Language Wars:
The Struggle for Bilingual Education in Connecticut

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> Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people--they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress.
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> — Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Spanish and other world languages are commonly taught K-12 in many elite, affluent, white communities throughout the nation; yet millions of children who are native speakers of languages other than English, or commonly referred to as English Learners (ELs) are denied this opportunity – and instead are subjected to English-Only instruction.

For nearly fifteen years, several states including Arizona, California, Utah, and Massachusetts have enacted anti-bilingual legislation that restricts the availability of bilingual education in favor of English-only programs for ELs.[12]

One positive response to the unfortunate trend of English-only instruction has been the promotion of dual language programs, including the two-way dual language model, based on the premise that all students can become fully bilingual if: (a) native speakers of a language other than English are enrolled with an equal number of native English speakers and (b) the students are given an immersion content-based curriculum in both languages.

Connecticut had seven dual language schools, until recently, when the DiLoreto Dual Language Magnet School in New Britain was closed during the middle of the 2012-2013 school year. In this article, three individuals closely associated with the school reflect on the controversial termination of the Dual Language School and the collective struggle to defend bilingual education in Connecticut.

Background on DiLoreto Dual Language Magnet School

New Britain is a small sized, racially and ethnically diverse, post-industrial city in Connecticut. Once referred to as the "the hardware capital of the world," New Britain's economic history is similar to countless other cities of its size scattered across the Northeast: In the last 50 years, the local economy was decimated by globalization as the local industries that once provided thousands of well-paying, unionized jobs either closed

or, like Stanley Black and Decker, outsourced nearly all of their labor to sweatshops in Asia.

In the late 1990s, a group of local administrators, educators and parents lobbied the school district to implement an English-Spanish dual language school, which eventually became the DiLoreto Dual Language Magnet School. After nine years, the dual language model was expanded school-wide to PK-8 and DiLoreto became a shining star in the school district. A local newspaper article in 2009 described the school as "one of the district's most sought-after (public) schools because of its dual-language curriculum."[3] Being only one of three other Spanish-English immersion programs in Connecticut at the time, DiLoreto held a long waiting list of applicants each year. Some suburban parents from neighboring towns were even willing to pay thousands of dollars in out-of-district fees to send their children to DiLoreto.

Senora Marina Perez-Taverner was the principal of DiLoreto between 2008 and 20013. When she arrived, Marina was given the opportunity to hire a dream team of bilingual teachers from across the district. The scores at Diloreto were among the most equitable in the district, the administration received district-level awards, but the dream slowly began to unravel.

Marina:

> In the summer of 2010, because of budget restraints, the superintendent gave me the choice, 'Either cut your dual-language (PK-5) teachers or we close another school's transitional bilingual education (TBE) program and relocate their ELs to join DiLoreto.' Of course, I decided to take the extra kids because regardless of my choice, the outcome would be the same – larger class sizes, no additional resources, and a compromised dual language program because the number of ELs would far outnumber the English Only speakers. All of which, ultimately led to lower achievement scores….I knew the TBE students in the other schools were not receiving a quality education. The other school principals and new ELL district supervisor didn't advocate for newly arrived emergent bilingual children. One TBE principal, from a neighboring school told me, 'I feel sorry for you. These kids are impossible to teach'…Every summer after that, the district closed another transitional program and transferred the kids into our school. Our class sizes grew from under 24 to over 33, with no paraprofessionals.

Marina's quote (above) illustrates the destructiveness that the high-stakes test-driven model of school accountability has had on schools across the United States. In historically underfunded, economically and racially isolated urban school systems the recent trend is for state departments of education to close publicly run neighborhoods schools and replace them with corporately run charter schools to undermine unions and collective bargaining, all under the rhetoric of 'turnaround schools.'

This test-driven accountability model appears to reinforce a decision-making process that ultimately undermines the best interest of children. In the case of New

Britain, the school board instituted the following policy changes during the last three years: moving all of the elementary and middle school students to neighborhood schools, relocated the most academically at-risk students in New Britain High School to an alternative high school, closed one of the middle schools, and terminating the Dual Language Model at DiLoreto. All of the policies described above involved shuffling programs (and the students in them) between schools in an effort to superficially raise standardized test scores.

In the case of DiLoreto, closing transitional bilingual programs in the other elementary schools across the district and relocating the EL students to DiLoreto was a simple way to artificially inflate the test scores across the five elementary schools. This prevented a state takeover; however, involuntarily transferring all the ELs into one school meant that DiLoreto soon began operating with nearly 2/3 of the student body ELs. With no additional resources, class sizes exploded and standardized test-scores plummeted. The superintendent retired the next year, moving back to Chicago. DiLoreto's Dual Language School, once the shining star of the district, now found itself in danger of being taken over by the state due to low-standardized test scores. The politics were obvious to DiLoreto's teachers.

Oscar (name has been changed), a former teacher at DiLoreto, added:

> Automatically, the scores in the other schools went up because the district moved the entire subgroup of ELs into our school. Our kids were being set up to fail for the sole purpose of making the other schools in the district look better.

New Sheriff in Town

After repeated years of flat-funding the school district and growing fears of a state takeover, the community was desperate to hire a strong school leader who would help energize the community, especially the Latino population, the largest racial/ethnic group in the district. In 2012, the New Britain School Board opened a national search for the position of superintendent of schools and paid a consulting firm nearly $30,000 to attract the best candidates for the position.

When the committee narrowed the search to four finalists, several were impressed with Kelt Cooper, the candidate from Texas, who spoke Spanish and supported bilingual education. When two of the other finalists dropped out, Mr. Cooper became the clear favorite, but a local teacher Googled him and found some disturbing things: (a) In 2009, Kelt Cooper made national news in his previous superintendent's position for assigning district staff to videotape and issue warnings to over 200 immigrant children at border checkpoint, who were *legally* crossing the border through U.S. customs;[4] (b) as an employee of Arizona's Department of Education, Mr. Cooper testified in the Flores vs. Horne Supreme Court Case (2009) claiming that it is not the state's responsibility to provide adeuquate funding for EL students[5]; and (c) Mr. Cooper played a role in passing Arizona's legislation mandating that all EL students study English only, instead of bilingual education.[6]

Oscar:

> I was one of the teachers selected to join the hiring committee. We read the background history of all finalists and none of the Texas controversy was in (Mr.Cooper's) file. I researched it myself, and I asked the chair of the school board, "How did we not know about this?" She simply shrugged it off and explained that the hiring committee used a thorough process. Basically, I felt like they already knew whom they were going to hire. We were being set up to fail.

More community leaders became aware of controversy surrounding Mr. Cooper's track record, but with only one other finalist many board members feared that a failed search would result in a state takeover of the school system. So, the leadership of the school board hired Mr. Cooper, despite his controversial background.

A few weeks after Mr. Cooper's arrival, Marina reached out to the new superintendent.

Marina:

> I felt a power struggle with Mr. Cooper early on. My leadership team and I wrote a plan to restructure our dual language model to address many of our concerns and added the research to support it. Mr. Cooper never responded to my e-mails. Finally, he said, 'Stop sending me these reports. I do not believe in all of this research…Anyone can manipulate the numbers to prove their point. I've seen it all. I've read it all, and I don't believe it!'
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> Kelt Cooper was an absolute con man. He started a radio campaign in Spanish and told the community that he wanted what's best for their kids. He wanted them to learn English so they could get good jobs. He said that our school had not done a good job and that he was going to fix it. It was all very paternalistic…Mr. Cooper claimed that he knew what was best for their children: Kevin Clark's Structured English Immersion, or ELD – English Language Development.

Clark's Structured English Immersion (SEI) or English Language Development (ELD)

During his tenure in Texas, Mr. Cooper implemented Kevin Clark's highly controversial version of Structured English Immersion (SEI), more recently referred to as English Language Development (ELD) (see http://www.cctinc.us/). Clark's model involves replacing daily instructional time in all core subjects area with a 3.5-hour block of discrete grammar skills in English only. Extensive research on Clark's model finds that the ELD program has an adverse affect on student learning. UCLA's Civil Rights Project finds that ELD (or SEI) contributes little to closing the achievement gap between EL and non-EL students, segregates EL students from non-EL students, and negatively affects EL students' academic development, among other findings.[7]

Marina:

> Every quality bilingual program contains English Language Development (ELD); which helps ELL students develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. DiLoreto had such a program, until the new Superintendent showed up and replaced our schools' program with Clark's ELD, which has absolutely no research behind it. SEI promotes segregation, grammar only instruction, and denial of grade level educational curriculum, all of which is against the law. The superintendent, however, continuously referred to SEI as 'ELD' to make people think it was research-based.

As Mr. Cooper continued to build support for his vision in the community and within the central office, many of the bilingual teachers at DiLoreto questioned the validity of Clark's ELD and began to challenge the superintendent's plan.

Carla (a current DiLoreto teacher):

> The superintendent took advantage that parents generally trusted our schools and they didn't really know what was happening at DiLoreto. It was frustrating to be a part of it… How dare he come here from Texas, say that he speaks Spanish, his girlfriend speaks Spanish, his grandchildren speak Spanish…then he destroys our school….A group of us (teachers) tried to resist (his plan).

Olivia (a current teacher at DiLoreto) added:

> I immediately started researching it. I read about Kevin Clark and where he originally came from…When the superintendent came, I said, 'Bilingual education is my specialty. Everything you're pointing out to (is similar to) English only in Arizona, and in Massachusetts. I am very concerned. That's not what we are working for.' The superintendent huffed, 'I don't pay much attention to research. I pay attention to data. This is the program I used in Texas. You will see it will work.' I replied, 'You better explain this to parents who want a full-dual language program…there will be problems.'

DiLoreto's Dual Language Terminated

In less than six months after becoming superintendent in New Britain, without formal input from parents or teachers, the dual language program at DiLoreto was terminated. Interestingly, the only dual language program in Hartford was eliminated and enrollment in a dual language model in Windham, Connecticut was temporarily halted around the same time.

In a November 2012 memo to the school board, Mr. Cooper defended the decision:

> DiLoreto is no longer a Dual Language School- but rather a regular K-8 school which provides Spanish as a foreign language. Our desire is that it becomes a high performing school with acceptable (standardized test) scores; that ultimately the school provides the best instruction possible-and-that students learn Spanish (as a foreign language) in the process.

Teachers, Parents, and Students Fight Back

Principal Senora Perez-Taverner and the School Governance Council (SGC) called for an emergency parent meeting. Hundreds came to learn of the district's plan to terminate dual language. At the next school board meeting, an overflow crowd of parents, students, alumni, and teachers came to defend the dual-language program. Below are some highlights of the two hours of public testimony:

"I'm not comfortable with the school board's decision. You are taking away access to our culture," said Kendris, a middle school student at DiLoreto.

"We want to have the right to speak Spanish and to be able to do our work in both languages," said Yasmin, another DiLoreto student who spoke.

"Listen to me and the other parents. Do not change the dual language program at our school. I am proud to tell my family in Puerto Rico that my daughter is attending DiLoreto school where she can learn and speak two languages," said Myriam Vazquez.

Several DiLoreto teachers also spoke out. They commented that the program at the school changed after the district gave up on maintaining the 50/50 language dominant enrollment in the school, but that the program should be improved not replaced.

"Before completely abandoning the program, the District should explore all the options that are available," said Margaret Murray, a DiLoreto teacher.

"…The SEI model is not theoretically sound or evidence based…I recommend that we have another open conversation where everyone can collaborate and contribute their voice to the changes," exclaimed DiLoreto teacher Olga Agosto, who approached the podium holding a copy of *Implementing Educational Language Policy in Arizona.*

After the last parent spoke, members of the school board responded. One-by-one they defended Mr. Cooper's plan. Several board members stated that those in the audience were misinformed because 'dual language wasn't being taken away.' They were careful, however, not to refer to 'dual language' as a model or a program.

"The dual language is not being eliminated at DiLoreto magnet school," stated the Chair of the School Board. "The proposal made by the superintendent is to change the instructional practices on how to deliver that language, not to eliminate Spanish culture or the Spanish language."

Dr. Aram Ayalon, a local professor and a member of the New Britain school board at the time, reflects on the meeting:

> Unfortunately, I was the only member of the school board to side with the parents. On record, I said, 'The Board should have told the parents that there would not be a dual language program any more. Some of my colleagues said

> that the dual language is not getting eliminated; however, it's a model and the fact is, it is being eliminated.'

Aram's comments drew large applause from the audience, yet the board passed the resolution 7-to-1 to hire Kevin Clark's company to implement his model of SEI district wide. Aram was the only board member to vote against the proposal.

Following the school board meeting, Senora Perez-Taverner gave her two-week notice announcing her retirement as principal of DiLoreto School. Within a few days, the superintendent sent one of his staff members to escort her out of the building.

The Struggle Continues

Many DiLoreto teachers and parents continued to resist the superintendent's plan and attempted to use the SCG as a formal mechanism to organize and leverage support from the state department of education, who sent representatives to the next SGC meeting. Parent involvement soon dropped, however, after the district appointed a non-Spanish speaker as interim principal of DiLoreto and he discontinued translation services at the parent meetings. We (the authors) spent the next two years continuing to mobilize parents, students, and teachers. Here are some highlights of our accomplishments:

DiLoreto featured on national television. As we reached out to various media outlets, the DiLoreto story gained national attention. In July 2013, *PBS New Hour* featured a 10-minute expose, titled "Language Wars," highlighting the SEI / ELD controversy. According to the expose, Kelt Cooper's previous school district (Del Rio, Texas) abandoned Clark's SEI program shortly after Mr. Cooper left for the position in New Britain. Furthermore, *PBS* found that Clark's SEI had an overall negative effect on student achievement - students' English proficiency scores went up, but their math and science scores decreased by 15%.[8]

U.S. Civil Rights investigation of Superintendent's Policies. One of our colleagues then filed a legal complaint to the U.S. Office of Civil Rights (OCR) against the school district's implementation of Clark's SEI/ELD program. After doing a site visit in June of 2014, OCR opened a full investigation of the school district, which will culminate in the summer of 2015.

Academic conference to mobilize teachers and students. After presenting an earlier draft of this article at the 2014 National Association of Multicultural Education (NAME) Annual Conference in Tucson, AZ, we (the authors) met Dr. Mary Carol Combs, a nationally recognized author on bilingual education, who had attended our presentation. After speaking with Dr. Combs afterwards, she agreed to come to Connecticut to be a keynote if we organized a workshop. Three months later, we held a statewide workshop on 'promoting bilingual education for all' and over two-hundred teachers came to see Dr. Combs present.

Letter writing campaign. After the conference, a small group of parents, educators, and local professor Dr. Jacob Werblow started a two-month long letter-writing campaign and wrote

five op-eds to local newspapers about the controversial termination of the dual-language school at DiLoreto and promoted our vision that *being bilingual is an asset, not a deficit*.

In one article, local parent and bilingual teacher, Violet Jimenez-Sims, wrote "Local districts in Connecticut have wasted millions of taxpayer dollars on 'get proficient quick' schemes, like Kevin Clark's ELD program, which have failed elsewhere and have been challenged by the U.S. Office of Civil Rights…In some cases, ELLs are segregated from their English-fluent peers for up to four hours a day, where they miss the other important academic subjects like Social Studies and Science. These corrupt practices must stop."[9]

Youth organizing within NBHS. Bilingual advocates within New Britain High School (NBHS) helped us identify teenagers who had attended DiLoreto and were willing to speak with the local media about the importance of being bilingual and their support for the Dual Language Model. In April, 2015, *Fox News Connecticut* (yes, Fox news!) broadcast the students' perspectives in an expose about the language controversy.[10]

Local university student and pre-service teacher Ana Rivera-Delgado reflects on her experience mentoring one of the youths and helping her prepare for the TV interview,

> As a prospective teacher and a Latina, I felt that it was my responsibility to help Tanairys voice her opinions in an effort to work towards a positive change for her community. Bilingual education helps preserve our culture and language, and empowers young people to feel proud of their roots. After learning about the battle over the La Raza studies program in Tucson and then having this experience to advocate for bilingual education locally, it has helped me learn what it means to be brave and to be proud of my culture, of my language. Now, I know that I can help others acknowledge and embrace diversity in our schools.

School board votes to change course. After nearly two years of ignoring our requests to meet, the chair of the school board agreed to meet with one of our lead organizers the Monday after *Fox News* broadcast the teens' perspectives. At the next school board meeting, the board voted 7-to-1 not to renew Mr. Cooper's contract.

Concluding thoughts

As this book prepares to go to press, unfortunately, the curriculum at DiLoreto is still far from the Dual-Language Model ELs are being taught Clark's SEI curriculum for up two four hours each day. The dual-language model has been replaced by Clark's Spanish Language Development (SLD) 45 minutes a day of the mechanical aspects of Spanish as a foreign language (DiLoreto teachers were ordered to remove the Spanish novels and textbook back in 2013). Most of the former bilingual teachers at DiLoreto have left the district. The school has now had three principals in the last three years. OCR's findings will be made public in the next few months, but Kevin Clark's consulting company has already received over two million dollars from the New Britain Public Schools.

Our collective struggle continues. Our organizing team has reached out to other statewide agencies as the DiLoreto case demonstrates the needs for progressive change to bilingual education must also come from the state level. We have recently drafted a vision statement and on-line petition to promote progressive change to bilingual education at the state level. In the 2014 legislative session, several of the bilingual advocates mentioned in this article submitted testimony during public hearings held by the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC) regarding the efficacy of bilingual education in Connecticut. With all of the above efforts, and LPRAC's continued activism, in the 2015 legislative session, *House Bill 6835 – An Act Concerning English Language Learners* was raised and passed the education committee. We are hopeful that the bill will make it through the legislature during the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, we recently interviewed a seventh grade student attending DiLoreto, who described Clark's model, "We mostly get worksheets to make sentences from word scrambles, describe objects, and long lists of letters into words and sentences. No books, no stories, no songs…."

"The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Viva la Lucha.

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