

EL PASO PROGRAMS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A FOLLOW-UP STUDY

Charles Glenn: Rosalie Porter, the dynamo who brought us here today and is our next speaker, is herself an English language learner, then a Spanish/English bilingual teacher, and for a decade the bilingual program director in Newton, Massachusetts. I first heard of her when I was in charge of urban education and civil rights for the Massachusetts Department of Education and everyone was complaining about the rebel in Newton, but I have always had a liking for rebels.

Rosalie Porter: We had hoped that Professor Russell Gersten of the University of Oregon would be here to report on his findings, but he is speaking at this very moment at a conference in Miami. In his place, I will present the main conclusions of the two studies he conducted for the READ Institute. Gersten analyzed and reported on the comparative second language acquisition and academic achievement of limited-English students in two different programs in the El Paso, Texas, Independent School District.

The El Paso study that the READ Institute commissioned in 1992 was our very first piece of research on a school district's bilingual programs. The elements of good education research were followed: Students in both the control group and the treatment group had the same characteristics, i.e., all were non-English speakers, or very limited English speakers, when they began school; all are of Mexican American background; all are from the same socioeconomic background; and all are attending schools in the same district. The 228 students in the original study were enrolled in two very different instructional programs. El Paso had started its Spanish transitional bilingual education program in 1970. After a number of years, an experimental model called the "Bilingual Immersion Project" was initiated under the direction of then Assistant Superintendent, Rosita Apodaca. The control group contained students in five transitional bilingual education program schools and the treatment group was made up of students in five bilingual immersion model schools. The comparison between these two groups of students was monitored over a period of 10 years.

The two programs differed quite dramatically. The transitional bilingual program provides instruction in reading, writing, and school sub-

jects in Spanish for the first three or four years, with approximately 30 to 60 minutes of English teaching per day. The bilingual immersion program instead delivers all instruction in literacy and subject matter through a special English language program, with 30 to 90 minutes a day of Spanish. You could almost say they were a mirror image of each other.

Because of the difference in the proportions of English language usage in the two programs, students in the transitional bilingual program were not tested in English until fourth grade. In grade 4, both groups of students were tested with the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), an assessment instrument which is used in many school districts. Test scores reported in language, reading, and math favored the bilingual immersion students in each of these subjects. If the rate of exit from a special program is a fair measure of success, then the immersion students prevailed decisively in this area. At the end of fifth grade, 99 percent of the immersion students were in mainstream classrooms, doing their schoolwork in English without special help, while even by the seventh grade one-third of the control group students were still in the bilingual program.

Teachers were surveyed for their attitudes toward the two programs. As is often the case when you start a new program and train teachers to do new things, there was a more positive attitude toward the immersion program. A majority of teachers said that students were learning English more rapidly and effectively in the immersion classrooms than in the bilingual classrooms.

Interviews with students revealed that all of the students had the same level of self-esteem. In other words, the students who were taught in English from the first day of school had not suffered a loss of self-esteem, nor did they show any signs of greater stress from being taught in a second language.

Thus, the differences between these two programs in the first four or five years of schooling are substantial, since the study found that the English immersion students learned their school subjects and learned to speak, read, and write in English at a faster pace. It took two to three years longer for the bilingual program students to reach the same levels of achievement as the immersion students, but by the end of

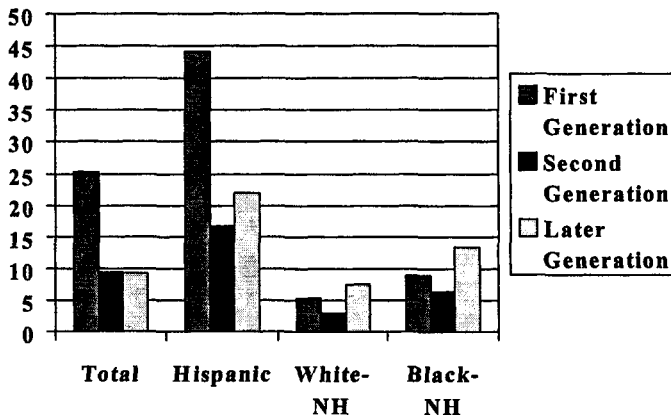
seventh grade, it is reasonable to say that both programs achieved the same goals.

In 1996, the READ Institute commissioned a follow-up study by Professor Gersten. Data were collected on students from the original study who were still in the El Paso schools—now in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Student test scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the statewide test required for high school graduation, were the measure of achievement. All students are expected to take the TAAS in 10th grade. Students who are not successful in passing the test of reading, writing, and mathematics on their first try are given special tutoring and may retake the test several more times until they score a passing grade. Here, there is rather discouraging news.

All of the students (of the original 228 there were 176 still in the district who had all started school together in first grade) performed at about the same level, whether they had been in the Spanish bilingual program or the English immersion program. Unfortunately, that level is not very high. A majority of the students were able to pass the graduation test at the very lowest level, so they were able to graduate

Figure 1

Status Dropout Rates



Source: Departments of Education and CPS, October 1996. Status dropout rate is percent of individuals 16 to 24 who were not enrolled in school and had not completed high school.

from high school. There was no statistically significant difference in the academic performance of students in the two groups, not only on the TAAS test, but also in their grade point averages which were about the same. Another troubling factor reported by this study is the high rate of high school dropouts before completing high school: 26.5 percent for students who had been in bilingual classrooms; 19.5 percent for the immersion program students. I am informed that the difference between the two is not statistically significant but at least to me this small difference proves once again that there need not be harmful effects from the early learning of English as a second language in a school setting.

What conclusions can we draw from this study? We can say with certainty that English language and literacy and subject-matter learning can be achieved as well in an intensive English program as in a bilingual (native language instruction) program. It takes a few years longer in a bilingual program. We can say that if there is a value in having bilingual students integrated in regular classrooms at a more rapid pace, then there is some advantage for the immersion program.

There was not a higher level of performance by either group after 10 to 12 years of schooling. It would appear to me that the predictions of bilingual education advocates—principally Jim Cummins, Steve Krashen, David Ramirez, and Virginia Collier—that several years of native language instruction in the primary grades will result in better academic performance later on are certainly not borne out.

I agree very strongly with Diane August, in her remarks earlier today, that all of our language-minority students need better learning opportunities, no matter what type of program they are involved in. These children need better-trained teachers, more challenging curricula and texts. Teachers need to have higher expectations for language minority students and must hold these children to higher standards. School districts need the flexibility to be creative and innovative in the range of programs they can offer.

Last, but far from least, consistent accountability for the academic progress of language minority students is long overdue. Bilingual children need to be tested along with their English-speaking classmates, after one, two, or three years in U.S. schools. Whatever rule is estab-

lished in each district, universal assessment of student development is the only effective way to determine what improvements are needed.

(Editor's Note: "El Paso Programs for English Language Learners: A Follow-Up Study," by Professors Russell Gersten, Scott Baker and Thomas Keating of the Eugene Research Institute at the University of Oregon, was published in its entirety in *READ Perspectives*, Vol. V-1, Spring 1998. The Executive Summary of the study is reprinted at the end of the conference papers as Appendix 2, page 120.)

LABOR MARKET EFFECTS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION AMONG HISPANIC WORKERS

Charles Glenn: We're particularly interested to have Mark Lopez here today because one of the weaknesses of education research in general is that not much of it is genuinely longitudinal; that is, we don't really learn what happens to kids over time, which after all is the fundamental issue in education.

Mark, who is assistant professor at the University of Maryland, is an economist. He conducts research on various issues involving what affects the achievement and participation in our society of language-minority children and adults. So we will be looking beyond immediate program effects to what the long-term effects are of the kind of education we provide to kids.

Mark Lopez: Good morning, I hope everybody's doing well. Today, I'd like to talk about the labor market effects of bilingual education among Hispanic workers. This is a study that a colleague of mine, Marie Mora, and I have done together. We were interested in looking at the long-range effects of bilingual education for a couple of reasons.

First, we know that there is an English proficiency gap. In the United States today, large and growing numbers of non-English speakers are in the workforce, and that has implications for the labor market. Those implications in particular are the following: There is an English proficiency penalty that one pays if one does not speak English very well, and one pays that penalty through lower wages and through lower