Politics, Bilingual Education, and the Curriculum

Arguments over the merits of bilingual education reflect different views of the actual status of students, where students should be, and ways to bring about the change.

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California's State Senator Newton R. Russell calls it "politically divisive." "Bring back the melting pot," cries Marvin Stone, editor of U.S. News, while Jerry Brown, former governor of California, supports "preserving cultural and language diversity among the state's school children." From its inception in the mid-60s to the present, bilingual education (BE) has evoked varied and volatile responses.

In the past year, the controversy has centered on amendments proposed by Senator Walter Huddelston (S.2002) and the administration's amendments advanced by ex-Senator S. I. Hayakawa (S.2412). The former sought to curtail the goals of bilingual education programs and set precise time limits on student participation in the programs. The latter attempted to circumvent the use of non-English-speaking students' native language as the initial medium of instruction and instead proposed English as a second language (ESL), instruction or immersion of students in a learning environment without regard to their linguistic differences. While these amendments failed, the questions they raised remain sources of uncertainty and debate. It is clear, however, that since the advent of the present administr-
tion, the federal government will no
longer serve as the principal impetus for
bilingual education. The Department of
Education's role, in Secretary Bell's
words, will be to "serve as a catalyst for
local districts to build the necessary
resources and capabilities to operate
programs when federal funding ceases"

While the debate over bilingual edu-
cation continues, the number of stu-
dents whose primary language is other
than English constantly increases. Pro-
visional figures released by the Census
Bureau in 1980 estimated the number
of school-age children speaking lan-
guages other than English at home to be
4.5 million. These populations are not
limited to the border communities or to
key ports of entry; they are found in all
major cities. The Lau vs. Nichols Su-
preme Court decision of 1974, which
required school districts to provide spe-
cial services for non-English-speaking
learners, affects almost every large
school district in the country. No longer
can schools ignore the child who does
not speak the language of the teacher
and the school system.

Now the President, the 98th Con-
gress, and the Department of Education
are once again turning their attention to
bilingual education: the interaction of
language, school policy, and equal op-
portunity. As they continue to define
the relationship between federal and
local governments as guarantors of
equal educational opportunity under
the law, their decisions will influence
the lives of millions of children.

Framework for Curricular Perspectives

Educators need to examine the varying
perspectives on bilingual education—
their relationships to each other and
how they influence the curriculum. They
also need to look at where BE came from and where it is going. In
order to do this, I will present here
opinions and events in light of three
pedagogical constructs on three scales:
(1) the Actuals of instruction; (2) the
Optimals of instruction; and (3) the
Enablers of instruction.

On the Actuals Scale (Figure 1) ap-
pear the various viewpoints on the status
quo of students with limited English
proficiency (LEP); on the Optimals con-
tinuum (Figure 2), the judgments as to
where these students should be after
they are educated; and on the Enablers
Scale (Figure 3), the different ways of
bringing students from their Actual con-
tion to the preferred Optimal state.

At one extreme of the Actuals Scale,
LEP students are viewed as handicapped
and in need of remedial assistance due
to a language deficiency. On the oppo-
site pole, the primary language is con-
sidered an untapped resource for the
student and for the country. Those who
hold this view appreciate the learners'
capacity to make a contribution to the
society based on their dual language
ability.

One extreme of the Optimals Scale
presents the future of society as mono-
lingual English speaking. Linguistic
unity, from this point of view, ensures
political cohesiveness and a uniform
cultural identity. These are the propo-
nents of culture uniformity. On the
other end of the Optimals Scale are
those who see a utopian America as a
multilingual society with English as the
national language common to all. This,
by their accounts, would facilitate inter-
change with non-English-speaking soci-
eties and increase world unity. These
proponents favor cultural plurality.
The Enablers Scale focuses on curricular delivery systems and methods. One group sees assimilation as the best way for students with limited English proficiency to enter the mainstream of school and society as quickly as possible. This method avoids any use of the learners' primary language. The opposite approach supports the goal of English development, but includes other primary languages in the curriculum as a means of cultural enrichment for all students. While the LEP students add English to their repertoire, they share their primary language with monolingual English speakers so that both groups develop bilingual facility.

These three scales with their contrasting viewpoints provide a framework for looking at events and opinions that have shaped the history of bilingual education from the mid-60s to the present.

Phase One
When bilingual education was originally funded in the mid-60s the failure of LEP students in the public schools was thought to be directly related to their language deficiency in English. Bilingual education was proposed as a means for remedying this deficiency. At hearings before the Special Committee on Bilingual Education, Senator Ralph Yarborough pointed to "the failure of our schools to educate Spanish-speaking students" (1967) and regretted to say that in Texas "a median of only 4.7 years of school was completed by persons of Spanish surname." President Lyndon Johnson prefaced the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 with the statement that "this law authorizes a new effort to prevent dropouts...the failure of children of Latin descent will get a better start" (Andersson, 1970).

On May 25, 1970, HEW issued a memorandum to clarify its policy on the responsibility of school districts to provide equal educational opportunity to national origin minority group children who are deficient in English language skills. To comply with this policy, districts had to "take affirmative steps to rectify the language deficiency in order to meet their instructional program to these students" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1975). The Lau vs. Nichols decision of 1974 held that "there is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1975).

In 1975, following the Lau decision, HEW published the Lau Remedies, which included specific "enablers" to meet the needs of the LEP student. Three types of programs were proposed: (1) transitional bilingual education; (2) bilingual bicultural education; and (3) multilingual/multicultural education. The "optimals" for the type two program stated that "the end result is a student who can function, totally, in both languages and cultures" (1975); for the type three program, "the end result is a student who can function, totally, in more than two languages and cultures."

Although both the HEW memorandum and the Lau vs. Nichols decision saw LEP students as suffering from a language deficiency, they declined to prescribe for school districts the type of curricular enablers that would provide these students with equal benefits in attaining an education. The Lau Remedies did give schools the option to operate full bilingual programs and to maintain languages other than English throughout the grades in order to produce students who functioned "totally" in more than one language. Implicitly, at least, the primary language of the LEP student was no longer a deficiency but a resource, both for the minority students and for their English-speaking classmates. Bilingual/bicultural programs would "enable" schools to bring about an "optimal" bilingual and even multilingual school and society.

Phase Two
The "optimals" of a bilingual, culturally pluralistic school and society caused a strong reaction from proponents of cultural uniformity. "This is America. We speak English," said Senator Hayakawa succinctly (1980). In the Saturday Review, C. Tucker (1979) called bilingualism "a disservice to the nation...America has a right to require the learning of our national language."

Wrote James J. Kilpatrick, "English is a part of the tie that binds us together. To the extent that we encourage official bilingualism, we tend to dissolve that cultural adhesive. Pushed too far, such policies are bound to divide our people, to foster block and faction, and to raise linguistic barriers among us." (1980). Senator Hayakawa proposed a Constitutional amendment to "declare English the official language of the United States. In his view, bilingualism could lead to separatist movements as that in the Canadian province of Quebec" (reported in NCBE Forum, June 1982).

At the opposite end of the Optimals Scale, the cultural pluralists defended a full bilingual program. "In twenty years you're going to hear several languages on TV, in the movies...everywhere," said Jerry Brown. "Instead of fighting it, why don't we work with and see it as a plus, as an asset?" (1980).

Paul Simon, a member of the Presidential Commission on Foreign Languages, favored developing languages other than English: "We are culturally isolated and guilty of a scandalous incompetence in foreign languages" (1979). He pointed out that when the Vietnam War broke out, there was not a single American-born specialist on Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos, anyone who spoke the language or understood the environment. The Academy for Educational Development's position was that high-quality bilingual programs "should be supported by all Americans who care about the future strength of the nation. Participation of students in BE is a way for the worlds of foreign language instruction, BE, and education for international understanding to come together as part of a general improvement in American education" (1981).
Phase Three
The Bilingual Act of 1978 heralded an end to the brief and controversial experiment of a full bilingual education program. It states that "the objective of the program shall be to assist children of limited English proficiency to improve their language skills" (1978). Instruction in the primary language is allowed "to the extent necessary to permit a child to achieve competence in the English language." Referring to English monolinguals, the Act stipulated that "participation of other children in the program must be for the principal purpose of contributing to the acquisition of English by the LEP students."

The controversy between cultural pluralists and cultural uniformists seems to have been temporarily settled in favor of the uniformists. Emphasis is on "transition" programs and "mainstreaming," along with a general movement toward federal deregulation. At the state level in California, for example, there is no longer any mention of the possibility of a full bilingual maintenance program. Bilingual education bills now require strict entry criteria into programs that limit the number of participating students. At the same time, exit criteria encourage early student withdrawal and set a maximum of five years for all students in the program, regardless of their competence in English.

Conclusions
It is perhaps indicative of the American pragmatic tradition to approach a reform such as bilingual education without clear pedagogical definitions of expected results. And true to form, federal, state, and local education agencies never reached a clear consensus over the specific goals of bilingual education. A problem existed, it became acute, a solution was proposed, and monies were appropriated to "see if it worked." "Optimals" were vague: to give learners a "better start," or "greater access to education." Federal funds,

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While policy makers in the United States debate the merits of bilingual education, the Mexican Ministry of Education is in the process of completing bilingual textbooks for students who do not speak Spanish.

In Mexico, over three million people speak between 125 and 150 different languages and dialects (Miller, 1981). They tend to be poor and live in rural areas of Mexico accessible only by horse or donkey. Since it is difficult to reach these people, it is important to educate them as quickly and as economically as possible.

The Mexican government realizes the implications of research that shows students learn faster when they are instructed in their native language. Studies in Mexico (Modiano, 1966), Canada (Lambert and Tucker, 1972), and the United States (Zappert and Cruz, 1977) all conclude that bilingual education is beneficial to students.

Several years ago, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) began developing materials based on the work of Paulo Freire, in which students become literate by first learning 17 or 18 words in their native language that contain all the sounds of that language. The words have special meaning to their culture and center on adult occupations, animals, food, or holidays. These words are printed in a primer and a picture is attached. Students discuss each word, divide the word into syllables to make new words, and continue this process until they learn all the basic words. In about six weeks, students can read the newspaper and write simple letters. After they become literate, they are introduced to Spanish words. By teaching literacy first in the native language, students learn about symbol-sound relationships, left-to-right progression, the concept of sentences, and the idea that words are printed speech (Miller, 1982).

Four years ago, the Mexican government recognized the success that INI was having with bilingual education and created a department within the Ministry of Education. The original textbooks produced by INI were replaced with full-color textbooks, teachers manuals, and specific goals and objectives for the teachers.

As of June 1982, the Mexican Ministry of Education had developed primers in 40 languages and 30 dialects (Torres, 1982). The series begins with a book without words in which students manipulate pictures and numbers to learn reading readiness skills such as shapes, color, and direction.

The Mexican government is committed to improving literacy among the non-Spanish-speaking population. Through the use of bilingual textbooks and specially trained bilingual teachers, Mexicans who speak a variety of languages and dialects are learning how to read and write in Spanish as well as in their native languages.

References

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Bilingual Education in Mexico

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coupled with vague goals, led to a proliferation of programs with disparate goals, methods, and means of evaluation.

Then came the controversy over "optimals," often fueled by people who were not even directly involved in bilingual education. The controversy elicited the xenophobic fears of the cultural uniformists and the liberal platitudes of the cultural pluralists. The uniformists emphasize the program's threat of political divisiveness; the pluralists stressed the potential for a utopian multilingual society. Neither the fears of one group nor the expectations of the other were grounded in reality.

In the process, little attention was focused on the real issues of academic progress for non-English-speaking students and the acquisition of a second language by monolingual English speakers. Instead, lawmakers have gone along with the political mood of the country, have heeded the false warnings of the conservative cultural uniformists, and have moved to curtail bilingual education.

Perhaps by the next swing of the political pendulum, further research on bilingual education will provide a stronger base for the program. In the meantime, there should be an ongoing effort to increase minority and majority parents' understanding and acceptance of bilingual education as a beneficial educational experience for their children. The challenge for the 80s is thus two-fold: to develop strong community support while continuing the effort at both the state and national levels; and to further substantiate the educational advantages for bilingual education for all students and articulate its particular benefits for LEP students in terms of social and economic gains. While we must keep foremost in mind that the battleground has perhaps moved to the local level, we must also remember bilingual education's potential for meaningful national educational reform.

References


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