

# ADVOCACY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Edited by **Heather A. Linville** and **James Whiting**



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## MAKING THE PATH BY WALKING TOGETHER

### A Collaborative Approach to Advocacy

*Sarah Hesson and Rachel Toncelli*

Engaging teacher candidates in our<sup>1</sup> ESL and Bilingual teacher preparation programs to think critically about curriculum, school structures, and in this case, top-down district, state, and federal policies is a subversive act. This is particularly true as the role of teachers becomes increasingly reduced to computerized learning, scripted curriculum, and test preparation, at the same time as teacher evaluations and school closings make job security all the more tenuous (Varghese & Stritikus, 2005; Von der Embse, Pendergast, Segool, Saeki, & Ryan, 2016). For historically underserved and disinvested bilingual communities, this shift is devastating as teachers have less freedom than ever to create rich, meaningful, anti-oppressive curriculum, and less security to oppose school, district, and state policies that harm emergent bilingual students.

Historically, creating school communities that serve emergent bilingual students well has been rooted in community struggle, activism, and advocacy. In New York, the Puerto Rican community fought for and won the right to bilingual education for their children in the 1960s and 70s, opening the door for many children in the state to benefit from bilingual education when the Aspira Consent Decree passed in 1974 in New York City, then later in the state as well. In a more recent case, Arizona community activists, students, and educators played a strong role in overturning the ethnic studies ban that forbade courses focused on a particular ethnic group in Arizona public schools. The Seal of Biliteracy, now recognized in several districts and states around the country, has been successfully implemented as a result of many stakeholders coming together to advocate for bilingual high school graduates to receive official recognition of their bilingualism on their high school diplomas.

The need for this type of community activism became apparent when the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) released a troubling proposal for changes to the *Regulations Governing the Education of English Language Learners* (2016).

As an ESL and bilingual teacher preparation program striving to prepare educators to not just follow the curriculum but truly provide an equitable education for emergent bilinguals, we felt compelled to act collectively to voice our concerns alongside our students. However, we were new to this type of advocacy work at the policy level, and though we had participated in many initiatives to improve educational opportunities for emergent bilinguals, we had never attempted to bring so many voices together for a cause. At the same time, we recognized that although most of our teacher candidates<sup>2</sup> were in-service teachers already working in schools with emergent bilinguals while pursuing their ESL and Bilingual Education certifications, many lacked the skills and confidence to advocate beyond the four walls of the classroom.

This challenge is not unique to Rhode Island teachers. Dubetz & de Jong (2011), in a review of 30 empirical studies of bilingual educators, found that what teachers "actually do does not include the kind of advocacy activities that focus on engagement with legislative and governmental constituencies to influence public policy" (p. 256). Further, it is not common for teacher preparation programs to engage teachers in this kind of work. Varghese and Stritikus (2005) suggest that teacher preparation programs should create opportunities to not just review policy but to also connect broader policy knowledge to "teachers' own local variables and their personal beliefs" (p. 84). Thus, in creating lived and personal experiences with policy, teachers become more prepared to participate in advocacy work.

The decision to involve students in our efforts was not separate from our program goals, as we believe that advocacy is a critical component to securing an equitable education for emergent bilingual students. Antonio Machado (1912) writes, "Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar"<sup>3</sup> (p. 77), and in this case, we, too, sought to make a path together with students, colleagues, and fellow advocacy groups in the state. In doing so, we began to explore the possibilities of collective advocacy from the "ivory tower."

In keeping with the national trend, Rhode Island schools are failing their emergent bilinguals students. In Rhode Island, only 77% of English learners (ELs) graduated in four years in 2016, compared to 85% of all students (RI Kids Count, 2017). Only 5% of students designated ELs compared to 42% of non-ELs met or exceeded the standard in the statewide ELA/Literacy assessment; this gap also appears in statewide math scores in which only 8% of ELs compared to 32% non-ELs met or exceeded the standard (RIDE, 2018). Thus, working with emergent bilinguals requires a commitment beyond the typical teacher contract. We firmly believe that securing an equitable education for emergent bilinguals cannot be achieved within the job descriptions of most teaching positions, yet increasing demands on teachers, including intensified teacher evaluations, pressure to raise test scores, and a fixation on data collection in the classroom, leave less time than ever for doing the important work necessary to secure the time and resources emergent bilingual students need.

Aside from demanding schedules, studies have shown that a variety of factors contribute to teacher willingness to engage in advocacy work. Athanases and

Martin (2006) found that an important factor in encouraging teacher advocacy and **risk-taking**, especially for new teachers, was having ample opportunities to **explore** and understand the issue at hand. ". . . [N]ew teachers tended to be more willing to risk interceding and speaking publicly when they felt they had ways first to feel informed on relevant issues" (Athanases & Martin, 2006). De Oliveira and Athanases (2007) note that teacher candidates gained confidence in advocacy work when given opportunities to attend public forums alongside faculty from their teacher preparation programs. Our collaborative project was a way to show our teacher candidates how they could go about preparing for advocacy work, and what concrete actions might look like.

One of the core tenets guiding our graduate program is Freire's (2016) notion of **praxis**, linking theory and practice, and developing meta-cognitive skills to consciously shape and be shaped by the world, and specifically, the communities our teacher candidates live and work in. To this end, we strive to engage students in our graduate classes in a practice of open dialogue and action in order to develop the skills necessary for "critical engagement with their world and a genuine sense of participation in a common democratic life" (Darder, 1991, p. 60). We believe this critical engagement must include advocating for equitable rights and opportunities for emergent bilingual students. This chapter focuses on one way we attempted to engage teacher candidates in advocacy work as a teacher preparation program, by raising teacher candidates' awareness of state-proposed educational policy that would drastically cut services for emergent bilingual students, and by working alongside teacher candidates in advocating against the policy proposal.

We ultimately hoped that the proposed policy would not pass, but we had several other goals for our program and teacher candidates as well. First, we hoped that **engaging** in this work would help us explore ways to embed advocacy work more deeply into the curriculum and assessments of our program. We also hoped that the teacher candidates who participated would come to see this kind of work as **integral** to their roles as ESL and bilingual educators, rather than additional or **peripheral**. Finally, we hoped that the process of analyzing policy documents, **speaking out** at public hearings, and taking a stance through written public comments would give teacher candidates confidence in their abilities to continue this work throughout their careers.

### The Proposal

On December 20, 2016, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) released a proposal for amended regulations authorized by RI General Law 16-54-2, the Regulations Governing the Education of English Learners in Rhode Island. This proposal, referred to as the EL Regs from here forward, raised red flags with us for two main reasons. First, the proposal significantly cut the amount of time that ELs would spend with certified ESL teachers from three periods per day to one for beginners and from one to two periods per day to zero for

intermediate and advanced students. Second, the proposed EL Regs eliminated Sheltered Content Instruction, an instructional model that makes complex subject material comprehensible while students learn English. In place of sheltered content, the proposal established a newcomer program and a vague collaborative model, which did not specifically require content and ESL teachers to co-teach or even to collaborate for a specified amount of time.

All told, the proposed changes included significant cuts to services for emergent bilinguals, putting this vulnerable student population at even greater social, emotional, and academic risk, as essential services and the safe, supportive space of the ESL classroom would no longer be a reality for most emergent bilinguals.

### ***First Steps Forward***

In addition to the proposal itself, the logistics of the community feedback process were worrisome as well. The public commentary window extended from December 26th to January 30th, during the first half of which schools were closed and stakeholders were distracted by winter break. Furthermore, Providence, the state's largest urban district, was slated to host one of three public forums, but the other two were to take place in wealthier suburban districts with very low bilingual student populations. Thus, the bilingual communities likely to be most affected by the EL Regs were also at a disadvantage to participate in the community feedback process. We worried about low turnout at the suburban meetings and high turnout in Providence, which would likely force RIDE to limit the length of testimony or the number of speakers at the only meeting to be held in an area with large bilingual communities.

Recognizing the challenges of the feedback window, we developed a multi-pronged plan to communicate our concerns and try to stop the regulations from passing. We were already involved in two key organizations in the state that advocate for emergent bilinguals, so we were able to compare and coordinate our plans of action. First, we coordinated with the state professional organization, Rhode Island Teachers of English Language Learners (RITELL), and secondly the English Learner Advisory Council, a council required by Rhode Island by-laws that advises the commissioner of education, comprised of various stakeholders including community members, P-12 educators and administrators, and higher education faculty, ourselves included.

With both of these groups, we signed written comments prepared by each organization. We also sent our own written comments to faculty in our department and, alongside many colleagues, we were able to submit our written comments together. At the same time, we coordinated our spoken comments at public hearings. We suspected that the first public meeting would be poorly attended because of the location (a suburb in a far corner of the state), the timing (a few days after the new year), and the demographics of the community, which did not represent bilingual communities. For this reason, we decided to speak at that meeting along with several others from the organizations mentioned above, to have more time to

elaborate our points, and to show our serious commitment to this issue. We coordinated the other meetings as well, taking turns and sharing notes so that important points were repeated, while various perspectives were also represented.

As anticipated, when we testified at the first forum on January 5th, only a handful of people were in attendance and testified with us, most of them colleagues from various professional organizations in the state. While signing in, a RIDE representative overheard us talking about our concerns that only one meeting was in a district with a large bilingual population, and let us know that the locations were chosen due to space available. At the end of the meeting, I (Sarah) approached the representative and asked if RIDE would be willing to add a fourth meeting if I could find a space. The RIDE representative agreed to take this request back to her colleagues and within a day, had confirmed that as long as someone at RIDE was available to hear the testimony, they would add a fourth meeting if I located a space. We immediately identified Central Falls as the ideal location for a fourth meeting. ELs represent 27% of their total student body, the highest percentage in the state, and the small city is home to thriving Latino and Cape Verdean bilingual communities, amongst others, that would be greatly impacted by the regulations.

With the help of José González, a community advocate and former administrator with ties to the public schools, we were able to identify a cafeteria in an elementary school in Central Falls that would serve this purpose, and the fourth meeting was added to the public forums. At the time of this negotiation, I also asked RIDE about the availability of translators, seeing that none were present at the first meeting. RIDE's initial response was that translators are only made available if requested in advance. Arguing that some people who needed a translator may not have access to the information or technology to make such a request, may not know well in advance if they are able to attend the meeting or want to speak at the meeting, or may be reluctant to request a translator only for themselves, I advocated for Spanish-speaking translators to be made available at both of the meetings in urban districts regardless of whether anyone made a request. After some insistence, RIDE agreed, and translators were present for each of those meetings.

The addition of this fourth meeting was significant for us on several counts. We felt deep frustration when the meetings were initially announced, as we saw clearly that the meeting locations and the lack of translators limited the opportunities for bilingual communities to voice their opinions. Establishing a fourth meeting shifted the public discourse around the regulations within the larger Rhode Island community, and also sent a message to RIDE that bilingual communities and educators in the field needed more time, and a more appropriate space, to voice their concerns. On a personal level, I (Sarah) had never been in the position to make such a request from a formal government body, and the experience expanded my vision of what kinds of actions were within my purview. The process of negotiating the additional meeting and the translators became a very meaningful personal lesson in advocacy for me, as I took tentative

steps without knowing what the outcome might be. As a novice to this kind of work, having the support of educational organizations as well as community members was key in our overall success, and on a personal level, it was critical in giving me confidence to take risks.

One of the greatest risks we took was in submitting an op-ed to the local newspaper to inform the public of the issue, make our stance known, and encourage a greater response. We learned much from the process of crafting this editorial as it forced us to reflect on how to best communicate our position clearly and concisely, while simultaneously positioning ourselves as potential partners to RIDE in crafting more supportive regulations in the future.<sup>4</sup> Publishing the op-ed felt like a personal risk, and in this sense, helped us crystalize our own views on the issue and increase our commitment to the outcome. After sending this off for publication, we were “all in.”

### *Involving Our Students*

With the editorial in process and public meetings and written comments underway, it was time to invite teacher candidates into the process. With our graduate students returning to campus just two weeks before the end of the public comment window, we developed a multi-pronged strategy to disseminate information quickly, and to give students as many options for participation as possible. First, we emailed all students and alumni with a link to the proposed regulations, and shared our concerns while encouraging them to read the proposal, analyze the changes themselves, and respond accordingly.

Next, we worked to embed some of the work in our current courses. In considering how to best utilize class time for advocacy, I (Rachel) opted to infuse this work into a course in which teacher candidates develop strategies for advocacy on behalf of emergent bilinguals, making this class the ideal platform for real-time advocacy. Though the class was a natural fit, the advocacy work was not without potential hurdles and careful consideration of these hurdles shaped the approach to in-class advocacy work.

The first challenge I anticipated was unpacking the proposed EL Regs themselves as teacher candidates might lack confidence in policy analysis. To address this, I dedicated class time to reading the proposal together and mapping each of its elements. I also shared a chart a colleague had prepared that compared current requirements in Rhode Island, the proposed changes, and the current requirements in New York, a state with a more well-defined co-teaching model, hoping that the objective, side-by-side comparison could visually anchor the impact of the proposed EL Regs.

Once we had established a deeper understanding of the proposed regulations, I had to consider how to help teacher candidates confidently use their voices. I believe that classroom teachers know best what serves their students, yet these same teachers are at a disadvantage in an era of top-down decision making with

regard to students, assessment, and curriculum. I wanted the teacher candidates to see themselves as agents of change and to allow them to link emotional responses regarding impacts on actual students to their intellectual understanding of language acquisition and student wellbeing, and for this reason, I felt compelled to dedicate time for them to share and reflect on the potential impact on students. Teachers specifically considered how the proposal would impact schooling for emergent bilinguals, then linked these considerations to current research. I hoped this connection would strengthen anecdotal evidence and give the teacher candidates confidence in responding to the proposal.

Guided by the belief that dialogue that allows for teachers and students to critically engage with ideas together and to openly learn from each other is a necessary element for growth (Freire, 2016), I required teacher candidates to respond in writing or at a public forum, but I did not require they assume a particular position. I framed my reactions alongside those of the teacher candidates, encouraging and engaging in reflective listening so that individual positions could be established and refined. This in-class discussion prepared me and my students to craft individual responses with a deeper understanding of the issues, impacts, and critical connections between theory and practice. Once students had crafted their responses, those who opted to testify in Providence were excused from class since the times coincided, while others made use of class time to peer review draft responses, a process I hoped would foster confidence in their identities as both stakeholders and teacher leaders, as well as generate confidence to speak at other forums, which we gently encouraged them to do. Recognizing the different positionalities of the teacher candidates in the class, I did not require all candidates to speak at the public forum, but the options I did provide allowed all students to actively engage in some form. Carving out dedicated class time for this work further embedded advocacy into our curriculum.

Finally, many teacher candidates feared retribution from their administration and/or districts. To address the teachers' legitimate worries regarding repercussions, I allowed them to submit letters anonymously. I drafted a letter to accompany and vouch for the professional credentials of the writers, and, in so doing, expanded my own definition of advocacy as a college professor. In acting as a bridge between teacher candidates and RIDE, our collective advocacy felt less risky yet still powerfully reflected many voices.

In the following section, we highlight the experiences of two participating teachers, Betsy Taylor and Cynthia Williams, and consider how their particular experiences advocating for their students provide a blueprint for their future work as well as ours.

Betsy has been a high school English teacher for seven years in Providence. When she began teaching, she quickly realized her passion for working with emergent bilinguals. Betsy struggles with the discrepancies and inequities that exist between mainstream and ESL classrooms and firmly believes that public schools should provide a foundation for equity and opportunity that can lead to real social

reform. As a graduate student in our program, Betsy is engaged, creative, and dedicated to knowing and honoring her students' cultural and linguistic practices and life experiences. Not surprisingly, Betsy was eager to analyze the proposed EL Regs in class and this laid the groundwork for her public testimony. Below Betsy recounts her experience in this process.

Being able to stand up at a public forum and directly tell the state's department of education my concerns over the proposal of the new ELL regulations was, to say the least, empowering. It expanded my role of advocating for not only my students but also all emergent bilinguals in the state. It was not easy to speak from the heart into a microphone in front of a packed forum. However, when I saw that some of my students had shown up on their own to voice their concerns over the proposed changes, I was both humbled and steeled.

*(B. Taylor, personal communication, September 1, 2017)*

Analysis of the EL Regs in class bolstered Betsy's initial courage to participate, and the presence of her students strengthened her resolve. Further, collective participation is mutually beneficial not only because the number of our voices feels louder, but also because multiple perspectives permit broader understanding, particularly when testimony times are limited. Betsy's experience reaffirms the power of communities responding together:

Based on strict time restriction given to each speaker it was impossible for any single person to include every talking point, statistic, or relevant anecdote; but together as a community we were able build an irrefutable case against the proposed regulations. Through participating in the process on a statewide level I learned that the most visceral, effective way to reach policy makers is to discuss the issues in a public forum where everyone's voice is relevant, valued, and most importantly, heard.

*(B. Taylor, personal communication, September 1, 2017)*

Through collective advocacy, we developed our individual voices which, in turn, allowed for nuanced and comprehensive responses. Public testimony received additional reinforcement from the letters other teacher candidates submitted. Cynthia Williams was the author of one of these letters and her experience expands our understanding of this work.

Like Betsy, Cynthia is also a graduate student and an experienced teacher of emergent bilinguals in Providence. Cynthia reports feeling compelled to advocate for her students and willing to do whatever it takes on their behalf (C. Williams, personal communication, August 26, 2017). Cynthia opted to draft a letter in response to the EL Regs and she actively utilized the in-class discussion and writing workshop to prepare her response; she also provided thoughtful feedback to her peers and was eager

to discuss her ideas with them. During class, she reported that she enjoyed advocating alongside her peers, and I observed that others, who were perhaps more nervous about speaking out, benefitted from her confidence and drive to participate in the process. Cynthia already saw advocacy as a critical part of her work and her engaged participation paved the way for other teachers to do this work as well.

Embedding this advocacy work in class helped foster the development from teacher candidates to teacher leaders. Betsy reports that "advocacy work done in [her] graduate studies has reaffirmed and renewed [her] passion for social justice and standing up for inclusive, equal education regardless of cultural or socioeconomic status" (B. Taylor, personal communication, September 1, 2017). Anticipating and addressing potential hurdles and working collectively allowed our teacher candidates to take these first steps in advocacy in a supported environment.

### Conclusion

After the public comment period closed, we expected a delay before hearing whether the regulations passed or not. However, on February 3, just days after the public comment period closed, the RI commissioner of education Dr. Ken Wagner announced in a field memo (RIDE, 2017) that based on the comments received, the regulations would not be moving forward. The state dropped the proposed changes and agreed to involve stakeholders in drafting future revisions to EL regulations, though as of the time of publication, no such working group has been formed.

While we cannot know for sure that our collective efforts were the sole reason for the commissioner's decision, based on his memo, we do ultimately feel we made a difference and contributed to the successful outcome. Further, in terms of building capacity, many teacher candidates emerged with greater confidence in their abilities as teacher leaders, and we at the college began clearing a path towards becoming better advocates ourselves, and better preparing our teachers for advocacy work.

As we reflect on lessons learned, we have come away with an expanded understanding of our role as college faculty. In addition to policy review and modelling our own participation in advocacy, we can also be intermediaries for public school teachers and the department of education to engage in critical dialogue. Policy review, in-class dialogue, and public response are now embedded within several of our courses, as we continue to consider ways of preparing our teachers to be changemakers and we position ourselves as partners in a dialogic process of developing relevant and meaningful programming.

In the short term, we celebrated that RIDE dropped the proposed EL Regs and would engage in a process of revisions that included stakeholders. However, in mobilizing our professional networks to advocate, we also recognized that we lacked a direct line of communication with community stakeholders. We reached out to bilingual communities indirectly via the teachers in our programs, through the newspaper (though only in English), and in helping to add a forum with translators in an urban district, but we realized we did not have a more direct communication

channel with families and students. A next step for us at the college is to build and develop these relationships, to better understand the needs of bilingual communities, and to become mutual sources of support in future advocacy work.

Throughout this chapter, we talk about the steps forward we were able to make in our advocacy work, but in reality, they may be better described simply as steps. What we mean by this is multifold. First, as we were taking each step, we did not know what the outcome would be. It was only a step “forward” when the outcome was successful, yet even steps “backward” are important learning opportunities. Second, as we were taking some steps, we were missing other steps, as in the case of connecting more fully with bilingual communities and better understanding their desired outcomes in this process. Finally, the notion of praxis teaches us that action and reflection are dialogical. Thus, this process is more circular than linear, as we act and reflect, and as the world continues to act upon us as well. Advocacy work is never done, and successes are not permanent but need to be maintained, and sometimes regained, depending on the political, economic, and social climate. Likewise, advocacy efforts that have not yet been successful should not be viewed as impossibilities or naive utopian fantasies. The process of advocacy is itself transformative, and in that regard, is always a worthwhile undertaking, and the landscape is always shifting, so what is unsuccessful today may move forward tomorrow. In our case, we do not know what the next iteration of the EL Regs will look like, or the ways in which the world will compel us to action, but after this experience, we do feel more confident that together we can make our way towards a more just world.

### Reflection Questions

1. With many teachers fearful of professional repercussions, how can ongoing advocacy be encouraged beyond the safe space of graduate programs? What other strategies can teacher preparation programs employ to develop teachers’ identities as changemakers?
2. Do you believe it is necessary for advocates to maintain working relationships with the government agencies whose policies they oppose? Why or why not?
3. One area of growth we identified in our advocacy work was a greater need to work with and learn from bilingual communities. How can teacher preparation programs develop ongoing collaborative relationships with communities?

### Notes

1. Throughout the chapter, we use the first person plural except in instances where one of us took the lead, in which case we use the first person singular and indicate the author in parentheses.
2. Throughout the chapter, we use the terms “teacher,” “teacher candidate,” and “student” interchangeably to refer to the candidates in our graduate programs because most are already in-service classroom teachers seeking ESL or Bilingual Education as a second certificate.

3 English translation: "Traveler, there is no path, one makes the path by walking."

4 The full op-ed we published in the Providence Journal on January 26, 2017 can be read via this link: <http://www.providencejournal.com/opinion/20170126/sarah-hesson-and-rachel-toncelli-new-rules-hurt-bilingual-students>

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