Chapter 6
Parental Perspectives on Dual Language Classrooms: The Role of the African American Parents

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ABSTRACT
Although limited research studies exist on African-Americans in dual language programs in general, even less exist on African American parents’ experiences within dual language programs. In this chapter, we present the voices of nine African-American parents. These voices serve as a lens to understand the ways in which the program impacted these parents’ homes and the lives of their children. The data was gathered within the first two years of a dual language program. Each of the families was interviewed twice across two years. Three major findings emerged. First, the capital that students gained in school impacted the adults at home. Second, these new home interactions based on students’ school learning influenced parents’ and students’ views of themselves and their community. Third, in the home and in the community, ambivalence was reflected regarding learning basic school concepts in a second language. This study captures the tug and pulls associated with families wanting to provide their children with the best opportunities within a racialized society.

INTRODUCTION
According to UNESCO (2003), more people across the globe live in multilingual settings then in monolingual ones. In particular, UNESCO reports that in “bilingual and multilingual contexts, … the presence of different linguistic groups living in the same country, are the norm rather than the exception throughout the world” (p. 12). Globally, bilingual and multilingual nationals represent a wide spectrum of linguistic, racial and ethnic backgrounds and it is not unusual for students to speak more than one language before entering school. In India for example, Hindi is spoken by 41% of the population, and in addition there are 14 other official languages (Bengali 8.1%, Telugu
7.2%, Marathi 7%, Tamil 5.9%, Urdu 5%, Gujarati 4.5%, Kannada 3.7%, Malayalam 3.2%, Oriya 3.2%, Punjabi 2.8%, Assamese 1.3%, Maithili 1.2%, other 5.9%). English, in India, carries a special status as a subsidiary official language that is used for a variety of communications (national, political, and commercial). South Africa has 11 official languages with English being used as the Lingua Franca, even though less than 10% of the population speaks it as a first language (Lew, 2014). These statistics show that multiple language learning and use represents the norm worldwide and that people of color are often speakers of these multiple languages.

The acceptance of a multilingual society is in direct contrast with the perception of bilingualism and multilingualism found in the United States. The debate over monolingualism and bilingualism is often a contentious political football that positions various language groups against each other. In 2009, the proportion of students enrolled in U.S. public schools from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds was 41.3% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). By 2020, the proportion of students from diverse backgrounds is projected to reach 49% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Some states and districts are working to redefine the American dialogue on language learning through dual language (DL) programs. Students in these programs are positioned to be bilingual, biliterate and bicultural.

The pervasive view that students of color and African-Americans, in particular, are linguistically underprivileged (Delpit, 2012) can in many ways be attributed to the predominantly monolingual stance taken in relation to language in the United States. The data on the linguistic abilities of people of color worldwide paints a different picture and requires a questioning of the prevailing assumptions concerning the lack of ability in African-American students’ bilingual and multilingual capacities. In this chapter we present the voices of nine low-income African-American parents who placed their children in a Spanish/English dual language (DL) program in their neighborhood. The student composition of dual language programs “includes native as well as non-native speakers of the target (non-English) language” and the target language is used no less than 50% of the instructional time (Lindholm-Leary, 2003) (p. 30). By painting a portrait of African-American families and their role in the lives of African-American children in dual language programs, we provide a space for these parents to become visible in the discussion of bilingualism.

Although limited research studies exist on African-Americans in dual language programs in general, even less exists on African-American parents’ experiences within dual language programs. Bourdieu’s (2011) notion of cultural capital takes into account the social and cultural structures present in the classroom and outside the classroom, which perpetuate societal structures that can limit mobility (McCollum, 1999). In considering the ways in which African-American parents functioned, we drew on this notion of cultural capital and how it positions bilingual learners in and out of school. To challenge the deficit view of African-American students’ linguistic capacities and create a counter dialogue, this chapter extends beyond acknowledging African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a legitimate language by portraying African-American children and their families as functional bilingual and multilingual individuals.

There is growing consensus within the field of bilingual education that dual language programs benefit students cognitively and linguistically (Anberg-Espinosa, 2008; Hornberger, 2005; Valdes, 1997). Umansky (2014) examined exit rates of Latino students across different programs types and found that Latinos in English-dominated programs were reclassified at greater rates from limited English proficiency status to competent English proficiency status indicating their ability to function in an all-English classroom. Conversely, students in dual language programs were reclassified at a slower pace, but showed long-term aca-
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