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The Bilingual Student Experience

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The Bilingual Student Experience

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Abstract

English language learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing group of students in the United States. The purpose of this research is to help better understand the personal experiences of these students in their journey to learn English while still maintaining their Spanish roots. Much research has been done on a large scale to identify the successes and shortcomings of the American education system in supporting these immigrant ELLs. This project, however, focuses directly on the personal experience of the bilingual student in the mainstream classroom and the influence of their home and community life on the assimilation process.

This case study was conducted through ethnographic research in which observations were made over the course of one year in one classroom at an international high school. These observations were supplemented by formal interviews with native Spanish speaking students (5), native English speaking students (2), faculty and staff from the same high school. This research proved that native Spanish speaking ELLs are very aware of the importance of learning English as a second language and the advantage they will have in the job market as bilingual graduates. They did not feel as though they were jeopardizing their Spanish culture or that English was being forced upon them. These, however, are the experiences of ELLs living and attending school in a community dominated by the Dominican culture and the Spanish language. These findings may have been different if the same study was conducted in a community in which native Spanish speaking students are not the majority.

Introduction

“America’s public schools enroll about 5 million English language learners (ELLs) – twice the number from just 15 years ago, and that number is expected to double again by 2015”

(NEA, 2011).

Globalization has led to unprecedented ease of connection and communication among people around the world. The importance of knowing multiple languages has thus increased significantly, especially in the United States. The prominence of the Spanish language in the United States can and should no longer be ignored. This presence of the Spanish language and culture in our country is something that affects all people. Americans are surrounded by the Hispanic language and culture due to a huge influx of Spanish speaking immigrants over the past several decades. The importance and relevance of bilingualism in the American classroom has increased considerably due to this wave of Spanish speaking immigrants.

While many Americans are concerned that these young immigrant youth will never fully assimilate without an English-only schooling approach, others believe that forcing the English language on these students will result in a detrimental loss of culture and self identity. This research explores the possibility of whether or not a middle ground can be attained in which students successfully learn the English language and assimilate a new culture to a certain degree, while still maintaining their native language and cultural heritage. Rather than viewing the presence of two languages in this country as a threat, people living in the United States should be embracing and actively promoting bilingualism and advocating for the acquisition of *both* languages starting in our public school system.

Through my own research, I began to dig deeper into this issue in order to more fully understand the personal experiences of native Spanish speaking youth, specifically, Spanish speaking students from the Dominican Republic. What are the student experiences in learning English as a second language while trying to balance their native language and culture? How do students feel about their “status” as English Language Learners? What roles do school, home life and the surrounding community play in the assimilation process of immigrant youth? These are important questions that must be answered in order to more completely understand the extent to which native Spanish speaking students are assimilating into the “American” culture and whether or not this assimilation has negative effects on cultural identity.

Literature Review

The Benefits of Bilingualism in the Global Economy

Some researchers and economists claim that the financial and economic advantages of speaking more than one language is increasing rapidly, while others believe that assimilation is necessary for economic and social “success.” Portes (2002) explains that there is a growing demand for bilingual and multilingual professionals in the global workforce. Djajić (2003) argues against this, claiming that assimilation into American culture is the circumstance that leads to the acquisition of human capital in terms of salary and social norms. He explains that a common culture gives its members confidence for successful social and financial transactions (Djajić, 2003). However, this conclusion seems applicable only when considering individual cases. If one Spanish speaking person is immersed into a sea of English speaking people, assimilation may well lead to more financial and social “success.” However, this issue should be addressed in a larger context if reliable and sustainable conclusions are to be made. When

assessing the situation around the huge influx of Spanish speaking people into the United States, it is more reasonable to argue against the need for total assimilation and in support of the need for bilingualism and biculturalism. There is a certain degree of assimilation necessary for financial success for Spanish speaking professionals in the American and global workforce. Total assimilation, in terms of speaking English and becoming a monolingual English speaker, is not necessary for financial and social success. Being monolingual in English *or* in Spanish simply does not provide the same level of professional “edge” that bilingualism provides in the global workforce. This is why bilingualism is such a significant advantage in the global job market (Linton, 2004).

The need for bilingual professionals is rising in nearly all sectors of the job marketplace. The demand for bilingual teachers is certainly on the rise. These teaching jobs have offered employment opportunities to many Spanish speaking professionals (Garcia, 1985). With the growth of multinational corporations and economic globalization, the demand for skilled bilingual workers is also being witnessed by the business sector. According to Portes (2002), the need for these employees can be seen in multinational corporations, government agencies, and retail outlets. However, many minority speaking parents continue to encourage their children to focus on learning English because of its supposed exclusive economic advantages. Many Spanish speaking immigrant parents come to the United States in hopes of providing a better life for their children. It is a socially constructed view that the only way to have success in America is to learn English. Unfortunately, this behavior tends to correspond to a loss of emphasis on maintaining the native tongue therefore leading, again, to monolingualism (Hakuta, 1986). The benefits of speaking two languages can only be fully realized if there is a careful, and deliberate

effort to maintain the student's native tongue and culture while simultaneously promoting the acquisition of a second language.

Bilingualism as a Benefit in Overall Academic Success

While some experts argue that a language barrier creates obstacles that lead to minority speaking students falling behind academically (Smith, 1931), others attest that bilingual students achieve more overall academic success than most monolingual students (Lambert, 1972). Portes (2002) explains that the advantages of bilingualism emerged after a study conducted in the 1960's which compared monolingual and bilingual students on cognitive test measures. The results showed that bilingual students outperformed monolingual students in almost all cognitive tests. Linguist Jim Cummins later confirmed this finding stating that bilingual students are able to "look at language, rather than through it, to the intended meaning" (Portes, 2002, 81). However, the potential positive correlation between bilingualism and overall academic success cannot necessarily be drawn simply on the basis of this study. While the participants were matched on the variables of sex, age, and family status, the onetime administration of a cognitive test, chosen solely for this study, cannot be justified as the determinant for such a bold conclusion. Unquantifiable factors such as motivation or how the students were feeling physically on the day of testing could have significantly skewed the data collected by this cognitive research. A research study should be conducted where the observation and testing are completed over an extended period of time, progress determined in a variety of subject matters, and perhaps in conjunction with a variety of other cognitive assessments. Yet, there are several

other hypotheses that support the idea that bilingual students attain differential academic benefit and a high success rate in the classroom.

Some researchers believe that an advantage that bilingual students have in the American classroom is evidenced by the Whorfian hypothesis. According to linguist Benjamin Whorf, a person's language determines their worldview (Wardhaugh, 1998). This thinking is confirmed by Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) who explains that the ability to define one's own world and self is realized through language. However, there are many issues affecting the development of one's worldview that transcend language differences, such as issues pertaining to ethics and morality. Most fundamental human values are universal despite the language a person speaks. According to Kenji Hakuta (1986), if Whorf's hypothesis about language and worldview is true, this would translate to mean that bilingual students have the advantage of having two distinct systems of thought. This, in turn, would "result in a richer view of reality." (Hakuta, 1986, 78). These two systems of thought could result in marked academic and intellectual advancement in the classroom and throughout adolescent development. Similar to the data offered by Portes, Hakuta clearly expects bilingual youth to have an advantage over their monolingual counterparts based on the correlation that Whorf draws between language and worldview development.

"Race to the Top" Testing Culture Suppressing ELLs

There are certainly practical advantages to learning English and it is important for bilingual youth to assimilate, in this regard, to a certain degree. Portes (2002) agrees that there are significant social and financial advantages that bilingual and multilingual students have in the American workforce as a result of economic globalization. However, he questions "whether school programs can be put in place to bring about these [advantages] or whether forces of

assimilation will continue to prevail” (Portes, 2002, 82). In other words, the American education system has the potential to take advantage of students’ bilingualism by encompassing different cultural aspects into content classes and encouraging the use of different languages in the classroom as a way of validating diversity. Many external factors, some of which are educational and others political, have come into play. One major example is the emphasis on “Race to the Top” standardized testing requirements and its impact on the success or failure of expanding bilingualism in the American classroom.

The requirements for assessment of student achievement established by the standardized tests initiative in the American education system hinder the successful promotion of bilingualism in the classroom. Otto Santa Ana (2004) states the fundamental dilemma for bilingual students in the classroom when he claims, “Schools are faced with an extraordinary task- to successfully serve the needs of immigrant children while meeting the increasing accountability requirements and rising academic standards required of all public schools” (111). Otto Santa Ana’s statement seems to forecast the fact that the performance of non-native English speaking students does not equal academic levels of native English speaking students. Due to the demands of curriculum goals and the importance placed on standardized test results, teachers tend to teach at a pace that will assure full coverage of all content material necessary for students to attain high test scores. According to Garcia and Padilla (1985) “The minimal objective is parity of academic achievement with monolinguals of equal status” (71). However, this goal is often not achieved because students who speak a minority language get left behind and lose ground in the rush and frantic pace to “teach to the test” and therefore do not succeed, as well, academically. This lack of the type of education that is both necessary and sufficient to meet the needs of minority students results in higher dropout rates and the procurement of only menial jobs.

Effects on Cultural Identity

The push for English-only education in the American school system has led to the creation of a significant gap in cultural identity among Latino youth. In fact, education in the majority language is considered “the most powerful assimilating force” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000,101). The root cause for encouragement of English-only education is based upon a fear that the English language may lose its predominance in America and the large number of Spanish speaking immigrants entering the country will never truly assimilate (Portes, 2002). On the other hand, the result of a strict English-only schooling approach is that immigrant youth end up rapidly embracing English over their native languages, creating a loss of cultural identity for these individuals and a loss for our society as a whole. According to linguist Joshua Fishman, by the third generation of immigrant youth, “English becomes the home language and the transition to monolingualism is completed” (Portes, 2002, 79). However, conversely, if students are encouraged and provided the opportunity to maintain their parental tongue, they will be positioned to better understand their heritage and background.

English-only education is often promoted so strongly in the American system of education that it leaves minority youth with a sense self degradation and inferiority. According to Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), native English speakers tend to view other languages as unintelligible and inferior. Rather than steadfastly trying to create a monolingual society, even though English has never been officially declared the language of the United States, our schools should be supporting and advocating for cultural and linguistic diversity. It seems counterintuitive, as Fishman (1966) indicates, that millions of first generation immigrants in the United States grew up speaking a language other than English, and yet their children and grandchildren end up

“tongue-tied” abroad. It is very difficult for minority speakers to maintain their native language over the course of generations. The devaluation of native minority languages has led many children to experience a rift and a sense of dissonance between their native language and culture, and the language and culture they experience in school (Santa Ana, 2004).

The trend to minimize the importance of native minority speakers in the American education system, when coupled with a parental desire to maintain the use of the mother tongue, creates another type of conflict that leads to selective ethnicity and code switching. Selective ethnicity refers to consciously choosing an ethnicity to associate with based upon a situation or circumstance while discrediting another (Ferrante-Wallace, 2006). Code switching “is defined as the practice of selecting or altering linguistic elements so as to contextualize talk in interaction” (Nilep, 2006, 1). Often, the language that a person speaks and the culture that they associate with is based on the macrosocial situation of a particular ethnicity (Centeno, 2007). According to Pedraza, Attinasi, and Hoffman (1980), the phenomenon of code switching is not necessarily a sign of language shift among bilingual speakers, but merely an indication that a person is fluent in both languages and can rapidly switch between the two during conversations. Fishman (1966) argues that codeswitching and the separation of language under certain social situations are necessary for language maintenance. While it seems plausible that Fishman is correct in viewing code switching as necessary for language maintenance, further research needs to be done to examine *why* bilingual speakers switch their use of language in certain situations. What effects do school and home life play in determining which language is spoken?

Methodology

Case study

Data for this study relied mainly on ethnographic research and observations which allowed me to gain objective views on the classroom setting and the ways in which students react to English instruction. It was important to observe ELLs in a mainstream classroom in order to examine their use of language and their interaction with teachers and classmates. Observations were made over the course of one year in a classroom at the Providence Academy of International Studies (PAIS), an international high school located in Providence, Rhode Island. This school was chosen because its high percentage population of native Spanish speaking students from the Dominican Republic provided a good opportunity to examine students learning English as a second language. These observations, and my presence in the classroom over the course of one year, allowed me to build rapport with the students in the classroom setting and added to the legitimacy of the personal interviews I had with the students.

The ethnographic data was supplemented by six interviews which helped validate my own observations and provide insight into the personal experiences of the students that mere observation could not reveal. Formal interviews were conducted over the course of several weeks and were documented on a tape recorder. Five native Spanish speaking students were chosen randomly and two English only speaking students, the only two in the classroom, were interviewed in separate focus groups. Table 1 compares the background of the seven students interviewed. (See Appendix 1) Interviewing students, both native Spanish speaking and English only speaking, allowed for a comparison of experiences in the classroom between the majority group (native Spanish speakers) and the minority group (English only speakers). Interviews were

conducted with two teachers at PAIS. The first was with *Sarah, a content course teacher and an English only speaker. This interview revealed important insights into the use and allowance of English in the classroom. A second interview with conducted with *Jim, an ESL teacher at the high school and a multilingual speaker, in order to determine how English is taught and how often it is used in the classroom. Both of these interviews shed light on the student experience as seen through the teacher's perspective. They also helped verify my observations in the classroom on the use of languages.

An interview was conducted with the principal of the school. This interview revealed what policies are actually in place regarding language use at PAIS. This conversation also helped reveal plans for the future of the high school and policies which may be put in place beginning next year. Finally, an interview was conducted with a professor from Providence College who has a strong passion for languages and cultures. This professor was chosen for an interview in order to shed light on the bilingual experience in the United States and abroad. This interview provided insight on the challenges of learning and teaching a new language, as well as the downfalls of the public school system in teaching ELLs.

*Names have been changed for confidentiality

Analysis

While some people are concerned that immigrant youth will never assimilate without an English only schooling approach, others believe that the American school system is repressing the cultural identity of native minority speaking students. Through my observations and interviews, I found that native Spanish speaking students at PAIS fully understand the importance of learning English while living in the United States. They are aware of the many opportunities that being bilingual offers them in the job market after graduation. The students are eager to learn the English language but realize the importance of maintaining their heritage. The students at PAIS are able to study the English language in the classroom while still maintaining their native Spanish language and culture.

These students are surrounded by the Spanish language and the Dominican culture. The city of Providence, especially the area directly surrounding PAIS, is highly populated with Spanish speaking immigrants, Dominican restaurants and Spanish churches. This setting, coupled with the Hispanic culture that is preeminent in their home lives, allows the students to more easily maintain their native language and culture with no real threat being posed by learning English in school. They feel proud to be Dominican and proud to be native Spanish speakers. Interviews with the English only speakers, however, revealed a different result. In a school and a community in which they are the minority, they tend to feel resentful and anxious which is probably typical of any minority group.

Through interviews with faculty and staff, I found that PAIS is, in fact, an English-only speaking school. Spanish is not supposed to be spoken in the mainstream content courses. However, through observations, I found that this is not always the case. Many teachers allow

Spanish to be spoken to some extent in their classroom so as to more effectively explain material or to facilitate communication among students in their native language. I asked the teachers if they think it is the school's responsibility to strive to maintain the Spanish language through classroom activities. According to Sarah, the content course teacher, "I think that particularly where we are in Providence, we essentially live in the Spanish culture... If we were in a different community and there was a microcosm of Spanish speaking students but the community at large wasn't Spanish, then I think it would be up to the school to better foster the Spanish language and culture" (Washousky, 2011). This presence of a strong Hispanic community has important implications for my research and conclusions.

Conclusion

I have found that in a school and a community in which they are the majority, native Spanish speaking students are flourishing and are certainly not at risk to lose their language or culture. The students at PAIS are able to study the English language while simultaneously maintaining their native Spanish language and Hispanic roots. The fact that they are able to do this reveals that there is a more complex dynamic affecting the assimilation process of immigrant youth than just the school setting. The presence of a firmly established Hispanic culture in the surrounding community, as well as the use of Spanish in the home, are two factors that have strongly contributed to the students' successful maintenance of the Spanish language and culture. While there is an English-only policy in place at PAIS, the school has been successful in not demeaning the importance of other languages and cultures. With a strict balance between English and Spanish, coupled with the internationally focused content taught in the school, this approach

to teaching allows for an acquisition of the English language while still maintaining a respect and appreciation for other languages and cultures.

The limitation to this research is that this is just one case study. If this same study were conducted in a school and community in which native Spanish speakers are *not* the majority, the findings could potentially be much different. This type of research should be more prevalent in the years to come given the large presence of the Spanish language and culture in America today. We must begin to better understand the personal experiences that immigrant youth are facing on a daily basis so as to better meet their educational needs and personal development. There is a need for real, firsthand stories and a more in-depth analysis of their emotional journeys in order to fully understand the assimilation experiences of native minority speaking youth.

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Appendices

Table 1

Students	Birthplace	When he/she Moved to America	Language Spoken in the Home	Language Spoken with Friends
Student 1	Dominican Republic	9 months old	More English than Spanish	Spanish
Student 2	Dominican Republic	12 years old	More Spanish than English	Spanish
Student 3	Dominican Republic	11 years old	Spanish with mom, English with dad	Spanish
Student 4	Dominican Republic	3 years old	More Spanish than English	Spanish
Student 5	Massachusetts	N/A	Only Spanish	Spanish
Student 6	Rhode Island	N/A	Only English	English
Student 7	Rhode Island	N/A	Only English	English