

# **Parents' Lack of Understanding of Their Children's Bilingual Education Program**

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## **Abstract**

This study provides information about 19 families that have children enrolled in a bilingual kindergarten class in the Spring Branch Independent School District in Houston, Texas. This paper concerns the parents' understanding of the bilingual program their children attend. The study revealed that a miniscule number of parents are familiar with the practices and policies in place at their children's school and that their expectations for English-language instruction vary widely from what is actually happening in the classroom.

## **Introduction**

I am a first-year teacher of a bilingual kindergarten class in Houston's Spring Branch School District. I have 19 students, all of whom took the Idea Proficiency Test (IPT)—a test of oral language skills that can be given in English or Spanish—to determine eligibility for the program, and their parents had to sign a consent form for their participation in a bilingual education classroom. Before I began teaching, I was given training on the bilingual model adopted at my school. Our bilingual model is a late-exit maintenance model. This implies that the focus is to develop the student's native language, using it as the primary language of instruction. English is introduced slowly, and children are not transitioned until they have attained cognitive academic language proficiency in English. Our model begins in pre-K and remains in place until fifth grade, when students should be prepared to learn in an all-English environment in middle school. The English as a Second Language (ESL) component in kindergarten is to constitute 30% of daily instruction at least 4 days a week, while the remaining 70% is taught in Spanish. Again, all of the content-area subjects (i.e., reading, writing, math, social studies, and

science) are taught in Spanish. Kindergarten students are not expected to read and write in English; thus, teachers' primary focus in ESL is on developing students' oral competency in English. During this time, the ESL component can take any shape; it can be a formal 45-minute block, or it can be integrated into other content areas. However, we are provided with a comprehensive ESL scope and sequence that must be met each year so that the students will be prepared for the following year.

Goldenburg's (1989) research reveals the importance of parental involvement in the school. Children whose parents are involved in school have more positive attitudes about school, have improved attendance, and show better homework habits than children whose parents are not involved (Epstein, 1985). The parents at my school are not involved in their children's schooling. This may be attributed to a number of reasons: their low socioeconomic status, low academic achievement, and other factors that make the school an undesirable place for my students' parents. Perhaps some are deterred from participating because they had bad experiences in school (or possibly never attended school), are not legally in this country, or do not speak English or write English or Spanish.

Regardless of the reason, there is a gap in communication and understanding of school programs that must be bridged so these at-risk kindergarten students can meet their full potential. Therefore, I feel it is very important to find out what parents' expectations are for their children's education in the bilingual program. The purpose of my study was to determine parents' preconceived notions of the program so that I can devise a plan to get parents informed about and involved in their children's education. In this study, I found that my students' parents were not involved and were not educated about the program.

## **Method**

Because I am primarily concerned with the situation at my school for the purposes of this study, all of the participants came from my own class and the class of the teacher next door, Mrs. Hilda Melkus, another bilingual kindergarten teacher. All of the children live in apartments near the school. All of the students in both of our classes receive free lunch, and they are all Hispanic.

To conduct the study, I sent home questionnaires with the 39 students in the two classes (my 19 students and the other teacher's 20 students). Nineteen families responded with completed questionnaires. The questionnaire included a letter (see Appendix A), in Spanish, with an explanation and directions, the questionnaire itself, and an envelope with my name and room number. The questionnaire was designed to be completely anonymous. The questions

were formulated to gather background information on each family and to discern parents' attitudes toward the English language and its usefulness to their child. It was also important to find out what the parents thought was actually happening in the classroom and what they thought *should* be happening in respect to literacy and English-language acquisition. (See Appendix B for the questions posed to parents.)

## Results

As I expected, I found that all of the parents are immigrants to this country. Seventeen of the nineteen families who responded are from Mexico, one is from Nicaragua, and one is from El Salvador. Ten of the students were born in the United States, and nine were born elsewhere. All of the subjects reported that they speak primarily Spanish at home.

All of the parents responded that it is very important for their children to speak English, many stating that it is the "official" language of the land and that it will be beneficial to the children's future. When asked which language is more important for their children to learn, eight parents stated that English is more important, ten stated that both are equally important, and one parent declined to answer. Every parent thought that bilingualism is positive. When asked what bilingual education is and what the goals are, ten parents responded that it is a program designed to teach both English and Spanish, four parents thought that it is a program designed to teach English, and five parents declined to respond. Thirteen parents believe it is good to teach the children to read and write in Spanish first, two thought that it is good as long as English is being taught simultaneously, two thought it is a bad practice, and two declined to answer.

When asked how much class time is dedicated to teaching English in the classroom, one parent knew that it is 30%, twelve did not know, one said 15%, two thought that it was done all day, two believed it was done for half of the day, and one thought that it was done for 2 hours a day (25% of the 8-hour school day). When asked how much of the day *should* be dedicated to English-language instruction, two of the parents believed English should be taught all day, six believed instruction should be half in English and half in Spanish, four believed that between 1 and 2 hours is sufficient, three said that the teacher should use his or her discretion, and four parents did not know. Finally, when asked in which grade their child would stop speaking Spanish completely, the parents gave surprising responses. One person responded that the children would stop speaking Spanish in second grade, three people believed it to be in the third grade, three in the fourth grade, two in the fifth, and one in the sixth, while nine stated they did not know.

## Implications

This study has important implications for administrators and classroom teachers. Because of the paucity of participants, its primary function is to lead the way to more extensive research on the matter. However, in this instance, conclusions can be drawn about this particular school and district. It is clear that the parents are not aware of the school and district policies in regard to bilingual education. Of the 19 families I surveyed, only one knew the percentage of time students are taught in English and Spanish. Only two people knew when the children would be exited from the program. More importantly, the parents' wishes for the bilingual program, as expressed in their opinions of how much time should be dedicated to English-language instruction, are not being met. This is evidence of a serious and problematic lack of communication between the school and the parents. The district provides a brief description of the bilingual education program on the Internet (Spring Branch Independent School District, n.d.), but it does not provide any percentages of time as to when instruction is in English or in the native language, nor does it describe the theory of bilingual education. This is not enough. The people to whom this service is provided, that is, recent immigrants who do not speak English, cannot be expected to have access to or knowledge of a computer in order to read this information. I propose that my school, and all others with a bilingual program, take measures to inform the parents and the community about the district bilingual education policies. Schools should have a bilingual program "education night" every year in which the program is outlined for the parents, and materials are distributed in Spanish that describe the benefits of bilingual education for their children as well as information on how to support the program in the home. It is also important to share the most current research on the long-term benefits of bilingual education with parents so that they feel more confident about their child's education and their decision to utilize this resource. Thus, by educating parents about the benefits of bilingual education, parents can become community advocates of bilingual programs.

Furthermore, if administrators are not prepared to take this step, it is our responsibility as teachers and as advocates for bilingual education to educate the parents and the community to the best of our ability. Teachers can visit their students' homes and talk with each parent about the program so that parents will know what to expect from the school. Teachers can address this issue during open houses and in classroom newsletters. Teachers can make a point of distributing copies of recent scholarly articles to parents and fellow educators and set aside an hour after school in which parents can come and discuss the research and implications of the materials. Teachers can also give talks on the program at local community centers.

In conclusion, as teachers, we all strive to bring our parents into the classroom so that our students can have the best possible chances for success. The best way to include parents who are marginalized because of language and socioeconomic barriers is to start by educating them by whatever means available so that these barriers do not perpetuate ignorance about and alienation from the educational system.

## References

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## Appendix A

### Letter sent to parents

5 octubre 2002

Estimados padres de familia,

Estoy haciendo una encuesta acerca de las creencias e impresiones de los padres acerca de nuestro programa de educacion bilingue. Estoy muy interesada en sus opinions acerca de lo que esta pasando en el salon de clase de su hijo/a y tambien acerca de lo que Ud. cree que debe de estar pasando. Favor de encontrar junto a esta carta un cuestionario disenado para darles a ustedes, los padres de familia, la oportunidad de expresar sus opinions, alabanzas y dudas al respeto. Usare la infomacion que Ud. me proporciona para desarrollar sugerencias para juntas venideras con la administracion de nuestra escuela.

Le invito a llenar el cuestionario lo tanto posible, pero no se sienta obligado a contestar algo que le hace sentir incomodo. Este cuestionario es completamente anonimo y no habra ningunas consecuencias por participar en el. Nadie de la administracion ni ningun otro maestro vera sus contestaciones y no seran jamas asociadas con Ud., ni con su hijo/a. Para asegurar la anonimidad del cuestionario, favor de NO poner su nombre, ni el de su hijo/a en el sobre ni en ningun otro de los papeles que va entregar. Cuando Ud. ha terminado de llenarlo, favor de encerrar el cuestionario en el sobre proporcionado y dejarlo en la oficina o lo puede mandar a la escuela con su hijo/a. Yo pondre todos los sobres en una caja y los abrire al mismo tiempo. Les ruego que me los manden de regreso antes de 19 de octubre, 2002.

Agradezco muchisimo su participacion en este asunto. Juntos podemos lograr hacer esta escuela el mejor lugar posible para nuestros ninos.

Sinceramente,  
Cherie Sheffer

[English Translation]

October 5, 2002

Dear Parents,

I am currently conducting a survey to determine the perceptions and beliefs regarding our bilingual program that are held by parents of children in the program. I am very interested in your opinions about what is happening in your child's classroom right now and what you believe *should* be happening. Please find attached to this letter a questionnaire designed to give you, the parents, the opportunity to express your opinions, praise and concerns about current practices. I will use the information you provide to develop suggestions for future meetings with administration.

I invite you to fill out the questionnaire as completely as possible, but do not feel obligated to answer questions that make you feel uncomfortable. This is an anonymous questionnaire and there will be absolutely no recriminations for negative comments shared in the questionnaire. No one in the administration will see your response and the response will never be associated with you or your child. To help ensure the anonymity of this survey, please do **not** put your name or your child's name on any sheet of paper or the envelope. After you have finished, please seal the questionnaire in the envelope provided and either drop it at the front office or you may send it to school with your child. All of the envelopes will be placed in a box and will be opened at the same time. I request that all of the questionnaires please be returned to me no later than October 19, 2002.

I appreciate your cooperation in this project. Together we can make our school the best possible place for our children to learn!

Sincerely,

Cherie Sheffer

## Appendix B

### Questionnaire Sent to Parents

1. ¿Dónde nació usted?
2. ¿Dónde nació su hijo/a?
3. ¿Qué idioma habla su familia en casa?
4. ¿Es importante que su hijo/a aprenda inglés? ¿Por qué?
5. ¿Es más importante que su hijo/a hable inglés o español? ¿Por qué?
6. ¿Está bien ser bilingüe? ¿Por qué?
7. ¿Qué es la educación bilingüe? ¿Cuáles son las metas del programa?
8. ¿Cuáles beneficios tiene este programa para su hijo/a?
9. ¿Qué tiene de malo este programa para su hijo/a?
10. ¿Por qué enseñan a los niños a leer y escribir en español primero? ¿Esto está bien o mal en su opinión?
11. ¿Cuánto tiempo diario dedican al inglés en la clase de su hijo/a?
12. ¿Cuánto tiempo deben de dedicar al inglés en su clase?
13. ¿En qué grado dejarán de hablar español por completo?
14. ¿Le importa la etnicidad de la maestra de su hijo/a? ¿Prefiere que la maestra sea de origen hispano? ¿Por qué?
15. ¿Por qué hay tanta gente en contra de la educación bilingüe?
16. ¿Cuáles son sus metas educativas para su hijo/a? ¿Ud. espera que su hijo/a vaya a la universidad?



### **[English Translation]**

1. Where were you born?
2. Where was your son/daughter born?
3. What language does your family speak at home?
4. Is it important that your child learn English? Why?
5. Is it more important that your child speak English or Spanish? Why?
6. Is it good to be bilingual? Why?
7. What is bilingual education? What are the goals of the program?
8. What benefits does this program have for your child?
9. What negative effects does this program have for your child?
10. Why are the children taught to read and write in Spanish first? Is this good or bad, in your opinion?
11. How much time is dedicated daily to learning English in your child's class?
12. How much time should be dedicated to this every day?
13. In what grade will the class cease to operate in Spanish?
14. Does the ethnicity of the teacher matter to you? Do you prefer a Hispanic teacher? Why?
15. Why are there so many people against bilingual education?
16. What are your educational goals for your child? Do you expect your child to attend college?