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Editorial

Bilingual Educators as Professionals: The Need for Standards

Aida A. Nevárez-La Torre

Editor

About a year and a half ago I was approached by a colleague who chairs a committee on program evaluation at the institution where I teach. He wanted to know the names of professional organizations in the field of language education and if they had professional standards for language educators. I commented that there were professional standards in TESOL developed by the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages International Association and revised in 2010. He also inquired about professional educator (that is, teachers, as well as, administrators, counselors, psychologists) standards in bilingual education. I pondered before answering and then commented that to the best of my knowledge, there were no professional educator standards parallel to those developed by other professional organizations in the field of language education.

This interaction made me curious about the professionalization of bilingual teachers in New York State and across the nation. Are there professional teachers' standards that guide the education of bilingual teachers? If so, what are they and where are they being implemented? If not, why not? I proceeded to investigate this query and decided through this editorial, to share with the *JMER* readership what I learned in the hopes that bilingual educators become more cognizant about the need to develop professional standards that shape our identity as experts and skilled in bilingual education.

There continues to be an increase in the number of students who are emergent bilinguals (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008) in the United States schools (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2008). Parallel to demographic changes, we are observing an expansion of school programs that use two or more languages as mediums of instruction (Freeman Field, 2011; García, 2008). This expansion is triggered by a variety of factors including: economic interdependency of nations across the world; federal government support for bilingual education; a constant influx of new immigrant students into our schools; and a desire of middle class parents in certain geographical areas to educate their children bilingually (de Jong, 2011).

From the historic presence of bilingual education in the United States and its current path of growth, it is important that attention is given to the education of teachers and administrators in this field. Of critical significance is to increase the number of programs that focus on the preparation of bilingual educators and to cultivate their relevance in envisioning and actualizing an education of excellence for multilingual students in schools. As argued by García (2010), the demands of the 21st century, require creative, rigorous, and multidimensional strategies to prepare bilingual educators with the knowledge and skills that can lead multilingual students through a

process of academic excellence. Poignantly, educators in the field of bilingual education must examine what constitutes the fundamental knowledge, skills, and dispositions bilingual educators should possess to master the art and science of teaching in bilingual classrooms.

Germane to teachers, for decades now, different national professional organizations have worked to identify criteria that define essential knowledge for teachers in specific disciplines (i.e., math, science, social studies). Several of these organizations, in addition to state education departments and accreditation agencies, have been successful in using these criteria to lead the education of teachers in higher education institutions as well as in school district lead professional development programs. Presented as professional teacher standards, these criteria then guides teacher education and credentialing in different fields.

This past summer I surveyed relevant literature on professional standards and found that such criteria do not exist at the national level in the field of Bilingual Education. I encountered that key national and international professional organizations in the area of language education (i.e., TESOL, ACTFL) have professional teachers standards, however, none specifically address the expertise needed by educators who teach in bilingual education programs. The review suggested that in the United States three states at the current time have professional standards for bilingual education teachers. These states, affiliates of the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), are Louisiana, New Mexico, and Texas. In addition, regarding programs' development, in 1992 NABE published a significant document entitled, *Professional Standards for the Preparation of Bilingual/Multicultural Teachers*, that identified five standards in the "design, implementation, and evaluation of programs for the preparation of bilingual/multicultural education teachers" (p. 3).

In my view more states with multilingual students should develop and enact professional standards for bilingual teachers. This can vitalize the professionalization (Shulman, 1987) of bilingual education, while at the same time build on the professionalism (Herbst, 1989) of bilingual teachers. Professional Teachers Standards in Bilingual Education may provide a reference point for use with pre-service teachers, in their education and supervision, and with in-service teachers in their coaching and mentoring. Moreover, they can channel teachers' introspective efforts towards a process of self-assessment and self-guided development in their trajectory towards being knowledgeable, competent, and transformative practitioners. It is imperative, then, that professional standards are designed about the relevant knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teachers must possess to embody and actualize mastery in educating students bilingually.

Based on my synthesis of the scholarly literature I put forth some of the potential benefits for the field of bilingual education in designing and embracing professional teacher standards. Bilingual teachers professional standards may: (1) support the recognition of the work and contributions that these educators do and make as professionals (Nevárez-La Torre, 2010); (2) advance the specialized knowledge reflective of best practices and research in the field of bilingual instruction required for exemplary practice (Swinney & Velasco, 2011); (3) influence the

exploration of ways to expand and improve teacher education and professional development (Perrone, 1989) with a focus on bilingual education (Reyes & Kleyn, 2010); (4) guide school districts and school administrators in the design and implementation of school programs strongly aligned with research-based practices that can serve to support schools as professional learning communities in addressing the language, literacy, and learning needs of Emergent Bilinguals (Hamayan & Freeman, 2006); (5) position teachers in specific states to be compared favorably with their peers across the nation (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages/National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2012); (6) trace a path for bilingual educators towards professional growth that is self-inspired, self-lead, and self-monitored (Nevárez-La Torre, 2010); (7) support the collective responsibility for promoting excellence in education (Shulman, 1987); and (8) ensure that teachers have an ethical framework and an essential knowledge base to promote the success of all students in multilingual schools (de Jong, 2011).

I echo García's view, in that the ultimate success in educating all students bilingually, resides, in part, in the professional knowledge that teachers in bilingual education programs hold (p. 2, 2008). With this intent a decisive step was taken by NYSABE in the fall of 2012, when its board approved the development of professional standards for bilingual teachers in New York. This project is in progress and during the 2013 year, Dr. Patricia Velasco, CUNY, and I will request practitioners and administrators as well as teachers and administrators in training, and university professors and researchers to review a draft of the standards and provide meaningful comments on ways to enhance it. My hope is that *JMER* readership add their voices to this review process. It is time to make the pursuit for Bilingual Teacher Professional Standards a top priority in New York state.

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