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Jesica Moreno
California State University, Monterey Bay

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Benefits of Bilingual Education Programs for Elementary
School Students

Jesica Moreno
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Senior Capstone
Advisor: Dr. Thao Paoze

Abstract

The benefits of bilingual education programs are endless; however, with Prop 227, students were disregarded the opportunity to learn in a more accepting, multicultural classroom environment. Now with the passage of the new Prop 58 in recent year, it is important for our community to become more familiar with the most effective bilingual education programs and their benefits on students. The purpose of this senior capstone is to examine the benefits of bilingual education programs on elementary school students through a literature review, interviews with teachers, and interviews with parents. The results reveal that the benefits of bilingual education programs for elementary school students go beyond academics.

Introduction

Throughout the years, there has been an increase in immigrants coming to the U.S in search of a better life. In fact, as of 1998, there were “3 million foreign-born children under eighteen, and over 10 million U.S.- born children under eighteen living with at least one foreign-born parent” (Feinberg, 2002, p. 182). Due to events such as 9/11, there has been an increasing amount of security at the border. Therefore, families immigrating into the U.S have made things more permanent. There is a clear indication of this in public schools. Now, there are more than just Black and White students, meaning that there is more than just English (Cervantes-Soon, 2014, p. 66). This is a clear indication that methods of teaching that may have worked in the past with a general group of students, may not work in the diverse society we live in today (Santa Ana, 2004, p. 111). School personnel have to act and begin to take the country’s diversity into account when thinking about ways to teach English language learners.

There are many types of bilingual education programs in existence. Bilingual education programs can be categorized into two different types, weak forms of bilingual education programs and strong forms of bilingual education programs. Weak forms include submersion, submersion with withdrawal classes, segregationist, transitional, separatist, and mainstream with foreign language teaching. Strong forms include immersion, maintenance/heritage language, two- way/dual language, and mainstream bilingual. such as two-way immersion programs, transitional instructional programs, and one-way immersion programs (McCarty, 2012). The reason why two-way immersion programs are so strong is because they bring together a nearly equal amount of students from two different native language groups and provide instruction in language, literacy, and academic content. Students start off with a 90/10 model which means that they spend most of the time learning in the partner language and over the years, students reach

the 50/50 model which means that students spent about the same time learning in the partner language and in English. (Howard et. al, 2005, p. 1). Transitional instructional programs are not as strong because they focus more on rapid transition to mainstream classes. They may be in the program from kindergarten through second grade and by third grade they are placed in a mainstream classroom. Once they are in a mainstream classroom, students are pulled out of their class for English as a second language (ESL) pullout support (Gerena, 2011, p. 343).

In California, concerns involving English language learners have been clear on the ballots. Proposition 58 appeared on the California ballot in 2016.

“Under this proposal, schools would no longer be required to teach English learners in English-only programs. Instead, schools could teach their English learners using a variety of programs, including bilingual programs. In addition, parents of English learners would no longer need to sign waivers before their children could enroll in bilingual programs” (California, 2016).

Proposition 58 repealed Proposition 227 which did the opposite of Proposition 58. Proposition 227 prevented English language learners from learning in their native language for an extended period of time regardless of the demands of parents to implement bilingual education programs for their children. Proposition 227 also encouraged schools to transition students as quickly as possible into English-only classrooms. Many believe that it is important for English language learners to be placed in English only classrooms so that they can learn English more quickly. However, when students are in bilingual education programs and are learning in their primary language, they are able to transfer their skills and knowledge onto the second language (Gerena, 2010, p. 56). As a result, they are able to become biliterate.

As a prospective teacher, my primary research question is: How do bilingual education programs benefit elementary school students? My related secondary research questions include:

What does research say about the benefits of bilingual education programs for elementary school students?

Additionally, through interviews I will answer the related secondary research questions: Are there bilingual education programs in California and in the school districts in Salinas? If there are, what are they? How are the bilingual education programs implemented in Salinas? According to teachers, what are the benefits of bilingual education programs for elementary school students? Finally, how do parents perceive the benefits of bilingual education programs for their children?

Literature Review

The benefits of bilingual education programs are countless, yet, there are many schools that are not implementing any form of bilingual education program. Although there are many teachers and parents that are aware of the benefits, there are others who are not.

Benefits of Bilingual Education Programs for Elementary School Students

Bilingual education programs are beneficial to elementary school students because they allow English language learners and English speakers to come in contact with each other while communicating with each other in their primary languages and learning about each other's cultures. This is important because "by valuing other languages, dual-language programs give these languages, and their speakers, greater prestige" (Genesee, 1999, p. 677). In other words, through exposure to other languages and cultures, students are able to become open-minded and knowledgeable about the world around them. This is something that is more difficult to do as a mainstream student because mainstream students are only learning in one language. Even if there are students from different cultures in a mainstream classroom, students will have difficulty

getting to know each other if they are unable to communicate through language or if they are unable to understand the struggles of learning a second language.

In addition, bilingual education programs are beneficial to elementary school students, particularly two-way immersion programs, because “[two-way immersion] programs seek to facilitate the development of [second language] skills while maintaining and enhancing the [native language] skills and cultural integrity of students from both the minority- and majority-language groups” (Lopez, 2006, p. 124). In other words, minority students are encouraged to hold on to their culture instead of letting go of it. This is different from other bilingual education programs whose purpose is for students to assimilate instead of integrating into the mainstream culture. It is important for students to maintain their culture so that people can learn to welcome and accept them for who they are. If students are able to feel accepted, then they will feel more comfortable and confident speaking up about issues that concern them at school or in their communities. When students feel that their culture is valued as early as elementary school, there is also a greater chance that students will remain in school instead of dropping out once they get to high school. This is because they begin to develop self-esteem and pride in both their native culture and American culture (Feinberg, 2002, p. 18).

Aside from maintaining one’s culture, bilingual education programs are important because parents are able to become more involved in their child’s education. There are many ways in which parents can be involved including helping their children with homework. Parental involvement is essential for students so that they become more interested in learning and have a better behavior (Mexhit & Flutura, 2015, p.89). Furthermore, “there is a direct and unequivocal relationship between children’s performance (mostly at school, but also in other areas) and their future trajectory into higher education and beyond” (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2013, p. 79).

Students are more likely to perform better in school if their parents are involved because they receive more motivation and pressure. When students have parents telling them to do their homework or are even able to receive help from their parents to complete the homework, students are able understand the content better. Parents act as second set of teachers because they may clear up any content that a child did not understand in class. Unfortunately, parental involvement may not take place if parents cannot understand the assignments that are being sent home. As a result, students are missing out on the opportunity to further expand their knowledge and experience an educational connection with their parents.

The role of parents in a child's education is not only important because it allows them to understand their assignments better, but also because it develops an essential connection between parents and teachers. This leads me to another benefit of bilingual education programs which is that bilingual education programs allow parents to remain well informed of what is taking place with their kids in the classroom and, vice versa, teachers become informed of events that may be affecting children at home. This is important because understanding a child gives insight into the their personal and academic lives, which helps teachers to be better prepared for each individual's success (Ellison, 1993, p. 112). Ellison (1993) gives an example of a child who was alienating herself from other children at school. Once Ellison talked to the mother of the child, she learned that the child had had a recent family death. This indicates that communication is important so that children are able to be supported through their struggles.

Student success in bilingual education programs can be seen in standardized tests. In a study, Marian, Shook, and Schroeder (2013) found that tests scores of students enrolled in two-way immersion programs were higher in upper grades than the test scores of students in transitional programs of instruction and in mainstream classrooms (Marian, Shook, & Schoeder,

2013, p. 178). Not only that, but it was clear that students enrolled in two-way immersion programs were improving throughout the years while students in transitional programs of instruction were not. To break it down, students in two-way immersion programs outperformed mainstream upper grade students in math while maintaining relatively similar scores in reading. Students in two-way immersion programs also scored higher than students in transitional programs of instruction in reading. Although there was not a major difference, they still did score higher. These results may be due to the fact that “subject matter knowledge and the cognitive/academic proficiency it encourages [helps] second language acquisition” (Leyba, 1994, p. 64). Students in bilingual education programs are gaining subject matter knowledge in their native language and, as a result, are able to take that knowledge and apply it in the language they are trying to learn. This is important because it allows students to concentrate on the same material that English only students are learning, except they are learning it in their primary language. On that account, students are able to stay on track and hold the same amount of knowledge as English only students.

Methods and Procedures

As we began to choose our topic for our senior capstone, I was clear on what I wanted to focus on because it is something I am passionate about after having been in a bilingual education program myself. It is also a topic I touched on in my GVAR class during my first semester at CSUMB. However, for my GVAR project I focused primarily on the benefits of two-way immersion programs. I knew that there were some thoughts and ideas I had to expand after obtaining a job in a school with a one-way immersion program. I wanted to learn more about the things that I was witnessing first-hand with students who are in the process of learning English,

therefore, I met with Dr. Thao Paoze. After meeting with him, I was able to gather my ideas, refine my topic, and develop my questions.

To answer my primary and secondary research questions, I conducted parent and teacher interviews (See Appendix A-B for parent and teacher interview questions). These interviews include six parent interviews (parents will be labeled as Parent 1, Parent 2, Parent 3, etc.) and six teacher interviews (teachers will be labeled as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, etc.) across three different schools in Salinas which I will be referring to as School A, School B, and School C. All of the parent interviews were conducted in Spanish because all of the bilingual education programs implemented Spanish and English. Also, all of the parents that I interviewed were parents that I came across in a kindergarten classroom. I chose to interview parents with kindergarteners because I wanted to gain insight into why they were choosing the program for their children, which then revealed what they thought the benefits of bilingual education programs were. Through the parent and teacher interviews, I feel that I have been able to answer my research questions fully.

Results, Findings, and Discussion

Are there bilingual education programs in California and in the school districts in Salinas? There are four out of the fourteen schools in one of the school districts in Salinas with bilingual education programs. I am unclear how many schools from the other elementary school district have bilingual education programs but I know that at least one school does because I conducted interviews at one of the schools.

How are the bilingual education programs implemented in Salinas? There are a number of ways that bilingual education programs are being implemented in Salinas. School A uses a one-way immersion model while School B and C implement a dual immersion program. I asked

Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 to explain the way the one-way immersion program functioned at School A. Teacher 1 told me that in kindergarten, teachers implement an 80:20 model which means that students spend a majority of the time learning in Spanish. Students learn everything in Spanish except for ELD which consists of about 40-45 minutes per day. Once students reach third grade, there is a 60:40 ratio implemented in the classroom. Students spend a majority of the time learning in English. By the time students reach sixth grade the ratio changes to 20:80 which means that the amount of time that students spend learning in English increases. It is also important to note that when parents decide to enroll their children in the program, they must sign a contract which states that students must remain in the program from the time they enroll up until the sixth grade. I asked Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 to explain how the dual immersion works at School B and they told me that there is a 90:10 model in kindergarten and first grade. Students only speak Spanish in class and at some point, during the day, they switch classes to speak English with a different teacher. Once students get to second grade, there is an 80:20 model and in the third grade there is a 70:30 model implemented in the classroom. By the fourth grade, students reach a 50:50 model which means that they spend about the same amount of time learning in both languages. The 50:50 model stays in place from fourth to sixth grade. In School C, which also has a dual immersion program, the ratios are the same as School B.

According to teachers, what are the benefits of bilingual education programs for elementary school students? After interviewing teachers at the different schools, I found that for the most part they shared similar ideas. Teacher 1 stated that she chose to become a bilingual education teacher because she wanted to put her first language to use. When I asked her what she thought the benefits of bilingual education programs were, she stated that they were beneficial because students socialize more in the classroom and in the playground with their peers because

they are all comfortable with the same language. Teacher 1 also stated that bilingual education programs were beneficial because students can receive help on their homework from their parents. As a result, students learn subject matter faster and are able to learn to read faster compared to English only students. When she was teaching in an English only classroom she noticed that native Spanish speakers were struggling more because they had difficulty comprehending the content being taught. They were also not as social as students in the bilingual education program.

Teacher 2 chose to become a bilingual education teacher because she thought it was important for students to learn in their primary language. She still holds this thought because she believes being in a bilingual education program is beneficial for students. According to Teacher 2, bilingual education programs are beneficial because they allow students to communicate effectively with their relatives. She also believes bilingual education programs are beneficial because they open many doors in the future. Knowing two languages can bring job opportunities because students are able to communicate effectively in more than one language. Although she worked in an English only classroom for two years, she stated that it was not an enjoyable experience. She was only there because she had no other choice. One of the differences she noticed between English only students and students in bilingual education programs was that students in bilingual education programs learn concepts more quickly and are able to internalize what they learn because they learn in their native language.

Teacher 3 stated that she did not choose to become a bilingual education teacher but when she placed where she is now, she ended up liking it. When I asked her what she thought the benefits of bilingual education programs were, she told me that they are beneficial because being bilingual can be a benefit for the workforce. When she was an English only teacher she noticed

that the students in the bilingual education program outperformed the English only students on the state tests. She also mentioned that, because she speaks Spanish, she was able to communicate equally as effectively with parents of students in both English only classrooms and in the bilingual education program but she feels that if she did not know the language, there would have been many parents she would not have been able to communicate with.

Teacher 4 stated that she decided to become a bilingual education teacher because she saw the need for Spanish speaking students to have education in their native language so that they can learn concepts better. This is important because they learn better by focusing on first learning the concepts and along the way learning the second language. When I asked her what she thought the benefits of bilingual education programs were, she told me that bilingual education programs allowed students to receive more help from their parents on their homework. Teacher 4 also stated that the program allowed for better communication with parents. Parents feel more confident asking questions knowing that she speaks and teaches in their native language. She has been teaching in the bilingual education program since the first day she became a teacher, therefore, she could not comment on what she thought the differences were between English only students and bilingual education students.

Teacher 5 chose to become a bilingual education teacher because, growing up, she was in English only classrooms and it led her to suffer academically. Once she became a teacher, she wanted to work with migrant students so that instead of losing their primary language, they could add another one. She believes that being part of a bilingual education program allows students to maintain their primary language along with their culture and beliefs. In addition, students have the opportunity to communicate with a variety of people as a result of their biliteracy. She has only taught in bilingual classrooms but she has come across English only students who have

difficulty communicating with their peers and teachers because they are not confident speaking English. This is different from bilingual program students who are more confident because they were given the opportunity to dominate Spanish before dominating English.

Teacher 6 was a foreign exchange teacher from Spain. She chose to become a bilingual teacher because she grew up knowing two languages. Once she started going to school, she became trilingual after learning English. She stated that being bilingual can bring many opportunities in the future. Students in bilingual education programs are more open-minded and accepting of different cultures. They are more conscious of the world and less judgmental of people who may be different from them. Up until a couple of years ago, Teacher 6 had been teaching in English only classrooms. She mentioned that something that distinguishes bilingual students from English students is that bilingual students appear to be more confident. Possibly because they are able to communicate in their native language.

How do parents perceive the benefits of bilingual education programs for their children?

As I mentioned above, all of the parents that were interviewed were parents that I came across in a kindergarten classroom. Parent 1 chose to enroll her student in the program because she wanted all of her children to be in the program. Since her older children were successful academically, she wanted the same thing for her kindergartener. Parent 1 believes that the benefits of bilingual education programs include more student confidence, the ability to learn to read faster, and the ability for the parent to communicate more effectively with the teacher. She also talked about how, because the homework is in Spanish, she is able to help her child with it, leading to better understanding of the work. When I asked her if she thought her child would be more successful in an English only classroom than a bilingual education program, she said that her child would not be more successful in the long run because her child would have limited opportunities. She

mentioned that with California being so diverse, being bilingual is important for jobs. This is why she would prefer that her child remain in the program throughout elementary school.

Parent 2 chose to enroll her child in a bilingual education program because her family only speaks Spanish at home. This leads to one of the many benefits she brought up which is that being in a bilingual education program allows for better communication between the student and the family. Another benefit that was mentioned were that being in a bilingual education program allowed the parent to help her child with the homework. Something that would not happen if the homework was in English. What stood out the most from everything she said was that, because the bilingual education program led her child to learn to read fast, her child is now spending a portion of the day in a first-grade classroom even though she is a kindergartener. It is because of the student's success in the program that Parent 2 would want her child to remain in the program instead of being part of an English only classroom. Parent 2 believes that her child would be frustrated in an English class because the child does not understand English as well as Spanish.

Parent 3 chose to enroll her child in the bilingual education program because she was in a bilingual education program herself as a child. When I asked what she thought the benefits were she mentioned that the program enabled her child to speak both languages which is beneficial for her future. In addition, she mentioned that being in the bilingual education program could benefit her child's school grades like it has benefitted her other children's grades. Although her kindergartener speaks both English and Spanish, she would not want her child to be in an English only classroom because her child would not be practicing her Spanish.

Parent 4 chose to enroll her child in a bilingual education program because nobody speaks English at home. When I asked her what she thought were some of the benefits of being in a bilingual education program, she brought up how being bilingual could be beneficial in the

future once she has a career. She also mentioned that being in a bilingual education program would allow her child to continue to communicate with her family instead of forgetting her native language and using more English at home. She would want her child to remain in the program because if her child was in an English only classroom, she would not be able to help with the homework.

Parent 5 chose to enroll her child in the program because they came immigrated from another country knowing only Spanish. After being asked what she thought the benefits of bilingual education programs were, she talked about how she thought it was beneficial to learn English at slower pace instead of trying to rush her to learn the language. To her, this is beneficial because it allows for easier learning in English. Parent 5 also thought the program was beneficial because knowing both languages would be beneficial for her child's future, once her child has a career. She believes her child would be more successful in a bilingual education program than an English only classroom and would want her child to remain in the program because if her child was in an English only classroom, she would be able to help with the homework.

Parent 6 chose to enroll her child in the program because she wanted her child to master the Spanish language. One of the benefits Parent 6 mentioned about being in a bilingual education program was that being in the program could bring career opportunities. This is because students learn to read and write in both English and Spanish. Parent 6 believes he child would not be as successful in an English only classroom because she would not be able to help with the homework. To add on, she talked about how her child could try to translate the homework instructions from English to Spanish but it would not be the same because it would not be as direct. For this reason she would not consider removing her child from the program.

Recommendations

Therefore, after completing the literature review and conducting the interviews, I think it is essential for bilingual education programs to become integrated into more of the schools in Salinas, in the state, and in the country. Both parents and teachers seem to agree that there are endless benefits for the students. However, I think it is important to consider what type of bilingual education programs are more beneficial for students. The literature and interviews suggest that two-way immersion programs, or dual immersion programs, would be the most beneficial for students. This is because students are learning English at a slower pace instead of being rushed like they would be in a transitional instructional program. As a result, students become more motivated and more confident.

Problems and Limitations

Overall, I feel that finding the information for my primary and secondary questions went well. However, I came across some challenges along the way. These challenges were primarily encountered during the interview process. Parents would bring up some of the things they believed to be benefits, but would not elaborate on them. It was also difficult to find a time to interview them because of our conflicting schedules and because of field-trips and minimum days students had throughout the time I spent doing the research. During teacher interviews, I noticed that some of them had been bilingual education teachers since the first day on the field. This could have made their answers more biased because, although they had come across or heard about English only students, they had never been able to get to know them for the entire school year. Another limitation was that all of the programs consisted of Spanish and English. I think it would have been beneficial to learn about bilingual education programs that consisted of

different kinds of languages. Although there were some obstacles along the way, I feel confident that they did not get in my way of answering my primary and secondary research questions.

After completing my research, I realized that there were additional or alternate things I could have done to answer my primary and secondary research questions. Regardless, as a prospective teacher, I think the information I gathered is sufficient enough to grab a deeper insight into what the benefits of bilingual education programs are.

Conclusion

Through literature review, teacher interviews, and parent interviews I have gained insight into the benefits of bilingual education programs and I have been able to answer my primary research question. The literature emphasized that bilingual education programs are beneficial for elementary school students because they allow students to maintain their language and culture which allows them to feel valued and gives them confidence. Thoughts and ideas that teachers and parents shared were that bilingual education programs allow students to have more job opportunities in the future, receive help from their parents on homework, and have better communication with family in their native language. To ensure that the growing number of non-English speaking students in elementary schools are confident and successful, it is important to develop more bilingual education programs in elementary schools across the nation.

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Appendix A

Teacher Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose to become a bilingual education teacher?
2. What do you consider to be the benefits of bilingual education programs for students?
3. Have you been an English only teacher in the past? If so, what are the differences between students in bilingual education programs and students in English only classrooms?
4. How is the bilingual education program implemented in your classroom and in the school?

Appendix B

Parent Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose to enroll your child in a bilingual education program?
2. What do you think are the benefits of bilingual education programs for elementary school students?
3. Do you think your child would be more successful in an English only classroom instead of a bilingual classroom?
4. Would you want your child to remain in the program throughout elementary school or would you want them to eventually join an English only classroom?