

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

CONTEXT (Early Fall): As part of a district-wide initiative, four teachers have been asked to come together on a dual language/bilingual PLC with a focus on collaboration among teachers. Three of the teachers are bilingual: Mónica, Susan and Elena, and Kelly is monolingual. They all teach in a bilingual/dual language program. The purpose of the meeting is to have the teachers get to know each other, identify strengths and weaknesses in the current program and to identify ways they can collaborate together.

Susan begins the meeting by saying:

SUSAN: Okay, we have about an hour so 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 think it's a really tough time for immigrants in our country and I'm concerned about the impact of national discourse on our students.

Susan gestures toward Kelly.

KELLY: Even though I am not bilingual, I know how hard it can be for students to hear some of the ways immigrants and Spanish speakers are described. I do a lot to elevate the status of Spanish even though I don't speak it – we sing happy birthday in Spanish, I have cognate walls, I have students use Spanish to help them in English. I find it works really well. In fact, Spanish enhances English learning! What do you think, Mónica? You grew up here, right?

MÓNICA: 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 López 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, what about you?

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.

MÓNICA: 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* have been criticized for being quite traditional in their pedagogy. Certification has changed recently in Guatemala and now teachers obtain their degrees at the University, and they are not *normalistas*, but *licenciadas*, and some think they know more than the *normalistas*.

MÓNICA: 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 for literacy, 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.

MÓNICA: 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.

KELLY: Wow! I am so glad to know about all this. Now I understand why some kids use syllable segmentation in English, and it actually helps them a bit. I will be clearer with them about how reading is different in each language. I'll bet some of the invented spelling I see ("da" for "the", "laik" for "like") also comes from what they know in Spanish. I was worried they were confused but I think they are simply using what they know in one language in the other. What a relief to know this!

ELENA: I don't know about invented spelling..... I use the writer's workshop, but my students just copy the prompt from the board and add a few words because I don't believe they should write incorrectly. We don't allow invented spelling 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 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.

MÓNICA: 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. I'll help you Elena, with writer's workshop if you help me with formal Spanish but promise not to make fun of me, and then I can help you with English, too!

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?
- How are Kelly and Susan similar and different? How about Mónica and Elena?
- What does 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.