



**Language, Culture, and Power: Bilingual Families and the Struggle for Quality Education.** Lourdes Diaz Soto. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. 170 pp.

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"Escuchar, mirar y callar" [Listen, look and be silent] was the sign at the local Latino senior citizen center in "Steel Town," Pennsylvania. This motto was a far cry from the picture seen at a school board meeting in 1992 in which over one hundred forty Spanish-speaking parents filled a local community center to "speak and be heard" by school officials and to advocate on behalf of their children's education. Defending their school and the bilingual program became a rallying point for many members of the Latino community, as the parents came to realize that the *consejos*, or advice, of the elders was no longer functional in changing times. In this case study, Lourdes Diaz Soto presents the elements of this changed context to show that controversies over bilingual education often involve issues of politics and power much more than issues of language. The change from the coping strategy of silence and submissiveness of the elders to the activist orientation of Latino families in defense of their children's education is the story of this book.

In doing research in the community, Diaz Soto became an advocate for the Latino parents who favored the bilingual program. She spent nine years involved with these families as they shared their views about what constitutes quality education. She became aware of how powerful voices were able to silence those families. The experiences of the families mirrored some of her experiences moving into a mostly white university in a community in which she, a Puerto Rican professor, and her children experienced discrimination.

The first chapter of the book contextualizes the issues by relating them to the literature on bilingual education and bilingualism over the last century; it provides a historical overview, including political dimensions. Subsequent chapters describe the ethnic diversity and history of the community, the views of Latino respondents about their own education and their ideas for a quality education for their children, a description of what led to the dismantling of the bilingual program, and a theoretical framework for analyzing the events.

Strengths of the book include the author's use of multiple sources of evidence for the case study and her development of a theoretical framework for understanding the power dimensions of such controversies. Diaz Soto conducted participant-observation at community meetings, gathered school district documents, analyzed newspaper and media accounts, and conducted interviews with various groups. The use of these multiple



sources strengthens her thesis that many decisions about bilingual education are less about language and more about power relations between competing groups.

One of the highlights of the book is the set of responses given in ethnographic interviews with educated Latino professionals, the so-called success stories. Most gave descriptions of the inequitable treatment of language-minority children, some based on their personal experiences in the district. Many of these individuals had received English-only instruction, and they recalled incidents in which their own language and culture were devalued. They described the sacrifice made in the early 1950s by the older generation, who had learned to use silence as a coping strategy and "swallow" mistreatment for the sake of their children. Themes in the interviews include the desire to raise children bilingually, pride in a Puerto Rican heritage, a home learning environment supportive of education, and a respect for teachers. Though they shared their indignation at the insensitivity of teachers who devalued their language and culture, they also gave credit to teachers who mentored them through school.

A district committee evaluating the 20-year-old bilingual program recommended its continuation with minor changes, but the superintendent proposed its replacement with an English-immersion curriculum. The program became entwined with other political controversies such as busing, school closings and new school construction, and ideological battles between the middle class and the working class and between bilingual and nonbilingual residents with their opposing views of education. The local push for English-only schooling mirrored national currents in this direction. Ultimately the program was dismantled, heightening the sense of disillusion and disenfranchisement of many Latino families. However, the Latino families' efforts to fight for their school and the program challenge some stereotypes of Latinos. Parents became assertive by organizing, speaking out, circulating petitions, and attending meetings where their voices might be heard. Some subsequently even became involved in running for political office.

Diaz Soto is not at all a dispassionate observer and researcher of events. She is clearly on the side of the Latino parents in their struggle. Sometimes her rhetoric is rather intense, however. "Are the conservative opinions of a superintendent czar more important than children's well being?" she asks (p. 75). In criticizing the opposition, she writes, "The coercive power tactics can be likened to destructive chemical warfare on a peace-loving, peacekeeping people" (p. 86). This rhetoric reflects the emotion-laden events.

In her last chapter Diaz Soto presents a theoretical model to place the controversy in the broader context of power relations and their effect on community, language, and culture. The case study demonstrates the complexity of the power issues and is thus an excellent example of how some national currents indicative of opposition to bilingual education and anti-immigrant sentiments are operationalized in one community. This case study affirms the need for research that contextualizes educational issues in relation to those power relations.

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