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Schools of Promise for Multilingual Students

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Frances Willard Elementary School is situated in one of the most underserved communities in Philadelphia, yet its multilingual students made significant gains in literacy in 2016, and even larger gains in mathematics, on the state's standardized test. I spent time with Ron Reilly, Willard's principal, to find out why this public school is helping so many students achieve. With about 750 students, 53% identifying as Latinx and 35% identifying as Black, Willard is a large school with a boutique, small-school feel. Students smiled at us as we walked through the corridors. Teachers spoke respectfully to students. The few wayward students who walked the hallways were gently guided to where they should be.

We visited about a dozen classrooms where I saw engaged students and rigorous teaching. Ron praised Willard's teachers: "There are many spectacular teachers in this building, and others who will be once they get more experience." He noted that teachers met consistently in grade-level groups to discuss how to meet students' learning needs. There was a strong climate of teacher support at Willard, which included professional development through the Children's Literacy Initiative, a nonprofit organization with an excellent reputation for fostering literacy-rich learning environments in Philadelphia's classrooms. What I found at Willard was a committed school leader working with accomplished teachers to enlarge learning opportunities for all students.

Willard is not alone. Several other schools have supportive school leaders, outstanding teachers, accommodating structures and initiatives, and strong outreach programs to welcome caregivers' contributions to students' learning. They serve students from an array of language communities, with many who live in homes where languages other than English and variations of nonstandardized English are spoken. These schools provide a humanizing education that nurtures students' literacy and language development. The purpose of this book is to expose the inner workings of these schools so that readers—educator candidates, teachers, school leaders, teacher educators, policymakers, and anybody else who cares about the welfare of multilingual students—can work toward creating these kinds of schools for all learners.

MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS

Across almost all economically distressed U.S. cities, students who speak languages other than English, primarily Spanish, attend schools with students who identify as Black (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016). Many of these students are learning English, a group we call *emergent bilinguals* (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010). They include recent immigrants who may not know English well but come to school with knowledge of many subjects, and those born in the United States who speak both English and their heritage language but may have difficulty using either language for academic purposes. And there are also those who are progressing in their use of academic English, but their ability to use their heritage language is declining. Though the chapters in this book focus on emergent bilinguals, these same schools also support their primarily English-speaking peers who affiliate as Black. Many use African American Language patterns, while others use more standardized forms of English, and still others use dialects and languages that reflect their heritage from many parts of the world (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2010). When identifying individuals or groups in this book, we use descriptors such as *Latinx* and *Black*, but these terms mask the infinite dimensions of people, including their positionalities, practices, choices, and perspectives (Mahiri, 2017). We focus on students' humanity by arguing that they are more likely to thrive in school when their languages, heritage, and communities are valued. Presently, several factors threaten students' linguistic rights and literacy potential.

FACTORS THAT WORK AGAINST MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS IN ECONOMICALLY STRESSED COMMUNITIES

Inequitable School Funding

Public schools in the United States have never afforded equal opportunities for students to achieve academically. It is not the *publicly funded* part of schools that undermines them; it is a problem of *uneven* funding. Children who live in affluent communities have better access to fully resourced classrooms, richer and more stimulating curricula, and more experienced teachers and school leaders than students in economically stressed communities. Most would agree that public schools are working well for the mostly White populations of students who live in middle-class or affluent communities. But this is not the case for the mostly Black and Latinx children who are disproportionately affected by poverty and under-funded schools (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016). In Philadelphia, where students of color and emergent bilinguals make up the largest percentage of the district's students, the per-pupil expenditure in 2015–2016 was $13,880, as compared to $28,495 for the predominantly White students living in the adjacent community of Lower Merion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

School funding inequalities will persist unless fundamental changes take place in society to redirect resources to underserved schools and communities and to dismantle inequitable structures and institutions (Anyon, 2005). This solution, however, never seems to be considered. Reform efforts have largely focused on curriculum standardization, high-stakes testing, school choice and privatization, and the adoption of Common Core Standards, with the predictable result that too many students are still left behind.

Educational "Reforms"

Over the past 30 years, schooling in the United States has shifted from preparing students for their roles as citizens for the common good to preparing them for a global and competitive marketplace (Hursh, 2007). Neoliberal ideas about educating students for an increasingly competitive society have undergirded the No Child Left Behind law and Race to the Top grants program. These federal efforts focused on making schools accountable for student success, and almost overnight, school districts responded by standardizing their curricula and adopting high-stakes tests. Low-performing school districts were especially vulnerable to these machinations, which led to narrowing school curricula to those subjects tested—namely, reading, mathematics, and most recently, science. Many of these districts eliminated content areas that were not being tested; subjects such as art, music, and social studies disappeared from schools.

Most unfortunate are the alienating effects of high-stakes tests. Rarely do they communicate what students know and can do. Misidentifying students' capacities has meant that too many students get slotted into remedial programs and low-level academic tracks that limit their future possibilities (Kim, 2017). Serious ethical issues have been raised about having bilingual students take standardized tests in English (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010). Not only do these tests confound students' content knowledge with their knowledge of English, but many of these tests are not normed on the populations of students who are being tested. Immigrant high school students who have been in the United States for less than 2 years are particularly vulnerable to these tests because they need to know enough English to be able to take and pass content-area courses to graduate from high school (Jiménez-Castellanos & García, 2017).

We have also seen a shift toward subtractive language practices in many U.S. schools that aim to eliminate students' home language and replace it with English (Menken & Solorza, 2012). English-only programs are not theoretically sound or supported by the empirical research (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010). Research shows that students' use of and growth in their home language enhances their cognitive and literate development and their ability to learn English (Goldenberg, 2008; Krashen, Rolstad, & MacSwan, 2007). A major stumbling block to developing the literacies and languages of multilingual learners is that "few school leaders and not enough teachers are well-versed in issues surrounding bilingualism" (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010, p. 84). Teaching and advocating for multilingual students requires

special expertise and preparation (Lucas & Villegas, 2013), a goal that is still unrealized across all teacher education programs.

Racism and Segregation

Beyond unequal funding and market-driven policies that have made schooling less equitable for many students, sociopolitical factors, including systemic racism, have created hostile conditions for many students of color and their families. We see White supremacists with their Tiki torches parading the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, spewing hate speech. We hear President Trump's racist remarks about Mexicans "being rapists" and we read about his view that the U.S. should welcome more people from Norway instead of from Haiti or "shithole" countries in Africa. We also witness the state of immigration limbo imposed on 1.8 million undocumented "Dreamers" who were brought to the United States as children and have lived in the only country they have ever known. These events are a major assault on the racial, ethnic, and religious mosaic that defines America.

One of the entrenched problems in America is that high percentages of students attend racially segregated schools, as a consequence of living in racially segregated communities. Racial segregation remains at high levels across America, with Black communities being the most segregated (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). More than 50 years after the desegregation landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, schools are more segregated and unequal than ever (Gamoran & Long, 2006). Kozol (2005) calls these "apartheid" schools because they serve almost exclusively African American and Latinx students. He describes these schools as having culturally barren instruction, punitive high-stakes testing, and proto-military forms of discipline. These schools systematically disadvantage students of color and bilingual learners along dimensions of teacher quality, curriculum, and student resources, and these disadvantages directly undermine literacy achievement.

THE IMPACT ON ACHIEVEMENT

All of these factors converge to compromise the literacy and language development of students of color, including emergent bilinguals living in underserved communities. Far too many are achieving at staggeringly low levels and many fail to graduate from high school. Among the nation's 4th-graders, only 18% of Black students and 21% of Latinx students scored at or above the basic level on NAEP's reading achievement test (www.nationsreportcard.gov). Emergent bilinguals lag behind non-ELLs in reading by an average of 37 points for 4th-graders and 45 points for 8th-graders, revealing a widening achievement gap as students progress through school (www.nationsreportcard.gov). Also, although Latinx students are receiving more high school diplomas than ever, about 65% do not graduate from high school, a higher dropout rate than for either White or Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This is happening at a time when we know so much about how to develop students' literacy and language abilities.

To protect students against these elements, we need schools that provide supportive conditions for acquiring English proficiency while preserving and growing the cultural and linguistic knowledge they bring to school. These schools offer a humanizing pedagogy where educators honor students' lives, languages, and experiences and attend to their well-being (Salazar, 2013). They preserve students' basic rights, including the linguistic right to identify with one's own language and use it in and out of school, and the right to learn the official language of the state (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994). Next, I will describe the qualities of these schools, beginning with schools that were established specifically for multilingual students.

SCHOOLS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The Small Schools Movement

The "critical small schools movement" of the 1980s and 1990s centered on creating schools with equitable teaching and learning practices, shared decision-making, inquiry-based and culturally informed teaching practices, and caregiver/community outreach (Fine, 2012). One example is the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn, New York. This school was founded in the late 1970s by community activists who sought to affirm the "language, culture, and identities of Latino students and link the individual development of students to a broader vision of community development" (De Jesús, 2012, p. 66). The El Puente community is guided by 12 principles of peace and justice and grounded by notions of authentic caring (Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999), an ethic of caring or *confianza* (Rauner, 2000), and culturally relevant instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The school uses a strengths-based approach to behavior and counseling called the Holistic Individualized Process (HIP). The goal of HIP is to understand students' needs and histories, resolve conflicts, and develop goals and individual action plans through weekly seminars that emphasize well-being of mind, body, and spirit. With these structures in place, "students consistently reported that they were significantly engaged in the learning process through high quality interpersonal relationships with adult facilitators and that these relationships were characterized by high academic expectations of the students by staff" (De Jesús, 2012, p. 75).

Another example is Gregorio Luperón High School for Science and Mathematics in Washington Heights, a community in Upper Manhattan (Bartlett & Koyama, 2012). Luperón offers a bilingual program that includes both English and Spanish instruction in content courses for the first 2 years. Teaching at Luperón centers on "language acquisition as a social process that involves an entire speech community while attending to sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts, including the ways in which practices, identity and power interact to provide a context for learning English" (p. 87). Language teaching is based on *dynamic bilingualism*, which emphasizes a flexible, context-based use of different language practices depending on students' goals and purposes, and *translanguaging*, the practice of

using different language systems to learn (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010). Examples of translanguaging include writing notes in Spanish while listening to and participating in discussions in English, or translating scientific terms in both English and Spanish. Bartlett and Koyama (2012) report that Luperón's 4-year graduation rate for immigrant newcomers was 83% in 2008, vastly outperforming its counterpart schools.

Schools That Continue to Foster Achievement

Schools like El Puente and Luperón, established by local community and educator organizations, are not typical of most available to multilingual learners in large cities today. Neoliberal ideas that resulted in the deprofessionalization of teachers and the widespread uptake of standardized testing and teaching have eroded some of what the small schools movement stood for (Fine, 2012). Yet some components of the small schools movement live on in schools that are succeeding with multilingual learners. These schools provide culturally welcoming settings that focus on students' academic achievement and honor students' heritage languages (Bartlett & Koyama, 2012; Jesse, Davis, & Pokorny, 2004; Tung, Uriarte, Diez, Gagnon, & Stazesky, 2011). Studies indicate that emergent bilingual students educated in dual-language programs make significant achievement gains over those in English-only programs (Collier & Thomas, 2017; De Jesús, 2008; Krashen, Rolstad, & MacSwan, 2007). Some schools deemed highly successful with multilingual populations do not include dual-language programs, although they are described as culturally welcoming, through either the composition of faculty and staff that share students' cultural backgrounds or a commitment to honoring students' culture through strong leadership and teacher education (Jesse et al., 2004; Tung et al., 2011).

One study looked at several components of four high-achieving Boston-based schools, including three elementary schools, Josiah Quincy, Sarah Greenwood, and David Ellis, and one high school, Excel (Tung et al., 2011). Tung et al. identified four broad components common to all of these schools: (1) school leaders who shared their students' cultural backgrounds and communicated a vision for their students' success; (2) an organizational structure that included clear procedures for identifying and educating English language learners and educator teams responsible for coordinating and enhancing students' learning opportunities; (3) a culturally familiar climate that welcomed family involvement and collaboration and provided an atmosphere of safety and belonging; and (4) standards-based instruction that included explicit English teaching, the use of students' languages as scaffolds, and high levels of linguistic engagement through workshop approaches to literacy learning informed by multiple forms of assessment. A significant number of the staff at two of the schools, Quincy and Sarah Greenwood, shared their students' ethnic heritage. Staff at the other two schools, Ellis and Excel, were less representative of their students' backgrounds, but these schools' professional development programs focused on understanding and ap-

preciating students' culture and language. Also, these schools had structures and staff in place to support students' language development, including Language Acquisition Team facilitators (LATs) who were responsible for assisting teachers and overseeing the "identification, placement, services, scheduling, assessment, and reclassification of all ELL students" (Tung et al., 2011, p. 17).

One of the schools described in the Tung et al. (2011) study, Sarah Greenwood, served African American and Latinx students; about half of this latter group were native Spanish speakers. The school had established a two-way dual-language program in order to create a community where all students were language learners. The school's principal indicated, "We wanted children to be able to talk in whatever language they were comfortable. It was important that everybody felt that they were going to be part of that community too—that everybody could become bilingual in the school. So that's how the Two-Way Bilingual program started" (p. 10). Researchers concluded that "the emphasis on teaching English and Spanish equally in the early elementary grades created conditions for collaboration and equal exchanges among all students who were learning a new language" (p. 10). Further, the researchers linked dual-language learning to positive identity formation among both Latinx and African American students.

The other three schools in the study, Josiah Quincy, David Ellis, and Excel High School, did not include dual-language programs, but structures and routines were in place to make them culturally welcoming. These schools used Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) programs based on students' specific language backgrounds. In the elementary schools, licensed English as Second Language (ESL) specialists delivered scaffolded instruction that matched students' English proficiency levels. Also, at Quincy, where a high proportion of staff lived in the school's Chinatown neighborhood and spoke the same Chinese dialects as students, all of the students studied Mandarin at least once per week. The staff at Ellis was additionally supported through an external, grant-funded team that used a Scaffolded Apprenticeship Model (SAM), to analyze students' development as they progressed through school. At Excel High School, ESL support was provided in English classrooms. The principal "led a process of prioritizing the cultural competence of teachers whose cultural backgrounds were different from those of ELL students and other minority students at the school" (Tung et al., 2011, p. 9).

The Tung et al. (2011) study highlights how strong leadership, the cultural competence of educators, and supportive structures matter in the education of multilingual students. It also communicates the uniqueness of schools in the cultural backgrounds of their staffs, their language programs, and their specific efforts to make these places culturally welcoming. These findings match an earlier study of nine Texas schools that served primarily Latinx students from low-income families (Jesse et al., 2004). These schools employed school leaders and teachers who maintained positive, caring relationships with their students while also establishing high academic expectations for them. The majority of the principals (six of nine) and teachers (68%) identified as Latinx and spoke Spanish. Although Spanish was frequently used in the hallways and playgrounds, instruction was pri-

marily in English. However, the bilingualism of many of the staff allowed for easy and frequent communication with caregivers. Also, most of the teachers in these schools had participated in special professional development sessions that focused on working with English language learners. Researchers also found these schools to be cohesive in their focus on student achievement, a goal that was communicated frequently by principals, teachers, parents, and students.

Attributes of caring, cultural affirmation, acceptance of students' home languages, a unified and research-based vision for teaching and learning, and supportive structures surface across the studies described here. Also, nearly all discuss the positive impact of knowledgeable, reflective, and dedicated teachers and school leaders—key participants in making successful schools work for multilingual learners.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

Caring and Culturally Informed

Several students at the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice expressed that teachers and school leaders cared for them (De Jesús, 2012). These teachers exhibited what Nell Noddings (1984) called *authentic caring*, or the ability to form respectful and genuine relationships with students. Authentic caring is different from *critical caring*, which is manifested by advocating for students and challenging oppressive schooling policies and practices that get in the way of their learning (Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). An example of critical caring would be the efforts of the Latinx community to establish El Puente to address unequal schooling for Latino students. Critical caring is based on understanding the systemic disadvantages that students face as members of culturally nondominant communities. Teachers who care critically strive to offset these inequities through their teaching and advocacy efforts. To care critically, teachers need to understand the complex sociopolitical and sociohistorical ecology that shapes students' opportunities to learn.

Critical caring is tied to culturally relevant teaching and exemplified by a focus on students' academic excellence, cultural competence, and their ability to challenge the social inequities that schools and other institutions perpetuate (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers and school leaders who are committed to preserving students' culture and linguistic assets are not only engaged in culturally relevant practice but work to "perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Culturally sustaining teaching is informed by students' *funds of knowledge,* the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992, p. 133). Instruction that infuses students' household knowledge, heritage, day-to-day experiences, and popular culture is empowering and it contributes to students' identification with school.