

Enacting Advocacy-Oriented Visions of Bilingual Education:  
Lessons from Experienced Bilingual Educators

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### Abstract

This article profiles the work of two experienced bilingual educators advocating in and for bilingual programs to illustrate the kinds of advocacy work that bilingual educators with advocacy-oriented visions of bilingual education engage in, the paths that their advocacy work take over time, and the factors that influence their advocacy efforts. Their stories offer insights for bilingual teachers who are seeking ways to effectively advocate for emergent bilingual learners and for teacher educators preparing bilingual teachers.

*Keywords:* bilingual teacher advocacy, sources of influence, advocacy teaching

## Enacting Advocacy-Oriented Visions of Bilingual Education:

### Lessons from Experienced Bilingual Educators

Over the past four decades, changes in U.S. educational and language policies have led to the elimination of many bilingual programs for immigrant children despite research in support of bilingual education (García, 2009). Educators who continue to use children's native language for instruction find themselves working in environments where their views of best practice for emergent bilingual learners (EBLs)<sup>1</sup> contradict those endorsed by policy makers and the general public (Crawford, 2004; de Jong, 2008; Dixon, Green, Yeager, Baker, and Fránquiz, 2000; Hornberger and Johnson, 2007). As a result, bilingual educators must openly advocate for the right to teach bilingually in their schools. This article profiles the work of two experienced bilingual educators advocating in and for bilingual programs to illustrate the kinds of advocacy work that bilingual educators engage in, the paths that their advocacy work take over time, and the factors that influence their advocacy efforts. Their stories offer insights for bilingual teachers who are seeking ways to effectively advocate for EBLs and for teacher educators preparing bilingual teachers.

### **Teacher Advocacy in Bilingual Programs**

Cohen, de la Vega and Watson (2001) define advocacy as “the pursuit of influencing outcomes—including public policy, resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions—that directly affect people's lives” (p.7). The extensive body of literature on advocacy in educational settings encompasses descriptions of both collective and individual efforts to shape institutions or policies to support either particular disciplines within

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<sup>1</sup> Emergent bilinguals is a term introduced by Garcia, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008) to emphasize that the goal of bilingual educators is to promote academic success and fluency in more than one language.

the curriculum, e.g., foreign languages and the arts, or specific student populations, e.g., learners with special needs, young children, and racial and linguistic minorities.

In a review of literature focusing on teacher advocacy in bilingual education programs, Author 1 and deJong (2011) found that teachers almost exclusively advocate for learners in the circles of influence that are in close proximity to them personally and professionally. These include the classroom, where teachers engage in advocacy teaching, and school and community contexts, where their work extends to advocating for bilingual programs and supporting immigrant families.

In the classroom, advocacy teaching encompasses various kinds of curricular and language choices that challenge assimilationist ideologies and social inequities. Teaching choices highlighted in the review by Author 1 and deJong (2011) included implementing practices that affirmed students' linguistic and cultural identities, and engaged them in critical explorations of issues of discrimination, equality, and social justice. In settings where teachers shared the minority status of their students, they served as cultural and linguistic role models, making parallels between their own experiences and those of their students and explicitly teaching students how to negotiate the norms of mainstream society without losing native cultural and linguistic identities. Perhaps the most politicized choices that the bilingual teacher advocates made within the classroom were to affirm students' cultural and linguistic identity by using learners' native languages as a medium for teaching and learning in the classroom.

Beyond the classroom, teacher advocates built respectful and trusting relationships with the families of their students by helping them navigate bureaucratic systems to gain access to financial and social services, and they communicated to families the value of bilingualism and bi-literacy. In the school or school district, teachers' advocacy work involved developing and

maintaining coherent bilingual programs, mentoring new teachers, and serving as resources for mainstream colleagues and administrators (Author 1 and de Jong, 2011).

Many of the studies reviewed by Author 1 and de Jong (2011) included some information about the factors that motivated these teachers to advocate in their classrooms and schools, but this information was often tangential to the main focus of the investigations. In fact, most of the studies did not explicitly use the term advocacy to describe teachers' work even though these teachers were serving as advocates by working on behalf of students to ensure their success in mainstream institutions. Nor did the studies under review reveal much information about the career paths of teacher advocates. To determine what lessons could be learned from experienced bilingual educators whose work reflected an advocacy oriented vision of bilingual education, the author undertook a qualitative study to document: (1) the career paths of advocates who began their careers as bilingual classroom teachers and continued to enact an advocacy oriented vision of bilingual education after leaving the classroom, and (2) the factors that motivated these individuals to maintain their advocacy efforts over time.

Although all bilingual teachers should be prepared to promote bilingual education, research by Varghese and Stritikus (2005) suggests that the interface of knowledge of local policies and personal experience can either lead bilingual teachers to support additive bilingual practices or to follow strict English only policies when these are imposed. Bilingual educators with an advocacy oriented vision of bilingual education are those who undertake the difficult work of promoting additive views of bilingualism and bilingual education even where this work runs counter to the status quo. For the study, experienced bilingual educators who enacted an advocacy oriented vision of bilingual education and engaged in the kinds of advocacy identified

in the review of literature by Author 1 and de Jong (2011) were interviewed about their advocacy work.

The stories of the advocates in this study were constructed from semi structured audiotaped interviews exploring educators' definitions of advocacy, the kinds of advocacy work they had engaged in over time, influences on their work, and their ideas about how to support new and practicing bilingual teachers to become advocates for their learners. A narrative inquiry methodology was selected that would allow the educators to "...re-story earlier experiences and reflect on later experiences" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p.3). Following an interview, an interpretive account<sup>2</sup> (Clandinin, 1986) was developed by the researcher and reviewed by the educator. The account then served as the basis for follow up discussions to clarify and extend details of an educator's story.

In this article, two bilingual educators from the study are profiled. Their stories are presented in three parts in order to provide a detailed exploration of each facet of advocacy work under investigation. First, their career paths as advocates of bilingual education are described and compared. Next, the factors that influenced their advocacy work are presented. In the final part, their recommendations for promoting effective teacher advocacy for immigrant children and their families are discussed in relation to those found in the existing literature on preparing teacher advocates.

### **Studying the Career Paths of Bilingual Teacher Advocates**

In this section, the stories of Marta and Helena, two experienced bilingual educators, are presented to illustrate the paths that educators take to enact advocacy-oriented visions of bilingual education over their careers.

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<sup>2</sup> An interpretive account is a tentative, incomplete interpretation of the data made by the researcher.

**Marta's Career Path**

Marta began her teaching career with bilingual children as an educational assistant in a bilingual classroom after obtaining an associate's degree at a local community college. During her two years as an educational assistant, she completed an undergraduate degree in accounting with a minor in education. When she graduated, she acquired a city-issued teaching certificate for bilingual education, which allowed her to begin teaching under the condition that she would complete a program leading to state teaching certification.

Over the next few years she taught kindergarten and second grade in a bilingual program and attended a graduate program designed to prepare bilingual teachers for certification. Her school's bilingual program lacked a cohesive articulated language allocation policy and adequate materials in Spanish for native language instruction. Marta created her own language allocation plan for her classroom, allocating 80% of the day to instruction in Spanish in her kindergarten class and, when she moved to second grade, allocating 60% of her instruction to Spanish. To make up for the lack of instructional materials in Spanish, she asked friends who were traveling to Spanish speaking countries to bring back materials for her, she borrowed materials from other bilingual teachers, and she created many of her own. She typed translations and pasted them into the story books written in English. Because she had not been formally educated in Spanish beyond the first grade, she sought assistance from other bilingual teachers with her written translations and with letters she wrote in Spanish to parents.

In her first years of teaching, Marta was one of a group of new teachers in her school who sought to involve families in school activities and chose to participate on a number of school committees. She joined a mainstreaming committee and the school based management team, and was involved with the school's parents' association. As an advocate for bilingual education,

Maria formed the Bilingual Committee, a committee of teachers and paraprofessionals who organized events where parents and staff socialized together and provided free workshops for parents on how to support their children's learning. To encourage parent involvement in her classroom, she invited parents into her classroom to work on projects with their children like creating a bilingual dictionary, and she used her students to encourage their parents to participate in school activities.

While still a classroom teacher, Marta joined a district wide bilingual committee, where she met the principal of a local school who invited her to leave her position as a classroom teacher to coordinate a Title VII grant to improve the education for EBLs. Marta viewed the Title VII position as an opportunity to move from promoting bilingualism in a single classroom to supporting multiple teachers in her school through collaborative decision making, program evaluation and allocation of adequate resources in both languages. This work required her to be able to communicate to others the components of an effective bilingual program. When the opportunity to become an assistant principal in the school arose, she moved into administration because, in her words, "I was inspired that if I became an administrator myself, then I would be making those decisions in my school and supporting the teachers."

In 2003, she moved to a new school to become the principal. For the last decade, she has maintained a clearly articulated bilingual program that includes native language instruction at a time when many other schools in her district have eliminated or significantly reduced the size of their bilingual programs. She continues to allocate resources for professional development to improve instruction in the bilingual classrooms.

**Helena's Career Path**

Helen entered teaching in the 1970s by applying to the Bilingual Pupil Services (BPS) program to complete an associates' degree. The BPS is a program designed to prepare bilingual teachers for New York City schools through a combination of intensive internship experiences in bilingual classrooms and tuition support for college coursework in bilingual education. After completing the BPS program, Helena finished a bachelor's degree leading to teaching certification at a local public four year college and was hired as a fourth grade bilingual teacher.

During Helena's first years as a bilingual teacher, the public schools faced a major budget deficit and cut programs, one of these being physical education. Helena responded by giving up her free periods to teach dance to her bilingual students, and within a year, had created the school's first bilingual program in dance and movement.

After six years of teaching in a bilingual classroom, Helena entered a period in her professional journey in which the focus of her advocacy work shifted from the school to the community context. The transition out of the public school classroom occurred when Helena was recruited by a local community college to develop a bilingual daycare center, which she directed for seven years. When the funding for the center was threatened, she left to set up a day care for homeless mothers that included bilingual and ESL programs for 2-4 year olds to serve the many Hispanic families using the center. She then became involved in Head Start and decided to begin a graduate program in administration and supervision. During this period, she worked for the National Council of Negro Woman where, she explained, she did "a little bit of everything" in her work with children from grades two to twelve, including reading in Spanish and English and helping them with math; and she also served as a volunteer for the National Association of Puerto Rican Affairs.

Helena left Head Start to assume a position at the local school district where she worked with educators and parents in different schools. Her work included teaching library teachers how to teach reading to the bilingual children, mentoring new teachers, conducting workshops for parents on their rights, and helping immigrant parents access adult education programs in GED and ESL.

When a position for a project coordinator for a federally funded program to prepare bilingual teachers at a local university came open, Helena applied and was hired. While in this position, she worked on a doctorate focusing on bilingual education. When the project ended, she applied for and was hired as an assistant professor in teacher education at a local community college with a bilingual mission and where she has taught courses in Spanish and English to students preparing to become early childhood educators.

### **Changing Roles**

Over the course of their careers Marta and Helena exhibited a sustained commitment to challenging institutional structures that limited their EBLs' access to a good education, which included the opportunity to learn in two languages. As teachers, they extended learning opportunities for EBLs in their classrooms by developing resources for their students that were not provided by their schools. Helena created a bilingual dance program in response to school budget cuts, and Marta provided her EBLs with learning materials in Spanish by acquiring or creating resources and developed a language allocation policy for her classroom because a school wide policy was nonexistent.

After they left the classroom to assume new professional roles, both educators promoted bilingual education by either providing support to families and/or by overseeing the work of other educators. Martha's path led to increasingly more influential positions within the public

school district where she began teaching and where she has continued to work. During her career, Helena moved among teaching and administrative roles in diverse educational settings including a range of public and private educational settings, i.e., early childhood and family centers, public schools, and universities.

Despite the differences in their career paths, the advocacy work of both educators has reflected a commitment to serving bilingual children across the career span. Beginning with her work as a classroom teacher and continuing to the current day as a school principal, Marta has had to not only implement effective bilingual programming, but also convince school and district administrators of the positive effects of a well-designed bilingual program. She has had to defend the role of native language instruction in effective bilingual programming as schools across her district have been eliminating the time allocated to native language instruction in favor of English instruction.

Much of Helena's advocacy work has focused on securing resources for bilingual populations. This was first evident in her work as a fourth grade teacher, and later, when directing early childhood and family programs that serve immigrant and minority families, she created opportunities for bilingual programming in early childhood centers. As a teacher educator, she sought to ensure that early childhood educators were prepared to work effectively with bilingual children, teaching university classes in Spanish and English.

Despite the challenging contexts in which they worked, Marta and Helena continued to serve as advocates for EBLs throughout their careers. Exploring what sustained their commitment to this work is the focus of the next section.

### **Influences on Teacher Advocacy**

In the studies reviewed by Author 1 and de Jong (2011), a number of teacher advocates reported that personal and/or professional experiences shaped the curricular and linguistic choices they made. Personal experiences that inform teachers' advocacy efforts include previous K-12 educational experience, experiences they have had as members of immigrant families and as minorities, and their previous experiences as activists (Bos and Reyes, 1996; Flores, 2001; Galindo, Aragon, and Underhill, 1996; Lemberger, 1997; Lenski, 2006; Petró, 2006; Rodriguez, 2011; Varghese and Stritikus, 2005). Additionally, a number of studies have suggested that formal education, i.e., teacher preparation and professional development, support teachers' ability to challenge subtractive views of bilingualism (Arce, 2004; Flores, 2001; Gersten and Rivera, 1996; Montero-Sieburth and Perez, 1987; Lemberger, 1997; Leone, 1995; Ramos 2005). In this section, the personal and professional factors that led Marta and Helena to pursue their advocacy-oriented career paths and increased their efficacy as advocates over time are explored.

#### **Sources of Influence on Martha's Advocacy Work**

Marta was initially inspired to become a bilingual teacher because of the negative experiences she had as a Spanish speaker in monolingual English classrooms as a child. She had gone through a process of losing her native language and only speaking English during her first years in the U.S., and she resolved to become a bilingual teacher by the time she graduated from high school. As soon as she completed her undergraduate degree, she began working in a classroom as a bilingual teacher under a city issued teaching license.

Once in the classroom, Marta increased her knowledge about educating bilingual children through her studies in a graduate bilingual teacher education program. According to Marta, the program faculty had a clearly articulated vision of and a long history in bilingual education.

Although she was committed to bilingual education when she began the teacher education program, she didn't know a lot about the impact of bilingual programs on children or how to implement them effectively. Her teacher education program provided opportunities for her to observe different models of bilingual instruction and increase her knowledge of research on bilingual education, which was important given that, at the time, she was teaching in a bilingual program that lacked a coherent vision or structure. She found herself making connections between what she was learning and what she had experienced as a child. She explained, "My courses gave me a better understanding of the differences between assimilation and acculturation, and I really wanted acculturation, how two cultures meet and the benefits of both...and to see that it's great to be able to speak, think, and do things in two languages, that it was really an asset." For her master's thesis, she undertook an investigation of bilingual program effectiveness, and the results of this work convinced her of the importance of maintaining students' native languages during instruction.

Marta's efficacy as an advocate for bilingual children increased when she began to coordinate a Title VII grant. In her new role as project coordinator, Marta had the opportunity to regularly observe how EBLs were learning in bilingual and monolingual classrooms in her school. Part of her coordination work required undertaking annual program evaluations to document the effects of different programs on learning, and the results of this experience validated for her that EBLs in bilingual programs were more successful than those in monolingual programs. Her observations, in combination with what she had learned in her professional studies, convinced her that what was central to student learning was consistency in the curriculum across the grades and adequate materials in both native and second languages. What she learned through her work as a coordinator also confirmed for her that certain program

factors must be in place for children to succeed: a clearly articulated, coherent language plan, a well-designed curriculum, and good teachers. As coordinator, she enacted her vision of effective bilingual education by providing professional development to teachers, engendering parental support, and keeping school staff informed about the important work going on in the program. She reported that having to defend the bilingual program to others such as the principal helped her become more articulate about describing the components of effective bilingual education programs and what is needed to support them. Once she became a school leader, she then had the power to make the funding and personnel decisions necessary to sustain a cohesive, well supported bilingual program in her own school.

### **Sources of Influence on Helena's Advocacy Work**

Family had a profound impact on the formation of Helena's identity as a bilingual educator. Helena was born and grew up in New York City and identifies herself as a "Neuyorkina." Her parents were Puerto Rican, and her father insisted that Spanish be spoken at home when she was growing up even though she was learning only in English in school. Several of Helena's family members had been teachers and social workers in Puerto Rico, including her mother and her aunt. When her parents moved to the United States, Helena's mother worked as a public elementary school teacher for 15 years, and was one of the first educators to be involved in Head Start in the area. Her mother had friends who were community activists including the educator who set up the first day care center in one of the poorest communities in the city and who introduced Helena to the Bilingual Pupil Services program.

Serving as a BPS educational assistant, Helena experienced what it meant to be an integral member of a school community. Learning to teach in a bilingual program helped her develop her repertoire of skills to teach bilingually. She was responsible to prepare short and

long term lessons plans; maintain an observation log for each of the twenty students assigned to her care from September through June; work selectively with her group of children, and meet with their respective parents or guardians. Helena attended weekly staff development meetings, which she believes helped her advance her teaching and technology skills.

In her years as an elementary teacher and later as an administrator of early childhood programs, Helena gained experience in learning how to provide or secure educational resources for populations of minority children and adults, many of whom were Hispanic. When Helena changed roles to work for the school district, she advanced her advocacy skills by adopting a particular approach to seeking changes to support teachers, parents and children. She would, in her words, “start on the inside” by working with school and district personnel, and if things didn’t improve, she sought out the local media. She acknowledges that sometimes principals didn’t like her approach, but she used her position at the district to make what changes she could, explaining that “when I know that a cause is right, I have to die fighting.”

When she assumed a position to support the preparation of bilingual teachers at a local university, Helena’s work was guided by a sense of social justice grounded in her own life experience. She explained that she had personally experienced many struggles as a woman of color whose first language was not English and who was a single mother. Having succeeded professionally and personally in the face of these challenges, she saw herself as a mentor to bilingual paraprofessionals and early childhood educators who participated in these teacher preparation programs and who faced similar struggles with managing family, economics, and schooling. “Prayer is very strong for me,” she said, and explained that she recommends to her students that they seek out organizations that can offer them support and inspiration.

**The Interface of Personal Experience, Formal Education, and Professional Opportunity**

Marta's and Helena's stories illustrate the ways that advocacy work is anchored in personal and professional experiences and formal education. For both women, a commitment to bilingualism and bilingual education emerged before they began their professional careers. For Marta, negative experiences in school as a child became the inspiration for her wanting to teach bilingual children. In contrast, Helena's advocacy work was as a natural outgrowth of family influences.

Once they began working in bilingual classrooms, Marta and Helena started to build capacity as advocates for bilingual children and families. Both educators cite their formal preparation to become bilingual educators as helping them enact their visions of teaching bilingually, though Helena emphasized the school-based experiences built into her preparation through BPS, whereas Marta focused on the kinds of experiences provided by her graduate program that helped her better articulate a vision of effective bilingual education. Moving into professional roles outside the classroom provided both women with professional opportunities that advanced their advocacy skills by having to defend bilingual education to individuals who did not share their views, educate individuals who were working with bilingual children and families, and secure and allocate resources to sustain bilingual programs.

**Building the Capacity to Advocate for Bilingual Education**

The stories of Marta and Helena demonstrate that sustaining an advocacy orientation toward bilingual education across a career entails developing both a clear vision of what advocacy teaching looks like and the capacity to realize one's vision in and beyond the classroom. Marta and Helena began their careers with a commitment to teaching bilingually, and this commitment was an important starting point for their advocacy oriented visions of teaching.

Their capacity to successfully enact their visions required a particular knowledge base and skill set that they built through professional experiences and formal education. In some cases, they advanced their advocacy knowledge and skills through opportunities that were presented to them by others, e.g., an activist friend of the family in Helena's case and the principal who met Marta on the district bilingual committee. In other cases, Marta and Helena created their own opportunities, e.g., Marta chose to become an administrator and Helena' decided to become a bilingual teacher educator.

The rich and extensive experiences they have had as advocates informed what they chose to emphasize when asked to identify the knowledge and skills that they believe bilingual teachers need to effectively advocate for EBLs. Marta's recommendations focused on teaching knowledge. She argued that being an advocate as a bilingual teacher requires both a strong belief in and commitment to bilingual education and a strong knowledge base grounded in research and personal practice. Marta believes that to advocate for bilingual learners in the bilingual classroom, teachers must have a deep understanding of bilingualism. In her view, knowledge of good teaching is critical, and being a good bilingual teacher means knowing the reasons why bilingual children learn the way they learn, knowing how to collect informal and formal data to examine how children are moving in the program, and being able to communicate this information to others.

Grounded in her extensive experience with immigrant families, Helena's recommendations for preparing teacher advocates focused on supporting families. She believes that teachers need to visit the communities of the children they serve. They have to see, hear, and sense what their students and families are experiencing on a daily basis. Helena argues that unless they have a clear understanding of what their students and families have to contend with

to survive, teachers will not be able to honestly connect with and advocate for their respective needs.

### **Lessons for Bilingual Teachers and Teacher Educators**

The stories of Marta and Helena offer four important lessons for bilingual teachers and teacher educators: (1) advocacy for EBLs begins in the classroom; (2) advocacy knowledge and skills can be learned; and (3) effective advocacy for emergent bilingual learners and bilingual programs requires action beyond the classroom; and (4) teacher advocacy must be understood as a political act. In the remainder of this section, these lessons are discussed in light teacher education research.

#### **Advocacy Begins in the Classroom.**

Experienced bilingual advocates like Helena and Marta begin as advocates in their classrooms. Given the ambiguity in many programs regarding language choice during instruction and the pressure to have learners demonstrate academic success in English with the first year of their exposure to the new language, bilingual teachers' first act of advocacy is often establishing a language policy within their classroom that supports bilingualism and bi-literacy.

It became clear in the stories of Marta and Helena that both came to teaching with a strong bilingual identity and recognized the value of maintaining the native language while acquiring a new one. However, not all individuals serving as bilingual teachers demonstrate a strong bilingual identity, so an important component of a teacher preparation program is helping teacher candidates articulate their identity as bilingual educators. In their model for preparing transformative educators, Hernández-Sheets, et al., (2011) refer to this important dimension of teacher preparation as *iluminación*. Without a bilingual identity, teachers' commitment to

teaching bilingually is too easily compromised when they are faced with negotiating powerful English only policies.

### **Advocacy Knowledge and Skills are Learned.**

There is a knowledge base for bilingual education that must be understood and applied by novice educators if they are to engage in advocacy teaching (Herrera and Murry, 1999; Hernández-Sheets, et al., 2011). The stories of Marta and Helena teach us that acquiring this knowledge base and how to use it to advocate effectively can be accomplished by combining carefully constructed learning opportunities in a teacher education program with first hand opportunities to engage in productive advocacy work involving emergent bilingual learners and their families.

Specific approaches to assisting preservice teachers in developing advocacy skills can be found in the literature on social justice education. For example, to help her preservice teachers explore the various possibilities for activism, Chubbuck (2010) uses a continuum of activities for the socially just educator. At one end are “private, individual acts of mercy or service to meet the needs of each individual child” and on the other end are “public acts of advocacy and reform to address inequitable structures and policies” (p. 207). She uses the continuum to engage her students in reflecting on their personal strengths and limitations, and where they see themselves on the continuum current and in 5-10 years into their profession. She view this effort as providing preservice teachers with the opportunity to begin developing a schema for serving as an advocate.

A model such as that recommended by Chubbuck (2010) can be useful in a bilingual teacher preparation program when it is aligned with the specific knowledge and skills needed to undertake different forms of bilingual teacher advocacy in contexts where teaching bilingually is

challenged, and when it incorporates opportunities for novices to engage in or observe advocacy activities in practice. The stories of Marta and Helena would suggest that learning to become an effective bilingual teacher advocate can begin during preservice preparation but requires sustained engagement in advocacy work over time.

### **Effective Advocacy for Emergent Bilingual Learners and Bilingual Programs Requires Action Beyond the Classroom.**

Changing the direction of the public discourse on bilingual education in school districts and local communities requires engaging with individuals in the broader school and community contexts who may not share the same priorities for bilingual learners or the same views about bilingual education. Martha's and Helena's professional roles outside the classroom helped them hone their advocacy skills and realize their visions of bilingual education in broader educational contexts. For Martha, this involved implementing coherent, well designed programs, and for Helena, this involved locating opportunities to ensure that immigrant families had access to needed resources including good early childhood and adult education programs.

Marta and Helena were fortunate to encounter individuals who provided them with opportunities to extend their advocacy efforts beyond their classrooms, but not all bilingual teachers will necessarily encounter such opportunities, so experienced educators committed to bilingual education must *create* the opportunities. Encouraging bilingual teachers to take their advocacy work beyond the classroom is important yet risky, particularly if they are new teachers (Athanasas and Oliveira, 2007). To reduce the risk, experienced bilingual practitioners like Marta and Helena who share an advocacy orientation to bilingual education must serve as mentors to new teachers. As experienced educators, they can minimize the risk that comes with entering a public space and confronting more experienced colleagues, administrators, or parents

by helping new teachers form alliances with others who share their views. When she was a new teacher, Marta aligned herself with a group of other new teachers who formed a bilingual committee to promote family involvement in her school, and Helena got involved in organizations promoting bilingual policies.

Forming local alliances is an important ingredient in effective advocacy work (Cohen, et. al. 2001). This is not to suggest that all advocacy work by bilingual educators must be undertaken at the local level; it is simply to recognize that this is where most teacher advocacy work occurs (Author 1 and deJong, 2011). Where bilingual practitioners can be connected to the larger national conversations and efforts to advocate for bilingual education is through participation in professional organizations like the National Association of Bilingual Education and its state affiliates.

### **Teacher Advocacy Must Be Understood as a Political Act.**

Marta and Helena understand that promoting bilingual education is a political enterprise, and both educators negotiated institutional structures and sought out more powerful platforms from which to advocate over their careers. Marta says that having specific examples from her own teaching practice to use to defend bilingual education was important for her advocacy work. Helena notes that effective teacher advocacy requires the ability to organize, engage in writing campaigns, and disseminate information to ensure families know their rights and have access to needed resources.

Having to defend bilingual education in a public space outside the classroom can advance the advocacy skills of bilingual educators, a finding consistent with research by Perez (2004) who found that, over time, bilingual teachers advanced their political skills through their professional actions in their school district. In their framework for advocacy, Herrera and Murry

(1999) argue that teachers need to be able to step outside their teaching roles to insure that school programs are culturally relevant and student centered. By serving as change agents in their local contexts, teacher advocates can provide a more coherent educational experience for immigrant children that supports their success in mainstream schools while preserving their bilingual, bicultural identities.

### **Conclusion**

Marta's and Helena's stories illustrate how an advocacy orientation toward bilingual education can be nurtured under the right circumstances and with the right support. Both educators have been involved in bilingual education for several decades and have faced the challenges of dwindling public support for bilingual education programs, yet both continue to persevere and engage in efforts to challenge popular opinion with evidence from their own practice and seek ways to ensure that bilingual programs continue to exist as the most effective approach to educating children from immigrant families. What is needed are more advocates like them.

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