

Reader's Theater: ***The Birth of a Biliteracy Professional Learning Community***

CONTEXT: As part of a district-wide initiative, three teachers have been asked to come together to represent teachers developing biliteracy. The initiative asks for representation of different stakeholders on a PLC that will focus on collaboration among teachers.

This meeting's agenda is to have the teachers get to know each other, identify strengths and weaknesses in the current program (including differentiated instruction and quality of materials) and to come ready to share ways these three specific teachers can collaborate together. In this scenario, all teachers are bilingual. As you read the script, think about how a monolingual English teacher would participate and what she could contribute to the discussion.

Susan begins the meeting by saying:

SUSAN: Okay, we have about an hour to cover all this material. I guess we should begin by introducing ourselves. I'll start. I'm from here, learned Spanish by working in the service industry alongside many Latino immigrants, and I also got to study in Spain. One of my struggles is with that new student, Antonio. He uses such sophisticated language that sometimes I don't understand what he is saying and I am embarrassed. I guess I should read more in Spanish. I have to tell you I am excited about immigration reform and am marching this weekend to pressure for its passage. I think it's a really tough time for immigrants in our country.

Susan gestures toward Monica.

MONICA: I am going to the march, as well. Ever since I joined the immigrants rights group I belong to in Pilsen (inner-city Chicago), where I grew up, I have learned so much about the issues faced by my parents and community. I guess I didn't learn a lot about the Latino perspective growing up as an immigrant kid in Chicago. It just wasn't part of the curriculum. I wish they had taught us more about our history and I wish my Spanish were better. They exited me out of the transitional bilingual program by 2nd grade and so I am really good at the George Lopez Spanish, but sometimes I can't understand a lot of words in the texts I have to use to teach. Gosh! I wish we could take classes in Spanish just for bilingual teachers.

ELENA: I am glad this meeting is in English because I want to improve my English. I am a *normalista* from Guatemala and I have taught many years in Spanish in my country. I realize parents are concerned about my accent in English. I guess I can help you with how to teach in Spanish if you help me with my accent. I can also help you with Spanish grammar such as accent marks.

MONICA: What's a *normalista*, Elena?

ELENA: Oh, *normalistas* are teachers who get their degree as part of their high school studies plus a few additional courses. *Normalistas* are criticized for being very traditional in their pedagogy. More teachers now get their degrees as part of an advanced degree at the University, and they are not *normalistas*, but *licenciadas*, and they think they know more.

MONICA: Since you actually learned how to teach kids to read in Spanish, could you explain to me why my students seem stuck with the names of letters? I thought they knew them really well and they can't seem to apply that knowledge in a fluent way.

ELENA: But why are you spending your time on letter names? I know that's done in English, and our program includes it, but it's not necessary in Spanish to learn how to read. Kids do learn letter names, but it's letter sounds we focus on, and syllables are the most important skill to quickly get to. It's a waste of time and it's confusing to students to teach letter names at the beginning of literacy in Spanish, and so I just skip over it and emphasize letter sounds, strong and weak vowels, and then move to syllables.

MONICA: Really? But our program is a translated version of the English program. I thought we were supposed to teach kids to read and write the same as we do in English. That's what I was told.

SUSAN: No wonder my kids are confused. We certainly don't know what we are doing. What a mess! But what is working well for me is the writing workshop. My kids loooooove to write and to read lots of different genres. In fact, the author's chair time is the most popular of the whole day.

ELENA: I also teach the writer's workshop, but my students just copy the prompt from the board and add a few words. That's how we teach writing in Guatemala. Paulo is a real problem for me because he doesn't speak Spanish well and he doesn't speak English well, and he writes the same way as he

speaks. I don't even know why he's in my classroom since he cannot speak either language well. My principal wants me to stop giving the prompts on the board, but I don't understand what she means about developmental writing stages. Hmmm.

MONICA: That's so interesting, because I really identify with Paulo since I speak just like him. I love how he can understand one thing in one language and realize it's similar in the other. I find that by contrasting his informal language (*soquetines*) with his formal language (socks and *calcetines*), he learns really quickly. My problem is that, like Susan, I want to improve my academic Spanish. I am so embarrassed to not know when to use accents, and to not always understand some of the really fancy words in texts. I wish I could spend time in a Spanish speaking country. Though I'm a Latina, I've never travelled to Latin America or Spain.

DISCUSSION

At your tables, discuss the following:

- What are the strengths of each of these teachers?
- What are their challenges?
- Who are you or your teachers like?
- What needs to be in place so that these teachers can support each other and grow together?
- If we added Kelly to the discussion (monolingual English teacher, teaching English literacy), what would contribute?
- How would Kelly and Susan be similar and different?
- What would Kelly need to learn to be successful at teaching English literacy in a bilingual/dual language program?

How would each of these three teachers address the following principles of teaching for biliteracy, and how could we support them in doing so?

- It is important to respect and value student's home and community language.
- It is important to provide students with good academic language models in the classroom
- Teachers who plan their language use beforehand are better models of academic language.