Encouraging Bilingualism in Early Childhood Education: A Focus on the Development of Metalinguistic Awareness and Preservation of Cultural Identity

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I. INTRODUCTION

The challenge for educators who aspire to being more than a cog in the wheel of social reproduction is to create conditions for learning that expand rather than constrict students’ possibilities for both identity formation and knowledge generation and that highlight rather than conceal the historical and current division of power and resources in the society.¹

In 2004, more than twenty-five percent of children under age six in the United States lived in households that spoke a language other than English,² with that number continuing to grow rapidly today.³ As a result of the massive influx of immigrants in the 1990s and 2000s, the children of these immigrant parents currently constitute a substantial portion of the country’s child population.⁴ Since the early 1900s, however, the United States has been inundated with newcomers, sparking an increasing concern over immigrants’ ability to adapt to American society, particularly with regard to language and intelligence.⁵ During this time, psychologists developed various theories to explain immigrants’ poor performance on intelligence tests,⁶ one

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⁴ Id.
⁶ Id.
of which suggested that proficiency in two languages created mental confusion and delayed cognitive development.\textsuperscript{7}

Though born in the first half of the twentieth century, this line of thought persists today with regard to the early stages of education for bilingual children. Many children coming from households that speak a language other than English begin their schooling as English language learners (“ELLS”) or dual language learners.\textsuperscript{8} As part of the linguistic minority, these children are faced with the task of learning the majority language – English – as a means to utilize the educational opportunities provided.\textsuperscript{9} Though the method of most effectively educating children with limited English ability has been an inconclusive discourse, the undisputed goal of many programs is to help integrate these children into monolingual English classrooms.\textsuperscript{10}

This Article explores this question of what is the most effective approach to early childhood education for children whose primary language is one other than English. Part II discusses perceptions of bilingualism held through history, and the definitions that exist today. Part III.A then outlines the arguments made by opponents of bilingualism in early childhood education and how they fail. Part III.B then discusses and concludes that bilingualism is a necessary skill to encourage in early childhood education. Finally, Part IV goes on to explain why rigid classroom instruction of linguistic education is insufficient, and proposes a more comprehensive approach.

\textsuperscript{7} Id.
\textsuperscript{8} MATTHEWS & EWEN, supra note 2, at 1.
\textsuperscript{10} Kenji Hakuta & Eugene E. Garcia, \textit{Bilingualism and Education}, AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST, 374, 376 (1989).
II. PERSPECTIVES OF BILINGUALISM THROUGH HISTORY

In the first half of the twentieth century, environments exposing children to bilingualism were thought to hinder their cognitive growth. Empiricists believed that bilingualism, particularly in children, led to low levels of intelligence. Proponents of the hereditarian viewpoint, like nativists Carl Brigham, Lewis Terman, and Florence Goodenough, stated that immigrants were simply genetically inferior. Relying on immigrants’ poor performance on intelligent tests, hereditarians maintained that intelligence was inherent and therefore, immigrants were genetically and innately unintelligent.

Monolingualism has traditionally been the standard, and bilingualism was viewed as a social stigma. Children have often been deprived of bilingual education because of the “myth of the bilingual handicap” – a belief that children who speak a language other than English fail in school because of that linguistic difference. In the 1950s, however, studies began to examine the cognitive aspect of bilingualism over the empirical or societal view, and “bilingualism” was defined as the proficiency in two languages. Similarly, bilingualism in the context of early childhood refers to children learning two languages during the first five years of their lives. Though the stigma has lessened in recent years, children who speak a language other than

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11 Id. at 375.
12 Id.
13 Id.
14 Lee, supra note 5, at 501.
15 BEVERLY A. CLARK, FIRST- AND SECOND-LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD 183 (2000).
16 Lee, supra note 5, at 513.
17 Id. at 503. This definition was followed by theories examining the relationship between thought and language, and eventually led to studies that showed positive effects of bilingualism. Id.
18 EUGENE E. GARCIA & STEVE MARTINEZ, MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDIES & RESEARCH CENTER’S WORKING PAPER SERIES, BILINGUAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE EDUCATION OF BILINGUAL CHILDREN DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD 3 (1981). “The definition includes the following conditions: (a) Children are able to comprehend and/or produce some aspects of each language beyond the ability to discriminate that either one language or another is being spoken...(b) Children are exposed ‘naturally’ to the two systems of languages as they are used in the form of social interaction during early childhood...(c) The simultaneous character of development must be apparent in both languages. Id.
English at home are faced with the daunting task of learning English when they enter school. Teachers are thus faced with the equally daunting task of determining first, whether or not to encourage use of that language (“L1”) amidst instruction in English (“L2”) and if they decide to do so, then how.

III. ARGUMENTS SURROUNDING BILINGUALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

A. ARGUMENTS AGAINST PROMOTING BILINGUALISM

Much of the debate about bilingual education has centered on the method of teaching L1, the language other than English spoken at home, with regard to how long and how much it should be taught. At one end, proponents of bilingual education favor vigorous development of L1 before introducing English, reasoning that it will establish the foundations in cognitive learning that are necessary to learn a second language. This argument relies heavily on the fact that this approach will enable children to more easily transfer the skills from L1 to L2. Opponents of bilingual education, however, argue for the instruction of English from the start of children’s education with little use of L1. This particular approach is often implemented in the form of English as a Second Language (ESL), teaching simplified English to help with comprehension.

It is also based in part on the concept shared by many opponents of bilingual education – that practice makes perfect, expressed in the educational terms “time on task.” This argument states that “time on task” is a major component in language acquisition, and therefore, immersion

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19 Hakuta & Garcia, supra note 10, at 376.
20 Id.
21 Id.
22 Id.
23 Id.
24 Id. See also Cummins, supra note 1, at 93.
in English is the most effective way to learn the language.\textsuperscript{25} In conjunction with the “time on task” argument, opponents of bilingual education claim that immersion in English will allow language-minority students to quickly learn enough English to survive academically without any more assistance. And further, they assert that this immersion should begin as soon as possible since younger children can learn language better than older children.

In February 1991, the United States Department of Education released findings from an eight-year study called the Ramirez Report, discussing education programs that would work best to help Latino students succeed.\textsuperscript{26} The study compared the academic progress of Latino elementary school children in three types of educational programs: (1) English “immersion” with almost exclusive use of English; (2) early-exit bilingual, where Spanish was used for one-third of the time for two years and thereafter phased out; and (3) late-exit bilingual with primary instruction in Spanish for the first year, and then English for one-third of the time for the next two years, half the time the following year, and about sixty percent of the time thereafter.\textsuperscript{27}

The results from the Ramirez Report directly refuted the arguments made by opponents of bilingual education.\textsuperscript{28} First, if the “time on task” argument were valid, the early-exit bilinguals would have performed at a much lower level than English immersion students, which they did not.\textsuperscript{29} Furthermore, the late-exit students were catching up academically to students in the general population, despite the fact that they had received much less instruction in English than those in the early-exit and immersion programs.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{25} Cummins, \textit{supra} note 1, at 93.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Id.} at 91.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Id.} at 96.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Id.} at 98.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Id.} at 97.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Id.}
B. ARGUMENTS FOR BILINGUALISM

As reflected in the Ramirez Report findings, research has largely supported the benefits of bilingualism in the classroom. When children who start school speaking L1 and continue to hone those skills while learning L2, they develop a better understanding of language and how to communicate effectively.\(^{31}\) Research also suggests that bilingual children are more flexible in the way they think as a result of processing information through two different language systems.\(^{32}\) A foundation in L1 allows for stronger development in literacy abilities when learning L2 in school.\(^{33}\) In terms of cognitive development, bilingual children’s L1 and L2 are interdependent, and the transfer across languages can go both ways.\(^{34}\) For example, when children’s L1 is encouraged at school in the bilingual education setting, many of the concepts and linguistic skills the children learn in L2, the majority language, can transfer to L1.\(^{35}\) Essentially, the two languages work together if the educational environment is conducive to it.\(^{36}\)

Three psychoeducational principles provide the foundation for the arguments maintained by proponents of late-exit bilingual education: (1) development of both languages promotes children’s educational and cognitive development; (2) literacy-related skills are interdependent across languages; and (3) while conversational abilities may be developed relatively quickly in an L2, up to five years is typically necessary for children to achieve grade norms in the academically-related aspects of L2.\(^{37}\) Considerable evidence demonstrates that acquisition of

\(^{32}\) Id.
\(^{33}\) Id.
\(^{34}\) Id.
\(^{35}\) Id.
\(^{36}\) Id.
\(^{37}\) Cummins, supra note 1, at 95.
two or more languages promotes metalinguistic development. Bilingual children can transfer the knowledge and skills obtained from L1 to their process of learning L2 without abandoning those L1 skills.

IV. PROPOSAL FOR A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO ENCOURAGING BILINGUALISM THROUGH DEVELOPMENT OF METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS AND PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Effective implementation of bilingual education programs must consider how crucial the early years are for children’s social, linguistic, and cognitive development. Despite the various perspectives taken towards throughout history, bilingualism is embodied in various linguistic shapes and forms, and subsequently represents vast linguistic diversity. However, the linguistic domain composes only a small part of what bilingualism ultimately entails, which includes the cognitive and social domains as well. As one researcher noted, “the acquisition of language or languages coincides with identifiable periods of cognitive development within significant social contexts.”

“Banking education,” as coined by Paulo Freier, is a model of pedagogy where the teacher instructs students and the students are limited in their scope of action to essentially receiving instruction and memorizing information. Under this model, students rarely produce any language since they are merely listening to the teacher’s instruction or responding with either

38 Id.
40 Lee, supra note 5, at 514.
41 GARCIA & MARTINEZ, supra note 18, at 2.
42 Id.
43 Id.
non-verbal actions or recall statements.\textsuperscript{45} This method of teaching ultimately restricts students’ ability to freely create language and engage in complex learning.\textsuperscript{46}

The “banking education” approach emphasizes academic skills that are incontrovertibly crucial, but fails to take into account the importance of development in other areas, such as physical, social, cultural, or emotional skills.\textsuperscript{47} The comprehensive approach proposed in this paper takes into account the academic aspect of learning language, including phonological awareness;\textsuperscript{48} however, educators can help children preserve their cultural identity and promote use of L1 by providing positive affirmation and encouraging children to embrace the values learned and words spoken at home. For instance, educators can communicate to bilingual children that bilingualism is a valuable skill and a significant accomplishment by initiating classroom projects that showcases the cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom.\textsuperscript{49} Successful early education efforts are comprehensive, providing services in education, health, mental health and family involvement.\textsuperscript{50}

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may experience difficulties and discomfort in the classroom.\textsuperscript{51} Particularly if they are unfamiliar with English, simply interacting in the classroom may be difficult due to lack of a mutual language.\textsuperscript{52} Children who enter school with L1 and fail to maintain and develop that language as they are expected to learn L2, may experience a loss of cultural identity and decreased contact with family members.

\textsuperscript{45} Cummins, \textit{infra} note 1, at 99.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{47} \textsc{Mariela Paez et al., Language and Literacy in Preschool Children} 5 (2006).
\textsuperscript{48} Phonological awareness is the ability to process and manipulate the various sounds of a language. Phonological awareness is necessary for comprehending the alphabetic principle of a language and understanding the alphabet. \textit{Id.} at 1.
\textsuperscript{49} Cummins, \textit{infra} note 31, at 19.
\textsuperscript{50} Matthews & Ewen, \textit{infra} note 2, at 1.
\textsuperscript{51} \textsc{Patton O. TaborS, PBS TeacherLine, What Early Childhood Educators Need to Know: Developing Effective Programs for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children and Families} 3 (2004).
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Id.}
who speak that L1. Rather than requiring educators to be proficient in the various languages that they may encounter in the classroom, educators can utilize parents or caregivers in encouraging L1 use while still teaching other skills, including L2. In some parent training programs, professionals instruct parents or caregivers in techniques that they can use to support language development in their children. Just as English-language instruction to children should not base itself exclusively in the academic aspect of learning language, parent or caregiver training does not consist of only written handouts or homework assignments. Rather, the techniques focus on language facilitation strategies (e.g., modeling, imitation, responsive feedback), and embrace various instructional methods (e.g., demonstration, coaching, role playing). Family or caregiver involvement is vital in preserving and strengthening children’s L1 and continuing cognitive growth, particularly if the children’s teachers do not speak every child’s L1.

Studies have suggested that higher degrees of bilingualism are associated with higher cognitive ability, metalinguistic awareness, concept formation, and creativity. Furthermore, research on language use by bilingual children demonstrates that they are able to transition from one language to the other, depending on the conversational context, a process known as code-switching. Lev Vygotsky, one of the first philosophers to examine the effects of bilingualism, asserted that bilingual children are able to view a language merely as one of many systems, manifesting in their awareness of their own linguistic abilities. Moreover, their experience

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53 Kathryn Kohnert, Intervention with Linguistically Diverse Preschool Children: A Focus on Developing Home Language(s), 36 LANGUAGE, SPEECH, AND HEARING SERVICES IN SCHOOLS, 251, 253 (2005).
54 Id. at 258.
55 Id.
56 Id.
57 Hakuta & Garcia, supra note 10, at 376.
58 Id.
59 Lee, supra note 5, at 510.
with more than one language system may lead to a better comprehension of “the arbitrariness of language.”

Similarly, another theory states that bilinguals, through learning two languages, develop an understanding of the form and function of languages in general. Accordingly, studies have shown that the interdependence of literacy-related skills across languages lead to more development in conceptual abilities. The correlation between the skills in L1 and L2 suggest that these language abilities are “manifestations of a common underlying proficiency.”

V. CONCLUSION

This paper first posed the question of whether or not bilingualism should be encouraged in early childhood question. Research and various studies have demonstrated that it should be. However, the question then is by what method should this approach be employed in the classroom. While no definitive answer exists as to maximize and reach each bilingual child’s educational potential in the classroom, this paper proposes a shift of focus from instructional language and “banking education” to a more comprehensive approach involving parental or caretaker involvement, interactive instruction across multiple mediums, and exploration of social and cultural influences. Utilizing children’s existing language ability, in English or any other language, to develop the metalinguistic awareness will allow them to learn a second language while still maintaining the first language. This approach also considers familial and cultural background and interpersonal relationships, creating an environment conducive to learning. Providing not only the academic knowledge but also an environment conducive to learning, are key to developing cognitive ability in bilingual children entering early childhood education.

60 Id.
61 Id.
62 Cummins, supra note 1, at 95.