“They don’t speak English”: Interrogating (racist) ideologies and perceptions of school personnel in a Midwestern state

Leadership for Learning in the Context of Social Justice: An American Perspective

Anthony H. Normore, Guest Editor

“ They don’t speak English”: Interrogating (racist) ideologies and perceptions of school personnel in a Midwestern state

Gerardo R. López & Vanessa A. Vázquez

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the attitudes and perceptions of school administrators, teachers, and other school personnel in a Latino-impacted school district in a Midwestern state. As this district struggles to meet the educational needs of a growing number of Latino students, research finds that school officials increasingly employ assimilationist ideologies that not only privilege the English language, but view Latino students and their families as intellectually and culturally inferior. In this paper we make the argument that these practices reinforce a subtle, but powerful, form of benevolent racism: where “good intentions” and compassionate altruism reproduce and reify a highly racialized discourse.

Public concern over the growing number of undocumented immigrants has intensified in recent years (Daniels, 2004; Graham, 2006; Perea, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2002; Wells & Bryne, 1999). This concern is fueled by an outpouring of American patriotism, nationalist sentiment, and a renewed esprit-de-corps that has blanketed the nation in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Indeed, as Americans search for a common symbol of allegiance to bring them together during these troubled times, they’ve found such symbols in the American flag, in patriotic songs, and in pleas for a common national language (Coryn, Beale, & Myers, 2004; Freyd, 2002; Gerstenfeld, 2002; López, 2002). As our nation struggles to heal itself from the wound inflicted within its borders, it has increasingly looked outside its borders as possible sites of worry, fear and trepidation. In an effort to allay public concerns over “weakened” borders and other potential threats to national security, US public policy has now focused on immigration reform and border security as solutions to protect this country from future possible attacks (Cornelius, 2005; National Public Radio, 2004; Newport, 2004).

At the same time, the threat of terrorism has fueled a need to re-examine the contours of our “American” identity—as this country has done several times throughout its history, particularly during times of economic crises, political upheaval, and international conflict (Daniels, 2004; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). As in the past, what it means to be “American” is often defined conterminously with the characteristics of the dominant culture (Perea, 1992, 1997, 1998). Individuals who do not fit this mold are viewed as outsiders, foreign, or alien. This often leads to xenophobic and racist reactions, as many of these “outsiders” often become the target of ridicule, disparagement, scorn, and vilification:

It happened to the Irish of the 1850s, the Germans during WWI, the Japanese during WWII, the Mexicans during Operation Wetback, and the Russians during the Cold War. In fact, the very definition of what and who is an “American” has shifted as different “out groups” become “in groups” when the situation and historical circumstances change. (López, 2002, p. 198).
It is against this backdrop of social and political tension, with a war on terror being fought both abroad and within our borders, in which the U.S. Senate voted to make English the “national language” of the United States in May of 2006 (Hulse, 2006).

What is problematic about this political maneuver is that it happened in the wake of large-scale immigration reform. In effect, the Senate’s move to “link” language issues with immigration not only positioned the English language as a linchpin of the immigration debate, but wrongly conflated issues of national security with modern-day nativism (Crawford, 2006). Moreover, by choosing the English language as a signifier of “true” Americanism, the U.S. Senate simultaneously subscribed to a popular myth surrounding bilingualism: i.e., that it is a divisive force that threatens national unity (Johnson, 2005; Stritikus & Garcia, 2003). Not only is this myth largely unfounded (Fishman, 1991), but it ignores the fact that language plurality is a “normal state of affairs in all but a few small countries” of the world (Crawford, 2006, p. 9). In other words, while the belief in a unifying national language is a powerful ideological construct, there is often much more at work than mere mastery of the English language when defining what it means to be “American” (Perea, 1992; Sekhon, 1999).

Research asserts (e.g., Cornelius, 2002, 2005) that Latinos are often viewed as a cultural “other,” even among other marginalized groups. They are perceived as problem minorities, largely because of their growing presence in the US coupled with their apparent failure to effectively assimilate into the larger social polity (Cornelius, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). The rapid growth of the Latino population, especially in regions outside the Southwest, has also been a source of tension and concern. States like North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska, are rapidly becoming destinations where Latino “newcomers” are settling (Guzman, 2001). Lured by American businesses and the desire to provide a better livelihood for their children, Latinos are now invigorating local economies in areas that have not historically attracted Latino workers (Cantu, 1995; Lazos & Jeanetta, 2002; Stull, Broadway & Griffith, 1995; Wells & Bryne, 1999).

In scholarly circles this population trend is referred to as “the New Latino Diaspora” (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002). This term arose from the need to address the multiple issues and circumstances facing Latinos in non-traditional regions of the United States. More often than not, issues pertaining to identity, citizenship, and “belongingness” are intensified in these emerging arenas—largely because there is little experience and first-hand knowledge in working with this population. As some research reveals, many Latino newcomers face an unwelcoming context of reception in these communities, as local residents often struggle with how to best accommodate this particular group (Lazos & Jeanetta, 2002; López & Vázquez, 2005).

While not all of the experiences of these Latino newcomers are negative, this group nevertheless remains positioned as a problem within the larger public discourse. This problem is due, in part, to predictable social forces that shape the lives of many immigrant communities, as Portes and Rumbaut (2001) conclude:

[O]n the whole, the environments created by the combination of the immigrants’ human and social capital, and the context that receives them, dominate the process of adaptation and its prospects of success. Placed in an impoverished community and surrounded by a hostile world, even the most motivated individuals flounder, despite brave declarations to the contrary (pp. 267-268).

In other words, despite their desire to overcome their social and economic position, most Latino immigrants have a difficult time assimilating into the larger U.S. society (see also Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Consequently, Latino social mobility—particularly in second and third generations—is often segmented and dispersed, as opposed to being predictable and expected (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). To be certain, Latino immigrants and their offspring often experience much stress as they try to adjust to life in their new communities (Cornelius, 2002; Falicov, 2002; Lazos & Jeanetta, 2002).

Such stress is often intensified when tension, apprehension, and misunderstandings arise between newcomer Latinos and local residents. Moreover, the inability to communicate across linguistic and cultural divides may only heighten this tension lead to further frustration, suspicion, animosity, distrust, and misunderstanding (Cornelius, 2002). Unfortunately, this may only reinforce the belief that newcomers are foreign, other, different and “un-American” (Hernandez-Truyol, 1998). To be certain, notions of who is/is not “American”—including the social, cultural, economic, and linguistic characteristics engendered therein—all influence how local communities interact with Latino

This study seeks to interrogate the multiple, yet subtle, ways in which teacher and administrator perceptions of their Spanish speaking Latino students were informed by nativist and assimilationist ideologies. It emerges from the belief that ideology is a powerful force that impacts and structures our everyday perceptions of reality and that racism, as an ideological construct, permeates our organizational practices, structures, and everyday ways of thinking (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Tyson, 1998). We argue that racism is more than just the enactment of overt and explicit acts and/or deeply-held prejudicial sentiments about a particular group, but is an “integral part of our social fabric” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). By looking at teacher and administrator perceptions of the Latino community, particularly perceptions of cultural and linguistic differences, this study aims to interrogate how these perceptions function as racialized constructs that reify and reproduce inequities in the larger social order.

“Help! They don’t speak English”

The title of this study was taken from an educational resource manual that aims to provide teachers with lesson plans, advice, and support on how to work with Limited English Proficient students. The online resource kit was produced in 1989 by a task force of migrant educators in Virginia who had received an increasing number of requests from classroom teachers, particularly in areas of high Latino growth. While the purpose of the “rescue” kit was well-intentioned, one need not be familiar with its contents in order to discern how language and cultural differences were perceived. In fact, the title alone (“Help! They don’t speak English,”) suggests feelings of helplessness, frustration and despair, and connotes a general lack of knowledge and/or competence in working with linguistically and culturally diverse learners.

Moreover, this kit positions teachers as helpless victims in need of a “life-line” to rescue them from their particular dilemma. In effect, language and culture are problematically positioned as issues that overwhelm and frustrate, thus making this kit the first line of defense for teachers working with these students. This is not to suggest that working across linguistic and cultural lines isn’t difficult and challenging, but that the emphasis on students’ shortcomings is narrowly conceptualized.

In other words, the title of the kit unilaterally blames children for their inadequacies, rather than looking at other sources (we don’t speak Spanish) or at the nature of the language barrier itself (we don’t understand each other) as possible sources of frustration. Not only is this discursive move problematic, but it is deeply troubling, given the current backlash against language rights in the classroom and the rise of “English only” initiatives that are gaining increased national support (Gershberg, Danenberg, & Sánchez, 2004; Platt, 1990).

In effect the nature of deficit thinking and the ideology underpinning English language acquisition is so pervasive that even progressive educators have internalized its poisonous logic by unconsciously subscribing to a language rights discourse that views students as having linguistic deficiencies or shortcomings (Perea, 1992; Sekhon, 1999). Not only does this ontological move position English as the dominant or primordial language, but also subscribes to the ideology that academic and economic opportunities are dependent upon the learning and mastery of the English language. This is not to suggest that learning English is unimportant, but to separate the learning of the language from the concomitant “benefits” one gains from having mastery over the language.

To be certain, many African American and Latino communities have been “speaking English” for hundreds of years, yet most have not “made it” academically, politically, economically, or socially in society (Conchas, 2001; Heath, 1983; Johnson & Martinez, 2000). When English mastery becomes the primordial route to achieving the American dream, we make a dangerous slippage between English language mastery and educational/economic success (Heath, 1983; Krashen, 1994; Ovando, 2003; Portes & Schauffler, 1994). As an ideological construct, this belief disregards the social, economic, political, structural, and racial context which keeps all underrepresented students—second language learners and English dominant learners alike—in a subordinate position in society (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdés, 2001). This is why it is critically important to interrogate the perceptions of school personnel, especially how they view, understand, and interact with under-represented language minority students, particularly those who are new or recent arrivals in their respective communities.
Background of Study

This case study emerged from a larger study based on Latino parents’ perceptions about and interpretations of “involvement” (López & Vàzquez, 2005). The aim of the research was to bring to light how traditional conceptions of parental involvement overshadow the ways in which Latino parents and their extended kin network are already involved in the educational lives of their children. As part of the study, we also interviewed teachers, administrators, and other school personnel in order to understand how the larger educational community in which the Latino families participated, were defining the terrain of parent involvement.

During these interviews, however, we quickly became aware that perceptions of Latino parent involvement were intimately connected to the perceptions of the Latino community itself. Many of our respondents provided anecdotes, observations, and first-hand accounts of their interactions with Latino parents, as well as explanations and personal insights as to why they believed there was a disjuncture in meeting the linguistic and cultural needs of their Latino students. In essence, we quickly realized the school personnel held particular beliefs about Latino families—beliefs that were “noble” and/or “righteous” on the surface, but emerged from a deeper racialized logic about language and culture.

Method

The research methodology chosen for this study was primarily qualitative in nature. Researchers focused on schools in three counties in one particular Midwestern state that had experienced substantial Latino growth in the previous ten years according to US Census and school district figures. However, because this study is still unfolding, the findings reported herein center around one particular county whose school district had a total student enrollment of 10,665 during the 2004-2005 academic year. Of particular importance is the fact that this district experienced a 500% growth in Latino student enrollment since 2001.

The school district is comprised of 11 elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools. In order to gain entry into these schools, researchers relied on personal and professional contacts within the district’s central administration to personally introduce us to principals, teachers, and other key personnel. After spending approximately one month at schools conducting observations in classrooms, gathering field notes and interacting with parents, researchers began the interview process. We specifically focused on three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school that served the largest concentration of Latino students according to district records.

During a four month period, researchers interviewed administrators, teachers, and other personnel at these schools—including counselors, social workers, teacher’s aides, program assistants, and support staff who worked directly with Latino students and/or ESL students in general. Researchers interviewed a total of 14 administrators, eight teachers, and six support staff. Special effort was made to interview these individuals at different times of the day in order to increase the availability of our subjects.

All of the subjects were interviewed once using a semi-structured interview protocol and three participants were interviewed twice. Interviews ranged between 50-60 minutes in length, and the longest interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed with the consent of the participants.

In addition, researchers conducted an informal or “unstructured” interview with each of the participants. These interviews were not audio recorded, although field notes were taken by researchers during the interview process. These unstructured interviews generally occurred after the first “taped” interview, but within the 4-month time period of this study. They provided us with opportunities to ask follow-up questions, probe for meaning/clarification, and triangulate some of our initial findings. Since many of these interviews were un-planned (though certainly not accidental or unintended), they occurred during the school day, and were held under less prescribed circumstances. They typically lasted between seven and 15 minutes in length, and materialized during hallway conversations, cafeteria duty, planning periods, and before/after-school bus duty.

Data analysis proceeded according to the procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), Huberman and Miles (1994), Patton (1990), and Coffey and Atkinson (1996), and included interview coding according to significant themes.
and the utilization of case and cross-case analysis. It is important to note that our analysis was an ongoing process, where observations, interviews, field notes, and journaling informed each other by providing analytic and theoretical insights during the data collection process (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). In effect, our analysis was formulated and reformulated while in the field. We found this overlapping of data collection/analysis useful, since many of the findings we uncovered—particularly those surrounding racism and assimilation—were rarely explicit or overt, but rather, were inferred from our collective insights during the interview process (Tierney & Lincoln, 1997).

Thus, we can not pretend that our findings are entirely unproblematic. In fact, as Stanfield (1993), Denzin (1997) and Lather (1993) collectively argue, there is no way of objectively interpreting the world—since we only see what our conceptual frames “allow” us to see. As with most qualitative accounts; our findings are partial, imperfect, and not ideologically—or theoretically—“pure.” At best, our findings are mediated, fleeting, and constructed accounts of our own engagements at this research site, and are far from neutral or objective recollections (Geertz, 1988; Lather, 1997; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Van Maanen, 1988). This is not to suggest that our findings are false, intentionally misleading, or meaningless, but that “truth” itself is multifaceted, complex, slippery and “unreliable” (Britzman, 1998; see also Lather & Smithies, 1997).

To be certain, our aim is not to provide findings that are universally true, but rather, to provide findings that are more local/situated. This is why the use of an instrumental case—as a methodological device—was chosen for this particular study (Stake, 1994). As Hamel (1993) and Yin (1994) suggest, the purpose of a case is not to “generalize” to a larger population, but to provide readers with a unique opportunity to identify how social practices are evident in the individual case.

**Results**

Preliminary results suggest that school personnel experienced much stress when working with members of the Latino community. Most of the individuals we interviewed shared anecdotes of frustration, fatigue, and disillusionment when working across linguistic and cultural lines, and often referred to the multiple “barriers” that had to be overcome in order to adequately work with this population.

While most of these perceptions highlighted a general frustration in working with language minority students, some emerged from deeply-held racial perceptions about language inferiority and an equally powerful belief in the “melting pot” ideology of assimilation. To be certain, all of our respondents did not directly state that they viewed Latino students or their parents as inferior. Nor did any of them mention any racial hostility toward Latino students. On the contrary, much of what they provided was very positive accounts. However, when we probed deeper in our interviews—and upon a closer examination of the data—a pattern of subtle, unconscious, and restrained racial attitudes became evident.

For example, early in the interview process, it became apparent that many of our respondents spoke to us in a kind of “code” that avoided any direct mention of race or ethnicity. Instead, they described the new population with “raceless” signifiers that masked any ill-intention or negative perception of the Latino newcomers. For example, when asked to describe the types of changes that had occurred in their schools over the past 5 years, many of our respondents mentioned that “things were different now” or that they had “more problems today than in the past.” When prodded to elaborate on what these statements meant, they typically utilized other benign signifiers to describe those changes:

- “Our students are now more mobile. We really didn’t have that problem before.” (Elementary school teacher)
- “We now have students who are poorer and low-SES. That’s certainly a change. I’ve been here for 28 years and this is the first time we’ve had to deal with issues of extreme poverty.” (Middle school principal)
- “We have larger class sizes than we did in the past. That’s a huge change!” (High school counselor).
- “There are a lot more language barriers than ever before. I think that’s another major difference—and a challenge for all of us at the high school.” (High school teacher)

While one could look at this evidence as harmless descriptors of the changing school context, the rapid demographic shift experienced in this school district during the past five years would indicate that they were making reference to the Latino community. Upon closer examination of the data, one might speculate that our respondents engaged in a type of racial avoidance. In other words, these signifiers indirectly made reference to how “things used to be” and juxtaposed those experiences to how radically different things now were.
In effect, our respondents reminisced about a time when students and families were less problematic, troublesome, English dominant, and middle class. It is these types of subtle, almost unconscious, racialized perceptions that permeated how our respondents perceived these Latino newcomers and their families.

Language as barrier

A finding that consistently emerged in each of our interviews was the notion of “linguistic barriers” or the belief that there was a gap in understanding students and families because they spoke a different language. In fact, the phrase “language barriers” or some iteration thereof (e.g., “the language issue,” “language differences,” “language deficiency,” “communication gap,”) was mentioned by each of our 28 respondents during the interview process. This concept usually emerged when asked about the types of challenges they faced when working with Latino students and/or families.

In effect, all of our respondents believed that language was the primary issue that was at the heart of many of the problems, concerns and experiences they faced when working or interacting with Latino families. They firmly believed that if the “language barrier” could be mitigated, many of the frustrations they experienced on a daily basis (e.g., discipline referrals, school performance issues, student conduct, etc.) would disappear. However, as was the case with the “emergency kit” mentioned above, many of our respondents problematically assumed that Latino families were the ones who had the “language barrier”—failing to recognize that the act of communication is bi-directional in nature. This perspective, therefore, not only blamed Latino families for their linguistic deficits, but perpetuated a problematic myth that linked English language mastery with educational success (see also Conchas, 2001; Heath, 1983; Johnson & Martinez, 2000; Krashen, 1994; Ovando, 2003; Portes & Schauffler, 1994).

The insistence that the primary problem schools surrounded the inability of Latino families to speak English was vividly expressed by one elementary school teacher:

**Interviewer: With regards to Latinos, do you see parents being involved?**

Teacher: [W]e are working on getting those parents to be more involved at home because to this child we’re saying “you need to practice this or you need to practice that” and the Hispanic parents don’t know how to help their children. Or we’ll send things home, or have kids do activities at home with their parents, and we get no response [from the parents]. I remember having a conference with a Spanish-speaking dad. Dad came to the conference, mom didn’t come. I think because of work. But, the student [would] say: “My mom don’t know English! My mom don’t know English! My mom can’t help me with my homework! My mom don’t know English!”

**Interviewer: Is all the work you give your students in English?**

Teacher: Well, yeah. The things she needs to learn are. I mean she needs to learn her shapes in English and her letters in English, and those things. But she has an older brother [who] speaks English. So there’s probably some way to work it out, you know? But we are probably going to have to meet with these parents again because that child isn’t progressing. It’s been really interesting to watch the [Latino] families. You know, each work it out the best they can. And, and they do show interest. They do care. But there are things that slip through the
crack because of the language barrier. I don't speak Spanish. I cannot begin to write my newsletters in Spanish. And I wish I could. I wish I spoke Spanish. I wish I could translate everything because it would simplify things a lot. But, that's just not realistic.

As the interview reveals, there appears to be an unstated assumption that the "real" root of the parent involvement problem was the inability of the parents to speak English. The fact that homework assignments, newsletters, and suggested parent/child activities are not available or offered in Spanish, all seem to be irrelevant reasons for the parents inability to get involved. Adding insult to injury, the teacher adopted a somewhat paternalistic stance when she stated that it was not “realistic” for her to learn Spanish—though she did not seem to find it unrealistic for the Spanish-speaking parents to learn English.

In effect, there were particular assumptions about the nature, origin, and locus of the “language barrier” that problematically prevented communication between the home and the school. Most of our respondents did not perceive it as their obligation to have to adapt to meet the linguistic needs of students and families, primarily because such “barriers” were outside of their domain. Despite the fact that all of the educators we interviewed had gone through ESL and other diversity training—including professional development for working with language minority students—many still harbored particular feelings about the role, primacy, and centrality of the English language. Moreover, they employed an assimilationist stance that not only privileged English, but viewed Spanish-speaking students and their families as having particular deficits for not being able to communicate in the “national language” of this country.

Need’s specialist become “experts”

A second theme that emerged was that school personnel heavily relied on ESL teachers, Spanish interpreters, teaching assistants, and community aides when dealing or interacting with Latino students and family members. This seemed to happen on a regular basis, regardless of whether or not there was a “language barrier” present. For example in one situation, the high school principal sought the help of a Spanish teacher to translate at a conference he was having with the parents of a Latino student. When the parents responded (in English) that they completely understood the principal and that an interpreter would not be needed, their words seemed to fall on deaf ears. The principal insisted that the Spanish teacher be present “just in case” there was a language issue that emerged during the conference.

In another example, a teacher at an elementary school specifically sought the help of a Spanish-speaking teaching assistant in order to help translate a class activity to a group of Latino students in her class. What makes this example problematic was the fact that the students appeared to have a solid grasp of the assignment in question. Nevertheless, the teacher walked out of her classroom and proceeded to the second story of the school building. She interrupted an ESL class that was in session in order to request the services of the bilingual teaching assistant. When we asked this teacher why she felt the need to have an interpreter present, she indicated that every assignment was important, and that she didn’t want her Latino students to feel inadequate by not knowing the material. When we indicated to her that the students appeared to have a good grasp of the assignment, she smiled and retorted “Oh they always say that! I just want to make sure that they really know what they’re doing, that’s all.”

In effect, building personnel engaged in what appeared to be diffusive practices: circumventing direct contact with Latino students and families under the pretext of linguistic or cultural barriers. While we do not care to speculate the reason under-girding such practices in this paper, we can conclude that the net result was an over-reliance on Spanish-speaking translators to negotiate the interactions between school personnel and Latino students/families.

We believe this led to a “diffusion of responsibility” in the school building: so long as there was someone in the building who could translate and/or was knowledgeable about Latino culture, that person would be called upon to perform the intermediary function. The following quote by an elementary principal provides further insights:
Interviewer: Tell me about those recess problems.

Principal: There were fights. Lots of fights. And kicking and just, I mean, you know, blows. And we had just never allowed fighting in our playground or anything like that. And they [Latinas/os] really felt like if somebody just barely brushed up against them, that you got in their space. And they felt like they wanted to solve it right there. So we had a lot of fights.

Interviewer: Was there kind of a trend?

Principal: It wasn’t. It was, in a sense. But it wasn’t racial or anything. I just think that Hispanic children have always been taught to stand up for themselves and if somebody doesn’t fight fair—whether it be soccer or whether it be coming down the slide and someone bumps into you—then you got in their space. [But] the Hispanic children tended to stay together, so the fighting was really amongst each other and not so much, you know, with White [children]. You know, Hispanic children fighting back and forth.

Interviewer: And what did you do as a school to begin to address that?

Principal: We brought—well, again, language was a barrier—so we did bring in the ESL teacher to help us with the problem. She came out to recess duty for a while. And she worked with the Spanish-speaking kids to kind of establish procedure again. And she taught them that if somebody does take something, or bumps into you, or you don’t think is playing fair, that you come and get the teacher and let them help solve the problem. She came out to recess a couple of times, and that greatly helped. It also helped that she covered some of those things within her class.

While the belief in the innate “cultural roots” of Latino dysfunctionality is problematic in itself, what is even more problematic is that the principal felt these students needed to be “educated” on appropriate playground etiquette and social skills. Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, and Doumbia (2003) suggest that many White educators firmly believe that Latino students—particularly those who are recent immigrants—come from “rural, underdeveloped countries that are devoid of any social order” (p.108). Consequently, many educators feel that these students need to be taught the norms, customs, traditions, and values of this country. This assimilationist logic is perhaps made even more insidious when educators actively recruit the efforts of ESL teachers and staff (who can communicate in Spanish) to perform those functions.

In short, ESL teachers and other individuals in these schools often served as interpreters, buffers, and liaisons, between full-time school teachers and administrators and the broader Latino community. By viewing and placing these individuals in this associativist position, school personnel created a space between themselves and those students/families whom they serve. In essence, the ESL and Spanish-speaking staff (many of who were hired on “soft” moneys and/or on an hourly basis) became the default “go-to” persons in the building whenever translation services were needed. The irony of this approach, is that the effort to consciously mitigate the linguistic and cultural barriers, only ended up reifying them in unique and different ways.

The construction of “Good” and “Bad” Latino parents
The last finding in this study surrounds how teachers, administrators, and other school personnel perceived Latino parents and their involvement in their children’s educational lives. These perceptions not only engender particular understandings of home and school functions, but also define the terrain of actions that circumscribe the discourse of appropriate parental behavior. Oftentimes, what is viewed as “good” involvement from the perceptive of schools only reflect and/or privilege “mainstream” involvement forms (Lightfoot, 1978; López, 2001). We believe this constitutes a deficit perspective that not only diminishes the culturally-specific perspectives of minority populations, but more importantly, deflects attention away from the professional responsibility of schools to establish effective parental involvement programs for marginalized families (Valencia, 1997).

Generally speaking, the findings in this study indicate that school personnel continue to deflect attention away from their own inadequacies to effectively reach out to all parents. Moreover, they reproduce a deficit discourse that focuses exclusively on stereotypic notions of home dysfunctionality. This was particularly true for Latino children whose parents were viewed as lacking the educational, social, and cultural, resources to have a positive effect on a child’s schooling. The following exchange with a middle school teacher provides an example of this type of deficit thinking:

**Interviewer:** How do you think the school sees the role of the parent?

Teacher: We hope that they’re making sure the homework is being done, that they’re eating right, that they’re going to bed at a decent time, you know? I think that’s the mental image of what a parent should be. And I think that with the demographics we have here, and especially with our Hispanic students, a lot of times we don’t see that. We know that’s not happening in everyone’s house. We know that a lot of those parents are working two, maybe three, jobs in order to put food on the table.

**Interviewer:** So what is it that you want from these parents when it comes to involvement?

Teacher: I think knowing, just knowing, the parents are going to be supportive. If there is a problem, are the parents are going to be there to back their children to make sure they have loving and nurturing environment to go home to? I think parents are, you know, the most important thing in the child’s life. And you know, I think a lot of students here don’t go home feeling that way.

This notion of what makes a “good” parent—checking homework, putting children to bed, making sure children eat right—are perceived by teachers as actions that support the overall schooling agenda. When parents are perceived as “failing” at these tasks, they are not only viewed as unsupportive by teachers, but are also seen as not providing loving and nurturing environments at the home. In effect, blaming the parent for their lack of involvement situates teachers as the “caring” adult in the Latino child’s life.

Teachers, unproblematically view themselves as benevolent and compassionate caregivers who call the home, communicate with parents, and try to balance schedules—only to be met with parents who aren’t supportive of the overall educational agenda. However, there is a dangerous and unexamined slippage between not getting a response from parents, and the parent not loving their children (de Carvahlo, 2001). This perception certainly needs to be critically examined and unpackaged, as it reproduces a very problematic—and dangerous—stereotype.
Conclusion and Implications

We want to make it clear that the school personnel we interviewed care very deeply for the Latino children and parents with whom they work and interact on a daily basis. There is no doubt in our minds that they truly love their jobs and want to provide Latinos with the best schooling experience possible. As public servants, they are fulfilling their duties in a professional manner and firmly believe that their teaching will benefit local, regional and national interests.

Nevertheless, our participants held on to deeply ingrained, and dysconsious (King, 1991) racial perceptions about language, culture, and “good” parenting. These ideologies were often cloaked with good intentions: the desire to bridge the language barrier, the heartfelt need to bring interpreters to minimize misunderstanding, the desire to assimilate parents and children into the mainstream, the yearning for Latino parents to express their support in more visible and discernable ways. Yet, the harder teachers tried to bridge this gap, the more frustrated they became, and the easier it was to point the finger at perceived linguistic and cultural inadequacies.

Not only are such beliefs and perception grossly exaggerated and unfounded, but they emerge from a deep-seeded paternalism that views immigrant groups as having to shed their native language and culture in order to “melt” into an English-dominant social order (Perea, 1997). Because these beliefs are so ingrained and transparent, we often fail to recognize how much they structure and shape both our personal and professional lives.

As individuals who work with culturally and linguistically diverse children, we have an ethical duty, and moral responsibility, to interrogate our own assumptions and perspectives about language and culture—especially those perceptions that may be harmful to linguistically and culturally diverse students. We also have a duty to challenge our deeply-held assumptions about the dominance and supremacy of the English language, and to interrogate the role of language in defining the parameters of what it means to be “American” (Crawford, 1998; Montoya, 1998; Navarrette, 1998; Perea, 1998). Perhaps the time has come to critically examine the ideological cloth of our assimilationist ideology and highlight the various overt and hidden processes in which schools and their agents regulate, monitor, and control language differences in the larger social order. This study is but a first step in this direction.

References


**Brief biographies**

Gerardo R. López is Associate Professor in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Indiana University. His areas of interests are parental involvement, school-community relations, and migrant education. His recent work looks at the application of LatCrit and Critical Race Theory to problems of practice within the field of educational leadership. His publications have appeared in Educational Administration Quarterly, Journal of School Leadership, American Educational Research Journal, and Harvard Educational Review. He is currently working on a research study of Latina/o parents in the state of Indiana, as well as a forthcoming book on the education of undocumented Latina/o children.

E-Mail Address: lopezg@indiana.edu

Vanessa A. Vázquez is a doctoral student in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Indiana University. Her areas of interest are Latina/o youth identity and the role of mediating institutions in the identity formation process. She holds a Master's Degree in American Studies from Purdue University, and a Bachelors Degree from the University of California, Santa-Cruz. She is currently assisting Gerardo R. Lopez in his research on Latina/o parents, and is commencing a new research study on Latina/o youth identity in a small town in Central Indiana.

E-Mail Address: vavazque@indiana.edu