

## Reactions from a NYC Bilingual Special Education Teacher

A response to: Peggy Hickman and Shernaz B. Garcia's  
"Elementary Principal Leadership for Equitable Learning  
Environments for Diverse Latina/o Students"

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**"Elementary** Principal Leadership for Equitable Learning Environments for Diverse Latina/o Students" (Hickman & Garcia, *NYS TESOL Journal* 1(2), 2014) argues that when a leader is not clear on the goals of bilingual education, there is a disconnect between the purpose of different bilingual tracks and the implementation of programs meant to create equitable learning environments for bilingual students. As a fifth-year bilingual special education teacher, I agree with García and Hickman that differences in the leadership's understanding of bilingualism leads to ". . . tensions and contradictions in placement and service delivery decisions for Latina/o ELLs with and without disabilities."

I have taught at two public schools New York City, both with a large Hispanic population (84% and 93%). In my experience the school leaders' implementation of a bilingual program is not consistent with the literature of bilingual pedagogy, and this can lead to fragmented programming. I believe that the transitional bilingual (TB) program available to most public elementary schools derives from a deficit view of the native language, using it only as a means to English development, and pushing students to transition into English as soon as possible. The three opportunities available to a transitional bilingual public school student will now be presented in order to evaluate the impact of the program on student and teacher.

### Three Distinct Paths for a Bilingual Student

Continued enrollment in the transitional bilingual program is based on results of the NYSESLAT exam or years in the country. This creates another layer of segregation between monolingual and bilingual classes besides race because there is also segregation by ability, as those who do not pass the exam stay in the program longer. Second, there is no parallel Spanish literacy curriculum at my school. The bilingual teachers must use their own resources, such as personal translations or piecemeal texts/workbooks in Spanish, to provide their students with access to native language instruction.

The second option for a bilingual student is mainstreaming into an English-only class. By passing the NYSESLAT, the student population is distinct. These students continually receive more rigorous instruction; they also have all of the materials necessary to deliver instruction in English, such as our literacy and math programs ReadyGen, Foundations, and Go Math!

Finally, if a bilingual student is determined to have a disability, that student is then transferred to one of the two self-contained (12:1) classrooms. Students in the self-contained classes are very weak in their native language because the decision has been made in the past that special education students will receive instruction in primarily one language. Therefore, the self-contained classes are taught mostly in English, with ESL supports.

I here reiterate the importance of the training and attitudes toward bilingual pedagogy from the school leaders. Valuing the native language development by school leaders would help ensure that the school community has the resources it needs in order to effectively develop Spanish literacy. The next steps for my school would be the implementation of a dual-language program available to all students. This would enhance the development of intercultural knowledge skills and holistically teach students to read, write, and function in a bilingual environment while valuing their home culture and language.



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