

Bilingual Programs: Short Shrift as Usual for a Double-Barreled Opportunity

There is a need for quality Bilingual education in many countries including the United States.

But, the delivery of quality, useful, benefiting-our-country learning to our children gets bogged down, side-tracked, subverted and "short-shrifted" by the bureaucracy, just like most other programs.

"A gentleman by the name of Ernesto Ortese, a foreman on the south Texas ranches quoted [sic] as saying, 'My children learn Spanish in school so that they can grow up to be bus boys and waiters. I teach them English at home so they can grow up to be doctors and lawyers.'"

(Thursday, April 30, 1998, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families, Committee on Education and the Workforce, words of Representative Martinez)

(<http://tinyurl.com/jlcu4>)

Aside from the political issues (because there is a perceived connection between the need for Bilingual instruction and immigration in the mind of many citizens), there are basic educational issues that seem to be ignored by almost everyone.

In addition, some "Bilingual" issues are economic, because, in many cases, children with lower English language proficiency will earn less money, particularly in an "Information Economy."

Is Bilingual education responsible for maintaining a large Spanish-speaking underclass?

Here are words from Congressman Martinez at the same House Hearing...

"None of my brothers and sisters went to college. In fact, I was only one of two that graduated high school of ten. But we did all right, and we didn't have bilingual education. But I'll tell you something else, 50 percent of the kids that started with me in kindergarten never finished high school, because they dropped behind because they had English-barrier problems. They dropped behind until they were so frustrated they dropped out.

(Thursday, April 30, 1998, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families, Committee on Education and the Workforce. Words of Representative Martinez)

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"If you are learning math, you first learn all the terminology in Spanish, Laotian, Tagalog, whatever. Then you have to retranslate it when you are taught it again. Is it any wonder these kids are bombing achievement tests when they are given in English? They are having to learn the subject matter twice.

(Thursday, April 30, 1998, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families, Committee on Education and the Workforce. Words of Mr. Jim Boulet, Executive Director, English First)

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Here are some relationships:

- Struggling with the English language in high school can lead to more school leaving (dropping out) by "Bilingual" students
- Struggling with English language learning in college can lead to leaving college, avoidance of advanced degree program, or the choice of attending a technical school instead of college

So, what does all this mean?

It means that we have a mammoth opportunity to help children when they are children and (our society) for generations.

Are we likely to take advantage of this opportunity? No. We are not likely to fund ordinary, run-of-the-mill education to an adequate level, or to fund other special interest areas of education, i.e., Special Education, Education for the Gifted and Talented, Early Childhood, Technology Integration; Health-Art-Music Education, Sports...every specialty area would rightly demand their slice of available funds.

But, what are the facts about learning for native Spanish speakers that most educators would accept as "basically" true?:

- Children learn languages "better-easier-faster" when they are younger, the younger, the faster. This is because a child's developing brain is structured to learn languages
- If learning a language is deferred for several years, then learning that language will be more difficult; at the same time that content area and technical vocabulary become more difficult (prescription for stress, frustration, failure and school leaving)
- Failures by children in the early grades are the best predictors of which students will leave school early (drop out)
- Segregating students for any reason, even well intentioned ones leads to separate, but unequal, educational opportunities
- Learning the words of a language is only part of the learning process. Language learning is inseparable from learning the culture of the language (language includes a lot more than syntax, vocabulary and grammar)
- Language learning and the learning academic content are different learning tasks, with a facility of the language being a prerequisite for acquiring content area and technical vocabularies
- Learning the vocabulary of each academic subject in two languages is more difficult, but not "twice" as difficult. Learning two vocabularies is only efficient if these vocabularies are presented at the Instructional Level of each student
- Presenting information at the Frustration Level of a student produces worse learning outcomes than not presenting any information at all (because of the stress and because a failure process teaches and trains students to adopt a "I No Can Do" attitude)
- The "Immersion Method" of learning a language focuses upon a day-to-day facility of the language. Just because some adults can develop to an "Advanced Plus" level of language use does not mean that they have the ability to translate academic subjects with specialized vocabulary, even when they recognize the concepts
- There is little agreement in what the term, "Bilingual Education" means. What is sure is that "I am Bilingual" means something other than "Bilingual Education."

Ideal Programs?

Maybe "I am Bilingual" should mean a demonstration of both a personal and a professional proficiency in two languages.

Maybe "Bilingual Education" should mean an educational process that starts early, continues for the entire school career of every student, one that produces a knowledge of the grammar, syntax, and culture of both

languages; so that each person can communicate fluently, without accent, on a professional level in each language.

Since no Federal or Local Education Agency (LEA) will fund and support such a program, these definitions are impractical.

What does "practical Bilingual Education" mean?

- The flip answer is: "Whatever the Federal, State or Local School District says that it means"...maybe...
- Teaching all students to be fluent in two languages?
- Teaching Spanish speaking students academic subjects in two languages
- Teaching Spanish speaking students for seven years in their native language; then turning them loose to learn all academic subjects, in English, on their own
- Placing children in classes where Spanish is supposed to be taught in equal time as English, but pulling the students out of that program as soon as they pass standardized tests, but teaching them hardly any English skills

These "definitions" are just a few of the possible guises that "Bilingual Education" might take when "What are we going to do" decision-making interfaces with the "Whatever it is, we must do it as cheaply and quickly as possible" vision of politicians and school administrators. Actually, the public in our country is divided over this issue, and probably even the parents of a majority of native Spanish speakers want their children to be fluent in English and to be fluent in academic, content area English.

There would be wider agreement if honest, "tell-it-like-it-is" dialogue was possible. Everyone wants the best outcomes for all our students; but there is limited agreement on what the "best" is, and less agreement on who will pay for an ideal education program.

But, practical considerations and long term vision are not issues that influence the ideologues on either side of the "Let's offer Bilingual Education, or not" debate.

The arguments "for" providing Bilingual Education are often the same arguments "against" providing Bilingual Education.

The arguments "against" providing Bilingual Education cite trainloads of evidence that Bilingual Education "doesn't work. This is the "straw man" logical fallacy error.

This error deceives by showing that lots of under funded, under supported Bilingual programs show poor, negligible, or non-existent measurable student outcomes. Then, the meager results of these programs are added up, and Bilingual Education is shown to be statistically irrelevant. From this conclusion, the theory of an "ideal Bilingual program" is attacked.

The logic is, "Since proponents can find almost no evidence that Bilingual programs work, Bilingual programs don't work."

Proponents of Bilingual education distort common sense in the opposite direction.

To justify the expense of providing Bilingual classes, proponents of Bilingual Education cite a school that is delivering an "ideal Bilingual program." What proponents fail to notice is that once Bilingual classes are developed, these classes are seldom funded and supported at an ideal level.

Here is the formula:

Less than ideal funding + Less than ideal support = Less than ideal results

What does "Less than ideal results" mean"

This is "bureaucratic speak" for...

- Marginal
- Mediocre
- Disappointing
- Of Questionable or Dubious Value
- "We made a mistake, but since we don't know what went wrong, we'll keep doing it"
- "We don't know what we are doing, but since people demand action," we'll throw them a bone (instead of serving a program with meat)

What less than ideal means is that, like most other educational programs, Bilingual programs are usually under funded, and marginally supported.

What kinds of educational programs and initiatives are under funded? Here are a few examples:

- General Education
- Special Education
- Gifted and Talented Education
- Health and PE
- Music and Art Education
- Library Services
- Technology Infrastructure and Training
- Professional Development
- Women's Sports
- School Health Services
- Food Services
- Maintenance Services
- Transportation Services
- Almost Every Other Program

What kinds of educational programs are over funded? Examples might be:

- High-stakes Testing Programs
- Pet Projects of High-Ranking Decision-Makers
- Men's Varsity Sports

What kinds of programs might have adequate funding, but little impact upon targeted educational outcomes?

Here are some examples:

- Federal Programs
- Compensatory Education Programs

So, why do Bilingual programs continue, and why are so many parents denied the right to remove their children from non-functional programs? (Goodling and Riggs, 1998)

An answer may be found in the "fuzzy logic" of school district management.

Here is a practical example...

What happens if there is a classroom with 20 Bilingual students, and ten parents request that their students transfer to classes that are conducted in English?

All the English classes are full, so the district would have to hire another teacher. And, that leaves a Bilingual teacher with only ten students. According to the wisdom of bureaucratic thinking, this move will cost the district 100% more (two teachers) and the district will receive only 50% productivity (two teachers with half-sized classes when they could get away with hiring only one teacher).

Here is another practical example...

The school district starts the year with 20 students in the Bilingual class, and ten make substantial progress as the year wears through (no pun intended).

Now, the Bilingual teacher can start placing students in English-speaking classes, and monitoring their progress (sort of like Sp. Ed.).

But, the teacher in the English-only classes complain about the extra work, and complain that as their class load increases, the Bilingual teacher isn't pulling his or her weight with the successively smaller class.

And, both the Bilingual and English-only teacher will be asking for tutoring help, i.e., hiring yet another person. To a school district administrator, this solution is even worse, i.e., being tricked by the gradual creation of another class and hiring a tutor to manage the transition. Three teachers hired when they could have gotten by with two!

The bottom line...

Education is under funded and producing less than ideal, less than desirable, and results and outcomes are less than possible and less than attainable.

Real Ideals...

Spanish speaking and English speaking (actually any language and ethnic group of students) learn best at their own pace, according to their own talents; based upon their individual learning styles, in a stress-free, supportive environment.

Teaching toddlers both languages (two and three year olds) will create students who speak both languages, accent-free. This is the approach that we should take if we really want "Bilingual" citizens.

Of course we don't really want Bilingual citizens, do we?

Not if building a Bilingual citizenry means spending the money to make truly two-language-fluent adults.

This really is another issue of "Lets have a program and see if we can get folks to believe that we are solving their needs."

How long has this been going on?

IN 1998, Representatives Bill Goodling (R-PA) and Frank Riggs (R-CA) wrote in the Washington Times (Monday, July 20, 1998) that the Federal Government had spent \$4.4 Billion on Bilingual programs over the previous 30 years, and still didn't "know what works."

"But the 3 million limited and non-English speaking students enrolled in these programs know that federal bilingual [sic] education doesn't work. Why? Federal bilingual [sic] programs emphasize native language instruction, not English. They also keep children and teenagers trapped in programs for years. Goals and results are rarely emphasized. Most studies show that native language based programs are no better, or even worse, than doing nothing." (Washington Times, 7-20-1998 <http://tinyurl.com/pbfyq>)

This is no surprise. The Feds have a track record of not knowing what is happening with our tax dollars.

Goodling and Riggs also note that in 1997, only one in 15 students in Bilingual programs learned enough English to transfer out. But, this is still better than our Representatives' track record where not one in 500 have learned enough to get the Feds out of the education business.

So, everyone's strategy for Bilingual education is wrong.

The claim of proponents that native Spanish speaking children learn better if taught in Spanish is false.

What these proponents see is that children do make more progress in the Kindergarten, First and Second grades when their instruction is in their native language. This would be great if...

- They were going to continue this language for their entire school career
- They would be competitive in the job market and in higher education once they graduated
- That learned English better when they were older

Unfortunately, none of these wishes are correct, and the delay in learning English places many of these children in a weaker academic (and economic position) for the rest of their lives.

So how can well-meaning educators support Bilingual Education in any of its "practical application" guises?

The culprit here are the monkey-wrench-gremlin, standardized testing programs.

Paying attention to standardized tests in reading during the first years leads to the mistake of supporting Bilingual Education.

If students were to attend English-only classes, their "test scores" would be lower for a year or two, until they caught on and began to excel in academic English.

The curriculum transitions to an academic, content area focus around the Third grade. The correct target is to have the children English proficient as they enter this part of their school career. To delay the learning of English until Middle School is backwards in terms of the psychology of learning, and backwards in terms of what students need to learn to succeed in high school, higher education and in the job market.

There are also some psychological and economic reasons that well-meaning educators would support programs that don't have face-value common sense.

One of the psychological reasons for wanting children to experience "less stress" and an easy transition from their native language to English could be overcompensation for being punished for speaking Spanish in school when they were children.

Another psychological/ sociological reason could be the desire to maintain a cultural identity and develop a political power base.

What proponents of "Bilingual" education know, at least on the internal, hidden level, is that you cannot know a language unless you know the culture of that language. Otherwise, you only know vocabulary, syntax and grammar. Words, ideas and concepts...but you don't know the people and what makes them unique.

But, children that learn English will gain a new culture. Of course this new culture is what they need to succeed in high school, higher education and in the world of work; but as the children embrace academic and economic success, they are free to pick and choose among the cultural artifacts of both languages.

To some proponents of Bilingual education, there is a "racial pride" in maintaining a Hispanic identity. Of course, this pride is misplaced since "Hispanic" is not a genetic classification, but a social and cultural one...a cultural classification that some wish to maintain and support through Bilingual education.

To be fair, Social Activists with "Cultural Pride" agendas have as miniscule an impact in delivering quality teaching to our students as our elected Congressional delegates.

Both groups use "carrot and stick" approaches to education, and both groups believe in using politics and bureaucracy to improve our schools. Both groups have it wrong.

The underlying problem is that our schools operate with the vestiges of the factory model of production, and most of our children will never reach their potential as long as schools are operated in this way.

Because of this model of education, the stress of school for lower socioeconomic and non-native speakers is tremendous; and related more to the Industrial Age model of schooling, than their particular native language.

The solution to this issue is to teach all children English...in daycare, in preschool, in Headstart language programs, in Kindergarten, and in every grade.

One other factor contrives to make the "Bilingual" experience a loose-loose situation for native Spanish speaking children.

There are not enough Bilingual teachers who are competent enough in Spanish to do an adequate job of teaching Spanish.

This is the reason that many parents of native Spanish speaking children complain is that the children learn better Spanish at home.

Gearing Up for Real Bilingual Education:

Turning the United States into a Bilingual country would take at least two generations of teachers and probably forty years time.

The biggest challenge would be to find the funding and support for such a program.

The second challenge would be to train enough teachers whose technical, content area Spanish was good enough to do the job.

One fact that the proponents of Bilingual education and the opponents both miss is that probably a minority of native Spanish speaking teachers are qualified to teach content area and technical classes.

Of course, cutting students off from help in Spanish after Elementary school, and providing only part-time English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at the Secondary level contribute to this lack of knowledge of content area and technical vocabulary for native Spanish speakers.

Even the term, "English as a Second Language," should provide enough of a clue that the children will acquire a "second class" grasp of English skills and American culture through these programs.

Conclusion

The way that many Bilingual programs are designed provides On-the-job training in Special Education methods for the Bilingual teachers; and structures economic disadvantage into the lives of the children that cannot escape the program.

A true "Bilingual" program we would not segregate a few students and hold them captive. A true Bilingual program would train every single student in both languages.

This is an unrealistic approach, and no one but the very wealthy who send their children to a private school will learn the two languages to the level of proficiency that is required for personal and technical fluency.

However, agreement can be reached on this issue if the motivations of parents of native Spanish speaking students are held paramount.

If given a choice between economic advantage or cultural identity based upon a language, what would these parents choose?

Apparently there are about 11 million people that risked a dangerous journey, skirted arrest, who live in fear of deportation that would answer that they want every economic advantage for their children.

Bilingual programs of every stripe will remain ineffective until the program moves students' lives toward real life success...successes where the unique talents of each child are valued and celebrated.

But, come to think of it, all education would benefit in exactly the same way.

Except that no one is willing to pay the truly substantial costs associated with delivering a truly ideal educational system.