

Coral Way Elementary School Bilingual Program

Rosaura Sotolongo, March 13, 2008

29 minutes

Interviewed by Richard Ruiz

Recorded by Bess DeFarber in Miami, Florida

For University of Arizona, Louise Greenfield

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Ruiz: This is an interview that's at Coral Way School. It's about 2:20 in the afternoon on March 13, 2008. Please go ahead and say your name into the [record].

Sotolongo: My name is Rosaura Sotolongo, former teacher of Coral Way Elementary. I want to say a few words about it, and then you can ask me a few questions if you want.

(reads from prepared statement) Words cannot begin to express how thrilled I am to be selected to talk and to express myself about the bilingual program of Coral Way Elementary, that school at which I taught for forty-two years. Throughout these exciting years of teaching here, I have met many wonderful teachers and administrators in this school.

When I started at Coral Way, we had on our shoulders a big and heavy goal to make, because we have to make everyone believe in our program. Mr. Logan was the principal that hired me in 1967, almost at the beginning of the new program, first in the nation. And it was thanks to our effort, hard work, patience, and commitment, that we succeeded. And we were able to cross the big bridge that we had in front of us, because we had a lot of problems from downtown, supervisors that we had to sell our beliefs in the bilingual program. It was a titanic job, but it went through because we firmly believed that every child could be taught and learn two languages: the North American, English and Spanish; as well as all the Latin kids, English and Spanish too.

In Coral Way we were just at that time a few teachers: four for [each] grade level, two that taught English and two that taught Spanish. But we were eager to push through and to convince parents, supervisors, and big bosses, our belief. We had a **big** grandfather in downtown, Lindsay Hopkey [phonetic], that we were fortunate to have. Mr. Paul Bell was always on our side, an extraordinary person who was intelligent, hard working, and eager to help. Now, everyone takes this program for granted, of Coral Way and a lot of other schools. But it was not an easy task. After so many years of hard work, we feel very proud, because our mission has been accomplished, and we urge all the new teachers to continue striving for excellence, and grow up our program.

I'm extremely proud to have been in this noble journey, filled with incredible adventures for so many years. And I'm willing to continue in this voyage forever. I love teaching, I love Coral Way, and I was always was excited with the bilingual program. And I still firmly believe in this program, and I will be loving it forever.

Ruiz: Thank you for that. That was great. You were a fifth-grade teacher? Or did you teach any other grades?

Sotolongo: When I started here, I was a sixth-grade teacher. They hired me with Miss Sanchez-Pando. They pushed me to be in sixth grade, although I was very young, and I said, "Well, I don't think that I will like it, but I'll try it." And then, over the years, I passed by second, third, fourth, fifth, all the grade levels except kindergarten and first grade.

Ruiz: So were you always the Spanish teacher?

Sotolongo: Spanish teacher. Spanish and math, that's what we used to teach—all the subjects in Spanish except math—that used to be bilingual, English and Spanish.

Ruiz: When you had children who were assigned to the Spanish group, do you know on what basis they were assigned to one group or another?

Sotolongo: Yes, they were assigned on the basis of if they know a little bit of the language, or if they didn't; and because they were low, average, or high. Although we always had a special thing that said if the kid is very high, even though they don't know the language, we used to send them to a special person that used to take care of them at the beginning, until they can immerse to the group.

Ruiz: But in order to know whether they had language proficiency, were they tested?

Sotolongo: Yeah, they were tested orally and written, first.

Ruiz: Do you remember was there a test that they used, or you all just decided?

Sotolongo: No. I don't, because there were special people to do that. They were not... We never did it, the teachers. When they assigned to us, or either someone of the administrators, or a person that used to take care of the ESL or the SSL program, which was Spanish for Spanish Speaker, or Spanish for non-Spanish Speaker, or whatever. They were the ones that provided the test. So when they submitted to us, they said, "They are not fluent. You have to consider that," or "You have to send them like an hour per day with a special person."

Ruiz: Can you tell me a little bit about how your day was organized in your classroom?

Sotolongo: Of course. We had half a day with a group, and half a day with another group. So in the morning, like it was our homeroom. We had a group of thirty, thirty-five kids at that time. And we used to have them for math, for language arts, for social studies, and science or health together. Then when that time finished, they used to take like an hour for the special assignment, like physical education or music or art or library. So we

were planning at that time, together, the English-speaking teachers with the Spanish-speaking teachers. Then we changed, we switched groups. The ones that the English-speaking teacher had in the morning, we used to get them in the afternoon, and visa versa. The same thing that we taught in the morning, we had to re-do it in the afternoon.

Ruiz: What about your classroom? How was your classroom arranged, the physical arrangement of the classroom itself.

Sotolongo: At that time, we never had like this kind of new things that we have, so it was a regular arrangement. And I mixed them together. We pushed them to learn, and that was it. I mean, with certain considerations, like we used to have special in our grading and such a thing like we never grade a composition theme. I never graded the same thing they'd done in the non-Spanish speaking, like the Spanish-speaking. And I'm sure the English teacher did the same thing with the other kids.

Ruiz: I understand that you were in the large classroom, the pod?

Sotolongo: Yes.

Ruiz: Did that create other kinds of concerns about how to organize?

Sotolongo: In the pod we had three teachers. I don't know if Miss Sanchez-Pando told to you about it, but when we were assigned to the pod, and that was our first assignment—**my** first assignment, not theirs, they were here before me—we had three groups. We had an American teacher; we had a person, that was Sanchez-Pando at that time, that was very proficient in both languages, English and Spanish; and myself. And we used to divide the groups according to their knowledge of math in three groups, low, average, and high. And language arts in three little groups, and we rotated in between the three teachers. And then one of us taught.... I mean, the math and language arts, and

social studies, science, and health were distributed among us, with a **large** group in front of us, ninety kids in front of us—ninety, ninety-five kids in front of us. The discipline was perfect, no one talked, everyone was serious about it. We were like in a big stand, an overhead projector in the back of us. We were writing everything on a big screen. And the other two were around, looking, seeing if they were on task. That's how we did it.

Ruiz: Was that your first teaching assignment here?

Sotolongo: Yes, that was my first teaching assignment.

Ruiz: So how did they, at that time, develop the capacity of teachers to work in a bilingual program which was very, very young at the time? There weren't that many bilingual programs in the country, even, so how did they train you or develop you, as a new teacher, to come into a program like that? What did they do?

Sotolongo: To me, they jumped me there. They didn't train me for anything!

Ruiz: They just threw you in?

Sotolongo: Yes, they did, but the other two teachers had previous experience, because they used to work together, Sanchez-Pando, and the other one was Ethel Mike [phonetic], which she passed away two years ago.

Ruiz: But during the time that you were in the program, teaching in the program, you got lots of development?

Sotolongo: Oh yeah. We had workshops, we had planning together, and they used to train me, those two teachers, and someone like a person that we can call the lead teacher. At that time it wasn't the lead teacher. I don't even remember. It wasn't the assistant principal either. She passed away, we went to the funeral last week. She knew a lot, she had a lot of knowledge, she was willing to help a lot. And she trained us during the hour

of planning, and we had certain workshops that we attended. And then during the first summer, we had like a little training, but it was like a team situation, more than bilingual situation: How to handle ourselves in a team way, like three or two in the same room. That I had. I even remember the school—Broadmoor Elementary—in the inner city, though—I didn't like it.

Ruiz: What about materials, the curriculum materials?

Sotolongo: Materials we always had. We had plenty of material. The math was really new math. We never had at that time books in math, reading in Spanish like we have now. The other books, we had reading books in Spanish, we had a grammar book in Spanish, we had spelling books in Spanish, we had a social studies book in Spanish. We had a science book in Spanish—science and health.

Ruiz: Do you know if any of those books still exist somewhere?

Sotolongo: I tell you the truth.... Fortunately, I used to keep, a lot of years, those books. But you know, every now and then, every five, ten years, they buy new books, and the others disappear and now we have new books. But they were great, especially the social studies was great, the grammar was great, the reading was very good, too. But nowadays, we have different ones.

Ruiz: You don't happen to remember the publisher of those books, do you?

Sotolongo: I don't.

Ruiz: You said that the math book, though, was in English?

Sotolongo: In English.

Ruiz: Did you have to do anything to adapt that book when you taught in Spanish?

Sotolongo: No, I used to explain it to them in English and in Spanish, in a bilingual way. I used to translate a lot of things to them—even though they understood most of the things in English, but I used to say it in Spanish because they made us teach like half of the time in English and half of the time in Spanish. I used to translate a lot of word problems myself. I made dittos. At that time we had dittos. We didn't have a copy machine like now. That's how we started.

Ruiz: Did you feel as if the students were experiencing this curriculum in a way that was easy for them, or was it very hard for them, or was it just something that they were just resigned to do?

Sotolongo: It was so easy. It became something like.... It never bothered them. They didn't even realize that at that time they were eager to learn in both languages. We never had any problems with the students. We had **some** problem with the parents—especially with the North American parents. And we had **some** problems with the supervisor, and that we needed more money for that, because of the double things, double books. But we never had any problem with the kids. The kids, when they're young, especially when they're starting first and kindergarten, it was just.... It was very easy. When they started there, first grade, the problem is a little bit harder—it's **still** a little bit harder, because they need more special attention, at least to take them out for an hour, until they can, just as smoothly, they used to get in the regular class. They never felt bad about it. They knew that that was the only way. And when they came to my class, they knew that they had to talk to me in Spanish, because I wouldn't answer to them in English.

Ruiz: So obviously the Spanish speakers were very comfortable with that.

Sotolongo: Yes, but they were not comfortable with the English teacher.

Ruiz: Right.

Sotolongo: That was the vice versa thing.

Ruiz: And so the English students just adapted to the fact that they had to....

Sotolongo: They adapted very well. The kids adapted very well. I myself used to sit them together, in order that the Spanish-speaking will help the English-speaking. They never noticed “we’re American,” “we’re Latin.” I mean, that was something that came easy, easy. They felt like they were children. They were not, I mean, called by nationality. They were children, and they all got together, and especially they played together. And when they talk in the cafeteria, they sit together too, and they talk. They could talk in either language, though. We were not forcing them in the cafeteria. In the class, they knew we forced them.

Ruiz: What about parents? Did you have a lot of interaction with parents?

Sotolongo: Parents, we had a lot of difficulties, especially with the American parents—at the beginning. Then, we used to meet with them and explain the necessity, especially here in Miami. And the big opportunities that the kids would have when they grow up, to be bilingual, to perform in two languages. We used to get then Chinese children that they knew Chinese, they knew English, and they started learning Spanish, and they spoke three languages. At the beginning was hard, but later on.... We used to have a lot of parent meetings, at night, in the afternoon, or whenever they think they have some problem with the kids. We used to meet them during our planning period and explain and tell them how they.... Some of them had some money, and tutor them extra. But it wasn’t really that many.

Ruiz: So do you think it was mainly the English-speaking parents who were concerned about the effectiveness of the program?

Sotolongo: Yes. It was hard because it was the first bilingual school. Now they're all pushing through, and trying to get them, like in [Allan Mary? 64:09] which is completely bilingual, and South Side Elementary, which I taught too. Carla Hotefilay [phonetic] or whatever. There are **plenty** of them, and they're pushing through that. I'm working now in a monolingual school, helping start. I end up working in an monolingual school, and the kids learn Spanish, but an hour two or three times a week. That's not [unclear 64:41]. I mean, they cannot write and read very well, but most of them are Latin.

Ruiz: Do you think the parents changed their attitude after a while, if they stuck out the time [unclear 65:00].

Sotolongo: After a little while. Before they had half of a year, they changed their attitude. They used to feel very confident.... The kids never said, "I don't want to go to school. I don't want to go to a bilingual school, I feel uncomfortable in the Spanish class," because we tried hard that they felt comfortable, you know. It was something like—it comes easy. Kids are kids—they get it so easy. I have now my granddaughters, and they speak English and Spanish. One is three years old, the other one is four. They don't go to school, but they have a person that takes care of them that doesn't speak the language [i.e., English]. Then my daughter-in-law speaks English. They speak English in between my daughter-in-law and my son. But they have the person that takes care of her, and she doesn't speak one word in English. So she [i.e., the granddaughter] speaks both languages. When she enters in school, she will be a perfect bilingual. What I think it is that they have to have is reading and [writing]. If you don't have them in a bilingual

school, in some kind of school, that they have at least an hour of reading and writing, they don't learn it.

Ruiz: Was there very much resistance or conflict among the staff, the teachers, the administration, about the new program, or how the program was being run?

Sotolongo: No, they were very, very, very happy about it. Our principal was a **big** help—the assistant principal too.

Ruiz: The principal at the time that you were there was Logan?

Sotolongo: That was the second one. I never met the first one. She was dead when I started here. The second principal was him. After him, it was another North American person, Pression De Martino [phonetic]. And after her, Latin principals from there on, Spanish-speaking, but fluent in both languages, of course. At that time, it was very curious—I don't know if they told you. When we had Pression De Martino, and we had [unclear 67:43]—that was the one that died—when Pression retired, and the other principal came, Maria Cota, which is retired too.... She's a big asset—you should interview her. She's still alive, she's a very good person and very capable. She's eighty-five, eighty-six, but she would come, I'm sure. And when she came to be principal, the assistant principal had to go to another school, because they never permitted at that time, assistant principal and principal that they were [both] Latin. Uh-uh! That was very curious. She had to leave, and it was very, very, very sad for her. She was so unhappy, but she had to go, because the principal was Spanish-speaking, Cuban, and she was Cuban, so one of them had to leave, and it was the assistant principal. Then they put a North American assistant principal.

Ruiz: So the last set of questions has to do with your attitudes and impressions about dual language or bilingual programs.

Sotolongo: Or three! I even think that they can learn three at the same time.

Ruiz: So I get from what you say that you're very happy with this experience that you had at Coral Way. Is that right?

Sotolongo: I tell you the truth. If I would be born again (raps table for emphasis) there are two things that I would do, and I would like to be. First of all, marry with my same husband, which I've been married for forty-three years. And the second one, to work in a school like this, Coral Way Elementary. Unfortunately, for money reasons, I had to go, because I'm a part-time teacher now, and this school, believe it or not, doesn't generate that amount of money that we need to have part-time teachers to help the kids that are low in Spanish or low in some kind of areas. And I'm now in a school, a monolingual school, that generates a lot of money, and we have **seven** part-time teachers there. I work there five hours, five days a week. And here we don't have money for that. It's very sad, believe me. When this principal, that was my assistant principal, the one before him was my student—Dr. Theis [phonetic]. And he kept me all the hours. At that time, they had money. Now, with this one, they cut them. They don't have enough money. They cut his budget like terrible! And he told me, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Sotolongo, I can handle you only ten hours a week." I said, "What? Are you kidding me? Then I have to go." He couldn't believe it! He said, "Let me sit down. I cannot hear that you are leaving after forty-two years at Coral Way, and I know that you love this school." I said, "Well, I need five hours, five days a week. If you can give it to me, I'll stay here until I die." He said, "I'm sorry." I said, "I'm sorry, tomorrow is my last day." He felt very bad, I felt very

bad. I said, “I don’t want any goodbyes or anything. I’ll stop by anytime you need me, without money, but I just cannot come.” I need for my mental health to be working. Believe me, I even thought to go back like a regular teacher, although my salary would have gone (ah!) terrible down. After you retire, if you want to go back, you have to get your starting salary.

Ruiz: Actually, I did have one more question about the early years. When you came in, and the program had been running for a few years, was there anybody formally in charge of the bilingual program, or did you sense that somebody was like the natural leader of the group or of the teachers, or anything of that sort?

Sotolongo: I think that downtown the person that was the big push of the bilingual program was Mr. Paul Bell. He was the guy.

Ruiz: What about here on campus?

Sotolongo: Here on campus, Mr. Logan, and the people that were working with him. And the teachers, the one that had been here for a few years before me. That was it. No one came just to.... I don’t know, it wasn’t no one sent specially for this [pool?] to be the leader of them. No, no, no. I think that the leader—Paul Bell was here a lot. I mean, a lot of hours, he spent a lot of days here, working with us, and helping over there, when they didn’t believe at that time, [in] the bilingual program. He was a believer. [unclear] He started, he was the person that really pushed this.

Ruiz: Well, I think we’re about out of time, so thank you very much for the interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]