

A Perspective on the Haitian Bilingual Program in Cambridge, MA

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As international immigrants settle in Cambridge, the public school system is providing native language instruction to children who know little or no English. The culturally diverse Cambridge school system has always come up with creative approaches to address these issues. The Cambridge desegregation plan and its bilingual programs, especially the Amigos Program, have received national and international acclamation. The Haitian bilingual program housed at the Graham & Parks school is also very effective.

In this article, I will present an overview of this innovative program, which was initiated by the monolingual and bilingual teachers in that school and which had the enthusiastic support of the principal of Graham & Parks, Dr. Leonard Solo, and the Cambridge bilingual program director, Ms. Mary Cazabon.

When a Haitian Creole speaker hears or reads "Okap" and "Okay," he or she thinks of the second and third largest cities in Haiti after Port-au-Prince: Cap Haitien on the north coast of the island, commonly referred to as "Okap," and Les Cayes on the south coast. In this context, however, they refer to the combination of two third and fourth grade classes at Graham & Parks school in Cambridge, Mass. where Haitian and monolingual students are learning together. The monolingual teacher Judith Richards, and the Haitian bilingual teacher Marie Joseph have been collaborating for the last five years to deliver a third and fourth grade integrated curriculum.

I taught in the bilingual program for over a decade. As an educator and a parent, I feel compelled to share with the public the remarkable amount of integration that is occurring between bilingual and monolingual students, particularly at the primary level. I have visited classes in Haiti and observed bilingual programs in Florida, New York and elsewhere in Massachusetts. I find the Cambridge program quite unique.

The Cambridge school community has to confront a number of issues, such as students coming from Haiti with limited or no literacy skills. In addition, some students take a long time to develop social and cultural behaviors that are acceptable in this society. Availability of quality materials in Haitian Creole is also an obstacle. However, teachers have developed their own materials and have gone to Haiti to purchase books. The Bilingual Department always manages to come up with funding to pay teachers to develop materials in Creole. With a federal grant to the Department,

more materials are being developed. We adapted a comprehensive Creole language arts assessment for grades 2 and 3, and we have revised folk tale books written by Yves Dejean and Michaele Auguste in the early 1980s. Elementary teachers have created phonics, social studies, language arts and math books, flashcards and other visual materials in Creole. Developing materials and making creative changes in the program are the school department's priority.

Many issues that cause trouble in other school systems, such as monolingual-bilingual integration, mainstreaming, teaching in Creole, students spending more than three years in the bilingual program, and the use of community resources are not subjects of controversy, debate, or concern in Cambridge.

Bilingual and monolingual teachers have always worked together informally. Besides being integrated in art, music, and physical education, Haitian bilingual and monolingual teachers have been doing integrated units and classroom activities for more than a decade.

One of the first integration activities I recall occurred during the academic year 1984 - 85. The third and fourth grade monolingual class came to my classroom once a week to learn Creole with the Haitian children. One year first and second grade bilingual and monolingual students did a unit on Haiti together. Another year that class did a science unit on Liquids. A Haitian playwright, a pediatrician, and a college professor did oral activities in the first and second grade native language and monolingual classrooms. In 1992, a year of intense political turmoil in Haiti, a group of teachers organized a Haiti Day to build awareness of the situation there. They had guest speakers, slide presentations, and story telling that day. There have also been celebrations of Haitian holidays in the school. The third and fourth grade classes have established a sister-class relationship with a school in LaGonave, Haiti, and recently added Lamitye (the Creole word for friendship). Haitian and monolingual students at the middle school level have begun integration classes in math and science.

Kindergarten teachers have done guided reading, whole language and science activities together. They have had after-school French lessons. French as well as Creole will be offered during the day. The first and second grade Haitian teachers had teamed with a counterpart monolingual class for mathematics instruction.

Okap-Okay is not a formal two-way program. Instruction is primarily in English, with some Creole lessons taught once a week to the monolingual students. As stated, integration is occurring in a consistent manner at the primary level. I find the cultural exchange that is developing in Okap - Okay classes very appealing. Both teachers team-teach science and math. Classes are scheduled in such a way that instruction is

provided in Creole to the Haitians for some part of the day. Students and adults work in both classrooms. There is also a bilingual assistant who works in both classrooms.

The physical aspects of both classrooms reflect an appreciation and respect for both languages and cultures. Bulletin board displays, labels for classroom materials, and titles of class activities and projects are written in Haitian Creole and English. Both Haitian and American foods are served during snack and for fund-raising luncheons that the classrooms organize. Haitian rice and beans and traditional American spaghetti and meatballs are prepared on sleep-over nights that both classrooms hold in the school every year.

The most touching and interesting event was the on-stage presentation of "Cinderella" last June. The play was presented entirely in Creole, with only a narration in English. The children sang in Creole and danced to Haitian music. One could tell from the smiles on the faces of parents, staff and students that everyone enjoyed it. Okap and Okay concluded that school year with a positive message for both language groups.

For Haitian students who are struggling to accept Creole as an authentic language, this program elevates their self-esteem. It is also a psychologically enhancing experience to see speakers of a language like English, which is socially and historically more acceptable and valued, read, write, and speak in Creole. For monolingual and bilingual children alike, it is an excellent way to expose them to another culture at an early age. Both groups are learning to develop mutual respect and appreciation for the other's culture and language.

The Haitian Bilingual program at the Graham and Parks school is not a structured two-way bilingual program. It is, however, an example of Haitian bilingual and monolingual teachers taking the initiative to work together, cooperating and exchanging curriculum ideas to foster self-esteem, and promoting multicultural learning that will have long-term positive effects.

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