

Preface



By Sharon Adelman Reyes

THIS BOOK GREW OUT OF MY EXPERIENCE as a parent first, an educator second. Or, more precisely, it was born out of my frustration with bilingual schooling options for my children. I felt it was important for them, coming from a biracial, bilingual, and bicultural family, to feel at home in two worlds. And language seemed to be an obvious bridge between their Puerto Rican and Jewish identities. So I enrolled my older child, Andre, in a Chicago elementary school that offered Spanish-as-a-second-language classes. Sadly, the program failed to excite him. After six years of instruction, my son still showed limited interest or proficiency in the language.

I was determined that my daughter, Glenna's, experience would be different. She spent her preschool and kindergarten years in Spanish-predominant classrooms, where she thrived and I was delighted. After kindergarten, I asked that she remain with her classmates in the transitional bilingual program. While the school administration thought this a bit odd, given my daughter's English-language dominance, my request was ultimately granted.

Then, in the autumn of Glenna's first-grade year, I began a series of visits to her classroom, pursuing interests that were both personal and professional (by now, I was a P.H.D. candidate in education). What I discovered no longer delighted me. I entered a classroom in which childhood was silenced by a rigid curriculum devoid of creativity and thoughtful instructional planning, an environment in which conformity was mandated and "discipline" maintained at all times.

The morning routine typically began with the children copying a teacher-created story from the chalkboard. Next came a phonics lesson, followed by children's recitations from a Spanish-language basal reader.* A few minutes were then devoted to answering literal comprehension questions regarding the text, usually involving the sequence of events. Finally, the children would be asked to take out their notebooks and draw a picture of the story.

On some days, as the thirty or so children sat silently drawing their pictures, the teacher called on them, one at a time, to sit and read to her at the back of the room. Soon the teacher's aide would begin to circulate among the other students, distributing ditto sheets for them to color and giving instructions on how to fill in the pictures. This would last for up to forty-five minutes, until it was time for a bathroom break.

With the exception of lunch and a short recess, the children remained at their desks all day for more phonics drills, science lessons taken from a text, and other seatwork. The only verbal communication between students that was allowed occurred in the lunchroom and on the playground. The store-bought and teacher-made displays that decorated the room all portrayed smiling white children, with no references to Latino cultures. And remember, this was a Spanish-English bilingual program!

The occasional music class consisted of a room with five straight rows of desks and chairs, without instruments or any space for physical activity. The children sang songs in English, in sequential order, from a cassette tape. Throughout one session the teacher spoke in cold, stern tones: "I really don't like all this noise. I want you to settle down and be quiet. I can't start with all this talking." She sent one child to the back of the room for speaking. He sat underneath the table where I was seated and remained there, forgotten, for the next half-hour.

Visiting Glenna's classroom was becoming an exercise in frustration. Prefabricated Halloween decorations were replaced by similar images of Thanksgiving. The daily regimen of teacher-directed activities continued.

*Basal readers consist of stories, poems, and other writings, usually abridged or revised, that are designed to teach specific literacy skills in a preplanned sequence. Unlike authentic children's literature, they generally fail to excite students about reading.

Nonetheless, I forced myself to return each week, although my visits became increasingly shorter. One November day the teacher led a discussion, a rare event in that classroom. The level of excitement rose as hands flew up and children vied for the opportunity to participate. Soon the discussion wound down, but the children did not. The teacher walked over to a girl and forcefully closed her book, slamming the pages shut. Then she faced a boy nearby who was still talking, placed her hand on his upper arm, and visibly tightened her grip until he, too, became silent. Order was restored.

I began to lie awake at night, thinking about what was going on—and not going on—in Glenna’s classroom. When seeking a bilingual education for my daughter, I had considered only language; now I was forced to consider educational philosophy as well. I spoke to the principal, but he refused to acknowledge that there was anything problematic about the school’s approach. I felt paralyzed, reluctant to give up on Glenna’s chances to become bilingual, yet horrified by what she was experiencing.

One evening after school, Glenna informed me that if she finished her homework she could move ahead and do extra pages in her workbook. She was proud that she was further ahead in her workbook than any of the other students. She was good. She listened to the teacher. She was not like the bad kids who talked.

“You don’t have to be good all of the time. Sometimes it’s okay not to be so good,” I told her. My daughter looked at me quizzically. I had the urge to tell her to talk in class, to get some answers wrong on her paper, to speak her mind. But I recalled how the teacher ensured obedience and I bit my tongue.

Clearly, it was time to look for a new school. I decided that, if I had to choose between second-language learning and a meaningful education for Glenna, I would choose an all-English school with an appropriate early-childhood curriculum.

Fortunately, I never had to make that choice. By the end of November, I was able to arrange for Glenna’s transfer to Inter-American, a public dual immersion school. My visit to her future classroom had featured an energetic and friendly teacher surrounded by active children exploring a classroom environment full of books, manipulatives, and art materials.

Soon I learned that these features were typical of the school, the result of a long history of language, instructional, and curricular planning.

Inter-American was born out of the vision of two teacher-parents who wanted a progressive bilingual education for their own children and for the children of others, and who were willing to engage in a grassroots effort to achieve that goal. Here Glenna began her re-education, learning that school need not be about being “good,” listening to the teacher, and giving the correct answer. It could be about discovering new worlds, posing her own questions, and exploring independent interests. Meanwhile, I began to reconsider the role of curriculum in second-language classrooms.

What’s more, I could not forget the callous treatment of Glenna’s former classmates, predominantly working-class children of immigrant parents. My daughter had escaped, but they had not, and that basic injustice continues to trouble me.

This book is about children of diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds who were fortunate enough to land in a school where both language and curriculum matter; where children are free to grow both bilingually and intellectually. It is about the ways in which language learning and curriculum combine in dual immersion classrooms to promote schooling that children enjoy, that inspires confidence in parents, and that allows educators to co-create and learn alongside their students. It is about rethinking pedagogy in dual immersion education. Above all, it is written in the hope that more children—whether bilingual, multilingual, or monolingual—will someday benefit from a *constructivist* education.