



RESEARCH ARTICLE

“It’s like they don’t see us at all”: A Critical Race Theory critique of dual language bilingual education for Black children

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Abstract

This article highlights the institutional harm that many dual language bilingual education (DLBE) programs can impose upon Black American children. By uncovering the ways that bilingual education is often complicit in educational injustice for Black children, this article argues for a closer interrogation of unquestioned DLBE policies and practices through an analysis that gives centrality to race and intersectionality. In this piece, a composite counterstory is crafted using African American Language to powerfully facilitate a Critical Race Theory-informed critique of DLBE’s institutional structures and practices that detail the experiences of many Black children in DLBE programs. A recommendation for intersectional approaches to DLBE that center, support, and advocate for intersectional consciousness across all Black identities is offered.

The recent exponential growth of two-way immersion (TWI), dual language bilingual education (DLBE) programs in the United States has evolved with many successes, including supporting students’ bilingualism, biliteracy, and academic achievement. However, the biased nature of *whose* bilingualism gets framed as valuable cannot be ignored (Flores et al., 2020). Although DLBE programs are considered to construct equitable spaces by default and design, they are historically situated in institutional colonialism, power struggles, and racial tensions (Cervantes-Soon, 2014). As Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars Cook and Dixson explain, “to understand any phenomenon requires a thorough knowledge of how it operates at various moments and with various actors” (2013, p. 1238). With the rapid surge of DLBE programs, critical bilingual education scholars have advised the field against compromising the interests of Black and Latinx children at the expense of serving the interests of their white, English-speaking counterparts (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017; Valdés, 2018). Educators have documented systemic inequities produced in dual language programs; however, nuanced experiences of Black students often go unheard due to homogenous framings of “English speakers” that silence their stories (Blanton et al., 2021; Presiado & Frieson, 2021).

This paper provides insight into educational injustices that the curricularization (Valdés, 2018) of language in DLBE programs can impose upon Black American children from CRT perspectives. A critical race theory-informed critique of two-way

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DLBE programs explicitly places race at the center of an analysis of harmful school practices that many Black children experience in bilingual education. Furthermore, this composite counterstory provides a critical perspective in understanding the full complexity of “various actors” in the “English speaker” versus “English learner” binary that misrepresents the varied experiences of Black American children in DLBE programs.

The pertinence of this conversation is urgent. Racism and anti-Blackness have been normalized in society and schools (Boutte et al., 2021; Brown & Brown, 2021). DLBE programs have been widely praised for their potential benefits (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). However, they are not devoid of systemic racism in spaces that were created for students of Color, such as DLBE programs. Black children in DLBE programs occupy intersectional spaces that urge attention to their distinctive experiences (Crenshaw, 1989).

Black Languages and Literacies

Black languages and literacies have been historically perceived as deficient for centuries, as the US has a lengthy history of grappling with providing meaningful educational experiences for Black children (Muhammad, 2020). DLBE programs are often perceived as an additive space that advances bilingualism, biliteracy, and cultural competence for all participants (Chaparro, 2021). However, in a cautionary note, Valdés (2018) challenged the ways in which DLBE programs typically operate, pointing to an Anglo/Latinx dualism that neglects the linguistic assets of Black children. Dominant ways of speaking undergird the linguistic categorization of speakers in DLBE programs as students are homogeneously grouped as “English speakers” or “English learners,” contributing to mainstream narratives that erase Black language and literacy practices. Therefore, it is crucial to interrogate how systematic structures of DLBE programs contribute to the marginalization and racialization of Black children.

Theoretical Orientations

CRT provides tools for addressing how institutional structures of DLBE reproduce inequitable education for Black children and advocates for a “more nuanced, yet bold explanation for persistent social inequity and its impact on people of Color” (Cook & Dixon, 2013, p. 1242). Rooted in Critical Legal Studies (Taylor, 2016), CRT challenges how U.S. systematic structures uphold white supremacy and maintain the status quo. CRT is thus characterized by prominent tenets that support how racism cannot be reduced to individual acts but instead is the result of institutional structures that function to oppress marginalized groups (Taylor, 2016). These tenets include exposure of the permanence or endemic nature of racism, challenging dominant ideologies, interest convergence, intersectionality, valuing the experiential knowledge of people of Color, interdisciplinarity, and a commitment to social justice.

Regarding DLBE programs, CRT postulates space for confronting how institutional structures of bilingual education can espouse white supremacist logics in its curricularization and teaching practices (Chávez-Moreno, 2020). CRT challenges dominant ideology that positions claims as “objective or neutral,” which often masks the power and privilege of dominant populations (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Thus, CRT questions language allocation policies that promote hegemonic values and norms that further

exclude and racialize the language practices of language minoritized students (Flores, 2016). Hence, the need for probing how systems of linguistic oppression get socially constructed is vital to understanding the harm that is perpetuated on Black children in DLBE programs. For example, intersectionality references multiple forms of oppression, such as gender and race, that contribute to multiple marginalization. CRT scholarship values the experiential knowledge or the “voice” of marginalized communities to “name their realities” and lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In addition, interdisciplinarity draws upon several disciplines to develop robust “scholarly traditions toward centralizing and making sense of experiential knowledge” (Martinez, 2020, p. 15), with the goal of eradicating all forms of oppression for marginalized groups. CRT is central to understanding DLBE’s role in the continued racial and linguistic persecution of Black children, even in the context of the way that it is often praised for bringing multiple linguistic groups of students together.

While extant scholarship has confronted systemic inequities produced in bilingual education (Dorner & Cervantes-Soon, 2020; Zuniga et al., 2018), here in this article, I specifically prioritize race and language through storytelling. Counterstorytelling is a powerful methodological technique composed of chronicles, parables, narratives, allegories, pungent tales, and dialogues utilized by CRT scholars to confront complacency about the status quo (Delgado, 1989). Dominant narratives, typically informed by the experiences of dominant groups, are prioritized by institutional structures (Cook & Dixson, 2013). Hence, it is of great value to share counterstories to challenge unquestioned “institutional knowledge.” In addition to confronting dominant narratives, counterstorytelling envisions new futures and possibilities beyond the realms of the lived experiences that communities of Color currently occupy (Delgado, 1989). Cook and Dixson (2013) assert that counterstorytelling leverages space for crafting composite characters that “turns the focus from individual participants to larger issues faced by groups and deepens the analysis of how race and racism affect the lived experiences of people of Color collectively within institutions” (Martinez, 2020, p. 24). In some cases, composite counterstories are researcher-constructed abstractions that are informed by empirical data, personal experiences, and literature (Martinez, 2020). In summary, counterstorytelling is a necessary and important step in accomplishing CRT’s goal of racial and social justice for Black children in bilingual education.

Making the Invisible, Visible: A Counterstory

I use composite counterstories to tell the story of DLBE programs’ complacency in the continuation of systemic inequities for many Black students. Specifically, this composite counterstory is informed by a fifteen-month ethnographic case study that explored the language and literacy practices of Black American children in an elementary DLBE program; my personal experiences with language education as a Black multilingual woman; and scholarly literature on Black children’s experiences in DLBE. I analyzed observations, interviews, field notes, and documents to create a composite story with fictional characters and firsthand accounts. Although parts of the counterstory are constructed, such as the names of characters and contextual setting, it is grounded in the realities and accounts of racialized experiences (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) that I was able to record as a community member, student teacher supervisor, professional development leader, and researcher.

The setting is Willie Jenkins Elementary School’s cafeteria, located in a predominately Black and Latinx neighborhood in West Plainville, Wisconsin. West Plainville

is a mid-sized city with a historical African American community, lined with mature trees and historical landmarks, two African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches, and several high-rise apartment brick buildings where many Jenkins Elementary families currently reside. Jenkins Elementary has one of three Spanish/English two-way DLBE programs in the city and has the largest percentage of enrolled Black children in the program. However, the program continues to render Black students silent, and students are starting to raise concerns. A conversation develops in the cafeteria between two fourth-graders, Khalid Jones, a Black American child, and Jasmine Olivera, an Afro-Puerto Rican child (pseudonyms), who have been a part of the program since they started in kindergarten. Khalid speaks African American Language (AAL), and Jasmine predominately speaks Puerto Rican Spanish and AAL. Maestra Landry (pseudonym), Khalid and Jasmine's teacher, is a young white woman who has been teaching in the program for three years. She is assisting the principal with welcoming the family of a new Black American student, who is soon to join Khalid and Jasmine's fourth-grade class.

Here comes another one of us. Bruh, I wish I could just run over there and keep it 100 with the fam about this program," said Khalid to Jasmine as he was taking notice of the new classmate and her family. Agreeing with Khalid while expressing frustration, Jasmine said, "I know, right. It's a shame how they talk this whole thing up, and then we get in here, and they act like we ain't got nothin' useful to add to the class. I'm tired of this mess. Ma Dukes ask if I want to quit and bet that I'm thinking 'bout it." Feeling relieved that his feelings of desire to transfer out the program were affirmed, Khalid mentioned, "You too? Yo, I been thinkin' bout that. It's just not fair. We can't even talk the way we want. I know the point is to learn Spanish, but dang, what about how we talk? What's wrong with that? We can't even talk like this during any subject time.

This counterstory reveals a deeper layer that is often buried in the majoritarian story from the voices of two Black students, Khalid and Jasmine. In contrast to the mainstream story about the benefits of bilingualism that DLBE affords students, Khalid and Jasmine captured the problematic nature of language policies that ignore or erase languages that go unrecognized in the program, such as AAL. Rigid language policies in Spanish/English DLBE programs "reimpose sanctioned structural barriers" to linguistic justice for Black American children (Saedi & Richardson, 2020, p. 147).

Reflecting on one of their assignments where Jasmine shared with her teacher the times during the day where she could truly be herself, she said, "That's why when Maestra Landry asked us to write that letter to ask for more time in our favorite subject, I said recess and lunch. That's the only time that I can be myself." In agreement, Khalid nodded his head and said, "Yep, me too. I mean, I know she said that we can talk however we wanna talk when we be doin' stuff other than classwork, but that's not even that much time."

As both Jasmine and Khalid recognized, it is the oppressive institutional structures of schooling that reproduce harm, not the individual acts of people (Taylor, 2016). As a result of the language policies being positioned as a normative structure that indicated designated times of speaking standardized forms of English and Spanish, it was

challenging for their teacher to see how not allowing AAL and Puerto Rican Spanish was an exclusionary practice. Language policies that reiterate a “politics of place” keep Black students out of “white spaces,” insisting that their language practices are not welcome unless they adhere to dichotomous framings of standardized languages (Saeedi & Richardson, 2020, p. 148). In addition, sanctioned language policies also uphold “white linguistic hegemony and supremacy” that denies “linguistic liberties” to Black students (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 7).

Thinking about the time when they brought it to Maestra Landry’s attention, and she suggested that they use translanguaging, Khalid said, “What was the name of that thing she said we could do? Trans...” Finishing his sentence, Jasmine replied, “...languaging. Translanguaging?” Khalid began to recall when Maestra Landry explained what translanguaging was and demonstrated to the class how to engage in it. But he quickly pointed out that empty words with no actions proved to be an inauthentic way to address their concern of feeling silenced. He said, “Yea. I mean, that’s dope and all, but she don’t even be showin’ no interest in who we are. What good is translanguaging if you just gonna turn around and try to correct us in class?” Jasmine added, “Or make us repeat stuff back to you in Spanish. I hate when Mr. Sam (teacher assistant) be doin’ that. It’s so wack ‘cause it’s not even the same thing. How you suppose to translate somethin’ that don’t even translate. Ya boy be out here lookin’ so silly doin’ that, ya feel me?”

Harmful language policies lead to dehumanizing pedagogical practices such as language policing, silencing, and marginalization. Khalid recalled an example of language policing when speaking about the teacher assistant asking students to repeat statements in Spanish and attempting to translate AAL to Mainstream American English. The goal of eradicationist language pedagogies is to eradicate AAL and replace it with the presumed “better” language practices (Baker-Bell, 2020). Such pedagogical tactics encourage deficit perspectives about AAL and white linguistic hegemony, where dominant groups attempt to persuade others that conformity to their language norms is the preferred way of speaking (Baker-Bell, 2020). Language ideologies, biases, and beliefs such as these seek to recreate language hierarchies that reimpose marginalized languages’ subordination that work to persuade “linguistically marginalized communities to buy into the supremacy of a language that is not their own.” (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 15). Dehumanizing practices, such as contrastive analysis, teach students about the distinctive features of AAL in comparison to English and emphasize a color-evasiveness approach to languaging that operates from a position of anti-Blackness. Furthermore, critical scholars may argue for teachers’ use of translanguaging pedagogies, but how can that be enacted in an institutional space that doesn’t recognize the usefulness of AAL in academic contexts?

Khalid agreed and responded, “Yea. And it just ain’t the stuff we be doin’ in class. The whole vibe off.” Looking back over at Maestra Landry and the new student’s family, both Jasmine and Khalid took notice of the program brochure that the new student’s father was holding. Jasmine said, “Yup. You see how that brochure be talkin’ bout how Spanish can benefit English speakers and vice versa. What about kids like me? My Spanish or my English is nowhere to be found in this program.” Khalid mentioned: “Bet. It’s like they picked one version of English and Spanish that none of us don’t even speak and said....here ya go!” Recalling

when her mom also expressed concern over her daughter's biracial identity not being represented in the program brochure, Jasmine said, "Right?! Ma Dukes picked up on that when we registered for the program, but then she never brought it up again since everybody at the school was saying how great that I was learning Spanish and English in school. But the fact of the matter is, I already knew both. It just won't be the type of language that they talkin' bout up in here. "I feel you. **It's like they don't see us at all.**" "And when they do, it's fake. Remember when Maestra Landry gave a lesson on AAL? It was dope to learn the features and all, but what you want me to do with that? Especially when you put it up in comparison to the English that they teach here. I wanted to crawl under my desk that day." Khalid shared in Jasmine's frustration, "Yep. I thought that was messed up too. It was like she was telling us that it only had one use because she sure didn't say nothing else to nobody about it since then."

Jasmine mentioned how the brochure explained how "Spanish" speakers and "English" speakers can benefit each other in DLBE programs. Hegemonic framings of language practices function to legitimize standardized forms of language and seek to erase the intersectional experiences and identities of Black students. This erasure not only marginalizes linguistic practices but also racial identities, as Black students are often referenced in monolithic ways. Jasmine and Khalid both addressed the multiple marginalizations that they experienced in the program as they were essentially rendered invisible when their racial identities were homogenized. However, if the program took an intersectional approach to understanding the identities of its Black students and the contextual factors that shaped their multifaceted identities, then perhaps more humanizing pedagogical approaches could have better served the needs of students like Khalid and Jasmine.

Acknowledging how harmful the language policy is, Jasmine shared, "It's like they all hide behind the talking rules. Like who even came up that we can only speak a certain way during math and then change during science? That ain't even natural!" Maestra Landry nearing the end of the tour, walked over, and said, "Jasmine and Khalid. I hate to interrupt, but can you kindly come over and give a big *bienvenidos* to our new friend, Ebony?" Khalid responded, "Si, Maestra Landry." Thinking that it may be a good idea to invite Ebony in on the conversation, Jasmine asked hesitantly: "Should we talk to her?" Khalid responded, "Nah. Give her a month or two. She'll figure it out. I wish they would just ask us what we thought. We could give them some dope ideas."

Conclusion

As Toni Morrison once said, race is always already present in every social configuration of our lives (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and DLBE programs are not an anomaly. Central to CRT's theoretical foundations is the omnipresence of racism in the U.S. societal contexts, which speaks to the pervasiveness of whiteness in institutional structures that "materializes in many configurations" (Motha, 2020, p. 129). As the popularity of DLBE programs continues to be on the rise, we must ask ourselves how dichotomous framings of language that *appear* to be race-neutral dehumanize Black students' linguistic and cultural identities. Color-evasive approaches to language education, such as the ones present in DLBE, continue to serve as a vehicle to exclude the *totality* of Black

students' linguistic practices, rather than honoring their racial identities and their multilingual repertoires. Intersectional approaches to DLBE programs would honor their racial identities while being "aware of how Black students' linguistic funds are sociopolitically contextualized and how their life experiences shape their linguistic system and vice versa." (Saeedi & Richardson, 2020, p. 157). Linguistically responsive practices, such as Kynard's (2018) race-radical literacies, that center Blackness and support intersectional consciousness across *all* Black identities (racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, and immigration status) are crucial for equitable and just education for Black children in DLBE programs. Black children deserve an excellent education that honors their brilliance on all accounts. Let's ensure that bilingual education is a part of the educational revolution and no longer a contributor to historical, educational injustice.

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Cite this article: Frieson, B. L. (2022). “It’s like they don’t see us at all”: A Critical Race Theory critique of dual language bilingual education for Black children. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 42, 47–54. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190522000022>