



SPANISH PROGRAM OVERVIEW

# Spanish Program at Hilltop

## Newsletter for Families Spring 2011

POCO A POCO

## From Eyeballs to Elephants

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Stevie looked up at the ceiling as he often does when he is concentrating. After a pause, while his friends waited expectantly for him to say his name, his gaze returned to the circle of fellow three and four year olds. With a glint in his eye he answered: “*¡Me llamo Ocular!*” My name is Eyeball! The class burst into laughter at such a silly declaration and Stevie settled back into his seat, satisfied.

My reaction to Stevie’s statement was not just amusement, but amazement. Not only had Stevie successfully expressed humor in another language, but he had also done so using a word that I had not directly taught him: *ocular*.

Two years ago, I was hired at Hilltop Children’s Center to start a Spanish language program that reflected the learning children experience in their classrooms. Hilltop uses a Reggio-inspired approach in its work with children; namely, child-centered, with the foundation of emergent curriculum, the environment as teacher, and parents as partners. My challenge has been to develop a program that supports children’s language acquisition in Spanish, while mirroring Hilltop’s commitment to anti-bias work and reflective teaching practices. My background in the Spanish language, my commitment to the Reggio philosophy, and my connection to the Hilltop community gave me a strong

foundation with which to form this program.

I recently attended a conference at which I was asked by a number of administrators how Hilltop has achieved some of the work it is known for. The best answer I can come up with is: little by little, or as we say in Spanish, *poco a poco*. As Hilltop continues to grow and develop in reflective response to both our own community and the larger national and global community, we challenge ourselves to ask; what is our responsibility to the children in our care? As a recent report from the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University stated, “If education policies were guided by what we know about the development of the brain, second-language learning would be a preschool priority.”

### Poco a poco

The “little by little” approach is how we are incorporating Spanish education into our school. At this point, we have built the structural parameters of the classes to honor and support the work already transpiring in classrooms, by allowing enough time for children to experience Spanish in a context relevant to them. Each class is forty-five minutes long, in a room separate from the children’s regular classroom, with a mix of children from different classrooms, made up of five to seven children in accordance with Hilltop’s ratio standards, and one teacher. As we continue to investigate the role of Spanish at Hilltop, we work to further incorporate it into a Reggio-inspired model.



### Our work is child centered

A little shy and at times reticent to talk, Amelie lights up whenever elephants are mentioned. In fact, the first word she repeated in Spanish class was “*elefante*,” after politely refusing

to say any of the other words and phrases I offered her. Soon, she would say, “*Quiero un elefante*,” (I want an elephant) or “*Tengo un elefante*,” (I have an elephant). Thanks to the “*elefante*,” Amelie’s comfort level in Spanish increased to the point where she began to use non-elephant related vocabulary, such as *Me llamo Amelie* (My name is Amelie) or *¿Cómo estás?* (How are you?).

As a language teacher, one of the most important ways I have found to ensure that learning is child-centered is to make it as contextual as possible. Instead of arriving in class with a list of vocabulary that I want the children to have memorized by the end of the week, I come to them with provocations in the form of songs, books, games, and open-ended materials and offer them the words they seek within each of those opportunities. Because each child responds differently to various invitations, it is my responsibility to engage as many strategies as I can within the class period.

The consistent structure of the class, constantly infused with Spanish, demonstrates the rich diversity of strategies for language learning, while offering opportunities for repetition. Each class begins with a meeting, in which we sing greeting songs (structured to teach standard conversation patterns) and read a book. Next, the children are invited to explore the provocations set up in the classroom. Throughout this open-ended play, I speak Spanish: narrating the play I see,

translating the English I hear, and asking questions relevant to the children’s play. Just like all the teachers at Hilltop, I also document what I observe with written notes, videos, and photographs. Finally, the class closes with a short gathering, which might include a game or finger play, and opportunities to practice saying goodbye.

### The foundation of our learning is emergent curriculum

“*¿Qué quieres hacer?*” I asked Ethan. What do you want to do? “Slugs!” he answered with a wide smile. “*¿Babosas?*” I asked. “*Babosas*,” he repeated, as he and the other children began to move their bodies like slugs. Accordingly, I incorporated slugs into the song I was playing on the guitar. When I had entered the class that day, I didn’t yet know that one of the vocabulary words I would be teaching the children would be “slug.” However, the word emerged out of their play, and because it was relevant to their immediate stories, they picked it up quickly.

Although in some ways there is a more outcome-oriented learning intention in Spanish class than in the other classrooms at Hilltop, the children’s interaction with Spanish is open-ended. This classroom culture invites children to explore language—just as they are encouraged to explore other ideas and materials—in the ways that most resonate with each individual. Some children are

fearless in tackling new sounds, repeating most everything they hear; others prefer to wait, listen, and truly absorb vocabulary before attempting to use the words themselves. Some children spontaneously incorporate Spanish into their speech, others feel more comfortable using provided structures (songs, games, finger plays, etc.), while other children prefer to translate what they hear into English. Regardless of which learning strategies are most relevant for the individual child, the integration of diverse avenues for the exploration and application of language allows every child the opportunity to grow and embrace at her or his own pace.

### The environment serves as the second teacher

"¿Jugamos?" I asked the class. Shall we play? "¿Jugamos!" The children answered with enthusiasm. Observing as they dispersed into the room, I waited to see what play and resulting language would emerge from the provocations that day. Maria immediately gravitated toward the stools lined up against the wall, stopping on her way to fill up a basket with small colorful blocks. "It's *comida* for the *ranas*," she told me (food for the frogs).

Not only was Maria experimenting with the concept that Spanish is the same kind of tool as English by incorporating it into her speech, but she was also using the environment of the

classroom to prompt her language exploration.

The Spanish class space is set up to reflect the environments in the regular classrooms. There is a rug to gather on as well as different sections to the room, distinguished by strategically-placed fabric—either hung or arranged on the ground, stools, and a table tall enough for the children to play underneath. By creating separate spaces throughout the room, children can choose to play alone or in small groups, depending on where the materials and their imagination take them. Each section houses an open-ended provocation that varies from week to week: at least one is sensory-based (water, bark, sand, etc.); and the others might include blocks and small animal figurines or stones, shells, and bowls.

The more engaging the environment is, the more opportunities the children have to explore Spanish as it relates to their play. In addition, this self-directed play environment gives me the opportunity to interact with and observe the children one-on-one and to strengthen their Spanish within the context of their individual games. In this way, children begin to understand that Spanish is just like English, and that English is one of many languages. They learn vocabulary relevant to them in context, and have opportunities to spontaneously express what they are learning.

### Parents are partners in the education of their children

"That song's from Panama!" Gideon exclaimed, as we started singing the traditional classic *De colores*. A few weeks later, his father, who had been in the Peace Corps in Panama, came into class to read a story and sing songs with us—including *De colores*. While Gideon was thrilled to have his father in class, sharing a song that was special to his family, I was just as excited for the children to have the opportunity to hear Spanish coming from another source.

Parent partnership in Spanish class, whether by joining us in the opening or closing meeting, playing with us, sharing a book or song, or reading, reviewing, and commenting on the documentation I send home, is a rich part of children's experience.



### Documentation is essential to the work we do at Hilltop

We consider teachers to be researchers who constantly observe, take notes and photographs, and collect

children's work in order to analyze, assess, and plan. The documents that we create are ways to communicate with parents and children as well as tools of curriculum development. Documentation is compiled in a journal for each child that will go with them when they leave Hilltop.

Documentation is similarly important to the Spanish program, and I take daily notes based on children's interaction with the language, while photographing and videotaping their play. Every week, I send out a Weekly Update to parents (as do all the classrooms), which includes a summary of the books we read and the play and vocabulary that emerged in the classroom, and photos and videos from class. This update is shared with staff as well as parents so that we can keep in touch about what is emerging in each of our classrooms.

This documentation is a way to communicate with parents about what we are doing in Spanish and to offer parents some tools that can be used at home if they so choose. Some parents pass it along to other family members, others post it on their fridge and use the vocabulary with their child, and still others seek out the books we read to share with their children at home. In addition, once or twice a year, I compile individual updates for each child, which gives a more defined picture of how he or she has grown as a Spanish language learner throughout the year.

A partnership with parents helps children make connections between home and school, introduces a diversity of experience, culture, and language to Spanish class, and offers me a depth of knowledge about each child.

### We are committed to anti-bias work

**We are committed to anti-bias work.** In one of his first days in class, frustrated that he couldn't understand what I was saying, Eddie asked in his booming voice, "Liddy, why don't you just speak American?" Not only did Eddie's statement prompt further questions, such as what is "American?" and what languages do people speak in the U.S.?, but it also served to reinforce the critical role this program plays in Hilltop's anti-bias work. Already, in a few short months, Eddie has moved beyond his reaction against hearing a language foreign to him to deriving joy from speaking the Spanish words he knows.

At Hilltop, learning new languages and cultures can serve as a reflective lens on one's own native language and cultural assumptions. In addition, having the visible presence of more than one language in our center supports children who speak multiple languages. Because of the diversity of the Spanish language and of Spanish-speaking cultures, we have ample opportunities in class to observe and discuss multiple perspectives. I acquired the bulk of my Spanish

in Spain, so my linguistic and cultural knowledge is rooted there. However, children have learned different pronunciations and vocabulary in their families or in other settings and bring that diversity of knowledge to our classroom.

In addition, we have community volunteers and interns come to class to share their linguistic and cultural knowledge with us as well. In this way, the Spanish Program at Hilltop supports multiple perspectives and invites diverse linguistic and cultural elements into the classroom. As a result, the children's exploration of representing and re-representing their learning occurring in their classrooms is reflected in the process of learning Spanish.



### We continue to grow through reflective teaching practices

As with everything we do at Hilltop, we are constantly documenting and analyzing our work with children. Through that reflective practice, the role that the Spanish Program plays in our community continues to emerge. In developing the current structure for the program, we took a number of factors into consideration, including parent

choice, financial support, and regular classroom integrity. As a result, we settled on the pull-out class structure, which at this juncture best accommodates all those needs. While the implementation of Reggio practices is more challenging in a class context limited by time and shifting groups, it is currently the model that best supports the varying needs of our larger community.

The Spanish Program at Hilltop is still young and I am excited to continue my efforts to increase parent and classroom partnership, focus on a more profound representation of the Spanish-language community, and incorporate more media of artistic representation into the class. Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the first such schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy wrote about the “100 languages of children,” referring to the myriad of tools of expression that support the exploration of a concept. Just as a child might use sculpture, ink, paint, and movement to represent “tall,” s/he might use movement, song, or drawing to understand words and ideas in Spanish. Indeed, our program reflects the emergent model we employ. As such, the Spanish Program at Hilltop continues to emerge through Reggio-inspired concepts, always with children as its center.

Hilltop’s faculty and families speak over 15 different languages: the more we integrate multiple languages into our school, the better we honor, serve, and represent our

community. What was initially a request from parents for an ‘extra-curricular activity’ has transformed into a program that truly reflects Hilltop’s values, while helping us move forward as a school: *poco a poc*



## El resumen semanal The Weekly Review

April 4-7, 2011

Greeted by beautiful flowers on the community studio table, I decided to offer painting for the children. It was really fun to see how they drew and painted their individual pictures, while also adding to their friends’ work. Each child noticed something different about the flowers. Kyle carefully counted the number of stems in the vase, Harper focused on the petals, and Ainsley experimented with a myriad of colors. Their paintings are currently hanging on the wall in the community studio. This project gave us the opportunity to practice “¿Me das...?” or would you give me...?

There was also quite a bit of

reading, as children continued to explore the books in Spanish. Elizah was looking at the dictionary, practicing her ideas of Spanish words and sounds. Dylan, Nicholas, and Maggie chose their own books to read and then shared them with each other. Alistair and Cara looked through previous Weekly Reviews, seeking out pictures of themselves and of their friends.

We read *La tortillería*, *The Tortilla Factory*, which chronicles how tortillas are made (on a large scale), from growing the corn on the farm to eating it in the kitchen. We used our bodies to act out the illustrations on each page; working the earth, sowing seeds, moving like plants in the wind, kneading dough, putting the “perfect discs” into the oven, packaging them, driving them to kitchens, and finally filling them with yummy beans and eating them with our “*dientes blancos*” or white teeth.



Please enjoy a selection of quotes from the week!

**Harper.** *Dame el boli.* Give me the pen. **Anna.** *¿Me lo das?* Will you give it to me? **Elsie.** *Voy al baño.* I'm going to the bathroom. **Bridget.** *Masa.* Dough. **Kyle.** "Why are you always *tengo frío?*" I'm cold. **Connor.** "Ojos, la nariz, and the boca." Eyes, the nose, mouth. **Maggie.** *Me gusta español.* I like Spanish. **Cara.** "I want *agua.*" Water. **Zev.** *Está triste.* He's sad. **Madeleine.** "What's *está cansada?*" She's tired. **Henry.** *Va así.* It goes like that. Liddy: *¿Qué tenemos para jugar?* **Anna Derya.** "Casas." What do we have to play with? Houses. **Luca.** "Zapatos." Shoes. **Paul.** *Rompecabezas.* Puzzle. **Caitlin.** *Me llamo Caitlin.* My name is Caitlin. **Esther.** *¿Me das agua?* Will you give me water? **Levi.** "I'm going to have a lot of gold *tesoro.*" Treasure. **Joaquín.** *Está triste.* He's sad. **Vehd.** *Sube al barco.* Get on the boat. **Nicholas.** *Verde, amarillo, verde, rojo.* Green, yellow, green, red. (Naming the colors in his painting). **Sebastian.** *Estoy en tu*

*sitio.* I'm in your spot. **Alayna.** "I brought my *zapatos.*" Shoes. **Sarah.** *Cocina.* Kitchen. **Alistair.** *Vi a Sam.* I saw Sam. **Jack (Rainbow).** *Jugamos.* Let's play. **Jack (Mountain):** "It goes in the back of the *camión.*" Truck. **Katie.** *Necesitamos cinta.* We need tape. **Elizah.** "I want *libros.*" Books. **Nicholas.** *¿Me das agua?* Will you give me water? **Dylan.** *Quiero pintar.* I want to paint. **Sebastien.** "I want *cuatro.*" Four. **Federico.** *Estoy en tu sitio.* I'm in your spot. **Sarah.** *¿Dónde está Alayna?* Where is Alayna? **Max.** *Hombre asco.* Gross man. **Connor.** *He acabado.* I'm done. **Miles.** *Quiero jugar buhos.* I want to play owls. **Sophie.** *Me gustan tortillas.* I like tortillas. **Sydney (Sunlight).** *He ido a gimnasia.* I've gone to gymnastics. **Sam.** *Miramos a la derecha.* Let's look to the right. **Mira.** *Baila.* Dance. **Gabe.** *Tengo un hermano.* I have a brother. **Sylvia.** "First I'm going to get *agua,* then I'm going to play with you!" Water. **Duzan.** *Jirafa.* Giraffe. **Bryce.** *Un pez.* A

fish. **Isabelle.** *Hay una niña.* There's a girl. **Danika.** *Soy la madre.* I'm the mother. **Caleb.** *Quiero agua.* I want water. **Brayden.** *Está muy seguro.* It's very safe. **Sydney (River).** *¿Quieres algo encima?* Do you want something on top?

