

Disrupting the Monolingual Bias

*To educators who dare to advocate
for their bilingual learners, this book is for you.*

Disrupting the Monolingual Bias

A Framework for Teacher Advocacy

Lillian Ardell

Foreword by Margo Gottlieb

CORWIN



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This chapter introduces the concept of the Monolingual Bias through a series of stories and data points from working in the field of bilingual education for 20 years. Consider the relationship between monolingual forces and pressures to assimilate multilingual learners (MLLs) to mainstream U.S. culture. The central argument is made that an advocacy stance rooted in sociolinguistics is the missing piece to realizing robust and sustainable academic outcomes for MLLs. This chapter concludes with an outline of the book, and an invitation to take the Small Brave Moments Quiz.

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reminder that the Supreme Court voted in favor of language access for immigrant communities as a fundamental civil right. It concludes with a set of soundbites to test your knowledge about how you (and others) perceive language access as: a problem, a right or a resource (Hult & Hornberger, 2016).

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Dive into 14 narratives that showcase the ways language can be used to marginalize and oppress, as well as how individuals and communities can challenge and resist these injustices. Each story will highlight the specific linguistic injustices faced by individuals or groups, the strategies they employed to mobilize and fight back, and the ultimate outcomes of their efforts—whether successful, disappointing, or redemptive. Through these stories, you will be encouraged to identify the different roles that individuals can play to dismantle linguistic injustice (the *Disruptor archetypes*) as well as the harmful beliefs and attitudes about language that underlie these injustices (the *deficit language ideologies*). There will be a blank page to take notes on the stories before flipping to Lillian’s exemplar analysis. The goal is to provide you with a range of stories that resonate with your own experiences and to offer opportunities for reflection and discussion that can be used in professional learning communities or higher education settings.

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www.languagematters.org.

FOREWORD

Disruption can often be uncomfortable, yet as we delve into the book's contents, we are awakened to its potential in provoking change to the status quo and upsetting stagnant systems essential for fostering growth and productivity. Following suit, we uncover Disruptors, those self-appointed agents who have the drive to innovate by questioning the norm and challenging basic assumptions. As an educational Disruptor, entering an environment of Monolingual Bias can be tremendously disconcerting, yet revealing, even stimulating, leaving you with an urgency to act. In response, raising awareness and defending multilingualism can be quite nuanced; however, as a deep-seated believer, you are constantly conjuring up ways to counter resistance to its principles and practices by fostering inclusivity and reveling in diversity.

Disrupting the Monolingual Bias captures the force behind this change of disposition. It is an in-depth ethnographical exploration of a teacher researcher whose intense study of cultural phenomena of peoples and communities draws you magically into her world. This autobiographical recount is one of an enduring advocate of bi/multilingual learners who weaves her stories and belief system into the fabric of the book through personal experiences and real-life accounts of her interactions and relationships with teachers, administrators, and students. Short of chastising her profession for promoting the power of English and an ideology of monolingualism, Ardell, at times, hoists the reader into unequivocal disbelief and disappointment in the education enterprise and its treatment of bi/multilingual learners, casting blame on those who cling to deficit language policies and pedagogies.

This historical narrative begins with questioning how monoglossic values have become so entrenched in elementary and secondary educational practices throughout our nation. In essence, we confront how the monolingual bias has been initiated, perpetuated, and ingrained into the educational psyche through powerful, often painful, histories and stories. The book is a sounding board of a critical pedagogist—the author—with the skills of a thoughtful qualitative researcher who delves into deep analysis of episodes actualized through authentic accounts of bi/multilingual individuals in a variety of situations and school environments.

What is uncovered in the book's nine chapters are anecdotes of real students, teachers, and administrators around the United States who, at times, are genuinely unaware that they are trapped in an ecology of a monolingual mindset. Still, with conviction and *ganas*, their negative ways of thinking and being are overturned, and we witness how educators inevitably extricate themselves from this misguided belief system to become victors of the multilingual cause. A sociolinguistic lens serves as the theoretical touchstone for Disruptor analysis, uncovering a monolingual bias within schools and districts along with pathways for gaining multilingual perspectives. Ultimately, we slowly inch forward toward the goal: for multilingual education to remain a mainstay and thrive as an integral component of our educational system. To accomplish this end, however, we must infuse justice and maintain hope in our ability to break the mold . . . and that is what *Disrupting the Monolingual Bias* accomplishes.

Part 1 constructs a knowledge base around what constitutes monolingual bias and its associated deficit ideologies, such as assimilationist views, that devalue non-English languages and perpetuate educational inequities of bi/multilingual learners. It simultaneously interweaves how enduring advocacy can rightfully portray multilingualism and how bilingual education can be a universal and sought-after educational aspiration and staple. Interspersed in the text are *Small Brave Moments*, a formative self-reflection tool and reminder of how one can initiate or further evoke change to elevate the status of multilingualism and multiculturalism across settings.

Chapter 1 introduces the monolingual bias—"a set of deficit ideologies within the educational system that promotes a singular narrative—English Learners must acquire academic English at all costs." That is the object of disruption. It is juxtaposed with the historicization of the role of language in learning, where "language is seen as either the barrier to entry or the golden key to unlocking the American Dream." Along with understanding this paradox is a plea to enhance and elevate multilingualism, not diminish students' heritage languages, cultures, or humanity at the expense of their English language development. What emerges from this fervent multilingual stance becomes the mission of *Disrupting the Monolingual Bias*—to equip teachers with respect for and value of multilingualism as a tool for empowerment.

Descriptions of five Disruptor archetypes emerge from Ardell's research based on ongoing observations and extensive interviews of four interest groups—students, teachers, administrators, scholars—and their encounters with the Monolingual Bias. These categorical divisions, ranging from the complacent Collaborator to the neutral arbiter or Mediator, the passionate yet controversial Rebel Rouser, the ultimate supporter or Cheerleader, to the creative Poet, serve both as a centerpiece of and thread throughout the book. Accompanying each person's specific episode or experience that stirs up potential disruption is a dual interpretation, the rationale for and naming of

the archetype along with an accompanying sociolinguistic analysis. The chapter concludes by urging the reader to “organize, plan, and enact Small Brave Moments that lead to full on Disruption Stories.” In essence, the ask is to assume responsibility for and pursue a cause that in some modest way begins to dismantle the Monolingual Bias.

While the first chapter prepares us for what might constitute and how we might initiate multilingual enlightenment, Chapter 2 establishes the relationship between bilingual education and social justice from evidence accrued through U.S. legislation and litigation. Specifically, beginning with *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), we witness the evolution of the courts’ role and influence in shaping the ebb and flow of bilingual education policy and practice of the next seven decades. Tucked between the Bilingual Education Act of 1964, an outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement, and the assimilationist English-Only Movement strongly reinforced during the No Child Left Behind years at the beginning of the millennium, we see the flourishing of languages and cultures in educational circles and classrooms. Ultimately, Ardell questions the orientations for language planning first posed by Richard Ruíz in his 1984 policy framework—language-as-problem, language-as-right, or language-as-resource, which are three views that reflect our perceptions of language in education and society.

Chapter 3 relates the evolution of and the theoretical rationale for the Monolingual Bias from Ardell’s personal encounters and sociolinguistics research. Combing the extensive database, we see how methodologically the Disruption narrative inquiry was followed, unearthed, and codified. Having unveiled the process of archetype formation, educators are then invited to reflect on their advocacy efforts using this typology. Starting here and moving into Chapter 4, we become familiar with portraits of enduring multilingual advocates and their language ideologies from teachers to principals, product developers, and education professionals. These strong believers, all with their unique insights and perspectives, shed light on their struggles (and victories), accruing small brave moments to become full-fledged tales of disruption equipped to dismantle the Monolingual Bias.

Part 2 furthers the argument and strategies for disturbing monolingual prejudice through voices from the field. Beginning with the author’s personal story in Chapter 5, we learn of the genesis and qualities of each Disruptor archetype and their contribution to the central argument that is elaborated in “success” and “bummer” Disruptor anecdotes in Chapters 6 and 7 followed by “redemption” stories in Chapter 8. Through real-life reenactments, we see how an array of diverse bilingual educators vested in multilingualism secures unique outcomes to issues that tend to plague the educational system, as illustrated in the following.

- A bilingual teacher whose impetus for devoting her career to advancing bilingualism and biliteracy stems from linguisticism (discrimination based

on a person's language) as it was socially manipulated and hatefully enacted

- A bilingual special education teacher who centers her students' interests in project-based learning experiences
- A team of administrators—a superintendent, principal, and bilingual coordinator—who leverages community and family assets to actualize their philosophy of dynamic bilingualism
- A school secretary who refuses to honor a family's request to maintain the Mexican tradition of carrying the duality of their father's and mother's surnames until a bilingual teacher supports the student's insistence on their legitimacy and use

The amassing of these and other voices of advocacy offers a convincing case for valuing multilingualism and multiculturalism as educational staples for all students. As a result, we become equipped with how to enact assets-driven pedagogies through strength-based methodologies and strategies regardless of the circumstances.

Chapter 9 of *Disrupting the Monolingual Bias* adds fuel to the disruption discourse through community cultural wealth and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005), a means of challenging deficit attitudes and the Monolingual Bias and replacing this negativity with equity-centered teaching. By underscoring student-centeredness, we are exposed to how to implement empowerment strategies to diminish the Monolingual Bias. Case in point, in valuing and promoting translanguaging (the natural cross-linguistic flow between languages) as a powerful language policy and practice, we help shape and nurture a student's bilingual identities.

One important lesson we glean from our reading is that by enacting empowerment pedagogies to ensure multilingualism, we promote both student and teacher agency. When it comes to multilingual learners, we learn that the students must come to have confidence and pride in their multilingualism and multiculturalism. Educators must act from a place of high expectations that focus on multilingual learners' potential, fostering their growth by creating meaningful, engaging, and relevant learning experiences.

Disrupting the Monolingual Bias is a true awakening for all teachers who work with multilingual learners and their families. We see sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical influences on language and learning come alive in this page turner that begs for deep reflection coupled with action to stir activism in the linguistic landscape to counteract the pervasive dominance of English as a marker of learning. In this modern-day attack on monolingualism, we hear the voices of other staunch guardians and fierce defenders of multicultural education, including Sonia Nieto and Shirley Brice Heath, dedicated ethnographers whom we might depict as Poets and critical pedagogists. Lessons learned from these trailblazers serve as open

invitations to probe and interrogate multilingualism as a phenomenon, creating opportunities to convert pervasive monolingual attitudes to multilingual convictions and, in doing so, ensuring positive educational experiences for K–12 multilingual students.

Amidst her attack on the Monolingual Bias, this author-Disruptor translates her vision into everyday school and classroom-related episodes and events, influencing adverse convictions through convincing claims and evidence to make space for trust and belonging. While fervently renouncing monolingualism, Ardell also understands its positionality within the U.S. context. She epitomizes her Disruptor archetypes—a fervent monolingual resistor who as a Collaborator, Mediator, Rebel Rouser, Cheerleader, and Poet insisting on multilingualism as the norm. Disruption might be considered a state of being; however, disrupting the Monolingual Bias is actionable and the message of this book. In essence, by illuminating the value and advantages of multilingualism while simultaneously attacking those in opposition, educators are induced to take a constructivist stance and forge creative ways to dismantle the pervasive monolingual mindset that plagues our educational system.

Given the current upheaval in K–12 educational policy, especially its potential negative impact on multilingual learners, *Disrupting the Monolingual Bias* successfully provokes ideological change illustrative of why the current state of multilingual education, in large part, isn't effective. Interacting with multiple interest groups and varied archetypes throughout the book unveils evidentiary data that fortifies the reader with a sense of openness and permission to engage in disruption, which, if successful, will lead to taking the multilingual turn (May, 2014) and its conversion to a full-fledged paradigm shift.

Affirming and, more importantly, furthering multilingualism appears to be an ongoing transformative educational and societal undertaking to honor students' individualities and lived realities. Seeking acceptance of multilingualism involves our shared commitment to elevating the status of languages and cultures inside and out of school. This book is one of advocacy on steroids where Ardell passionately defends multilingualism from a personal, collective, and institutional stance. It's a volume that should not sit on a bookshelf but rather inspire you to rethink spaces for infusing multilingualism in your context and join the compelling cause of *Disrupting the Monolingual Bias*.

Margo Gottlieb, Ph.D.

May 2025

PREFACE

I was talking with my mom over the holiday break last winter, and she asked me why I'm writing a book about advocacy in bilingual education.

Actually, that's not how it went.

We were talking about what kind of student I was, stories about my education, and what kind of "behavior" notices I'd get sent home with. (Hey, I wasn't *exactly* the class clown, but I knew how to sit in the back row and crack a few jokes with the class clowns. Always a performer, the world is a stage when your zodiac sign is Leo.)

We got to talking about middle and high school, and a memory formed of me getting my Illinois State test results back—middling at best—and those scores did not reflect my true potential. My mother knew I was hard working, bright, and with a little effort (on her part) could justify my placement in the honors track. At least in honors English and Social Studies class (never math, let's not kid ourselves).

This was my first (of many) advocacy stories—I saw my mom on the phone, appealing to the head of the English department at Glenbrook North High School. I sat in a dimly lit room after school in October taking an essay quiz, then having an interview with Ms. Forbes about "whether I read outside of school," which of course, I did. I recall feeling ambivalent about this decision, being moved to the honors class, but I knew it meant something really special to my mom who, as the youngest child in a family mostly of girls, was never expected to excel in her schooling and would repeat the refrain "Lillian, they didn't invest much in *my* education, but doggone it, we're going to invest in *yours*."

Then, I felt immense joy at the Chair's decision to give me a try in the honors class, where I formed some of my best friends from the performing arts (Christina, Eric, Erika) and then soaked up the insights and creativity of a slightly higher echelon of learners. My mom wanted the best opportunities for me, and I quietly received the message that you pursue things you care about, especially when it's on behalf of someone who can't yet do it for themselves. It's the memory of someone caring so *deeply* for you, of taking

hours of their day (unpaid, nonglamorous hours) to carve one small, better opportunity out for their loved one. To me, that is advocacy.

FIGURE 0.1 LILLIAN AS A TODDLER, WEARING HER SIGNATURE *TINY BUT TOUGH* T-SHIRT

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My road to bilingual education is interesting (like how did a Jewish girl from suburban Chicago develop a pretty bangin' Spanish repertoire and land herself in the South Bronx writing Spanish language arts curriculum and presenting at national conferences . . .). Well, two nonprofits that recruited promising bright youth (Amigos de las Americas and Teach for America) coupled with some strokes of good luck and a fervent desire to live in New York City as soon as I could . . . help explain my backstory. Throughout the moments and hiccups of college and early career foibles, there remained a throughline of feeling injustices—like knife wounds to my soul—and (awkwardly, sometimes brutally) throwing my Lilly-anger and passion into the moment with (ahem) varying results.

By the time I exited my New York City public school job with eight years of service, I had one letter in my file for insubordination, two letters expunged, three union-mediated conversations, stood on at least five UFT picket lines, and held countless conversations with parents and older Latinx students about their options, course selections, and letters of recommendation.

When I left teaching to pursue a doctorate, my focus was on educational linguistics (learning the more technical components of language, metalinguistic instructional tools, whilst developing research methods at New York

University—all things I care for deeply, but those are themes for another book), and I was also maturing and becoming a mom. I experienced my first Trump presidency, which led to increased activism for the social issues I cared most about.

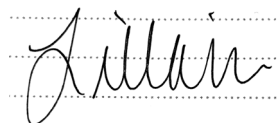
My dissertation research in 2017 brought me back into upper-elementary linguistically diverse classrooms, and there, I witnessed some frustrating patterns between the ESL/bilingual teachers and their mainstream colleagues. Tensions that surfaced over how to best support bilingual students, the emotional toll of being in a service provider position, and the deluge of additional compliance work that really should have been delegated out to two professionals—instructional support and compliance. In my interviews with some of the monolingual teachers, I'd see deep concern in their eyes for never being properly trained to help their emergent bilinguals, a desire to ask me (the local bilingual expert) a range of questions, and then ultimately defaulting to vocabulary instruction—the best (and only) option available to them based on how they understood language teaching to look and sound like.

Which brings me to now and to why I'm writing this book.

Based on my observations and conversations with teachers, and despite the extensive literature on language teacher training and the millions of dollars invested, significant improvements in academic outcomes have been minimal, with only slight upticks. Meanwhile, if we had been investing as much in arming teachers, community leaders, and staff with advocacy tools—a framework even—to notice, analyze, and respond to deficit attitudes toward our MLLs and the (mostly Brown/people of color) teachers who serve them, perhaps there would be a different, more hopeful trajectory for our nation's growing population of multilinguals. This book is about the Monolingual Bias, but it's more about the pathways to disrupt it by engaging in endurance advocacy.

I'm humbled, excited, and *bien agradecida* that you've joined me on this journey of hope, self-discovery, and disruption. Let's go change the world, one disruption at a time.

Lillian Ardell

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lillian", written over a set of three horizontal dotted lines.

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There are so many to thank in the conceptualization, development, and publishing of my first book! And I love gratitude moments, so let's get into them.

First stop on this gratitude train is all the participants who agreed to be interviewed for this project: Alejandra Vaz Bauer, Amy Mosquera, Ana Torres, Andrea Luna, Aradhana Mudambi, Dorsa Fahami, Jackie Stowers, Jillian Hakemian, Katie Leven, Kathy Escamilla, Laura Ascenzi-Moreno, Lindsey Rose, Luisiana Melendez, Luz Rivera, Maria Cioe-Pena, Robert Pena Diaz, Ruth Radwan, and Susana Ibarra Johnson. Each of you felt called to advocacy work across your careers as you've lifted up the voices and academic outcomes for so many multilingual learners. Your disruption stories breathe life and color into my book. I hope I've done your stories proud and that you continue to chart new disruptive chapters in your lives.

Thank you to Michelle Watson and Kathryn Kosmider—the two ladies on my Language Matters team. Michelle helped keep me on the straight-and-narrow as I was working through the research and writing of the book. Her eye for design and graphics is all over this thing. She helps me stay “business-minded” as I seek to build my empire one story, data point, and speaking engagement a time. Kathryn manages my social media and has been a listening and guiding ear as the Monolingual Bias concept has evolved over the past three years. I'm lucky to have these two talented assets supporting this work.

With deep thanks to Darveiyé Michel, whose original artwork is woven through these pages with beauty, emotion, and intention. This book would not be what it is without her extraordinary vision.

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You took a flyer on a first-time author and look at what we made together! Megan never gave up on me (although Corwin did pass on this proposal twice beforehand). She was (and continues to be) my advocate at Corwin, which if you're new to the publishing game . . . ya need an advocate. Lucas helped do all the nitty-gritty work that a big thinker like me just *loathes*. I'm so glad this book found its home at Corwin.

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PART 1



BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE BASE

CHAPTER 1

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INTRODUCING THE MONOLINGUAL BIAS

I want to open this book with a story that happened while I was collecting my dissertation research in the fall of 2017. I was working in two Brooklyn schools, observing language teachers' work with bilingual and English Language Learner (ELL) students in upper elementary classrooms. And while I was a baby researcher at the time, I had already spent 15 years working in New York City public schools as a dual language teacher, bilingual coach, and professor. Enthusiasm and curiosity are two emotions that best capture how I remember feeling during that period of my life. The work I saw teachers engage in took my breath away. For example, sourcing authentic Spanish texts for the 4th grade project on ancient Mayan and Aztec architecture. The teachers were in a broader bilingual program group chat whereby one teacher would avail herself should a parent need support in the main office. These were professionals who went above and beyond the contract requirements to ensure their students felt safe and included in the school community. I felt lucky that my four participants allowed me into their classrooms to study and learn alongside them.¹

Yet, on occasion, other moments also took my breath away, in a cringey kind of way. Like the moment I saw a mainstream, monolingual teacher corner my research participant at the end of the day.

MY ENGLISH LEARNERS ARE SOOOOO FAR BEHIND

We both clocked Susan's manic energy from midway down the hall. Her footsteps were heavy with urgency, arms swinging in an almost force-of-motion way. She had one person in mind to corner, and it wasn't me.

It was my research participant, Zoraida, the ESL teacher.

(Continued)

¹My dissertation looked at teacher beliefs and attitudes about multilingual learners, as I compared the instructional choices teachers made against their stated beliefs. I used discourse analysis, triangulation, and interview methods to collect the data. I have a few studies published based on this work; the best one may be found in *TESOL Quarterly* (2021).

(Continued)

This incident occurred in early October as the school geared up to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month. Zoraida informed me the Bilingual and ESL teachers were *voluntold* to avail themselves to their monolingual colleagues to help them think through ways to integrate the Latinx students into the mainstream curriculum, which brings us back to Susan who was quickly and quite aggressively approaching us.

Zoraida shot me a look and braced herself as Susan arrived, catching her breath.

“ZoRAYda, I’m so glad I caught you. Listen, Hispanic Heritage Month is next week, and I feel stressed about adding any cultural work to the main curriculum. You know . . . my ELLs² are sooooo far behind, I feel like I should just focus on teaching English skills. But ya know, you’re their ESL teacher, so maybe you have some tips for me?”

Zoraida is calm but firm. She turns to Susan and says, “Susan, have you heard of Sandra Cisneros, the Chicana poet and author? She has some short essays you can give to your ELLs. Your 5th graders can read them in small groups and talk about some of the themes like identity, culture, and belonging. That would be a great way to integrate your Latinx students’ lives into the curriculum.”

Then, she lets out an audible sigh, shoots me a look, and turns to walk away. I can’t believe how calm and poised Zoraida is. I can believe that she had a masterful response to Susan’s inquiry—I had been observing Zoraida’s practice for five weeks by now, and she knew what she was doing. The school was lucky to have her. All of this is running through my head as Susan gears up to respond.

“Wait, I know Cisneros. She has a picture book about hair, *Pelitos*, right? I think that’s a better fit for my 5th grade ELLs. Like I said, they’re soooo far behind, I doubt they’d be able to read entire

It’s like Susan had an algorithm of low expectations and was seeking some Latino author’s name to slot in: Latino author–picture book–coloring page, voila! Hispanic Heritage modification checked off my to-do list.

essays. Plus, it’s just easier to do a read aloud and have them color than, like, do full-blown literature circles! Thanks so much for your help ZoRAYda, I dunno what this school would do without you!” Susan gives her a quick hug then bolts down the hallway.

Zoraida looks down, frustrated, and confused, like nothing of what she offered actually landed in Susan’s brain. It’s like Susan had

an algorithm of low expectations and was seeking some Latino author’s name to slot in: Latino author–picture book–coloring page, voila! Hispanic Heritage modification checked off my to-do list.

²In this book, you will come across a few labels referring to students for whom English is a new or additional language. These include English Language Learner (ELL), Multilingual Learner (MLL), and Emergent Bilingual (EB). The project of remaining consistent with terms has proven to be a tricky one, largely because the label is context dependent (e.g., the term reflects a speaker’s views about the learner’s language trajectory). When possible, I use the asset-based label MLL.

As I watched the disappointment wash over Zoraida's face, my blood began to boil. I also felt sorry for Susan—a teacher who seemed genuinely confused about how best to serve her Hispanic students in a school system that wasn't designed to celebrate their rich heritage, culture, or languages. She also seemed eager to take the ESL teacher's advice, even though her ability to receive the advice being offered was . . . not great.

Something in this equation isn't working, and the nation's English Language Learners are suffering the consequences. Zoraida knows this. Our nation's language teachers know this. I'm willing to bet you, dear reader, know this.

As my thoughts were swirling in my head, it occurred to me that I should check in with Zoraida to see how she felt. So, I asked her, "Does this happen often, getting cornered in the hallway to help teachers support their ELLs? Do they regularly misconstrue your good advice? How do you feel after these conversations?"

Zoraida lets out an exhale, looks at the floor, then at me. I'll never forget her response: "Lillian, they always see my kids through a deficit lens. They're constantly talking about them being behind, not enough, and they don't believe they can rise to any kind of academic challenge. And anytime I offer advice or try to advocate for my students—'Yes! They can complete these higher academic challenges!'—it always gets misunderstood. Year after year, I wonder if I'm even effecting change in this school. (sighs) What's the point?"

THE WATER IS CONTAMINATED, MY FRIENDS

I remember this moment like it was yesterday. And the more I've played it out in my head, the more I continue to return to the factors in our educational system that *conditioned* Susan to think this way and say these things to Zoraida. I know Susan is trying, but that doesn't give her the right to opt her multilingual learners (MLLs) out of high-level literacy activities, such as reading Cisneros's essays and engaging in rich conversations about themes and identity. And Zoraida doesn't deserve to get hounded to accommodate Susan's pedagogical deficits around culturally responsive teaching.

Something's not working in this equation. Susan is not feeling confident about how to support MLLs, Zoraida is not getting paid double for doing her job plus offering on-demand training for her clueless colleagues (although she darn well deserves to), and the research on MLL student literacy outcomes remains fledgling (OECD, 2023).

Which leads me to share this parable I learned from one of my idols, David Foster Wallace, in his now-famous commencement speech about the majesty and heartbreak of what it means to be human and the struggles we face to live life according to our values.

There are two fish swimming in the ocean, going about their nautical lives. When suddenly, an older fish swims up alongside

them and says, “Hey boys, how’s the water?” The elder fish smiles his fishy smile, then moves along. The younger fish takes a beat, looks at his friend perplexed, and says, “What the hell is water?”

(Wallace, 2009)

Like Wallace, I’m not here to play the role of the wise old fish. I’m here to help you see the water. What we live in—culture, society, our context—so invisible and yet (pause) so powerful. It is our job to peel back that veil of invisibility so we can problematize and address its contaminants because only when we *see* what’s wrong can we *fix* what’s wrong. In this case, the water is education policy, and the contaminant is the Monolingual Bias: a set of deficit ideologies within the educational system



In this case, the water is education policy, and the contaminant is the Monolingual Bias: a set of deficit ideologies within the educational system that promotes this singular narrative—English Learners must acquire academic English at all costs.

that promotes this singular narrative—English Learners must acquire academic English at all costs. This accelerated pressure to acquire English is done in the service of an obvious need for bilingual learners to assimilate to a U.S. monoculture. Language is seen as either the barrier to entry or the golden key to unlocking the American Dream (Garcia et al., 2021).

AT. ALL. COSTS.

Right now, you’re probably wondering, “So what, Lillian, you *don’t* want us to invest in my students’ English language development?”

FIGURE 1.1 FLAG BANNER



Yes, of course I do. I hold four degrees in *bilingual* education. I want our nation's emergent bilinguals (EB) to develop a strong, robust, full-bodied range of English-language literacy skills and analytical tools to succeed in whatever professional endeavors they may wish to pursue. And to achieve that goal in the United States of America, a citizen requires confidence and competence in academic English.

And yet, I never want their English language development to come at the cost of their heritage language, culture, or humanity. This is what I'm fighting against day after day, and the mission of this book, and most of the research I cite in building my argument to convince you of the Monolingual Bias never wants English dominance or the need to assimilate (e.g., change who you are to fit in) to forsake full biliteracy development (Butvilofsky et al., 2021). Which leads me to offer an insight about the invisibility of assimilation forces and how they operate so powerfully and unapologetically in our educational system.

THE PARADOX OF ASSIMILATION

Have you noticed the more professional teacher organizations (e.g., National Council of Teachers of English or American Educational Research Association) promote progressive initiatives such as (1) Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), (2) Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998), or (3) Dual Language (DL) Programs (Howard et al., 2007), the more push-back from a certain faction of the American population educators seem to face? I offer two bits of media plucked to highlight this point. In a CNN article published on March 11, 2024, titled “What is DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] and why is it dividing America?” (Ellis, 2024), it offers this statistic: “Since 2023, 81 anti-DEI bills that target programs at colleges have been introduced in 28 states and in Congress, according to a tally by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Eight have been signed into law, in states like Texas and Florida.”

At the time of writing, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to enshrine English as the language of the land. The New York Times reported, “The pronouncement was the biggest victory yet for the country’s English-only movement, which has long been tied to efforts to restrict bilingual education and immigration to the United States. More than 30 states have already designated English as their official language” (Broadwater, 2025).

Sometimes the noise happening *out there* (in the media, at policy level) can seem so far away that we fail to see how those forces act on us in hyper-local and personal ways. But they do.

The paradox of assimilation shapes how immigrant, first- and second-generation learners are socialized to downplay or degrade their heritage language practices throughout their lifespan (Valdés, 2016). And the vestiges of that forced assimilation emerge in some pretty shocking and awfully subtle ways.

FIGURE 1.2 LIBERTY



iStock.com/Davide Zanin

Take, for example, a private conversation between myself and a U.S.-born Latina assistant principal, back when I was a rank-and-file dual language teacher in the South Bronx. Ms. Cortéz approached me at the end of a PD day with a stern look in her eyes to disparage me after I had voiced critical commentary on whatever white-washed literacy training I was required to sit through. She said, “You don’t know how lucky you were to be born a native-English speaker. Don’t you get it? These kids *need* English, and it’s our job to get them ready. Sure, Spanish is nice, and they’ll get it at home with *abuela*. But our focus must remain on academic English. Get in line, Ardell.”



Ms. Cortéz shamed me for my apparent linguistic privilege, therefore sowing a seed of real doubt and regret in my disruptive actions. I remember thinking, “Well, she’s a Latina, she must know better than me—a bleeding-heart white girl who chose to become bilingual and is proud of my bilingualism.” Even though I knew the biliteracy research points to longitudinal growth, investment in high-quality bilingual resources and support for students, and full-throated support by school admin (Lindholm-Leary, 2016), my administrator used the best coercive tools she had at her

disposal: self-righteousness and pulling rank.

Perhaps some of you have shared this experience of trying to squirm your way out of a structured literacy training, where the refrain was something like, “Well, the Science of Reading research states that our ELLs need English phonics now more than ever.” Maybe the scenario is one in which you approach your superintendent to get a critical book club going with your fellow bilingual coordinators/directors, only to be reminded that funding is tied to [insert mainstream curriculum or monolingual policy], and there simply isn’t money to pay for the book, much less give you supplemental funds for professional growth.

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THE PROMISE OF THIS BOOK: SOCIOLINGUISTICS + ENDURANCE ADVOCACY

Do one thing every day that scares you. —Eleanor Roosevelt

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. —Ludwig Wittgenstein

The promise of this book, and really my entire reason for launching my consulting firm, Language Matters, is twofold:

- 1) To bring greater visibility to the power of sociolinguistic knowledge as a tool for teacher empowerment and, hence, bilingual student empowerment. Sociolinguistics is the study of language use in society. I see empowerment (power from within) as the first step toward tilting the narrative of academic achievement in more sustainable, actionable ways for language minoritized learners.

But how can you achieve power from within, especially in a system designed by and for monocultural, monolingual students?

- 2) Armed with sociolinguistic knowledge, teachers can organize, plan for, and enact *Small Brave Moments*³ that lead to full on *Disruption Stories* (stories where you boldly confront the policies, practices, and pedagogies that foist rapid English acquisition on our EBs).



QR CODE 1






<https://www.language-matters.org/small-brave-moments-quiz>

Scan this code to take the Small Brave Moments Quiz.

³Take the Small Brave Moments Quiz on page 14.

Courage is a muscle and requires daily reps, stretch goals, and accumulated victories to shift the arc of teaching and learning toward linguistic justice for all. To achieve this long-term goal, I invite you to engage in *endurance advocacy*: a mindset coupled with a set of practices to keep your senses alert, your body rested, and your strategies nimble to challenge any given moment of linguistic injustice. And the way you do this is by embodying the 5 Disruptor Archetypes.

TABLE 1.1 5 DISRUPTOR ARCHETYPES

ARCHETYPE	DESCRIPTION
<div>The Collaborator</div> 	open-minded, strong communicator, problem solver, respectful, patient, has an extensive network
<div>The Mediator</div> 	can maintain neutrality, a facilitator, expansive vision, knows how to hold space for dialogue, pursues sustainable outcomes
<div>The Rebel Rouser</div> 	bold, fearless, virtuous, charismatic, intellectually curious, willing to face consequences of their actions
<div>The Cheerleader</div> 	energetic, enthusiastic, deeply dedicated to the cause, flexible, optimistic, strong public speakers
<div>The Poet</div> 	expressive, gifted linguists, think in metaphors, sensitive, high emotional intelligence, prefers to work behind-the-scenes

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Throughout the pages of this book, you'll engage with a range of Disruption Stories: some victorious, others less so. As you read each narrative, you'll notice a pattern emerge. They always start when the Disruptor senses a linguistic injustice tied to a specific deficit language ideology, then they mobilize into one (or many) Disruptor archetypes to overturn some monolingually biased policy, practice, or pedagogy. Get ready to feel deeply inspired!

MY DISRUPTION STORY: Inequitable Assessments in a Dual Language Bilingual Education (DLBE) Program



► Here is my favorite *Disruption Story* from my time as a bilingual teacher that led to real policy changes in my building. It was my first year in a new wall-to-wall dual language (DL) school. I had heard whispers that a new administration was brought in to level up the dual language program and that my hire was a nod to this revitalized mission.

September was underway, and my assistant principal, Ms. Bueno, gathered my team to tell us when the English reading data was due. I turned to my Spanish-medium colleagues and asked, “What about Spanish reading data? Surely a DL school requires Spanish reading data if it’s serious about full biliteracy outcomes.” Clearly, they hadn’t, so I asked for a private meeting with Ms. Bueno to make my case more . . . directly. An entry from my journal during that time states:

I got red-in-the-face, my arms crossed, and I closed my argument with a grandiose appeal: If this school calls itself a dual language school, surely our administrative team would want to collect literacy data in BOTH languages. After I left Bueno’s office, I ran into the bathroom and burst into tears. Did I just seriously jeopardize my reputation just one month into getting hired at this school?

And although Ms. Bueno knew that Spanish data was not a requirement of the district office, she considered my nudge and told me she’d speak with leadership and have an answer within a week. Silly me . . . I didn’t realize how long it takes to overturn bureaucratic (monolingual) policies in a school. In the meantime, I began researching free or basic Spanish reading assessments, resourceful and quick-thinking, in the hopes that she would return with an affirmative answer.

True to her word, Ms. Bueno got back to me to assure me I would not be conducting English assessments, and that I may administer the Spanish ones. By the end of the day, she sent a memo to the entire K–2 team, assuring all teachers that we would collect running records in English and Spanish if we were to adhere to the mission and vision of a truly equitable dual language program.

My journal line from that evening: *It worked, it (bleeping) worked! Three cheers for Ms. Bueno! And good on ya for doing the right thing, even though it was hard.*

MY ANALYSIS

How is this a Disruption Story, and what role does sociolinguistics play to help achieve this victory? This is actually a story about language ideologies (LI)—the set of beliefs and attitudes about language that shape how humans make sense of the world and of others (Silverstein, 1979). The specific LI at play above is *assimilationist*,⁴ whereby the de facto assessment policy was to collect English data *at the cost of* collecting (and valuing) Spanish literacy trajectories for our emergent bilinguals (Menken, 2008). Although I didn't know it at the time, the linguistic justice I sensed was tied to an assimilationist view of language.

This was my *what* (or my identification of the problem). My *so what* (what I'm going to do about it) was a strategy to disrupt the deficit policy vis-à-vis becoming a specific kind of Disruptor.



In this story, I am a *Rebel Rouser*—willing to confront my authority figure, backed by a strong conviction that the linguistic injustice I sensed was serious and had serious consequences for my emergent bilinguals' academic achievement. I furthermore marshaled the courage to face any kind of retribution that may have come from my actions. Let's review: I got red in the face, I asked for that private meeting, and I continued to remind Ms. Bueno of the stated mission of our bilingual program. I feared for my reputation, and I ran to the bathroom in tears!



But I wish to point out that my Rebel Rousing archetype was met with a softer *Collaborator* role. In the days that followed, I rolled up my sleeves to solve the problem. I researched free Spanish assessments, was willing to make copies, organize spreadsheets, and volunteer to oversee this work because it mattered so deeply to my core values. I collaborated with Ms. Bueno, whose own courageous actions with her supervisors led to a shift in the assessment policies in our newly formed DLBE program. I guess Ms. Bueno hired me because she wanted a little fire and chutzpah on her team after all.

⁴In this view of language, the goal in public education is to remove and replace the heritage language with the prestige language of power. When you hear folks say, "Why don't they just learn English?," you know this is the view they hold dearly. (You can learn more by reading James Paul Gee's 2014 work, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*.)

CLOSING STATEMENT

► This book is written by, for, and with language teachers-turned-advocates who care deeply about their students and about their biliteracy outcomes. This is a book about linguistic injustices and the many ways they manifest in the daily work of being a bilingual or ESL educator. And since the Monolingual Bias isn't going anywhere anytime soon, anchored in a country that has an uncomfortable relationship with colonialism—steeped in racial, cultural, and dare I add, linguistic hierarchies of power—then we need actionable and sustainable strategies to build a more just and equitable world for our MLLs.

TAKE THE SMALL BRAVE MOMENTS QUIZ



QR CODE 2

[https://www.
language matters.org/
small-brave-moments-
quiz](https://www.language matters.org/small-brave-moments-quiz)

Scan this code to take the Small Brave Moments Quiz.

A Small Brave Moment (or SBM) is a singular moment when you advocate for your bilingual/ELL student by doing the next right (brave) thing. Begin by noticing moments (dare I call them opportunities?) where you can advance linguistic justice in your respective role and district. Over time, and with coordinated efforts with your equity-allies, you will begin to Disrupt the Monolingual Bias in ways that will fill you with pride.

This quiz gives you an opportunity to determine how consistent of an advocate (or what I call a Disruptor) you are in your daily life. The questions are designed to help you find your strengths and then opportunities for growth. Tally up your score below or scan the QR code above, which will bring you to a digital version of the quiz.

1. I can think of a recent example when I was brave with a peer, coach, administrator, or (gasp) myself.

Nope				Yep
1	2	3	4	5

2. I have practices and routines in my life to reflect upon and monitor what's going on around me.

Nope				Yep
1	2	3	4	5

3. I can list up to three equity-allies with whom I strategize and can vent to when things get hard in my role/district.

Nope				Yep
1	2	3	4	5

4. When I hear deficit-thinking in my colleagues and staff, I regularly say something about it.

Nope				Yep
1	2	3	4	5

5. I am resilient in the face of setbacks.

Nope				Yep
1	2	3	4	5

6. I am comfortable identifying as an advocate for ELLs/MLLs.

Nope				Yep
1	2	3	4	5

7. I am clear on my core values working in bilingual and TESOL education.

Nope				Yep
1	2	3	4	5

SCORE:

7–12 You scored *emergent*. This means you are still finding your advocacy voice and you may need some clarity around your core values.

13–24 You scored *bridging*. This means you're working to amplify your advocacy voice and align your work with your core values. It is tough work, but you are tougher.

25–35 You scored *exceptional*. You reliably advocate for your students and for linguistic justice. You are also clear on your core values. Stand tall and proud today!

