

An Administrative Perspective Of A Two-Way Bilingual Immersion Program

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Abstract

This article is an interview of a female Hispanic administrator who has successfully lead the implementation of both a 50/50 and a 90/10 two-way bilingual immersion model in a predominantly Hispanic community in an urban setting. The interview was conducted at the beginning of the fifth and last year of the State Department of Education pilot. Through the interview, the administrator candidly shares her perspective on crucial questions about the implementation of the program. Included in the discussion is information on how the program came about and challenges encountered, as well as the resources and support available for such an endeavor. The administrator's leadership style is then analyzed and described utilizing Blackmore's (1989) leadership model of leadership from a feminist perspective.

Introduction

Two-way bilingual programs have emerged as popular approaches to address limited or non-English proficient minority children. English-speaking students generally comprise 50% of the population in these programs. Each language group maintains and refines its native language while learning each other's language as a second language. Longfellow Elementary, a magnet school for Spanish and the fine arts in the Albuquerque Public Schools, has successfully implemented a two-way bilingual immersion concept for seven years. Unlike the programs generally recognized as two-way bilingual immersion, the program at Longfellow has a different student composition, which drives the direction of the program. Approximately one-fourth of the entering kindergarten students are monolingual Spanish speaking. Another one-fourth are monolingual English speaking. The rest, or 50% of the students, are bilingual, with bilingualism ranging from limited receptivity to fluency in both languages.

For the monolingual Spanish and monolingual English-speaking student, the program strives to develop and/or refine the native language as the child learns English or Spanish as a second language. For the bilingual child, the primary focus is on heritage language recovery and/or retention, as may be the case, while English is further developed and refined. This is done in a natural context, with kindergarten and first grade functioning in a 90/10, Spanish/English ratio. The percentage of Spanish used for instruction gradually decreases by 10% starting at second grade and culminates in a 50/50 ratio of Spanish/English use in delivery of the curriculum by fifth grade.

Before the onset of the two-way bilingual immersion program, Longfellow had been established as the first magnet school in the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS). This came about through an agreement between the community and school district when the school was in danger of closure due to falling enrollment. The magnet focus of Spanish and the fine arts was selected to attract students from outside the residential area and thus increase enrollment.

The purpose of this paper is to involve the reader in a professional conversation between administrators sharing a success story about their schools. The principal interviewed has been at the school eight years, during which time the two-way bilingual immersion concept was initiated. The interview questions are listed here, followed by the administrator's response to each. The administrator being interviewed hopes that some part of her experience may serve another administrator in his/her own school.

Question: How did the two-way bilingual immersion program come about at Longfellow Elementary?

Eight years ago when I came to Longfellow, the school had undergone an intensive evaluation over a period of one and a half years. One area of weakness was the Spanish component in the magnet focus. At the time, Spanish instruction was being delivered through the state-funded program, which required 45 minutes a day of Spanish language instruction with an additional 15 minutes daily of cultural extensions. I set about to study how this situation could be changed to reflect what research indicates about the development of a second language.

The following year, the influx of a larger percentage of Spanish-speaking students in kindergarten than had ever entered Longfellow gave us the "push" we needed to begin re-thinking and reforming our practice. Our kindergarten teachers, although Spanish speakers themselves, came to me and indicated they didn't know how to help these children who only spoke Spanish. They were very willing to do whatever it took, but they needed help. I shared my experiences in bilingual education, and we agreed these children needed to be instructed in Spanish to develop "readiness" skills for literacy. A couple of mothers of two kindergarten students were teachers in Mexico; they agreed to work with the kindergarten teachers to help them learn how to use *el método onomatopéyico* (onomatopoeic method) to form a foundation for literacy in

Spanish. This method is a traditional approach to the teaching of reading used in many Spanish-speaking countries, in particular, Mexico. It is based on a strong phonics approach coupled with reference to concrete objects in teaching the sounds of letters. Each language group of children received their readiness instruction in their native language.

At the end of that year, the teachers did not feel that monolingual Spanish students were ready to go into what was then in place as the progression up the grades—a first/second-grade classroom. We discussed the challenge with the first-grade teachers and brainstormed possibilities for meeting these students' needs. I proposed a 50/50 two-way bilingual immersion model, and one of the first-grade teachers said she'd attempt it if she could have direction and support from me. All the monolingual students, who comprised about 50% of the students, were placed in that class, with permission from their parents. The other half came from families who chose to have their children receive the more intensive instruction in Spanish rather than the 45 minutes a day that was the general practice heretofore.

The combination of highly skilled and dedicated teachers, and very supportive parents, undoubtedly was crucial, if not totally responsible, for the success we had that year. As generally happens, other parents heard about how well those first-grade students were doing. Many kindergarten parents that year asked for their children to also continue into first grade as a 50/50 two-way bilingual immersion cohort. We did lose some students along the way because they moved out of our community. We also added others, at parent request, even as late as fourth grade. These two groups are now sixth and seventh graders. These students were very successful in developing a strong foundation in bilingualism and biliteracy in Spanish and English. The one criticism, which came from both parents and teachers, was that for our population we needed a greater concentration of instruction in Spanish.

The following year, when the state department of education put out requests for proposals (RFP) for the implementation of different models of two-way bilingual immersion, we considered what we had learned through our two 50/50 cohort groups, and we applied to implement a 90/10 model. Our request was approved, and we have been implementing such a model for five years now. We started with kindergarten and first-grade on a 90/10 ratio. Each subsequent year another grade has been added and the Spanish/English ratio adjusted by 10%. This year the original first-grade group is in fifth-grade, receiving their instruction 50% of the time in each language.

Because we are a magnet school for Spanish, we have been able to implement the two-way bilingual immersion model on a school-wide basis. We gradually phased out the 45-minute-a-day Spanish instruction program as we expanded the two-way bilingual immersion, one grade level at a time. At the end of this year, which is the final year of the pilot, the school will be a total two-way bilingual immersion magnet school.

Question: What were the challenges you faced in getting the two-way bilingual immersion program going?

First of all, although families were quite happy with the 50/50 pilot we had under way, there was some alarm expressed when those, who for whatever reason did not stay informed through the planning phase, realized the new pilot would be a 90/10 model. I understood the concerns were legitimate, given the history, in particular, of the predominantly Hispanic residential families. Many of the adults had suffered discrimination and had been punished and prohibited from speaking Spanish when they were in school. In many cases they had made a conscious effort not to teach their children and grandchildren Spanish. In other cases, they had become convinced that bilingualism had no value, that knowing Spanish hindered them from learning English well. And yet in others, the loss of the mother language had happened without them realizing it. In the case of families who were recent immigrants, their goal was for their children to learn English, and they could not see how teaching them predominantly in Spanish could accomplish this goal. Luckily, although there were a number of different reasons why some families opposed the program, the number of families in opposition was small.

I personally sat down and talked with each concerned family. I shared research about successful two-way bilingual immersion efforts in other areas of the nation as well as in other countries (Christian, 1996; Collier, 1992; Lindholm & Aclan, 1991). I gave them literature on research on how our brains function (Restak, 1982; Ornstein & Thompson, 1984), how children learn (Dunn & Dunn, 1978), and on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). I expressed my strong and unwavering conviction, as an educator with 30-plus years of experience, that our children had the capacity to be bilingual and even multilingual if provided support from the family and the school and the appropriate formal instruction and informal experiences. I repeated over and over that our children have the same intellectual capacity as European children who grow up multilingual. As part of the orientation for parents, everyone watched professional videos on two-way bilingual immersion philosophy and practice done by the Center for Applied Linguistics. The final step I took with those families who opposed the program was to ask them to give us a chance to show their children could learn within the program. I asked that they set a time limit, after which we would meet to discuss whether, in fact, their concerns were proven. In the five years of the program, we have yet to have a family say their child was not learning or unable to learn as we were instructing them in the two-way bilingual immersion program. In fact, many expressed a sense of surprise and pride at what their children were accomplishing. And they said their children loved school and their teacher.

A second major challenge was staffing the program. The challenge wasn't in finding personnel, but in being able to move out of crucial levels, personnel who were unable to teach 90%, 80%, etc., of the time in Spanish, but who

were good teachers otherwise. The first two years posed the greatest challenge in this area. Some teachers, who preferred the primary grades but were not sufficiently bilingual, moved on to other schools. Each year, we worked at preparing staff at the next grade level to which the program was advancing. One challenge in staffing that continues to plague us is that of bilingual support personnel such as the librarian, physical education teacher, and special education personnel who are short in availability and high in demand in our district. A final major challenge was informing the community at large, which, although had no children at Longfellow, had strong opinions about what it perceived as an excessive use of Spanish for instruction at “that” school. Among those concerned was a board member (not the representative for our area) who asked for proof that what we were doing was sound. After providing him a detailed description of our program and a large package full of articles on two-way bilingual immersion education, we never heard from him again. It took almost three years before I no longer had to justify the soundness of the program. However, last year when our state began requiring standardized testing beginning at the third grade, we faced another challenge that again required justification of the program. Since we don’t introduce the formal instruction of reading in English until third grade, we felt our third graders weren’t ready to be tested on the Terra Nova in English, but we had to do it anyway. We saw a slight dip in the test scores that year, confirming our concern that the students would not be ready to be tested in English by third grade since the major part of their instruction had been through Spanish. On the Spanish *La Prueba*, the scores were above the 60th percentile, even for students acquiring Spanish as a second language or recovering the use of their heritage language. That was a success.

Question: What were some of the resources available to you for implementing the program?

Let me preface my answer to that question with what I consider is a very important point regarding the duration of any pilot beyond the pilot funding period. I’ve been in education for many years and have seen successful initiatives come and go and even disappear immediately after the special funding is exhausted. I set out to show that a special program does not need an inordinately large amount of special monies to be implemented successfully. From the inception, most of the costs for its implementation came from the operational budget.

As a pilot model site, our school did receive an average of \$40,000 per year of funding beyond that authorized in two and three-hour programs, commonly found throughout the state. This amount was calculated through the state formula to fund bilingual programs, giving us credit for a six-hour program for 36 students, identified as the target population of the pilot. Although they were the only students for whom we received financial credit as being served in the two-way bilingual immersion effort, we served all students in the target grade levels each year. Additionally, as the 36 target

students moved up a grade each year, the implementation of the program continued at each previous grade level. At the end of this year, the fifth year of the pilot, the school will be a total two-way bilingual immersion magnet school, financed primarily through the operational budget.

The special funding was used initially for staff training, i.e., primarily conference and workshop attendance, and for additional materials in Spanish, which we seriously lacked when we started the program. We have built our supply of Spanish texts by using operational funds earmarked for textbook adoption every year. We order a proportionate amount of materials in Spanish and English as reflected in the percentage of time of instruction in each language, at each grade level. We have texts and materials for all curriculum areas in both English and Spanish. We continue to build our Spanish resources in the library, but this has been a bigger challenge as our line item in the operational budget for library materials is much smaller than the one for texts. We generally use a large portion of our state bilingual budget for library materials each year.

The Mexican consulate in Albuquerque has been a great source of human resources and materials in Spanish. For the cost of shipping, we have obtained texts for math, science, language arts, and social studies/history for all grade levels, a service the government of Mexico offers schools, which serve students of Mexican descent. These materials are very well done. They are, however, more challenging in the level of Spanish used, so we find we generally have to use them at one or two grade levels above the level they are intended for in Mexico.

Building resources for staffing, other than financial, was another important area that needed to be addressed well. I felt the staffing had to be stable and established early. The first two years were years of more dramatic change in staffing than any other. Some staff transferred to other schools and others retired. Thereafter, staff members were hired with a goal of preparation for the following year. Staff hired had to either be certified in bilingual education or be willing to go on a waiver to be certified. The first year we started the program only two of the classroom teachers and three of the bilingual resource teachers were bilingually certified. This year 12 more of the classroom teachers are certified, and one, a new teacher this year, is on a waiver and taking courses toward earning certification and a master's degree in bilingual education. This has enabled us to reduce the number of resource teachers lending support to classroom teachers to two. They are working as specialists in drama and music with all classrooms. Most of the teachers who have earned their bilingual certification and master's degrees have been assisted through a program in the district that reimburses their cost of tuition after completion of each course. And this year, the district is finally providing an additional stipend, above salary, to any teacher certified in bilingual education or ESL. This has been a long time coming.

A resource for continued professional development in the Spanish language and culture is a cooperative effort between the New Mexico State Department of Education and the Ministry of Education and Culture of Spain, associated with the Spanish Embassy in Washington, D.C. Teachers from New Mexico have the opportunity to receive scholarships to study in Spain during the summer or academic year or do post-to-post exchanges with practicing teachers in Spain. Six of our teachers have participated in the summer programs thus far. Others have gone to language schools and conferences in Mexico as well, to further themselves professionally. Next year we will find out if the goal of creating a program that can run without special funding and whose staffing supports the two-way bilingual immersion concept, will endure beyond the pilot phase. We all feel that it will!

Question: What kind of support did (do) you have as an administrator to carry out your responsibilities within the program?

Support can come in many forms to an administrator. One type of support, which I consider very important, is professional trust. I feel I have gotten this support, in particular, from the five assistant superintendents who have been my immediate supervisors during the course of the last eight years. Because of professional trust in my ability and experiences, on their part, I've had autonomy in carrying forth the responsibilities of the program and guiding its direction without interference from anyone. I've also had support from fellow principals who have served as sounding boards, sympathizers, cheerleaders, and friends. The support I've gotten from the staff is perhaps the most meaningful, as it is the one I count on to tackle the many responsibilities and challenges which come across daily. Their support is in the form of the work they do with the students, each other, and the community. That is what creates the success of the program! Their belief in our efforts and their daily commitment to give their best is support beyond description.

The school community of families, as well as the greater community of the neighborhood we serve, also lends invaluable support. Without entrusting us their children and believing in the philosophy and goals of the program, none of what we have done would be possible. They are also the ones who give the extra financial support through fundraising that enables us to have many extras not covered by our operational budget. Also, their support as volunteers within the school and at home with their own children makes our school one in which "the village is educating the child." The families have responded strongly to a requirement of four hours a month of family involvement that we initiated four years ago. This support is of great value to our efforts.

The last couple of years, the district has created several professional development initiatives focusing on bilingual education. One of those is for principals in schools implementing some type of bilingual education program. We meet monthly and have group presentations and discussions on pertinent issues in bilingual education and district, state, and national requirements.

This provides information as well as collegiality, sought highly by principals, myself included.

Question: How do you keep current on issues related to the concept of two-way bilingual immersion relative to the program?

I read and read and read. That, besides doing my mail, is my nightly homework. I am high on professional development for teachers, staff, and myself. I attend conferences and workshops, often with staff members, and sometimes by myself. In many instances, I cover my own expenses to attend, seeing this as a gift to myself for my hard work! I also volunteer to present at conferences, usually about the program or about the strong parent involvement at our school. When I present and explain two-way bilingual immersion or some other topic to others, I often learn more myself, as when one teaches in the classroom.

By the way, the two best conferences I've found on two-way bilingual immersion are a summer conference sponsored by California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE), usually held in July, and La Cosecha, previously held in the spring and now early in November. The latter conference is held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, under the sponsorship of Dolores Gonzales Elementary, which has a 50/50 pilot program. This year I also attended a conference on global education, in Veracruz, Mexico, which I felt was closely related to our efforts in two-way bilingual immersion.

I also feel that my work within our program and with staff, students, and families gives me valuable information I need to guide the program. As I often tell the staff when I encourage them to present at conferences, they are the experts in this effort of implementing the two-way bilingual immersion concept. I am fortunate to be part of that effort, learning from them, the experts. The collective expertise among the staff is invaluable to our professional growth.

Question: What are some successes you have experienced in the implementation of the two-way bilingual immersion model?

A major success is carrying the pilot to completion this year and implementing it on a school-wide basis, in a sense, institutionalizing the concept of two-way bilingual immersion at Longfellow Elementary. This constitutes a total reform of our school, which has the potential to serve as a model for others. The initial 50/50 model produced high standardized test scores (on average, ranging in the 60th to 85th percentiles) on both the ITBS and *La Prueba* when the state was testing students in fourth grade. Since standardized test scores are seen by society as a sign of success in schools, that might be deemed to be one of our successes. Although the 90/10 model went through a year in which scores dipped, the scores went up again the following year.

Our program for the gifted has increased in numbers substantially. Prior to the inception of the two-way bilingual effort, we were in danger of not

qualifying for a full-time program annually, as the number of students in the program ran about 20 on average. In addition, there were no representatives of the predominantly Hispanic residential population in the gifted program. Since the second year of the implementation of the two-way bilingual immersion effort, the gifted program has been growing in numbers and now consistently averages around 40 students, a large percentage of them being students from our residential community. This number represents over 10% of our total population, which averages around 365 students annually. We are also seeing characteristics of giftedness in children earlier than before. Whereas before, most of our gifted students were concentrated in the upper grades, many of our children are qualifying for the program as early as second grade and a few in first grade. A substantial number of the students qualifying started school as monolingual Spanish-speaking students, a population that was not represented at all in the gifted program prior to the inception of the two-way bilingual immersion model.

The increase in the number of teachers certified for bilingual education at our school is to be celebrated. Only two of our classroom teachers were bilingually certified five years ago. Today, every one of the 15 classrooms is taught by a certified teacher, except one kindergarten teacher who is on waiver and working on her Master's degree. This is an indication of the commitment and dedication of the staff to the two-way bilingual immersion concept and their own professional development.

The most significant success, in my eyes—and it does not mean I discount the others in any way—is the response we have gotten from the community of families and students we serve. It is important because of our primary goal of achieving heritage language recovery for the majority of our students. Families report using more Spanish at home and talk with pride about their children's bilingualism. Teachers indicate that parents now speak with them very comfortably in Spanish whereas at the beginning of the program the parents would speak only English to the teachers even though they knew the teachers spoke Spanish. Visitors to our school, and we have many, comment that they are pleasantly surprised to hear Spanish being spoken informally as people interact with one another. Some time ago, I experienced something that moved me very deeply and affirmed that we had achieved success in our effort. After one of the many occasions when we bring the community together to showcase our children's accomplishments, a grandmother who was visiting one of our families from Guatemala approached me, with tears in her eyes, and thanked me in Spanish for what we were doing within the program. She said it was the first time that she was able to carry on a conversation with her granddaughter, without one of the parents having to translate for them. “*Senora,*” she said, “*no le puedo expresar la alegría que siento en mi corazón.*” [Ma'am, I can't express the happiness I feel in my heart.] For me, that said it all.

Conclusion

Blackmore (1989) describes four factors that she uses to reconstruct the area of leadership from a feminist perspective. The first factor indicates that power is shared. Although the principal was the initiator of the two-way bilingual immersion programs, the rest of the stakeholders played a critical part in the development of the programs.

The second factor states that morality is relational and situational specific. The fact that Longfellow Elementary is a magnet school for Spanish and the fine arts, carries the assumption that students will become bilingual and will be well educated in the fine arts. Perhaps these children would be well informed in the fine arts, but developing bilingualism through a 45-minute-a-day block of Spanish instruction was an unjust expectation. The program was changed to one respecting others' rights to a quality education.

In the third factor, Blackmore (1989) tells us that community is essential in the female's perspective of leadership. "La Señora Armendáriz," in her efforts to do justice to the education of the school's community, prioritized educating it and made sure that it played a viable part in the development and implementation of the program. Every effort was made to keep the school community informed, involved, and empowered.

Finally, Blackmore (1989) indicates that leading is done by different people in different contexts or situations. From within each group, i.e., parents, faculty, and the community at large, arose different leaders that were either more committed, cared more, were more knowledgeable about the two-way bilingual immersion program, or simply wanted to be more involved or had more time to do so. These individuals were called upon by the principal, not only to assist in the development and implementation of the program, but also to receive input on how to improve the program and assist in the promotion of the concept throughout the communities on a local, city, and statewide level.

In the final analysis of the program, if we were to ask, "why were the two-way bilingual immersion programs so successful at Longfellow Elementary School?" one would have to say that major contributors to the success of the program were a well-informed, caring, committed, and supportive parent group, and a faculty, community, and principal that were trying to do justice to the education of children. The leadership demonstrated by these people, their willingness to share and give of themselves unselfishly to the school's efforts, and their participative and collaborative attitudes (Bennis, 1989), proved to be the right combination for the successful development and implementation of the two-way bilingual immersion programs.

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