



Speaking with Two Bilingual Educators

SUMMARY

Bilingual education is not a passing fad in the United States but, rather, has been part of the educational landscape since early immigrants settled in North America.

This article briefly explores the hot-button issues around bilingual education and highlights two devoted teachers who took unusual paths to reach their destination at the helm of their dual language programs.

Throughout the world, bilingual

education is the norm, as countries strive to educate their children for global citizenship, in which fluency in two or more languages is paramount. In contrast, in the United States, bilingual education is a lightning rod for opinion among parents and educators, politicians and voters. Many Americans would be surprised to learn, however, that bilingual education has been part of our country's legacy since early colonial times, according to a recent article in our sister publication, AFT's *American Educator* (2015). At one time, conservatives balked against losing the right to educate their children in their native German, Spanish or Polish; fast forward 100 years, and traditionalists advocate for *English only* in schools, fearing that using other languages in

school "will somehow fracture the national identity" (Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015). Recently, however, bilingualism is increasingly associated with positive benefits, both neurologically and educationally; research indicates that older bilinguals experience a fortunate delay in the symptoms of dementia (Valdes, 2015) and younger bilinguals have better problem-solving skills and attention control than monolinguals (Brisk & Proctor, 2015). Furthermore, studies show that English language learners (ELLs) who are educated bilingually actually out-score ELLs in English-only programs on academic tests in English (Parrish, Linqunti, Merickel, Quick, Laird & Esra, 2002).

Bilingual education is a tool for current policymakers to embrace, given the fact that by the year 2020, the majority of all school-aged children will be a

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“minority” and that “the proportion of the total U.S. child population being raised in immigrant families is projected to *continue to increase regardless of future immigration*” (Rumbaut, 2015). With recent press about all the advantages of bilingualism, more school districts are returning to their real American roots by offering their students dual-language programs, which are as varied as the career paths of the two bilingual educators profiled here.

Bilingual Educators Take Roads Less Traveled to Bilingual Classrooms

Ana Banda-Wemple is at the helm of the bilingual prekindergarten in Albany, while Suzy Malone teaches third grade in a dual-language program in Ossining. Both New York public school teachers help their students acquire academics and social skills in Spanish and English, but they took disparate paths to reach their bilingual classrooms.

Banda-Wemple always dreamed of teaching our youngest learners and earned her degree in early childhood education in her native city of Lima,

Peru. Two years later, she moved to Albany, and began her career teaching Spanish as a Second Language to fourth, fifth and sixth graders. Eight years later, Banda-Wemple helped to start Albany’s dual-language program, teaching grades two and three, until the city opened its first prekindergarten classroom in 2008. With her background in and love for early childhood education, Banda-Wemple was a shoe-in for this program and reports with pride (and some astonishment) that she is now teaching the children of her former students. Her full-day class includes nine native Spanish speakers and nine native English speakers, who were selected by lottery for this popular program. While her students come from a range of economic circumstances and cultural backgrounds, Banda-Wemple’s welcoming classroom brings children and their families together to form a nurturing and supportive community. It warms Banda-Wemple’s heart that parents from opposite ends of Albany step forward every day to bring their children’s classmates to and from school, since transportation is not provided for pre-K. She explained, “One of my students was unable to come to school

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Engagement with community, and generous interaction from other parents enabled a student with limited resources to return to the classroom.

and was about to be forced to leave the program. Her family is going through a pretty rough time, so they had no transportation, odd working hours, and so on. After the other parents found out, they got organized, made phone calls, donated a car seat, and volunteered rides to and from school. We are so happy to have her back in school!”

Malone took a more circuitous route to her current third grade dual-language assignment. Growing up in Rochester, she loved her Spanish classes and decided to immerse herself in the language by living in Mexico and Costa Rica. After completing college, she joined the Peace Corps as a special educator on the rural Santa Elena peninsula near Guayaquil, Ecuador. After attending graduate school at Columbia

University, Malone was a bilingual special educator in an inclusion program at a Bronx elementary school. The world again lured her away from New York for a stint teaching high school English as a Second Language and Spanish in Thailand. Malone returned to the U.S. to teach for six years at Public School 165 in Manhattan, located near Columbia University and in a predominantly Dominican neighborhood. “What made that school so special at the time was the pride and collaboration among teachers and the support of administrators. She went on to say, “At P.S. 165 I learned how vital partnership is to dual language programs and the hard work, grit and delicate dance of having a successful side-by-side team. The sharing, planning, coordinating, continual passing of tidbits of information, and communicating with parents in the language that works best, go much beyond being solely team members.” After that influential experience in Manhattan, Malone moved to the Galapagos, off the coast of Ecuador, where she taught ESL and first grade. She is now in her sixth year of teaching elementary dual-language in Ossining. With more than half of Malone’s students hailing from Ecuador, her experiences in that country and culture are integral to building her class community, just as Banda-Wemple’s Peruvian upbringing and college preparation are to her.

Parent engagement is key to student success, agree Malone and Banda-Wemple. Especially at the preschool age, parents need to know and be able to communicate on a daily or regular basis with their child's teacher. Banda-Wemple counts on seeing most parents every morning, when they bring their children to class and pick them up after school. She feels this is a wonderful opportunity to chat briefly about each child and to share anecdotes or touch on more serious issues a child may be having at school or at home. Parents often stay for morning circle time, which is always conducted in Spanish, and they often help out in centers in the classroom. She also hosts frequent family breakfasts, including special ones for Mother's and Father's Day, and a mid-year celebration in February.

Banda-Wemple's entire school celebrates Latino culture in a Cinco de Mayo potluck, in which families come together in the school cafeteria for food, music and dancing. Malone hosts a similar family gathering for Dia de los Muertos, or Day

of the Dead, at Halloween time. This celebration of ancestors encourages families to continue to share their own traditions with their children in their new environment.

In addition, parent involvement helps fuel her students' enthusiasm for learning, says Malone. "Every year I invite each child and his or her parents to share with the class something that is important to their family. Last year, one father showed pictures and described in English his trip to the Taj Mahal. This year, a mother came to school and made a drink called colada morada with the class... If you could have seen all the proud, beaming faces of that child and that mother — and of all the other children who know and love colada morada!"



Sharing the tradition of colada morada.



Classroom projects tie in to cultural traditions.



Families are engaged with invitations to special events, and encouraged to continue their own traditions of celebrations.



Music and dancing for Cinco de Mayo.

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Families are encouraged to share and participate in classroom celebrations of cultural traditions, helping to foster a sense of understanding and community among those from different backgrounds.

Malone contends that it doesn't really matter what topic or activity parents share; what is important is the sharing between the child's world at home and school.

Both Malone and Banda-Wemple find the occasional challenge in being a dual-language teacher in a monolingual school. The other bilingual teachers at Banda-Wemple's school have higher grade levels, so she sometimes feels the absence of colleagues who share her passion for pre-K. Both educators lament the lack of bilingual teachers in the arts, in music, and in physical education, since this means that students only speak Spanish in their own classrooms. The teachers also stressed the importance of administrative support and the overall school culture for embracing and enhancing their dual-language programs and students. Malone feels fortunate in that her current principal recognizes the importance of communicating with her students' parents and supported a "split curriculum night, during which parents could attend the presentation only in Spanish, rather than sitting through the English program first."

Because their programs are small, it is a challenge meeting the specific needs of the Spanish zone teachers during weekly professional development meetings, as most curriculum and materials are geared toward monolingual classrooms. Malone recalls the optimal professional community that she experienced working in Manhattan, where "... all of our professional development was created to support our program. We did a lot of work with the reading and writing project from Teachers College at Columbia

University, through which we entered each other's classrooms to observe and learn from one another and mentored many bilingual student teachers..."

Malone concluded, "Dual-language teachers created and ran our own study group, meeting before school. We invited the administration occasionally, but the agenda was ours, and we had full attendance."

Both educators are active in bilingual education outside the walls of their classrooms. Banda-Wemple meets monthly with her school's Dual Language Parent Committee, while Malone serves as a regional delegate for the New York State Association of Bilingual Educators (NYSABE). She attends monthly meetings with bilingual educators from across the state, presenting at professional conferences and collaborating with teachers, administrators and professors in the field, such as professor Zoila Tazi Morell, who shares her expertise in pre-K bilingual education in this issue of *Educator's Voice*.

Despite the challenges, both teachers sing the praises of bilingual education, which is clearly shared by parents, as their programs have long waiting lists for seats in their classrooms. Community members from Albany to Ossining see bilingualism as an asset for their children. Banda-Wemple and Malone's students reap the benefits from the unusual paths that these exemplary bilingual educators took to New York State.

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