
Hmm ... Hmmm ... Excuse Me? A Case Study of Interruptive Caring in a Bilingual Classroom

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ABSTRACT Drawing from ethnographic research data and couched in critical care research, the author introduces the concept of 'interruptive caring' – a critical approach to caring that both transforms deficit-oriented school practices and challenges the underlying ideologies that inform and rationalize the inequitable power imbalances that operate within a school system. The author examines the concept of 'interruptive caring' as it emerges in a stand-alone, two-way, dual-language bilingual elementary classroom. The article includes a discussion on the importance of contextualizing interruptive care practices within the larger sociopolitical contexts in which teachers work.

Introduction

The USA as a whole has never fully supported the concept of bilingual education. While bilingual education, in some form or another, has almost always existed somewhere in the USA, it has been marginal to the public school experience and primarily supported by language minority groups hoping to preserve their native language, or by policy makers who envision bilingual education as an early intervention program to facilitate English language learning. The linguistic majority – English monolinguals – have been largely complacent about the status quo of English monolingualism. As the Latina/o, Spanish-speaking population has continued to increase in the USA, this complacency has largely turned to language restrictionism, characterized by an outward demand for English monolingualism. This response can be compared with those of other countries which have responded to linguistic diversity by adopting two or more official languages and/or implementing a more consistent form of bilingual education (e.g. Canada, India, Switzerland and South Africa).

The push for English monolingualism in the USA creates inequitable schooling experiences for language minority students who often struggle academically, and also lose their native language in a schooling context that pushes English language learning at the cost of their native language(s). It is within these oppressive power dynamics that I seek to understand how the relationships teachers have with their Latina/o students may serve to disrupt these power imbalances. Through a case study of an elementary bilingual teacher, this article introduces the concept of interruptive caring, an approach to caring for students that interrupts the ideological underpinnings of an inequitable education system that devalues bilingual education. To start this discussion off, I examine the ironic nature of the English movement in the context of the USA.

The Power of English

There is no doubt about it, the English language has international appeal. More and more people across the globe are learning English as their first, second, third, or more language. The allure of learning English is based on the powerful positioning of English as the international language of

business, research, technology, and communication. Indeed, the power of the English language has been captured in the terms *global English*, *international English*, and *world English* (McArthur, 2004). If it is any indicator of the English language as a means of international communication, it is worth noting that 80 percent of what is on the World Wide Web is in English (Teodorescu, 2010). Jiang (2011) identifies the desire to learn English across the globe as an 'English craze', stating that English has touched every continent and is now the first foreign language being taught in many countries, including China, Russia, Germany and Japan.

Although there is no official language in the USA, 92 percent of the population speaks English fluently (Shin & Bruno, 2003). Despite the dominance of the English language globally, as well as in the local context of the USA, the dominant rhetoric in the USA is that English is at risk and in need of intervention. In the past few decades, there has been a push by a number of political organizations to pass English-only laws, designate English as the nation's official language, and do away with bilingual education altogether. To date, 31 states within the nation have passed official English legislation, designating English as the official language of those states. Additionally, three states (Arizona, California, and Massachusetts) have passed anti-bilingual education legislation, outlawing bilingual education programs from their public school offerings.

This legislation, which promotes English monolingualism, contradicts the bilingual education research (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Collier & Thomas, 2004; Rolstad et al, 2005; Collier et al, 2006) which states, more clearly than ever, that bilingual education facilitates academic achievement, the acquisition of a second language (English, for language minority students in the USA), and academic and cultural integrity. This language restrictionist movement also disregards the fact that US immigrants who do not speak English are not only learning English in unprecedented rates but are experiencing language loss at a rate unlike any other immigrant group historically. While eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European immigrants would commonly experience language loss by the third generation of being in the USA, today's Latina/o immigrants are often losing their native language by the second generation (Crawford, 2004). As Crawford aptly states, for US immigrants who speak a non-English language, 'bilingualism is often just a brief phase between monolingualism in the native language and monolingualism in English' (Crawford, 2004, p. 13).

Thus, despite what the English monolingualism rhetoric and legislation would like the public to believe, English is not at risk and language minorities do not need further encouragement to learn English. Rather, the push for official English, English-only, and anti-bilingual education legislation is less about saving English or emphasizing the importance of learning English, and is more about exercising power over minority groups in the USA. The ongoing language restrictionist rhetoric pushes the view that non-English languages are low-class, non-academic languages and bilingualism is a condition that must be overcome. These power dynamics intensify as the Latina/o population continues to grow in the USA, currently making up 16 percent of the US population and representing nearly half the population in the Southwest region of the United States (Ennis et al, 2011).

While this oppressive context sets the tone for many US schools, most teachers claim they care for their Latina/o students and want to see them succeed academically. Researchers, however, are finding that even though teachers care for their students, they may be caring in ways that reinforce the power imbalances within schools and society, and are consequently contributing to Latina/o academic failure. In the following section, I examine the concept of educational care in relation to Latina/o education.

Educational Care

While most teachers claim they care for their students, and that this may even be the reason why they went into the profession in the first place, critical care scholars claim that not all forms of caring promote academic achievement for students of color. To be effective, educational care must address school inequities with a goal of social justice. Critical care scholars clarify that critical educational care is not an apolitical act of color-blind nurturing (Thompson, 1998), just being nice to students (Nieto, 2008), making up for perceived deficiencies (Rolón-Dow, 2005), or feeling sorry for students (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; De Jesús & Antrop-González, 2006). Individual acts of being nice, and even friendly to students, do little in regard to challenging the inequitable

power dynamics at play in schools and society. In regard to racism, Nieto (2008) states that ‘racism is not simply a personal attitude or individual disposition and feeling guilty or “being nice” are not enough to combat racism. Racism involves the systematic failure of people and institutions to care for students of color on an ongoing basis’ (p. 28). Thus, critical care scholars push beyond the type of caring that focuses on interpersonal relationships to a conception of caring that is grounded in ‘the racialized contextual factors surrounding such relationships’ (Rolón-Dow, 2005, p. 87).

In the educational care research that focuses on Latina/o students in US schools (Valenzuela, 1999; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; De Jesús & Antrop-González, 2006), researchers find, more often than not, that teachers’ approach to caring often aligns with the oppressive power dynamics operating within schools and consequently reinforces the inequitable schooling experiences Latina/o students endure. Valenzuela (1999), in her ethnographic study at Seguin High School in Houston, Texas, shows that the teachers in the study cared about whether their Latina/o students achieved academically, but this achievement was to be accomplished in a schooling system that was highly oppressive. Thus, as Valenzuela argues, teachers’ notions of care were bound to institutional notions of success, including how well students perform with a school-sanctioned, Eurocentric, and English-only curriculum and in standardized tests. This instrumental or results-driven approach to caring, also referred to as aesthetic caring, necessarily subtracts everything Mexican about the students, including ‘Mexican culture, the Spanish language, and things Mexican’ (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 16).

According to Valenzuela (1999), when teachers approach the caring relationship with their students in these apolitical, color-blind terms, students learn that major aspects of their lives have no relevancy in the school setting. Thus, despite teachers’ best intentions to care, many students are left feeling as though their teachers do not care, and this approach to caring, as Valenzuela states, leaves Latina/o students ‘progressively vulnerable to academic failure’ (p. 3).

In contrast to the aesthetic approach to caring, the Mexican students in Valenzuela’s study sought out a more holistic approach to caring – what Valenzuela refers to as authentic care. Authentic care builds upon the social capital Mexican students bring to their schooling, including culturally specific conceptions of education. Valenzuela explains that the Mexican students sought out an education that was grounded in the Spanish cognate *educación*. *Educación* is an educating process that encompasses what is taught at home and in the community and ‘refers to the family’s role of inculcating in children a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility and... a competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others’ (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 23). In Valenzuela’s study, she only highlights a few teachers who embodied this approach to caring. Overwhelmingly, teachers’ relationships with their Latina/o students were characterized by aesthetic practices, leaving many Latina/o students feeling as though their teachers did not care, which ultimately contributed to many Latina/o students’ various manifestations of school disengagement.

Rolón-Dow (2005), in her study of Puerto Rican girls at James Middle School, similarly found that teachers employed deficit approaches to care when working with Puerto Rican girls. Within her study, she refers to this approach to caring as ‘racist care’ – a deficit approach to caring, wherein teachers envisioned Puerto Rican girls and their communities as having no concept of care. Consequently, teachers constructed their pedagogical practices around the idea that their role as teachers was to make up for this deficiency by providing a safe haven for students at school. As one teacher put it, school can provide these students with ‘a good home away from a bad home’ (Rolón-Dow, 2005, p. 96). Essentially, the way many teachers approached the caring relationship with their Puerto Rican students was based on a perceived need to save children from their culturally bankrupt and non-caring homes. In contrast to this conception of ‘racist care’, Rolón-Dow calls for a color(full) critical care praxis– a race-central framework that acknowledges the reality that schools are not color blind, meritocratic institutions that hold hope for all students. Rolón-Dow describes teachers who work from a color(full) critical care praxis as those teachers who ‘care enough to understand how such issues as white privilege and racism, colonization, migration, and citizenship have played out in the communities where they teach and have affected the education of Latina/o students’ (p. 104). Thus, a color(full) critical care praxis not only recognizes how families and communities care for their children in ways that necessarily have to respond to an inequitable society, it is critical of the ways in which schools and the larger society perceive students’ cultural and linguistic differences as deficiencies.

In an effort to recognize teachers and schools that effectively incorporate a critical care perspective, Antrop-González & De Jesús (2006) and De Jesús & Antrop-González (2006) highlight two community-developed schools (PACHS in Chicago and El Puente in Brooklyn, New York). These schools center on the concept of 'hard caring' – a Puerto Rican conception of caring that is characterized by high academic expectations and supportive, instrumental relationships. Within this caring relationship, teachers closely monitor students' achievement and intervene when needed. The authors explain that these two schools were developed as a result of the students' experiences in mainstream schools that were characterized by 'soft caring' – an approach to caring that is characterized by the teacher taking pity on the students because of their harsh circumstances and consequently having low expectations of them in terms of academic achievement.

In a continued effort to conceptualize critical care in regard to Latino/a school achievement, this article identifies the concept of interruptive care, a concept of caring that is culturally relevant and transformative of deficit orientations, and that interrupts the dominant power relationships in schools that privilege Eurocentric practices and ideologies. To illustrate what interruptive care might look like in practice, I draw from a case study of a fourth- and fifth-grade bilingual teacher. It is important to note here that I do not provide a comprehensive representation of this teacher's pedagogical practices as a whole. Rather, for the purpose of this article – to discuss the concept of interruptive care – I only highlight instances from the larger case study that can be classified as examples of interruptive care. Consequently, the data included in this article provide a limited portrait of the teacher, and may run the risk of valorizing him as a poster child for interruptive care. I want to assure readers that the purpose of the data included in this article is not to valorize the teacher, or to provide a fully developed case study of the teachers' pedagogical practices. Because the focus of this article is to introduce the concept of interruptive care, not the teacher's pedagogical practices as a whole, the data included in this article serve to illustrate examples of interruptive care that emerged in the larger case study.

Methodology

The data included in this article derive from an ethnographic study in a bilingual classroom, from which I take a case-study approach to examine a bilingual teacher's multicultural practices. Within this two-year study, I carried out participant observations, formal interviews, and informal discussions that centered on the successes, as well as the difficulties, involved in carrying out a multicultural agenda in this bilingual classroom. The purpose of this engaged methodology was to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that either impede or facilitate the teacher's local attempts to implement multicultural education. The ethic of care emerged as a theme from the data, which were coded using a constant comparative method (Strauss, 1996). During data collection, the idea that all teachers at Viewpoint Elementary cared about their Latina/o students emerged many times, although teachers' approaches to caring differed greatly.

Within this case study, I identify Mr Potts' (introduced below) approach to caring as interruptive caring, not only because his caring practices are culturally relevant and transformative to the extent that he attempts to build upon the cultural and linguistic resources his students bring to his classroom, but also because he also tries to interrupt the dominant power relationships that operate within the school that define white students as normal and academically equipped, and Latina/o, Spanish-dominant students as abnormal and academically deficient. Although this study focuses on Mr Potts' classroom, the power dynamics operating at Viewpoint Elementary (introduced below) resemble many schools in the USA, as well as internationally, that unofficially assign varying degrees of worth to the different languages students speak. Thus, the significance of this study is much broader than Mr Potts' classroom alone. Mr Potts' pedagogical practices, as situated in a language-restrictionist school context, may provide educators in similar school contexts with ideas on how to challenge the oppressive power dynamics operating in their schools.

Viewpoint Elementary

Viewpoint Elementary is located in the western United States in a large metropolitan area, and is situated on the west side of the city, where a majority of the city's Latinas/os and other ethnic

minority populations reside. The state in which Viewpoint Elementary is located passed 'Official English' legislation in 2000, resulting in all official government business (e.g. public documents, records legislation, regulations, hearings, official ceremonies, and public meetings) having to be conducted in English only (US English, <http://www.us-english.org/view/8>). While this legislation did not directly affect public schools such as Viewpoint Elementary, indirectly the general sentiment was that everything in schools should be conducted in English only.

At the time of this study, Viewpoint Elementary had 720 students. Of these, most were of low socioeconomic status (73 percent qualified for free or reduced-cost lunches), and nearly 60 percent of the student body was Latina/o and learning English as a second language. I further discuss the power dynamics of Viewpoint Elementary under the section 'Interrupting the Language-Intellect Link'.

Mr Potts

Mr Potts is a 35-year-old white man who has been teaching elementary school for 10 years in various models of bilingual education. When Mr Potts was nine years old, his family moved to Chile, where he became fluent in Spanish. In Chile, Mr Potts occupied the identities of language- and ethnic-minority, and went through an experience whereby the knowledge he held, and that which could be expressed in English, was rendered non-existent in a school system that operated solely in Spanish. After an initial assessment, Mr Potts was placed in a grade level below what he had already completed in the USA, and was demoralized in a number of other ways, such as through the changing of his name. Because of Mr Potts' experiences as a child, he became attuned to the ways in which language politics can work to disengage and cut off students' opportunities for school success. He knew that language minorities in the USA often experience what he experienced as a child in Chile: the systematic invalidation of students' knowledge and worth. As a result of Mr Potts' critical awareness and knowledge of language politics in educational settings, he has become an advocate for providing equitable educational opportunities to language-minority students. At the time of the study, Mr Potts was teaching a fourth- and fifth-grade, two-way dual-language immersion bilingual class in English and Spanish. Although the state in which he was teaching had passed 'Official English' legislation, it was not against the law to teach bilingual education in this state, even though there was a strong anti-bilingual, English-only sentiment there, and only a handful of bilingual programs existed within the entire state.

In an effort to demonstrate what critical, interruptive care practices might look like in such a restrictionist state and school context, I highlight some of the data from Mr Potts' case study. Again, the purpose of this data is not to valorize Mr Potts as the ideal teacher, but rather to provide examples of interruptive care as they emerged amongst many of his varied, complex, and contradictory pedagogical practices. Within this discussion on interruptive care, I examine Mr Potts' decision to teach a stand-alone, two-way dual-language classroom, his unique way of scheduling parent-teacher conferences, and his unconventional way of submitting his students' poems to poetry contests.

Interrupting the Language-Intellect Link

Suffice it to say, most US schools do not have adequate language programs in place for their language-minority students. The US Department of Education reports that only 13.7 percent of language minority students in the 100 largest US school districts were enrolled in English Language Learner (ELL) programs for the 2002-2003 school year, and even these students were not necessarily enrolled in bilingual education programs (US Department of Education, NCES, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/100_largest/tables/table_14.asp). The uneven and contradictory implementation of bilingual programs, as well as the absence of bilingual programs altogether in schools, often stems from the ideology that links language with intellect. As previously discussed in this article, there is an assumption that non-English languages are not academic languages and that the business of learning at school cannot be fully achieved until students are competent in the English language. In terms of learning English as a second language, the implementation of English-instructed programs (e.g. English as a Second Language) is fueled by the myth that native

language instruction slows students down from learning English (Crawford, 2004). The argument usually goes something like this: In order for students to learn English as quickly and efficiently as possible, there must be no time wasted learning in a non-English language. Rather, students should be completely immersed in the English language.

Viewpoint Elementary was no exception to these national sentiments and practices when it came to language and learning. Despite its nearly 60 percent Spanish-speaking population, there were only two teachers who taught their classes bilingually: Mr Potts and a kindergarten teacher. The overall sentiment at the school amongst teachers and administrators was that students needed to learn English as quickly as possible in order to become successful academically. As a result, students entering Viewpoint Elementary speaking a language other than English were perceived as having a deficit and were in need of remediation. Indeed, in a formal interview I had with Mr Potts, he discussed a district meeting he attended that addressed the various barriers students within the district face in their education. Within this meeting, as he explained, language was identified as one such barrier:

During this meeting, one of the district administrators held up a poster board with a road map on it. They were identifying all these different potholes or barriers students face in their education and one of the potholes they pointed to on the map was students who speak a second language.

Mr Potts was cognizant of the language-intellect link that was in place at Viewpoint Elementary. He understood that at Viewpoint Elementary, English was informally identified as the only 'academic' language. As such, Spanish fluency was not viewed as an academic accomplishment, a goal worth further development, or a resource for learning. Rather, Spanish was viewed as an obstacle to overcome.

In an attempt to counteract these deficit-oriented ideologies and practices and in turn validate Latina/o students' unrecognized academic qualities within the schooling context, Mr Potts decided to implement a stand-alone, two-way dual-language bilingual classroom. As much as he could, he attempted to mirror a 50/50 dual-language model in his classroom. He had an integrated classroom of Spanish-dominant and English-dominant students, and he attempted, although not always successfully, to deliver his instruction equally in both languages; both languages were taught through content, and the overall sentiment was that both languages were valued, academic languages. He decided to combine fourth and fifth grades in his class, so that fourth-grade students could have an additional year of bilingual education by being taught by him again in the fifth grade.

Mr Potts intentionally chose the two-way dual-language model to implement in his classroom, because his teaching experiences taught him that other bilingual models (transitional and one-way dual language) positioned Spanish-speaking students as remedial. According to Mr Potts, only the two-way dual-language bilingual model held the potential to counteract the deficit perceptions the Latina/o, Spanish-dominant students otherwise endured at Viewpoint Elementary. In an interview, Mr Potts and I discussed his decision to implement the two-way dual-language model in his classroom:

Mr Potts: I've taught bilingual education my entire teaching career and whenever Latinos are bunched up into one program, it is looked at by the school as the 'special' program. They still think of those kids that go into a class all day, where they're separated, as the kids that can't handle it, a normal classroom.

Charise: So it's seen like a program that is meant to meet their special needs?

Mr Potts: Yeah. It's always in a certain part of the building and the English-speaking kids and teachers don't know anything about it except that the Spanish-speaking kids go there to get help.

Charise: So the Spanish-speaking kids are definitely looked down upon by being in that program?

Mr Potts: Yes. But when they're in a dual-language immersion class with English speaking kids, then it's, 'Oh-that's the gifted class where everyone is learning a second language.' As soon as English speakers are learning a second language, it's a gifted program.

As Mr Potts explained, one-way bilingual programs – consisting of only language minority students – are rarely, if ever, frequented by the English-speaking students and teachers within a given school. As such, they are often physically as well as conceptually marginalized within the larger school, thereby contributing to the programs' perceived remedial status within the larger school. The two-way bilingual model, on the other hand, brings white, English-speaking students,

teachers, and parents into the bilingual space where they can see for themselves that bilingual education is not a remedial program, but rather an academically demanding program where students are expected to learn content in both languages, as well as increase their proficiency in both languages.

Mr Potts' decision to implement a stand-alone, two-way dual-language classroom can be understood as a critical approach to caring for Latina/o students because he addressed the inequitable schooling experiences Latina/o students were receiving at Viewpoint Elementary. Important to this case study, however, is that Mr Potts' approach to caring was not only transformative, it was also interruptive. The implementation of a one-way bilingual classroom in itself would be transformative because it would transform the otherwise deficit-oriented monolingual English instruction Latina/o students were receiving at Viewpoint Elementary. In fact, by adopting a one-way dual-language model, Mr Potts would inevitably transform the schooling experiences of twice as many Latina/o Spanish-speaking students, because this model is made up entirely of language-minority students. While a one-way dual-language program may be transformative, it would not be likely to interrupt the dominant ideology that defines the Spanish language as a barrier to learning and the Latina/o, Spanish-speaking students as remedial. By choosing the two-way dual-language model, Mr Potts ended up with a racial/linguistic mix in his class, thereby creating a space where he could begin to interrupt the deficit-oriented ideologies operating at this school.

Teacher Interrogation

Viewpoint Elementary teachers were among the many players within the school who had an interest in Mr Potts' bilingual classroom. During a participant-observation session, Mr Potts explained that many English-monolingual teachers often interrogated his bilingual classroom, seeking assurance that the students who were previously in their classes, but were now in Mr Potts', were performing well in this new context.

The teachers' primary concern, however, was not the Spanish-dominant students. The Spanish-dominant students who were placed in Mr Potts' class were often students the monolingual English-speaking teachers identified and placed there because they could not comprehend the all-English instruction in their classrooms. These teachers placed these 'struggling' students in Mr Potts' class because they thought Mr Potts would be able to better serve these students because they speak the same language. Using the students' lack of comprehension in mainstream classrooms as a reference point, the teachers assumed the students were doing better in Mr Potts' class because they could understand the language of instruction.

More pointedly, the teachers' major concern, and the purpose of their interrogation, was to monitor the academic achievement of the white, English-dominant students. Informed by the language-intellect ideology, these teachers feared these students would fall behind in a context where they were losing instructional time in English. In fact, in order to prevent this potential outcome, these teachers were often proactive in their placement strategies of English-speaking students. To compensate for this potential loss in achievement, teachers would often refer white monolingual students who were reading above grade level to Mr Potts' class. Despite this compensational strategy, teachers were often concerned about English monolingual students losing their 'advanced' status by being in a classroom where 50 percent of their instruction time was in Spanish.

This concern often brought English monolingual teachers into the bilingual mix (physically coming to the bilingual classroom, participating in conversations on bilingual education in faculty meetings, etc.) because they thought it was their duty to monitor the progress of the English-speaking students. In effect, these teachers sometimes observed Mr Potts' classroom, and also monitored these students' grades and standardized test scores. To these teachers' surprise, the white, English-dominant students performed very well in class and on standardized tests – this despite never having any Spanish instruction prior to the fourth grade. Although these findings did not necessarily change the teachers' viewpoints on the role of bilingual education, they served as a starting point to interrupt the language-intellect link – the assumption that academic work can only

be performed in the English language. This interruptive approach to caring continues to be a relevant theme in the next section, on parent-teacher conferences.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

As explained in the previous section, the two-way dual-language model provided the opportunity for white, English-speaking people to enter the bilingual space – an outcome that rarely occurs in other bilingual models. Recognizing the benefits that come with this racial/linguistic integration, Mr Potts amplified opportunities for such integration in his parent-teacher conferences.

Traditionally, parent-teacher conferences are scheduled individually with each child's parent(s) and it is not necessary that the child attend the conference. In contrast to this traditional method of scheduling parent-teacher conferences, Mr Potts doubled up his conference appointments by simultaneously scheduling one white, English-dominant student with one Latina/o, Spanish-dominant student, along with their parent(s). During each conference, Mr Potts asked the students to demonstrate some of what they had learned in class so that parents could observe their child's progress in content, as well as language comprehension.

Part of the content that Mr Potts asked students to display during this meeting was their ability to recite the multiplication table (0 through 12) in 60 seconds or less, which granted the students status as 60-second-club members. Mr Potts had the English-dominant students recite the times table in English and the Spanish-dominant students recite it in Spanish and then vice versa. The purpose of the recitations was so that the parents could understand the students in their home language, and so the parents could have a sense of how the students were performing in their target language. Students were also asked to complete a translation sheet, so they could display their ability to translate from one language to the other.

The genius of the parent-teacher conferences was not the fact that parents could observe the academic skills of their own children, but rather that the white, English-monolingual parent(s) could have the opportunity to observe the Latina/o, Spanish-dominant students perform academically. The overwhelming response by white English-speaking parents at these conferences was that they were surprised and impressed that a Spanish-speaking child knows the equivalent of what their child knows, but in the Spanish language; in terms of fluency in the target languages, the Spanish-dominant children actually outperformed the English-speaking children. In an interview, Mr Potts addressed his approach to parent-teacher conferences:

They hear each other's conferences. And Lupe will get up there and be able to do the 60-second club and be able to do everything that I'm asking Frank to do, whether she does it in English or Spanish, and the parents are impressed. And then they [students] do the translation sheet. Maybe their [white parents'] child will struggle on doing it in the opposite direction, but the Spanish student might fly right through. And they [the parents] are like, 'Wow!'

As can be seen, Mr Potts' caring practices were intentionally interruptive in nature. If he was to simply offer parent-teacher conferences in Spanish and follow the traditional parent-teacher conference protocol in terms of scheduling, Mr Potts may have transformed the normative practice of providing a parent-teacher conference to Spanish-speaking parents in English. However, this transformative practice would not have necessarily interrupted white, English-speaking parents' deficit perceptions of Latina/o students – perceptions that often envision Latina/o, Spanish-dominant students holding their white, English-dominant children behind. Indeed, Mr Potts' unique way of organizing parent-teacher conferences served to interrupt the dominant perception among many of the white, English-monolingual parents that the Latina/o, Spanish-speaking students within the class were not as academically adept as their children. After the parent-teacher conferences, there was little discussion amongst white, English-speaking parents that suggested the Spanish-dominant students may be holding the class back and thereby preventing their children from reaching their full potential.

Poetry Contests

In order to carve out potentially interruptive caring pedagogies, Mr Potts not only went against the grain – for example, by adopting the dual-language model in his classroom - but he also went

against the rules of the game. As Valenzuela (1999) puts it, 'The inflexibility of bureaucracies often places caregivers in the problematic position of having to break rules in order to be caring' (p. 81). In this example, Mr Potts submitted his Latina/o, Spanish-speaking students' Spanish poems to a number of poetry contests that were intended for English-language submissions only. Nowhere in the rules and regulations of the contests was it written that poems needed to be submitted in a particular language. However, given the normative status of the English language in the USA, no mention of language at all can be assumed to mean English only. Mr Potts took advantage of the rules' normative vagueness when it came to language by submitting the poems his Latina/o, Spanish-dominant students wrote in Spanish, along with the poems his white, English-dominant students wrote in English. While Mr Potts' intention in submitting his students' poems in their native languages was to have them evaluated and to bring attention to the outstanding poems that were being written in both languages, the outcomes of his poem submissions were less than desired. Mr Potts explained the results of this practice in an interview:

The students who wrote in English received response letters and the children who wrote in Spanish didn't receive any recognition whatsoever. Not even a response that theirs had been sent, which bothered me immensely, because I went back to the rules and there was nothing that said that it had to be written in English.

With this one bad experience, Mr Potts decided to be proactive when he submitted his students' poems to another poetry contest. He explains:

With another contest which is right in the school, I called Washington DC, and asked the National PTA for the rules, what had to be done, 'cause I already had this one bad experience and they said that entering it in Spanish is just fine, but that I needed to go through and mark all of the mistakes in red, which first of all makes the Hispanic child's paper look worse than the Anglo child's paper, which I didn't like, and then provide a close as possible word for word translation at the bottom that would still convey the meaning. And in poetry word for word really stinks, but I did my best.

Despite following these newly formed rules for Spanish submissions, which he found inappropriate, the end result left Mr Potts feeling discouraged and unsuccessful in interrupting this system. Mr Potts explained further:

[In] last year's contest, they were thrown away. Uh, the judge at the school had assumed that the words used by the Spanish-speaking students were too high of a level. Uh, an example is the word 'subterráneo' which means underground. And the close cognate I could come up with was subterranean and she was just positive that no fourth or fifth grade child would use the word subterranean. And so they just threw away all of my students' entries. So the following year I did not mass encourage my class. The first year – every single child in my class entered. The second year – I just went through and those kids who had some beautiful poetry on their own throughout the year, I said don't you want to enter this? And so, uh, Leticia, hers was the only one in Spanish entered. So [Spanish entries] went from half the class to one. And when I translated it, I took it to two other teachers that both were Spanish speakers and had them verify and write on a note that it was translated [accurately] and that this was their original work. I never made a comment to the judges or the people in the PTA that I had went and done that, but hers was not only one of the winners in the school level, but it was the only one.

Although Mr Potts' attempts to bring recognition to his Latina/o students' work in Spanish was constrained by the assimilationist context in which he works, and that informed the poetry committee's evaluation process, his work was interruptive nonetheless. In essence, Mr Potts interrupted the poetry committee's unstated, and thus normative, practice of only accepting and recognizing English poems as legitimate work. By interrupting a system that unofficially only recognizes English as an academic language, Mr Potts pushed the poetry committee to come up with a process in which they could evaluate poems in Spanish, which ultimately brought recognition to one Latina student's work.

Closing: the politics of caring

While the purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of interruptive care, that is not to say that Mr Potts' teaching practices were solely characterized by interruptive caring. Mr Potts was embedded in a school and social context that was racist and devalued non-English languages. It would be unrealistic to think that Mr Potts' embeddedness in a schooling system that values whiteness and English monolingualism, as well as Mr Potts' own investment in whiteness, did not infiltrate his pedagogical practices. Even though I highlight a few examples of interruptive care, Mr Potts' pedagogical practices must be understood and contextualized in the larger social and political power dynamics that shape both the possibilities and impossibilities for critical care practices.

It is not helpful to conceptualize Mr Potts' pedagogical practices as wholly ideal and/or anti-racist, as this perception strips away the complexity and contradictory nature of Mr Potts' pedagogical practices in a racially charged school and social context. Even within the examples of interruptive care that I highlight in this article, Mr Potts' challenges to the status quo were not sweeping (e.g. only one Latina student's poem was considered in a poetry contest; he was not successful in his larger goals of implementing a two-way dual-language program within the larger school; and his interruptive interactions were limited to the parents and teachers who would come into his classroom, which was still not a very common event).

In addition to the limited impact Mr Potts' interruptive care practices had in the larger scheme of anti-bilingual and monolingual English schooling, he was also very cognizant of the ways in which he would reinforce the status quo himself, even despite his best efforts. That is, even though Mr Potts engaged in interruptive care, he simultaneously reinforced the power dynamics that privileged the white, English-dominant students in his class. As stated previously, the white, English-dominant students' education was often a priority in the larger school. In the context of Mr Potts' classroom, teachers and parents wanted assurance that these students' proficiency in English, as well as in the core curriculum, would in no way be jeopardized by being in Mr Potts' class. In other words, the placement of white, English-dominant students in Mr Potts' class was only consented to as long as Spanish instruction did not take away from these students' advanced status in English literacy. Aware of these expectations, Mr Potts admittedly facilitated white, English-dominant students' comprehension of the curriculum by speaking English more than Spanish, utilizing sheltered Spanish, and translating Spanish into English. In my own observations of Mr Potts, I found that he often utilized Spanish as a tool for instruction rather than for academic content that both sets of students would have to achieve in order to learn. That is, Spanish was often used to translate English lessons for Spanish-dominant students. The outcome was that students would often tune their target language out, relying on the expectation that the curriculum would be translated in their primary language. Despite their goals to become bilingual, white English-dominant students would sometimes disregard the Spanish translations, content with the English version of the lessons. Thus, the deficiency status that the Spanish language often signifies in other language programs was at times (re)produced in Mr Potts' classroom. I also found that the student placement strategies utilized in Mr Potts' class reinforced the already established ideology within the school that conceptualizes white, English-speaking students as academically capable and Latina/o, Spanish-speaking students as remedial. Because low-level Spanish-dominant and high-level English-dominant students were placed in Mr Potts' class, it was often the case that English-dominant students surpassed Spanish-dominant students not only in English reading levels and proficiency, but, after a little time in the class, in Spanish as well.

Despite and in spite of these unfortunate outcomes, Mr Potts was persistent in his imaginings of how he could interrupt an unjust educational system. In this article I have highlighted some of his unique pedagogical practices that attempted to interrupt the inequitable schooling context in which he was teaching. By identifying the concept of interruptive care, I hope to point to the possibilities for teachers in the wider world who teach in similarly inequitable schooling contexts to carve out critical care pedagogies, and possibly interruptive care pedagogies.

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