

12 Nice White Parents and Dual Language Education¹

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The first episode of the podcast ‘Nice White Parents’ documents the experiences of a school that experienced an influx of white parents in response to its efforts to create a French dual language program. (Chapter 11 deals with the same school and podcast episode in greater detail.) What happened next is something that those of us who have worked with schools with dual language programs in gentrifying neighborhoods know all too well – white parents, enthusiastic to be involved in the school community to ensure that their children receive a quality education, steamrolled the existing leadership structure led by people of color and transformed the school in ways that made the families of color who had long been the primary clientele of the school feel unwelcomed and unheard.

With the increasing popularity of dual language programs with white parents, this dynamic will likely continue to emerge as schools trying to attract white parents market programs that were once intended to serve racialized bilingual communities into programs that are framed as enrichment programs for white children. Yet, these dynamics are not inevitable. In line with what the reporter concluded in her exploration of school integration, ensuring that dual language programs do not simply become a new tool for the maintenance of racial hierarchies requires white parents interested in dual language education to be willing to give up some of their power in service of the greater good – something that the reporter pointed out hasn’t often happened.

In this spirit, I lay out some principles that white parents might consider when thinking about how to engage with schools that have an existing dual language program or (as in this case) how to engage with a school to advocate for the development of a new dual language program.

- *Leave your savior complex at the door.* A dynamic documented in ‘Nice White Parents’ that I have also come across in other gentrifying contexts are the ways that white parents have convinced themselves that they are somehow saving the school and their involvement is the first time that anything positive has happened in the school’s entire history. Guess what? Families of color have been attending

these schools for a long time and have been pushing these schools to do right by their children. To suggest that these schools were some kind of urban wasteland before you arrived is not only racist but completely self-serving. It allows you to promote an agenda that is completely focused on the needs of your child while pretending that you are actually trying to bring positive change to the school community. I'm not sure how your privileged white child receiving a dual language education is helping the many students of color who are either excluded from the program or forced into it because they have not been given another choice. How about instead of positioning yourself as the savior of the school you take some time to listen to the experiences of the families of color who have been attending the school and develop a cross-racial alliance focused on benefiting *all* the children in the school, not just yours?

- *Respect the existing leadership structure of the school.* One of the most painful moments of the first episode of 'Nice White Parents' is the recorded interactions of the new white parents completely undermining the authority of the Puerto Rican parent-teacher association (PTA) president in a series of tense meetings. Though we don't hear their perspectives explicitly, I imagine that these white parents experienced the PTA president as overly defensive and perhaps even ill-informed. With this framing as their point of entry, they most likely experienced her as a barrier to their vision for the school. This not only led to her silencing but also worked to undermine the goals of the dual language program by making the families of color even more suspicious of a program they never asked for and didn't want. Just imagine if the nice white parents interested in a dual language program had met with the PTA first to discuss their ideas and to solicit feedback in the hopes of developing a plan with which the entire school community was on board.
- *Consider the existing languages of the school community when selecting the partner language for a dual language program.* In 'Nice White Parents', the white families unilaterally decided to implement a French dual language program. This was despite the fact that many of the existing students came from homes where Spanish and Arabic were spoken. The result was that white students were celebrated for becoming bilingual or maintaining their heritage language while the long-standing racialized bilingual student population continued to have their bilingualism ignored at best and treated as a barrier to learning at worst. Just imagine if the nice white parents had bothered to do research first and develop alliances with the Spanish- and/or Arabic-speaking community to develop a program that offered their children the opportunity to become bilingual while also building on the existing bilingualism of the school community.

- *Don't ignore the many students who are not in the dual language program.* While it is true that dual language programs have unique needs and challenges that need to be addressed, in this case, and in the case of many such programs, it is one program within a larger school community. This means that when developing plans to support the school it is important to think about the entire school to avoid the creation of a competitive dynamic that leads families and students not participating in the dual language program to feel like they are getting the short end of the stick. This requires a shift away from discussions of 'what is best for my (white) child?' to 'what is best for our children (of many different racial backgrounds with a diverse set of needs)?'.
- *Understand that you will have to prove yourself to the school community.* It can feel demoralizing to be treated with suspicion when you feel like all you are trying to do is to develop an innovative program that will benefit your child and perhaps others in the school community. But what you have to understand, and what this podcast shows over its five episodes, is that nice white parents have been experimenting at the expense of families of color for decades. The only way to show that you are different is through the hard work of community building and compromise – something that nice white parents have historically not been particularly good at. If you aren't willing to do this work then you actually are just like all of those nice white parents throughout the history of US education and shouldn't be upset when you are treated as such.

The podcast does end on a somewhat positive note by pointing to how the school eventually did take stock of the power dynamics that had emerged and worked to consciously challenge them in the name of racial equity. Part of this entailed the scaling back of the French dual language programming at the school. While advocates for bilingual education might feel like this was a loss, I would argue that this was a gain. Dual language education is not inherently socially transformative and, in this case, seemed to be doing more harm than good. Should the school be interested in revisiting a dual language program I hope that they work to develop the program from the bottom-up in ways that ensure that the program fits into a broader vision that ensures that the school is working to service *all* its students equitably and with an anti-racist agenda always at the forefront.

Note

- (1) This chapter is reproducible for use by advocates and educators interested in spreading its message. It is a revised version of Flores' Educational Linguist blog post from 26 August 2020.