

MISSION-DRIVEN RESEARCH: Dr. Stephen Fafulas on Embracing the Needs of North Carolina's Hispanic Community

By Deborah A. Shoop



Dr. Stephen Fafulas

As East Carolina University continues to solidify its status as a national model for public service and regional transformation, Harriot College faculty lead the way in outreach to meet the changing needs of our state. One such set of needs emerges from the expanding Hispanic population in eastern North Carolina schools. Dr. Stephen Fafulas, assistant professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, launched a major research initiative, "Bridging the Gap: Bilingual Education and

Community Engagement," to study dual language immersion in North Carolina's elementary and secondary schools. Working through the Engagement and Outreach Scholars Academy at ECU, Fafulas is advancing our understanding of second language acquisition and student learning.

According to Fafulas, North Carolina has one of the fastest growing populations of Hispanics/Latinos, ranking seventh in the United States. It is this statistic that helped him decide on his dual language immersion project. Dual language immersion is an approach to classroom instruction that brings together

native English speakers and native speakers of another language, providing same-day (or alternate day) instruction to both groups in both languages. The goals of this approach are to develop bilingualism/biliteracy for all students.

To see this immersion approach at work in the classroom, and to learn more about bilingual education, Fafulas partnered with Dr. Marjorie Ringler, ECU associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership in the College of Education, and used North Carolina's Greene County schools as something of a laboratory for observation. Greene County has been running the dual immersion program (dubbed "Los Puentes," or "The Bridges") for 10 years, funded by a grant from Z. Smith Reynolds, and it is among the nation's most successful programs. County schools are tracking the gains in English language learning among Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations. The study entails six separate test classes at each grade level, four English-only and two dual immersion. In one week, students receive half of their instruction in English and half of their lessons in Spanish. Teachers in the dual immersion classes covered the same curriculum as those who taught only in English. Research from these programs has shown that, by fifth grade, students who were enrolled in the dual immersion classes gained certain advantages over those who were not in those classes. These students performed on average better than the non-dual immersion students on all state tests in English, suggesting that their cognitive capacity/development had improved in some form.

Newly graduated scholars and some of their coaches posed for a group photo after the 2013 ECU Engagement and Outreach Scholars Academy ceremony. They are, seated left to right, Lori Flint, Linda Crane Mitchell, Olga Smirnova, Paige Schneider and Borim Song; standing, left to right, Mark Scholl, Jeannie Golden, Tara Gallien, Essie Torres, Sharon Paynter, Carol Kline, Kirk St. Amant, Stephen Fafulas, Linda May and Sharon Rogers. (Photo by Cliff Hollis)



According to these data, the payoffs for this sort of program are readily apparent around the fifth or sixth grade level. However, at the second or third grade level, there has been a small drop in students' performance in English, prompting some parents of non-Hispanic students to remove their children from the program. Consequently, the schools are reporting problems with retention in the dual immersion program.

Fafulas and Ringler wanted to learn from the successes of the Los Puentes program in Greene County and perhaps use that knowledge to help other students succeed. To that end, they spoke with the administration of Lenoir County Schools, proposing a dual language immersion program. The Superintendent suggested they approach a school in Pink Hill, NC, that is approximately 33 percent Hispanic. With the goal of forming a learning community in Pink Hill, Fafulas, Ringler, and their collaborators, including ECU assistant professor of Spanish Dr. Laura Levi-Altstaedter and ECU teaching assistant professor of Spanish Dr. Ann Borisoff, moved slowly to gain community approval. There was a mixed reaction to the first discussion of a dual immersion program, from parents and administrators wary of low test scores and issues of funding. After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, a committee established to review and approve research involving human subjects, Fafulas, Ringler, and their research team, including undergraduate and graduate students from ECU, began conducting research, which included a survey of parents with regard to what they knew about dual immersion. These results showed that there was a large amount of resistance from parents, which motivated Fafulas to find a way to demonstrate the benefits of the program for these wary parents. He invited Dr. Lindholm-Leary, a leading authority on dual language instruction, to come to eastern North Carolina. She visited ECU as well as Pink Hill Elementary School, discussing the various dual immersion programs and giving instructions to the Pink Hill teachers. The hoped-for acceptance from Pink Hill parents is, according to Fafulas "still a lengthy and delicate process, but it is ongoing."

The school in Pink Hill has now stated that they do want to begin this program, so Fafulas and his partners are very hopeful. He, in particular, wants to learn more about whether children enrolled in dual language immersion programs are more aware of ethnic diversity. He and his research team would like to continue to study and measure the positive effects of these programs over time.

Fafulas said that he thinks ECU is eager to include this bilingual education in their curriculum. His department is talking with the medical and dental schools about how to incorporate bilingual education into their programs. The new chair of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Dr. Ben Fraser, is also discussing with the West campus how to create a track into their programs that would integrate a degree of dual language immersion. Fafulas' year long project is building a learning community in eastern North Carolina with engaged partners in various school districts and ECU faculty, and by doing so, embodies the mission of public service and community outreach at work in the Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences.



Fafulas with mentor, Dr. Kirk St. Amant