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Educating Language Minority Children

READ PERSPECTIVES

A publication of the READ Institute

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Educating Language Minority Children: Volume 6

READ Perspectives



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editor

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Introduction

The current volume of *READ Perspectives*, which marks our sixth year of publication, represents a change from a biannual magazine to an annual serial publication within the Periodicals Consortium Group at Transaction Publishers, Rutgers University. Each volume will have a central theme, with our focus this year on "The Transitional State of Bilingual Education."

Charles L. Glenn of Boston University's School of Education and a long-time member of the READ Institute Academic Panel provided the seed that germinated into an impressive gathering of educational leaders whose presentations make up the major portion of this volume. Glenn wrote an essay for the Pioneer Institute in Boston, "Rethinking Bilingual Education," (*Agenda for Leadership*, 1998), in which he recommended a series of changes to Massachusetts' 1971 Transitional Bilingual Education law. Glenn's ideas for making essential, and long overdue, modifications to the legislation reflect the realities of the current status of immigrant education and build on the insights gained from a quarter century of research and practical experience. "Rethinking Bilingual Education" is reprinted in its entirety as the lead article in this volume.

It seems appropriate that the impetus for reasonable reform of bilingual education should come from the state that first institutionalized this teaching model by legislative mandate. Glenn's proposed changes in Massachusetts law which could be sensibly applied anywhere in the nation center on these main ideas: desegregate bilingual classrooms, introduce flexibility in program options for each school district, and monitor bilingual students' academic performance, holding them to the same high expectations as other students.

Illustrating the power of well-expressed ideas, Glenn's article also sparked the notion of organizing a conference to bring together a range of presentations covering disparate viewpoints on the issue of bilingual education reform. The READ Institute and the Pioneer Institute jointly sponsored a one-day conference titled "New Directions in Educating Language-Minority Children: An Agenda for the Future," held on October 30, 1998, at Boston University, with their

generous support. The papers presented at that conference constitute the major portion of this volume. Three panels of educators, researchers, and social scientists offered their views on what we have learned from the recent research, what program practices look promising, and what reforms are most urgently needed. These reports were delivered to an audience of 125 interested participants from New England. Richard M. Estrada, editorial page editor for the *Dallas Morning News*, delivered the keynote address.

One of the most gratifying expressions of appreciation for the conference came from a Boston educator of English language learners, who was grateful for the broad range of ideas presented and the civil tone of the discussion—two elements often missing from bilingual education gatherings. This participant remarked, "I came hoping to have my prejudices confirmed, when in fact they were rather challenged. The session went way beyond the usual war of clichés into a bracing, stimulating, highly informative discussion. . . . It's what this issue needs—not more inflamed rhetoric . . . but reasoned argument. That will carry the day in the end."

Panel One focused on a few examples of the latest reported research: Diane August gave her views as co-author of the 1997 National Research Council study *Improving Schooling for Language Minority Children: A Research Agenda*; Christine H. Rossell delivered a critique of the Thomas and Collier Study, "School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students"; I reported on the findings of two research studies commissioned by the READ Institute on the El Paso Independent School District's programs for limited-English students, and the last speaker on this panel, economist Mark Hugo Lopez of the University of Maryland, reviewed his findings on the end product of different education programs: the labor market earnings, ten years after high school completion, of limited-English students who had participated either in native language instruction programs or had been educated in English language programs.

Panel Two presenters included Mary Cazabon, a leading proponent of two-way bilingual programs, who reported on the outcomes in language acquisition and academic achievement for public school students in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Thomas J. Doluisio, superintendent of the Bethlehem (Pennsylvania) Area School District, who described the change in his district from a Spanish bilingual pro-

gram for Puerto Rican, limited-English students, to an English Acquisition Program; and Boston University Professor Maria Estela Brisk, who contributed strong recommendations on how schools should be restructured to effectively educate language-minority students.

Panel Three featured different viewpoints on the need for legislative action. Charles L. Glenn summarized the main modifications he favors; Rep. Harold Lane, Chairman of the House Joint Committee on Education, Arts and Humanities in Massachusetts, spoke on the necessity of legislative reform, generally agreeing with the Glenn recommendations; and two school superintendents, Eugene Creedon of the Quincy Public Schools and Douglas Sears of the Chelsea Public Schools, discussed their ideas on needed reforms. The overriding consensus of the speakers was that bilingual education in Massachusetts must be improved, that liberalizing the state law from a one-size-fits-all teaching mandate to one that will allow for creative alternatives, *with a strong measure of accountability for bilingual students' academic progress*, would create genuinely better learning opportunities for bilingual children. Whether legislative change can occur in a timely fashion is not entirely clear, given the opposition of advocacy groups in this state.

To balance the Glenn essay on what legislative changes ought to be made in Massachusetts, the READ Institute commissioned a report on the early effects of legislative changes in California, whose citizens passed Proposition 227, the English for the Children Initiative, by 61 percent of the popular vote on June 2, 1998. Because California is the most populous state as well as having the highest proportion of immigrant families and limited-English students (1.2 million children, one of every five students in California schools), it is instructive to make a very preliminary assessment of the early effects of a new law that requires all English language learners to be placed in English immersion programs for one year, or for additional time, if necessary. There is a provision in the law for parents to request that their school continue to provide bilingual instruction for their children.

Kevin Clark, a program evaluator and teacher trainer with experience in hundreds of schools, conducted a survey of five representative California districts: Atwater, Ceres, Delano, Orange, and

Riverdale. In his report, he describes the measures taken by each district to implement the new law. Remarkably, in spite of differences in size, geography, and demographics, the districts observed took similar steps to establish new teaching guidelines, to explain the new approach to staff and parents to gain community support, and to put in place an evaluation process to monitor student achievement. Much more needs to be reported from California schools, and we look forward to substantially more data to be presented next year.

It would be fair to say that bilingual education as we have known it since 1968 is in a state of transition. With calm and reason and intelligence, its best feature—the recognition that limited-English students need special help—can be preserved and expanded. We must also acknowledge that no one teaching method is effective for all of these children—much can be improved by letting local initiatives and the creativity of individual teachers and schools flourish.

ROSALIE PEDALINO PORTER, EDITOR
READ PERSPECTIVES

Rethinking Bilingual Education

Charles L. Glenn

Introduction

I will be arguing here that bilingual education programs that educate students separately have become a problem for school systems and for thousands of language-minority (LM) children, and that integrated bilingual education is the solution. By "integrated bilingual education" I mean making use of the language that children speak at home for support and supplemental instruction but without segregating them in separate classes. To make this pedagogical change possible, fundamental reform of the legal and policy framework within which language-minority children are schooled is necessary.

Millions of children have passed through separate bilingual programs in the United States over the last thirty years. Some have received a fine education in that way, but far too many have not. Educating children who speak a language other than English at home separately from other children until they can do school work at grade level in both their home language and in English is an educational experiment based on theories that have not held up in practice. It's time we took another look. This article suggests changes in Massachusetts law and educational practice based on these decades of experience. The article concludes with a series of recommendations and Appendix A, which presents proposed revisions to the bilingual education law, Chapter 71A.

This is not to say that teachers should neglect or fail to develop the language skills children bring with them to school. Real reform of bilingual education is not about suppressing languages or cultural traditions; it is about equipping children to function well in our schools and our society. Throwing children into a regular class with

This essay is reprinted, with permission of the author, from *Agenda for Leadership 1998*, published by the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research in Boston.

a teacher not trained to meet their language development needs and without additional support along the way is both cruel and unwise. But so is "sheltering" them for years from the language and the curriculum they must eventually master. "Separate development" is not the way to go.

Choosing which pupils should participate in a language support program has been treated as the central question in efforts to scale back bilingual education in Massachusetts. Critics claim that pupils who could do perfectly well in regular classes are assigned to separate bilingual classes, often by misleading their parents with scare stories about the harm that would result from all-English instruction, and also that pupils are retained far too long after they should be assigned to a regular class. Those who defend the present program claim that parents are often misled by school officials into forgoing their right to a bilingual class, and that the great majority of pupils are "mainstreamed" after three years in bilingual education (though they do not count kindergarten as one of those years). Bilingual education advocates argue that learning academic subjects in the home language first leads students to greater academic success once they enter English-only classes.

It is obvious that academic skills do transfer from one language to another. A teenager who arrives here with well-developed skills from strong schooling in her homeland is likely to do well, after a few months of hard work and even struggle. But it does not follow that a child who was born here or has received inadequate schooling before immigrating should spend years acquiring academic skills in another language simply in order to transfer them to English. Someone who plays soccer will learn to play American football faster than someone else who has never played a sport, but that does not make it efficient to teach soccer first, if the goal is football. We should build on academic skills if a child already has them in another language, but we should not make developing new ones in that language a priority.

Is it valuable and enriching, other things being equal, for a pupil to learn and to learn through two languages? Of course! Should we make that possible? Yes! But should pupils acquiring a second language be kept separate from native speakers/pupils and even teachers of that language for years and years? No!

Why the Debate Is Confusing

Discussion of bilingual education tends to become complicated, for three reasons:

1. The phrase is used to describe many different practices, from teaching language-minority (LM) children exclusively in their home language for years to teaching them in English with occasional help from their home language. For the purposes of this discussion, it will be best to use the phrase "separate bilingual program" to refer to the practice of assigning LM children to a separate class, whether taught in the home language or in English or in some mixture of both, for all of their formal instruction for a number of years.

There are other models also termed bilingual education. Children may be assigned to a regular class with pupils whose first language is English and pulled out for supplemental instruction and practice in English as a Second Language (ESL). Or they may be in such an integrated class with a teacher who has received special training in second-language development, and who modifies the instruction accordingly (perhaps with an aide for in-class help). Or the LM children may be in an integrated class in which both languages are used for instruction, with the goal that the children from homes where only English is spoken will also become bilingual: this is known as "two-way" bilingual education. The difference between each of these cases and separate bilingual programs is not so much the manner in which instruction is provided (since, as we have seen, that can vary widely), as whether LM children receive a separate education.

There are significant organizational implications. Pupils in separate bilingual programs are typically the responsibility of a separate group of teachers and specialists who report to a separate administrative hierarchy, while LM pupils in integrated programs are the responsibility of everyone in the school. Pupils in separate bilingual programs follow a curriculum that may or may not be well-matched with what others are learning and may or may not prepare them to enter successfully into the regular program later in their school careers; while LM pupils in integrated programs are by definition studying the same content and skills as other pupils of their age and grade.

2. Many different agendas are pursued under the banner of bilingual education, and this makes it hard to sort out what is at stake in a particular discussion. Each of these agendas deserves attention, but jumbling them together, as occurs too frequently in debate, makes it impossible to address any of them adequately.

A number of educational and social objectives have been identified as justification for providing separate bilingual education programs. These include promoting "self-esteem," respecting cultural diversity, offering a safe shelter from an otherwise hostile or indifferent school environment, maintaining minority languages, providing a role for school staff drawn from language-minority groups, intervening on behalf of pupils identified as requiring special services to overcome educational disadvantages, ensuring that LM pupils are supported in participating in the full range of opportunities offered by the educational system, and ensuring academic achievement through building on the home languages of pupils. One of the goals of this article is to sort out these objectives each will be discussed in turn and to show that no single program can be expected to meet all of them or indeed to meet any very effectively when so overburdened with expectations.

3. To the wide spectrum of educational experiences that have been clustered under the heading of "bilingual education," and the multiple agendas (or hopes) imposed on these programs, we must add a third factor the great diversity of pupils who are enrolled in such programs. First, there is the contrast between the youth who arrives at age 12 or 14 directly from another country and the native-born child from a language-minority family who enters kindergarten. In Western Europe, which has also experienced massive Third World immigration in recent decades, the first pupil would be placed for the first year in a transition or reception class to learn a survival proficiency in the language of the school, while the second would be assigned to a regular class, with supplemental help as needed. In Massachusetts, we tend to assign both to separate bilingual programs operating on the basis of the same educational rationale and strategy.

Second, there is the contrast, among late-arrivers, between those who have received a good education up to that point in their homeland and those from rural poverty or refugee camps, who have re-

ceived little or no schooling. The difference is exponentially greater than is usually present in a classroom of children of the same age and creates tremendous problems for the teacher and for the pupils.

Third, among younger and older pupils alike, there is the contrast between children from middle-class, highly literate homes and those from families where little reading occurs. The first group is likely to become proficiently bilingual very soon, while the second may not master either language to a level that would lead to academic success. Screening of children to determine whether they should be assigned to a separate bilingual program, as required by Massachusetts law, may result in assuming incorrectly that some "unable to perform ordinary classwork in English" (the legal test of eligibility in the state) are able to do so in Spanish or Kreyol or Lao.

Fourth (and the list could be extended), there is the contrast between children of different ethnic groups with culturally different expectations for schooling and for how children should spend their time and energies. These differences affect not only the work that children do and the rate at which they learn, but also the desire of their parents to have their children schooled through a language other than English. Typically, Asian parents are eager for their children to join the mainstream as soon as possible, while Hispanic parents are more likely to expect that the school will help to maintain their home language.

As a result of this diversity as we will see below the assessment of whether a particular child should be assigned to a separate program and of when pupils in separate programs are ready to be educated together with non-LM pupils has been the central administrative issue arising from our present form of bilingual education. Nearly twenty years ago James Cummins pointed out the "entry and exit fallacy in bilingual education"; this article agrees that the developmental needs of children are a continuum that should not be divided sharply into incompatible phases of separate schooling followed by "cold turkey" integration with no continuing support. Against the current practice of deciding that some LM children should be eligible for educational support through their home language and others should not, this article argues that all should be eligible to the extent that it benefits them. Against the current prac-

tice of ending such support once pupils are able to function in a regular classroom, this article argues that continued development of proficiency in a child's home language should be an option no matter how proficient he or she becomes in English.

Some years ago, as the state's equal educational opportunity official, I was asked to speak at the conference of the Massachusetts Association for Bilingual Education. If language minority pupils were integrated and held to the same high standards as other pupils, I said, I would support their continuing to be taught bilingually for as many years as their parents wished. If they were segregated and followed a separate curriculum without accountability for results, I would fight to get them out of bilingual programs as quickly as possible. That continues to be my position, and it underlies the recommendations made here.

What We Can Learn from the Numbers

The education of pupils whose first language is not English is no longer a rather exotic problem for a few urban school systems but is and will increasingly be a challenge faced by most schools and most teachers.

The latest figures from the federal government, based on 199394 enrollments, show more than 2.1 million public school pupils reported as "Limited-English Proficient" (LEP). This represents 5.1 percent of all pupils in public schools. These LEP pupils represent 31.1 percent of all the pupils who are American Indian, Asian-American, or Hispanic. 2

The comparable figures for Massachusetts were 33,364 pupils classified as LEP (in the language of the Massachusetts law, "unable to perform ordinary classwork in English") or 4.3 percent of the total.³ By contrast, there are 922,239 LEP pupils or 19.2 percent of the total enrollment in California public schools. Of the American Indian, Asian-American, and Hispanic pupils in Massachusetts, 35.5 percent were classified as LEP.

"Bilingual education" is by no means the only way in which language-minority children are served by the public schools. Both na-

tionally and in Massachusetts, more than two-thirds of Hispanic, Asian, and Native-American pupils are not considered unable to perform their ordinary classwork in English. Many of these pupils lag in academic achievement for reasons having to do with home environment and other social factors and not with having a dominant language other than English. Almost all are enrolled in regular classes in their schools, as are many LEP pupils who attend schools where no special programs are offered. After all, only 11 states mandate bilingual education; another 25 make some provision for teaching English as a second language (ESL), but this is rarely done on a full-time basis, at least after the first year.

But how are LEP pupils by definition requiring extra assistance served if they do not attend a school with a bilingual program? The federal report shows that 85.2 percent of schools nationwide that enroll LEP pupils provide them with ESL services; only 35.5 percent provide separate bilingual programs. In other words, most of the LEP pupils are receiving help with acquisition of English without being in a full-time separate program that uses their home language. As might be expected, schools with larger proportions of minority pupils were more likely to provide separate bilingual programs.

Unfortunately, many LEP pupils still receive no services adapted to their language-acquisition needs, either in separate programs or as a supplement to participation in regular classes. A proposal a few years ago in Massachusetts to make school systems eligible for partial additional funding for language support services outside of a separate bilingual program was blocked by those who feared it would undermine the existing separate programs.

The federal report found that there were LEP pupils attending 37,419 public schools, or 46.3 percent of all public schools nationwide; 961 or nearly 60 percent of Massachusetts public schools enrolled LEP pupils. More than 1 million teachers (41.7 percent of the total) reportedly have LEP pupils in their classrooms, though for three-quarters of them the LEP pupils made up less than 10 percent of the class or two or three pupils in a typical class. Only 7.4 percent of the teachers reported that more than half of their pupils were LEP. No separate data are provided for Massachu-