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Book Review: The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas

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The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1936-1981. By Carlos Kevin Blanton. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004. 204 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

Arriving in Texas as a recently graduated Title VII Bilingual Education Doctoral Fellow in the latter part of 1980, I was particularly eager to learn more about the history of bilingual education in the state, especially the *strange career* alluded to in this volume's title. Before my arrival, I had worked in bilingual education in Illinois and western New York. Was the history of bilingual education in Texas stranger than in other states?

Although I am not able to answer that question clearly, the story of bilingual education in Texas includes a curious back and forth between acceptance and segregation of the native Spanish-speaking population (Tejanos), approval and rejection of bilingualism, as well as interesting intermixes of educational philosophies (English-only and progressivism) and world events (WWI leading to prejudice toward German bilingual schools). There is also the historical quirk of Lyndon Baines Johnson. The Texas-born president who ultimately supported the federal Bilingual Education legislation was also the only U.S. president who had ever taught English as a Second Language. (His teaching performance was applauded by several of his former students in this book even though, like most teachers of the period, he administered mandated corporal punishment for speaking Spanish at school.)

Bilingual education in Texas had a promising start. In the early years, English and Spanish

were both used for educational purposes since there was no centralized educational system. Schools were organized by local and religious entities, and each group chose its own mix of language and content. Both Spanish-speakers and English-speakers recognized a value to having children learn at least some of the other group's language. This approval of other languages extended to the new German and Czech immigrants who emphasized the teaching of their native languages in their schools.

In the late 1890s, however, Direct Method English instruction became mandated for Spanish-speaking children. Content-instruction in either English or Spanish gave way *entirely* to repetition and practice in English. Racism is clearly at least one important reason for this shift. English-only instruction allowed for the segregation of *white*, Spanish-speaking children so that they could be thoroughly *Americanized*. The lack of an explanation of how a relatively tolerant co-existence between English- and Spanish-speaking Texans turned to such a brutal form of racism toward vulnerable young children is my one minor complaint about this volume. (Direct Method language instruction was rejected for high school-age English-speaking children because it was perceived to be too harsh.) The slow return to bilingual education, including actual content instruction for Spanish-speaking children, begins in 1924 when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down an English-only law in Nebraska (*Meyer v. Nebraska*) similar to the Texas law. As this volume, however, notes throughout, educational bilingualism is irrelevant "unless accompanied by good teachers, proper resources, and the support of parents and the community." Texas's current school funding controversy makes clear that the history of a lack of adequate resources and appropriate curricula for Spanish-speaking children in the state has not yet been resolved.

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