Supporting Change in our Schools and Classrooms:
Two Teachers’ Journeys towards Additive Bilingual Education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the power of individual teachers in subtractive bilingual school contexts to instigate and drive change within their classrooms and in their schools toward more enriched, additive bilingual programs. Two of the authors are bilingual kindergarten teachers in a large school district in Texas. The article defines additive/subtractive bilingual education, explore the research on the powerful role of the teacher in school reforms, and presents two cases of teachers listening to their students’ and families’ educational, social, and emotional needs and moving toward change despite sometimes ardent opposition from colleagues. The authors assert that with very young children, the most authentic assessment data available by which to make vital programmatic, curricular, and individual decisions are our observations of students, both one-on-one and as they work and play with peers in the classroom, and their conversations with their parents. Paying attention to these data, teachers will inevitably make good choices.

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One of the most important factors in the success or failure of bilingual children in schools is the way teachers and school leaders view students and their home language/culture. School programs designed to serve bilingual children fall along a spectrum, from those oriented as remedial, subtractive, or deficit to those with a strong enrichment or additive orientation. Deficit-oriented programs, also often referred to as “compensatory” programs, view children who speak a language other than English as lacking important skills (i.e., the ability to speak in English) and therefore in need of remediation; In response, the teachers work to fill in students’ perceived gaps in English, while devoting little or no attention to developing students’ home languages and building on their home cultural experiences. Success in these programs is defined as the acquisition of English literacy, often at the expense of the home language, which languishes or even disappears from students’ repertoires by middle school (Fillmore, 1991). Compensatory programs are found to be less successful at helping bilingual children reach high academic and literacy levels than programs that are oriented as enrichment, which we will term “empowering bilingual programs.” Such programs view children with developing bilingual skills as highly capable due to their ability to learn and perform in two languages (Lindholm-Leary, 2000; Ramirez, 1992; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Looking at the labels often used to describe the different programs schools offer, one would generally place “ESL” and most “transitional” bilingual programs in the category of compensatory bilingual education, as these two programs hold as their goal students’ acquisition of English. Whether they take advantage of students’ home language to help them achieve this goal or not, such programs do not value students’ home language enough to work to maintain it. Meanwhile, “maintenance,” “dual language,” or “two-way bilingual” programs fall into the category of empowering bilingual education, as their goals include the maintenance and development of bilingualism and biliteracy for all students. But program labels can be misleading; more important than any label is the way teachers and educational leaders within schools view students and their home cultures and languages, and the ways these professionals find to reach, teach, and empower students.

For a transitional bilingual teacher in a more or less subtractive school setting, learning about the differences between compensatory bilingual education and empowering bilingual education can be bewildering. It is often not clear what an individual teacher’s role is or should be in instigating necessary change or increasing awareness of educational inequities at her/his school. Moreover, the process of change in schools is challenging, and even a highly motivated and well-respected teacher will not find it easy to transform either her own or her colleagues’ thinking about bilingual children. Where does one teacher begin?

This paper begins to answer this question with two cases. Two of the authors are experienced bilingual educators, teaching kindergarten in traditional transitional bilingual programs. Both, in their own way, came to attempt to transform the orientation of their classrooms from compensatory to empowerment, and through their own classroom practices, to
introduce new ideas about pedagogy and equity to their schools. The paper reconfirms that teachers in their classrooms are the ultimate arbiters of change, while at the same time examining some of the challenges involved for teachers who choose to challenge traditional views of bilingual children and traditional bilingual teaching practices.

After a brief review of the literature on compensatory and empowering orientations toward language minority students and the literature on teacher agency in school reform, the authors will present their two cases and examine the complications each teacher faced (and continues to face) in the process of transformation.

“Enrichment” versus “Subtractive” bilingual education

While state law in Texas mandates bilingual education in any school district that has 20 or more students at a grade level with limited English proficiency from the same language group, the is generally interpreted as being intended for transitional programs. Coming out of federal policy, which placed bilingual education firmly under the jurisdiction of “compensatory education,” (Crawford, 2004), Texas bilingual education policy was intended to help children move quickly and more successfully into English instruction (Blanton, 2005). Yet the law also allows for, but does not fund, the development of more enrichment-oriented “dual language” programs ("Texas education code," 1995).

Dual language classrooms engage students in two languages--English, and a “target” minority language that is the home language of at least a significant proportion (if not all) of the students in the program. Dual language programs expect all participants to achieve high levels of literacy and academic achievement in both languages. Teachers generally make an effort to present the two languages separately, and to offer students instruction in the “standard” academic registers of each language. There are “balanced” or 50:50 dual language programs, in which instruction occurs half in English and half in the minority or “target” language of the program, and “Minority language dominant” or 90:10 programs in which children begin kindergarten with 90% of their schooling in the “target” language. The percentage of English experienced then increases gradually to 50% by fourth or fifth grade. A special innovation of dual language classrooms known as dual immersion, or two-way immersion, involves English-speaking students learning a minority language alongside language minority students learning English. The English-speaking students, through their desire to learn the minority language, further demonstrate its value. There is a growing body of research that shows dual language education to be an excellent way to empower students to academic excellence (Christian, Lindholm, Montone, & Carranza, 1997; Cummins, 2000; Lindholm-Leary, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 2002). In particular, in her recent study of Latino immigrant and Mexican American students involved in a dual language program in San Antonio, Texas, Bertha Pérez found that for Latino students, an enriching bilingual experience that valued their home variety of Spanish and their rich literate traditions of code switching, along with teaching students to perform in standard varieties of both English and Spanish, allowed all students--both English and Spanish speakers--to excel by a variety of measures (Pérez, 2004).

The mere act of using Spanish in the classroom to teach bilingual children, however, is not enough to empower students. In fact, when Spanish is used selectively in the classroom only
to discipline while English is reserved for academic tasks, or when students’ home varieties of
Spanish are devalued by the teachers, bilingual education can be a disempowering experience for
students (McCollum, 1999). Some argue that since its empowering beginnings in the Chicano
Civil Rights movement in the 1960’s, modern bilingual education in the U.S. has taken a general
turn toward this disempowering, subordinating use of Spanish, giving students the impression
that they are incapable or not worthy of instruction in English and therefore must still receive it
in Spanish (Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000). In a transitional model of bilingual education, in which
students must eventually graduate out of Spanish and into English instruction, it is difficult to
escape this remedial orientation. Yet as the most politically feasible form of bilingual education
in a strong anti-immigrant, English-only climate, transitional programs have been the preferred
model for policymakers at both the national and state levels for over 30 years.

What is a Teacher to Do?

All of this information can be overwhelming to a teacher in a transitional bilingual
classroom, trying each day to offer Spanish bilingual children a chance at academic success in an
American schooling context. Many of the policy and programmatic decisions that affect the
education of their students are out of teachers’ hands. State laws and federal educational policy,
including recent testing and assessment legislation and language policies, have increasing sway
over classroom practices. Districts have become more and more explicit in their curricular
dictates, even in some places going so far as to monitor teachers’ progress in scripted curricular
programs such as Open Court Reading. Teachers are evaluated based almost entirely on their
students’ performance on state standards-based tests, which in Texas is the TAKS (spell out this
acronym), and district- and school-level policies will often dictate the language in which a
student is tested.¹

Yet, even with so many policies operating to exert control over teachers in their
classrooms, a growing body of research suggests that the teacher’s role is pivotal in policy
implementation (Coburn, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1990; Stritikus & Garcia, 2000). Teachers,
following their own philosophies of education, developed models of pedagogy, and assessments
of children’s abilities and needs, have a great deal more power than many of them realize over
the success or failure of different policy initiatives. Bringing to bear their own beliefs and
methods of data-collection as they spend countless hours with children and families, teachers
make sense of often confusing and contradictory policies and ultimately decide for themselves
how to make policies a reality in their classrooms for children. They also decide how to explain
policies to parents. Therefore, it is vital to the success of any policy initiative intended to
improve the education of students to ensure that teachers are afforded the opportunity to develop
sophisticated understandings of policy goals and the teacher’s roles in implementing them.

¹ While some teachers, at some grade levels, do have input into decisions about their students’
language of testing, there is still the necessity to choose; bilingual students do not take the TAKS
in both of their languages. This further reinforces the ultimate goal of transitional bilingual
education: English success for all students.
In the following two examples, both teachers take their developing understandings of the purposes of bilingual education, their ongoing assessments of and connections with their students, their ongoing communications with parents, and the particular context of their schools, and begin to forge new structures. Change was and is not an easy task for either teacher. However, they looked to these various sources of information to guide their decision-making throughout the process. Perceiving change as an ongoing process rather than as an event, they developed strategies for continuing the implementation process despite obstacles. Because their decisions at every stage were based on the information they gathered from the behavior, performance, and reactions of their very young students, the authors contend that both teachers, in a very real sense, engaged in data-driven decision making.

Case #1: Marta

As a bilingual kindergarten teacher, I am passionate about providing my children with the highest quality education. I feel it is my job to provide them with the strongest base of education in Spanish, while exposing them to English and preparing them for the demands that will be placed on them as they move to higher grades. I feel that though I am their teacher and academics are my business, it is also important to incorporate an appreciation for and various examples of their home culture into their learning and classroom life.

Too often, I have seen students who want to escape their heritage once they have “graduated” from bilingual education. At such a young age, some of my children already view themselves with a deficit attitude. This attitude often also carries on to their view of their parents as well as their peers still “stuck” in bilingual classes. I remember with embarrassment how ashamed I was of my father when I was growing up. His first language was Spanish, he mixed it with English too often for my taste, and he spoke with a heavy accent. I do not want my students to feel the shame I felt. I want them to learn to be proud of who they are and where they came from. Children are not born with attitudes toward societal issues. I have seen in my school that these attitudes, whether they are positive or negative, are learned primarily from parents and teachers.

“My School”

When I was in college, I used to ride the city bus to class. The route would take us right in front of a very old little school. It is a typical little schoolhouse, red brick with red trim. I would daydream about someday working at that little school. It was so cute. It was centrally located, and I always lived in that area. How perfect that would be! It wasn’t until my second year of teaching that I would manage to be hired there.

During my first year of teaching, I remember hearing on the news that “my” cute little school was in danger of being shut down. Its enrollment was way down, and people in the neighborhood--mostly those whose children were attending other schools--were glad this school was going to be closed. After all, “it’s a Spanish school,” claimed several people interviewed for the news story.
This attitude has followed my school, despite its State of Texas Recognized label. I have met parents in the neighborhood whose children are supposed to attend the school but who have chosen to send their children to another school because it “has too many brown faces and too many Spanish speakers.” This statement was made to me, even after this person knew that I teach there.

The school is small, with two classes at each grade level, PK through 4, and with only one 5th grade class. We follow our district’s guidelines and have a transitional bilingual program. At PK through 4 we have one “bilingual” class full of Spanish-dominant children, and one “English” class comprised of English-speaking children and children who have already “transitioned” out of the Spanish bilingual program. In the fifth grade, when nearly all students have “transitioned” into English instruction, one ESL-certified teacher is in charge of the whole group. At every grade level, we are encouraged to “transition” children—to move them into English instruction—as quickly as possible. Children who have managed to make this transition are deemed successful; we are very excited about them. We do not very much celebrate students’ successes in Spanish. Furthermore, “bilingual” and “English” classes do not spend much time together. Except for their “Specials” class (P.E., Music, and Art), they are not in class together, and teachers do not collaborate much. Because of this separation, the two student groups do not play together on the playground, nor do they see one another as friends. It is almost like two separate schools. Overall, despite the often very good intentions of educators, there is a devaluing of Spanish and the cultures of our Spanish-speaking students at the school. To a great extent, we have unwittingly created a segregated society within our little school.

The school is finally changing

However, I believe these attitudes are finally changing. To begin with, there are many exciting things going on at our little school. There is a big push for technology use, several different university student groups work with our children and participate in school-wide activities, and parental involvement has increased by at least twenty percent. We have developed a relationship with IBM to secure volunteers to tutor, mentor, and teach computer classes. Our children, particularly our bilingual children, are experiencing things they are not “supposed” to have any experience with: Outdoor School (a three-day educational camping trip), the symphony, art museums, and much more. We have been able to ease concerns of parents in the neighborhood enough that they are willing to send their children to the school, rather than requesting transfers to nearby schools with larger Anglo populations. However, many people still see us as that “Spanish” school that only has bilingual classes. This attitude infiltrates the school and affects the attitudes and understandings of my students and their parents. It seems to me that we still have some changing to do.

I have spent a great deal of time during the past six months energized and excited about what we are learning in my classes at UT, where I am pursuing a Master’s Degree in Bilingual Education. I have always been passionate about my students and their learning; however, I only recently realized that I did not have a bilingual philosophy. When I first began teaching, being a bilingual teacher simply meant that I had enough Spanish, had taken enough courses, and had passed the necessary tests to be certified a Bilingual teacher. I always fought for what I felt was best for my children, but I was merely going by what my heart was telling me. During the past
semester of study, I have been realizing that I needed to be better prepared with research and
theory. I am convinced it is essential for all of us to understand why we do what we do.
Unfortunately, I too often feel the need to defend myself and my classroom.

As I have been defining and refining my own bilingual philosophy, I am realizing that my
ultimate goal for children at the kindergarten level is for them to work, learn, and play together
without seeing a distinction between the kids from the “English” class and the kids from the
“Spanish” class. With this in mind, I approached the “English” kindergarten teacher about
working together more. We have been taking the risk together. The kindergarten bilingual and
monolingual English classes have begun to interact (this interaction is never really described?
The nature of the interaction would be important, I think) more on a daily basis and start learning
alongside each other. Even the teachers are learning things together, thereby modeling for the
children. This has contributed to a feeling of togetherness among the two classrooms. The
children in the monolingual English class no longer use the terms “That Spanish boy or girl” or
“That brown kid” to refer to one another. They use their classmates’ names! For the first time,
the children in both classes seek each other out during recess. I can see a difference now when
my children freely talk to the parents of children in my teaming partner’s class, and when in turn
the parents of monolingual English speakers acknowledge my children.

The Parents

The racism and bias against bilingual children I see at my school makes me very sad. It
also makes me wonder what the parents, both English and Spanish speaking, think is going on in
our bilingual classrooms. Do they know the objective of bilingual education?

Spanish-speaking parents have concerns about our program. I have had parents approach
me because they do not want their child placed in the bilingual class; they fear their children will
be behind academically and excluded socially. Where do these ideas come from? Are other
parents conveying this attitude? Are other children making fun of their kids? As difficult as it is
to do, I must ask myself if the parents’ concerns are justified, based on our bilingual program as
a whole. On the other hand, I have had parents approach me, upset that their child is being
transitioned into the monolingual English class. They do not want their child to lose their
Spanish. Do these parents think that our bilingual program is a language-maintenance class? Do
they want it to be a language maintenance class? Parents from my school want a better future and
more opportunities for their children. At the same time, many of them have expressed a desire
for their children to maintain their heritage culture. How is that different from what any other
parents want for their children?

Too often, I have heard parents of monolingual English children say that they do not want
their children playing with the “Spanish” kids or even learning alongside them; they see the
bilingual children in a deficit framework— as lacking English—rather than an enriching
framework that offers a rich linguistic and cultural heritage. This negative, subtractive attitude
often gets passed on to the children and can be harmful out on the playground, in the classroom,
and in the lunchroom. I would like to think that the reason for these attitudes is mere ignorance.
However, I suspect that there is more to it than that. At least in some instances, I can trace
parents’ racist attitudes about bilingual children back to my own colleagues: teachers can be among the worst offenders.

The Teachers

I have been trying to “spread the word” about what we can do to ensure all of our children’s success by sharing articles and ideas with my colleagues and bragging about what is going on in the Kindergarten classes. Some teachers wondered where my excitement came from when I announced that my children and the other Kindergarten teacher’s children were actually seeking each other out and playing together. Overcome by emotion, I blurted out, “They used to call each other ‘that brown girl’ or ‘that Spanish kid!’ Do you know how that made me feel?” I seized the opportunity to make a public statement that I would no longer tolerate this behavior in my classroom, or any other classroom. Ours is a small school; all of us feel a strong sense of responsibility toward each other’s students. So the fact that I was no longer going to allow our bilingual children to feel less than adequate, or not on par with kids in the “English classes,” now meant that all the teachers were going to have to work with me and learn with me, or be counterproductive to what is best for our children.

I am a strong believer in the idea of reciprocity. I feel that we as teachers have an incredible influence over what our students, as well as their parents, feel and think. What we say and do is noticed by all; we sometimes begin a cycle that resonates throughout our entire school culture. Parents are beginning to notice what we are doing in kindergarten, and this is beginning to break down barriers and build community. I have tried as well to share with my colleagues and to help them see what can be done and impart to them my vision for our school. However, my colleagues have not been as excited as I had hoped. While they are at least happy for me, they do not seem to understand the importance of integrating our children after Kindergarten. I feel that attitude is part of what keeps our classes--English and Spanish--so deeply divided. With half our students bilingual, we need to make an effort to create more of an understanding of our bilingual program among all our teachers. If teachers better understood the power of learning in two languages together, perhaps support for bilingual education and tolerance of the children in bilingual classes would increase.

Case #2: Lupe

I remember the exact moment I realized I understood the English language. I was barely six years old, and a recent immigrant from Mexico. The first grade teacher in my English-only classroom in San Antonio, Texas, was angry with the whole class and said, “You should be glad you have someone to teach you. Your people are lazy and stupid.” I learned to be quiet, to try harder and begin to accept that I would never be successful.

Recently in my classroom, a five-year-old English-speaking African American girl nonchalantly translated my Spanish instructions into English for one of her classmates. With surprise and joy in her face, she turned to me with a huge smile and exclaimed, “I can understand you!”

For me, this contrast is why I am teaching in a bilingual classroom.
My school district like many others works with the TBE (Transitional Bilingual Education) model. The majority of the bilingual teachers I know define bilingual classes as places for monolingual Spanish speaking students to learn English; thus, they run transitional classrooms. I have always believed that bilingual education means all students, both English and Spanish speakers, learning two languages together. I have come to make this belief a reality in my own classroom through a gradual process, on a long road of experiences with my students during my eight years of teaching kindergarten, even though my colleagues have continually warned me I was misguided. Although I did not know it as I was developing it, my classroom much more closely resembles a dual language model than a transitional model.

In my kindergarten classroom, some of my goals are to promote challenging academic achievement, English and Spanish language development, and cross-cultural understanding for all the students, English speakers and Spanish speakers alike. English- and Spanish-language learning take place primarily through the content, in particular a literature based, hands-on science curriculum. Academic subjects are taught to all students through both English and Spanish. As we work in my classroom to perform academic tasks, all of my students’ bilingual language abilities are developed along with their knowledge of content. The students demonstrate an interest in learning each other’s language and make tremendous progress toward that goal by the end of their kinder year. In retrospect, it appears this model was a natural course I took in trying to fulfill my students’ needs. Research supports my choice to have a dual-language classroom.

How did I come to be essentially teaching a dual-language classroom in this entirely transitional context? I did not begin teaching with thoughts of any particular kind of bilingual program. My plan was, and still is, to help students develop academic skills while building confidence and respect for each other’s culture and language. Some of the reasons were circumstantial. At my school, we have three kindergarten bilingual classes; two classes whose teachers team-teach, separating their students by language group for academic instruction; and my class, which is self-contained--no partner to team with. So from the start, I was on my own to manage a classroom with two language groups. In what follows, I will tell the story of my journey. I hope it may inspire other teachers to take the risk to create for themselves and their students a classroom to be proud of, regardless of their context or situation.

The Beginning of My Journey

Before I became a teacher, I volunteered in a kindergarten classroom at my children’s school, where I observed the students’ excitement over hands-on science. They demonstrated an interest in reading about the topics they studied, while the science curriculum tapped into their natural curiosity. I knew I wanted to do what this teacher was doing. I was lucky enough to be hired at that very school and assigned that very teacher as my mentor. While she had over 20 years of experience and was one of the authors of the science curriculum I wanted to use, her classroom was English-only. This did not concern me, but some of my bilingual co-workers believed it would pose a problem.
I shared with the bilingual teachers on my team my idea of using the integrated science curriculum I had learned in my own class. They were not happy that I was considering this and offered the following objections: since many of the children had never traveled outside their community, the topics would be foreign and difficult for them to comprehend; teaching in English and Spanish in the classroom would confuse students; hearing both languages would promote code switching; it would impede proper language development; it would persuade Spanish-speaking students to stop using their native language. Their opinion was that a science curriculum could not provide opportunities for literacy skills development, particularly for bilingual students. These beliefs were echoed by many of the bilingual teachers on campus. Yet, how could I avoid exposing my bilingual children to English, when half of their classmates would require English instruction?

As a first-year teacher, wanting to do what is best for my students, I decided to follow the recommendation of my peers and not use the integrated science curriculum with my bilingual students. I taught my two language groups separately: the English group got the exciting, science-based integrated curriculum, while the Spanish group got the “accepted” bilingual curriculum. My teaching was forced and did not feel comfortable at all. I was using mostly English in the class and translating quite often. Quite a bit of instructional time was wasted. The students’ faces reflected their lack of understanding and loss of interest. My instincts told me I needed to go in a different direction. Incredibly, it would be my students who would push me to change.

**My Road to Discovery**

Here were my data points: although my Spanish-speaking group was doing well, they appeared bored. They were distracted and would not focus on their work because they were too interested to see me working with the English-speaking group. I began to encounter some behavior problems; furthermore, there was a lack of cohesiveness between my students, which I realize now I was encouraging with my classroom setup. The curriculum I used for the Spanish speakers was neither challenging nor enriching. My bilingual group was receiving language instruction for L2 development in isolation. I was segregating my groups from each other in class. They referred to each other as the Spanish kids and the English kids. The native English speakers were not interested in listening to anything in Spanish, let alone learn it. I had a student who would cover his ears every time I began to speak Spanish. The group would constantly interrupt and ask what I was saying. Children with some limited skills in English would try to communicate only in English. The monolingual Spanish speakers seemed to have a prolonged “silent period.” The children would rarely play together during recess, if at all, while interaction was minimal during free choice centers. In a sense, all these data points converged to inform me that change was needed. Finally one day, one of my students refused to work on his assignment and asked, “¿Por qué no podemos hacer lo que ellos están haciendo? Yo quiero hacer eso.” (Why can’t we do what they are doing? I want to do that!) The rest of the group echoed his sentiment.

I decided to follow my instincts and take the risk. At the last minute, I took the math lesson and used it as a whole group activity. It was a math lesson integrated into the science topic of the week. It was easier than I had expected. During the lesson, I saw students help each other.
When students did not understand what step to take next, they did not think twice about turning to their classmates to ask questions. I was experiencing a most remarkable event. If one student did not know what the other was saying, someone else would jump in and try to interpret or explain it. The students were engaged and actively participating in the math activity; amazingly, language was not a barrier. I worked backward, since I did not want to interrupt the interaction; I took the bilingual group after the lesson and reviewed it. I checked for understanding as they talked me through the steps of the math activity on which they had just worked. I guided them through the lesson while encouraging them to use the correct math vocabulary. Students participated without fear and demonstrated risk-taking abilities. What I did not realize was that I was experiencing the magic of dual immersion: integrating students, learning language through content and using preview/review to support language learning. It was a special thing to observe.

After that day, I was sure of the kind of instruction I wanted for my students. I realized I could provide it and believed the science curriculum could help me do it well. I learn so much from my students, but probably learned more that first year than any other year. This group of five-year-olds pushed me to challenge the norm, as well as guided me toward the class I always wanted.

I slowly began to translate lessons and information, beginning with the little reading books that accompanied each science unit. My bilingual students were ecstatic, but it was not enough. The students demanded more. They kept saying they wanted to be scientists too. I had a student who was truly bilingual, and the other students discovered that if they asked him about the lessons, he could tell them some of what was going on. My Spanish-speaking students demanded equality and equity. They may not have known that is what they were asking, but that is exactly what was happening. My students understood I was working to provide them with something better, and they wanted to make sure it happened. After I completed the teacher-directed portion of my lessons, my bilingual students would question me. They asked if I were going to teach them everything “just like in English.” The children demonstrated a sense of empowerment; they were actively participating in their learning; they were verbal about how and what they wanted to learn.

Things began to really turn around after I made another major decision. I had to find a way to stop my students from thinking of each other in terms of “them” and “us.” I wanted to help them stop seeing language as a divider. On one occasion, as I announced I needed my group for language arts, I overheard one student saying to another student, “No, not you. She’s calling the Mexican kids.” I decided to share with them some of my own background. It was a shock to them when I explained that my first language is Spanish. I explained how my family immigrated to the United States when I was only six years old, and settled in Texas. A couple of students shared their families’ backgrounds too. I also shared my expectations with them with regard to the two languages in our classroom and why all languages should be respected. I think we underestimate small children; my students rose to the occasion. I asked the class to help me decide on group names to make it easier on everyone when I called them for group work. We talked about why it was important that sometimes I work with each group separately. I asked the class to come up with some rules for everyone to follow. Although I had a list prepared, I did not need to use it; they came up with a more thorough set of rules than mine. Among their rules: it is ok to answer in English or Spanish; you cannot make fun of or laugh at a student who does not
say something correctly or who mispronounces words; you cannot make fun of Spanish. They became interested in each other.

The next change was more revolutionary than I knew. I decided to take turns alternating English and Spanish for the morning activities on a daily basis, which included calendar, some math, and literacy activities. I informed the class of the change I was considering. Most of the class appeared excited to try something new, but there were a few who were hesitant and afraid they would not understand what was happening. My students agreed to try it “for a while,” and if it did not work we would try something else. The first week was somewhat difficult because no one knew what to expect. The language arts lessons were conducted in two separate groups; the lesson would be conducted in English, then later in Spanish, or vice versa, alternating the group I worked with first on a daily basis so that the students would not feel one was above the other. The students kept such good track of this that there was no chance I would forget. They began to pay attention to each other’s lessons and the activities. They were filled with excitement and anticipation.

Needless to say, my class was constantly changing. I changed my classroom setup five times or more that first year. Our schedule changed at least three times, and the lessons were absolutely different. My students became so used to changes that if there were none in a long period of time, they looked for things we could change. Before every change, however, I would communicate my intentions to the students and give their input consideration. I was very happy to find that with every change my teaching was a better “fit.” The more comfortable I became, the more receptive they became.

The next step was to adjust students’ homework. I sent a letter to the bilingual parents describing the topics we would be studying, and every Thursday’s homework was connected to the unit of the week. It was a way for students to share what they were learning and spend time with their parents. Parents, both English- and Spanish-speaking, began to stop by to let me know how happy they were with their child’s excitement about school and their studies. A couple of parents mentioned that their usually quiet children were constantly talking about what they were studying. They were exploring at home, they wanted to go to the library, and they began to watch educational channels. The children shared at home what they learned at school. They were also using the vocabulary and scientific terms they were learning. One mom came to speak to me because she was so proud of her son. Apparently he had been wanting a specific toy, but when his parents took him to buy it, he found two books that covered topics we had studied and he chose the books over the toy. He wanted to take the books to school and share them with his classmates.

Even as an inexperienced teacher, I knew there was something important happening here, yet bilingual colleagues continued to disapprove. Despite their concern, however, being next door to an all-English class was a good experience for the students as well as the teachers. I approached my neighbor, and mentor, with ideas and she asked questions as she tried to understand what my students needed. This stretched me to look at things from a different perspective. Our two classes bonded during recess. The interaction of the classes facilitated language development between native and non-native speakers.
I noticed that during whole-group activities more and more of my students were participating regardless of the language used for instruction. While I haven’t formally assessed my English speakers in Spanish, I have noted bilingual development. Students are more open to participating in both languages and seem to trust that they are safe to try. My students create an environment of excited second language learners. I believe the transformation of my class is the result of my willingness to listen to the students.

A Shining Star

Here is one of many examples of why I am proud to be teaching where and how I am. Last year I had a student who entered my classroom on the first day of school, furious to be in a bilingual classroom, hostile to his Spanish-speaking classmates, and uninterested in his own bilingual heritage. Although his parents had wanted him to learn bilingually, and his own father was from Mexico and spoke limited English, the child’s attitude was so negative that his mother tried to move him out of my class during the first week. The principal persuaded her to give it three weeks. At the end of the three weeks, however, his mom informed me that her son had changed his mind: he was adamant that she not remove him from my class. She wanted me to know that she believed his change of heart was because of his experience in the classroom. He enjoyed the class and he liked our science units. He was having long conversations with his dad in Spanish. He was looking forward to their Christmas trip to Mexico to visit the family. He kept telling his parents he was going to surprise them with what he had learned and speak Spanish.

Conclusion…But Not the End

I respect my peers as capable professionals with many years of experience. Still, my idea of what should happen in a bilingual classroom differs greatly from theirs. It has been difficult to stand alone for what I believe against their opposition. There have been many days of frustration and self-doubt. I was a new, inexperienced teacher receiving constant criticism. I was regularly told I was doing it wrong and damaging the students. Yet how could what I was doing be wrong when everyone, the students, the parents and the teacher were excited with what was happening?

I recently shared this paper with a bilingual colleague at my school. She confided that she cried as she realized that she too was segregating the students and that she was presenting English as more important. The very next day, she changed her centers so they were bilingual. She was surprised by all the students’ excitement. She has begun to ask students for ideas and suggestions for the classroom. Change does not come easily; maybe it will have to happen one teacher at a time. But at my school anyway, the door has been opened and communication has begun.

Discussion: Child-Centered Data

Both teachers, independently, have been developing a goal of dual language and an orientation of enrichment bilingual education, in our kindergarten classrooms. Both school contexts, including peers, supervising principals, and members of the larger community, challenged the new ideas coming out of these classrooms. At the same time, both teachers won
the support of a growing group of parents and we were surprised at the unexpected support that came from some parents and teachers who liked what they saw. Ultimately, both teachers agree that when we are with their children, we know we are right. We have learned so much from our students simply by watching and listening to them. Having spent eight or nine years learning to know our communities and becoming become aware of the spaces available within those communities for change, we are both very thoughtful and serious about our process of change in the classroom and at our schools. We both care deeply about our schools.

While we concede that kindergarten is often afforded more spaces than older grades in the state assessment and accountability system, we are concerned at the direction the state is taking toward ever-more vigilant test-based (i.e., paper-based) standardized accountability for very young children. We agree that we as educators must be accountable to our students, their parents, and our communities to do our very best to provide all students with equitable learning environments, opportunities to excel in all ways, and the best instructional practices. However, with very young children, data come in different forms, and therefore the process of “data-driven decision-making” will look different.

We contend that as kindergarten teachers working to build enrichment bilingual education in our classrooms and changing our schools’ orientations towards bilingual children, we are engaged in data-driven decision-making. Understanding that data-driven decision-making generally refers to making decisions about program needs based on test results, we wish to define “data” more broadly, as what might be termed “child-centered data.” In our kindergarten classrooms, we look at students’ motivation and attention, their interactions and participation, their observed comprehension of our content instruction, and the product of their written work. We observe. Seeing our students motivated and engaged in the materials we offer gives us invaluable data—far more helpful than the results of pen-pencil tests. We accept their product in either language, encourage them to experiment and explore in both languages, and celebrate any successes we observe.

How do we reconcile the fact that the state is encouraging us to use “test” data to drive our decision-making? We use what we have. Our students, at five years of age, often teach us more by what they do in our classrooms than by how they perform on assessments, even one-on-one assessments such as Tejas Lee. We use these assessments of course, but as professional educators, we will continue to use all the tools available to us to help us understand and monitor our students’ progress and our teaching.

Conclusion

Our advice, therefore, to teachers interested in developing a new orientation in their classrooms, in instigating change in their schools, and/or in opening spaces for exciting new bilingual programs, is not going to surprise anyone. First of all, take the risk. There is no way to know what is possible until you try. You will likely be surprised at how much welcome you receive! Second, be receptive to your children’s needs, to your community’s response, to the parents, and to your colleagues’ concerns. Third, and seemingly contradictorily, stand firm in your own convictions. Develop a clear but flexible philosophy that helps you understand what you are doing and why, because you will be asked to defend it. Be sure you are able to. Finally,
take things step by step. Real change takes real time. Expect to progress child by child, group by group, teacher by teacher. Expect to feel at times as though you are taking one step forward for every two steps backwards. Expect to engage in many conversations about what you are doing, and expect to be challenged more often than you are commended. You will be making an investment in the future of your students. By taking on the challenge of changing how your school views and teaches bilingual children, you will be investing in a better future for all. It is worth the investment, and the returns will be long-term.
References


