While students are to some extent ‘protected’ by their teachers, and offered tools for facing the larger world, the context cannot be ignored.

All school programmes, no matter how special or unique, operate within the context of their community and culture. All children must deal with the larger discourses of society sooner or later. Even with the complete collaboration of the school and surrounding community in the development of ‘alternative’ and enriching discourses for language minority children, eventually students will need to face and challenge the world beyond. The ultimate challenge is to prepare students to face the mainstream with strong agency, to claim their own rightful place, both in schools beyond the elementary grades and in society itself. What is the best way to pursue that goal?

Is it our aim as bilingual educators to protect our students within a carefully constructed bubble for as long as possible, nurturing their identities and developing in them an appreciation for what is possible, only unleashing them into the world fully formed? Regardless, this is not possible. Societal-level discourses have a way of intruding on us, invading our spaces and undermining our best efforts. We cannot and should not shelter children from the larger society we wish for them to change. If the project of dual immersion education is to transform our vision for bilingual education, from compensatory to enrichment and high-calibre, and in so doing develop an empowered empathetic next generation, then we must do so in the context of the highly imperfect society where those future leaders are growing up.

Recalling the positive reaction of the Latino immigrant families to the English/Spanish balance at Medgar Evers despite its decidedly English dominance, I wonder if those parents weren’t implicitly expressing the need to prepare children to deal with society’s English dominance in additive and positive ways. It is imperative for any bilingual programme to begin integrating children early on, while simultaneously assisting them to develop the tools to tackle the inequities they see and the eyes to see them. As their parents and teachers, we are also responsible for demonstrating to them the process by which we make change happen, both on an individual level in terms of communicating with our colleagues and administrators and making our needs and opinions heard, as well as on the level of social change, organising ourselves to change policy and public opinion.

In a sense, a dual immersion programme in the USA – whether it is a strand programme or a schoolwide programme – is always operating within an English-dominant environment and therefore has a responsibility to work on both fronts: teachers must attempt to offer children alternative discourses.
and an opportunity to develop strong academically oriented identities, while simultaneously working to educate and collaborate with colleagues, community members and the larger society to counter any dominant discourses that may be working to negate their efforts.

**Correspondence**

Any correspondence should be directed to Deborah Palmer, University of Texas, 1 University Station, SZB 440E, Mailcode: D5700, Austin, TX 78712, USA (debpalmer@mail.utexas.edu).

**Note**

1. All names are pseudonyms.

**References**


