

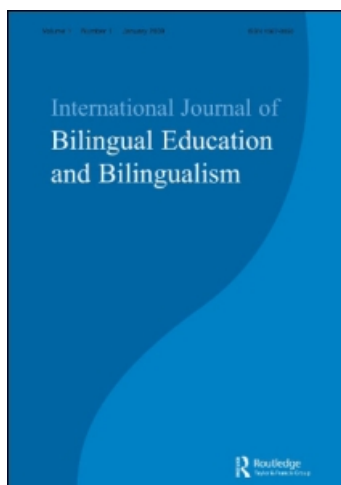
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Bilingual education policy as political spectacle: educating Latino immigrant youth in New York City

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To examine the ways in which high schools in New York City attend to second language acquisition is to consider everyday actions in schools, government dealings, localized policy responses, and disparate discourses on bilingualism. It is to position the circumstances of learning and teaching English in an American high school within the problems encountered and produced when multiple educational policies collide in local settings, such as individual schools. It is also to consider, and then interrogate, the ‘political spectacle’ in which educational actors associated with schools – teachers, counselors, parents, students, community members, activists, and administrators – become dramaturgically cast into political-policy roles as they enact federal, state, and district policies with regard not only to issues of language acquisition and bilingualism but also to increased accountability, mandated high-stakes testing, and other sanctions-driven approaches. Drawing on qualitative research conducted between September 2003 and May 2008, this article situates Gregorio Luperón High School, a successful bilingual school for Latino newcomers, within a web of politics and policies, grounded in the history of bilingual education in New York City. It reveals how this school, caught within a political-policy matrix of centralized federal authority under No Child Left Behind and decentralized accountability under the City’s Children First reforms, continues to emphasize second language acquisition as the ongoing work of building a bilingual speech community, even in the face of educational policies that increasingly narrow assessment of language acquisition and intensify the overall evaluation of academic achievement.

Keywords: bilingual education; political spectacle; policy; Latinos

Introduction

To study bilingual education policy in American education is to consider issues of racialized immigration, labor subordination, citizenship disparities, and an embarrassment of societal inequities faced by those who are deemed ‘English language learners’ in the USA. It requires an analysis across multiple social policy and political contexts, both in and outside of schools, to reveal ‘the ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language’ (Phillipson 1992, 47). Bilingual education policy has been imbued with the struggles and compromises accumulated during five decades of controversy

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surrounding language use and educational aims. Situated within an ‘orientation to English-only, a drive for cultural uniformity, and the accommodation to the language rights of some minority groups’ (Gándara and Gómez 2009), bilingual education policy is political activity, replete with historical, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts (Crawford 2000; Ricento 1998; Tollefson and Tsui 2004).

In this article, we reframe what we know about bilingual education policy and its implementation in New York City with the ‘political spectacle’ (Edelman 1988; Smith et al. 2004; Wright 2005) – the purposefully crafted and publicized political constructions – of bilingual education. These theatrical productions are manipulated by politicians to veil xenophobic and linguistic discrimination directed at those who do not speak English as their native language, and are then circulated through public media. With attention to politics and policies, we examine Gregorio Luperón High School, a successful bilingual school for Latino newcomers. This school, caught between centralized federal authority under No Child Left Behind and decentralized accountability under the city’s Children First reforms, continues to emphasize second language acquisition as the ongoing work of building a speech community. In circumstances created by policies that increasingly narrow assessments of language acquisition and intensify the evaluation of academic achievement, this case reveals that the enactment of policy can be restaged locally when policy actors, initially relegated to subaltern roles, draw upon their community’s political strength to recast themselves as policy leaders. Teachers and administrators at Gregorio Luperón capitalize on a key spectacle element – ambiguous wording in political documents, in this case, district policy – to create a public, bilingual high school.

This article draws upon data collected between September 2003 and May 2008 in a qualitative case study of Gregorio Luperón High School. Here we consider the development of the school, the implementation of federal and state policies, and the local politics of New York City to illustrate how policy actors ‘appropriate’ (Levinson and Sutton 2001) bilingual education across diverse contexts, replete with political subjectivities and differentials of power, by creatively and selectively incorporating ‘discursive and institutional resources into their own schemes of interest, motivation, and action’ (3). We position Luperón’s bilingual education within the multidimensional and dynamic policy processes shaped by a political climate best described as the marketization of education and the depoliticization of citizens (Bartlett et al. 2002; Edelman 1988; Smith et al. 2004). Examining the speech community at Luperón reveals the ways that the school confounds and confronts the constraints imposed on ‘emergent bilinguals’, defined by García (García 2009; García, Kleifgen, and Falchi 2008) as those who are developing academic English and becoming bilingual.

To begin, we look at political spectacle as a theoretical framework. From there, we reconsider 50 years of bilingual education policy in the United States and in New York City, highlighting elements of the spectacle. We describe Gregorio Luperón High School and discuss the methods used to gather data. We then explain how actors at Luperón participate in the spectacle, capitalizing on the strengths of New York City ethnic politics to produce a local policy discourse, recasting the policy leaders and restaging the story of bilingual education. We conclude with an analysis of our findings.

Bilingual education policy as political spectacle

This article draws upon Edelman’s (1988) theory of political spectacle, as applied to educational policy by Smith et al. (2004). Political spectacles are, according to these

scholars, political constructions of reality that ‘resemble theater, complete with directors, stages, casts of actors, narrative plots, and (most importantly) a curtain that separates the action onstage – what the audience has access to – from the backstage, where “real allocation of values” takes place’ (Smith et al. 2004, 11). Variations between onstage and backstage conduct and maneuverings, originally elucidated by Goffman (1959), are often concealed by the actors. Presented by the media as benefiting public good, spectacles serve to obscure the ways in which they sustain inequalities and maintain power differentials.

In political spectacle applied to policy, dramaturgy includes staging ‘policy events that are carefully crafted and planned for the purpose of media attention’ (Wright 2005, 664). Onstage, props such as students’ test scores and graduation reports are strategically selected and deployed as symbolic objects imbued with meaning. Policy actors – leaders, enemies, and allies – ‘are cast to play certain roles’ (Smith et al. 2004, 16). These actors generate and repeat their plot lines to garner support for their positions, often concealing costs and benefits to the public through an enactment of particular ideas and values. In the spectacle of bilingual education policy in the United States, English most often becomes inextricably bound to national allegiance and democratic values while other languages, such as Spanish, are positioned as a threat to the strength and integrity of the nation.

Deception in political spectacle hinges upon the use of symbolic language, which is ambiguous, metaphorical, and open to multiple interpretations. Policy-targeted problems are situated within vague claims; ‘A central theme of this analysis, then, is the diversity of meanings inherent in every social problem, stemming from the range of concerns of different groups, each eager to pursue courses of action and call them solutions’ (Edelman 1988, 15). Ill-defined terms such as ‘national identity’ and ‘democratic citizenry’ are employed to evoke emotional responses. Words, figures, and numerical data used by political leaders to support policies are presented as precise and absolute, rather than subjectively contextualized. Paradoxically ‘political language bemuses, obfuscates, befogs, mystifies, lulls, [and] glosses’ (Smith et al. 2004, 16), while garnering consensus through its vagueness.

The theatrics are for public consumption. However, backstage, actors (who are far less numerous than spectators) ‘negotiate for themselves material benefits using the informal language of barter, in contrast to the stylized, formal, abstract, ambiguous language characteristic of the performance onstage’ (Smith et al. 2004, 32). Political hopefuls gain favor from particular constituents; businessmen garner lucrative contracts with educational agencies; and government officials vie for popularity and ongoing support.

Utilizing a political spectacle framework to examine bilingual education policy illuminates not only how policy develops its ‘own momentum inside the state’ (Ball 2006, 45), but more explicitly elucidates how particular politicians, with the enlistment of the media and corporate investment, capitalize on the power of policy to produce particular versions of truth and knowledge. The spectacle perspective exposes the ways in which national and local government officials, influential businessmen, and policy stakeholders collude in staging policy.

Bilingual education as political spectacle

Federally, bilingual education is inextricably linked, through legislation, court decisions and executive action, to the country’s ‘war on poverty’, and it has been

'largely a compensatory program to remediate the language deficits of limited English speakers' (Gándara and Gómez 2009, 582). Title VII of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), often referred to as the Bilingual Education Act (BEA), was added in 1968 and became the first official federal bilingual education policy in the United States. As a political spectacle, despite its misleading name, the BEA initially focused not on developing bilingualism, but rather on eliminating poverty among 'deprived' children who presumably suffered from an English language deficit. According to Wiese and Garcia (2001), the BEA pointed to the education of emergent bilinguals as a critical educational problem in the United States. The official story line of the Act was one of intervention in the (political and media manufactured) 'crisis' of rising Mexican immigration (Garcia and Gonzalez 1995). The BEA was ambiguously written and variably enacted 'during a time of great domestic upheaval and demographic transformations, including the civil rights movement and the federal War on Poverty' (Reyes 2006, 370). Ten years after its inception, Title VII was reauthorized in a version that explicitly denied native language maintenance in favor of federal funding for transitional programs, in which children were to learn English as quickly as possible. By 1994, Title VII was renewed and the cap on the quantity of English-only programs was lifted, thus paving the way for districts who claimed they could not support bilingual programs to proceed with English only (Gándara and Gómez 2009).

In the early 1980s, amidst the rapid increase of a Spanish-speaking immigrant population, the English-only movement reframed bilingual education as a bane to cultural assimilation and citizen participation. The movement swelled and gained increasing media coverage, especially in California and the Southwestern USA, states with large Mexican immigrant populations. While unsuccessful in getting federal legislation passed, the movement did secure measures in 28 states (García 2009). California and Arizona, which have large populations of emergent bilinguals, have drastically restricted bilingual education through Propositions 227 and 203 respectively.

In the staging of California's Proposition 227 and Arizona's Proposition 203 spectacles, immigrant families and local Latino officials were used as props, appearing in campaign television advertisements. Attached to the families was the following rhetoric: immigrant parents want their children to learn English. Businessman and political hopeful Ron Unz, the primary author of both propositions, as well as similar versions in Massachusetts and Colorado, cast the federal government and public schools as culpable. The narrative he and his followers created was that public schools, which share a moral obligation to teach all children English, had failed to educate immigrant children because of costly experimental language programs – i.e. bilingual education. Political hopefuls, turned policy leaders, made public (and publicized) alliances with local Latino government officials, creating the symbolic illusion that initiatives had grassroots Latino support.

Nationally, the political spectacle of bilingual education policy continued to be staged. In 2002, Title VII was eliminated under the reauthorization of ESEA entitled the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and replaced by Title III (Public Law 107-110), which mandates vaguely-described language education programs that allow, but do not specify, native language instruction. In fact, the word 'bilingual' was removed not only from the law, but also from any government offices associated with it (García 2009). Ambiguous language and grandiose titles that conflated different educational foci were generated; the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language

Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited-English Proficient Students replaced the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs. Through Title III, federal funding shifted from competitive grants to formula grants allocated to states based on enrollments of students designated as 'Limited English Proficient' (LEP) – and has resulted in a reduction of per student funding (García 2009).

The political spectacle of NCLB has been widely noted, although not all scholars have used this framing. Through the official NCLB narrative, the public is told that the crisis in American public education is so severe that the deficiency of achievement (which has supposedly reduced the global economic competitiveness of the USA) requires federal intervention Koyama (2010). Stating that 'no child' will be ignored, or conversely that 'all children' will be addressed, it hides categories by naturalizing them, disguising the fact that NCLB is premised upon the disaggregation of children and their test scores into race, ethnicity, class, language and cognitive and physical abilities so that much can be made of their differential test results. Under NCLB, bilingual education (or what Crawford [2004] has aptly named the 'B-word') has given way to program descriptions defined by individual states.

Bilingual education in New York State has not fallen prey to English-only campaigns, although changes have occurred. The *Aspira Consent Decree* (United States District Court 1974), which ensures transitional bilingual education as a legal entitlement for students, has become, through a lack of funding, a symbolic rather than a material policy. Recently, 'as in other locations, standardized testing has affected bilingual education' (García and Bartlett 2007, 4) in New York City. In particular, the imposition of the state English Regents exam – a six-hour exam, which is taken over two days – as a high school graduation requirement has resulted in reduced instruction time in languages other than English (Menken 2005) and increased the intensity of English instruction, essentially eliminating substantive bilingual education in high school (García and Menken 2006). In the context of these policies regarding assessment and bilingual education, schools in New York City have struggled to educate Latino English language learners.

Latino immigrants in New York City public schools

Latinos, who by the late 2000s made up the largest minority group in the New York City public schools, are not faring well educationally.¹ While estimates of dropout rates vary, the picture of disparity between Latinos and other groups endures. In 2004, the New York City Department of Education found that Latino dropout rates were higher than all other groups in New York City public schools with the exception of the few American Indian students (De Jesús and Vásquez 2005). The New York City Department of Education (2008) found that Latinos had a graduation rate of 53.4% in 2007, as compared to a 79% graduation rate for white students.² There is some evidence that the institution of Regents' exams, and the heightened requirements for a Regents diploma, are exacerbating the Latino dropout rate (Avitia 2009; Fine et al. 2007). Rates for foreign-born youth are even lower. In their analysis of the New York City Department of Education data for the cohort that entered high school in 1995, Rosenbaum and Cortina found that only approximately 39% of Latino foreign-born students successfully graduated with a high school diploma (2004, 4; see also Fry 2005).³ Dominicans, in particular, have historically been relegated to under-resourced and under-performing schools, resulting in part from residential segregation, transnational linkages, and limited experience navigating

the public school system (Conger, Ellen, and O'Regan 2009; Ellen et al. 2001; Kasintz et al. 2008).

Gregorio Luperón High School

Responding to this crisis, as we detail below, in the 1990s a group of Latino educators organized to establish a new bilingual high school for immigrant Latino youth. They purposefully located it in Washington Heights, the neighborhood with the highest concentration of Dominicans in the USA. The overwhelming majority of students at the high school are Dominican. Ninety-seven percent of the students attending Gregorio Luperón are deemed English language learners (what we, following García [2009], are calling 'emergent bilinguals'), the highest percentage in all of the city's high schools.

Luperón's mission statement reflects its commitment to bilingualism; the school 'aims to nurture, challenge and prepare students...to achieve high standards of scholarship and leadership in both Spanish and English speaking society'.⁴ To achieve this goal, Luperón employs what García and Bartlett (2007) call a speech community model of education, in which educators focus on language acquisition as a social process that involves an entire speech community, while attending to sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts, including the ways in which practices, identity and power interact to provide a context for learning English. This speech community model has a focus on *macroacquisition*, defined by Brutt-Griffler (2004) as 'a process of social second language acquisition' in a process of dynamic bilingualism (for more on this process, see Bartlett and García 2011).

Compared to national and citywide averages, Luperón has had remarkable success shepherding newcomer immigrant youth through graduation. Official rates show that, in 2008, Luperón enjoyed an 83.8% graduation rate within four years. It far outperformed peer schools with similar populations, leading the New York City Department of Education to declare the school as performing at 119.8% of its 'peer horizon' in graduation rates.⁵ In 2007, the official four-year graduation rate was 67.2%, while the six-year rate was 76.1%, which reflects the necessity of allowing emergent bilinguals more time to develop academic English. Luperón, with its unwavering commitment to bilingual education, has been achieving impressive results.

Research methods

The data in this article are drawn from a larger, longitudinal case study of Luperón. The study began in 2003 with nine months of bi-weekly school-based observations, a survey of 50 newly arrived students, and seven focus groups with newly arrived students. Over the next four years, while school-based observations continued, researchers on the project also began annual interviews and regular observations with a cohort of 20 students. In addition, in the third and fourth years of the project, researchers conducted interviews with teachers, administrators, founders of the school and parents and observed participants at Parent-Teacher Association meetings.⁶

This article relies primarily on interviews with administrators, founders, and teachers, supplemented by historical accounts of educational politics in New York City and a thorough review of press coverage of relevant events. The data were

analyzed using two approaches. First, we identified various events that became relevant in Luperón's historical development within a shifting bilingual policy context, and we analyzed the political actors and discourses employed. Second, after identifying the staged feeling of these political dramas, we conducted a metaphorical analysis (see, for example, Smith 1981) using the concept of political spectacle.

Educating emergent bilinguals at Luperón: key historical moments of political spectacle

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s in New York City, Latino activists pressed for improved school conditions. Relatively high levels of segregation in northern Manhattan allowed Dominicans to achieve greater control of neighborhood schools and, subsequently, political representation. A full 80% of the 25,000 students attending elementary and middle schools in District 6 in the late 1980s were Dominican; the schools were miserably overcrowded and had some of the lowest reading scores (Linares 1989, 78). According to Vélez (2007, 136):

It was then that the Community Association of Progressive Dominicans confronted the school board and superintendent to demand bilingual education and other services for recently arrived immigrant families. The concerted efforts of community organizations, a parents' network throughout the district, and an aggressive voter registration drive led to greater Dominican representation on neighborhood school boards (and a majority in District 6). As a result, bilingual programs were started, new schools were constructed in the district, and, in 1994, a Dominican was appointed principal of a community high school where three-quarters of the student body was of Dominican origin (Pessar 1995).

By the early 1990s, a group of educators had formed the Dominican Association of Education Professionals in order to bring greater power to bear on the New York City Board of Education (Torres-Saillant and Hernandez 1998, 85). Dominicans made important gains during this period in the opening of elementary and middle schools. A group of young people called *Union de Jovenes Dominicanos* began to pressure for improved high schools as well.

In New York City, political agitation in the 1980s for equal representation led to the 1991 redistricting that yielded a predominantly Dominican electoral district in upper Manhattan (Ricourt 2002). This shift produced the election of the first Dominican to the New York City Council, Guillermo Linares, and, in 1996, the election of Dominican-born Adriano Espaillat to the New York State Assembly as northern Manhattan's representative for District 72 (Pessar and Graham 2001). Linares and Espaillat had, alongside other activists, helped to organize the community to pressure for improved schools and more qualified teachers. Community activists and Latino support organizations regularly appeared at Community Board meetings to protest the deplorable school conditions for Latino immigrant youth. During this time, the boards held authority over public education in the city and the activists played important roles in school politics, directly challenging the status quo and gaining public support for their positions. More recently, however, as the Bloomberg and Klein administration has gained control of the schools, eliminated the community boards, and purposefully centralized district authority, the platforms for community involvement and influence are less explicitly available.

In 1992, the maverick Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernández announced a Call for Proposals to create new schools. Fernández was appalled by the circumstances of New York's schools. He hoped that smaller schools might reduce anonymity and

restore a sense of community for some of the city's struggling immigrants (Fernandez and Underwood 1993). This opening provided the opportunity that some Latino activists had been seeking.

Disenchanted and angry over the poor education that Latino immigrant students were receiving, one assistant principal and four teachers at George Washington High School met to respond to Fernández's call for proposals. These educator-activists had helped organize community efforts to improve schooling for area youth. Two leaders drafted a concept paper for the school that was then supported by the Manhattan High School superintendent, Patricia Black, and other local politicians.

After a year of planning – attending workshops, visiting schools, and studying various school models – these Latino educational pioneers with deep ties to Washington Heights developed a bilingual, two-year transitional school for Spanish-speaking newcomers. Reflecting on the early days, one founder explained the social motivation for starting the school: 'We were very hopeful, with the youngsters who were lost, who didn't speak the language, but who were hopeful to have a career' (12 April 2007). The founders were determined that not knowing English should not lead to academic failure; they were moved by a sense of getting individual students to succeed in school and also to strengthen the community.

By the time Luperón opened in September 1994, the number of emergent bilinguals in city schools had doubled to about 180,000, far exceeding the number of students that could be served by educators qualified to teach bilingual education or funded by the limited federal and state monies specifically targeted to the education of immigrant children (Hernandez and Rivera-Batiz 1997). But as Luperón began teaching immigrants in their bilingual program, the city's Board of Education released a study claiming that students (including recent immigrants) who took classes in English achieved more, academically, than students in bilingual programs (Dillon 1994). The study fueled local media reports and mirrored the national media construction and coverage of mounting public opposition to bilingual education, in which the costs for providing social services and public education for 'illegal alien children' who were 'more likely to be enrolled in programs such as bilingual education' (Edmonston and Lee 1996, 15) were portrayed as fiscal liabilities for local municipalities. A report released in early October 1994 by Herman Badillo, City Hall's special counsel for school finances, asserted that each bilingual student cost the city \$2,000 more than mainstreamed students (who were referred to as 'regular students' in the report).

Despite the discourse against bilingual education, in its first few years, Luperón remained out of purview of the media and beyond critical review by district officials. Situated in the Alternative School district, located in a converted warehouse with few windows in Washington Heights, Luperón's politically committed faculty and small, ethnically homogenous student body received relatively little scrutiny from the educational hierarchy. Its power, while local, increased mostly out of view of the city's political-policy leaders who continued to focus on enacting their educational reform battles across (and behind) the public main stage. The anomalous school did not fit any norm as defined by the New York City Department of Education. Capitalizing on the ambiguous policies associated with alternative schools and transitional programs, Luperón was not subsumed in the ongoing public debate over the efficacy of bilingual education and managed to establish its unique speech community model of bilingual education at the same time that federal funds for bilingual education

were retracted and redistributed to reform entire schools with large immigrant populations (Dillon 1994).

Becoming a four-year high school amid Children First reforms and NCLB

After the first few years at Luperón, a debate emerged over shifting from a transitional school to a four-year high school. After much deliberation, the school became a four-year high school during a period that Reyes (2006) characterizes as a ‘perfect storm’ – what we would call a *political spectacle* – of controversy regarding bilingual education policy in New York City. Beginning in 1998 and extending through 2001, then Mayor Giuliani, who described bilingual education as a 1970s failed experiment, endeavored to end the Aspira Consent Decree and partnered with Ron Unz to eliminate bilingual education in the city. In direct opposition, schools chancellor Harold Levy and school board representative Irving Hamer released studies in support of bilingual education – and ‘for six stormy months, the public was awash in a swirl of research reports, newspaper headlines, editorials, and competing sets of policy recommendations’ (Reyes 2006, 380). Aspira, Latino activists, and other bilingual education advocates rallied and the Aspira Consent Decree remained, although its power became mostly symbolic after Giuliani’s decision to radically reduce funding.

Within Luperón, the transition to a four-year high school posed numerous internal challenges and subjected the school to state regulations, such as Regents exams. Furthermore, this shift coincided with a landmark reorganization of management structures for New York City schools. In 2003, after Mayor Bloomberg was given control of the school system, the 32 community school boards that had been in place for decades were abolished and ten regions were established. Together with Schools Chancellor Klein, Bloomberg cast himself as an innovative educational policy leader, accentuating a platform of pioneering reforms that thrust him into the national spotlight. Calling his reforms a response to the ‘crisis’ of the City’s public education, Bloomberg supplied ‘an apparent justification’ (Smith et al. 2004, 18) for his dramatic unilateral changes, while also setting the stage for what continues to be a public display of political battles over district control and school programs, including bilingual education. This change unsettled many community leaders because it stripped them of their sense of political participation in local schools. Latino leaders were particularly concerned as they had witnessed Bloomberg assail the status quo in bilingual education and call for English-only education during his campaign, a stance he changed when faced with plummeting popularity ratings among Hispanics (Freedman 2004; Trotta 2003).

Under Bloomberg’s reorganization, which occurred at the beginning of our study, Luperón was placed under Region 10. Region administrators frequented the school often and became increasingly critical of the fact that many Luperón students required five years, rather than four, to complete the Regents exams necessary for a Regents diploma. Faculty and staff complained that the regional administrators clearly had no idea of the school, its history, or its political mission (March 2004). As one faculty member said, the Region:

... wants a yes man. They don’t want any questions. . . . The region cares about paper and numbers, not stories and people. . . . We’re teaching kids. We care about them. We have a wonderful faculty, experienced, caring, dedicated. But that doesn’t seem to

matter. The system hasn't given us the credit we deserve for the work we've done. We could have done a better job, in terms of percentages [of pass rates on tests]. But compared to other schools, we've done a good job. (28 April 2004).

Yet, in political spectacle, it is precisely 'words and numbers made to appear precise and rational' (Smith et al. 2004, 13), such as a Regents exam cut off score or the percentage of students who pass the exam within four years, that determine how rewards are allocated or denied.

Teachers, who increasingly felt they were under surveillance by regional and district administrators, were cast in the political spectacle as 'enemies', reluctant to implement the City's reforms. Regional administrators demanded that Luperón improve its four-year pass rate on the English Regents – a requirement to earn a high school diploma. The English Regents, a six-hour test taken over two days, was a major impediment for the students. As Menken (2008) and García and Menken (2006) have shown, these tests require students to display high levels of academic-register English. The English Regents requires a total of four essays, difficult for emergent bilinguals who generally 'develop receptive skills more rapidly than the productive skills needed to write an essay in academic English' (Menken 2008, 69; see also Cummins 1992). Further, though Luperón was succeeding at graduating most of its students within a five-year window, consistent with the five to seven years required to develop academic competence in a second language (Cummins 1992), the region wanted Luperón to significantly increase its four-year graduation rate, a goal that served political rather than educational aims. 'It's all about the numbers,' said one assistant principal at the time (May 2004); Bloomberg frequently confirmed this assertion, holding up standardized test scores and four-year graduation rates as the mark by which his reforms should be judged.

In 2006, based on its overall accountability system, the Department of Education implemented a Progress Report for each school. Graduation rates, Regents pass rates, the proportion of students passing classes each year, and measures of the school environment are components of the measure for high schools. However, the Progress Report's grading scheme has proven to be overly sensitive, with small changes yielding large shifts in a school's status (Hemphill and Nauer 2010). Luperón's Progress Report scores wavered from 70 (2007) to 100 (2008) to 88.5 (2009), with relatively little differing within the school. As further evidence of the fickle nature of standardized measures, in 2007, the same year it earned an A on the New York City Department of Education Progress Report, Luperón was determined by the New York State Department of Education under NCLB to be in need of improvement and placed on the Schools in Need of Improvement (SINI)-year 1 list.

(Paradoxically) more testing and greater empowerment

In 2007, reacting to what they perceived as the slow pace of change, Mayor Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Klein abruptly shifted course. They abandoned the regional organization, which had vested regional supervisors with a great deal of power, and replaced it with Learning Support Organizations, or coalitions of schools. The move centralized authority in the Department of Education, which monitored school performance on the basis of high-stakes accountability measures; it simultaneously decentralized responsibility, allowing principals greater latitude in budgeting and curricular decisions. One of the Learning Support Organizations was known as Empowerment Schools (initially called 'autonomous schools'). Although

this second phase of Children First reforms essentially reversed the actions of the first, Bloomberg and Klein presented them as a rational and logical progression of the reforms, a common feature in political spectacle. Further, empowerment (and who would argue against empowering those working closely with students?) and increased district assessment contradicted each other, a common and often unquestioned condition created by spectacle language.

In 2006, Luperón escaped the Region's harsh scrutiny by becoming an Empowerment School – a school in which broad authority over educational programming and curriculum, discretion over budgets, and significant control over staffing is awarded to a school's principal in return for increased accountability and assessment. As an Empowerment School, under the accountability and standardization of NCLB and Children First Reforms, Luperón agreed to implement ongoing periodic assessments to yield formative data intended to help teachers better target their instruction to students' learning (as measured by standardized tests). In the first year, they did not have time or resources to create their own assessment system, so they purchased testing materials from Princeton Review. The materials, which were developed for monolingual students, were incongruent with their linguistic goals and speech community model (see Bartlett and García 2011). The tests, provided in English and often presented in multiple-choice format, did not accurately measure students' learning. At that time, the principal complained: 'We have to do evaluations of our kids using an instrument developed for a population that has nothing to do with our kids' (22 March 2007). Further, the tests had to be administered every six weeks, reducing time for teaching new content. Finally, teachers and students were experiencing testing overload. One administrator, interviewed during a month of concentrated testing, complained, 'There's no communication between the people who are asking to test these kids. NYSESLAT, AP exams, ELA everything in May, plus periodic assessment, and the end of the marking period' (30 April 2007). Within a year, the faculty and staff designed their own assessments. This approach was time-consuming and laborious, but it yielded periodic reviews that provided the teachers with more reliable data. Further, the requirement for periodic assessments was reduced to twice a year, thus easing the testing burden.

The decision to become an empowerment school was the best among seemingly few choices. Chancellor Klein, known for his penchant for sudden reforms, was championing the Empowerment Model, which suggested that the other options available at the time might well fold in the near future. Further, the empowerment model allowed greater discretion over budgets and curricula, provided a school met testing requirements. However, the decision brought with it an array of testing that the principal characterized as 'overwhelming', using unreliable tests not aligned with the curriculum, and administered so frequently that it was difficult to detect any gains (interview, 15 June 2010). Maintenance of the empowerment status depended not only on use of periodic assessments; it also depended on yearly gains in end-of-year Regents tests. Yet these are problematic measures; as discussed previously, the English Regents is a notoriously complex test for emergent bilinguals and a recent study reveals that by comparing pass rates over time, the city is essentially misusing a test designed to measure proficiency as a tool to measure growth (Hemphill and Nauer 2010).

The advent of the 'empowerment' model perfectly illustrates the ways in which richly symbolic language is used in political spectacles to impose the extension of government control via accountability in the guise of greater freedom. While local educators were unable to avoid being drafted into the drama, they could negotiate

the terms by developing their own assessments and, by implementing them, earning for themselves greater curricular control to implement bilingual education.

Discussion: reconsidering Luperón and the political spectacle of bilingual education

Within a national policy spectacle of bilingual education, Gregorio Luperón High School became wedged between mounting federal and district policies and regulations and its commitment to constructing and maintaining a bilingual speech community. Its founders emerged, perhaps unexpectedly, as policy leaders by building upon the visibility of Latino political coalitions pushing for educational reforms and capitalizing on the ambiguity of a policy created by a previous and somewhat demonized school chancellor. They fought to become a bilingual school when bilingual education programs in New York City were under threat of mayoral elimination. The school then dared to subject itself to intense scrutiny and evaluation by the regionally-segregated district by abandoning its sheltered position as a two-year transitional program in order to become a four-year high school. This decision proved harmful, as regional supervisors pressured teachers to intensify English instruction in order to increase the four-year English Regents pass rates. Aiming to regain some of the autonomy it had enjoyed as a transitional program in the alternative district, Luperón, then a four-year high school, accepted greater accountability for increased decision-making and 'empowerment'.

Assessment policies like the ones imposed on Luperón served the political careers of the Bloomberg and Bush administrations. Inconsistencies in evaluating the success and failure of schools are commonplace as contradictory assessments, variable allocations of merit, and complex grading formulas are used simultaneously as props in the political spectacle. As noted by Anderson (2007) in his study of the media's impact on educational policies and practices, 'any principal or superintendent knows that there are at least a dozen ways to deflate dropout statistics when under pressure to do so' (106). In this case, Gregorio Luperón received an A on its progress report and was simultaneously found, under NCLB measures, to be 'failing' and in need of improvement. In the spectacle, each measure of Luperón was originally crafted, strategically developed, evoked as rational symbols of measurement, and presented for public consumption in the spectacle of transparency. However, when staged in the aggregate, the reports appear absurd, reinforcing the notion that educational issues are too complex for the public to comprehend – and should thus be left to the 'experts'.

Still, amid narrowing and more stringent assessments of language acquisition and amplified evaluation of overall academic achievement, Luperón persisted and grew as a public bilingual school for newcomers, partly by remaining off the main stage, affected by the enactment of the political spectacle, but not consumed by it. Instead, Luperón staged its own production in its overcrowded warehouse, successfully integrating its social aims and political mission to build a successful public bilingual high school, and likely surprising many in the district audience. Their counter-performance demonstrates that in New York City, 'the condition of politics and the degree of political spectacle have not been constant and inevitable' (Smith et al. 2004, 255).

In the school's most recent (and most public) act, Luperón engaged in and won a battle with the Department of Education to secure a new building. For years, teachers organized students and parents to agitate for a more appropriate site; they circulated petitions and held protests at the school. In 2005, Bloomberg announced that the city would spend \$41 million to construct a new high school for Luperón.

Located at 165th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, the new facilities include a library, gym, auditorium, science labs, music and art room, kitchen/cafeteria and wireless Internet access. The project was completed in time for the opening of the 2008 school year. At Luperón, 'ordinary' teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and students accomplished extraordinary things in one of the City's 1500 public schools by taking localized political actions, which Smith et al. (2004) notes may be the antidote to political spectacle.

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Notes

1. Approximately 384,211 Latino students attended grades K–12 during the 2007–2008 school year (New York State Education Department 2009). Over two-thirds of New York City's so-called emergent bilinguals are Latino (Conger et al. 2009).
2. However, De Jesús and Vasquez (2005) warned that actual graduation numbers may be lower than those reported: they suggest that while the Department of Education in 2005 reported 46% of Latinos as graduating, only 33.4% of Latino graduates actually received a Regents Endorsed diploma, while 33.4% of Latino students had to enroll in a fifth year of high school (for additional critiques, see also Fine et al. 2007).
3. Different ethnic groups experienced markedly differentiated levels of success: only 34% of Mexican-born students and just under 40% of Dominican- and Salvadorian-born students graduated, while more than 50% of students born in South America, Colombia, and Ecuador who started high school in New York City in 1995 were able to graduate (Rosenbaum and Cortina 2004).
4. See <http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/06/M552/default.htm> (accessed November 23, 2009).
5. See http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2007-08/Progress_Report_2008_HS_M552.pdf
6. For more information on the methods used in this project, please see Bartlett and García 2011.

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