

**Case Studies of Minority Students
in a
Transitional Bilingual Education Program**

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The educational system in many of our schools fails to meet the academic needs of minority students. The dramatic shifts in student demographics are demanding changes in the ways we are teaching them. It is essential to understand the long term effects of our past educational practices and bilingual programs. Research indicates that there are many academic, historical, socioeconomic and language factors that can contribute to minority students' success in schools. This research looked into the factors that have influenced the academic success or failure of native Spanish speaking students who were placed in monolingual English instruction programs in their early schooling. The project presents five case

studies of these students over thirteen years in one district. The students' case histories reflect many of the same academic and social problems encountered by minority students in our school system. The parents' lack of formal educational experiences provided limited home support for the students. The families' and students' language and cultural backgrounds were in conflict with the school district's focused method of delivering academic instruction. The students' academic history showed the limited academic skills learned through their English instruction. Test scores did not show a steady upward growth of skills and students never reached parity with their English speaking peers.

Chapter 1

Bilingual Education in the Classroom

My First Class

On August 24, 1988, I began a career in education assigned to a transitional bilingual first grade classroom at Vandalia Elementary School. The enrollment was seven hundred and twenty-five students and the school year was on a traditional schedule, (Sept.-June), with a teaching staff of twenty-seven teachers, as well as fifteen support staff personnel. The growing number of both main stream

and language minority students required the district to make changes in the housing and educational program for the students. The school, located directly across the street from the local community college and along side a middle-school campus, had an ethnic population consisting of Hispanic, Hmong, Lao, Native America Indians and White students. In 1988 California was experiencing an increase of limited

English proficient students. The reported number of LEP students in 1987 was at 613,224 students in California public schools. In kindergarten through third grades there were 291,719 students (Loide, 1991).

With a background in bilingual education I understood the difference among programs such as, immersion, early-exit, late-exit transitional bilingual and the academic success of bilingual students in such programs. During this first year, I had to draw from my previous preschool work experiences as well as from my academic training in bilingual education at California State University, Chico.

My class that year began with twenty-nine students, but by the end of the school year, a total of forty-two students had been enrolled in the class during the year. There were two months when the class enrollment had increased to thirty students. Twenty-five students were in the classroom the entire school year. Fourteen students had stayed from a few days to a month; then they were either moved to other schools or their families moved out of the district. The initial make-up of the class consisted of eleven English learners, nine bilingual speakers and nine monolingual English speakers. Ten of the students had been together in a bilingual kindergarten and then moved into the bilingual first grade. Six additional students had been at Vandalia's other kindergarten classes but although they were English speakers, they were moved into the bilingual setting in first grade by parent request. The parents' expectations were that their children would read in English but would learn to speak Spanish in this bilingual setting. The thirteen remaining

students were a combination of new students or transfer students from neighboring schools which lacked space in their school campus during the enrollment period. These transfer students were placed on a waiting list and the parents could move students back to their neighborhood schools when there was an opening in first grade at that site.

In my classroom, I had a bilingual assistant for one hour and an English speaking assistant for three and a half hours in the mornings. In the area of curriculum, the district had bilingual text books for the math and reading programs but lacked Spanish primary language text books in the areas of science and social studies. There were virtually no primary language library books in either the library or the classrooms. Staff development for the year consisted of a grade level expectancies booklet and six hours of training in writing lesson plans following the district's policy. The district had just adopted its Spanish reading program so the certificated bilingual teachers received two hours of training on the use of the program. All other support related to curriculum needs came from teachers helping each other on the campus.

I had started the school year expecting to apply my background experience to this bilingual transitional program setting. The school was following the district's policy to move students into main-stream English classrooms by the third school year. The district's plan on paper sounded easy but in application it had many problems. This policy was in direct conflict with the needs of the minority students who

needed academic instruction in their primary language beyond the second grade in school.

By December of that first school year, our school staff was informed that we were going to a year-round calendar in July of 1989. The changes, using the existing classrooms and adding six teachers to the staff, would allow Vandalia School to house a total of one thousand students. This information required changes in my approach to teaching the academic areas and using the minority students' primary language for instruction. The problem was complicated by the year-round calendar and its tracking of students by the academic calendar chosen by their parents at the time of enrollment at the school. District-wide English speaking students would be allowed to change into any of four calendar tracks.

At Vandalia School English learners were directed to the Red Track where the only two bilingual teachers had been assigned. Therefore, I began to look at the students' future academic needs. It was clear that the English speaking students were not going to stay in the bilingual track where they were allowed more time to develop their English reading while they acquired the Spanish language. Many would be moving into the monolingual English tracks starting in second grade. It was important to assure that fluent English speakers be at the same exiting level in English reading as their counterparts in other first grade classes. Lacking the program training on the district's adopted English reading series, I found it necessary to talk to and observe school site teachers in the first and second

grades to learn the reading program for both grade levels.

The academic needs of the English learners in second grade were of great concern to me because there were no other bilingual teachers beyond first grade assigned to the bilingual track. Teachers were told that students needing further primary instruction could be transferred to the other school sites in the district; Olive Street and Doyle School. It seemed necessary to visit the bilingual schools that would be receiving my students as second graders.

Although the two schools approached the publishers' goals differently, at the same time, they had many of the same concerns regarding the needs of students. The bilingual teachers found that the material presented was beyond their students' comprehension levels. They were also in great need of primary language literacy materials that would support first and second language literacy development (Freeman and Freeman, 1997). In addition, there was a lack of qualified bilingual staff to fill each grade level. Placement of teaching staff had been according to the calendar track that the teachers' chose to teach during the year-round adoption phase at each site. The needs of the students were a second consideration and students were placed on a track where most of the bilingual staff was assigned to Red or Blue Tracks. Because of all these complications, some of the students could be placed with a bilingual Spanish speaking teacher in first grade, then have a monolingual English speaking teacher in the second grade, then find themselves in a bilingual setting again in the third grade.

In July of 1989, the school year was opened with the Red Track designated as the bilingual track. There were bilingual teachers in kindergarten and first grade with monolingual English teachers in second through sixth grades. My twenty-seven first graders moved into second grade in the following tracks. Thirteen of the English learners

were placed with Miss Morgan, a French and English speaking teacher on Red track. Five of the monolingual English speakers were moved into the other three tracks. Six of the advanced bilingual speaking students also moved out of bilingual Red track. Three students were moved to other schools in the district.

Going Beyond the First Grade

In the second year of our program a second grade teacher with four years of bilingual teaching experience was hired. The two of us developed a personal and professional team effort in order to help both sets of first graders and second graders in our bilingual classrooms. We spent time discussing the first graders progress in my class and the strengths and weaknesses bilingual students demonstrated entering the second grade. Her professional opinion was important in order to make changes to my approach to working with the minority students. I found that this helped to improve my teaching strategies, and it reaffirmed my belief in giving students academic instruction using their primary language.

I wanted this year to be a positive experience for all my students. English speakers were learning basic communication skills and academic terms in Spanish. English learners were hearing academic English and practicing oral English communication skills with their classmates. All the students were expected to meet District's grade level expectancies. Academic content was presented in both languages in order to meet the learning needs of the students. Students were comfortable working and

learning from each other in the classroom and on the play ground.

As the school year progressed, I wondered if the academic growth in both classes would continue when students entered the third grade. There was no bilingual teacher assigned to the third grade. The problem was that the bilingual students in the Red track were going into classrooms with English speaking teachers and classrooms lacked curriculum materials in their primary language. After second grade, these students were not receiving comprehensible instruction. Meeting the recent arriving English learners academic needs was not seen as a problem beyond the second grade. Krashen's theory "draws a distinction between language acquisition and language learning". "We acquire language when we understand it" (p. 101). "The key factor is comprehensible input: messages in the second language that makes sense" (Crawford, 1991, p. 101-102). The older English learners in Vandalia's school were not acquiring English because they could not understand the instruction.

Statement of the Problem

In each of the following years, the makeup of my class was changing to include more Spanish speakers to the point that it created a monolingual Spanish classroom with students at different levels of English learning. Changes in the educational system came very slowly and without the school wide support; it was hard to implement teaching methods that best support the academic progress of language minority students.

The educational system in many of our schools failed to meet the academic needs of language minority students. The past practice that the educational system had in place was a transitional bilingual model with the primary goal of having the students learn English in three years. Many educators, those outside of bilingual education, fail to understand “the relationship between language proficiency and bilingual students’ academic progress” (Cummins, 1996, p. 55). Cummins’ work and that of other investigators clarify the “distinction between contextualized and decontextualized language as fundamental to understanding the nature of children’s language and literacy development” (Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukoma, 1976; Bruner, 1975; Olson, 1977; Donaldson, 1978, as cited in Cummins 1996, p. 56). Bilingual students require more than three years to develop first language proficiency and the academic language of English. Studies by Collier (1987, 1989) have shown that immigrant students require five to seven years to reach national norms in reading, social studies and science. By reviewing the different bilingual models, I intend to use the

information to explain the failure or success of students that have spent the twelve years in our educational system. This information is important to help adopt appropriate curriculum approaches to use in the classroom.

There are many factors that influence the degree of academic success of bilingual students. These factors are not limited to the school system; but also reflect social attitudes in the community and family structure as influences on minority student success in the schools. Cortes’s (1986) contextual interaction model suggests that failure of students is the result of an interaction of social, educational, and psychological factors that influence individuals as they live in the community, the school, and their homes. Cultures are dynamic, always changing, so they interact with each other rather than match or mismatch. Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986) note that some minority groups do better than others in the school setting. They attempt to account for these differences by differentiating minorities groups as “immigrant, caste-like, and autonomous minorities”. It is with these constructs in mind that I have chosen to research the twelve years of academic progress of students in my first bilingual class.

It is essential to understand the long term effect of our past transitional bilingual program at my school site. The purpose of this research is to take an in depth look at the factors that have influenced the academic success of minority students who are placed in transitional bilingual programs. In this thesis I will answer the question: To what degree did the academic instruction

in primary language support the

academic growth of students?

Historical Factors

In the United States, as well as in California, the educational institutions have not been structured to accommodate minority students. They are organized to meet the industrial and economic needs of the country and the state. This economic focus has caused the continuing separation and inequality of education programs. It has instilled in all phases of our American culture the existence of social classes based on racial and religious differences. The dominant social attitude has been that minority students did not have the intelligence, attitude or economic need to be educated (Spring, 1994, 1997). Social attitudes and educational focus are in the power and control of the policy-makers who finance schools at the state and national levels of government. Decisions made in the political arena are not meant to meet the needs of all students, thus creating our educational class system.

Bond (1981) presents his general explanations of the poor academic achievement by non-mainstream children dividing explanations into three categories “(1) the genetic argument, (2) the cultural argument, and (3) the class analysis argument” (p. 16). As the educational system has failed to meet the needs of minority students, the public as well as the educational institution have shifted the blame to the family’s lack of

support and the students’ lack of the English language when they entered school. In order to understand the complex reasons why minority students are academically failing, one needs to understand the history of education including the history of equality. (Bond as cited in Valdéz, 1996).

The struggle for equality has focused on the civil rights of women and minority groups. Educational and employment opportunities continue to be closed for many in these two groups. Educational rights have had to be won in both the political and social arenas; “Both groups struggle for equal political power, equal access to economic opportunities, equal treatment and access to social institutions, and equality of educational opportunity” (Spring, 1994, p.110). It is easy to see how the ruling majority has had the opportunity to gain control over the lives of women and minorities through the educational setting. Changes required improving the educational programs for women and minority students have been enforced only after court ruling.

Present Setting of Bilingual Students

The dramatic shifts in student demographics are demanding changes in the ways we are teaching language minority students. These changes have resulted in a stronger political effort to take away the educational gains made in the education of minority students in the California's educational system. The education of minority students is seen as a political and economic threat to those who are dependent on the cheap labor force that has existed in the past. The economic slavery of minority groups had been fixed by the education system. Society has managed to blame minority students and their families for their failure in our present educational system. Second language learners learning English but struggling academically are blamed for their lack of success. Cummins explains that the school system follows this line of reasoning. Because bilingual students are fluent in English, their poor academic performance and/or test scores cannot be attributed to the lack of proficiency in English. Therefore, these students must either have deficient cognitive abilities or be poorly motivated (Cummins, 1996, p. 55).

At my school site, there are now bilingual teachers on Red Track and support staff throughout our kindergarten through sixth grade

classrooms. However, it is necessary to review our past teaching strategies to evaluate what we should do next. We cannot teach effectively utilizing the past teaching methods that have failed to meet the learning styles of minority students. Further staff development and training is necessary to insure that the most effective teaching methods implemented are based on current and sound research data.

Today's classroom teacher should be a researcher and scholar. This concept refers to the "action research" by teachers into their own classroom practices (Freeman and Freeman, 1994). The teacher as researcher model assumes that part of the satisfaction of teaching is the active participation in the development of new methods of instruction and the creation of new classroom materials. "Teachers assume the responsibility of judging their teaching methods, experimenting with and evaluating new methods, and actively exploring new methods of instruction by working with other teachers and seeking advice from university researchers and scholarly publications" (p. 57). Classroom teachers are the best source of information about teaching and that their share experiences provide a method of improving instruction (Spring, 1994).

Mona Romandia's Masters Thesis presents extensive research on the progress of five students over a period of thirteen years. We will continue publishing Mona's research in future Journal editions. Mona is a veteran teacher in the Porterville School District in Tulare County. Email: eldragon@charter.net