

Bilingual Education

In the United States, the Bilingual Education Act was passed in 1968 to provide equal education for student speakers of minority languages (most notably Spanish.) However, bilingual programs have been severely under-funded and reports have yet to prove that this Act is beneficial or effective. Some evidence points to increased achievement for minority students, while other evidence shows that certain factors need to be considered when determining the success of bilingual education, such as family background and the time period in which the bilingual education actually begins. Reports from other countries examine the costs of producing educational materials in minority languages, as well as the economic and political decisions of which minority languages to include in the educational system. Overall, bilingual education has not existed for very long in the United States, nor has it proven to be very effective in furthering the education of minority students.

An analysis of minority students in American schools indicates that these students are less likely to achieve a sufficient education as compared to their native English-speaking counterparts. Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1974 that bilingual education must be provided in public schools, these “programs have been inadequately funded since their inception.” (Rosigno 4) This is a rather disturbing fact considering the sharp rise in immigration from Spanish-speaking countries to the Southwest. In some areas, minority students represent a quarter of the student population, mostly from Latin America and Asia, yet less than a quarter of these students are enrolled in bilingual education.

Nevertheless, a more important question has arisen about the effectiveness of bilingual education. Researchers have little conclusive evidence for or against bilingual programs. One

problem lies in the lack of consideration of family background attributes that “are strongly related to educational achievement.” (10) Children who live with both parents and have fewer siblings perform better in school. Parental education and income also play a role in the positive relationship between background characteristics and successful bilingual education. Children who began learning English before relocating to the United States also outperformed those students who did not begin learning English until after immigration. This is most likely contributed to participation in other bilingual programs outside of the United States, which may be more intensive or demanding.

Another factor to consider is the age at which bilingual education is introduced to the minority student. Humans’ cognitive abilities are the strongest in the early childhood years, so it seems logical that children will benefit the most from bilingual education during the elementary years. Fundamental learning of basic skills, such as math and reading, are shaped during this period. Studies show that bilingual involvement in the later school years and prolonged involvement “are not as beneficial and may even be debilitating.” (14) The bilingual classroom in the middle school years is considered to be radically different from the elementary counterpart. The organization and regulation of bilingual education in the United States has not been very consistent, and seems to ignore the advice of linguists. Public and financial support for bilingual programs are almost non-existent, yet immigration continues to increase, as well as the need for bilingual education.

In contrast to the United States, where “resources allocated for bilingual education have yet to meet the number of language minorities in need,” (13) nations such as Senegal are finding ways to produce materials in local languages. Six of Senegal’s 28 local languages have national status, and must be taught in local schools alongside French. But estimating the cost of

producing these “learning materials in local languages... is highly problematic because this cost is infinitely variable.” (Vawda 12) Bilingual education in nations with more than one dominant foreign language is always challenging because the government decrees which languages are to be taught. In addition, local language materials manufacturing is neither simple nor quick. A long-term investment must be made in bilingual education for this process to succeed. In the case of small countries, cooperation with neighboring countries that share the same local languages (Senegal and The Gambia) has rendered “the production process less costly” (13) as well as increased the number of materials printed. The United States could benefit from a partnership of this sort with Mexico to produce language materials in Spanish and English for use in both countries.

Perhaps it is not only a strong bilingual education system that is lacking in the United States, but also the concern for minority students struggling to survive in a foreign world with a foreign language. American apathy for foreign languages and cultures has most likely contributed to the failure of bilingual programs. Americans do not want to waste tax dollars on language programs other than English although the government has passed legislation requiring this education be available. Although the bilingual education system in the United States may not be a success, other countries have proven that it does work even with less funds and more languages to consider.

Works Cited

Roscigno, Vincent J., Maria B. Vélez and James W. Ainsworth-Darnell. "Language minority achievement, family inequality, and the impact of bilingual education." 7 May 2002.

Vawda, Ayesha Yaqub and Harry Anthony Patrinos. "Producing educational materials in local languages: costs from Guatemala and Senegal." 17 June 1999.