

13 Countering Gentrification through Critical Consciousness: Recommendations and Success Stories for DLBE Educators

Deborah Palmer, Emily Crawford, Lisa Dorner,
Claudia Cervantes-Soon and Dan Heiman

Introduction

The term ‘gentrification’ in dual language bilingual education (DLBE) is used metaphorically to describe the increasing participation of privileged populations in bilingual education spaces in ways that often result in the marginalization of language-minoritized students, their families and their communities (Delavan *et al.*, 2021; Valdez *et al.*, 2016). In addition, a growing body of work has shown that gentrification also occurs literally in many urban contexts where schools with DLBE programs contribute to and reflect the displacement of minoritized students and their families from their increasingly gentrified neighborhoods (e.g. Chaparro, 2019; Heiman, 2021). Scholarship examining these trends and the resulting inequalities in DLBE has proposed establishing critical consciousness as the foundation that can help redefine and reorient the goals, practices and policies of these programs (Cervantes-Soon, 2014; Cervantes-Soon *et al.*, 2017; Heiman *et al.*, 2023, Palmer *et al.*, 2019).

As conceptualized by educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (2000), critical consciousness is at the core of emancipatory education. Developing critical consciousness involves engaging in *problem-posing*, i.e. continuously interrogating the discourses and structures of power that shape one’s oppressive historical, material and social conditions. It also involves recognizing one’s own role in perpetuating these oppressive conditions and taking collective action to transform them for liberation.

For educators this means that to teach literacy should imply encouraging students to read not just *the word* but *the world*.

Fundamental to the notion of critical consciousness is the idea of *praxis*, a cyclical process that takes place in the context of dialogue with others (including teachers, students, families and any other stakeholders) involving (1) critically interrogating and reflecting about the systems that structure inequities and that materialize in people's daily lives; (2) recognizing personal agency and responsibility, including our own role in perpetuating systems of oppression and our capacity to disrupt them; and (3) planning and carrying out action for social transformation both individually and collectively. Thus, critical consciousness goes beyond an individual's sociopolitical awareness of inequalities and oppression to include action, and it disrupts the notion of educators as saviors because it centers learners' experiences and knowledge as essential to *read the world*; educators become co-learners in the process of dialogue.

In many contexts, critical consciousness is conceived as a process through which those from oppressed groups can engage to liberate themselves from ways of thinking that don't benefit them or their communities. However, having carried out a thorough review of the research literature documenting inequalities (much of it due to gentrification) in DLBE (Cervantes-Soon *et al.*, 2017), we assert that DLBE schools are a unique context that necessitates that stakeholders from all groups, and perhaps most importantly those from privileged groups, engage in the process of critical consciousness and its praxis. We then set out to support leadership, faculty, students and families of all backgrounds to engage in the above-described *praxis* cycle for DLBE. We presented four *actions of praxis* that we believed to be particularly powerful in the diverse DLBE context: *historicizing*, *interrogating power*, *critically listening*, and *engaging with discomfort* (see Figure 13.1; Palmer *et al.*, 2019). Subsequent research has turned up three emerging themes that shed light on *how* critical consciousness and engaging praxis can transform DLBE: (1) embracing *translanguaging*; (2) *affirming* students'/communities' marginalized *identities*; and (3) specifically for those in positions of relative power (such as educators or white/middle-class families), *acompañamiento/accompanying* students/families with marginalized backgrounds (Heiman *et al.*, 2023). These connected and overlapping actions and themes can – and usually do – happen simultaneously.

This chapter offers tools for engaging these actions for praxis in DLBE. To illustrate these actions, we present four real cases (though most names are pseudonyms) in which educators worked deliberately to engage in praxis to counter both literal and metaphorical gentrification. We close with action steps and resources to support efforts to carry out professional development, community building, pedagogy and curriculum that infuse critical consciousness in DLBE classrooms, communities, programs and policies.

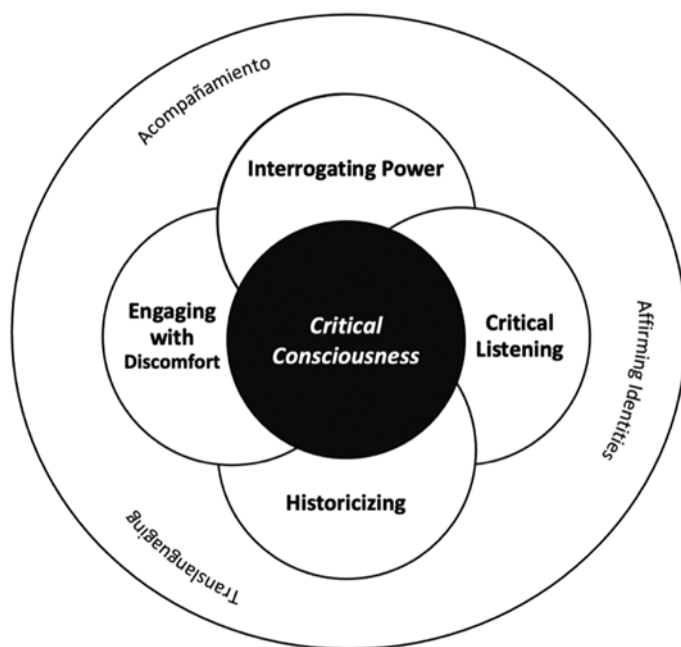


Figure 13.1 Actions to foster critical consciousness in DLBE

Example 1: Teaching About Immigration: Engaging Discomfort, Affirming Identities, Supporting Acompañamiento

DLBE in New York City has experienced both literal and metaphorical gentrification as programs and language options continue to explode. Some neighborhood schools actually *seek* to gentrify, starting DLBE programs to bring in white/English-dominant children to save ‘failing’ or shrinking schools; others find their student body changing as neighborhoods change (Avni & Menken, 2019). In a case study about one such school, Dina López and Tatyana Kleyn (2023) describe how one teacher, and then their entire school, enacted critical consciousness when a white parent challenged a first-grade unit on immigration.

The unit was designed specifically to address the fact that anti-immigrant policies directly impacted some of their students. While other students (the white/English-dominant children in this gentrified space) merely heard about anti-immigrant policies on the news, they had the privilege of distance. The goal was to support young students to build their awareness of the disparate impacts of anti-immigration policies upon different members of their class. As part of the unit, children read a book about an undocumented mother being detained, and the child and her father advocating for her release. The book *engaged young students with discomfort*, as they saw how anti-immigrant policies harm people.

Some children related to the story – expressing similar experiences – while others showed sympathy for their classmates; thus it also *affirmed identities* and supported *acompañamiento*.

The next day, a white (non-immigrant, middle-class) mother complained, demanding that they not read such stories, as her daughter was now scared that her mother could be taken away (an example of a parent's possible metaphorical gentrification in the classroom). The teacher explained that the goal was not to shield children from difficult realities but to help them understand and make sense of each other's worlds. But the mother remained unsatisfied and went to the principal. Rather than remove such books from the curriculum, however, the principal called a faculty meeting. Together educators developed and posted a statement about the importance of bringing contentious and challenging issues into their classrooms in age-appropriate and thoughtful ways.

There are two important features of this school's enactment of critical consciousness to address gentrification: (1) leadership matters: the teacher was able to respond as she did because she knew the principal supported her; and (2) praxis is collective: this was not just an issue for one teacher but rather the whole school community; the faculty engaged in collective action to confirm their vision.

Example 2: Leadership Praxis: Developing Critical Consciousness in a Gentrifying Community School

Leaders set the tone of a school. They have the power to influence others, especially in contexts where racial and economic segregation – and gentrification – are increasing. In another case study, scholars David DeMatthews and Leyla Olana (2023) examine how one elementary school leader, Mrs Reveles, addressed the complexity of rising gentrification in her school community, Hayes Elementary, in the southwestern United States. The city where Hayes is situated actively promoted racial segregation in the 1920s. Racial and economic segregation has persisted in the community decades after the federal government intervened to desegregate schools. As technology companies settled in the city in the early 2000s, housing prices began to rise, and white, affluent families moved within Hayes' school boundaries. African American and Latinx residents with lower incomes were forced to leave their neighborhoods.

Tensions over gentrification in the city were felt at Hayes Elementary. Hayes had served and centered a predominantly Latinx population for over three decades; families considered the school a community centerpiece. However, with demographic change, community trust in Principal Reveles diminished; fewer students were enrolling in Hayes and the campus was threatened with closure. The district invited the school to develop a dual language program to entice more families to the school and encourage cultural responsiveness for English learner (EL) students.

The parent–teacher association (PTA) developed the program, but Hispanic community members were dismayed when it was announced that the program would include French and Chinese along with Spanish. The PTA was predominantly white and affluent; their interest in DLBE was grounded in the economic benefits they believed would accrue to their children. Ironically, the district had previously rebuffed Hispanic families when they pushed for a Spanish DLBE program.

In this divided context, Principal Reveles began the principalship and was tasked with implementing the DLBE program. She began by *critically listening* to teachers in one-on-one meetings and at staff and community meetings, seeking to understand the dynamics among various groups. She leaned into potential *discomfort* about questions of her trustworthiness and credentials by reassuring families that the program would center students' best interests and sharing her autobiography as a Hispanic woman who was once classified as an EL. She attended to *differences in power* by creating a diverse bilingual leadership team, drawing from the PTA along with families of color and teachers. She gave the new program two non-negotiable organizing principles that took the school's *historical context* into consideration: EL-identified students would be the top priority, and the composition of the leadership team would reflect the school's history, current context/community, and future. She stressed that all stakeholders must stay open-minded, acknowledge the gentrification shaping and changing the community, and share leadership power. She gained the community's trust, but she understood that finding constructive solutions and acting as a buffer among different school constituents would remain challenging.

Example 3: 'Hay que Sentir la Masa': A Teacher's Praxis to Center and Learn from the Madres/Experts in her Classroom

Hillside, once a working-class Latinx community and school, was a Spanish/English DLBE school in Texas that was experiencing rapid gentrification. This was due to both neighborhood demographic changes and a stellar reputation that brought in transfer students from all over the city. As gentrification dislodged Latinx students and families, Michelle, a fifth-grade teacher who had looped up with her students from 4th grade, was determined to *acompañarlos* by centering their voices and ways of knowing/being in her pedagogy, curriculum and parent meetings. This case example (Heiman & Yanes, 2023) shows how she engaged in a praxis cycle to counter gentrification at Hillside through a hands-on lesson about procedural texts with three madres/experts around tamale making. The final procedural texts would be used by attendees at a schoolwide Tamalada a few days later.

Michelle had taught a procedural text lesson the previous year to the same students when they were in 4th grade on 'how to make s'mores',

but through *critical listening*, she discovered that largely the students did not know what s'mores were. The topic of 's'mores' did not connect to her Latinx students' lived realities. Upon learning that one student's mamá made and sold tamales on the weekends, Michelle *interrogated* the previous year's procedural text lesson, and instead invited that madre and two others to teach students the process of tamale making. Students gathered around three large tables with their notebooks as the madres/experts described a procedure through *translanguaging* that was not about precise measurements and clear sequential steps, but rather about engaging in keen observation (Urrieta, 2013) and getting the feel of the masa ('hay que sentir la masa'). This dialogical interaction offered students the opportunity to *historicize* tamale making alongside the linguistic and cultural ways of knowing of the madres/experts while also being open to the *discomfort* of writing a procedural text that did not align with the standards-based, linear and precise steps of whitestream writing prompts. The centering of the lived realities of the madres/experts was also an *affirmation of the identities* of the children of the madres/experts.

Although, unfortunately, Michelle's actions did not ultimately result in resisting cultural gentrification/commodification throughout the school, her collaboration with the madres/experts served as a starting point for Hillside, which will need to engage in further collective action and reflection in other classrooms, with other families, and schoolwide.

Example 4: Growing up Bilingual in Blanton: A School–University Partnership for Critical Consciousness

In the center of Blanton, a college town where median home prices hover above half a million dollars, across the street from the predominantly white university campus sits a Title I two-way DLBE elementary school with a long history and strong reputation for serving diverse students in a caring community. Because the immediate neighborhood is largely student housing for the university, the school does not draw directly from its neighborhood, relying instead on district-wide lotteries to attract upper-middle-class families interested in language and cultural enrichment, and on recruitment (and busing) from the few remaining Latinx immigrant Spanish-speaking neighborhoods in the southeast corner of town.

One year, two professors in the university's school of education proposed to the principal a weekly after-school 'cultural mentoring' program that would match up fifth-grade students of color with university students in a partnership to learn about the cultural heritage of their community (an effort to *affirm the identities* of students of color in both institutions). The teachers, principal and outreach specialist at the school were enthusiastic about the idea; the university provided monetary support and the program took off. Among the activities, the university students produced

a report of fifth-graders’ first-hand accounts as Latinx children of immigrant parents in this town; the report, rich with the children’s *translanguaging*, highlighted the community’s cultural wealth, their transnational ties, and the challenges they faced living in this predominantly white college town. It also noted the silencing Latinx children described experiencing in their school (evidence of metaphorical gentrification).

The following year, when the children moved on to middle school, one of the professors used this report as a tool to support the teachers’ process of *interrogating power* in their own school community. After engaging in a professional development session about the four primary actions for critical consciousness, the teachers eagerly read the full report, *critically listening* to the voices of their students. At the end of the session, as the professor was attempting to close, no one moved. One teacher commented, ‘These are OUR kids!’

This is a case still in progress; the teachers’ next step will be to lean into the inevitable *discomfort* of recognizing that ‘their kids’ often feel silenced in their classrooms; they will then need to collectively develop actionable ways to change the culture of their school to allow more Latinx working-class family and student voices to be heard, acknowledged and centered in the school’s decision-making. And then this praxis cycle – reflection and action – will need to happen again.

Conclusion

Like language and culture, critical consciousness is not a product; it is a process, always incomplete. As is clear from these examples, praxis in gentrifying schools is messy, complex, recursive and imperfect. Just as the educators at Hillside, Blanton, Hayes and in New York City still have work to do, so educators everywhere will find this work is never done. To continue with this struggle to counter gentrification in DLBE schools, we offer three framing ideas: go beyond language, go beyond the classroom, and go beyond the individual.

Three Framing Ideas	
Go beyond language	Students often practice language outside the boundaries of culturally named languages (translanguaging). As we work toward bilingualism/ biliteracy, we must embrace the various creative ways of speaking and being that are present in our schools. The curriculum too – both the lessons in the classroom and the policies and practices that support them – must reflect the cultural, racial and linguistic diversity of the school community and beyond.
Go beyond the classroom	Leadership matters, policies matter, community dynamics and demographics matter. Take a broad view to consider the actions needed to build a beloved community that centers justice in your school.
Go beyond the individual	Organize, network, build a shared vision and take collective action.

Discussion Questions

- Define whether/how gentrification is happening at your school. Consider both the metaphorical and literal gentrification described in the cases in this chapter. Discuss why critical consciousness is necessary in your context.
- This chapter provides snapshots of the overlapping actions that both generate and are generated by critical consciousness. How have these actions been employed (or not) to fight gentrification in your context? What barriers have prevented these actions from taking root?
- As these cases reveal, *critical listening* can be an initial action that leads to *interrogating power*, *historicizing*, *discomfort*, etc. In your DLBE context, where and with whom has critical listening taken place (or not)? How has critical listening led to engagement with other actions? Discuss any missed opportunities in moving from critical listening to further actions.
- These cases offer examples of how critical consciousness as the foundation of DLBE processes can expand the way we conceptualize academic achievement, bilingualism/biliteracy, and sociocultural competence (the three traditional goals/pillars of DLBE). At the same time, critical consciousness is not frequently mentioned when talking about the benefits of DLBE with parents and/or interested stakeholders. How would you talk about the importance of critical consciousness in DLBE contexts with parents and/or interested stakeholders?

Suggested Resources

- Barbian, E., Gonzales, G.C. and Mejía, P. (eds) (2017) *Rethinking Bilingual Education*. Rethinking Schools.
- Beloved Community: <https://www.wearebeloved.org/>: Consultation and materials to support equity audits of schools, to identify the spaces of inequity and address them.
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- España, C. and Herrera, L.Y. (2020) *En Comunidad: Lessons for Centering the Voices and Experiences of Bilingual Latinx Students*. Heinemann.
- Espinoza, C.M. and Ascenzi-Moreno, L. (2021) *Rooted in Strength: Using Translanguaging to Grow Multilingual Readers and Writers*. Scholastic.
- Learning for Justice: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/>: Curriculum materials for PK-12 on teaching and learning for justice.
- Rethinking Schools: <https://rethinkingschools.org/>: A monthly magazine and resource books/materials to support teachers who seek to teach for social justice.

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