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Bilingual Education and Children's Development

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Bilingual Education and Children's Development

“Seventy percent of the world's population speaks more than one language” (3). Not only is the majority of the world bilingual, if not multilingual, but “Second language learners are one of the fastest-growing populations in early childhood classrooms” (3). In the United States, it is no different, and classrooms in the United States are probably even more affected by multilingual students because it is so many immigrants from all over the world. The United States was nicknamed for its diversity and was known as “the melting pot” hundreds of years ago, and it is no different today. There are lots of different nationalities and languages represented among elementary school classrooms, and it has been shown that learning another language, and more specifically bilingual education, is beneficial for children's development.

Learning another language besides the first, native language can be extremely beneficial and is actually noted to be necessary. “At the beginning of the twenty-first century, proficiency in only one language is not enough for economic, societal, and educational success” (5). Not only by learning the language does it teach you the actual words themselves, but in doing so, it teaches you to appreciate another culture. Lots of words in other languages don't have a literal translation into English, and vice versa, so in order to understand what word would be the closest translation, you have to understand a little bit about the culture of another people group. There are also many other benefits such as “developing cognitive abilities, giving a challenge, reinforcing first language abilities, and giving a heads-up for career opportunities” (6).

It is definitely important to note that it is easier for students to learn a new language when they are in the school and middle childhood age. “Children aged 7 to 11 are eager to communicate, are logical, and have an ear (and brain) for nuances of code and pronunciation”

(1). The older you get, the harder it is to teach someone a new language, especially if they have never had any background in it. "Usually the children succeed, while their elders have a much harder time" (1). Personally, I didn't have second language instruction till I reached junior high and high school. While it was easier for me to learn at this time than if I was even older, it still would have been more beneficial for me to start learning when I was in elementary school. I am still working on it, but it has been very difficult to try to master the language at the age I am now.

Before we really get into the advantages and possible disadvantages of Bilingual Education, we need to really understand what it is. Many people get Bilingual Education mixed up with another type of instruction called ESL (or English as a second language), when in fact, they are very different. "Bilingualism is the ability to speak, read, and write in more than one language. It is a concept that is difficult to define because rarely does someone achieve the ability to speak, read, and write two languages with 100 percent accuracy. Bilingualism is not necessarily the goal of bilingual education." Bilingual Education is actually defined as, "an educational program for language minority students, in which instruction is provided in the children's primary language while the child acquires sufficient English skills to function academically" (3).

ESL is much different than Bilingual Education. ESL has been defined as "programs in which ELL children are taught intensively and exclusively in English to prepare them for regular classes" (1). Many educators think that this is the best method for students to learn English because if they are immersed in the language all the time, they will have no other choice but to learn it. While this may be true, this can also be extremely detrimental, as well as confusing, for the children trying to learn English. Although they will probably learn some English, they are at risk for completely losing their native language, as well as potentially shutting down and not

even trying to learn English because they are so frustrated. “Learning a second language is highly dependent on a high skill level in their first language” (3).

“Bilingual education is grounded in common sense, experience, and research. Common sense says that children will not learn academic subject material if they can’t understand the language of instruction. Experience documents that students from minority-language backgrounds historically have higher dropout rates and lower achievement scores. Finally, there is a basis for bilingual education that draws upon research in language acquisition and education” (5). There are many problems that have been noted with Bilingual Education programs in the United States. One of the main problems deals with the first part of this quote. If educators are treating bilingual education programs more like ESL programs, there are definitely going to be issues. Like the quote says, it is common sense that if students don’t understand the language of instruction, they are very obviously not going to learn the academic subject material.

When comparing the two, it has been noted that bilingual education is “much better since it works on strengthening their language abilities. ESL is still presenting it in a foreign language to the student. Bilingual education takes the four aspects of language into consideration—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—but ESL doesn’t focus on all of them. It’s counterintuitive that reinforcing their native language would strengthen their second language, but it’s true” (6).

Another major problem is standardized testing. “The ESEA requires English Language Learners to take standardized tests in English within three years of entering the U.S. School System—not enough time to gain academic English proficiency. This time crunch forces many bilingual schools to restructure their programs and emphasize English over native-language instruction” (2). School boards and academic institutions all over the United States are getting

upset that these students are not doing well on standardized testing. These students are expected to understand enough English to understand the tests that they are given, and educators don't seem to understand why they aren't doing well. Bilingual education is a potential solution! I am personally not a fan of standardized testing to begin with, but if the ESEA would not have the tests so soon after these students entered the school system in the United States, as well as gave the bilingual schools the opportunity to actually teach like they are supposed to, then I believe these students would be doing better. Bilingual education not only strengthens the students' first language, but also helps them learn the second language of English more efficiently.

There are many different approaches to Bilingual Education. Submersion, immersion, pullout, transitional, maintenance, and dual language approaches can all be used and all have their advantages and disadvantages. The submersion approach is basically the ESL approach. "This model is a 'sink or swim' approach... The children are placed in an English-speaking classroom; all instruction, classroom routines, and social interactions take place in English." Using the submersion approach is very dangerous because the students are at a very high risk of losing their native language. The immersion approach is much different than the submersion approach. "In an immersion model, attention is paid to teaching content such as math, social studies, and science in both languages, and making sure that children master content in whatever language is most comfortable for them." This model is highly effective because they the students are learning both languages, but comfort level is taken into consideration. The dual language approach "is a two-way approach that addressed both English-speaking children and children learning English as a second language. Classes are taught in one language for part of the day and in a second language for the other half of the day. Or, classes are taught by a team of teachers with one teacher using English and the second teacher using the other language" (3). This

method is the most effective because at the end of the program, both groups of students have had the opportunity to not only learn both languages and strengthen both languages, both their native and second-language, but they also have had sufficient help and support along the way.

No matter what approach is used, it is important that two key elements are present in a bilingual classroom. “The two key elements are that there is at least one staff member in the classroom who speaks the child’s home language and that there is a clear plan for using both English and the children’s home language throughout the day” (3). Having these two key elements in the bilingual classrooms has been proven to be much more successful than if even one of the elements is missing. Many programs either don’t have a staff member who can speak the same language as the child, so it is very difficult to understand and identify with the student, or they don’t have clear plan of how they are going to implement both languages. “Winging it” is not a very effective teaching method, no matter what language the educator is teaching the subject matter.

Many advantages of bilingual education have already been discussed. On top of “developing cognitive abilities, giving a challenge, reinforcing first language abilities, and giving a heads-up for career opportunities” (6), students are also able to “better communicate with people” (7) in general.

Developing cognitive abilities is a major advantage to bilingual education. “Children learn to think in their home language (3). Thoughts are one of the best ways that children develop, no matter what language. “Language, learned through social interactions with the young child’s family, is a tool for thought...Before a child has language, his or her actions drive thought; after acquiring language, thoughts drive action. Thus, cognitive development is closely linked to language learned within the context of the unique cultural paradigm of a child’s family

(4). There is also a negative effect to ESL programs when it comes to cognitive development as well, “Loss of the [home] language has a negative effect on their cognitive functioning. We see children’s academic skills drop when they are required to replace their home language with English” (3).

Better communication skills are a huge benefit to bilingual education. When a child is first learning a language, they have what is called a language explosion, where they learn many new words every single day. “Some school-age children learn as many as 20 new words a day and apply grammar rules they did not use before. These new words and applications are unlike the earlier language explosion. Increases in logic, flexibility, memory, speed of thinking, metacognition, and connections between facts enhance the learning of both first and second languages (1). By using all of these different skills when learning a second language, the students are becoming better communicators. Children who know multiple languages have an easier time expressing themselves and their ideas than children who only speak one language. I have noticed this as I’ve been learning Spanish. I am not fluent, by any means, but every time I learn a new word in Spanish, I relate it to something that I know about that in English. For example, if I’m trying to describe something, and I say, “It was like...Oh, what’s the word...?” And then I think of a similar word in Spanish and am able to express myself in English and better describe whatever it is that I’m talking about, I have utilized the fact that I know both languages. If I only knew English, I might not be able to express myself as well.

The only major disadvantages to Bilingual Education are that it “can cause separation among the populations of the students” (6) and that it can sometimes be confusing for those just getting started in the program. The only way that it would cause separation though is if the whole school isn’t a bilingual school. There are many schools that offer bilingual programs, so that

could potentially separate those students who need the bilingual program from those who don't and have all of their classes in English.

Teachers need to be aware of the bilingual students that are in their classrooms. Even if they don't teach at a bilingual school, that doesn't mean that they are exempt from teaching students that come from a different background or speak a different language. These students are going to need help just like any other student. They can't be looked over or ignored. In many classrooms around the United States, "English-language learners and ethnically diverse children are at risk of being marginalized in schools" (4).

Teachers need to take advantage of this diversity in their classroom instead of viewing it as a problem. "Diversity enhances the educational experience of all students... While having a diverse population of students is important, schools must also provide programs that bring students together, encourage dialogue, and give minority students the tools they need to succeed" (2). Diversity can be a great way to utilize students in the classroom. We all know that we can learn from people who are different than us. This is no different for bilingual students. "Bringing the culture and practices of children's homes and communities into classroom instructional and curricular processes can enhance learning experiences and, therefore, the academic success of children from the non-dominant culture" (4). And it simply isn't enough to have bilingual students in the classroom or in the school. Schools need to have programs that actually enhance learning for all students, both monolingual and multilingual. "When the focus is solely or primarily on compositional diversity, [however] there is a tendency to treat diversity as an end in itself, rather than as an educational process that, when properly implemented, has the potential to enhance many important educational outcomes" (2).

In my high school, we had a lot of Asian students. This was largely due to the fact that my hometown is a university town. Lots of these students' parents were working at or attending the university. My high school, although I loved it, didn't do a very good job of helping these bilingual students. Most of them spoke Korean, but not very many of them also fluently spoke English. However, all of our classes were in English, and the only foreign language that was offered at our high school was Spanish. Looking back now, I think how hard it must have been for these students! Our high school even made a rule that these students were not allowed to speak their home language at school because other students and teachers wouldn't know what they were saying. I didn't agree with the rule at the time, but now, after learning more about education and bilingual students, I think it's even more awful. School must have been such a negative place for these students! I hope I never make school a negative place for my future students. It is so important to make students feel comfortable if you really want them to learn. Another educator from UIUC talked about "how important it is for children to learn in their home language so they will feel safe and comfortable in the classroom (4). The whole point of going to school is to learn, so if students aren't comfortable enough to do that, then the educators in the school are doing something wrong.

Students enter in to bilingual schools or bilingual programs for a various number of reasons. Some students might only speak a different language other than English at home, so they need a bilingual program at school to help them do well in classes. Some students' parents are migrant workers, and in order to succeed while they are here, they need a bilingual program. Others might have moved here from a different country, and if placed in an ESL program, will not be as successful or might actually fail as opposed to being placed in a bilingual setting. No matter what the reason is, bilingual students should not be segregated or looked down upon.

They are students just like every other population group of students in the school. Some educators, sadly enough, will either just throw them into an ESL program and give them minimum help, or not even assess their needs at all and segregate them from the other students and dumb their work down to a lower level. I completely agree with an educator from UIUC that said, "These children are here and have a right to the best education they can get, including the home language. If we take away something that is going to make them smarter or better adjusted, you take away part of them. So, if you take away their language, then you take away part of their respect and self-worth" (4). I don't think that any educator, no matter what language they are teaching, no matter who their students are, would want that. Every educator wants their students to succeed. Good educators will do everything possible to make that happen. Bilingual education is a great way to do exactly that.

Bilingual Education has many advantages, and not many disadvantages. It helps students develop faster and more efficiently, and overall, has many positive effects. Although I don't believe many educators in the United States have caught on to how valuable Bilingual Education is, and how much bilingual students can add to a classroom, I definitely believe that these things are true. I strongly believe in the power of learning about other people's cultures other than our own, and language is a great way to do that. Bilingual students should be treated just like any other student, and be given the respect and support in the classroom that they need to succeed. I hope that by the time I have my own classroom, more educators will be aware of bilingual students' needs, and be willing to give them the support that they need and value them as much as they should. Equal education is extremely important. I agree with an educator from UIUC who said, "I believe that every student should be able to participate in the classroom" (4).

Bilingual students included.

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