

✧ INTRODUCTION ✧

A Year in the Life

We need a sense of hope in our assessment of schools and our work in them. Not blithe optimism, but a grounded belief that something can be done: some image of goodness and some tangible sense of how to begin.

—Mike Rose*

SOME READERS MAY BE EAGER TO KNOW how dual immersion education can be “aligned” with the latest standards, tailored to federally mandated testing programs, or held accountable for meeting “benchmarks” of student achievement. If so, they should put down this book and look elsewhere. The public discourse on schooling today is far too concerned with such distractions. In our view, these fashionable notions of “education reform” have nothing to do with real teaching and learning, bilingual or otherwise. We believe they are passing fads that will eventually run their course. One can only hope that will occur before America’s schools are severely damaged.

This book, by contrast, is about *possibility*. Depicting a year in the life of a second-grade classroom, it demonstrates what can happen when the instruction is bilingual and the curriculum is constructivist. Children thrive in an environment that unlocks their intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm for learning. Simultaneously, without conscious effort,

*Source notes begin on page 115.

they become proficient in two languages and at home in a culture that differs from their own.

Their story unfolds at the Inter-American Magnet School in Chicago, Illinois. The program was one of the country's earliest and most acclaimed experiments in dual immersion, thanks to the strong commitment of parents as well as educators and an adventurous approach to pedagogy. Much has been written about the virtues of this model—and this particular school—in nurturing bilingualism and biculturalism for students from diverse backgrounds. Yet surprisingly little attention has been paid to its progressive educational philosophy, curriculum, and methodology. Exploring how these priorities complement and strengthen each other is the central focus of this book.

We present it here in the form of day-to-day narratives, each followed by a brief discussion of what transpired and how the children responded. Our aims are twofold: first, to convey the immediate experience of a bilingual constructivist classroom and, second, to analyze that experience and its impact on student learning.*

We begin with an overview of dual immersion and constructivism, along with a brief synopsis of their guiding principles. Five narrative chapters follow, illustrating how the principles were applied by a talented teacher. A final section tracks the lives of the main characters into the present, to see how the former second-graders are faring today as young adults.

While the theoretical portions of the book are grounded in research, references will be kept to a minimum in the interest of accessibility for readers, whether laypersons or professionals. Source notes at the end of the volume will provide suggestions for further reading.

Some Notes on Terminology

BILINGUAL EDUCATION IS KNOWN for its abundance of terms, often contradictory and confusing to nonspecialists. Here, for the sake of clarity, is a brief glossary of those that appear in this book.

*The classroom and family narratives are taken from an ethnographic study conducted during the 1995–96 school year. These stories were collected through audio recordings (transcribed by native speakers of the languages used), still photography, and detailed field notes.

We use *dual immersion* to refer to a pedagogical model sometimes described as “dual language,” “two-way bilingual education,” or “two-way bilingual immersion.” Such programs enroll children of at least two different linguistic backgrounds and are bilingual in both goals and methodology.

Immersion—as distinguished from *submersion*, or “sink or swim”—encompasses various strategies for teaching a second language through “sheltered” instruction in academic subjects. The term is also commonly used to describe “one-way” program models serving students from a single language background, such as Spanish immersion for English speakers.

English language learners (ELLs)—also known as “emergent bilinguals” or, formerly, as “limited-English-proficient” students—are children from minority language communities in the United States who are still in the process of acquiring proficiency in the majority language.

Developmental bilingual education, sometimes described as “bilingual maintenance,” is a program designed to teach English to ELLs while also supporting the development of their native language. As with dual immersion, the goals are proficient bilingualism and grade-level (or better) academic performance.

Transitional bilingual education, by contrast, is an approach designed to promote English acquisition for ELLs as quickly as possible, while using students’ native language only to the extent necessary until they can be reassigned to mainstream, all-English classrooms.

English as a second language (ESL) and *Spanish as a second language (SSL)* describe various programs designed to foster second-language acquisition in a context where the *target language* is a widely spoken vernacular in the surrounding community rather than a “foreign” tongue.