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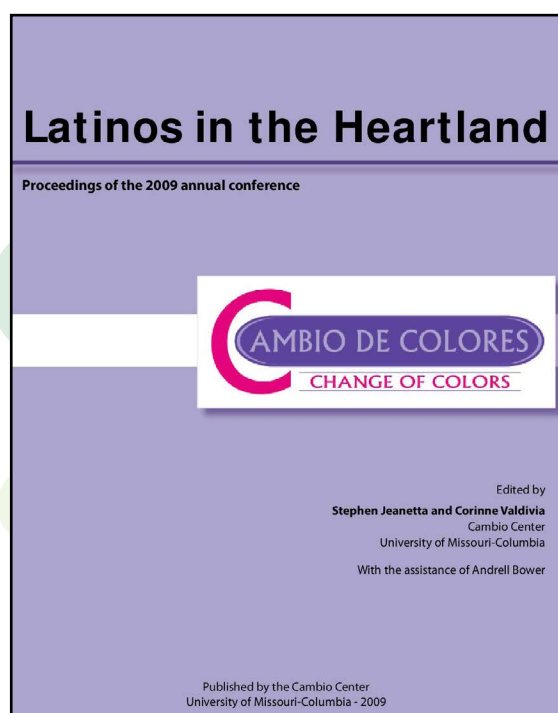
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Re-examining Citizenship: Best Practices of St. Louis Spanish Immersion Schools

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Abstract

When introducing the concepts of citizenship in our schools, how an American citizen looks, speaks, and thinks is often presented in assumptions and stereotypes. As the demographics of the nation have shifted, these stereotypes sometimes remain the same and the new reality ignored. How can and should we teach our young children about citizenship? How are language immersion schools in particular developing global citizens? According to National Migration information, (Terrazas and Batalova 2008) in 2007, 22.9 percent of school-age children had at least one immigrant parent, 47.5 percent of which reported their background to be Hispanic or Latino.

In this paper, we discuss two educational opportunities in the St. Louis area that build on the strengths of the Hispanic/Latino community and its primary language of Spanish. Casa de Niños is a preschool program built on the Montessori philosophy that primarily serves children through age 5. The St. Louis Language Immersion Schools, a nonprofit organization (<http://sllis.org>), is dedicated to supporting the development of a network of charter schools in the area. They are set to open a Spanish immersion school for K-1st grade in August 2009 and will be using the Primary Years International Baccalaureate program in order to promote “international-mindedness” in their students (<http://www.ibo.org>). Specifically, SLLIS’ mission is “to position all children for success in local and global economies through holistic, intellectually inspiring language immersion programs,” in essence, to create global citizens.

The central vision of these language immersion schools, then, is to provide both the opportunity to learn in another language and about other cultures and languages. This presentation will explain how these educational organizations work to develop language and citizenship capacities. In particular, we will explain in detail the planned service-learning community research project all SLLIS students will complete by the end of fifth grade. We will also provide best practices for addressing issues of culture and language in immersion settings designed for young children. Finally, we will discuss with the group the challenges and opportunities of designing these sorts of programs in areas of new immigration, such as many towns and small cities across the Midwest.

Keywords: language immersion schools, citizenship and education, bilingual education

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“We really want the diversity of our school to represent the diversity of St. Louis: geographic, ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, and country-of-origin diversity.”

- Executive Director, SLLIS

In the United States and across the globe, great demographic changes are happening. Latinos and Latinas, for instance, increased from 6.4 percent of the U.S. school population in 1976 to 12 percent in 1996. Census data demonstrates similar increases in Missouri; in St. Louis County, the Latino/a population increased 49 percent from 1990 to 2000. A number of schools are embracing these changes and using this moment to teach about citizenship in new ways. Here, we briefly summarize best educational practices that aim to develop “global” or “transformative” citizens, in part by immersing children in the Spanish language and related cultures. Specifically, the Spanish School—part of the St. Louis Language Immersion Schools network (<http://sllis.org>)—and Casa de Niños (<http://www.casamontessori.info>) offer civic opportunities to students’ families and communities and learning activities in which students analyze the world from others’ perspectives and, in turn, question their own roles in this world.

What is global and transformative citizenship?

Briefly, transformative and global citizens understand the world is interdependent and pluralistic. This view of citizenship argues that people should have the knowledge, attitudes and skills to analyze problems from local and global perspectives to effect positive change in their world. Citizenship is more than just a legal status. Instead, it includes all of the educated actions individuals take to better their communities. These communities include the local neighborhood, state and nation as well as transnational connections.

What is a Spanish immersion school?

The best practices described here come from Spanish immersion schools. Language immersion programs (K-12) have expanded over the past 30 years, from only 35 in the mid-1980s to more than 330 currently (see the directory compiled by the Center for Applied Linguistics at www.cal.org/twi/directory). They have also grown at the pre-school level as educators open a variety of nonprofit and private language schools for infants through 5-year-olds. At such schools, instruction happens primarily in the target language (in the schools highlighted here, Spanish). The main goals of immersion schools are to graduate students who are proficient in a target language as well as English, have increased cultural awareness and achieve high academic success.

Casa de Niños is the only Spanish immersion preschool in the St. Louis area that is based on the Montessori philosophy. The director, Veronica Greene, is from Mexico, certified in Montessori methods and has more than 20 years of experience as an early childhood and Spanish educator. Casa’s website describes the school as offering opportunities for “children ages 18 months to 5 years old to experience a comfortable, safe, and peaceful environment in which lessons are individually tailored to their needs, both in a general sense, and in terms of their language learning.” Children complete daily activities, for example, making artwork, figuring out puzzles, playing games, helping in the garden and preparing meals, while listening to Spanish. By the time they graduate and enter kindergarten, they have mastered some conversational ability in Spanish, and many can read Spanish words as well.

SLLIS’ Spanish School opened in August 2009. This school follows the total immersion model in which

all subject-area instruction provided during the school day occur in Spanish until the end of second grade. At that point, classes on English language and literacy begin while all other coursework continues in Spanish. Although the Spanish School constructed an immersion program primarily for native/monolingual English speakers, about 10 percent of the student body will likely be children from Spanish-speaking homes.

Creating communities, creating citizens

Casa de Niños and the Spanish School are making it a priority to integrate families and communities into the schooling process. By creating opportunities for community and parent involvement, they are developing civic opportunities for the whole family. When students witness their family members and community organizations making positive changes for their school, they are seeing global and transformative citizenship in action. This visible citizenship is quite powerful.

The Spanish School, for example, has developed a full range of ways that parents can participate in and make positive changes for the school. Specifically, the assistant head of school is in charge of coordinating the following involvement activities: cultural celebrations and similar events, at which families, administrators and teachers interact outside of school; courses in English and Spanish for community, family and school members who want to strengthen their own linguistic and cultural skills; other adult education programs, such as citizenship courses and job training; and parent task forces that help to create school policies and plans on topics from environmental impact to school uniforms.

One of the goals of these efforts is to make sure that not only children but also parents and community members interact across such differences as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity and immigrant status. These opportunities also put different family members in different positions of power. A Mexican immigrant might teach the evening Spanish courses for parents. Another parent who has experience with food services might help to arrange the cafeteria and meal options. These efforts to engage family and community members with diverse knowledge and experiences into the school community develops the knowledge students, families, staff and educators have about each other. More important, the way parents and community members are woven into the school's actions could matter for students' real-life experiences of citizenship, civic action and identity.

Creating problem solvers, creating citizens

Both Casa de Niños and the Spanish School have developed curricula and methods that focus on building students' sense of community, identity and cultural awareness and recognition of universal human values. Part of this is done through the use of Spanish, rather than English, as the language of instruction, which helps to jump-start discussions about who we are, what languages we speak, where we live and how we interact with others. In addition, the knowledge and skills developed in these Spanish immersion schools help to create problem solvers: citizens who know how to make positive changes for and in their communities.

First, at both Casa de Niños and the Spanish School, the language of daily interactions and instruction is Spanish. This means that students from Spanish-speaking homes experience their school days primarily in their home language, rather than English, a language that might have little immediate meaning for them. This can shift the balance of power in their environment; Spanish has become the language "to know," and Spanish-heritage students can use their skills as language and culture brokers. For example, English speakers might ask the Spanish speakers for help. In turn, Spanish speakers might act as helpful citizens, as they recognize needs in their classroom community and provide the necessary assistance. School leaders believe that these interactions plant the seeds for understanding aspects of "global" and "transformative" citizenship.

Second, through hands-on, inquisitive action projects in students' communities, the Spanish school

develops “global citizens,” or children with the capacity to analyze the links in their local and global worlds. To do this, they use the framework provided by the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (see www.ibo.org). Like the Montessori philosophy (see <http://www.montessori.org>), the IBPYP framework focuses on the whole developing child. Both frameworks encourage educators to attend to the social, physical, emotional and cultural needs of students as well as their academic development. Most significantly, IBPYP has a number of projects in which children study issues in their local and global communities and try to solve them. The culmination of these studies is called Exhibition.

Specifically, older elementary students at the Spanish School participate in Exhibition, a project that requires student research, writing and community action. For this project, students do extensive research during fourth and fifth grades. Although some of this research includes reading information about their chosen topic, it also requires them to work with an expert community mentor. Students work with their mentors to study their chosen questions, issues or problems. Then, students write up their results and defend a chosen action in front of a panel of educators, community members and families. The Exhibition requires that students think about what they can do to make an impact within their communities, a key component of global and transformative citizenship. Research demonstrates that such real-life work and student action matters not only for children’s understanding of citizenship, but also for later political involvement. This is the kind of learning that the Spanish immersion schools strive to provide: meaningful, active inquiry that leads to positive outcomes for children’s lives as well as their communities.

Conclusion

Casa de Niños and SLLIS’ Spanish School are using language immersion education as the bridge to teach about world cultures. Through community and family integration and hands-on, inquisitive learning, both schools strive to create citizens who understand their local and their global situations and who have the knowledge and capacities to make significant changes to improve our world.

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