

# The Role of Bilingual Education in the Chicano Struggle for Educational Equity

By Rachel Brody

The Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, born out of a desire for civil rights and empowerment, had many facets. One important aspect was the demand for bilingual education. Many Chicanos believed bilingual education would expand educational opportunities for Mexican Americans, while also fostering cultural identity and providing a platform for political and social empowerment. However, bilingual education efforts have historically fallen short, emphasizing Americanization over the preservation or integration of Mexican American culture. This essay traces the historical development of bilingual education in the United States, examining its impact on Chicano identity and its lasting influence on education policies within the Chicano community's ongoing pursuit of social justice.

The Chicano Movement emerged in the turbulent socio-political climate of the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the systemic discrimination and unequal treatment faced by Mexican Americans and Chicanos in the United States. Despite the 1954 ruling against segregated schools, Mexican American children faced stark discrimination in schools. Harry Gamboa, the only non-english speaking kid in his kindergarten class in Los Angeles, remembers his teacher showing him how to make a paper cone, then writing the word Spanish on it, placing it on his head and telling him he could take it off when he learned to speak English.<sup>1</sup> Chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa describes being slapped on the knuckles with a ruler for being caught speaking Spanish at recess.<sup>2</sup> Chicano students were funneled into vocational classes instead of being

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<sup>1</sup> "Chicano! Episode 3: Taking Back the Schools" (Galan Inc. Television and Film, 1995), <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/chicano-episode-3-taking-back-schools>

<sup>2</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, "Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza," in *McGill-Queen's University Press eBooks* (2017): 381–99. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773551886-027>

prepared for college.<sup>3</sup> Widespread discriminatory practices and prejudices like these contributed to high dropout rates. In 1957, the Texas Education Agency Report showed that Mexican American students in Texas were spending on average three years in first grade and were dropping out before the fifth grade.<sup>4</sup> Only one in four Chicanos was graduating high school in East LA in 1968.<sup>5</sup> These disparities were a significant source of frustration for the Chicano community because lack of educational success meant no opportunity for economic gain and social mobility. It was clear that something needed to change and young Chicanos took matters into their own hands. High school students staged walkouts of seven East L.A. schools in 1968, with participation from over 15,000 students.<sup>6</sup> This kickstarted a movement for educational reform, within the broader Chicano movement.

In response to the call to address the educational disparities faced by Chicano students, bilingual education policies began to take shape. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 provided federal support for bilingual education programs, although it didn't require them.<sup>7</sup> This act's vague language allowed for differing interpretations.<sup>8</sup> This act was written in a way that, depending on interpretation, satisfies both the ethnocentrism desired by the Anglo majority and the cultural pluralism Chicanos had been fighting for.<sup>9</sup> It states that one of its intentions is to promote the development of non-English speaking students' native language as well as their learning of English, and that literacy in their mother tongue in addition to English would promote

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<sup>3</sup> Anzaldúa, "The New Mestiza," in *McGill-Queen's University Press eBooks*, 381-99.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Andersson, "Bilingual Education: The American Experience" in *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 7 (1971): 427- 440. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/322911>

<sup>5</sup> "Chicano! Episode 3: Taking Back the Schools" (Galan Inc. Television and Film, 1995)

<sup>6</sup> "Research Guides: A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States: 1968: East Los Angeles Walkouts," n.d.,

<https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/east-la-walkouts#:~:text=Discrepancies%20in%20the%20education%20of,an%208th%20grade%20Anglo%20student>.

<sup>7</sup> Andersson, "Bilingual Education: The American Experience" in *The Modern Language Journal*, 427-440.

<sup>8</sup> Andersson, "Bilingual Education: The American Experience" in *The Modern Language Journal*, 427-440.

<sup>9</sup> Andersson, "Bilingual Education: The American Experience" in *The Modern Language Journal*, 427-440.

more “broadly educated adults”.<sup>10</sup> However, the primary goal of the original act and first Spanish-English bilingual education programs in the US were to more efficiently teach non-English speaking children English in order to assimilate them as quickly as possible into the dominant english-only school program and greater American society. The belief was that being taught in their native language would help them keep up with their academics, while learning English, so they could easily transition into the English only programs when they were ready.<sup>11</sup> In his memoir, Chicano writer and teacher Francisco Guajardo reflects on his experience with bilingual education in the 1970’s.<sup>12</sup> He states that his teachers encouraged the process of cultural assimilation, because while they taught in Spanish, they insisted that their students read and write in English and they gave their students Anglicized nicknames.<sup>13</sup> He interviewed one of his teachers, Mrs. Longoria, who claimed that although she was thankful for the new bilingual practices, she truly believed her priority was to teach her students to read and write in English, because she was always taught that English was more important.<sup>14</sup> This kind of thinking in policy making and instruction held back bilingual education programs from uplifting Mexican American students in the way that many Chicanos hoped. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, the primary goal of bilingual education was to Americanize. Spanish was only used as a tool to help children assimilate more easily to American culture. There was no emphasis on preserving Chicano culture or empowering Chicano identity.

Most of the bilingual programs established in the 1960’s and 1970’s in response to implementation of the Bilingual Education Act were considered transitional bilingual education

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<sup>10</sup> Andersson, “Bilingual Education: The American Experience” in *The Modern Language Journal*, 427-440.

<sup>11</sup> Gaynor Cohen, “The Politics of Bilingual Education,” in *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1984), 225-241. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1050049>

<sup>12</sup> Francisco Guajardo, “This is my story of language” in *Crosspol: A Journal of Transitions for High School and College Writing Teachers*, (2018) 5–16.

<sup>13</sup> Francisco Guajardo, “This is my story of language”, 5-16

<sup>14</sup> Francisco Guajardo, “This is my story of language”, 5-16

programs, which provide non-native English speakers with instruction in their native language while gradually transitioning to English proficiency and eventually transitioning to mainstream English language classrooms.<sup>15</sup> A 1981 federally funded meta-analysis of 28 studies concluded that there was not enough evidence supporting the effectiveness of transitional bilingual education in teaching children English or improving competence in other academic capabilities to mandate it as the favored approach to education non-English speaking children.<sup>16</sup> However, results were largely inconclusive.<sup>17</sup> Yet, they reflect a common belief held by many Anglo and Hispanic Americans at the time, that bilingual education was ineffective. The stigma that Mexican American students were “mediocre” students still persisted. But this failure of bilingual education programs was likely due to lack of financial and social support from the government and the general public.<sup>18</sup> Many of the teachers in these bilingual programs were not adequately trained and didn’t believe in the value of bilingual education.<sup>19</sup> In addition, short term evaluation studies in which bilingual students underperform are misleading, since students require several years to become competent in English.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it is clear from the objectives of these federally funded studies that the U.S. government was only interested in boosting minority academic achievement and English language proficiency and didn’t consider native language development, or appreciation of native culture and identity a worthwhile goal. This is why initial attempts to measure academic success or language proficiency of bilingual programs don’t tell the full story.

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<sup>15</sup> Yoon Kyong Kim, et al. “Bilingual Education in the United States: An historical overview and examination of two way immersion” *Taylor And Francis Online*, (2013). [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2013.865593](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2013.865593).

<sup>16</sup> Keith A. Baker and Adrianna A. de Kanter “Effectiveness of Bilingual Education: A Review of the Literature” *Office of Planning, Budget and Evaluation*, (1981). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED215010.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Keith A. Baker and Adrianna A. de Kanter “Effectiveness of Bilingual Education: A Review of the Literature”

<sup>18</sup> Andersson, “Bilingual Education: The American Experience” in *The Modern Language Journal*, 427-440.

<sup>19</sup> Andersson, “Bilingual Education: The American Experience” in *The Modern Language Journal*, 427-440.

<sup>20</sup> Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras, “Chapter 4: Is Language the Problem?” in *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Social Policies*, (2009): 128-135.

Although not the norm, a few particular programs in the 1960's and 1970's did see some success. These programs shared some common characteristics. Instructors in these programs taught in both languages, classes were a mix of native English and native Spanish speakers, and there was a focus on maintaining and developing Spanish language skills alongside English. These typed or bilingual education programs are categorized as dual-language programs.<sup>21</sup> A comparison of learning before and after the establishment of a dual-language bilingual education program in Webb county, Texas in 1966 revealed that both English and Spanish speaking children learned mathematics better bilingually than monolingually.<sup>22</sup> An evaluation of an experimental bilingual education program at Coral Way Elementary School, in Miami, Florida in 1968 reported that the students progressed in language arts and mathematics at the same rate as the children in the English-only program.<sup>23</sup> Later research, emerging in the 1990's, supported the notion that bilingual education can be effective at boosting academic achievement and language proficiency in both Spanish and English, if the programs follow a dual-language design and especially if they incorporate Mexican American culture in the curriculum.<sup>24</sup>

Emphasizing the native language and culture of Mexican American children in the classroom is critical because it legitimizes their identity instead of subordinating it. Mexican American students in transitional bilingual education programs were able to use Spanish at school and learn in it, but it was mainly a means to achieve English fluency and assimilate to the dominant American culture, it wasn't the end goal, it wasn't desirable. This perpetuated the idea that the "Mexican" part of their identity was not significant or worth developing and somehow subordinate to the dominant American culture.

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<sup>21</sup> Yoon Kyong Kim, et al. "Bilingual Education in the United States: An historical overview and examination of two way immersion" *Taylor And Francis Online*, (2013). [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2013.865593](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2013.865593).

<sup>22</sup> Andersson, "Bilingual Education: The American Experience" in *The Modern Language Journal*, 427-440.

<sup>23</sup> Andersson, "Bilingual Education: The American Experience" in *The Modern Language Journal*, 427-440.

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras, "Is Language the Problem?" in *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Social Policies*, 128-135.

Several testimonies from current dual-language bilingual program participants suggest that incorporating Mexican American culture and history into the curriculum as well as encouraging the development of Spanish language skills and literacy promotes a sense of pride in their cultural identity and increases their sense of self-worth. Mexican American students are both American and Mexican. They are a fusion of cultures and their education should reflect that. Odayls Mungia, a Chicana who completed an elementary school dual-language program in 2012, revealed that she felt accepted and proud whenever her class read books by Mexican or Chicana authors. She said it “made me feel accepted and seen by my teachers, my classmates, and my community.”<sup>25</sup> It also connected her to her roots and encouraged her to embrace her Mexican culture and heritage, when so much of the messaging around her told her that Mexican American students are bound to get bad grades, barely graduate highschool, then get a job as a laborer.<sup>26</sup> Damien Gutiérrez, a Chicano student who graduated from the same dual-language program as Odayls said that, if it hadn’t been for his bilingual education, he probably would have stopped speaking Spanish because he felt shame speaking it in public.<sup>27</sup> His bilingual education experience taught him that Spanish was just as valuable as English and that there was beauty and strength in being able to express yourself in more than one language. He said “I realized you could be smart in Spanish, you could have intellectual conversations, you could interpret literature in Spanish and learn algebra.”<sup>28</sup> The testimonies of these individuals also underscore the link between academic success and fostering of a strong Mexican American identity. Bilingual education gives Mexican American students a strong sense of cultural identity, a crucial element in fostering self-esteem and a strong foundation for personal and academic

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<sup>25</sup> Odayls Mungia, (bilingual education program graduate, Hatch Elementary School), interview over phone with author, November 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Odayls Mungia, interview over phone with author

<sup>27</sup> Damien Gutiérrez, (bilingual education program graduate, Hatch Elementary School), interview over phone with author, November 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Damien Gutiérrez, interview over phone with author

success. The sense of acceptance, pride, and connection to one's heritage becomes a powerful motivator for students, challenging stereotypes and promoting a positive self-image.

In conclusion, the role of bilingual education in the struggle for educational equity is a complex narrative that reflects both the aspirations and challenges faced by the Mexican American community in their pursuit of cultural preservation, empowerment, and identity formation. Bilingual education, initially envisioned as a means to empower Chicano students, fell short of its potential as it became primarily a tool to reinforce assimilation over cultural pluralism. Although bilingual education has not realized its fullest potential, it remains a valuable investment. While historical bilingual education programs may not have directly translated to increased academic achievement for Mexican American students, due to conflicting goals, uninformed design, and inadequate funding and support, they help inform the direction bilingual education should head in to bring equity to education in the U.S.. Dual-language programs show promise, because they help Mexican American students achieve academic success, while promoting an identity formation that honors their bicultural lived experience, which could empower them in so many ways inside and out of the classroom. There is a long way to go to achieve full educational equity in the United States, and implementing strong bilingual education that empowers Mexican American youth alone cannot fix the problem, however it is an important component to the solution.

**Interview Transcript:**

**This interview was conducted on November 27th, 2023 over the phone. Odalys was in Fullerton CA, I was in Isla Vista, CA.**

**Me:** Alright, my first question is for you to describe a bit of your language background. What languages do your parents speak? What language do you primarily speak at home with your family? And what was your proficiency level in English before entering Hatch (Spanish immersion school)?

**Odalys:** My parents speak Spanish. Dad speaks Spanish and English, mom only speaks Spanish. I mostly speak Spanish at home, but often with my siblings we'll speak both Spanish and English. I spoke a little English before Hatch, but my level was way below that of my native-English speaking classmates. I didn't graduate from English learning development until 5th grade. It took me a bit longer to reach the proficiency level as the rest of my classmates, but at the end of the day I'm really thankful for the program because now I have more opportunities.

**Me:** How did having part of your education in Spanish influence your relationship to Mexican culture?

**Odalys:** I'm able to communicate with my extended family that only speaks Spanish in Mexico. And speaking the language, you know, of my Mexican descent is super important to really get to know my culture. Whenever I'm talking to older people who tell me about all these traditions and it's spoken in Spanish. I think if they were to tell me in English, let's say an English translator



tells me all that information, a lot of the lingo and meaning would probably be messed with, it just wouldn't be the same. So having that bilingual education really helped me build a relationship with my Mexican American culture.

**Me:** Do you think bilingual education enabled you to have more educational success? Why?

**Odalys:** Yes. definitely. I think it did. I remember something I would do when I had English spelling tests in school was I would word things out in my head in English and would pronounce them a little bit in Spanish and somehow that worked and it helped me spell out words and get better test results. Also, it helped me stay motivated and pushed me to work harder, because I was already challenged by learning two languages.

**Me:** In what ways do you believe bilingual education contributes to the preservation and promotion of Mexican culture and language in the US?

**Odalys:** I think bilingual education contributes to the promotion of Mexican culture and language because it feels very welcoming. It also depends on how the program does it. I remember in Hatch, there were Ammities (teaching aides from Spanish speaking countries) and Fiestas (fundraiser for the Spanish immersion program in which students would perform traditional dances from Latino countries and Latino food would be served), so that promoted a lot of Hispanic and Latino culture. I liked that we read books from Mexican authors. Just speaking Spanish in general is a communal feeling that is very welcoming so we can open up about what our family does, our traditions. It just made me feel accepted and seen by my

teachers, my classmates, and my community. Yeah. Especially since so much of the media I would consume or spaces I was in outside of school would promote negative stereotypes.

**Me:** Can you share any specific examples of how bilingual education influenced your connection to Mexican American identity?

**Odalys:** Having bilingual education helped fuel my confidence in speaking Spanish, so I feel more comfortable having conversations that are not just superficial with my family in Mexico. I feel more in touch with my Mexican American identity.

**Me:** Do you see any opportunities for improvement or expansion of bilingual education programs in fostering Chicano identity?

**Odalys:** I think they should continue to have teachers that are Mexican, or Latino themselves. If they belong to the communities that they are teaching, it brings a different perspective. Also by simply adding more seats to the classroom. One cousin of mine wanted to join the program, but there wasn't enough space so she did English only schooling. Another cousin of mine was able to go through the program like me and I noticed a big difference in their Spanish speaking abilities.

**Me:** How did bilingual education impact your language proficiency?

**Odalys:** I'm a nursing student, so I use both Spanish and English everyday to talk to my patients. There's a lot of inequity in medicine and I hope that I can help educate and advocate for Spanish speaking patients. I'm gonna take a class soon that will certify me as bilingual so it will hopefully help me out when applying for nursing positions.

### **Interview Transcript:**

**This interview was conducted over the phone on November 27th, 2023. Damien Gutiérrez was in Half Moon Bay, CA, while I was in Isla Vista, CA.**

**Me:** What language(s) do your parents speak?

**Damien:** Both of my parents speak Spanish. They can understand some English, but they don't really speak.

**Me:** What language(s) do you primarily speak at home with family?

**Damien:** Spanish mostly, sometimes English with my brother.

**Me:** What was your proficiency level in English before starting kindergarten?

**Damien:** I didn't speak any English before starting school.

**Me:** Did having part of your education in Spanish influence your relationship to Mexican American culture? How so?

**Damien:** It definitely made me appreciate Mexican culture more. It felt validating to see my culture reflected in my education. I feel like there are so many negative stereotypes of Mexicans and bilingual education showed me that those didn't have to be true. Being able to express yourself in Spanish and English is an advantage not a disadvantage. I used to get weird looks when I'd speak Spanish in public with my parents, so I wanted to stop doing it. I felt ashamed, but bilingual education made me feel proud of my dual identity because it opened so many doors for me.

**Me:** Do you think bilingual education enabled you to have more educational success? Why?

**Damien:** I honestly just think that the confidence it gave me in myself enabled me to be a successful student. I realized you could be smart in Spanish, you could have intellectual conversations, you could interpret literature in Spanish and learn algebra. Before I thought that Mexican kids just failed out of school and found a job in the fields.