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Abstract

Perceptions and beliefs about past, present, and future bilingual educational programs were gathered from key members of a bilingual community, including teachers, parents, and educational administrators. Participants' responses were analyzed and three overarching themes emerged. Current perceptions of bilingual education programs are strongly influenced by: (a) sociohistorical and political factors, (b) the effectiveness of instructional techniques; and (c) beliefs about bilingualism in general. Implications of these results are described with a focus on how they can inform policies and practices for bilingual learners.

Introduction

The number of bilingual learners (BLs) in the United States increases every year. In 1998-1999, 3.5 million were enrolled in PK-12 public schools in the United States. In 2008-2009 the figure increased dramatically to 5.3 million students (Flores, Batalova, & Fix, 2012). Given these growing numbers, it is important for educators to identify the best practices for educating BLs, investigate the barriers they might experience, and work toward finding solutions to meet the needs of BLs across diverse school settings. The present study offers a preliminary glimpse of the perceptions of bilingualism and bilingual education programs from a small sample of teachers, principals, and parents living in a bilingual community. In the following sections, we describe how these themes fit with past research, then provide specific examples of responses for each theme, and finally conclude with how this knowledge can be used to inform future directions to promote positive outcomes for BLs in the community.

A Brief History of Bilingual Education

The complex history of bilingual education intertwines with social, political, and cultural factors. The majority of interviewees herein grew up during or experienced bilingual education in schools through historical policies that they felt did not meet their educational needs as learners. Given that the participants' perceptions of bilingualism and bilingual education have likely been profoundly shaped by these sociohistorical and political forces, it is important to briefly outline these influences.

In the 19th century bilingualism and bilingual education were quite common in the United States. Immigrants who wanted to educate their children in their native language and culture formed schools to maintain the traditions of their homeland. This period of "permissive" bilingualism gained acceptance until international affairs such as world wars and ideological challenges purported American values that ushered in a "restrictive" period between the 1880s and the 1960s (Ovando, 2003). This transition, referred to as the restrictive period, was characterized by a push for English-only monolingual approaches to education. The restrictive period was challenged by a generation of activists who led an effort to pass civil rights and bilingual education legislation in the mid to late 1960s.

The Bilingual Education Act (BEA) of 1968 emerged as a legislative achievement to encourage public schools across the country to use specific educational strategies to help BLs gain greater access to academic opportunities. The United States Supreme Court then validated the necessity of bilingual education in the landmark *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974) case, where linguistically appropriate accommodations could be provided in schools for BLs. The *Lau* Remedies of the late

1970s "attempted to spell out appropriate expediency-oriented policies that could be implemented in schools" (García & Baker, 2007, p.100), and the *Castaneda vs. Pickard* (1981) case further clarified how schools should approach BLs and the bilingual education programs schools provided (Crawford, 1998; Ovando, 2003). Though the BEA was meant to provide BLs with equal academic opportunities as their monolingual peers, resources were scarce, and it was hard to find qualified bilingual educators. Thus, less-than-optimal bilingual programs were instituted (Petrzela, 2010). Some of the interviewees herein remarked about how programs implemented during this timeframe have had lasting effects on their perceptions of bilingual education.

Title III, the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) effectively reversed the spirit of the BEA, pushing the concept and practice of bilingualism off the policy record by primarily aiming for the acquisition of the English language for BLs through the stark absence of using the BLs' native tongue to learn English (San Miguel, 2004). The BEA was repealed in 2002 and replaced with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Collectively, these policy changes impacted the field of bilingual education significantly, and the responses of the interviewees showed that their perceptions on bilingualism and bilingual education have been profoundly shaped by these political changes. Despite the challenges faced, some participants also provide comments that reflect positive sociocultural (e.g., parents, family) influences on their language acquisition experiences.

Effectiveness of Instructional Techniques

Interviewees' perceptions were strongly impacted by the effectiveness of the type(s) of bilingual education programs they experienced. Thus, in the following section we provide a brief description of basic bilingual education models and research on the academic effectiveness of various bilingual education programs.

Title III proposed three basic models of bilingual education: Transitional, Developmental, and Two-way bilingual educational programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The state of Texas currently recognizes other language acquisition programs as Transitional Bilingual/Late Exit and Early Exit, Dual Language Immersion/One-Way and Two-Way, Content-based ESL, and Pull-out ESL instruction (Texas Education Agency, 2012). Each school district in the state of Texas selects the bilingual program model for its schools with the approval of the school district's board of education. The state of Texas has no set criteria on how to select the bilingual education program model.

The purpose of the majority of bilingual educational programs implemented in Texas is to help students reach English proficiency, not necessarily increase their proficiency in their native language, in most cases Spanish (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Snow and Hakuta (1992) have argued that these programs help children learn English, but do not create *bilingual* children. Thus programs such as transitional early- and late-exit, and any ESL program, are categorized as *subtractive* programs (Soltero, 2004; Thomas & Collier, 2004). Subtractive bilingual education programs typically do not foster an effective learning environment for BLs because there tends to be reduced teaching of the academic curriculum with a strong focus on English language development. Learners in subtractive bilingual education programs have been shown to have limited academic literacy in English or their native languages (Menken & Kleyn, 2010).

To the contrary, dual language programs are categorized as *additive* bilingual education programs (Collier & Thomas, 2003; Gómez, Freeman, & Freeman, 2005). Additive bilingual

programs are effective for the following reasons: (a) the enriched curriculum is focused on high academic achievement with the goal of biliteracy; (b) they include linguistic and cultural maintenance for the BL; and (c) they provide equal educational opportunities for the students participating in the program (Lutz, 2004; Soltero, 2004). BLs in effective dual language programs (implemented with fidelity) often outperform their monolingual counterparts (Li, 2007; Thomas & Collier, 2002), as content learning occurs across languages. Furthermore, educators following dual language bilingual education practices emphasize that bilingualism is an important asset to obtain and preserve. Dual language programs use BLs' first language skills to help them develop their second language and concomitantly build academic skills (Linton, 2004). This approach can help immigrant children and/or children of immigrants be viewed as assets to the school and not as academic challenges, as in some subtractive programs. Alanís and Rodríguez (2008) have shown that BLs in dual language education programs have progressed in academic areas better than other students in districts without dual language bilingual education programs, as indicated by standardized test scores in reading, mathematics, and science. Thus, if an interviewee primarily experienced learning or teaching in an ineffective or poorly implemented program, (s)he developed negative views of bilingualism and/or bilingual education programs. These negative views are then passed down generationally and continue to impact community levels of support for bilingual education programs.

Perceptions of Bilingualism

Historical views of bilingual education are persistent. Even though researchers have documented the effectiveness of particular bilingual education programs and the benefits of bilingualism, findings are not always shared with parents or community members of BLs (Martinez & Hinojosa, 2012). Thus, there remain strong sentiments opposing the implementation of bilingual education programs focused on creating bilingual and biliterate learners. For example, Li (2007) describes how anti-bilingualism sentiments, patriotism, ignorance, and the belief that parents have the sole responsibility of teaching their children their native language, have created an atmosphere of doubt as to the effectiveness of these programs. Therefore, parental support for effective bilingual education programs, such as additive programs, is desired by teachers and administrators, but not always obtained. The present study provides some examples of these sentiments.

Method

Participants

Participants included 13 individuals (8 women and 5 men) who were attending a community learning exchange focused on bilingual education in South Texas. Learning exchanges are gatherings of individuals who are working together to organize human, cultural, and technological resources in ways that enable local people to work together to improve the community. As such, this sample captures only the perspectives of those who were motivated to engage in discourse on bilingual education. All participants volunteered to be interviewed on camera to share their experiences with bilingual education. Eight were currently serving as educators in the community as assistant superintendents, teachers, assistant principals, or professors. One was a parent and student; another was a former teacher who was serving as a

school administrator; another one was the president of a university-based student organization; and two were non-English speakers who did not discuss their professions. All were residing in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas at the time the interviews were conducted.

The Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, located on the United States-Mexico border, is a community rich in social, cultural, linguistic, and political life. As residents of this community with deep bilingual, bicultural, and bi-national legacies, participants were likely profoundly shaped by this context.

Design and Procedure

Questions to participants were asked using a non-structured, conversational method, appropriate for the cultural context (Vázquez-Montilla, Reyes-Blanes, Hyun, & Brovelli, 2000). Background questions were posed first, followed by questions regarding perceptions of bilingual education programs. For example, "Can you tell us about yourself? Where did you grow up? What has been your experience with bilingualism/bilingual education? What do you think about the bilingual programs offered at your district?" Other questions were more organically constructed in an effort to delve more deeply into interviewees' specific interests and roles in the community (e.g., you described your interest in raising a bilingual child, what has been your experience as a parent engaging in your child's school?).

Results

Three broad themes were inductively developed from the interview data: (a) how sociohistorical and political influences have shaped perceptions of bilingualism and bilingual education, (b) how the effectiveness of bilingual education programs varies across programs, and (c) how general views about bilingualism affect bilingual education programs. Table 1 provides examples of responses across the themes.

Theme 1: Sociohistorical and Political Influences Shape Perceptions

A major theme that emerged from the interviews was how perceptions of bilingual education have been shaped by sociohistorical and political factors. One interviewee described having been a Spanish-speaking student growing up in the United States during the pre-NCLB timeframe, "My personal experience with bilingual education is, I can strongly connect with the ineffectiveness [of past] programs. . . They threw me into an all-English classroom. [There was] no support for my first language…the purpose: learning the English language. I was the Spanish; the little Mexican girl that came in with no English, . . . going home crying…I did not want to learn that second language… that particular bilingual program was not effective…it does not help build a strong learner."

Another interviewee spoke about the politics involved in the implementation of current models in some local bilingual education programs: "Well, why do they continue to use it? Because it's part of the law. So, they have to continue using it, but it's not -- they didn't do it the proper way. They are not giving the value to it." He spoke of his disappointment that many current bilingual education programs in our community do not teach children both English and Spanish across their elementary school years. He felt that, "When they move to junior high, they are lost .

. . the student is lost. It's not going to be a comfortable setting for them to be learning or to be in school. So, I think that brings a lot of drop-out rates in the United States." His statement exemplifies how the implementation of particular bilingual education programs is often affected by decision-makers who are focused on short-term impacts, rather than positive long-term outcomes for BLs.

Theme 2: Effectiveness of Bilingual Educational Models Varies

Interviewees also discussed differences in the effectiveness of bilingual educational models and their personal feelings about them. Overall, the interviewees commonly noted that "Bilingual programs are very limited and often not effective." This theme continually emerged. "They have bilingual programs, but they are still very limited. Sometimes they are not very effective because of the system, [or] the teaching; they always look at language, Spanish, as a second language, as a lower language." Yet, it was clear that respondents' had different views of bilingual education, depending on the model that was being followed.

One teacher said, "Students should learn in Spanish if they feel more comfortable." Another interviewee suggested that a bilingual education program should, "Encourage students to like who they are," going on to describe how this meant allowing schools to teach them in their native tongue. Similarly, a Spanish-dominant interviewee stated, "*Si el niño no entiende en inglés, necesita comunicación en español. Yo no estoy totalmente de acuerdo en que al niño se le obligue a que totalmente hable inglés o que intente hacer todo en inglés si no entiende la mayor parte*". (If the child doesn't understand English, he needs to communicate in Spanish. I don't completely agree that the child is forced to speak only English or for him to try to do everything in English if he doesn't understand most of it). Though they did not use the terminology, they seem to be describing how a dual language model would be preferred over an early-exit model.

Some participants used explicit terminology. For example, in response to a question about the model her school district used, a second grade teacher said:

> *Currently, they follow the dual-language program, which personally I think is the best. There is a lot of support towards that program. The students are basically being given the opportunity to strengthen their native language and they are learning in their native language and at the same rate they are learning a second language, which is very important. It's not just about language; it's also about content, the instruction that they are being exposed to; they are exposed to enrichment activities, enrichment instruction and practices.*

Many interviewees also described the disconnection between research and practice that leads to an ineffectiveness of many bilingual education programs. One teacher told us how she had learned about effective programs in college, but did not see these models used once she became a teacher: "It's an early exit model that they are leaning to and early exit will be the least effective." Another said:

> *I have taught bilingual students as well, and I have also seen the trauma that students go through, the rejection. And so, it's going to take more than just one person believing that bilingual education works. It's going to take all of us to make sure that these students are able to overcome all of these traumas and are able to start believing in themselves as*

successful students that they can be successful at whatever they decide what to do in their future and so, but it's going to take more than a couple of us that believe in it and are promoting it.

The interviewee also stated, "We need to be able to stay on top of and abreast of all the current trends that are happening at this time… We need to make sure that every decision that we make is the best thing we can do for students." Others expressed the critical need to have parental support for effective bilingual education programs. Similarly, some mentioned the importance of families feeling a sense of school belongingness. Collectively, the data show a clear affinity for bilingual education programs that respect, value, and build upon the students' native language and cultural heritage; ideas in line with past research on parental views of bilingual education (Farruggio, 2010).

Theme 3: Perceptions about Bilingualism/Bilingual Education Programs

The data also suggest a lack of public understanding of the different kinds of bilingual education programs and research regarding the effectiveness of these programs. Thus, a third theme focused on what it is to be a bilingual individual. For example, some participants felt that community members did not understand the value of bilingualism or how to best achieve it.

One participant made an impassioned plea to "educate parents about the outcomes of the programs!" It seems that despite living in an area that is predominantly bilingual in English and Spanish, residents undervalue their bilingualism. This might be because historically, the bilingual education programs in practice did not develop many learners into true balanced bilingual/biliterate individuals. Consequently, it might be that some parents today do not understand the benefits of bilingualism. Our participants described some encounters with parents that support this third theme. For example, one teacher described how she had nearly begged parents to allow her to teach in both English and Spanish, explaining that knowledge learned in one language would develop in the other, too. This sentiment was also noted by administrators. One expressed his knowledge about effective curriculum and instructional modalities, but also said, "[It's just that] parents demand teachers to teach their children English at school."

Teachers also described how they felt pressure to use instructional techniques that they knew were not best. One teacher described opposition she encountered:

So they started closing in on us, restricting our ability to do bilingual education. I was in a school district that fought back, so we maintained our bilingual program and through people like me, we [tried] to amplify and strengthen it. Then…the high stakes testing came in…Teaching to the test, everything about test scores and California made it that you could not test in Spanish…Kids barely can speak English and they are testing them in English with standardized tests…A lot of my cohort, bilingual educators, baby boomer generation, started retiring early in disgust.

This teacher, like many of the teachers, made explicit statements about their desire to teach children in both Spanish and English. To see further examples of responses from across themes, see Table 1.

Table 1

Inductively Developed Themes from Respondents' Perceptions of Bilingualism and Broad Types of Bilingual Education Programs

Theme	Respondent	Response
Sociohistorical and Political Influences Shape Perceptions	Teacher	Even though I was in the ELS Pull-out program, I succeeded because of my parents' support. Students should take pride in their heritage and value the Spanish language.
	Assistant Principal	Political reforms could be endorsed through parents' voices.
	Associate Professor	Political reforms make it nearly impossible to make suitable programs for bilingual students.
Effectiveness of Bilingual Education Programs Varies	Teacher	Bilingual education programs subtract the native language, depriving students of a strong foundation Bilingual education programs do not accommodate to parents' and students' needs Bilingual education programs should be implemented with the right attitude to help build strong learners.
	Assistant Superintendent	Bilingual education programs should be research-based to include the most effective programs (i.e., Dual language)
General Beliefs about Bilingualism/Bilingual Education	Teacher	Teach students in a language they understand!
	Administrator	Some parents think that if they live in the United States, children should speak the English language only.
	Assistant Principal	Parents demand teachers to teach their children English at school, while they teach them Spanish at home.

Discussion

    Listening to the voices of the teachers, parents, and administrators of our bilingual community has provided insight about how current perceptions of bilingual education programs are formed. These data suggest that there are many factors that give shape to perceptions including social, historical, and political factors impacting bilingual education programs, the effectiveness of instructional techniques, and general beliefs about bilingualism and bilingual education programs. As a whole, the perceptions of community members provide a wealth of information for developing and implementing practices and policies for sustainable programs.

Recommendations

Following our practice to bring together the stakeholders in the community motivated to facilitate bilingual learners' success, these results provide a useful beginning for future discourse. Given that these factors impact perceptions of bilingual education programs, several recommendations are suggested. There is a need to:

- Recognize the significance of personal experience in shaping one's value of bilingualism. Even though many educators are knowledgeable about the data on bilingual education programs, their personal historical distress may make it difficult for them to implement programs. Having multiple conversations in which listening to all perspectives is emphasized and given time, may be necessary for community members to move forward.
- Engage in discourse about the differences between contemporary and historical bilingual education programs. It was clear that interviewers felt strongly that the community as a whole lacked knowledge about the types of bilingual education programs available. In order for parents and educators to make informed decisions, there is a need to learn about program choices, the needed resources for each, and their longitudinal outcomes associated with their implementation.
- Discuss beliefs about bilingualism. What does it mean to be a "bilingual" and "biliterate?" There is a need to re-frame some past thinking about bilingual education programs and whether or not they create individuals that are bilingual and biliterate.

Future Research

Future research is needed to investigate how members in our community can continue to work together to create long-term positive outcomes for bilingual learners. These data are a useful beginning toward that effort. They document a desire for change among a group of motivated community members willing to share their past and current perceptions about bilingual education and they provide useful insight about possible items for survey research.

The subtractive version of bilingual education programs continues as a reality for many school districts in our community, with over 93% of schools in the Rio Grande Valley implementing the Early-Exit Transitional Bilingual Education program (TEA, 2012). However, there is hopefulness and a desire for more effective programs to be implemented among at least a small group in the community. If we can move forward in a way that is mindful of the historical factors, social importance, program characteristics, and political climate that have shaped perceptions, perhaps we can grow this group and create the positive social change that is desired.

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