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Resisting subtractive language and literacy policies: Breaking the cycles of loss among bilingual preservice educators

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Almost one-fourth of children under 17 years of age in the United States speak a language other than English at home (ACS, 2019, C16007). Contrary to rhetoric that positions bilingual people as "outsiders," most bilingual children in the United States are U.S. born. Texas and Arizona are among the states where the population of bilingual children has steadily increased and now exceeds 20%. Among students 0–8 years old, 29.7% in Arizona (Park et al., 2017a) and 49% in Texas (Park et al., 2017b) were bilingual in 2017. While these states have different educational policies, they also have many similarities. They are both states bordering Mexico and have had a long-standing presence of bilingual education in various forms.

Yet, the education of racialized, low-income bilingual learners has been approached in ambivalent ways. As reflected by state policies and educational practices, bilingual children tend to be positioned as "limited" and in need of remedial education, and their knowledge, identities, and unique language and literacy practices are often ignored or devalued (Ruiz, 1984; Valdés, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Such policies often result in cycles of subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) that perpetuate trajectories of loss, particularly in the areas of language and literacy.

As educators and researchers, we notice patterns across time and schooling contexts; the most persistent patterns are often unsettling ones. In the following reflections about our teaching, we illustrate how these troubling patterns are tied to policy. To situate our reflections, here we share a bit about our positionalities and what brings us to this work. Rosalyn is a white woman and sequential bilingual who was a bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) teacher in Texas and Mexico before becoming a university professor. She experienced language loss (and the resulting family and community disconnection) of her heritage language, Romanian, and through her research and teaching she works to decenter whiteness and monolingualism. Having grown up in the Juárez-El Paso border, Claudia identifies as a transfronteriza Chicana with Chinese heritage who spent about a decade as bilingual educator in Texas before becoming a university professor and researcher. While raised by her Chinese mother, she never learned Cantonese and rather grew up speaking Spanish and acquired English in her adolescence. As a mother, she has experienced the challenges and setbacks of attempting to sustain her children's bilingualism in the context of Arizona. Carol is a bilingual, queer, Chicana who grew up on the border in south Texas where she taught 6th-grade language arts and high school English. As teacher educator, she works to prepare future bilingual teachers to affirm all students through transformative literacy practices. Through our experiences as bilingual elementary teachers, and later, teacher educators in bilingual and ESL language arts and reading methods courses in Arizona and Texas we examine how language and accountability policies impact students across time. Importantly, we also highlight the power of literacy courses for bilingual preservice teachers (BPSTs) as spaces of agency for healing identities and developing transformative literacy practices.

TRAJECTORIES OF SUBTRACTION: THE CASE OF ARIZONA

In 2000, Proposition 203 was approved in Arizona with 67% of voter support. Since then, Arizona became an infamously English-only state, as it mandated that designated English learners (ELs, a note that we prefer the terms "bi/multilingual" but use EL here to reflect the policy terms) were taught in English at all times in all public

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and charter schools, including those serving Native Americans. This policy generated additional restrictions, including a 4-h block of structured English immersion (SEI) which impeded these students not only from using their home language in school, but also from full participation in other curricular activities due to logistical challenges. For almost two decades, researchers have noted the failure of such instructional approach, which has generated not only increased academic failure—Arizona has among the lowest EL graduation rates in the nation—and home language loss, but also segregation and social and emotional trauma (Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Parra et al., 2014). Ironically, English speakers who were not designated as ELs could access the growing dual-language programs across the state. Although the 4-h SEI block policy has recently changed, expanding opportunities for ELs to access bilingual/biliteracy instruction, English-only policies of almost two decades have caused significant damage (Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Parra et al., 2014).

In the past 5 years, Carol and Claudia have taught bilingual/ESL literacy and language arts methods courses for preservice teachers at two major Arizona public universities. Many of our students have been young women of color, especially Latinas, whose educational trajectories were directly impacted by Arizona's restrictive language policies. Our courses emphasize pedagogical practices to support students' biliteracy development, inquiry, critical literacies, and students' funds of knowledge, and encourage the use of translanguaging and authentic language practices. However, our racialized preservice teachers are often hesitant to draw upon their home languages, keeping them private as if it was something to be ashamed of. "This is the first time I was ever able to use my home language in school," wrote a student in one of Claudia's course evaluations. However, many of them also begin our courses hesitant to identify as bilingual, perceiving their proficiency in their home language as inferior or inadequate for teaching or learning feeling self-conscious even to translanguage during discussions with peers of similar backgrounds. This is not to say that they are timid about their language in every space. After all, they have been able to maintain their home languages against all odds and after years of being subjected to subtractive and punitive language policies in school. Instead, we suspect that official educational contexts, like schools and universities appear to rise anxiety about using the language practices that characterize their intimate lives. In contrast, in our experiences, white English-speaking preservice teachers, who had the privilege to access dual-language programs, often position themselves as bilingual and do not express concerns about their competency to teach in bilingual classrooms.

Importantly, when teaching these racialized BPSTs to identify hidden gems (Bomer, 2010) in their bilingual students' writing, we have observed several BPSTs struggle to focus on their students' unique messages, voice, perspectives, or linguistic creativity. Instead, they have tended to focus on grammatical features that they view as English errors, impeding them from recognizing what their students are doing well. When asked about why they focused on the errors instead of the "gems," these BPSTs often cited their own schooling experiences that focused on correctness over all other aspects of writing. Consequently, these BPSTs designed lessons focused specifically on remediating perceived students' English deficiencies, rather than on building on students' interests, experiences, or rich linguistic repertoires. In this way, the restrictive language environment that shaped their own literacy experiences also creates a lens that only allows them to see one aspect of their students' literacy practices—their perceived incompetence in English conventions. We share this trend not to fault BPSTs, but instead to highlight the fact that PSTs often draw upon their own educational biographies (Lortie, 1975) to formulate their teaching pedagogies. Inequities in the language and literacy experiences schooling of racialized BPSTs versus their white counterparts may account for these differences. We see this as a missed opportunity especially because these racialized BPSTs often share common lived experiences around language, culture, and schooling with their racialized bilingual students and their families, making BPSTs especially well positioned to meaningfully and effectively teach racialized bilingual students from an asset-based perspective.

We posit that, even as more linguistically inclusive policies are enacted, a cycle has already been established that ensures the perpetuation of subtractive schooling, that is, the divesting of linguistic and cultural resources through domesticating schooling practices, discourses, and policies. To break through such a cycle, literacy teacher education must be contextually mindful and must raise preservice teachers' critical consciousness to equip them to disrupt their views of their own linguistic resources and heal their identities so that they too can recognize the richness in their students' language and literacy practices.

TRAJECTORIES OF SUBTRACTION: THE CASE OF TEXAS

In contrast to Arizona, Texas is among a handful of states that require schools to implement bilingual programs for designated ELs when possible. With a long history of advocacy for language rights, bilingual programs have continued to serve mostly ELs even as they opened their doors to English speakers through their growing dual-language program models. One would hope that this policy context would prevent subtractive education for racialized bilingual students. Unfortunately, bilingual education is still perceived as remedial when it comes to

racialized emergent bilinguals, with policies demanding that English acquisition is the ultimate goal. And many schools, including schools along the border and other predominantly bilingual communities in Texas, choose to implement policies that enforce a quick and strict transition to English-only instruction (Degollado, 2019; Nuñez, 2021).

Moreover, Texas has also been the prototype for high-stakes testing even before the era of accountability became widespread with the establishment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. While NCLB aimed to ensure that schools were providing quality services to all children, in many cases it resulted in subtractive schooling contexts for low-income students of color, particularly emergent bilinguals. The punitive consequences of low test scores have generated severe standardized test-driven curriculum and instruction, particularly in Title I schools, acutely restricting the learning opportunities and experiences offered to students. We have noticed this trend in our several years of experience teaching both bilingual children and youth as well as preservice teachers in Texas. Many of our racialized bilingual/ESL preservice teachers of color in Texas experienced the fallout of NCLB in the form of test-driven instruction when they were K–12 students, often attending Title I schools. After experiencing schooling trajectories and literacy experiences that were heavily shaped by a standardized testing, these same students later were still restricted and overstressed by test-driven instruction as student teachers and novice teachers.

For example, Rosalyn, Claudia, and Carol were all teachers in Title I schools in Texas with heightened standardized testing pressures. For teachers, students, and families, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and later the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) were seemingly ever present; there was after school TAKS/STAAR tutoring, TAKS/STAAR pep rallies, TAKS/STAAR practice tests, etc. Claudia remembers how her second graders (who were not even taking the official test yet) would get sick with anxiety and some to the point of tears or vomiting, as they anticipated a mock TAKS test day. Much of her time was spent in trying to reduce anxiety while being asked to bribe her students with rewards if they did their best on the test.

Rosalyn taught fourth grade, the year students took the STAAR writing test for the first time (in addition to the Reading and Math STAAR that they began taking in grade three). At one point, Rosalyn was encouraged by administrators to stop teaching reading and math entirely for several weeks to focus 4 hours of daily instruction on the writing STAAR test. Later, Rosalyn realized her very smart and curious fourth graders did not know the difference between a city, a county, a state, and a country, seemingly because school administration had discouraged lower elementary teachers from teaching social studies (a content area that builds and layers each year and helps students understand the world and their roles within it) because it was not tested until 8th grade. Rosalyn saw that in the implementational space (Johnson, 2010) of her classroom, she would have to decide how to simultaneously prepare students for the STAAR writing test, while also helping them explore their identities as biliterate people. These anecdotes illustrate how state-, district-, and school-level policies are interpreted by various stakeholders, and ultimately, how teachers are left to navigate the intersections (and often, contradictions) of these multiple policies.

Rosalyn was teaching in a transitional bilingual education program, a program which seeks to "transition" bilingual students to full English instruction (subtracting home language instruction), often by the time they are in upper elementary. This means that bilingual students who move through the world with dynamic languaging practices are often encouraged and even required to test in one language, English. As they were transitioned to English instruction, bilingual students were expected to write essays about a topic they did not choose, often given a cultural context that was both unfamiliar to them and white centric—given the cultural bias of standardized tests, in a language that they did not choose. Even within more expansive bilingual programs, such as the 50/50 Spanish/English dual-language model, bilingual teachers felt additional pressure to privilege the language (English) and format of the test, even in opposition to their own beliefs about students' linguistic and academic needs (Palmer & Rangel, 2011). This focus on English has a profound impact on biliteracy learning, even in linguistically rich communities. For example, Carol was teaching sixth-grade language arts at a school a mile from the U.S./Mexico border when she introduced *Cool Salsa*, a book of bilingual poetry. Her students were surprised to see writing in both English and Spanish on the same page, though they used both languages dynamically in their own lives. They had never even seen culturally rich and relevant bilingual books, let alone use those books as mentor texts to use both Spanish and English in their own writing.

Years later, Carol, Claudia, and Rosalyn all taught bilingual literacy methods courses to preservice teachers at three different large public universities in Texas, and our students, like in Arizona, were in their majority Latinx. We noticed BPSTs had profoundly similar feelings about writing, also linked to testing and subtractive bilingual education policies. In Claudia and Rosalyn's methods courses, when we invited students to share their "Hugs and Hurts" (their positive and negative experiences) with writing, we were saddened to learn that almost every BPST overwhelmingly shared "hurts" from their experiences with writing, and many writing contexts they described were high-stakes test focused. They expressed feeling their writing was inadequate, in Spanish and in English, and that they never really had opportunities to engage in writing that was not assessed (for grammar, for structure, for the expectations of the state standardized test). We got the sense that many of

our BPSTs hated writing, and rightfully so. Carol's students also expressed similar fears. Her literacy methods courses were housed in the English department and the course prefix alone seemed to instill fear in the preservice teachers who often shared that they typically failed in English courses. For these students, the hegemony of English remained a powerful force despite the existence of strong bilingual programs and policies in Texas because of (1) the widespread deficit thinking about racialized bilinguals as linguistically deficient, which views testing in languages other than English as evidence of such deficiency, and so instruction, even in bilingual classrooms, favors English, (2) the emphasis on language separation and standardized language varieties as the only valid ones in bilingual programs, and (3) the perception of translanguaging as a deficient practice that bastardized both English and Spanish. It is our impression that all of these ideologies combined made BPSTs feel inadequate or not "bilingual enough."

BILINGUAL/ESL TEACHER EDUCATION LITERACY COURSES AS SPACES OF AGENCY AND POLICY TRANSFORMATION

As teacher educators, we have taught various literacy courses where students explored their own histories with language and literacy, beginning with multimodal language and literacy maps that excavated the people, places, events, and modalities that shaped their languages and literacies. These maps were shared in their cohort community and served to disrupt homogeneous notions of what it means to be bilingual and biliterate. Our literacy courses are embedded in programs that foster critical consciousness by examining the pervasive coloniality of language imposition that started with settler colonialism but that remains today. In addition, courses focus on histories of struggle for language rights championed by historically resilient communities, ethnic studies and civil rights fights to legitimize their identities and cultures, the monolingual bias in second language acquisition theory, raciolinguistic ideologies, new understandings of language as a social practice, bilingualism, biliteracy, translanguaging, culturally sustaining pedagogies, and social justice practices that extend equity to include issues of antiblackness, gender, sexuality, and ability. These classes are fundamental to create spaces where BPSTs learn to read the word and the world and, in turn, teach their future students to do the same. We engage in a culturally sustaining writers workshop approach in our language arts methods courses to experience what it means to not only read, but to also *write* the world; that is, to recognize the value of their own experiences and perspectives as theory in the flesh (Moraga et al., 1983), and their own writing as a creative, transformative, and legitimate voice to intervene in the world (see e.g., Brochin Ceballos, 2012; Harvey-Torres & Degollado, 2021). For instance, we invite BPSTs to explore the political history of zines as self-published works, often featuring the voices and interests of subalternized people. They then create a zine about a topic that is transformative and important to them, and share their zine in our classroom communities. These practices cultivate spaces where future teachers develop a deep sense of belonging with one another, and where all their languages are valuable and beautiful, providing a stark contrast to the subtractive writing courses of their youth.

Creating teacher education courses where transformative practices are modeled is especially important because as BPSTs began their clinical practice through internships or student teaching in classrooms serving emergent bilinguals, they often reported challenges with implementing enriching and meaningful writing pedagogies, particularly in the spring semester as the testing season approached, and especially in Title I schools, where instruction was restricted to Arizona and Texas' state mandated exams. Within this context, we lacked empowering models that could help disrupt the cycle of hurts associated with writing. Thus, our courses became critical sites for bilingual teachers to recover and reclaim their bilingual and biliterate identities (Brochin Ceballos, 2012; Harvey-Torres & Degollado, 2021).

CONCLUSION

By analyzing the ways that language and testing policies have impacted current BPSTs in Arizona and Texas, we reveal the potentially cyclical nature of inequities brought about by policies that favor the hegemony of English and high stakes testing, as these teachers often attended Title I schools with heavy testing pressures and the devaluing of languages other than English, and who now teach in similar schools. We also inquire into how biliteracy courses in bilingual teacher preparation programs can be spaces to excavate and reclaim subaltern and translingual literacy practices, those practices often ignored or rendered invisible by high stakes, English, standardized testing that reflects and rewards dominant experiences. By linking some of the troubling patterns we have observed across temporal space, we also illuminate hopeful possibilities for countering some of the damage done by English only and high stakes policies, reclaiming writing as a space of healing through our own implementational spaces as university educators.

The challenge to provide racialized bilinguals with bilingual teachers who share their cultural and linguistic backgrounds is not new, yet standardizing educational policies create challenges for recruiting and growing these teacher candidates. Racialized BPSTs had little to no access to bilingual education and biliteracy instruction as students, and yet bilingual teacher education programs emphasize bilingualism and biliteracy as essential

racialized emergent bilinguals, with policies demanding that English acquisition is the ultimate goal. And many schools, including schools along the border and other predominantly bilingual communities in Texas, choose to implement policies that enforce a quick and strict transition to English-only instruction (Degollado, 2019; Nuñez, 2021).

Moreover, Texas has also been the prototype for high-stakes testing even before the era of accountability became widespread with the establishment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. While NCLB amendments like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 have provided states with more flexibility to implement their own accountability systems, the legacy of high-stakes testing in Texas continues to have a powerful impact on how teachers and students view the purpose of school and learning. Many BPSTs who submitted their narratives for this study were themselves products of Texas schools and were deeply influenced by the English only and high-stakes testing practices that were dominant during their own K–12 schooling. Both as students and as teachers, they have witnessed the detrimental effects that these practices have had on bilingual children and youth and on bilingual education in Texas. Many of the Latinx bilingual/ESL pre-service teachers in our teacher education program, including those who identified as Texas natives, had attended K–12 schools in the state of Texas experiencing the full force of NCLB in the form of test-driven instruction when they were K–12 students, grade. Rosalyn saw that in the implementation space (Johnson, 2010) of her classroom, she would have to decide how to simultaneously prepare students for the STAAR writing test, while also helping them explore their identities as biliterate people. These anecdotes illustrate how state-, district-, and school-level policies are interpreted by various stakeholders, and ultimately, how teachers are left to navigate the intersections (and often, contradictions) of these multiple policies.

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