Education Reform:
AN INDIVIDUAL'S PERSPECTIVE

Carmen H. Sanjurjo, Ed.D.
Department of Elementary, Secondary,
Linguistically Diverse & K-12 Education
Metropolitan State University of Denver
csanjurj@msudenver.edu

RESUMEN
Este artículo describe las experiencias de la autora ante las reformas educativas, desde sus años de escuela elemental hasta sus años como maestra bilingüe en las escuelas públicas de Denver, Colorado. En algunos casos, las reformas hicieron que la educación fuera más igualitaria para todos los niños, mientras que en otras ocasiones perpetuó el *statu quo*. El trabajo incluye sus experiencias sobre el tiempo que vivió en Puerto Rico, desde cuarto grado hasta el nivel universitario, y cómo la reforma de la escuela modelo iniciada por Ángel Quintero Alfaro transformó su vida y la de otros niños de la clase trabajadora. Sus años como maestra en el sistema de educación pública de Denver le permitieron ser testigo de la reforma de la ley No Child Left Behind y el movimiento de *accountability*, así como los cambios de la educación bilingüe en Denver. ¿Han ayudado las reformas a reducir la brecha en el aprovechamiento de los niños negros y los pobres? Eso está por verse.

Palabras clave: educación bilingüe, escuela especializada, escuela pública, reforma educativa, igualdad

ABSTRACT
This paper describes the experiences of the author with education reform from her years in elementary schools to her time as a bilingual teacher in Denver Public Schools. In some cases the reforms made education more equitable for all kids while in others it perpetuated the status quo. The paper includes the years the author spent in Puerto Rico, from 4th grade through college, and how the model school reform initiated by Angel Quintero Alfaro impacted her life and the lives of other working class kids. The author's years as a teacher in Denver Public Schools had her witness reforms such as NCLB and the accountability movement, as well as changes in bilingual education

in Denver. Have educational reforms helped bridge the achievement gap of children of color and children of poverty? This is still to be seen.

Keywords: bilingual education, education reforms, equity, magnet school public school

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to reflect on past experiences with education reforms in Puerto Rico and the U.S. in order to attempt to comprehend what works in education reforms and what does not. This would give people studying education a perspective about how education reforms evolve and change, and how some repeat themselves through history, as Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggest. This is a narrative of the educational trajectory of an educator from childhood to adulthood and how some educational reforms affected her life and her academic achievements.

The methodology used is the narrative method or the narrative as research technique. The narrative is the way we create and recreate our realities and ourselves. According to Joyce (2008), "Storytelling is a vehicle often used in sociological research in which the individual tells others about themselves" (p. 5). The narrative methodology allows people to present their story, their influences and how these affected them during their lifetime. This is the process employed in this paper, in reference to the ways some education reforms affected an individual or how that individual observed or participated in these reforms and gained an understanding of their outcomes.

In our education classes at Metropolitan State University of Denver we have two assignments that made me start thinking about my own experiences with education. In one of them students have to explain what urban education is; they also have to read about education reforms. In another assignment they have to reflect and think about their own experiences with public education or education in general. While doing research on education reform and reading my students' works, I started reflecting on my own experiences. Throughout my life I have been involved, or have been part of, in some way or another, in education reform.

Reforms, policies, and laws that impacted education during my lifetime: A chronology

Elementary: 1956-1962

1956: Two years after Brown v. Board of Education (BOA), of Topeka, I'm 4 years old and enter Kindergarten in an integrated school in Washington D.C. In third grade my teacher didn't like me. She always called me a crybaby, and made fun of my Spanish accent. I wonder if she resented having me, a curly haired Puerto Rican, in her class. My sister and I were the only Puerto Ricans in the school and many times we felt as outsiders.

1957: As commented by Ravitch (2000), Sputnik is launched and as a consequence of this event, schools in the United States started providing a curriculum with emphasis on math and science. Also, more federal funds were given to education.

1950's-1970's: Puerto Rico's Revolving Door Migration. Because Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens —allowing them to travel back and forth from the island to the United States—, the term "Revolving Door Migration" has been coined by Puerto Ricans themselves to explain their migratory pattern.

1959-1960: Our family returns to Puerto Rico, and I start school in Guaynabo-Baldorioty de Castro Elementary. Because I couldn't speak Spanish, school officials wanted to place me in a lower grade. My mother stood up for me and told them to place me in 4th grade, the grade I was supposed to be in. Back then bilingual education didn't exist, and the way schools dealt with students who couldn't speak the language was to place them in a lower grade level. It happened to my cousin, who is my contemporary; we were born in the same year, 1952. She spoke English and Spanish well but still was placed a grade lower rather than at the appropriate level. The curriculum for elementary education was similar to what was offered in the United States with some variations. All our classes in 4th grade were taught by the same teacher except the English as a Second Language (ESL) class —in Puerto Rico all students take ESL classes from 1st-12th grade. In sixth grade, still in the same school (Elementary was from 1st to 6th grade) we changed classes. We had three or four teachers: one for

math, one for English, one for Social Studies, and one for Spanish. I don't recall if we had Science but maybe our math teacher also taught it, probably the cause for my dislike of Science. Sixth grade is when I started developing asthma. It was mostly emotional but also caused by allergies (i.e. some trees such as the "Pomarrosa", or bird feathers). I was terribly afraid of my Spanish teacher. Corporal punishment was allowed in those years, so she would discipline us by pinching our arms and knocking us on the head using her BIGGG college ring. I lost the textbook of her class, and I was always afraid of what would she do to me if she found out. Yet, she was a great teacher and story teller. She read to us spooky legends of Puerto Rico and made our imagination fly.

Junior High School: 1963-1965

1963: I attended Antonio S. Pedreira Junior High School in Caguas, Puerto Rico. I started 7th grade in Guaynabo, in Rafael Martinez Nadal Junior High, but later transferred to Caguas. Rafael Martinez Nadal Junior High, serving an entire town, had too many students. In order to deal with that, the school had a system of "inter-locking"; this meant that some students attended classes in the morning, from 7:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., and another group attended classes in the afternoon, from 12:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. I attended classes in the afternoon. I remember always being hungry and eating a snack after school, hence I was never hungry for dinner, ate very little and was quite skinny. At Antonio S. Pedreira Junior High we had classes from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. I had English, Spanish, Social Studies, Science and Math. We also had Home Economics, the girls of course, and the boys had Woodshop. The curriculum of Home Economics was very much linked to some sort of Human Services program. They wanted kids from working class background to develop skills and values linked to those of middle class families. One semester of Home Economics was dedicated to sewing and the other to cooking and home keeping. The teacher would visit us at our homes to see how we lived and what things needed to be fixed there. In my case it was our yard. I don't remember completing the project though. Also, the class had lessons on good nutrition, health and a little bit of sex education. I remember when the teacher asked us if we

had had our first menstrual period, or as they used to say in my country, "si éramos señoritas" (if we were "young ladies"). I felt bad because me and another girl were so young and skinny that we had not entered that strange world known as puberty!

Curriculum. The Spanish curriculum had an emphasis on learning Spanish grammar and Spanish literature. We read two novels: *El final de Norma*, by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, and *Marianela*, by Benito Pérez Galdós, and discussed them in great details. These novels were by Spanish authors. Most of the curriculum in Puerto Rican schools was based on the U.S. public school's curriculum, but the Spanish curriculum was mostly based on authors from Spain, some from Latin America, but very few, if any, from Puerto Rico.

In our English classes we used the *Fries* Series for grammar and ESL. This ESL series went by levels based on the grade level you were in. The emphasis was on pronunciation. My 7th grade English teacher didn't speak English well. Because I was constantly correcting her, she wanted to lower my grade from A to B but, again, my mother didn't allow it to happen.

My 8th grade teacher must have been in love at the time she was teaching us English. She taught numerous romantic songs, such as *The Shadow of Your Smile* and *The Autumn Leaves*. She was probably aware that songs are a great instructional tool for teaching a new language. I still remember her class with fondness because I still enjoy listening to the songs she taught us.

My favorite class in 7th and 8th grades was Social Studies. The teacher who taught that subject also taught Spanish and his political ideology was that of pro-independence for the island. This is what made his class interesting. He taught me about the beauty of my country. He taught us three different versions of Puerto Rico's national anthem. The official anthem praises the beauty of the island. There is another version, by Lola Rodríguez de Tió, which is very patriotic and revolutionary, as national anthems should be. One thing that I liked about this teacher is that he lived in the neighborhood and would always say hello when he ran into you. In other words he was connecting with his students, which, as we tell our preservice teachers, will help in teaching students from diverse background.

1965-1968: Lincoln High School, Caguas, Puerto Rico - A liberal arts magnet program

In Junior High I befriended a girl whose father was a school principal. Being a school administrator he was aware of the reforms that were happening in the island. With his help we were able to get into a new magnet school, which contributed to making possible my college education and my success at the graduate school level. I'm convinced that the general studies curriculum at this magnet school played a significant role in my formation as an educator and as a strong believer in teaching students how to think.

In 9th grade I was accepted into the mentioned magnet program at the Abraham Lincoln High School in Caguas. The program was designed for working class students who, offered the right opportunities, had the potential to enter college and be successful. The curriculum was modeled after that of the general studies program of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). It was the idea of Puerto Rican educator Angel Quintero Alfaro, who from 1965 to 1968 was appointed by the Popular Democratic Party ("Partido Popular Democrático" [PPD]) as Secretary of Education.[1] He, as many other educators of the time, such as Jaime Benítez, studied at the University of Chicago when Robert Hutchins was Chancellor. They were influenced by the "Great Books" curriculum and the Perennialist view of studying the great ideas of history and students discussing them in class using the Socratic Method.

There were only five or six high schools offering this magnet program across the island, consequently we were considered "special". In each of the selected schools there were two groups per grade level. The groups were called "grupos especiales" ("the special groups"). In 9th grade my classes were Biology, Algebra I, World History, Humanities, Spanish (Literature, writing and grammar), English (reading and writing). My Tenth grade classes were Chemistry, Geometry, Humanities, Social Sciences, Spanish and English. Eleventh grade was more or less the same, but in addition I took American Literature and Physical Education (P.E.). In order to be able to graduate a year earlier, I took two classes during two summers. The first Summer I did U.S. History and History of Puerto Rico. The next Summer I took Physics.

I do not recall taking an elective course until my junior year, when I took P.E. Our academic courses were so rigorous that there wasn't any time left for electives.

Students today complain how boring this or that course is. My Algebra I teacher also taught Geometry, Algebra II and III. Talk about boring classes. Just imagine being with the same teachers for three or four years!

My Ancient History class developed my writing skills more than my history knowledge. We didn't have many textbooks, hence our Social Studies teacher would fill up the chalkboard with all the information we needed. We would then write them in our notebooks and this is what we used to study for our tests. Back then, the working conditions of teachers were worse than today. My poor Social Studies teacher developed a terrible rash on his hands. They would peel and burn because of all the writing he did with chalk that was not dust free. My Algebra teacher had asthma attacks because of the same reason. She always came to work even with her asthma acting up.

In our English and Spanish classes we read books that were taught in the general studies program of the UPR. At the UPR in the 1960's the curriculum was strongly Eurocentric, with an emphasis on Western Civilization. In our school we did read some Puerto Rican authors such as Rene Marques. His novel, *La víspera del hombre* (The Awakening of the Man) influenced me, and I believe others of my fellow students, to the point that most of us followed the political ideology expressed in the book. We also read a study made by Puerto Rican sociologist, Eduardo Seda Bonilla.

1960: The segregation in the public schools happened based on the two track system: general studies vis-à-vis vocational education. Most of the students who came from a working class background ended in the vocational education track and few were entering the state university. The purpose of the magnet program described previously was to place working class students on the general studies track, or college preparatory program. They were selected based on having the cognitive skills and abilities to make it to college.

Most of the students in the magnet program had college in their minds and graduated from high school in three years. We

were well prepared for college and the majority of the graduates have been quite successful professionally, being that most of us were from working class background or kids of poverty. In many cases, some of the students were the first in their families to go to college.

I was one of many working class kids who were able to enter the UPR with an honors scholarship and with an excellent academic preparation that allowed me to finish my college degree in four years. One of my friends, who used to live in the projects, finished her degree in three years and went on to become a prestigious lawyer in Puerto Rico. Other graduates of this program became medical doctors, college professors who did their graduate programs in Europe or the U.S., engineers (especially chemical engineers, one of the careers promoted in the 1960's due to oil refinery corporations' interests in the island), teachers, and pharmacists, among many other professions. The college acceptance rate of graduates from the general studies magnet schools was almost 100%.

The Popular Democratic Party believed in upward mobility by means of education. The program established by Education Superintendent Angel Quintero Alfaro was successful as an education reform because it allowed the UPR to have more inclusiveness among their undergraduate population by accepting academically well prepared students from working class backgrounds. The UPR had been criticized because, being a state university, most of the students admitted to it were from the upper classes and had attended the priciest private schools of the island.

Quintero Alfaro's educational reform ended when there was a change of political power in the island and the pro-statehood party, the Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP), won the 1968 elections for the first time in Puerto Rican history. That year I graduated from high school with high honors, while in 11th grade. After graduation I entered the UPR with an honors scholarship. Jaime Benítez was the President of the UPR at that time.

The University of Puerto Rico, my Alma Mater, was and still is an excellent institution of higher learning. In the 1960's through the 1980's, it had a curriculum of general studies modeled after that of the University of Chicago and following a philosophy

about higher education expressed by Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset (Sanjurjo, 1986).

I finished my college degree in 1972 with a major in history. These were very difficult years at the UPR. There were numerous protests against the Vietnam War and the draft, and against having the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) on our campus. Still I was able to finish my degree and I started my Master's program in history in my Alma Mater.

1972-1973: I was unable to finish my Masters at the UPR. Life got in the way and I had to work to help raise my first born. I taught 9th grade English at Rafael Martinez Nadal Junior High, in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. I was using the same ESL books that I used when I was in junior high myself, and my students reacted in the same ways as I did. They were bored with the behaviorist method of teaching ESL using repetition of sounds and reading dull texts that didn't have anything they could relate to.

1974-1976: I taught Humanities and Social Sciences General Studies classes at the Turabo University, in Caguas, Puerto Rico. This is a private institution of higher learning and their curriculum was modeled after that of the UPR.

1976-1977: I worked at ASPIRA of Puerto Rico. We had some small office space on the second floor of a building in a poor working class barrio in Santurce. The school drop-out rate in the island in the 1970's was very high and many students would go to ASPIRA to prepare for the General Educational Development (GED) exam. I was a part-time teacher who worked evenings to help adults prepare for their exams in Social Studies and Spanish. Another of my colleagues worked with them for the Science and Math sections of the test. ASPIRA of Puerto Rico was modeled after ASPIRA of New York and its purpose was to help the urban poor acquire a better education and in the long run be able to have better jobs.

1970-1980: I studied at the graduate level at Teachers College, Columbia University. My son and daughter attended New York City public schools. As an informed parent, I chose the best schools. My son attended P.S. 75 (West End and 96th Ave.), that had an excellent bilingual program. This school later started a dual language program that my daughter benefited from. Today she is

an ECE/Kinder teacher teaching all in Spanish to recently arrived Mexican kids in Denver Public Schools.

At Teachers College in Columbia University I was one of a handful of Latinos accepted into this school. Very few Nuyoricans were there back then. The ones I saw were mostly custodians or cooks in the cafeteria.

For a short period of time I taught at Brooklyn College and observed firsthand the lack of help for students who were English Language Learners (ELLs). My students at Brooklyn College were illiterate in both Spanish and English. I cried when I first read papers written by them.

1981-1992: I was a professor at Boricua College, a bilingual college in New York City, where I helped Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Latinos finish their GED and finish their careers in the different academic and professional programs of the college. I felt comfortable there because both the faculty and the students looked like me. They were mostly Puerto Ricans and we all had the goal of improving the educational opportunities of our students and helping them to be successful academically and professionally.

1992: I left New York heading west and arrived in Denver, where I became a 5th grade bilingual teacher in Denver Public Schools (DPS). In the 1990's DPS was struggling in making their bilingual program work, and it wasn't working well in most of the schools. In my so-called "bilingual" class, the majority of the students were Chicano (Mexican-American) kids with Spanish surnames that didn't speak or understand Spanish and had been placed —or should I say miss-placed— in a bilingual classroom because of this. I only had five Spanish speaking girls out of 30 students. Most of the students were rowdy, disruptive and disrespectful, with tons of issues related to poverty and lack of parental involvement.

I was teaching in a struggling, urban school in Denver and this was my life in education for fifteen years. I taught in several schools in Northwest Denver where the student population is 99% Latino, 50% of which are English Language Learners (ELL's) and most of them are eligible for free or reduced lunch. That speaks of their poverty level.

In the early 1990's the emphasis in our reading classes was on phonetics and we used basal readers. We had boring books and lessons (both for the teacher and the kids) almost every day. In DPS the discussion about phonetics vis-à-vis whole language was evident in the confusion of what approach to use and which one was the most effective. As a Title 1 school we had reading specialists pull out the students from their regular classes and offer them small group or one-on-one instruction in reading and writing. Towards the late 1990's this changed and no more pull-outs were allowed. Title 1 funds were used for reading programs and books that were used in schools assigned as Title 1 schools.

Bilingual Education in DPS

About ten years after a desegregation order in 1973, Keyes v. School District #1, a federal judge ruled that the district was not meeting the educational needs of bilingual students. In 1994 the Congress of Hispanic Educators established a lawsuit against DPS. The group charged the district with creating what was essentially a separate-but-equal system, subjecting English Language Learners to inadequate instruction from unqualified teachers. Clarke, Hero, Sidney, Fraga, and Erlichson (2006) state, "An agreement between the district and the Congress led to guidelines for the creation of a bilingual program." (p. 50).

In the early 1990's some schools had excellent bilingual programs while others did not. I worked at an elementary school in Northwest Denver where they placed students in so-called bilingual programs based on their Spanish surnames. In many cases, the school secretaries were the ones placing students in bilingual or English only classes based on their first impressions of the parents or the students who were registering at the school. Later on I worked at a middle school where we had a highly gifted and talented bilingual program. In this school many Latino students continued their educational path to high school with biliteracy skills and well prepared. These disparities concerning the quality of the programs in different schools had to do with inconsistencies pertaining teacher preparation and lack of knowledge of best practices in terms of language acquisition theories and strategies used in the district.

In 1999 the program is changed from Bilingual Education to English Language Acquisition (ELA) as a result of the court order. The philosophy of the program also changed. To learn English is the goal. On the other hand, better assessments were developed in order to determine the English language level of the students. As a result, their placement in appropriate ELA classes improved. There is still a tendency to exit students too early from the ELA program. Students are also required to take English Standardized tests very early in the program. Both of these situations are probably one of the causes of the high dropout rates among Latino students in the district. However, DPS is ahead of other districts in terms of providing professional development for their teachers, helping them to be more effective when teaching English Language Learners. Today DPS is trying to be in compliance with the 1994 court order. They are preparing teachers better by providing intensive high quality training for those who are working with English Language Learners.

Other Reforms in DPS

Denver Public Schools has had its share of reforms: Busing versus community/neighborhood schools, Phonics versus Whole Language, Bilingual Education versus English Language Acquisition, just to mention a few. In terms of curriculum reforms changes would occur year after year. Every year you would have the "gurus" of each program reform rush into the schools to train teachers and to observe and evaluate how they put into practice the different curricular reforms. Today the gurus are called literacy, humanities, and math coaches.

In the 1990's the standardized test used to evaluate students' academic improvement was the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). From 2001 to the present, as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the accountability movement it has been the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP).

Professional Compensation

The DPS Professional Compensation system, or as it is called, ProComp, is considered one of the most innovative reforms in the states. It has received praise by President Obama and by Secretary

of Education Arnie Duncan. It is a big contrast to the traditional increment pay steps, the salary ladder that most school districts have. ProComp was the product of a joint collaboration between Denver Public Schools and the local teachers union, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association. The purpose was to offer compensation incentives to teachers to see if their teaching skills would improve and as a result their students' test scores would also improve. The four major components built into ProComp as means for the district's teachers to enhance their earnings are the following: 1) Market Incentives, 2) Student Growth, 3) Knowledge and Skills, and 4) Professional Evaluations. I worked in one of the schools that piloted this program. According to DeGrow (2007), at the present, some teachers and principals have observed improvement in students' scores and they believe it is as a result of ProComp. Yet, it has only been ten years since its implementation, and it is still to be seen if ProComp will help improve academic achievement in high needs schools and help bridge the achievement gap.

The latest reform in Denver Public Schools is the Leading Effective Academic Practice (LEAP), a framework for evaluating effective teaching. DPS, as other districts across the nation, have spent millions of dollars on different reforms.

In 2010 DPS received a 10 million dollars grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to develop an evaluation and professional development system for teachers and principals in the district, the result of which was LEAP. The LEAP is another attempt at bridging the achievement gap and improving academic achievement among students of color by improving teacher and principal effectiveness.

Conclusion

Public schools in Puerto Rico have followed a similar reform path to that of their counterparts in the United States. As in the states, reforms in the island have come and gone and recently, in both cases, a movement towards the privatization of the public school system is the tendency in the education reform movement. Both Puerto Rico and Denver Public Schools have high drop-out rates, low numbers in terms of graduation rates, and children of poverty

are still getting the short end of the stick when it comes to access to quality education.

Gottlieb (2002) mentioned, in reference to Denver Public Schools, that the school district is more segregated today. When I started working with DPS in 1992 their standardized test scores were low for students of color and they continue to be so today. The scores and graduation rates of students of color are still below 35%. In one of the DPS schools, of 450 students in 9th grade, less than half graduate in four years. As a teacher in one of DPS' low performing high schools I remember attending the pep rallies and seeing the numbers of students dwindle as you looked around the gym and saw less and less students as you went from the groups of freshmen through seniors, with freshmen having the largest amount of students and seniors having the least. In reference to test scores and graduation rates, DPS has flat-lined as many school districts across the nation.

In a Denver Post article, Meyer and Hubbard (2010) wrote:

> Scores on Colorado's annual academic assessment again came back flat, a trend that continues year after year in a state that is touted for pushing education reforms. Results from the 2010 Colorado Student Assessment Program were released Tuesday as the state's top education officials were in Washington, D.C., to make their pitch on why the state should win a share of the $3.4 billion Race to the Top federal grant challenge. Back home, the CSAP scores did little to spark celebration. "If you were to ask, 'How did Colorado do overall?' It was flat," said Jo O'Brien, assistant education commissioner, in a news conference announcing the results.

Jonathan Kozol (1992), in his book, *Savage Inequalities, Children in America's Schools* stated the following, and I quote: "In many cities, what is termed 'restructuring' struck me as very little more than moving around the same old furniture within the house of poverty." This reference to restructuring schools, which is one type of reform, can be applied to most reforms today. As a person reflecting on education reform, I ask myself, when will the "dream deferred" of our children, as expressed by poet Langston Hughes become an actualized dream? The way we are heading in

terms of school reforms, it doesn't seem that we will see it in the near future or any time soon.

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NOTE

1 In Puerto Rico, even today, the Superintendent of schools, as well as the President and the Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico are appointed by the governor of the island and are affiliated to the political party in power.