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# EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP OF IMMIGRANTS

## CASE STUDIES IN TIMES OF CHANGE

Edited by

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*We dedicate this work to our families. Todd, Chip, Locke, and Amalia—your love and support mean more than you may ever know. We appreciate your patience, listening ears, and good humor as we strove to bring this project to fruition. We also dedicate this work especially to our family members who were or are the children of immigrants.*



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## Translanguaging Challenges and Opportunities for School Leaders

*Dina López and Ofelia García*

This case narrative is inspired by CUNY–NYSIEB’s professional development work with many schools in New York. However, Principal Hudson and Springvale Elementary are a fictional character and school.

### CONTEXT

Springvale Elementary is a K-5 elementary school situated in a suburban district outside of New York City. Due to changing demographics in the local community over the past ten years, the school now serves a predominantly Latinx student population. (Latinx is a gender-neutral term referring to those of Spanish-speaking and/or Latin-American heritage.) Close to 70% of students are from Spanish-speaking households, with many having immigrated from Central and South American countries. The rest of the student body is 20% Black, 7% White, 2% Asian, and 1% multiracial. About one third of the students at Springvale have been classified as English Language Learners (ELLs, also called EBLs, emerging bilingual learners). Though the majority of these students (95%) speak Spanish at home, other languages, such as Arabic, Bengali, Pashto, and Polish, are also represented in the school.

Springvale Elementary offered three programs for their classified ELLs: a Two-Way Spanish–English Dual Language Bilingual Education (DLBE) program; Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE); and an English as a Second Language (ESL) push-in/pull-out program. Students with home

languages other than English and Spanish were placed in the ESL program (now called English as a New Language, ENL, in New York State). The Dual Language Bilingual program was a 50/50 side-by-side model; that is, one teacher taught only in English and another one only in Spanish. The DLBE program went from kindergarten through fifth grade. The program aimed to develop bilingualism and biliteracy, as well as cross-cultural understanding among its students.

The surrounding community is made up of a mix of working-class, middle-class, and higher income residents. However, students with higher socioeconomic status tend to go to Catholic or private schools. Students who do enroll in the public elementary schools are lower or middle class, and the DLBE program was seen as a way to attract and retain more local middle-class families. Half of the students in the program were from English-speaking families and the other half were from Spanish-speaking families. The Transitional Bilingual Education program at Springvale targeted EBLs with “entering” or “emerging” proficiency in English, and instruction was mainly in English with some Spanish language supports; however, there was no explicit instruction in Spanish. The ESL program at Springvale was mainly a push-in program, meaning that an ESL-certified teacher supported EBLs in some mainstream classrooms, although the school also provided some pull-out ESL services for these students.

Over the past ten years, student performance on state Math and ELA tests had been dismal (hovering at 23–25% proficiency), and Springvale Elementary had been identified as a low-performing school. Principal Hudson had taken over the school about three years ago and had been charged with getting scores up. The first order of business had been to overhaul the English Language Arts and Math curricula and make them more uniform across the grades. Teachers had gotten professional development on the balanced literacy approach and on the new common core-aligned state Math curriculum. She felt that the school was making strides, just not fast enough.

### CASE NARRATIVE

It was a rainy fall Friday afternoon, and Principal Laura Hudson was in her office wrapping up some emails before heading home. It had been a trying week at Springvale Elementary—including a grueling quality review visit from New York State—and she was anxious to get home to her family. After putting the finishing touches to a couple of emails to parents and one to the assistant superintendent, she came across an unopened message with the subject heading “Upcoming Translanguaging Workshops.” She read about a

series of workshops for school leaders and teachers that would be offered at The Graduate Center of City University of New York over the next couple of months with the focus on improving practice for “emergent bilinguals” by “using bilingualism as a resource” and implementing *translanguaging* strategies in varying classroom contexts. The workshops were part of a professional development project between New York State and City University of New York called CUNY–NYSIEB (City University of New York–New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals, [www.cuny-nysieb.org](http://www.cuny-nysieb.org)). Principal Hudson was not so sure what *translanguaging* meant exactly, but she was intrigued. And the email seemed incredibly timely since one of the main issues identified by the state visit had been the underperformance of those classified as ELLs at Springvale. No, she couldn’t do this, she thought; she already had so much on her plate. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that she could be missing out on an important opportunity. After mentally debating it for several minutes, she decided to go ahead and register.

When Principal Hudson sat down on the morning of the first workshop focused on bilingual students and translanguaging, the most recent state visit and quality review was on her mind. The evaluator had identified the performance of students labeled as ELLs on state tests as particularly worrisome and had suggested that working with teachers on how to better serve ELLs be one of Principal Hudson’s top priorities. As someone who was woefully undertrained in bilingual education and TESOL, she hoped that these workshops would provide her with tools to help her begin this work. The CUNY–NYSIEB workshops on bilingualism and translanguaging did not disappoint. After every session, Principal Hudson left feeling inspired and energized. What she was learning at the workshops was also shifting her understandings of bilingualism and the strengths and needs of her bilingual students and families. Following lectures and discussion, the participants were engaged in a process of Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry, where they were asked to describe their experiences in their school around a question focused on some specific aspect of teaching these students.

Principal Hudson first learned to view ELLs as emergent bilinguals, as students who in developing English were also becoming bilingual (García & Kleifgen, 2010). She understood then that bilingualism, and not just English learning, were important topics for her and all her teachers, since they were indeed developing the bilingualism of their emergent bilingual students. Principal Hudson began to realize that the learning of English in that community always resulted in the development of bilingualism. Bilingualism, she started understanding, couldn’t be resisted, but had to be leveraged.

Through the focus on “emergent,” Principal Hudson also started understanding that it was impossible to simply move her emergent bilingual students so that they “had” English. Instead, in shifting the focus to people

“doing” language, she became convinced that what was important was to provide her students with appropriate affordances and opportunities so that they could “do” English for different tasks, including academic ones.

Principal Hudson had thought that bilingualism was simply additive, and that what was important was to “add” English as a second language to her “ELLs” so that they could become “English proficient.” But through participation in the CUNY–NYSIEB workshops, she started understanding bilingualism as much more than simply the addition of a second language to a first language. First, she realized that many of her emergent bilingual students had been born in the United States, and they were growing up with two languages simultaneously. She started seeing that English was not simply their “second” language, just as Spanish was not simply their “first” language. The concept of additive bilingualism was being challenged! She started understanding the concept of dynamic bilingualism that was introduced in the workshops. And she started to realize that if she indeed wanted to ensure that her emergent bilingual students performed/did English competently in different academic tasks she would have to let go of the idea of “English” as a “second” or even “new” language. English had to become part of the students’ communicative repertoire, not as an add-on, not as second, but as an integral part that was simply theirs.

Once the concept of translinguaging was introduced in the workshops, Principal Hudson struggled. She had started to understand bi/multilingualism, but how was she to understand multilingualism through a translinguaging perspective? She could grasp the idea that her bilingual students used Spanish and English dynamically, that is, responding to the context, the situation, and their audience. But she had always understood bilingualism as simply being English and a language other than English, in the case of her students, mostly Spanish. But now she was being asked to “trans-cend” her understandings of bilingualism by focusing on the “trans.” That is, she was asked to understand bilingualism not from the perspective of the named languages, but from the perspective of the children themselves. “What exactly did this mean for her students, her programs for emergent bilinguals, and her curriculum?” Principal Hudson wondered.

Principal Hudson started to understand that the way in which bilingualism was being conceptualized, through a translinguaging lens, meant that all of her instructional programs, whether they were ESL/ENL, TBE, or DLBE, had to leverage the multilingualism of her students. Even in bilingual programs where only two languages of instruction were used, there were students with other languages and many diverse language practices. CUNY–NYSIEB proposed that the first step would be to develop a multilingual ecology for the school. Principal Hudson learned that the visible usage of language in a school said a lot about how a school valued multilingualism.

She had the sudden realization that her school, except for the Dual Language and TBE classroom hallways, was largely an English monolingual environment. In between two workshop sessions, she took a walkthrough around Springdale to analyze the languages that were displayed and used in and around the school. She was amazed and disappointed to see English-only signage in the main entrance, main office, and in the majority of the school’s hallways and bulletin boards. Almost 80% of the school’s students spoke languages other than English, but they were nowhere to be found in the visible landscape of the school. During this time, Principal Hudson also conducted classroom visits and noticed that the home languages of students were rarely used as resources for instruction and—more disturbingly—that, sometimes, bilingual students were reprimanded for using Spanish during classroom activities in ESL and TBE classrooms, and for using the “wrong” language in DLBE classrooms.

Principal Hudson started coming to terms with the fact that not only her ESL and TBE programs had to leverage bilingualism, but that the structure of her DLBE program had to be made more flexible and to allow for the dynamic and flexible use of languages. How was this to happen?

It was at this point that Principal Hudson decided to share her newfound knowledge with her teachers. She brought in a university-based teacher educator affiliated with the CUNY–NYSIEB project to do a presentation on translinguaging to her full faculty. From her perspective, the presentation had been dynamic and informative, so Principal Hudson expected mostly positive feedback from the teachers. However, this was far from the case. The presentation seemed to resonate with her ENL and bilingual teachers, as some even stayed after the presentation to talk to the presenter. A fourth-grade ENL teacher admitted that she had thought she was doing her students a favor by requiring them to speak only English, but that the presentation had made her rethink this stance. TBE and Dual Language teachers expressed how refreshing it was to hear that using the home language flexibly in strategic ways was actually an effective practice. One kindergarten DLBE teacher admitted that she had been using translinguaging for years, but always felt guilty because of the prevailing notion that you must maintain strict separation of the languages. But some Dual Language bilingual teachers were wary. They wondered how translinguaging could be used strategically to help bilingual students’ linguistic performances and identity-building, without destroying the important space for Spanish instruction. “If I let them speak English in my classroom, they will not want to learn or speak in Spanish,” argued a third-grade DL teacher.

Principal Hudson’s close colleague, a second-grade TBE teacher, informed her that many of the general education teachers did not seem convinced about the concept of translinguaging. From what Principal Hudson could



gather, there were many assumptions being made about emergent bilinguals and their families. One 16-year veteran teacher had been heard saying, "They come here and they want to learn English. I don't think the parents want us using Spanish in the classroom." Another had complained that it did not make sense to use home languages since, "They are only going to be tested in English." Another gripe expressed by teachers was the idea that since they were not bilingual themselves, there was no way they could effectively use translanguaging in their classrooms. Thus, many believed that the presentation was not useful for monolingual teachers: "I don't know why we all had to participate in this workshop. This should have been only for the bilingual teachers."

Principal Hudson was disheartened by some of these responses. She knew it pointed to larger issues, including the disconnect between school and home and the undervaluing of the linguistic and cultural resources of her emergent bilingual students. After the full faculty presentation, she decided she needed to address these issues by putting a team of teachers together to deepen their knowledge of translanguaging and using bilingualism as a resource in their instruction. Yet when she presented this opportunity to her faculty, the only ones who volunteered were the bilingual and ENL teachers. Principal Hudson knew that to effect school-wide change, she would need buy-in from her general education teachers and the rest of the school leadership and staff. However, at the moment, she was at a loss as to how to best go about this. How could she get buy-in from the whole school staff?

## TEACHING NOTES

### Dynamic Bilingualism and Translanguaging

Bilingualism has long been thought of as the use of two separate and bounded language systems. An additive understanding of bilingualism assumes a simple ( $1+1=2$ ) equation in which a person starts with one language and simply adds another—one that does not relate to or interact with the "first" language. The concept of dynamic bilingualism, which the CUNY-NYSIEB workshops expounded, completely shifts this perspective (García, 2009). Dynamic bilingualism posits that bilinguals can never be two monolinguals in one (Grosjean, 1982) and that their language performances are always the result of using language in different contexts and for various tasks. Thus, it is not a matter of having teachers "add" more to their emergent bilingual students—more vocabulary, more phrases, more texts disconnected from what they already know. Instead, teachers are challenged to teach differently, taking into account the students' full linguistic repertoire, and providing

them with the different contexts and tasks that will engage them in "doing" language authentically and meaningfully (García & Li, 2014; Li, 2011).

Translanguaging theory postulates that, from the internal perspective of the bilingual, the speaker does not simply have two named languages, but has one unitary communicative repertoire. This communicative repertoire includes linguistic and multimodal features with which speakers make meaning. Translanguaging posits that for bilinguals this repertoire is not compartmentalized into two discrete linguistic systems. Rather, the linguistic cognition of bilinguals is not dual but unitary (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, 2018).

These theoretical perspectives on dynamic bilingualism have important implications for schools that are interested in better serving their emergent bilingual students and families. One is that the school environment and landscape must reflect the linguistic diversity of the students and families and the ways in which they use language. As described in the case narrative, one way to achieve this is for a school to develop a multilingual school ecology (García & Kleyn, 2016). Another implication is that schools must engage in a process of self-reflection and analysis in order to understand how students' bilingualism is being leveraged (or not) through curriculum, instruction, and programming. For schools that already offer DLBE programs, there must be an awareness that just as students need a space to perform in English and to perform in Spanish in a DLBE program, they also need a space in which they can experience their bilingual performances as unitary and reflective of their *bilingual* identities, and not just a Spanish language identity and an English language identity (Lee, Hill-Bonnet, & Gillispie, 2008; Sánchez, García, & Solorza, 2018).

### Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry as a Tool to Engage Entire School Community

The purpose of Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry, which we describe below, is twofold. First, educators' stances about bilingualism are one of the most important shifts that must occur. However, school leaders must not impose this through a top-down approach. Only through being engaged in a collaborative process in which staff have the opportunity to listen to each other generously and gather data collaboratively is there a possibility of shifting their stance toward the students' and the community's multilingualism.

Second, school leaders cannot change school structures or demand pedagogical changes by dictating it so. The Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry process engages educators themselves in acting on their reflections and their

new understandings. In this way, transformations in structures and practices can happen organically in distributed and collaborative ways.

The overall purpose of the Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry process is to create a community of learners and agents—teachers and staff curious about their students and their community and the ways in which languages and literacies are used in those communities. Teachers are able to learn deeply and firsthand about the linguistic and cultural resources of their students in order to build lasting relationships and draw on these funds of knowledge in their school and classrooms. Only a curious, committed, and engaged community of educators-as-learners can then effect school transformations that serve well a diverse multilingual community.

One of the first steps toward changing instruction and curriculum for emergent bilinguals is to develop understandings of dynamic bilingualism and translanguaging among staff and faculty. Unless teachers hold a positive stance toward bilingual students' language and cultural practices, as well as their histories, instruction for these students will always remain poor. However, effective school leaders know that they cannot just exert that shift in attitudes simply by declaring it to be so. A distributive school leadership model, in which teachers take leadership roles within the process, is thus necessary (Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2009; Spillane, 2006), especially to transform schools to work with emergent bilinguals (Ascenzi-Moreno, Hesson, & Menken, 2015). With an understanding that many educators and staff have little experience with bilingualism, the process of Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry offers a productive approach to shifting educators' stances. Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry (García & Ascenzi-Moreno, 2012) is a process derived from the descriptive processes developed by Carini (2000) and Traugh (2000).

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

### Steps for Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry

- School leaders or university instructors can use professional development opportunities, weekly staff meetings, or class meetings over a period of at least three to four months to engage groups of students or school staff in reflecting on bilingualism. In this process, everyone must take a turn describing how they have answered a predetermined focusing question, without interruptions. The group selects the chair, whose main role is to listen, keep order, and restate the most important threads in the conversation. After each participant has answered a focusing question, the chair asks whether anyone has any

clarifying questions, with others offering responses as directed. Then, there is another round where one-by-one, each person in the group gives a recommendation or shares a reaction. Over time, this builds a collaborative space to acknowledge differences, live with tensions, and alleviate some of them.

- Chairs can then group participants into teams of five to seven people. Ideally, these groups should be diverse across roles (administrator, teacher, staff, parent), teaching experiences (ESL, bilingual, grade level), and language/immigrant background. Because there are generally more monolingual than bilingual personnel in a school, and because families are important stakeholders, there should be a bilingual parent on each team.
- During a preliminary meeting, the team members get to know each other more deeply and select a project to explore over six weeks:
  - Week 1: Choose a project.
  - Weeks 2–4: Conduct Collaborative Descriptive Inquiry sessions about the project; see focusing questions below.
  - Week 5: Reflect on what you have learned and what this means for your school.
  - Week 6: Develop an Action Plan and share it with school leaders.

### Focusing Questions for Initial Sessions

1. What has been your experience learning language(s), as well as learning how to read and write? What did you grapple with during those processes?
2. Watch an episode of *Jane the Virgin* or *One Day at a Time*. How are Spanish and English being used? By whom? When? What are you struggling with as you watch these shows?

### Focusing Questions for Subsequent Sessions

1. Conduct observations of two different neighborhoods in the school community. Make sure that each neighborhood is diverse socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically. Spend some time on a main street where stores are located. Take pictures of signage in languages other than English. Listen for languages other than English. What languages are represented in the signage and the sounds in the different communities? For what purposes? How are the different languages being used? What does that tell you?

2. Conduct an oral history with four bilingual/multilingual parents. Make sure that one is the im/migrant parent of an emergent bilingual; you may have to ask for assistance with interpretation. Ask them about their experiences with im/migration and multilingualism. Focus on their use of language and literacy in the U.S. and in their particular communities. What do their stories tell you about the function of bilingualism for these families and their communities?

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