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The Impact of a Spanish-English Immersion Program on Participants' Identity

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Background

Within the Latin American context, research on bilingual schools has focused primarily on pedagogical and administrative concerns, while ignoring important discussions surrounding the impact of these programs on cultural identity (de Mejía & Montes Rodriguez, 2008). Alley (1996) questions the impact of bilingual programs in Honduras on students' sense of national identity. This lack of research, as well as my own experience working within The Pines Bilingual School (TPBS) one-way immersion program over the past decade, led to the following research question which guided this study: How do students describe the impact of TPBS on their national and cultural identity?

Literature Review

In his work on language and cultural policy in Latin America, Hamel (2008) outlines a framework which includes three ideological orientations: monoculturalism/lingualism, multiculturalism/lingualism and pluriculturalism/lingualism. Within monoculturalism/lingualism, diversity is denied. de Mejía & Montes Rodriguez (2008) explain the learning of English within bilingual schools is seen to many as a danger to national identity as it threatens the monolingual Hispanic tradition. Instead, these schools focus on learning English for material and economic benefits. de Mejía (2013) argues other schools promote a monocultural/lingual ethos through a subtractive model of bilingual education which prioritizes foreign languages and cultures over students' home ones. Alley (1996) refers to this process in Honduras as "denationalization". Within multiculturalism/lingualism, diversity is recognized, but it is viewed a problem. This approach is reflected in language policies which separate languages in the classroom and insist on students developing dual linguistic systems (García, 2008). Finally, within pluriculturalism/lingualism, diversity is seen a source of enrichment. Prasad (2015) claims plurilingualism focuses on the development of a variety of proficiency in different languages and encourages a process of identity negotiation which incorporates different cultural and linguistic influences. In the Honduran context, Alley questions whether some bilingual graduates would fall into the category, though he uses the term "transculturals". This view sees diversity as a source of enrichment, as opposed to the "mono" approach which denies diversity, and the "multi" approach which views diversity as a problem to be managed.

Methodology

I employed a two-phase qualitative approach. In Phase 1, I gathered qualitative data through written reflections and drawings from 21 Grade 11 students a few weeks prior to their graduation. Five months later, I conducted follow-up interviews with 6 of the students. Both sets of data were analyzed separately and then compared to my theoretical framework.

Results

Stereotypical Honduran Identity: One primary way in which students defined themselves was by who they were not. In this approach, students differentiated themselves from two different identity models: a stereotypical Honduran identity and an exchanged identity. In general, students' descriptions of a typical Honduran referred to an assumed low level of English proficiency, lack of education and closedmindedness. While students provided a very narrow description of a typical Honduran, it is important to note part of their process of identifying themselves included contrasting themselves against what they defined as a typical Honduran.

Exchanged Identity: Students also contrasted themselves against other Hondurans who they believed had undergone an identity exchange. Many students believed some Hondurans had decided to exchange their Honduran identity for another one, primarily one tied to the United States or Canada. Some students tied this exchange directly to the influence of studying in other bilingual schools. One student explained: "At TPBS, we learn English, in other bilingual schools, they teach basically how to become a North American and Hondurans start leaving their identity and changing it for one from the U.S. or Canada." Many students were criticized by other Hondurans for having undergone this same exchange. One student wrote: "People see me like I'm a stranger and think I had lost a part of my identity as a Honduran." While students criticized other Hondurans as having undergone a perceived identity exchange, they thought the criticisms directed toward them were unfounded.

Negotiated Identity: Students described two models of identity negotiation: an intentional process of mixing two cultures and students who indicated some confusion regarding their current identity. First, many students described an intentional process in which they chose from a number of cultural influences and mixed them together with elements of their own identity. One student described this process, writing: "I have had 12 American/Canadian teachers who have taught me since Kinder. I have seen the difference between their way of acting and Honduran teachers way of acting...So studying at TPBS made me want to mix those ways to be a more complete person." Students described this process of picking and choosing elements from each culture based on their own personal preferences or values taught by their families. On the other hand, other students indicated a level of confusion and uncertainty with the negotiation of their identity.

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Influence of TPBS: Students recognized a number of factors which had contributed to the development of their national and cultural identity. First, many students indicated their experience at TPBS had played a large factor in the development of their social consciousness. While students demonstrated a sense of pride as Hondurans, they also recognized there were significant social problems that needed to be addressed and believed they must play a role in solving these issues. Next, many students believed their studies at TPBS had played a strong role in the development of their linguistic identity. One student wrote: "I have been very defined by the fact of being bilingual. English became my way of expressing myself. When I am overwhelmed, I tend to go and write stuff in English about how I feel. English has become a must have in me and part of who I am." Many students indicated a preference for English in certain ways, such as for reading, expressing themselves and listening to music. While students primarily saw their affinity with English as a positive outcome of studying at TPBS, some indicated concerns with the impact on their first language. Students discussed how learning English at TPBS had opened doors which had influenced their identity in a number of ways. Learning English had opened doors of access for them to information and to new cultural experiences. Their experience learning English also opened doors of relationships worldwide. One student wrote, "Learning English has influenced my identity because I can talk with ... people from countries where English is their language official." Access to a global society, as well as relationships outside of Honduras, contributed to a more open mind compared to other Hondurans. Students linked this different perspective to the actual experience of learning another language, as, "Being able to speak English is like putting on glasses; it lets you see from a different perspective and it helps to see the world around you in a better way."

Discussion

Monocultural/linguistic: Students did not demonstrate evidence of this type of orientation in regards to their own identity, but they did categorize others within this orientation. Students described a stereotypical Honduran as one who spoke only Spanish and little to no English and demonstrated little understanding of other cultures or the existence of a world outside of Honduras. In this case, students reflected the monolingual ethos discussed by Hamel (2008) as they defined a typical Honduran as someone who only speaks Spanish, though in reality, Honduran demographics reflect a variety of different indigenous and immigrant languages and cultures.

Multicultural/linguistic: While all students acknowledged diversity, many also viewed it as a problem to be managed in regards to their own identity and the identity of other Hondurans. Some students discussed they were trying to find a balance between two cultures. In their descriptions of Hondurans who exchanged one identity for another, students were not denying the existence of the two cultures, but instead arguing against emphasizing one culture over the other. This process of identity exchange aligns with Bourgois' (1989) concept of denationalization, in which citizens move away from their own culture in favour of another. Alley (1995) expressed concern that bilingual graduates in Honduras would fall into this category upon graduation, yet students' description of their own experience does not confirm Alley's assertion. On a school level, students described TPBS as demonstrating a balance of both cultures. While students held a variety of opinions on the balance of different cultures within the school, they did not describe any reference to the idea of mixing or merging cultures at schools and described events and practices as separate cultural entities.

Pluricultural/linguistic: Some students saw their identity as a constantly changing state in which they intentionally drew from a number of cultural influences. Students described the creation of their identity as a process by which they picked habits, customs, and values from a variety of cultures according to their own preferences and values. While students did not go as far as describing themselves as part of a new emerging culture, in line with Willis' (1992) definition of transculturals, they fit Prasad's (2015) definition of plurilinguals who engage in a process of identity negotiation as they incorporate different cultural and linguistic influences. While many students' descriptions of their own identity would fall within this pluricultural orientation, students provided less space for fellow Hondurans to migrate between different aspects of identity. This distinction may indicate students have not yet fully progressed from a monocultural outlook to a multi or pluricultural one. This seems to question Hamel's (2008) presentation of the three orientations as a linear progression, as participants in this study at times demonstrated characteristics of more than one orientation simultaneously.

Conclusion

In sum, students described a number of aspects of their identity which had been influenced by their experience learning English as TPBS. While students demonstrated both multi and pluricultural orientations in regards to their own identity, they often defined others through a monocultural lens. While my findings are unique to TPBS, they demonstrate a need for continued support of students as they negotiate aspects of their identity. The thousands of students studying in bilingual schools throughout this region, as well as the ongoing migration of individuals from this region worldwide, necessitates ongoing investigation into the experience of these students and the impact of bilingual schools in Latin America on students' national and cultural identity.