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**Understanding Bilingual Education—or The Sheep in Wolf’s Clothing**

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The education of language-minority students must be approached with caution and objectivity; there is more than one answer to this issue. I have several reasons for wanting to reply to Gersten and Woodward’s article, not the least of which is that they quoted me directly and promised in the same breath to show the world that my remarks were totally without foundation.

A more unselfish reason for my interest, however, concerns the article’s “potential to divide and disrupt a germinating field”—bilingual education (Willig, 1981-82, p. 7). It is one thing to attempt to prove and celebrate the fact that a program has been effective in fulfilling the educational needs of linguistic minority children; it is quite another to suggest, by quoting from the AIR report (Danoff, 1978) and Baker and de Kanter (1984), that this program has succeeded for the very same reasons that bilingual education has failed. In addition, I am disturbed by Gersten and Woodward’s apparent lack of understanding of the purpose of bilingual education and the nature of bilingual education programs (Willig, p. 1). If we in the field of bilingual education have not suc-
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On one level, their article makes fine inspirational reading. If what Gersten and Woodward have reported is true, then we should be gratified that an instructional program is having remarkable success. Problems arise, however, when the authors propose to show that two examples (even successful ones) of what they call "structured immersion" are enough to build a case not for structured immersion but against bilingual education.

Proceeding Cautiously and Professionally
Perhaps we should begin with the least serious charge, as it is the easiest to refute. I was fairly sure of my facts when I said that the immersion method has only been tried with middle-class children in Canada, but in the interest of accuracy I did some further checking and came across the following statement by Dolson (1984, p. 3):

...immersion programs have not been implemented with language minority students. Essentially, the participants in Canadian immersion programs have been students who linguistically, socially, and economically enjoy majority group status.

Dolson adds that "virtually no systematic information is available concerning the use of immersion education for language minority students" (p. 5).

Gersten and Woodward also claim that "despite the documented success of the immersion model in Canada, the majority of bilingual educators are adamantly opposed to its use in the U.S." It would have been much easier to agree with them if they had said that we are violently opposed to immersion's misuse. As Dolson (1984) indicates, "educators in the United States, impressed by the favorable reports from Canada, have expressed interest in immersion education" (p. 1), but they want to be sure of the implications.

In fact, the Office of Bilingual Education of California commissioned a
publication to "address immersion education as it has been or is projected to be implemented in Canada and in the United States, both in its classical as well as divergent forms.... The focus of the papers will be on the applicability of immersion programs for language minority students" (Studies in Immersion, 1984, p. 2). Thus, responsible bilingual educators, including those who pioneered immersion programs in Canada, far from discouraging anyone from exploring the applicability of immersion to U.S. contexts, welcome experimentation but urge us to proceed cautiously and professionally. Genesee (1984, p. 53) best exemplifies this concern:

Successful implementation of an immersion program for a particular group of children requires more than knowing when to teach students using a second language. More important, it involves knowing which sociocultural conditions and educational approaches will facilitate their learning. To recreate these conditions and implement these approaches to facilitate academic and language learning among minority language children will require more than changing the names of the languages involved. Indeed, this task may require changing the basic structure of immersion education as it is known to apply to majority language children.

Perhaps my greatest concern is the authors' indiscriminate use of the term immersion (and structured immersion, whatever that might be), particularly in referring to the Canadian model. Their proclamation that "structured immersion appears to be a viable alternative to transitional bilingual education" is like saying that pancakes are a viable alternative to breakfast. As Genesee (1984) points out, "immersion education is a type of bilingual education in which a second language (or second languages) is used along with the students' first language [emphasis added] for curriculum instruction during some part of the students' elementary and/or secondary schooling" (p. 32). Furthermore, the claim made by presumed advocates of immersion that compensatory education models are best suited to meet the needs of low-income, linguistic minority students is ample proof of their unfamiliarity with immersion models. Genesee tells us that the major goals of immersion programs have always been:

1. To provide participating students with functional competence in the second language.
2. To promote and maintain normal levels of first language development (not mentioned once by Gersten and Woodward).
3. To ensure achievement in academic subjects commensurate with the students' academic ability and grade level.
4. To instill in students an understanding of and appreciation for the target language group and their language and culture without detracting in any way from the students' identity with and appreciation for the home language and culture (p. 32).

Obviously some of these goals are incompatible with those of compensatory education models.

Research and Reality

The authors' uncritical acceptance of Baker and de Kanter's contention that "transitional bilingual education has had minimal success, that there is no empirical evidence to support its use" (p. 2) and that immersion is superior to bilingual education demonstrates a gross misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of bilingual education programs in the United States. They do not seem to acknowledge that "in real life, bilingual education programs come in many shapes and forms" (Willig, 1981-82, p. 6), and that "depending on where one draws the line to differentiate program types, U.S. immersion programs may very well fall within the realm of bilingual education" (p. 7). It is thus of little value to imply that there is a clear-cut distinction between bilingual education and the type of immersion program that has been conducted in the U.S. (as Gersten and Woodward can attest since by their own description the Uvalde program has been liberally sprinkled with doses of bilingual "enhancement"). Approaching the problems from an ethnographic perspective, Burns (1981-82) makes essentially the same point when he says that the success or failure of bilingual education programs "cannot be measured in absolute terms because the programs exist in many social fields each with its own configuration of attitudes and values associated with bilingualism as an ideology or a cultural strategy" (p. 48).
A second problem associated with Baker and de Kanter’s judgment of bilingual programs is their conclusion that transitional bilingual education has been ineffective primarily because the children in these programs do no better (but no worse, incidentally) in English language skills and in math achievement than children in traditional programs (Willig, pp. 3–4). The absence of differences between the two groups in these two measures is considered a failure by these researchers, who attach no value to the children’s performance in other subject matter areas such as science, social studies, native language arts, and native language reading, as well as self-concept and dropout rates (Willig, p. 4). Such a narrow focus may be appropriate in the necessarily contrived world of research but is of little value in the real world of children.

The Proper Perspective
Ultimately, we should be thankful for articles like this because they give us the opportunity to put matters in perspective. I have no desire to quarrel with the specific evaluation results emanating from the two programs Gersten and Woodward describe, even if I do have reservations about the methodology (for example, the absence of comparison groups in the Uvalde program, which by Baker and de Kanter’s standards would invalidate the results) and the interpretation of the results (comparing the acquisition of reading proficiency between early elementary and late elementary students). Such articles make us realize that there is still a significant segment of the American public who does not fully understand the nature and purpose of bilingual education; who judges programmatic efforts on behalf of linguistic and cultural minority populations from a dangerously narrow perspective.

I appreciate and applaud the authors’ attitude at the end of the article, where they identify their report as an attempt to “really understand what constitutes effective instruction for language minority students” and recognize that the implementation of instructional models, whatever the type, is easier said than done. For this reason, we should recognize the excellent work coming out of the California Office of Bilingual Education, which in the past few years has developed a series of extremely useful documents (Studies on Immersion Education, 1984, Schooling and Language Minority Students: A Theoretical Framework, 1981) on the education of language-minority populations. The quality, objectivity, and professionalism of these publications should be emulated, for they recognize without bias that there is more than one answer to the same problem:

For students who are native speakers of English, immersion education has been shown to be an enrichment program which will improve students’ academic achievement, language development, and psycho-social adjustment in addition to fostering high levels of bilingual skills. Conversely, programs given in the mother tongue of language minority students have been shown to achieve similar outcomes for that group of students (Dolson, p. 6).

Planning and Implementing Educational Programs
I would urge everyone concerned with the effective and humane education of linguistic minority students to seriously consider and utilize the seven principles proposed by Dolson (1984, p. 4) for planning and implementing educational (not merely language) programs for all children:

1. Under optimal schooling conditions, on the average, students realize the full academic benefits of their bilingualism only after four to seven years of appropriate instructional treatment.

2. Bilingually schooled students, at times, even under the very best conditions, may initially lag behind their monolingually schooled counterparts in some literacy-based skills. After three or four years, they begin to catch up; and by six or seven years, they equal and commonly surpass their monolingually schooled counterparts.

3. When the instructional treatment is adequately designed and appropriately matched to local sociolinguistic realities, native speakers of a majority language may be schooled in a second language for an average of approximately 50 to 75 percent of the time from K-12 with no detrimental effects on their academic achievement and native language development. Conversely, it may also be predicted that many language minority students in
the United States could be schooled in their native language for an average of 50 to 75 percent of the time from K-12 as an appropriate means to promote their normal academic achievement, high levels of English language proficiency, adequate psychosocial adjustment, and satisfactory native language development.

4. In formal schooling contexts, additive forms of bilingualism are best achieved through the separate use of two languages. That is, as students are instructed in both their first and second languages, steps are taken so that students are exposed to each language at different times and for distinct purposes.

5. To avoid cognitive confusion and greatly increase learning efficiency, program staff should provide initial literacy instruction in bilingual settings in a sequential manner. That is, basic literacy skills should be developed through one language before reading instruction is introduced in the other language.

6. Underachievers and students with learning disabilities seem to experience no detrimental effects from bilingual instruction. When such children receive bilingual schooling, their academic achievement and native language development are similar to those of their counterparts in monolingual programs.

7. Formal second language instruction, even when provided under optimal conditions, appears to be insufficient to develop all of the language skills needed by second language acquirers. Some amount of exposure through natural social interaction is also required.

References

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Response to Santiago
Russell Gersten and John Woodward

Empirical data support the use of structured immersion with Hispanic and Asian students in the U.S.; can Santiago claim the same for transitional bilingual education?

We disagree with Santiago on several points. First, there were four studies other than the St. Lambert study, all of which involved children from working-class families. The results of structured immersion with these students were comparable to those found with the middle-class children in the St. Lambert study. Second, our range of measures was not as narrow as Santiago suggests; our achievement battery included science and language as well as reading and math. Further, we provided data showing improved high school attendance, fewer retentions, and a reduced dropout rate. Our studies included a measure of student adjustment and achievement after transition into a regular English language classroom had been made, and one study (Becker and Gersten, 1982) followed the students for seven full years—the criteria suggested by Santiago as a sign of true effectiveness.

The results we presented seem to demonstrate that structured English immersion, when sensibly implemented, is, a worst, not harmful to low-income Hispanic or Asian students. We urge researchers and educators to focus more attention on what is happen-