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**Creating Social Change Through a Two-way Immersion Program:
La Escuelita's Efforts to Foster Spanish/English Bilingualism**

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A substantial academic literature suggests that public schools are failing to provide an effective educational program for language minority students. This paper presents an ethnographic study of an independent charter school, “La Escuelita,” which was built by educators and community members who sought alternative educational resources and programs for their Latino children. This study demonstrates how communities as a whole can use schools as foundations upon which to create meaningful social change. By using a Two-Way (Dual Language) Immersion program, which fosters and maintains students’ native languages while teaching students English, the school encouraged student and parent participation in cultural and political events that empowered the entire community and made learning a social activity.

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What we need to do is just believe in our students because if we don't believe in them...*ya ya pensamos que los niños de los barrios pobres no aprenden* (we think that children from poor neighborhoods won't learn). You see if we don't believe in them we can't do anything with them.

– La Escuelita school official, February 24, 2003

Introduction

In the United States today, many Latino communities believe that educators and administrators are writing off their children as unintelligent, unable to learn, and “unteachable.” The consequences of underestimating Latino youth are grave, for when poor Latino children are perceived as unintelligent, they are often denied the opportunity to achieve educational success. In the city of Eastside¹, California, community members have responded to the lack of academic opportunities to excel in public schools by organizing a school/institution that recognizes and serves the needs of their culturally and linguistically diverse children and community (Garcia 1994). “La Escuelita del Pueblo,” or as translated in English, “the town’s little school,” was founded over 18 years ago. First structured as a grassroots organization, La Escuelita has evolved into an independent charter school. Bulkely and Wohlstetter (2004) define a charter school as a “school of choice that operates with more autonomy (and fewer regulations) under a charter or contract issued by a public entity, such as a local school board, public university, or state board of education.” The autonomy afforded charter schools freed La Escuelita from many of the problems that big school districts often face, such as over-population, shrinking resources, and labor union disputes.

La Escuelita is the product of social change fueled by the charter school movement. Over the years, this school was built by educators and community members who lost confidence in public schools because their children were not benefiting academically from a large education

¹ “Eastside” is a pseudonym, as are all proper names used in this case study.

system. The founders of La Escuelita believe that, contrary to the stated mission of public schools, the public school system was discouraging and “push[ing]out” Latino children (Valenzuela 1999). This belief inspired parents to look for alternative educational resources and programs for their children and for themselves.

There is substantial academic literature suggesting that public schools are failing to provide an effective educational program for language minority students. As a result, some scholars have developed alternative educational models. In *The Dual Language Instruction: A Handbook for Enriched Education*, Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan (2000) offer an educational model that transcends the limitations of these ineffective programs by offering a curriculum to develop minority students’ English skills while simultaneously fostering their native language skills. Sadly, few schools today have adopted this model. Instead, most schools continue to provide students with English-only instruction, causing immigrant and language minority students to lose their native language skills at an alarmingly fast pace (Wong-Fillmore 1991, Fishman 1994).

The failure to provide minority students with an adequate educational curriculum and sufficient educational resources is one of the many reasons why Latinos, especially immigrants, have chosen schools like La Escuelita (Meier 2002). Because La Escuelita is relatively small—both in terms of its physical size and student population—it has been able to offer an alternative academic curriculum and provide instruction in students’ native languages. The goals of La Escuelita also differ from the goals of many public schools. La Escuelita works not just to educate children, but to help children and their families improve physically and mentally, and to make positive contributions to their community and society at large.

In the anthology *Empowering Spirits Is Not Enough: Latino Charter School Struggles* (Fuller 2000), Wexler and Huerta explain the meaning of the word *educación*, which they derive from a group of Latino families in their study. They explain that *educación* is:

[n]ot simply a search for higher test scores, [but]emphasizes family, morality, and manners as much, if not more, than the mastery of subject matter. Children are expected to respect their elders and abide by school rules; adults are expected to discipline and nurture (p. 99).

This definition helps to explain one of the many goals of La Escuelita. Since the early stages of its existence, La Escuelita has established educational programs that focus on primary language instruction. Mirroring the educational model suggested by Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan (2000) in *Dual Language Instruction*, La Escuelita's model is designed not only to shape the minds of the students, but to shape the minds of the families that send their children to school (Meier 2002).

This paper describes an ethnographic study of La Escuelita. In it, I document how administrators, staff, and community members collaborated to define the meaning of education through their participation in cultural and political activities. This collaborative approach is described by a fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Linda:

[La Escuelita is] very family and community oriented. [. . .] I've had lots and lots of opportunities to be able to know my students' families really well. [. . .] I generally didn't feel that in other schools where I worked at. You were the classroom teacher and you dealt with the students. Whereas here I feel it's the whole community that you deal with. You get to know the families very well and work with them closely or work with them individually in terms of what their needs are and get resources for them.

Though the initial purpose of my study was to document the uniqueness of La Escuelita charter school as compared to its neighboring public schools, the project has evolved to focus on how communities as a whole can use schools as a foundation upon which to build meaningful social change. By using a Two-Way (Dual Language) Immersion program, which fostered and

maintained students' native languages while teaching students English, the community I studied was able to participate in and create cultural and political events that empowered the entire community and made learning a social activity (Freire 1992).

Research Study and Design

Research Questions

The following questions guided this ethnographic study: (1) How does La Escuelita promote bilingualism and biculturalism?; (2) How does the school promote the use of Spanish and English in educational, cultural, and political activities?; (3) What tools or curriculum does La Escuelita use to foster bilingualism at school and in the community?; (4) How does La Escuelita demonstrate the value of parent involvement and engagement and how does this support the school's mission of bilingualism?

Methods

The research for this project was conducted at La Escuelita del Pueblo Elementary Charter School and Family Learning Center in the city of Eastside, California. I was involved with La Escuelita beginning in 2000, however the data for this project was collected from October to March during the 2003-2004 academic years. My primary method of data collection was participant observation. I attended board meetings, parent meetings, and staff development trainings, and I took part in school-wide educational, cultural, and political activities that were promoted by La Escuelita. To learn more about the school's curriculum, I observed the fourth grade class for two hours (9am to 11am) every other week (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), and I conducted informal classroom visits throughout the school. I also conducted three interviews

with school founders, two interviews with school directors, and two interviews with teachers. In addition, I had many invaluable interactions with students (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). All interviews averaged about 40 minutes and were audio and/or video recorded and transcribed to capture perspectives accurately (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). I also collected and analyzed written field notes, video logs, archives, records, pictures, documents, flyers, and other relevant artifacts.

Role of the Researcher

I conducted research in the community that I grew up in. While I assumed that becoming part of the school would be an easy task, after a few weeks of fieldwork I realized that I needed to demonstrate to my subjects that I was a legitimate educational researcher. Playing the dual role of friend and researcher made me sensitive to the ways in which my friendships might affect how I interpreted my findings. As Zentella (1997) pointed out in her study of a New York Puerto Rican community:

Membership in the ethnic group which is being studied should enable the researcher to dispense with interpreters, to be sensitive to cultural norms, and to have access to and more profound relationship with a larger number of community members. The closer the researcher is to the group, however, the more myopic the researcher may become about the significance of everyday acts that group members take for granted (p. 7).

In my situation, I had a great deal in common with the founders and directors of La Escuelita and the children I was observing. Like me, the children at the school were Spanish speaking Latino children of immigrants, many of whom came from a low social economic background and whose parents and grandparents were Spanish monolingual. In her book *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996), Ruth Behar talks about the complexity of participant observation. She states that researchers who act as participants should not forget to keep their eyes open.

In my research, I struggled to find the proper balance between participation and academic observation—the teacher in me always wanted to help the struggling kids in class, but doing so threatened to over-shadow my role as the researcher. Like Zentella (1997), who studied *el bloque*, I became a cultural interpreter of a stigmatized group—Latino children—that I was once a member of. As such, I frequently had to remind myself that my obligation as a researcher was not to evaluate the school’s effectiveness, but to document its uniqueness and identify those things that set the school apart from other public schools in the area.

Goals and Purpose

La Escuelita was not built overnight. It was the result of a long-term collaboration between teachers who wanted to better serve Latino immigrant children and parents who were fed-up with the fact that their children were not succeeding academically in public schools. The founders of La Escuelita were also concerned that Latino children were becoming isolated from their families and communities due to the many language and cultural barriers that ‘interfered’ with their learning (Valenzuela 1999, Zentella 1997). The community wanted to create a school that not only understood their language and culture but valued it as a resource to help and mold their children (Garcia 1994).

The founders of La Escuelita brought the school into being, but La Escuelita was shaped by many people in the community and especially the parents of students. While the founders identified the need for a new kind of school, it was members of the community who decided that they were no longer going to sit by and watch their children struggle in public schools and who used the school to create social change.

Many parents believed that language barriers between students and school teachers and staff contributed to the difficulties their children faced in the public school system. Flor Plaza, La Escuelita's director, recognized this and designed the school to address this concern. Plaza summarizes this belief in the following statement:

It's really important for me that the students have that gift of language at home and that the school has a responsibility to honor what they come in with. I feel we're meeting the needs of the students because we're able to foster their language, we're able to foster their culture, we're able to introduce them to content in a language that they understand and in a language that they can easily share with their families. I think that for me that's one of the big things – that parents understand what their kids are doing.

Flor understood that language maintenance and loss is one of the main problems affecting young Spanish speaking students from immigrant families. She knew that it was important for educators, teachers, researchers, and members of society to contemplate what happens when the children of Spanish speaking communities are not taught to retain their native language.

Research studies by Fishman (1994), Wong-Fillmore (1991), Gandara et al. (2000), Gutierrez, Baquedano-López, and Asato (2000), and others have investigated children who have lost their native language and are given minimal or no instructional support in their native language.

Fishman and Wong-Fillmore have argued that children who lose their native language also lose their culture and thus often do not participate in the kinds of cultural activities that help to construct a child's identity, social norms, values, and beliefs. As a result, the loss of language means the loss of cultural values.

In *Pedagogy of the City*, Paulo Freire highlights the importance of looking at language:

It is necessary that the progressive schools, especially those located in the deepest areas of the city periphery, seriously consider the issue of language, of the syntax of the underclass.... This issue has been so long and many times misunderstood or distorted.... It is not possible to think of language without thinking of the concrete social world we constitute. It is impossible to think of language without thinking of power and ideology (p. 41).

Taking Freire's philosophy to heart, the founders of La Escuelita built an institution designed to assist Spanish speaking children and their families, using their native language as a tool to understand and foster the everyday activities and learning experiences of children.

The Founders of La Escuelita's Two-Way Immersion Elementary Charter School

The life experiences of each of La Escuelita's founding members played a pivotal role in the formation of the school. The desire to create La Escuelita came at a different point in each of the founder's lives. Many of the founders had negative educational experiences that ignited their drive to create a school or educational system that would do away with the educational inequalities and obstacles faced by Latino students in the United States. The following excerpts attempt to capture the formative moment in each founder's life.

Luz Rodriguez

Luz Rodriguez is one of three founders of La Escuelita and a teacher at the school. She grew up in a "rancho" in the suburbs of La Paz, Bolivia in the 1930s and attended school and college in Bolivia. Although she was an orphan, Luz was able to focus on her schooling and had the good fortune of having guardians that understood the value of an education. For that reason, she always worked hard to be the top student in her class.

Luz believes that her early struggles in life led her to become a teacher and prompted her to create her own school. During her tenure as a graduate student at Stanford University she obtained her first teaching job at De Anza Community College. She also worked at a middle

school in the city of Eastside, California. It was as a middle school teacher that she first witnessed the educational inequalities that many Latino students face in public schools. She believed that many children at her school were treated like second-class students, labeled as unintelligent, and placed in the so called “Mickey Mouse” classes. She also believed that Latino students were unjustly dismissed by teachers and school administrators as incapable of learning the same material as “mainstream” American kids.

It wasn't any better at the community college where Luz taught ESL classes. Luz and her colleagues struggled to get Latino students the resources needed to access a quality education. For example, Latino and other non-native English speaking students faced problems with registration because enrollment and registration forms were only printed in English. Because the community college did not have adequate staff to help students who did not have the English language skills needed to complete these forms, many Latino students were placed in the wrong classes or were given classes that they did not need.

These experiences prompted Luz to envision a school that would welcome Latino students who spoke Spanish but who wanted to learn English. Sadly there were not many people or agencies willing to help Luz start her school. In 1986, the Holy Trinity Baptist Church offered her a small space in their church hall to conduct classes. Luz quickly left her teaching job at the middle school and began teaching English and citizenship classes at the church, which was conveniently located at the center of the Latino community in the city of Eastside. As the years went on, Luz acquired more classroom space in different areas of the community in order to accommodate the growing number of students.

In 1999, Luz approached her daughter, Perla Rodriguez, and her daughter-in-law, Flor Plaza, with the idea of opening an elementary charter school. Within a few months, the three

women opened the school with only one Kindergarten class. They were able to add one grade level each of the following four years. Today, the school offers classes from Kindergarten through fifth grade.

Perla Rodriguez

Perla Rodriguez, daughter of Luz Rodriguez, was born in La Paz, Bolivia and moved to California after her fifth birthday. Perla was immediately enrolled at Escondido Village Elementary School. The school was sponsored by Stanford University where her mother attended graduate school. Perla spoke only Spanish at home and this made entering into English-only classes difficult. She experienced culture shock and believes that the language barriers limited her learning because she did not understand what was going on in class and could not communicate with her classmates or her teacher. Perla's family eventually moved to Cupertino, California but she found that she faced many of the same educational issues in her new school. Although she learned English, Perla was very quiet and hardly spoke in class. School administrators became concerned that she had a speech problem. As a result, she was given speech therapy and tracked in remedial classes.

Perla found high school very difficult. She always felt misplaced, and every time her family moved she would feel as if she did not belong. During this time, Perla learned to be ashamed of her name, language, skin color, and family. She reports feeling like a second-class citizen throughout her educational experience. Although Perla's career goal was to be a doctor, she was not allowed to enroll in honors classes and was discouraged from taking science classes.

Beating the odds, Perla went on to attend the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she received her bachelor's degree and a teaching credential. It was at UC Santa Cruz that Perla

met Flor Plaza, the other founding member of La Escuelita Charter School. After teaching for a few years, Perla went to graduate school in New York at Teachers College and earned a masters degree in bilingual/bicultural education.

Perla returned to Eastside, California and worked in numerous jobs in the education field. Specifically, she worked as a Title 1 program coordinator for Mountain View School District and as a resource teacher for the migrant education program. It was during these experiences that she encountered the educational inequalities faced by Latino students.

In 1999 Luz approached Perla with the idea of starting a charter school. Perla had just had a very negative experience teaching in the local public school district. As a young, inexperienced teacher, she felt disrespected by her colleagues. She decided that she wanted a job that would positively impact not only students but the whole school and its community. For Perla, it was an easy decision to join her mom and Flor in starting a new charter school.

Flor Plaza

Flor Plaza was born in Mexico, but was brought to live in Fresno, California when she was eight years old. Flor's parents had the equivalent of a third-grade education and worked as farm workers when they arrived from Mexico. Flor has one sister and five brothers and her parents enrolled all of the kids at a neighborhood public elementary school. Flor later attended the local high school. Although Flor attended the same high school as the rest of her siblings, her experience was different.

In Flor's 7th and 8th grade years, children were placed into three different educational tracks, allegedly according to abilities. Flor states that the tracks were created according to surnames and that all of the white kids in the school were automatically placed in the high

academic level A track. Although Flor was placed in the B track in the 7th grade, she excelled academically and moved up to the A track the following year. Consequently, when she proceeded to high school, she was tracked into academically challenging college prep classes that fulfilled the entrance requirements for college. Flor's brothers, however, were tracked into ESL classes and their counselors advised them to plan vocational careers in mechanics, carpentry, and other low-wage manual labor jobs. Professional careers (e.g., lawyers, doctors, and engineers) were not discussed with students in the lower tracks. Flor attended the University of California at Santa Cruz and the experience drastically changed her life. College was an unfamiliar environment for Flor. Although Flor had taken college preparation classes in high school, the low standards in those classes made the transition between high school and college difficult.

Many white American students are taught what it takes to "survive" in college at a young age. For Flor and other students with similar backgrounds, any discourse about college life was absent. As a result, Flor felt very unprepared and naive in her understanding of the culture of the university. Learning how to write term papers, read before class, take tests, and deal with the course workload are only some of the daily challenges Flor faced in her new environment.

Flor's network of friends motivated her to finish college. She formed study groups, participated in student clubs, and found a strong core of friends who shared similar backgrounds and goals in life. Within this group she met Pablo Rodriguez, her husband. As their relationship flourished, so did their goals in life. After graduating from college, Flor and Pablo worked a few years for UC Santa Cruz and then decided to attend graduate school at Teachers College in New York City. After completing their masters, Flor and Pablo returned to the city of Eastside, California where they bought a home and started a family.

While attending Teachers College, Flor decided that she wanted to pursue a career in the educational technology field. But when she returned to Eastside, Luz Rodriguez asked her to get involved in creating a new charter school. Although Flor had many doubts about working in the education field, she accepted the invitation to take part in the project of creating La Escuelita. Now the Rodriguez's were not only Flor's family, but her colleagues.

Founding and Development of La Escuelita

When Luz Rodriguez decided to provide educational services in her community she turned to the work of Paulo Freire. She explains:

Our teaching methods are inspired by “popular education” as defined by Paulo Freire. The concept of popular education is based upon serving students by identifying basic needs and building on their strengths while providing instruction that is relevant to their lives.

La Escuelita began in 1986 as a school that taught English as a Second Language (ESL), General Education Development (GED), and citizenship courses as part of the Amnesty Education Program. Over the years it grew, and today the school assists and teaches over 300 students each year.

In August of 1999, La Escuelita formed a partnership with the California Charter Academy (CCA) and became a site under this multi-school charter. Under the CAA, La Escuelita developed a Two-Way Dual Immersion Elementary Charter School that currently has Kindergarten through fifth-grade classes. La Escuelita also redesigned its adult ESL classes and now provides a non-graded high school degree program and a ninth- through twelfth-grade traditional-age high school program. Today, La Escuelita provides educational services to approximately 320 students in three age-appropriate programs in two facilities, each with separate leadership. The student population is predominately Latino (96%), and most of the

students (94%) qualify for the free and reduced-cost lunch program or fall under the federal poverty guidelines. The majority of students are recent immigrants and are monolingual Spanish speakers. The school is therefore designed to serve students that historically have been unsuccessful in large traditional school settings.

Preliminary Findings

1) La Escuelita's emphasis on language maintenance & bilingualism

In the United States, in particular, the pressure toward linguistic assimilation is all the greater because the country has few other elements on which to ground a sense of national identity. Made up of people coming from many different lands, lacking the unifying symbols of crown or millennial history, the common use of American English has come to acquire a singular importance as a binding tie across such a vast territory (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

The primary theme that ran through all of the interviews was language maintenance and bilingualism. Both directors and teachers emphasized the importance of offering children the opportunity to maintain their native language, in this case, Spanish. However, it was also a critical goal for the school to help students learn academic English. Accordingly, the school employed pedagogical methods that complemented the school's goals of creating young fluent bilingual/bicultural children (Christian 1996, Howard and Christian 1997). An excerpt from one of my interviews with Luz Rodriguez demonstrates how her personal experiences with the issue of bilingualism in her family shaped her understanding of the need for a school like La Escuelita:

I remember my husband when we came here he said, "Luz I don't...*yo quiero ir me* [I want to leave]." Even he use to say, "*Yo no quiero que mi Pablito sea Chicano* [I don't want Pablito to be Chicano]. *Que ni va saber ni español ni ingles* [He will not know Spanish or English]. *Que no va saber quien es* [He won't know who he is]." I said why? We are here, he'll know who he is.

For Luz, the negative personal experiences she had with schooling and bilingual education shaped her vision for La Escuelita (Zentella 1997, Garcia 1994). As an educator and parent, Luz wanted to ensure that her children and the children she taught did not have similar negative experiences. La Escuelita constantly re-enforced high expectations and ensured that no child was looked down upon or treated differently because of his or her language or culture (August and Hakuta 1997).

Attempting to understand the educational, cognitive, socio-cultural, and economic benefits that young bilingual children attain led La Escuelita to implement a Spanish/English bilingual program. The founders knew that research had shown that English language learners obtain certain cognitive and linguistic advantages compared to English monolingual students when they are provided with the opportunity to receive schooling in their native language. Specifically, studies made clear that English language learners make better progress acquiring English and academic development when receiving instruction in their primary language (Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan 2000). La Escuelita's founders provided primary instruction at the school in Spanish and taught English as a second language. This bilingual program allowed the school to provide innovating educational, cultural, and political activities and opportunities for students, maintain students' native language, and provide students with a positive schooling experience.

2) Implementing a relevant curriculum at La Escuelita

La Escuelita teachers set clearly articulated goals as to what the school expected students to learn. The school created a well-defined curriculum which clearly stated that all children should be fully bilingual and bicultural by the end of the fifth grade (Christian 1996, Howard

and Christian 1997). The goals set by La Escuelita were extremely challenging and difficult to achieve. To reach its stated goals, La Escuelita turned to a Two-Way (Dual Language) Immersion program (TWI).

The TWI program used at La Escuelita was a 90/10 model, structured to assist language minority students (Spanish speakers) with learning English by providing instruction in their native language. The TWI model also provided language majority students, i.e. English speakers, with an opportunity to become proficient in Spanish, their second language. Although the TWI model is fairly structured, it is flexible enough to enable other schools interested in implementing a similar program to modify the model to fit individual school designs (e.g., schedule, balance language and student population).

While TWI programs work toward similar goals, they may take different paths. One major dimension of difference is in the allocation of languages of instruction: by content area--for example, social studies and math are taught in Spanish, while science, art, and music are taught in English; by time--for example, instruction is in each language on alternate days; or by person--for example, one teacher uses only Cantonese and another uses only English (Christian, Howard, and Loeb 2000).

As an independent charter school, La Escuelita's director, leadership team, and parents had the power to create an innovative program without having to deal with the bureaucracy of a large school or district (Fuller 2000). To meet the language needs of its students, La Escuelita modified its TWI model to help accomplish its goals of providing an opportunity for all children to develop proficiency in Spanish and English. Although the school does not have the percentage of target language learners and dominant language model speakers suggested by the TWI program guidelines and recommended by Howard and Christian (1997), the school has made modifications to account for this limitation. For example, to enhance modeling of languages, the school uses two teachers per grade level for each language. It also provides a space where each language is learned and nurtured separately within a rich academic setting.

Linda, a teacher and site coordinator at La Escuelita, explains the importance of keeping the two languages separate:

In this school one of the ways that we have been able to keep very clear separation between the two languages is by having two teachers and having the teachers stick only to that language that they're suppose to teach in. Obviously all the teachers here speak both languages, but the Spanish teacher only speaks in Spanish and the English teacher only speaks in English. That happens throughout the day. If the students see their teacher at breakfast or at lunch time, the teacher will only speak to them in that language.

Preliminary analysis of the interviews and classroom observations suggests that the language use and instruction at La Escuelita has served its purpose of educating bilingual children. In accordance with the theories espoused by Howard and Christian (1997), language instruction at La Escuelita is very structured and organized specifically to meet the needs of the students and the goals of the school (Cummins 1981, Cummins 1996, Garcia 1994, August and Hakuta 1997).

Curricula is not the only important factor of educational success. The school also makes a point to use the students' culture as a tool for learning. As suggested by Angela Valenzuela (1999) in her book *Subtractive Schooling*, schools need to provide an 'additive' bilingual/bicultural program that will enhance and contribute to the learning of its students. Valenzuela shows that nurturing bilingualism, biculturalism, or fluency in a language other than English builds on students' bicultural experience to make them conversant, respectful, and fluent in as many dialects and languages as they can master.

The most important point that came across in my interviews and classroom observations, however, was that La Escuelita's number one goal was to provide students with materials and resources that would meet their every day educational, cultural, and linguistic needs. The founders and teachers' negative experiences in public schools led them to team-up with their community to serve Latino students from a diverse background.

3) La Escuelita's value of parent involvement and engagement

La Escuelita has a strong parent involvement component that encourages parents to participate in their children's learning experiences (Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan 2000). The school worked to accomplish this goal by sponsoring and participating in activities such as *Día de Los Muertos*—Day of the Dead, Aztec dancing, marches, rallies, boycotts, parent trainings, yoga, and social events put on by and at the school and in the community. During a time in which many school districts and other agencies are eliminating programs that serve Spanish speaking communities (McKay and Wong 1988), La Escuelita is providing a space where parents can actively participate in the learning experiences of their children.

La Escuelita is unique in the degree that parents and teachers value their children's education and engage in school activities (Meier 2002). For example, during a Harvest Day Celebration in November, La Escuelita held an Aztec dance performance. The performance was special because two of the Aztec dancers were parents of students in the school and two of the musicians were teachers. Before the event, students received Aztec dance lessons and learned about the life and culture of the Aztec people. What surprised me was that parents actually wanted to engage in these activities, demonstrating the importance of the activity to the children and the community.

In their recent study, Boyd and Brock (2004) argue that a young child actively participates in making sense of the world through meaningful social interactions. La Escuelita Charter School provides just such interaction. It does this by getting parents involved and by promoting political activities that directly influence the lives of both parents and students. Specifically, La Escuelita provides activities that aim to enhance political awareness. On

numerous occasions, the teachers and staff have joined boycotts, rallies, marches, and events that directly address issues relevant to their students and their families. By sponsoring these events, La Escuelita demonstrates to the community that it is interested in addressing issues that impact the growth and learning experience of children both inside and outside school (Meier 2002). These political/social interactions also demonstrate to students that teachers and parents actually care about them and their community. The participation and actions modeled by parents and teachers thus become an incentive for children to learn about their language and culture (Cummins 1996).

The level of parent involvement and engagement at La Escuelita is often lacking in regular public schools. Public schools are often overwhelmed with standardized testing preparation, mandated district and state testing, over-crowded classrooms, and simplified curricula. This has made it challenging for many teachers and administrators in public schools to get parents involved in a meaningful or interactive process that draws on parents' experiences and knowledge. At La Escuelita, however, the school focuses not only on "why" parents are involved in school activities and school-community sponsored events, but on "how" parent engagement affects a child's educational success and progress.

My study suggests that by sponsoring activities in school and in the community, which predominantly take place in Spanish, La Escuelita encourages Latino community members to get involved in the education and lives of their children. La Escuelita has made clear that by (1) valuing parent's language and culture, and (2) encouraging parent involvement by providing families with the 'space' and 'resources' needed to engage in their children's schooling experiences, schools can foster successful bilingual education and become a force for change in their communities.

Conclusion

This study looks at the social change in the community of Eastside, California brought forth by La Escuelita—“the town’s little school.” It discusses how the parents and educators at La Escuelita fought to change the quality of education available to their children. Seeing no real opportunities in the public school system, the community members of La Escuelita started a charter school to address and meet the language and cultural needs of their children. La Escuelita soon became a tool and agent of change for the entire community. Today, by employing the Two-Way (Dual Immersion) program suggested by Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan (2000) and Wong-Fillmore (1991), La Escuelita is producing bilingual children while the public school system is fostering only English monolingual children.

Although this study did not statistically measure or evaluate the school’s academic progress or academic growth for its bilingual children, it sought to describe how social change in one community was shaped. Future research might focus on and develop tools to measure the extent to which allowing students to access curricula in their native language resulted in greater academic success and improved students’ cognitive abilities.

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