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Are we gentrifying DLBE?: Reframing school choice as family language planning

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Abstract

Dual-language bilingual education (DLBE) is often framed through a binary: either serving linguistically minoritized students or being "gentrified" by White, English-dominant families. Drawing on autoethnographic narratives from three racially diverse motherscholars, we complicate this framing by highlighting families at the intersections of race, class, language, and migration. Guided by intersectionality and critical systems theory, we examine how DLBE access is shaped by overlapping structures of Whiteness, linguistic commodification, and gendered care work. Our stories show how school choice and family-language planning are constrained by systemic inequities, not just individual preference. We argue for a race-radical vision of DLBE that centers historically marginalized communities while recognizing the legitimacy of multiracial, heritage-language, and English-dominant families. This vision challenges market-driven models of bilingualism and calls for cross-racial solidarity to expand—not ration—equitable DLBE. By bridging personal experience and structural critique, we offer a more inclusive framework for multilingual justice in education.

Keywords: Dual-language bilingual education, family language planning, gentrification, intersectionality, racially complex families

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Introduction

As we, three racially diverse mothers and bilingual education scholars, have prepared ourselves and our children for the start of a new school year, we have often found ourselves asking similar questions: Will our children be seen as legitimate participants in bilingual classrooms? Will our desire to raise multilingual children align with the language programs available to us? And what do our choices say about who these programs are for? As multilingual motherscholars (Matias, 2022) whose families sit at the crossroads of migration, racial complexity, and language shift, we want our kids to

inherit the languages and cross-racial connections that shape our own identities. Yet every decision – moving districts, entering a lottery, choosing between gifted tracks and immersion strands – forces us to weigh who qualifies as a "legitimate" dual-language family and what it means for racially complex households to seek space in programs historically designed for language-minoritized youth.

These dilemmas echo a growing scholarly conversation on the gentrification of dual-language bilingual education (DLBE). Valdez, Freire, and Delavan's (2016) early work described how DLBE can "push out [English learners] and other non-privileged students" (p. 604); subsequent studies trace how the influx of White, middle-class, English-monolingual families directly affects the very students bilingual education was meant to serve (Cervantes-Soon, 2014; Heiman & Murakami, 2019). While this research rightly centers racialized bilingual learners, it rarely accounts for families like ours, those that sit at diverse intersections of race, class, and language and include heritage speakers in multiracial, middle-class homes or Black children from English-dominant households. At the heart of this issue, for us, is the persistent binary framing in the literature of those interested in bilingual education: White middle-class families seeking enrichment or low-income immigrant families pursuing English acquisition alongside home language maintenance. Thus, grounded in intersectionality and critical systems theory, we weave autoethnographic accounts of raising multilingual children in linguistically and racially complex homes to show how these overlooked identities complicate prevailing gentrification narratives and to call for a race-radical, intersectional reimagining of access and equity in DLBE.

Review of Literature

Our experiences as researchers, teacher-educators who work in dual-language, and multilingual mothers inform how we understand the gentrification dynamics of language education. We present these understandings across three overlapping strands of literature: school choice, with particular attention to issues of language, race, and class; gentrification in DLBE; and the experiences of heritage language learners and their families in DLBE. Extant literature often focuses on these issues in isolation. To ground the present study, our goal here is to offer a more expansive, intersectional perspective of the social patterns associated with access to DLBE programming and situate them in relationship to family language policy and planning.

Family Language Policy, Choice, and DLBE Access

Access to dual-language bilingual education rarely hinges on a single "school-choice" mechanism; instead, it emerges from families' ongoing language-planning decisions—where to live, which programs to request, and how to balance linguistic and academic aims (King et al, 2008). Research on family language policy shows that parents seek out community resources, including DLBE, to maintain a minoritized language across generations (Fillmore, 1991; Kaveh & Sandoval, 2020). When such programs are

scarce, families move districts, petition principals, or enter lotteries—not simply to exercise consumer choice, but to keep heritage languages alive amid dominant monolingual pressures (King et al., 2008).

These pursuits are deeply racialized and classed. Middle-class White families may frame DLBE as a value-adding distinction that enhances their children's cultural capital (Dorner et al., 2021). Such opportunity-hoarding can reproduce gentrification logics within DLBE, crowding out the very communities bilingual programs were designed to serve (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020; Valdez et al, 2016). Black and Latinx parents often weigh a school's racial composition and safety alongside the availability of language programming (Gándara & Orfield, 2012; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021). At the same time, minoritized families who are English-dominant—e.g., Black households or multiracial, heritage-language families like ours—often find their claims to bilingual education questioned or ignored, revealing how access debates still rely on narrow binaries of language need versus enrichment (Cervantes-Soon, 2014; Flores & García, 2017).

Situating DLBE within intersectional family language policy therefore clarifies that gentrification is not only about who enters a program, but how structural scarcity forces families to compete, negotiate, or relocate for linguistic rights. This lens aligns more closely with our findings than generic school-choice frameworks and foregrounds the everyday decision-making that shapes bilingual opportunity.

The Gentrification of DLBE Programming. Dual-language bilingual education (DLBE) programs have long been positioned as tools for fostering integration, multilingualism, and educational equity. Yet, as these programs expand, scholars have also drawn attention to how they are sometimes implemented in ways that displace the needs and desires of historically marginalized communities while increasingly serving more privileged families (Valdez et al., 2016). This dynamic—referred to as the gentrification of DLBE—highlights the tension between inclusionary ideals and exclusionary outcomes in program design and access.

Research examining the equity implications of DLBE programs reveal mixed results. On the one hand, (within racially diverse schools) DLBE programs have been found to reduce access to education for Latinx, Spanish-speaking students and exclude Black students (Palmer, 2010). Similarly, research demonstrates how Black families can experience DLBE programs as tools of racialized exclusion (Blanton et al., 2021) as well as linguistic racism and cultural erasure (Frieson, 2022). On the other hand, Uzzell and Ayscue's (2021) analysis of a DLBE program in a rural school shows how programs can reduce the racial isolation of language-minoritized students and situate all students (White and Latinx) as equal participants and beneficiaries of the program. Still, even in programs that primarily serve language-minoritized students, ideological

gentrification can occur when equity and social justice goals of programs are displaced by neoliberal emphases on choice and competition (Bernstein et al., 2021; Cervantes-Soon, 2018).

These varied outcomes suggest the need to move beyond binary framings of privilege and marginalization toward a more nuanced understanding of how race, language, and power intersect within DLBE systems. Though much of the gentrification discourse emphasizes individual decision-making, we argue that these dynamics are best understood through a systemic and intersectional lens. For this reason, we draw on intersectional critical systems theory to guide our analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectional Critical Systems Theory

Critical systems theory (CST) "brings a systems-thinking lens to help educational researchers understand the complex nature of educational systems and problems, while incorporating critical perspectives in both methodology and broader research objectives such as emancipation and social justice" (Watson & Watson, 2011, p. 63). Critical systems theory rests on three intertwined principles—critique, emancipation, and pluralism (Watson & Watson, 2013).

1. *Critique* urges researchers to interrogate their methods and assumptions, resisting the weak spots of traditional inquiry (Watson & Watson, 2011).
2. *Emancipation* calls for exposing and dismantling hidden power relations (Fischer-Lescano, 2012; Watson & Watson, 2011).
3. *Pluralism* champions methodological flexibility, treating lived experience—including our own—as valid scholarship and enabling motherscholars to both navigate and reshape the systems they inhabit (Graham, 1999; Watson & Watson, 2011).

In this study, CST serves as both a theoretical and methodological guide, shaping how we, as motherscholars, are engaged as co-constructors of knowledge. As motherscholars, we are equal partners who guide the design, analysis, and dissemination of findings. By foregrounding critique, emancipation, and pluralism, CST supports an inquiry rooted in lived experience, collective reflection, and transformative participation. To fully reflect the diversity of our experiences, we also adopt an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2019). Grounded in Black feminist thought, intersectionality traces how intertwined systems of race, gender, class, language, and place shape experience—especially for women of color—and imagines their transformation. Thus, this unified framework allows us to expose the layered power dynamics often missed in debates on gentrification, school choice, and dual-language programs, situating our own stories within those structures and pointing toward actionable change.

Methods

Context

The data shared in this paper arose from a collaborative motherscholar project. We engaged in a collaborative descriptive inquiry study to "refuse [the] logics of hyperindividualism" in the interest of "cultiva[ting] solidarity" and seeking "collective healing" (Beneke, et al., 2024, p. 2586). Grounded in descriptive inquiry's use of recollections (Himley & Carini, 2000), this study aimed to understand our experiences as mothers in multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual families in developing their children's bilingualism. Centering three bilingual education motherscholars (Matias, 2022), this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. Why do we, as mothers, seek out bilingual education? What happens in the process, and why?
- RQ2. How do these experiences relate, if at all, to our professional identities and knowledge as equity-focused language educators and researchers?
- RQ3. How do we understand our own choice processes in relationship to (or contestation of) the larger systems in which they occurred?

Participant Positionalities

María is a neurodivergent Black Dominican immigrant, fluent in Spanish and English. A former bilingual student and New York City bilingual-special-education teacher, she and her White-presenting, third-generation Italian-American husband aim to raise their two children bilingually. The family left their multilingual New York City neighborhood in 2018 for a racially diverse, English-dominant suburb 12 miles away.

Crissa is White, middle class, and electively bilingual. With her White-presenting Chilean-immigrant partner—Latino and an English learner since 2010—she speaks mostly Spanish, intentionally translanguaging with their two children. Confronting their role in the gentrification of a historically Black Washington, DC neighborhood, they send their children to a dual-language charter school.

Sabrina, an African American first-generation college graduate and elective Spanish-English bilingual, is married to another African American elective bilingual (in a different language). A former Spanish DLBE and English Learner (EL) teacher, she and her husband have a daughter and son who both attended a Spanish DLBE program in a predominantly White, English-dominant suburb outside Washington, DC.

This study foregrounds mothers because, as Cioè-Peña (2021) notes, they carry the most responsibility yet hold the least agency in guiding their children's educational, sociocultural, and linguistic paths. As multilingual motherscholars active in DLBE teaching and research, we can both shape scholarship on bilingual education and

observe its effects within our own families. This paper reflects that dual role: our mothering informs our research and pedagogy, while our scholarly activism shapes how we parent and interpret our children's schooling (Matias, 2022; Beneke, et al., 2024).

Data Collection

This study draws on three data collection sessions grounded in the method of recollection—a guided memory-sharing exercise in which participants respond to a shared prompt to explore a topic, theme, or issue (Cioè-Peña, 2021, 2022; Himley & Carini, 2000). In this case, the recollection focused on the authors' experiences as multilingual scholars raising multilingual children (Appendix A). The approach centers participant-driven narratives, illuminating both the emotional depth of these experiences and their entanglement with broader systemic forces.

María and Crissa shared their recollections in Spring 2022, and Sabrina shared hers in Summer 2022. Recollection guidelines were sent in advance to support each motherscholar's preparation. Sessions began with a brief, two-minute reflection on the word teacher to anchor each participant's memories within the broader study's focus on bilingual education and multilingual parenting. María, trained by the Institute for Descriptive Inquiry, drew thematic connections across responses.

Each participant then had 30 minutes to share uninterrupted, followed by a period of clarifying and expository questions (Appendix A). During each session, the non-sharing motherscholar took notes, generating an additional layer of data. Sessions were conducted over Zoom and recorded in both audio and video formats; transcripts were later cleaned by an external party.

By prioritizing narrative methods, this study provides a space for motherscholars to articulate what it means to raise—or attempt to raise—children bilingually while navigating their own commitments to multilingualism. In doing so, it offers a more nuanced understanding of school choice as family language planning and the gentrification of dual-language programs from the perspective of a rarely examined group within equity research: multilingual, middle- and upper-middle-class motherscholars.

Data Analysis

The video-recorded sessions were transcribed and examined with content and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Content analysis helped us identify what stories we told; narrative analysis probed how we told them. Guided by our theoretical framework, an initial round of coding surfaced why we sought bilingual programs and the obstacles we faced—desire for bilingual education, access, and challenges. A second round explored links between those experiences, our professional identities, and our relationships to bilingualism and motherhood. A third, "free-listening" round

flagged contradictions, surprising comments, and intersectional moments, yielding the themes reported below.

Since we analyzed our own recollections, we recognize this work as inherently autoethnographic (Chase, 2010). In light of the autoethnographic elements of the study, each author first coded all transcripts independently before we compared and coded salient passages collaboratively. We also shared the three resulting themes at a conference where we sought peer feedback, and had an external reader confirm that our interpretations matched the data. This created an analysis that included and was informed by multiple perspectives of the group as well as perspectives outside of the group.

Findings

The three themes that follow are deeply interwoven—one leads to the next, and key ideas echo across sections. We begin by explaining why we chose to raise our children bilingually and the tensions between individual identities and family needs. These motives resurface in the second theme, which details the systemic barriers we encountered in accessing and sustaining bilingual programs. Finally, the third theme shows how our professional insights reframed those motives and challenges, shaping our decisions as mothers and influencing our families' sociocultural and linguistic trajectories.

Individual versus Familial Positionalities

Race, class, gender, resources, and family roles all shaped our family language policy school choice decisions, and our reflections upon them demonstrate the messy yet hopeful elements of critical consciousness in action. Though our circumstances vary, each of us is a scholar of multilingualism and equity—and a wife and mother—so these intersecting identities drive how and why we "do bilingualism" (García & Wei, 2014).

For María, bilingual parenting is both a claim to her Black Dominican immigrant identity and a pushback against the linguistic, cultural, and racial oppression she has faced. Yet her position as wife and daughter-in-law complicated her bilingual mothering choices:

> I'm married to a White man…whose family has a history of giving up their own language… to obtain upward mobility. And here I was, fronting my language. And that didn't sit well with my in-laws.

Here, María engages with her critical consciousness of historical patterns of external and internalized oppression around language and heritage, which converged in judgment upon her bilingual mothering and wifehood. In relationship with her in-laws, her bilingualism was not associated with abundance nor even positioned within

neoliberal notions of language as a value-adding commodity. Instead, her use of Spanish within her family was viewed as taking up space and threatening resources—"fronting" one language, to the detriment of others.

For Sabrina, bilingualism served as a bridge—to identity, connection, service, and community. Her study abroad in the Dominican Republic marked a turning point:

> It was the first time language and nationality came to sit in the front seat of my identity bus, sharing the row with race, class, and gender… I built relationships that transcended race… being an elective bilingual was impacting me both personally and professionally.

Spanish opened doors in her career, supported her husband's work, and deepened her community ties. Wanting the same expansive worldview for her children, she pursued bilingual education—while also navigating racialized stereotypes and fighting for programs that would affirm her children's intellect and identities. In the end, Sabrina and her family faced multiple barriers to inclusion for her and her children, forcing her to move her children to monolingual schools that would be less racially and culturally affirming. As such, reflecting on and countering hegemonic patterns in language education is a form of critical consciousness work for her.

Crissa's positioning as a White, U.S.-born woman and elective bilingual in a transnational family raised questions and tensions about her role, responsibility, and right to her family's bilingualism. Though not the "native speaker" of Spanish, she bore much of the labor of raising bilingual children, informed by both her maternal and scholarly roles. She reflected:

> I would have these guidelines in my head of what research says about what I should do as a mother to support [my daughter's] multilingual language development… I experience a lot of social privilege, and so when I think about language maintenance for myself… it then also gives me a space to do my own antiracist work.

Here, Crissa grapples with the expectations shaped by her academic expertise and her ethno-linguistic positionality in relationship to her Chilean husband. Her reflection reveals how positionality, privilege, and questions of access shape her parenting and provide a path into antiracist work around language and education as a form of critical consciousness work.

In order to align our desires with our realities, we attempted to approach our DLBE decision-making with critical consciousness as we all experience racialized, classed, and gendered positionalities, formed and evolving alongside—and in contrast to—societal expectations of bilingualism in a monoglossic, racialized society. Critical consciousness of these things is an ongoing process that helps us interrogate and understand how power historically and presently structures oppression and clarifies

our own place within it (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). Although our racial and contextual backgrounds differ, we share tensions around the systemic impact of our language and schooling choices and continually interrogate our privileges of income, location, and status as pieces of our family language policy and planning. For all of us, bilingualism is at once struggle, labor, gift, and bridge to our cultural histories—and a pathway to the futures we hope to build.

Our experiences indicate that the usual binaries applied to DLBE families—White/Brown, Black/Brown, English learner/monolingual, "American"/immigrant, wealthy/poor, remediation vs. enrichment—oversimplify reality. They overlook multiracial households like ours and, in turn, marginalize heritage-language communities.

Here, we demonstrated how linguistic complications manifest internally—as conflicting emotions and family pressures—next, we examine how they present externally through restricted program access.

Forced Choices

The presence –or absence– of dual-language education intersected with other aspects of our identities, often forcing limiting and binary choices for enacting our family language policies. For María, the pursuit of economic stability amplified the immigrant narrative of "upward mobility," yet placed bilingual schooling out of reach: "Somehow, in moving my kids to greener space… where they could ride their bikes… I then felt like I had actually sent them into the abyss… because there's no bilingual programs here." This reflection highlights a central tension: the promise of safety and prosperity stemming from upward mobility clashes with the tangible loss of cultural and linguistic access. For María, upward mobility came at the cost of her children's bilingual development, surfacing guilt and disillusionment with the very ideals she had been encouraged to pursue.

Sabrina remained acutely aware of the space her African American family occupied within a DLBE system shaped by a White–Latinx binary. As a former educator in the district where her children attended school, she had seen how bilingual strands often excluded Black children: "We were not the targeted families—we were not White and affluent, and we were not Latino." Having witnessed the racial segregation within DLBE programs, Sabrina recognized that access for her children would likely mean being positioned as racial outsiders, raising complex questions of belonging and representation.

Our identities as educator–scholars and mothers also influenced how we navigated dual-language education. Crissa wrestled with the impact on her identity as a White woman gentrifying an urban neighborhood. She described choosing between

supporting the neighborhood school and accessing a DLBE charter school via the citywide lottery to maintain bilingualism in her family:

> Do we just send her to the neighborhood school? [… that's the] more clear-cut kind of like social justice choice… because of all the equity issues in the larger space of education… And we—I at least, still feel a bit of conflict because we were able to enroll her in a bilingual school through the lottery.

Crissa's experience underscores the ways gentrification, school choice, and DLBE intersect, revealing the personal and political weight of navigating an inequitable system.

Sabrina's background as a dual-language teacher and racialized mother contextualized how she viewed her children's experience in the dual-language program. When they qualified for the district's gifted and talented (GT) program, she faced a difficult trade-off:

> I knew the benefits of bilingualism, and how attending an immersion program meant at a minimum that my children wouldn't be the only black and brown faces in their classes …and still wrestled with why we had to choose.

For Sabrina, choosing GT meant leaving the racially diverse DLBE community she valued. While GT aligned with her children's academic profiles, it came at the cost of cultural and linguistic connection—leaving them among the few non-White students in their classes for years to come.

At times, what we knew as scholars clashed with our lived realities as mothers. Research emphasized the importance of "linguistic input" for bilingual development, but without access to DLBE, María struggled to apply this at home:

> It became my instinct to want to shift into, like, the teacher role. And then I realized that I didn't actually like that interaction with my kids because teacher María used to say to kids, "I don't understand that. Yo no entiendo. Dímelo en español." And force you to say something to me in Spanish, and I didn't want to have that relationship with my children.

Without a school-based program, María faced a difficult choice between promoting language acquisition and preserving nurturing mother–child dynamics—revealing the tension between research-informed practices and relational priorities.

Ultimately, each of us grappled with the tension between language and the threat of future loss. For Sabrina, having her children leave DLBE for the GT program meant giving up something deeply meaningful: "We would leave behind a gift that I desperately wanted for my children, and I remember thinking if they would have […] multilingual friendships like I did." When choosing GT, Sabrina worried her children would lose access to bicultural development and cross-racial connections—central

goals of DLBE often overlooked in research. The decision marked not just a shift in schooling, but in the kind of community and identity she hoped her children would develop.

Similarly, Crissa saw language loss as a threat to her children's cultural identity and connection to extended family: "What's at stake in them losing [Spanish]? I mean, they would—they would lose relationships with our Chilean family…Their Chilean culture and identity."

Considering her transnational family, Crissa viewed Spanish as more than a communication tool—it was a cultural anchor and relational bridge. Without school-based support for bilingualism, she feared that her children's ties to their Chilean heritage would weaken.

María, on the other hand, worried that language loss would sever part of her children's connection to her: "I feel like in order for my children to fully know me, they have to know Spanish… if my kids didn't speak Spanish, then I would be cutting off my whole family." For María, Spanish is central to her sense of self. Raising bilingual children was not just a cultural aspiration but a personal necessity—a way to be fully seen by her children and to preserve family ties. Yet limited access to DLBE programs placed that goal at risk, forcing difficult choices between identity, language, and the promise of upward mobility.

Taken together, our experiences show how our desire to raise bilingual children often conflicted with the programs available to us and our sense of belonging within them. These choices played out in raciolinguistic contexts that privilege English, sidelining families' linguistic needs and values. Our narratives underscore how multiracial, middle-income families of color are largely absent from gentrification discourse, which tends to conflate race with class—casting White families as middle/upper income and families of color as poor or upwardly mobile. This narrow framing overlooks how SES can be used to limit access to DLBE for families of color, particularly immigrant and first-generation families, reinforcing inequities and stunting program growth. While we encountered structural barriers to sustaining bilingualism, the most enduring challenges were ideological. Our professional critiques of gentrification often clashed with our personal experiences of it. As we explore next, the fear of being "the gentrifier" shaped the lengths we were willing to go to access DLBE and secure bilingual identities for our racialized children.

Tensions (New Understandings) of Participation for Racially Complex (Middle Class) Families

As scholars we were hyper aware of how gentrification shapes bilingual education. This awareness led us to foster multilingualism at home, but doing so revealed tensions between research and lived experience. Crissa explained:

> Our life didn't reflect a strict separation of languages…I think I was feeling like the body of knowledge I knew as a scholar could not account for the experience that I was having in my home and in my relationship with my child.

Here Crissa surfaces how academic frameworks often overlook the emotional and cognitive demands of raising bilingual children. For all of us, our professional knowledge of language development clashed with the realities of being a language learner or parenting one—adding layers of guilt, frustration, and contradiction that the research rarely addresses. These tensions were, unfortunately, aggravated by our roles as academics.

For María, professional advancement required relocating to a suburb near her university—disconnecting her from the Spanish-rich community that had supported her eldest child's bilingualism in New York City. Hoping to recreate that immersion for her youngest, she hired a Spanish-dominant au pair from Latin America:

> Now, a twenty-two-year-old girl was in charge of my daughter's Spanish language immersion while she herself was here to learn English…she started practicing her English with my daughter … instead of communicating with my daughter in Spanish.…it felt like something that I should be able to outsource to someone else, and I wasn't able to do it.

While her eldest benefitted from an organic multilingual environment, María found it difficult to replicate those conditions. Her professional move ultimately limited access to the rich linguistic communities she had once nurtured—as a mother, teacher, and scholar.

Geography also posed challenges for Crissa, who, before relocating, lived near the university where she worked—but in a predominantly White, highly educated, affluent community. The contrast between her family's socioeconomic reality and that of her neighbors created friction:

> Maybe [other] parents were able to alleviate—like automate their food delivery and therefore have a little more time for reading a Spanish book […] I found myself, just looking for resources and feeling like I didn't have the resources. […] it was connected to overwhelm about larger parenting culture, economics, money, space, and place.

Crissa's desire to support her children's bilingualism clashed with material realities. Lacking time, support, and access, she found her parenting and scholarly selves increasingly at odds:

> It took me away from self-determination or my own instinct…the scholarship really conflicted with my own [maternal] instinct...I had these goals in my mind, and yet, just like everything else with parenting …the book is a loose guideline, and it doesn't account for the relationship with your child and your circumstances.

Crissa also felt isolated, as the gap widened between her aspirations as a motherscholar and the conditions that shaped her everyday mothering.

María echoed this emotional toll:

> I felt like I had failed [my daughter], I felt like I had failed as a mother, as a daughter, as an immigrant, and as a person of color… And like, do I actually know what I'm talking about when I'm talking to teachers and parents about this stuff when, here I am, and in my own home, I can't get this to work.

For María, bilingual parenting was not just about language—it was bound up with identity, credibility, and communal belonging. When efforts to support bilingualism fell short, they sparked feelings of inadequacy across personal, professional, and cultural spaces.

Ultimately, Crissa enrolled her daughter in a bilingual program in a different community –a decision that provided relief and new tensions: "On one hand, knowing that the school is supporting my daughter's bilingualism…does take a weight off of me as a mother." While the bilingual program eased the burden of maintaining Spanish at home, it also added to preexisting concerns about gentrification and the family's role as cultural capital accumulators. Still, Crissa grounded her decision in her family's linguistic needs and cultural ties, weighing the tension between social justice ideals and her responsibility as a motherscholar.

For parents without direct cultural connection to a heritage language—such as those in multiethnic families—awareness of inequities in bilingual program access can lead them to opt out, even when they belong to minoritized communities themselves. Still, as Sabrina's story shows, bilingualism can hold deep personal and communal meaning regardless of one's linguistic background:

> I'm an elective bilingual. I learned Spanish in school, and by studying abroad in Santiago, Dominican Republic, and that trip was life-changing […] through my [teaching and] graduate studies, I embraced the benefits of multilingualism and knew I wanted the same for my children.

Here, Sabrina frames bilingualism much like a craft or passion—deeply connected to her identity, worldview, and values. For her, bilingualism was never just a professional "skill;" it was a way of seeing the world and participating in it. She wanted her children to experience that same sense of connection. Bilingualism, for Sabrina, was about relational belonging—not as a commodity to pass on, but as a bridge to more meaningful participation in multilingual and multiracial communities.

Still, once her children entered bilingual spaces, Sabrina encountered tensions around belonging and visibility in those settings. Her firsthand experience as an educator gave her a sharp understanding of the exclusionary dynamics embedded in DLBE programs:

> I'd heard generally about kind of the rumored history of the immersion programs and the discourse around attracting certain families to certain schools, that if a school had a high Latino population, they would purposely put an immersion program there to get the 50-50 model to attract, what we inferred to be, White and affluent families. I knew and had witnessed the segregation that happens with strand programs within schools. And I knew that our identities didn't fit any of that discourse.

These observations illustrate how systemic design and recruitment narratives in DLBE programs shaped Sabrina's perception of who those spaces were truly meant to serve. As a Black mother and educator, her insights show the ways racial belonging in bilingual education remains narrowly defined—even within programs that claim to be inclusive.

Still, Sabrina enrolled her children in immersion programs. But when they qualified for gifted and talented (GT) services, her family faced a tough decision: prioritize linguistic or academic support? She described:

> It was explained to us that we had three choices. We could refuse GT services and continue with the immersion program, hoping that the classroom teachers, we were told, would differentiate enough for her. Whatever that meant. We could remain in immersion with what I really just called "GT light," which was one hour a week an itinerant GT teacher went around to all the schools and would pull the kids who were GT eligible but didn't go to the Center and do activities with them. In theory, they were consulting with the classroom teacher to help them differentiate for my daughter. Because I had taught in that district, I knew that didn't happen. Or we can accept a GT placement in another school, a GT center where all of the classroom teachers were GT trained, the other students were all GT students ("GT students" in air quotes), and the curriculum was accelerated, but it was also only in English.

Drawing on her experience in the district, Sabrina believed the GT center would best support her daughter's academic needs. Like María, she tried to supplement Spanish through outside activities:

> We decided to transfer our daughter to the GT Center… I did mommy and me classes with my son […], enrolled my daughter in Spanish classes on Saturdays[,] community events [and] summer camps that offered Spanish. I remembered [scoffing] at parents who did the same for their children and lamented how much smaller the immersion classes were in grades three through six when compared K to two, and we would question, were [the parents] really ever committed to the immersion program? ..And those are questions that I was asking myself when we decided to change my daughter's school.

Here, we see how deeply language ideologies shape both our judgments and our parenting. The internal tension between educator and mother underscores the complexity of navigating systems that force families to choose—and then question—their commitment to bilingualism.

The tensions presented here signal how cultural and community ties—whether linguistic or professional—can both enable and restrict access to bilingual programs that support language development. Equity discourses that focus solely on who gets access risk being exclusionary. Instead, efforts should prioritize expanding program availability. Our experiences suggest that some parents engage DLBE critically and thoughtfully—often at a personal cost to themselves and their racialized children.

Discussion

Navigating DLBE Through Intersectional Lenses

Our journeys as racially diverse motherscholars raising multilingual children unfold within systems that frame DLBE as both a promise and a barrier. Our motivations—rooted in preserving culture, fostering solidarity, and resisting assimilation—were repeatedly complicated by racialized and classed structures of access. We sought DLBE not only for our children's development, but also as an extension of our commitments to justice, and ourselves. Yet, as our stories reveal, professional expertise did not shield us from structural exclusion. Rather, it deepened our awareness of how DLBE access is shaped by coded gatekeeping, ideological gentrification, and geographic constraint.

Our experiences illuminate the insufficiency of binary narratives—those that categorize families as either White and privileged or marginalized and in need. These tropes erase the realities of multiracial, transnational, and interethnic families who occupy contradictory positions of access and exclusion. For instance, we found

ourselves making educational choices from scarcity, not preference, in systems designed to reward proximity to whiteness, affluence, and English dominance. Even when access was technically available, it came tethered to trade-offs: between belonging and survival, cultural continuity and academic security.

As motherscholars, we also carried the gendered labor of enacting family language policy in contexts that questioned our legitimacy. Dominant DLBE discourse seldom reflects our complex negotiations across care, safety, identity, and opportunity. Instead, prevailing literature often fails to account for how intersecting oppressions shape participation in these programs—especially for those whose families straddle racial, linguistic, and migratory boundaries. As Taylor (2017) reminds us, binaries are tools of erasure. Our narratives disrupt them.

Using Critical Systems Theory (CST), we see these experiences not as individual struggles but as manifestations of larger systems. In our critique, we challenge the ideological terrain of DLBE that commodifies language and defines deservingness through narrow racial and economic lenses. Emancipation, then, requires moving beyond universalist claims like "bilingualism for all" and instead insisting on pluralistic, relational models that honor community-defined goals. A truly inclusive DLBE must center those most impacted while also recognizing the fluidity and multiplicity of family configurations that seek belonging.

Toward a Race-Radical Vision of DLBE

Our experiences and analysis point to the need for an expanded, race-radical reimagining of DLBE—one that interrogates how whiteness, neoliberalism, and coloniality undergird both the access to and function of bilingual programs. A race-radical vision (Flores, 2016) resists market logics that treat language as an individual asset and instead demands systems that nourish language as a communal right, deeply entangled with histories of struggle and survival.

This vision urges us to move beyond reforms that merely widen access to gentrified programs. It calls for structural transformation—beginning with centering families historically excluded not only from DLBE but from educational decision-making altogether. It also recognizes that solidarity across racialized communities—Black, Brown, multiracial—is both essential and possible. As García and Sung (2018) and Heiman and Nuñez-Janes (2021) remind us, race-radical language activism has long been built on cross-racial alliances.

We call on DLBE leaders and educators to act with this vision in mind. This includes recruiting and sustaining diverse educators, embedding anti-racist and culturally sustaining pedagogies, and designing curricula and school structures that reflect community languages, histories, and aspirations. It also requires resisting displacement—of people, programs, and purposes—by prioritizing long-term residents in program development and policymaking. As we've shown, the personal is deeply

political: Our choices as mothers are shaped by and shape the contours of justice in education.

Future Research

Research that advances a race radical vision of DLBE must grapple with current educational realities while building toward a liberated future. Future studies should explore how DLBE programs can cultivate cross-racial solidarity and meaningful coalition building. Key questions include: How might schools structure inclusive conversations across stakeholders? How can educators shape diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts to ensure all voices—not just the most privileged—are heard?

Given the structural gentrification shaping DLBE access, research must also examine how families engage with programs to drive change from within. At the same time, we must move beyond binary frameworks of race, class, and language that constrain our understanding of equity. Across these efforts, a central aim should be to disrupt dichotomies that oversimplify identities and experiences.

To truly move beyond Black–Brown and White–Brown binaries, access to DLBE must expand. Reframing gentrification through the lens of family language policy may spark more inclusive conversations about access. Ultimately, equity in DLBE requires not just reforming existing programs, but scaling them up—thoughtfully and in race-conscious solidarity.

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