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Educating Immigrant Children: Bilingualism in America's Schools

Patricia Parmon

There has been great controversy in the United States over whether immigrant children should be able to attend schools in this country, and this paper focuses on bilingual education in America's education system to explain why there have been concerns with these programs. Most Americans are not compliant with funding these bilingual education programs and feel that children who do not speak English should be mandated to learn, speak, and write English in America's schools. Even though many Americans are hostile toward immigrant children filling classrooms in America, there is evidence that children who do not speak English as their native language are more successful and socially adapted if they retain their bilingual skills while learning English. Therefore, immigrant children in America's schools should be able to maintain their own culture and native language, but should also become fully proficient and literate in the English language in order to achieve a successful education.

The rise of immigration in the United States and the growth of the non-English speaking population have become concerns for America's education system. Children who cannot communicate in English because their primary language is not English are labeled as Limited English Proficient, or LEP. Children learning English in the classroom are also known as English Language Learners, or ELL. According to The Urban Institute's Immigration Studies Program, by as early as 2015 children of immigrants will constitute 30 percent of the nation's school population (Honigsfeld 167). This rising number has caused schools in America to adjust by creating English language programs for LEP students.

The increasing immigrant population in the United States has also precipitated a rise in conflicts about education. The population of non-speaking English children has caused many social and cultural problems, and in American society, two different philosophies have emerged. Some people believe that every person in the United States should only use the English language; and some people believe that every person has a right to speak their own native language. There are those who strongly believe that if you are living in the United States then you should become an American and assimilate into the culture by learning to speak the English language. Opponents of bilingual education feel that if LEP students are given the option to receive instruction in their native language or learn English they will choose their native language and never learn English. James Crawford, an author who has specialized in the politics of language for over 20 years, states:

Today's immigrants appear to be acquiring English more rapidly than ever before. While the number of minority-language speakers is projected to grow well into the next century, the number of bilinguals fluent in both English and another language is growing even faster. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of immigrants who spoke non-English languages at home increased by 59 percent, while the portion of this population that spoke English very well rose by 93 percent.(1)

Bilingual education has been part of American education since 1839. It involves teaching academic content in two languages with varying amounts of time spent in both the native language and secondary language depending on the specific program. Over the years, the argument of whether or not immigrant children should learn to read, write, and speak English proficiently in the school system has been fraught with controversy. Cultures and opinionated philosophies come into play when arguing about immigrant children in America's schools. Even though bilingual education programs have caused great controversy in the United States, immigrant children in America's schools should be able to maintain their own culture and native language, but should also become fully proficient and literate in the English language in order to achieve success in education.

In 1839, Ohio became the first state to provide students with instruction in English as a second language. But by the mid-1920s bilingual education ended and English-only instruction continued for LEP students. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 passed during an era of growing immigration and mandated schools to provide bilingual education programs to LEP students because students in English-only classrooms were failing academically and dropping out of school at concerning rates. However, this act was abolished in 2001 and replaced with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The main goal of the NCLB Act of 2001 is to improve the performance of primary and secondary schools through standardized testing, although specific provisions have been made regarding bilingual education. Because immigrant children can no longer receive full instruction in their native languages in the classroom, there have been many programs specifically constructed to teach them the English as a second language. Abedi writes, "The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires that all children,

including English language learners (ELLs), reach high standards by demonstrating proficiency in English language arts and mathematics by 2014” (1). Even though all students who are learning English have a three-year time frame to take assessments in their native language, they must demonstrate proficiency on an English-language assessment after those three years. This causes great stress on the parents, children, and schools that deal with this issue.

The NCLB Act could make it harder for schools to achieve adequate yearly progress because students who do not speak English well hinder the progress of schools meeting the goals of this legislation. The English proficiency of LEP students is among the goals of schools with high numbers of LEP students. This could be troublesome for these particular students because schools may rely less on dual language programs which help LEP students learn English while also being taught in their native languages. Capps states, “Students who do not score well on tests, such as late entering immigrants and those who have difficulty learning English, may grow discouraged by their poor performance and possibly drop out of school” (2). High LEP dropout rates create additional problems for schools that have many LEP students enrolled in them, and as a reaction to this specific challenge, the U.S. Department of Education recently approved NCLB plans for several states permitting students to remain in the English Language Learner subgroup until they have reached the proficient level on the English language arts section of the state achievement test for several consecutive years (Abedi 1). On another note, the NCLB Act could help programs for LEP students since they are required to pass the same standardized tests as English-only students. Title I of the NCLB Act mandates that schools must submit assessment results for students in these protected classes as well as be held accountable for improvements in the performance of these students (Capps 1). However, Altshuler and Schmautz report that we need to consider the effects of standardized testing on culturally diverse students, because these students have historically scored lower than white students on standardized tests and dropped out of school without receiving a high school diploma (Sanchez 333).

There are consequences that schools can suffer from if the performance of students in these groups is proven to decrease over an extended period of time. Schools can be subjected to government intervention or suffer from parents sending their children to another school. According to the U.S. Department of Education, consequences could lead to school restructuring and possibly even closure. “NCLB is likely to promote changes in curricula for LEP students—whether enrolled in dual language, bilingual, or English immersion programs—so these students can perform better on standardized content area assessments” (Capps 1). This legislation works in LEP students’ favor because bilingual education programs seem to help test scores, and abolishing them may have negative consequences. According to Education Week, studies based on National Assessment for Education Process scores suggest that statewide mandates limiting Bilingual Education in California, Massachusetts, and Arizona have produced negative results.

In order to achieve success in America’s education system, there are many different bilingual programs that are offered to immigrant children in schools of America. Some programs may be considered to be more effective than others, but depending on the school’s demographics, these programs should be chosen so that they will meet the academic needs of the diverse learners. Programs such as bilingual education allow children to learn while still speaking their native language in the classroom. Other programs such as English as a Second Language (ESL) are taught mainly in English until the child is fully proficient in English. Students in these separate classes receive instruction in English for part of the school day until they are ready to learn with the rest of the students in the classroom for the entire day. Some state education departments, such as New York’s, have developed closely monitored guidelines for the number of periods each English language learner is entitled to receive ESL services (Honigsfeld 168).

English immersion programs are frequently used, but rarely prove advantageous for students learning English. In English immersion programs, LEP students are placed in classes where they receive English content instruction all day. These English immersion programs are being increased in states such as Massachusetts, California, and Arizona. California’s Proposition 227 mandates that all children in California public schools will be taught English. Similar to this, Arizona’s Proposition 203 requires that “Children who are ‘English learners’ to be taught in English immersion classes during a temporary transition period not normally intended to exceed one year” (Honigsfeld 168). Arizona’s Proposition 203 has caused civil rights problems because research indicates that one year of instruction is not enough time for children to learn English. According to Education Week, “Cumulative and comparative studies based on National Assessment for Educational Progress scores suggest that statewide mandates limiting bilingual education in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts have produced ‘less-than-stellar’ results” (Mora 17). No matter the program, every student needs to be taught equally and effectively. In a particular civil rights case, *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974), Chinese American students from California claimed they were not receiving help in school due to their inability to speak English. A Supreme Court decision was made that protected the civil rights of LEP, and Mora notes,

“One means of addressing these rights was through implementation of bilingual education programs, which give students the opportunity to learn academic content in their native language while they gain competence in English” (14).

Sociological and educational researchers Portes and Rumbaut both support the notion that immigrant students who retain their bilingual skills and their ties to their parents' culture of origin are more academically successful and socially well-adapted in the long term than their peers who become monolingual in English (Mora 16). Bilingual education programs have been shown to be effective according to a research brief by Center for Research on Education. One of the two key findings related to program choice is that 90/10 and 50/50 Two-Way Bilingual Immersion Programs helped students score above 50 percent of the other test takers in their own language and in English in all subject areas. The 90/10 Program allows students to receive 90 percent of instruction in their native language, which is then gradually reduced to 50 percent. In the 50/50 model the students are taught in both their native language and English for equal amounts of time. This research brief also found that English language learners who attended English-only programs showed large decreases in math and reading achievement, and the largest number of dropouts came from this group (Honigsfeld 80).

There is no evidence that bilingual education hinders the process of an immigrant child learning English, and bilingual education actually can provide advantages such as enhancing cognitive thinking skills. An example of a school that successfully implemented the 90/10 learning model into their classrooms is City Elementary School, a K-5 school located in Texas that begins a dual-language program in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. During the first few years the goal is to present 90 percent of the content instruction in Spanish and 10 percent in English. 87.8 percent of the student population at City Elementary School is Mexican American with 29.4 percent of the population speaking Spanish as the primary language in the home, and after the introduction of the 90/10 Program, Alanis noted that:

Research studies on this model have indicated high academic achievement for both groups of students. Scores for the fifth-grade TAKS test in English reading indicated that students at City Elementary consistently outscored students across the district. Students exhibited high scores in the 80 to 100 range. This finding is impressive given that students were tested in English, even though students in the dual language program did not receive formal English reading until the third grade. Consequently, Spanish did not hinder the development of English for either the English-dominant or Spanish dominant group.(313)

The 90/10 Program at City Elementary proves that advantages of bilingual education should not be ignored.

Opponents of bilingual education claim that when an immigrant child begins his or her education in America, he or she should be placed in an English-only classroom. These people feel this way because they believe Americans should not adjust the school system to accommodate immigrant children who were not born in the United States. Unfortunately, those who do not agree with bilingual education cannot see what they are truly doing to these students and to American schools. Sanchez writes, “The English immersion approach's negative effects have been found to manifest in secondary school (middle school and high school) when students begin to move toward higher levels of English syntax, lexicon, and academic language registers” (332). Students need a strong foundation in their native language to achieve success in their education as well as learning English.

Despite the controversy of bilingual education programs in the United States, immigrant children in America's schools should be able to maintain their own culture and native language in addition to becoming fully proficient and literate in the English language. The number of school-age children who spoke a language other than English reached almost 10 million in 2004, and with this expanding population, schools across America should figure out which programs are the best models for educating immigrant children, since the demographics vary across the country (Alanis 305). Statistics show that only 13 percent of English language learners who received English acquisition beginning in Kindergarten were reclassified as fluent English proficient by third grade (Mora 18). Therefore, more things must be done to improve the education of immigrant children, such as targeting educators. Teachers must have the sufficient professional skills in how to use LEP curriculum to instruct students in English, and more books in English should be offered to immigrant children so that they can practice English at home on their own time and at their own comfort level. Many immigrants do not have access to books or other educational materials because of their financial situations, and it would benefit LEP students to further their practice of the English language as bilingual education is an advantage to native English speaking students as well.

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