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Making the Case for Being Bilingual

Teacher Certification for Visiting Teachers: NASDTEC Interstate Contract

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I. Current climate regarding bilingualism in the United States.

Let me begin with a brief sketch of the history of bilingualism in the US as a conceptual framework for our discussion this morning.

In the last decade, the US has had clear manifestations of rejection toward any issues pertaining to bilingualism. Examples include the "English Only" movement, headed, incidentally, by a Hispanic, and Proposition 227 in California which basically rejected bilingual education.

This rejection of bilingualism has had its bases in, what we can term, the politics of immigration. Presently, just the Spanish-speaking immigrant community accounts for more than 15% of the US population. This figure however, does not account for persons that are either illegal in the country or are on visas which allow them to have work permits even though they are not residents, yet, when questioned, plan on staying within the US borders. A more probable and realistic estimate of Hispanics in the US is in the range of 20% of the total population. This means approximately 35 to 40 million people (the entire population, for example, of Spain!!!!!!).

Why the problem with immigrants, given that the US is an immigrant country? repelled The reality is that, since its inception, the US' legacy was one of "leaving behind and starting anew." When the first colonists came to the US from England, their entire perspective was creating a new republic. Although these individuals did not have to leave behind their language the entire conceptual framework surrounding their arrival was one of forging a new identity.

The US is a relatively young country… some 200+ years old. When immigration became more viable, both because of transportation advancements and because the "good news of opportunity" travels fast, there was an immigration boom. This comes to a hilt in the last part of the last generation, with significant increases in immigration, particularly from other parts of Western Europe, not only Britain. These new immigrants came with a new situation - mainly, a different language. Therefore, their easy integration into the existing community was hindered and the questions posed by their different language suddenly focused on whether "being American" needed redefinition. As is common and understandable, the facile response to this question was "NO." Being American meant speaking English and easily integrating into the relatively new dynamics of America.

Learning English proved to be a difficult task (as is learning any new complex skill), The turn of the century and the first 50 years, were difficult times for immigrants, particularly children. They were sent to school, tested in English, testing, of course, poorly, and labeled easily as "imbecile" or some other label indicating deficiency, deficit, or paucity of capacity. Not a great way of starting in a new country, but clearly facilitating the "status quo" and also of establishing a clear precedent of looking at language only and primarily as a political or economic reality, not in consideration of the socio-cultural or even cognitive dimensions. The late 1800's do see some form of maintenance of language in German/English programs in several states for example, but many sociologists believe that these programs were permitted because of stereotypical acceptance of the notion that Northern Europeans (and hence, their language) were of greater intellectual capacity.

All forms of bilingual education disappear after 1920, as a result of World War I. Suddenly, German did not appear to be as attractive as previously thought. Not until 1963 did a second phase of bilingual education begin in the United States. In the early 60's we start seeing Cuban refugees pouring into Miami at the rate of approximately 3,000 per month. These first newcomers expected early repatriation (a very important point[1]). As a result of this large immigration of highly educated, economically-stable Cubans, and because of their status as political exiles, as opposed to economically-disadvantaged immigrants who arrive in the US to create a new life, there was consideration of creating educational programs which facilitated or, at least considered, children's learning of language. This consideration was the result of numbers large enough, and the exiles concentrated enough demographically, to be able to preserve their institutions and language. And, so we have the beginning of a dual-language instruction program at Coral Way Elementary in 1962. I will discuss this "new beginning" a little later on when I discuss programs and pedagogical issues.[2]

Where are we today and what has happened since 1962? Increased numbers of immigrants with a whole host of other languages have settled in the US… and we are back at the concerns of the new Republic and the defining of what, truly, constitutes "being American." And that is at the basis of the political debate on bilingualism.

But let us separate ourselves for a short while from the political arena of bilingualism and look at what constitutes being bilingual and being competent in two or more languages.

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[1] I myself, along with my sister, brother and cousins were sent to the US with only winter clothes since as our parents explained to us we would be there only for a few months…. Eventually my parents joined us and for many years every celebration brought with it the promise and the dream "Next year in Cuba."

[2] N. Beebe, Von & Mackey, William F. Bilingual Schooling and the Miami Experience, Institute of American Studies, Graduate School of International Studies, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, 1990.

II. Bilingualism as a theoretical discipline.

Let's look first at bilingualism from a theory-based, neuropsychological perspective. The reason for doing so is that, in my opinion, beyond the political and economic realities that may encumber the issue of bilingualism, there is data and research to suggest that learning, knowing (and loving) two or more languages can actually be developmentally (meaning cognitively) beneficial to children.

First, I do not think that there would be any question that richness of language (and by this I mean knowing, understanding, and the using of many words irrespective of whether we are speaking of one or more languages) is an attribute highly valued in our society and in our academic world. People that speak fluently, correctly, and with a varied vocabulary are usually considered bright, articulate, and intelligent. How much more could this richness of language be reality if, instead of one language, we have the ability to use well more than one language.

The left hemisphere of the brain is considered the language center of humans. There is an area for primarily receptive language (Wernicke's Area) an area for primarily expressive language (Broca's Area). These two areas are interconnected and the lines of communication between the two are considered highly reflective of the capacity to use language. In bilingual individuals (who learn their second language in childhood), these connectors and areas appear enhanced.[3]

Neuropsychology, the science of brain-behavior relationships, follows the regular rules of norm: the more the better. Not only does it appear bilingual individuals have a greater number of connections between the receptive and expressive parts of the brain, but also there appear to be interconnectors between the languages at a psycholinguistic level, making for not only breadth in language (more than one language), but also more depth (more words).[4] *Let us remember that learning is concept-based. The referent, or word, is a label. Therefore, the more concepts (the world surrounding each word), the more labels. The more labels, the more language. This sheds light on the findings of the College Entrance Board, which reports that students of foreign languages score statistically higher on standardized tests conducted in English.*[5]

Let me use a simple example to clarify this point… When I say the word "cup" what is the first word that comes to your mind in Spanish?

CUP ➢➢➢➢➢ COPA

It makes sense that "copa" is the first word that comes into your mind in Spanish because it is the most similar phonetically. However, it may not be the best translation. What other word can we think of?

CUP ➢➢➢➢➢ TAZA

[3] Recent studies of Einstein's brain have demonstrated differences in precisely this part of the brain. In his case a ridge between these two areas is flatter or missing. This, some believe, is what made him conceptually very good (a genius) but verbally poor (at three years of age Einstein had such difficulty expressing himself that his mother worried that he was retarded).

[4] This reminds me of a quote I keep on top of my desk. It says – "Too much of a good thing is wonderful."

[5] When "New Math" was introduced in the 60's I was in 11th grade. Up to then I had been very successful in mathematics but I almost failed algebra II and trigonometry that year.. Needless to say I never took a Math course again. However, I always did well in standardized test because I scored very high in the verbal section of the tests.

This is a very simplified example of a very complex process that the brain undertakes in which it compares and contrasts words phonetically (sound), semantically (meaning), pragmatically (use), and linguistically (syntax or position) not only within one language but also between two languages. All this activity happens almost automatically and in an instant (we are dealing here with milliseconds).

Neuropsychological studies indicate that individuals with extensive vocabularies appear to have significantly more connections at even the neuronal levels in the brain and functional MRIs and PET scans show high intensity of activity in people with good language abilities. So my fertile brain imagines that the MRIs and PET scans of truly bilingual individuals must resemble a fourth of July firework display.

Furthermore, research indicates that bilingual children are endowed with an additional perspective as a result of the dual system of interpretation which they have acquired. This translates into a high degree of flexibility between codes, modalities, and tasks.

Interesting, and consistent, research in the US shows that students that enroll in Algebra I prior to 9th grade have a significantly greater chance of completing high school with a regular or standard diploma, enrolling in post-secondary institutions or programs, and acquiring the skills and competencies needed for a successful participation in the existing global economy. In contrast, few students not taking Algebra I before 9th grade "make it." The exigencies of the global economy are growing… What is Algebra I today may be Calculus tomorrow. The knowing of languages different and separate from one's own in clearly the Algebra of the verbal realm. As James Edward Olmo, the American actor and producer recently said, "Not knowing more than one language today is akin to writing on a typewriter (in a world of computers)".

III. Bilingualism as a pedagogical discipline.

Regardless however, of all the interesting, possibly fascinating studies that show that bilingualism can actually be one of the most natural and dynamic ways for developing cognition and thinking, the reality is that we need to shift the debate of bilingualism from the public's perception and perspective of an issue related to language and place firmly in the context an realm of sound educational policy.

I am only really going to discuss what is happening in Miami-Dade County, since it is what I know best. It is where I grew up, became truly bilingual, and am now in the center of professionally making and seeing my beliefs regarding biligualism being made reality.

As Miami-Dade County moves into the 21st century, it faces a need to respond dynamically to the demographic, linguistic, an economic trends which the area has experienced over the last twenty years. M-DCPS is increasingly diverse. Today's student population includes 58% whose home language is something other than English. Approximately 52% are Spanish-speaking and some 164 countries are represented on the student database of limited English proficient (LEP) students.[6]

Bilingual/Foreign Language Education in the M-DCPS encompasses those programs whose ultimate goal is to produce students who can communicate orally and in writing in English and in another language with proficiency. In programs for students classified as LEP, children are immersed in English from the moment they start school. They are offered home language support in content area subjects and language arts until they can be integrated into English speaking classes for those subjects. These programs focus on the student's acquisition of English. Indeed successful, this type of transitional program is based on the subtractive basis of bilingual education- in other words, replacement of one language for another. As our Director, Lourdes Rovira, aptly states: "We take a monolingual speaker of language X and turn him or her into a monolingual speaker of English." If we think back to the history of bilingualism in the US the question then becomes – Must history repeat itself?

[6] Or as Bernardo Garcia would correctly say "language enriched pupils"

We are growing and learning that, in order for our district to truly respond proactively to the needs of the community and truly prepare the children to meet those needs, language, or better yet, languages must be additive. In other words, trying to change from "replacement mode" to "addition mode." Or, as the Miami-Dade County Business Community calls, in their campaign for the education of a truly bilingual workforce: "English + One."[7]

M-DCPS is offering its students a wide array of language programs including Haitian-Creole to Hebrew to Japanese, to name just a few. The most successful language programs, meaning that students really learn and use two languages, are the two-way bilingual, dual-language programs. This means being instructed in both languages for part of the day every day. Each portion of the day is dedicated to one language, but at the end of the day, each language has had its time. Coral Way Elementary, which I mentioned previously, is one school which implements this type of instructional program.

Today, Coral Way Elementary continues to break ground with innovative curricular and pedagogical reforms which include: whole language/literature based and phonics instruction in a print rich environment, reciprocal teaching strategies, and CORE knowledge curriculum, all in two languages. Coral Way, also offers the International Studies Program.[8] *It is important to note that the founders of this program considered the presence of a large Spanish speaking student population a unique opportunity, truly a population of language enriched students – not a problem to be solved.*

In M-DCPS we want to move and in fact have moved beyond addressing or looking at bilingualism as solely a home or native language initiative. We have courses in more than 10 languages, and dual-language programs (K-12) are growing. In consort with the embassies of Spain, France, Germany and Italy, we also have dual-language programs whose students graduate with diplomas from the US and these countries, reflecting dual language mastery, global awareness, and an internationally enriched education. The long waiting lists of those interested in entering these programs bear witness to their success.[9]

IV. Philosophical musings, thoughts, and future directions.

We have witnessed the falling of, not only the Berlin Wall, but also the walls that have traditionally separated the continents in the past, telecommunications and technology have made them fall. We live in an ever shrinking world - multilingual yet every day more interdependent politically and economically and in all ways a world in which countries can no longer afford to think of unilateral progress but of a global future. A world where significant numbers of people live in places different from where they or their parents were born. Identity in the 21st Century then takes on new meaning… or as a famous Russian writer once wrote, exiled from his country of birth:

"A language is a much more venerable, profound and inevitable reality than a country… I belong to the Russian language…"

Let us think about these words in the midst of our falling walls, the growing violence in our world, and our deep, inexorable need to be able to communicate in ways and with people that just a decade ago we thought naught.

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[7] Read quotes from "Two Cultures" by Rosa Sugranes as published in Florida Trend, September, 1998.

[8] Too often the failure of bilingual education is in reality the failure of mediocre or poor educational programs. This is why in our district it is now our policy to require schools not to implement dual language programs unless they really want to, believe in them, and are going to go the extra mile to make them work.

[9] Handout – Review of M-DCPS Bilingual Programs.