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The Bilingual Education Program in Hartford: Then and Now

Bilingual education in the United States has not always been beneficial to the identity and the culture of language minority children. After changes in legislation and the definition of “non-English proficient”, students eligible for bilingual education were identified and then placed in classrooms and provided the services they needed to excel in English. Hartford is a microcosm of what the nation has experienced as a whole. After the large influx of Puerto Rican immigrants in the late 60s and early 70s, Hartford was faced with thousands of non-English proficient students and with no resources to meet their needs. In 1968-69 reception centers were opened in several Hartford schools to accommodate these students, however, because these students were coming in at a rate of about 1,000 each year, the space was far too limited and the resources far too scarce to achieve the objectives of helping children communicate in English. Soon, it was clear that the needs of these students were not being met and therefore changes to the curricula and the program as a whole were required.

So, what were the initial objectives of the bilingual education program in Hartford? And, how have those objectives changed since then? Indeed, the objectives of the bilingual education program in Hartford have changed since its inception in the late 1960s nonetheless; the basic objective of teaching English to language minority children has not changed. Furthermore, the program as a whole has shifted from targeting these non-English proficient groups, to welcoming monolingual children into

the bi-cultural experience where both groups learn and welcome each other's languages and cultures.

The United States was developed through the immigration of millions of people. When the first Europeans arrived, the inhabitants of what is now continental United States spoke over 200 languages. The settlers who maintained their native languages in communities all over the country continued this linguistic diversity. During the era of the Common School Reform movement, immigrants were seen as the future carriers of the Republican and Protestant ideals and therefore were courted and accommodated in American schools proliferating instruction in languages other than English. As immigration increased by the late nineteenth century, the sense of nativism and "Americanization" also gained strength meaning that competency in English was equaled to political loyalty. The Nationality Act of 1906 required immigrants to speak English in order to be naturalized. Although required by law to be proficient in English, these immigrants were not provided the proper instruction necessary to learn English. Thus, the beginning of the struggle of bilingual education in the United States began. Meanwhile, the influx of immigrants continued to increase years after this legislation, principally by Spanish speaking groups.

With this came the impetus for bilingual education programs in the United States in the 1960s. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibited discrimination on the grounds of race, color, or national origin in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. This promised equal and meaningful access and educational opportunity for language minority students. Ten years later the question of equal educational opportunity for language minority students was still present when

instruction was in a language the students did not understand and it was brought to the Supreme Court in *Lau v. Nichols* (Jan, 1974). The court upheld their right to special services and programs designed to meet their English language and academic needs. Federal funding for such services and programs was made available through Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the Bilingual Education Act. Schools across the nation were now faced with the task of identifying eligible students and then providing them with the proper services and programs. In addition to this, schools were responsible for evaluating and maintaining these programs.

While the United States as a whole was experiencing these legislative changes, Hartford was struggling with the same problem. How can students be identified as being “limited English proficient”? An amendment to the Bilingual Education Act in 1978 provided a definition. The terms “limited English proficiency” and “limited English proficient” mean:

- A. individuals were not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English;
- B. individuals who come from environments where a language other than English is dominant, and
- C. individuals who are American Indians and Alaska Natives and who come from environments where a language other than English has had a significant impact on their language proficiency; and who, by reason thereof, have sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language to deny such individuals the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English or to participate fully in our society (Casanova and Arias, 13).

Unfortunately, the definition of “limited English proficient” did not facilitate the process of identification of eligible students, the establishment of such bilingual programs in schools without the resources for these, or the guarantee that these programs would be successful.

Before 1973, Hartford had already begun to experience a shift in ethnic composition of its population. An increasing number of Puerto Rican migrant families (as well as other Hispanic groups) were settling in to the North end of Hartford and spreading rapidly throughout the city. In 1966, 8 percent of the school population was Puerto Rican and three reception centers were established at Barnard Brown Elementary School, Kinsella Elementary School, and Hartford Public High School for the more than 1,000 bilingual students. The introduction of new cultures into the communities was reflected in its schools where the number of non-English speaking students was increasing at a rate of about 1,000 students per year. These included 15 classrooms across the entire school system, which provided English instruction to these children. Clearly, 15 classrooms were not sufficient to meet the needs of these students. Moreover, the lack of Spanish-speaking teachers was painfully evident and teachers were being recruited from Puerto Rico and the South and Midwestern U.S. in order to mitigate the crucial need for bilingual teachers in Hartford. The programs established at the three reception sites had three clear objectives:

- To establish oral English vocabulary and basic language patterns, which will meet the immediate needs of the student.
- To enable student to communicate using complete sentence patterns, correct verb forms, adjective and adverb placement, personal pronouns, [etc.]
- To enable student to distinguish sounds, practice using structure patterns and to demonstrate the use of English intonation and rhythm patterns. To enable student who is literate in his native language to function graphically.

Although these objectives seem to promise the effective learning of non-English speaking students, in reality, the program was ineffective because “academic progress goals [were] not defined for this program”, “43% of students finished the level on which they started the year”, none of the students finished Level 3, more than half of

the students left the program during the year, and the program was understaffed by 25% at any given time throughout the year. Furthermore, students were expected to learn English through full immersion.

By 1986-87 the language had shifted from simply enabling students to speak and read English to maintaining, developing and using the student's language "as a vehicle for acquisition of academic skills while using, developing and maintaining second language and culture for increased learning opportunities." This means that the program changed from being a transitional one to a maintenance program, which stressed the preservation of the student's native language, with a more gradual easing into English and a continuation of native language instruction.

However, additional gradual changes occurred by the early 90's and by 1997 the Annual Report was speaking of dual-language education where "speakers of both languages are placed together in a bilingual classroom to learn each others' language and work academically in both languages." This is seen today in Hartford classrooms. Mrs. Lopez-Lebron, a bilingual teacher at Sanchez Elementary School explained how this program works. Two group of students become "sister classrooms" and a specific amount of time is allotted to the combination of these two groups. During that time, the monolingual students and the bilingual students come together to sing songs in both Spanish and English; learn vocabulary from stories in both languages; and discuss the weather in both languages. I was able to sit in on two of these sessions as a student teacher. When the monolingual students joined the bilingual classroom, which is Spanish-English (as are most of Hartford's bilingual classrooms), both groups practiced

their Spanish. The contrary occurred when the bilingual students entered the monolingual classroom where both groups spoke English.

This shift in bilingual education is extremely important to notice because it moved from limiting children to welcoming their linguistic and cultural diversity.

Robert D. Milk, in Bilingual Education, explains how children learned to assimilate into American culture and into the English language while devaluing their own culture, language and identity.

While minority students are learning to disvalue their language, their culture, and their social group, the majority students are likewise learning to disparage their fellow students and to believe in the inferiority of the minority language and culture, and the inherent superiority of the majority culture and its linguistic medium, standard English. Such beliefs, though founded in ignorance, become deeply engrained to the point that they acquire an almost religious tenacity and become the basis for perpetuating inequities and inequality of educational opportunity. (Arias 90)

I am hopeful, then, that bilingual education in Hartford, and throughout the United States is headed in the right direction. By welcoming language minority students as NOT language minority and instead as bilingual/bicultural students, both monolingual and bilingual students will be able to appreciate each other's cultures and identities, and not make one superior over the other.

Educators who see their role as adding a second language and second culture to their students are more likely to empower their students more than those teachers who believe their role is to replace the native language with American culture and English. This is why it is essential to continue to employ bilingual teachers who have also experienced bicultural education and life in the United States. This confidence will be transmitted into the students' communities and subsequently will be reflected in their academics. Milk proposes four components towards the improvement of bilingual

education in the future. He stresses the importance of the elimination of translation in bilingual education. He believes that the same content, repeated in two languages, does not promote “the development of elaborated language” therefore limiting and shortchanging students (102). Second, bilingual teachers need to be better trained. By allowing a discrepancy in the amount of time dedicated to one language over the other in the classroom, the educator will be replicating societal patterns and returning to the idea that one culture is superior to the other and, again, limiting bilingual students in both the classroom and in society. Third, Milk makes it very clear that bilingual education should be balanced. Walsh also makes this point in her book. Programs that do not provide balanced amounts of instruction in the native language should not be considered bilingual education because it is crucial to maintain the home language (Milk’s fourth point) in order to instill confidence which is needed for learning, to enhance the student’s sense of identity, and to enrich the country’s culture as a whole.

The success of the bilingual education program in the United States and more specifically, Hartford depends on this. The objectives of the bilingual education program in Hartford have changed from being a setting through which language minority students would assimilate into American culture and language, to being more of a bicultural program where the native language of the student is welcomed. Moreover, it is not only welcomed, but also taught to monolingual/ monocultural students.

The future of bilingual education in Hartford seems promising, however the difficulties of testing, availability of equal amounts of resources, and the low number of bilingual teachers is still very prominent. Perhaps, this research will be improved with

time and further investigation into the discrepancies in testing, resources and other problematic areas of bilingual education programs in Hartford and in the United States.

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