



Not just a language barrier

By Tommy Navickas

Serving every student's individual learning needs is no simple task. But with a growing number of learners in schools whose first language is not English, teacher education programs are challenged to produce enough qualified teachers to meet that need.

At Illinois State, the College of Education is reforming the traditional on-campus teacher education model.

Through grant funding from the U.S. Department of Education and collaboration with Chicago Public Schools, the City Colleges of Chicago, and other educational organizations, a new model of teacher education was designed. The model targets preservice teachers, in-service bilingual teachers, and bilingual paraprofessionals for participation in on-site course work and supervision leading to certification and/or endorsements in bilingual/English as a second language (ESL) education. The program, which is now institutionalized, has been delivered to areas in the state where qualified bilingual and educators of English learners teachers are needed the most and offered in ways that allows them to concurrently work and go to school.

The results of this grow-your-own model have been encouraging.

Since 2001 more than 400 individuals have either completed certification or received endorsement in the Chicago Metro area, with approximately 60 individuals still in-progress. Over the duration of the grants, the results have exceeded all expectations.

"Their graduation raises the bar for those coming behind; it solidifies the value of programs of this type and reinforces the commitment of teacher education at ISU to train teachers to teach all children," says George Torres, director of the Bilingual Paraprofessionals in Transition (BPT) program.

This project has qualified hundreds of bilingual and ESL educators to teach in the Illinois schools that need them the most. The significance of this success lies in its potential impact as a model for schools across the nation. To help put the model's value in this larger context into perspective, there is no better way to gain understanding of the progress made than to consult one of project's most recent graduates.

The following is an interview with one of the project's graduates, Jose Grimaldo '10.

Q: Where did you grow up, and what were some of the challenges you and your family faced in your early years?

I was born in Guadalajara, Mexico. My family immigrated to Chicago when I was 10 years old (June 1974). During those early years, we struggled with housing and the language barrier. Our family of nine—father, mother, three boys and four girls—lived in a two-bedroom apartment.

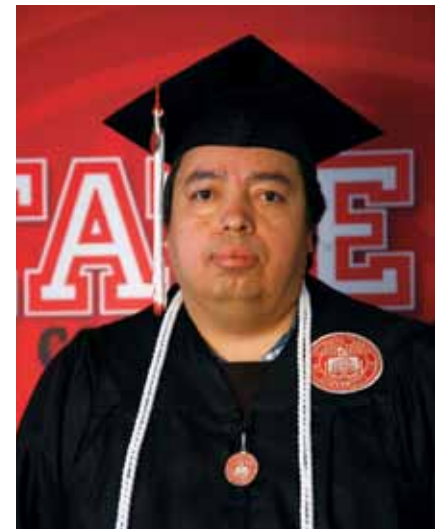
The language barrier affected our family when we needed to run errands or go to appointments where only English was spoken. Gradually, as my siblings and I learned English, our parents, relatives, and friends would use us as interpreters.

Q: What type of work were you involved with prior to beginning the program, and when did you make the choice to go back to school?

Prior to entering the education field, I worked as a welder in a factory. When the factory relocated to Mexico, I decided to go back to school and study to become a social worker. It was then that, for a class purpose, I had to volunteer in a school. I liked working with and for children, so I applied and was accepted for a teacher assistant position in a special education program, where I have now worked for several years.

Q: How do you believe your experience in this program has affected you and your family's life?

I feel that I am setting a good example for my children—Joanna (20), Joseph (18), and Jonathan (11). My wife, Ana, is also working toward a degree in this program. She will graduate this spring. Our children state that they feel proud of what we have and will continue to accomplish and that we inspired them to continue their education.



Continued on page 14

I believe this was the right decision because now I have more job opportunities, and I finally have my own classroom. I want to go on to earn a master's degree in bilingual special education.

Q: How do you believe this program offered by Illinois State has facilitated the advancement of your career as an educator?

The ISU program allowed me to reach a goal that I almost gave up.

I tried getting my teaching degree from another institution, but most of the education courses were offered only during the day and I needed to work. So for practical reasons I re-enrolled in a social work program and earned a bachelor's degree in social work. I later heard that ISU was offering the opportunity to enter a program (the Bilingual Paraprofessional Training Program) that worked under a government grant. The program worked around my work schedule, and this is how I was able to earn my teaching certification.

Q: Outside of your training as an educator, in what ways do you think your own experiences with the language barrier help English language learners?

The experience that I had with the language barrier allows me to better understand the struggles that newcomer students may face. As a teaching assistant, I offered students the option of deciding what language they wanted during instruction. I believe that all students should have the opportunity to use their language, background knowledge, and culture when transitioning to an all-English curriculum.

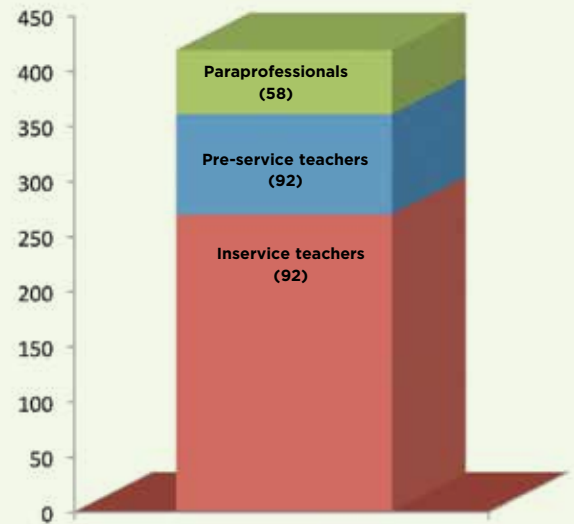
Q: How do you believe the training you went through, and the program as a whole, benefits urban communities?

This program benefits urban communities because almost all of the paraprofessionals live close to their school. I constantly see my students when I am out doing errands. When the students see me in school, they remind me that they saw me out in the community. I am planning to live within the community of the school that I will be working in. I feel that this is important because the students need to see that the teachers are interested in the well-being of the community and that teaching is not only their job but also is part of their private life.

In less than a decade, this model has impacted the schools and communities of thousands of students and has helped to regenerate the profession of teaching for hundreds of educators.

“These graduates are quality individuals who were given the opportunity, and they took it. Their graduation gives credit to programs like this and proves that it can be done. I am very proud of them, and I am proud of being a small part of their success,” says Torres.

Teachers earning degrees, certifications, and endorsements (2001–2010)



Total teachers trained=418