

## “Siéntate”

*Come here; sit down; be quiet; NO.* If these were the only comprehensible words coming from your teacher’s mouth, would you want to participate in school? Would you feel motivated to produce your best work? Could you even do nominal work without understanding the lesson, the context, or the instructions? Likely not! Unfortunately, too many Spanish-speaking public school students are placed in this position with little say (literally) in the process of improving their own education.

At one local elementary school, conflicting views between a previous principal and numerous educators have abandoned Spanish-only students in an environment with a lack of support for their learning. For a class at Westmont College, I was placed in a kindergarten classroom, where I witnessed the language dissociation between certain students and their teacher. Miss Smith\*, who teaches kindergarten, is a capable, enthusiastic, and thoughtful educator. She, however, has no background in the Spanish language, creating a barrier in her classroom, since a handful of her students have not been previously introduced to English before coming to school. What she can communicate toward these students are a limited number of basic commands: *come here, sit down, be quiet, no*. Should all other words spoken by this teacher be completely foreign, a child’s only comprehension from her as an adult figure carries a strong negative connotation. Although I am not a psychology major, I would argue that these particular students are not placed on the path to success!

There follows an obvious cycle of disengagement. A child not paying attention in class is called-out by the teacher. No one present offers help for the Spanish-only student. After attempting to follow an unintelligible lesson, the child tunes out again, failing to learn anything new, all the while being criticized in the process for something out of his control. Thus, the cycle begins again. He quickly falls behind in comparison with his peers. While he clearly is not learning anything new in English, he simultaneously learns nothing new in Spanish. The greatest misfortune is that as this

happens every school year, these potentially capable students become increasingly less educated in general than their English-speaking peers with whom they attend school, leading to failure, dropouts, limited job options, etc. This is not to say that the English language is the only link to a successful life, but after falling behind in school for many consecutive years (due to a lack of comprehension), they may be set back quite a bit in life, as well.

Occasionally, one-on-one time between teacher and student, even without sharing a language, aids them greatly in their understanding of a new subject. In my classroom, teaching experience of working with one of the Spanish-only students, I have found that in math concepts, being able to demonstrate adding or subtracting using fingers does not require communication. The students visibly gained confidence in their abilities when offered a high-five, or tone of voice was used to demonstrate “great job!”. However, while small steps are taken to help a single student achieve greater understanding, the rest of the class is then disadvantaged by lack of teacher attention.

The main challenge with lower grade, Spanish-only students is their struggle to learn concepts for the first time, in a second language. Typically children are introduced to new ideas in their primary language, which they can then synthesize in their brain and later connect to a second language: English. If students have no way of gathering, interpreting and internally translating information from one language to another, they consistently fail to understand the material entirely. Many parents and educators are concerned by a Spanish-speaking student’s difficulties in relation to his/her peers, but in reality, the school system is causing many of these problems by failing to offer integrative learning programs.

Those who do not fear for the futures of Spanish-only students suggest that *kids’ brains are like sponges, and they will figure things out somehow*. While there is some truth to this, developmentally Spanish-only students may find help in processing information by observation or help from peers, but without a conscious effort on the part of an authority figure or educational

system to further the students' academic progress, they will not feel as though their learning is being valued.

In the observational stage of my liberal arts education, I am motivated by the problems I witness in classrooms, and hopeful to eliminate them from my future experiences. Often the hardships of students are not reflective of the teacher, because he/she may not have adequate training to communicate--no public school teacher is obligated to do so. Working with students who only speak a language that is different from that of the teacher puts enormous strain on his/her role of conveying new knowledge. With the prevalence of the Spanish language in California, it is easy to argue that the Spanish language should be considered a necessity to obtain a teaching credential. On that note, it is far easier to *say* that an issue needs change than to take action towards finding a solution. I am but a small fish in a large pond; however, I plan to do my part by continuing my education in Spanish. I want to be a teacher that does not make a student feel incompetent because of his inability to communicate, but instead feel cared for because his teacher wants to talk to him, too.