

Parents' Perceptions and Attitudes for Denying Bilingual Education

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Abstract

One of the most important decisions parents of English language learners have to do is select a language program. This study investigated the perceptions of Hispanic parents on the bilingual program and the reasons they had for denying bilingual services. The results reiterated previous research on the following: a) lack of support for the bilingual program, b) lack of information about the bilingual program in general, and c) lack of understanding of the enrollment guidelines. The association of learning and English proficiency was the major finding of this investigation.

Keywords: bilingual services, parent perceptions, English only instruction, limited English speakers

Bilingual education despite the many years of supportive research continues to be contentious among politicians, educators, students and parents. Many years of research on bilingual education amount to positive outcomes with programs that utilize native language instruction to a longer degree and the effectiveness of programs which employ late exit models (Flores-Dueñas 2005; Gillanders & Jimenez 2004; Hasson 2008; Rinaldi & Paez 2008; Shin 2000). Most recently dual language programs have acquired more attention as they promise high academic success and the acquisition of bilaterism and biculturalism (Ramos, 2007).

Nevertheless, parents are still rejecting bilingual services for their children in spite of all the supporting evidence offered by current inquiry (Farruggio, 2010; Shin, 2000).

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to contribute information about the reasons parents have for denying bilingual education services to their children. Four research questions will be answered.

Review of Literature

Additive bilingual programs provide limited English proficient students (LEP) with the appropriate language support needed to learn the English language at the same time it fosters content and concept mastery (Gillanders & Jimenez, 2004; Hasson, 2008; Rinaldi & Paez, 2008). According to Stritukus and Garcia (2005), parents in general think that bilingual education programs are beneficial.

Parents who support bilingual programs see bilingualism as important not only for its academic benefit, but because it provides opportunities to appreciate other cultures and promote career opportunities (Ramos, 2007). In addition, parents who are aware of the dual language components and process, appreciate the value of the Spanish language (Ramos, 2007). Parents are reliable raters of their child's language ability, thus the need to consider their observations when assessing their language proficiency (Bedore, Peña, Joyner & Macken, 2010). According to Yan (2003), quality education for bilingual children needs to be approached from the cultural perspective, not only at the language level.

Most parents show pride in maintaining their heritage and language (Yan, 2003). This idea is supported in Farruggio's (2010) research on parents' perceptions about bilingual education. Parents saw heritage maintenance as the most important reason for enrolling their children in bilingual classes. In general parents think that high degrees of English and Spanish promote a brighter future (Dorner, 2010). In the other hand, some parents think being in the bilingual program confuse the child and do not promote English acquisition (Dorner, 2010). Among other perceptions of parents that oppose bilingual education are the notions that bilingual programs do not include enough English instruction, thus the need for exploration (Farruggio, 2010).

The majority of parents who support the bilingual program and enroll their children in them are first generation immigrants with poor educational backgrounds and low economic status in the United States (Farruggio, 2010; Rinaldi & Paez, 2008; Shin, 2000). These parents appreciate the use of Spanish instruction and the ability to communicate clearly with teachers and administrators in their own language. In addition, they expect the school to provide opportunities for cultural development.

Children of immigrants born in the United States, experience difficulties learning academic Spanish due to the lack or quality of bilingual education experiences in their lives (Guerrero, 2003). Experts in education propose bilingualism as a necessity no longer a matter of choice; teachers must know Spanish if they plan to adequately meet students' needs. Parents ignore the politics involved in the enrollment process and have therefore resigned to their children's education in English. Lack of information has even lead to the abolition of bilingual

education in states like California and Arizona where parents blindly voted against this instructional plan. Nevertheless not only Hispanic parents, but parents in general view the benefits of additive bilingual programs (Stritukus & Garcia, 2005).

Farruggio (2010), found that the English only group in his study reported the denial of bilingual program due to little English, no English or poor Spanish instruction. Little attention was given to parents who deny the program because of their association of knowledge to proficiency in English. All of the conclusions in the studies reviewed have affirmed that bilingual programs are effective, especially the ones that employ native language development and transition to English in the upper elementary grades along with dual language models. Additionally, parents' views in general favor bilingual education programs. This raises the question for further investigation about the reasons parents had for not wanting their children to participate in bilingual classes even though they think it's an effective program. Many questions come to mind with the plethora of information concerning this topic, however these stand out: what do parents think when they prefer a bilingual program that involves more English or even only English? What do parents consider when choosing a language educational program for their children?

Statement of the Problem

The majority of parents, regardless of background, see the benefits that bilingual education provides. However, there are some parents that do not want their children to learn the Spanish language or be taught in their native tongue. The lack of literature about the reasons parents deny bilingual programs to their children guided this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding on the reasons parents reject bilingual education. This investigation will explore factors that affect parent decision when choosing an educational program for their children. In addition, this investigation will provide with information that will enable educators and school officials to understand parents when faced with this situation.

Research Questions

1. What differences are present in parents that choose an English immersion ESL program rather than a bilingual Spanish program?
2. How does proficiency of parents in the English and Spanish language affect the determination of placing children in English dominated bilingual programs?
3. What are parents' negative considerations for academic Spanish literacy?
4. What can schools do to aid parents in making an informed decision?

Research Significance

This study differs from previous research in that it focuses in the attitudes and perceptions of parents whose children qualify for a bilingual program, but do not participate in it. Previous investigations have only provided researchers with limited information for parental actions, thus requiring further investigations. This study will provide the educational field with valuable information about parental decisions, which will enable us to understand their reasoning for choosing an ELS immersion program over a dual language program. School district officials will get an insight to the true reasons parents have for choosing English instructional programs.

Method of Procedure

This qualitative research utilized a paper and pencil survey titled *Parents' perceptions and attitudes for denying bilingual education* with open-ended questions, close-ended questions and semi-closed questions to obtain parent perceptions on bilingual education.

Selection of Instrumentation

A survey was chosen as the instrument to collect data due to the time limitations implicated for this project and because the feedback would be more likely to be collected and analyzed within the due dates. The closed-ended questions at the beginning of the 15 question survey served as an icebreaker and provided with basic background information about participants. Semi-closed ended questions were selected to provide opportunity to participant to explain his opinion on the question being asked. These questions required more thought and prepared participants for the next section of the survey. The open-ended questions purposely placed at the end, served to gather a deep understanding of parent perceptions. These questions required parents to explain the reasons for not choosing bilingual services for their children. Their responses to these questions emerged themes that were later analyzed and categorized.

Selection of Participants

The sample of this investigation was chosen from a site in Texas where the minority, Hispanics, represents the majority 97%. The participants were 15 individuals; 8 males and 7 females. The district where this site is located strongly believes in dual language models, which have been proven to be the most effective in language acquisition. The advocacy for language is such, that differentiated guidelines are used for students. Several categories for newcomers (those new to the country) exist, which direct instruction according to the amount of time in US schools. For this study homogenous sampling was found to be adequate because the Spanish language was a characteristic among the desired group. Participants' criteria included only one requirement: that they qualified for bilingual education but accepted *ESL* or English (regular) education. To qualify for bilingual services, students must be exposed to the Spanish language and must be limited in English. To keep privacy of site and participants names were not used; rather numbers were given to each survey for analyzing.

Collection and Analysis of Data

Once surveys were administered and collected, questioners were selected for further analysis. Of the 15 distributed surveys, only 10 were chosen as adequate participants due to incorrect completion of questions. Due to the lack of proficiency of parents in English and Spanish, some questionnaires were filled out for them. Because the instrument was not available in Spanish at time of completion, questions were read aloud in both languages. The data was then desegregated and questions 1-10 were coded. Results were then accounted for using percentages.

Results

Research Question 1

What differences are present in parents that choose an English immersion ESL program rather than a bilingual Spanish program?

When parents were asked to describe why they chose a specific program, 60% of parents explained they chose English immersion. Comments provided in the open ended questions included: "I chose *English Only* because I want my child to get ahead." All the parents strongly agreed that if the child knew English, he could learn faster. In addition, all of the parents also thought that the more English their child knew, the better he would do in the future. When asked if they had denied bilingual services for all their children, 50% percent or half of the participants said yes and 50% or half of the participants answered no. Out of the 10 participants, 70% were born in the United States. Only 20% were born in Mexico and were fairly new to the country (3 months- 3 years). When parents were questioned on what language they spoke to their children at home, 60% reported to speak both English and Spanish. 30% answered that they spoke only Spanish at home and 10% spoke English, Spanish and Hebrew. Parents considered the following as tools for second language learners: "helping parents help their children," "school and tutoring," "teacher relationships," "school," "exposure to language" and "structured school setting."

Research Question 2

How does proficiency of parents in the English and Spanish language affect the determination of placing children in English dominated bilingual programs?

Proficiency in Spanish was greater than the total proficiency reported in English. In Spanish 80% reported to be proficient in the areas of reading, writing and speaking compared to 60% proficiency in English. Being proficient only in speaking the language was reported by 10% in English and 10% in Spanish. Non proficient in Spanish was reported by 10% of participants and the same figure was reported for English not proficient, 10%. For this particular study, language did not seem to play a major role in determining a language instructional program for their children.

Research Question 3

What are parents' negative considerations for academic Spanish literacy?

When parents were asked if they thought Spanish was necessary for their children 50% said no, they did not agree with this notion. The same question was asked in a slightly different manner: "Being bilingual is important to me." The majority did not agree with this idea either (60%). The majority of the parents did not believe that Spanish was an asset to their children. They did not consider their native language as an important tool for second language learners.

Research Question 4

What can schools do to aid parents in making an informed decision?

When parents were asked about their knowledge of the bilingual program, 70% reported not to be informed. Only 10% selected "somewhat informed," another 10% said they were informed, but only 10% indicated to be very informed. When presented again with the same question, this time with the option to explain in detail, 20% did not respond and left the lines blank. Others had comments such as "I don't understand the difference," "don't know much about the bilingual program," or "no thoughts." One parent commented that the decision for choosing ESL was based on room in class, but did not explain further. Another participant reported that the school had chosen a program for them. A similar remark was made by another parent, this time saying that the placement was done by the ISD.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Bilingual education will continue to raise the most controversial and intriguing questions, therefore continuing to be a debatable topic among people involved with education. For the purpose of this study it is important to note that because of the small size sample, the findings cannot be generalized for a large population. The limitation of size does not allow us to generalize across a population, but it reinforced some findings from previous research. It also provided with insight that will unquestionably need further investigation.

This study corroborated what other research including cited in this article have concluded. One such finding is that despite the advancement on procedures districts have adopted, parents still do not feel educated about the bilingual program (Shin, 2000; Stritukus & Garcia, 2005). None of the parents except one believed they were informed. They were not specific as to what they knew. Were they familiar with the process? Or were they knowledgeable of the benefits? Or did they recognize the importance of both? This is a question that needs additional exploration. This study reinforced what Farruggio (2010) presented in his research; parents want their children to know English and if a program does not have this exposure, then parents do not desire it. This raises the question whether parents are aware of the benefits of native language instruction.

One aspect that is worth investigating in more detail and in correlation to current research that states that bilingual programs are chosen by first generation immigrants, is to explore the relationship between second and third generation immigrants and their lack of interest for the Spanish language and confirm if this in fact is the determinant piece. The necessity to understand why some parents think Spanish is important to their child, but being bilingual is not important to them is intriguing and worth investigating. Another aspect that needs further clarification is if parents did not deny bilingual services for all their children, what were their motives? What made them decide was it previous experiences like Shin (2000) explained? Or was their decision based on the individuality of their child? Going back to the concern of parent association of Knowledge and English proficiency, this investigation fell short in answering this question. Further investigation and different data collecting methods will be necessary to fully understand this idea. Not enough information was collected to conclude this assumption or hypothesis because again the sample was small, and because the questions cannot be correlated to affirm this concern. One fact that was found with this study is that parents in fact think that knowing English facilitates learning; however this is just the beginning.

Parents clearly did not support bilingual education, but the lack of information about the program was also evident. Because of the limitations, groups of US born and Non US born could not be compared, this will be the next step. In conclusion, the association of language acquisition and knowledge, as one of the reasons for denying bilingual services, provided a start; all parents thought that knowing English promotes learning in general.

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