

January 29, 2014
Hartford, Connecticut

To the esteemed members of the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, guests and community:

This afternoon I am grateful for an opportunity to provide observational insights about the current trends in Bilingual Education in Connecticut. I have presented at the Spring L&PRAC meeting held in Willimantic and recently, I have provided written testimony in regards to the over identification of Emergent Bilingual students in Special Education.

In 2002, I began my teaching career in CT. In 2006, I earned a Highly Qualified certificate in Bilingual Elementary Education and the school in which I taught earned a National Blue Ribbon during the No child Left Behind era. In 2009, I earned an MA in Curriculum and Instruction in Bilingual Education and membership to the Beta Sigma Chapter of Pi Lambda Theta Honor Society for Educational Professionals. In 2012, I earned a certificate in legislative advocacy training sponsored by the Connecticut chapter of the American Federation of Teachers and in 2012 and 2013 I was inspired by the writings and lectures of Drs. Antonia Darder and Stephen Krashen as they presented in conferences held in Connecticut.

I needed all these experiences to prepare myself for the upcoming storm surrounding my field which probably began as early as midway of my tenure.

Up until two years ago I was Windham Center Elementary School's second grade Bilingual Education Teacher. In spite of relative growth, Windham, as a district, was not meeting the State mandated benchmark for academic achievement. State intervention occurred and we were presented with a "Special Master" whose first remand was an audit of the district's Bilingual program which incorporated Transitional Bilingual with a 30 month limit and Dual Language Immersion in spite of the fact that the district had already been studied by Brown University. The assertion was that we were denying families of Emergent Bilingual students the choice of ESL (English as a second language) (Norwich Bulletin 9/21/11) and that it was a matter of effectiveness and not compliance and that the emphasis on first language literacy was to be eliminated in order to prepare better for assessments. Comments like, "What's the point in teaching them in their first language if they don't already know the language" or "It's because of the Bilingual program that your scores are so low" stung in its irrationality. We were now at point of implementing the lowest standard of the law as opposed to adhering to the highest intent of the law.

Some community members think I am upset because I was instructed to pack up and ship off all the Spanish materials in my classroom: the books, magazines tapes, textbooks, posters. Some think I am upset because classroom libraries were ransacked and Spanish titles were removed from them and leveled books were removed from the guided reading baskets. Then there are others who think that I am upset simply because I do not have a classroom. Given all these events, I would not blame

anyone to be upset. However, the most painful experience was when I was instructed to go to the last bilingual classroom of 16 and tell the students that I would have had that I would not be their classroom teacher and that we would not be learning much in their language and that I was going to their new classrooms to "help them" instead. That I could "translate" for them but there was to be no first language literacy. The response would pierce your heart. You have seen the look of a child when you tell them that you are breaking a promise, that you have take back something they cherish, that you were doing this for "their own good". Basically, I was a messenger of some very sad, bad news.

Two winters ago I communicated my concerns of the legal, moral and ethical ramifications of dismantling such a program that needed fortification not dissolution to State legislators and other leaders. I have invited them to visit the classroom I had to show them Bilingual Education at work. No one came and they missed an opportunity to witness the humanity and intelligence that was evident.

According to the State's Constitution the primary goal for public education was to create capable participation in democratic institutions. The trend to take away, reduce and provide the least amount counters this mission and State's own regulations. ESL is an inappropriate approach to early literacy. As a "service delivery" model is relies on the students' foundational understanding of content and concepts. With Common Core State Standards accessing higher order thinking is tantamount. However, we cannot access higher order thinking without a foundation in concept thinking and that foundation is based in first language no matter how weak it is perceived.

The fact that the State created its own program annihilator (via Special Master legislation) makes our policies de facto language submersion/immersion and contradictory to what had been legislated in the first place that was, to some extent, accommodating to the understanding of literacy and language acquisition.

The most critical piece: Connecticut State law requires that bilingual instruction be provided whenever there are twenty or more students in a school who are dominant in a single language other than English. A student is fully transitioned into the standard curriculum program after he/she has reached a sufficient level of proficiency in **all four domains** of English to ensure equal access to the instruction in the English only classroom.

The Transitional Bilingual Program uses and develops the student's native language and culture to help the student acquire academic skills, positive self-concept skills and develop English proficiency.

The bilingual education model is based on research which asserts that in order to be successful.... **students must continue to develop cognitive and linguistic skills in their native language,** while they are learning English. This approach will allow students to successfully transfer those abilities, skills and strategies to their new language.

The most extensive and widely read study in the nation (Collier and Thomas, 1997) found that students reading on grade level in their **native language** took **four to seven years** to achieve **50th percentile** reading performance in English, while students schooled **only in their second language** generally took **seven to ten** years to reach that performance level. The implication is that there will be an additional three to five years of costs involving "interventions" and higher percentages of "case studies" of Emergent Bilingual that will be called to monitor and...assess....more. Another implication will be that the focus of education will be shifting from producing well rounded literate young adults to producing adequate test takers. Also, what were the implications of the Hartford Center for Children's Advocacy's 2007 complaint regarding the rights of Limited English proficient learners?

What we do know is that literacy in the first language (not age specific) provides a smoother transition into English reading. Increasing, not decreasing, first language print materials and promoting the recreational reading in those languages provides opportunity for higher achievement. English Oral language proficiency (what is emphasized in English language development programs) is not an adequate indicator of academic achievement. Continued reading in the first language can insure growth for the Emergent Bilingual as well. We can shift the paradigm by thinking of our students as Emergent Bilingual who are the potentially gifted and talented as opposed to the perspective that they are the deficient and in need of interventions. Based on these observations I find the position to improve, extend, fortify existing bilingual programs compelling. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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