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Responding to an Increasingly Polylingual Society: An American Bilingual School

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Introduction

If you have ever traveled anywhere in Europe, you will be quite familiar with the following scenario: you travel to Italy and sit down to order a plate of pasta and your waiter asks for your order in perfect English. You take a quick plane to Spain and your tour guide switches back and forth between conducting your tour in English and addressing locals in his native Spanish. Even the German people in your tour group can understand the tour in English, and you now begin to feel a sense of shame that you are limited in your abilities to communicate with those of other cultures and ethnicities. They seem to do all the work, while you cannot even meet them halfway with decent proficiency in their language. Many people, especially those from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, are well versed in the English language and can speak several additional languages.

According to a study from 2009-2013, only 20% of the U.S. population “speak[s] a language other than English at home.” Furthermore, “only... 10% of the U.S. population speaks a language other than English proficiently. Most of those who can speak a language other than English are heritage language speakers,” which means that they are usually children of immigrants who grew up in bilingual households. Another 10% can speak another language outside of English, but not well. So, the remaining 231,000,000 Americans in the country can only communicate in English (Commission on Language Learning, 2016, p. 3-4).

America was founded as a sort of “melting pot” of people from all backgrounds and walks of life who all share the common identity of being “American” while at the same time being completely different from each other. For many, celebrating this diversity, this multiculturalism, is one of the great things about this country. For others, however, it is frowned upon. These individuals feel that the nation should privilege those who are white and speak

English only. Often, being “different” (non-white, non-Christian, and a speaker of a language other than English) in this country can be perceived in a negative way. In America, simply speaking a different language or wearing an article of clothing that identifies one as a non-Christian can prompt people to jump rashly to negative conclusions about one’s character: you are speaking Arabic, so therefore you are a radical extremist. You are speaking Spanish so you must be an illegal immigrant. Those who are not white and speak in foreign tongues have perhaps become associated with being un-American. They often seem to be alienated and met with distrust and suspicion driven by fear and racism.

In the past few years, there have been several examples of this white nationalism all over the globe including in the United States. For example, Coulby (2006) notes that “tensions and violence on the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem [that] have spread to western cities,... fear and distrust of foreigners [that] have informed electoral decisions in at least the Netherlands and Denmark,... and xenophobia [which] was... one of the voices informing the rejection of the EU Constitution in France and the Netherlands” (p. 245). These phenomena are all prevalent in the US as well, and it is evident that “the need to recognize, tolerate and... understand cultures other than that of the state into which people are born has never been more vital” (p. 246). Currently, there is little promotion of intergroup dialogue and affirmation of diversity, and I believe that language can fulfill this role and bridge a “communication gap” that promotes cultural misunderstanding and intergroup prejudice.

As stated by the Commission of Language Learning (2016) for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in *The State of Languages in the U.S.*, “languages are fundamental to nearly every aspect of our lives. They are not only our primary means of communication; they are the basis for our judgments, [and inform] how we understand others as well as ourselves.” We are

social beings, or as Aristotle puts it, “political animal[s]” (Aristotle, 2013, p. 3). It is our natural instinct to communicate, especially through dialogue and reasoning, so that we can develop our society and communicate our needs and desires.

Despite the importance of English as an international language, “there is an emerging consensus among leaders in business and politics, teachers, scientists, and community members that proficiency in English is not sufficient to meet the nation’s needs in a shrinking world” (Commission on Language Learning, 2016, p. 3-4). The causes for this lack of multicultural lingual diversity in the US today include an educational framework based on assimilation and a lack of focus on multiculturalism and interculturalism. This problematic dynamic has led to little focus on foreign language education. The literature review will therefore focus on this sociocultural contextualization of language education, demonstrating the lack of focus on languages and its negative implications. In addition, I will focus on an uncommon approach to language education, namely bilingual and polylingual programs, to demonstrate their efficacy and necessity in an increasingly global, polylingual and transnational economy and world.

Positionality Statement

My name is Madeleine and I am a 21-year-old white middle class female of Italian, French, and Irish descent. I am a native English speaker, and prior to high school had never learned another language nor ever had anyone in my family who was bilingual; but, language acquisition greatly interests me! I attend Assumption College and am pursuing two language degrees in Italian and Latin. Because I have gone through education of several different languages over the course of eight years, I have experienced firsthand the struggles of learning other languages. I studied abroad in Rome, Italy as part of my language education and experienced immersive language instruction through an intensive course in Italian. While I was

abroad for a semester, I lived in and attended school in Italy for almost four months and was heavily exposed to the more open and polylingual culture of Europe. Throughout this personal experience, my curiosity was sparked: how do so many Europeans know English and usually several other languages very well, while my classmates and I could only muster a few basic words and conversations in another language? In a country such as the United States, where education itself is so greatly prized, why is our foreign language education so poor and undervalued? For me, a student studying Italian, Spanish, and Latin, the study of foreign languages is immensely important, and I would like to gather information on how it can be improved in my own country.

In an increasingly mobile, transnational, and multicultural global society, being multilingual is an increasingly important asset and this is an important stand that I take. In a nation of immigrants like ours, a multicultural country full of people who have different religions and speak different languages, it is surprising that we are so predominantly monolingual and that our education system is one of assimilation. Immigrants are encouraged to assimilate into a dominant English-only paradigm instead of having structures in place to support parallel language acquisition, so that immigrant children and descendants are able to not only acquire English but also maintain their mother tongues. Because I strongly believe in plurilingual language skills and acquisition, I am drawn to educational frameworks that make room for cultural hybridity and language acquisition, such as intercultural and multicultural education, and this thesis will be an opportunity for me to study these frameworks and their application to the study of languages and culture. I hope to examine not only the best ways of learning a foreign language in America but also the best ways of becoming a more open and affirming civilization.

In this project, I hope to discover and highlight the downfalls of a monolingual society, as well as analyze the causes of America becoming extremely nationalistic and closed to other cultures. Though I am sure other countries have their fair share of nationalism and xenophobic tendencies, I think that America is one of the best examples of a monolingual society that predominantly places value solely on its own culture and people. Though there are many language programs here in the US, I would like to see what the advantages are to a society that values other languages and cultures instead of suppressing them in favor of their own tongue and customs.

Multicultural and Intercultural Education

As Pica-Smith, Contini, and Veloria (2019) explain, assimilation gained popularity in the American context between the two World Wars when immigration was steady in the U.S. In this framework, assimilation is considered ideal and immigrants progress in a linear fashion. They acquire the mental, social, and cultural habits of natives while abandoning their own ways of being to climb the social ladder of their welcoming nation. They must do this without upsetting the sociopolitical context of the receiving society, which bears them no responsibility. In an assimilationist educational model, immigrants abandon their languages of origin to learn in English only and are asked to stop speaking their languages of origin even in their homes and home communities.

Multiculturalism, on the other hand, is a framework born in response to aggressive assimilationism (Contini & Pica-Smith, 2017), and therefore focuses on pro-diversity, pro-minority positions. Multiculturalists believe that minority groups should not be forced to assimilate. In fact, they should expect equal treatment and respect for their cultural traditions.

Indeed, they believe that “natives” would also learn from an exchange with the cultural ways of being and knowing of those persons and that this diversity would benefit all.

In regards to language specifically, the need for Americans to learn foreign languages is a result of its current function as a nation where thousands of immigrants and first-generation Americans abound. Throughout the world, “people are confronting increased cultural diversity” and these “changes...force people of different backgrounds to interact in ways never imagined a generation ago” (Cushner, 1998, p. 1). According to Cherry A. McGee Banks (2005), author of *Improving Multicultural Education: Lessons from the Intergroup Education Movement*, “American classrooms are experiencing the largest influx of immigrant students since the beginning of the 20th century” (p. xi). This is one of the reasons why the field of multicultural education, defined as “a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates...content, concepts, principles, theories, and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral sciences, and particularly from ethic studies and women’s studies” has become increasingly more important (p. xi). Because the population is becoming more and more international, its “influence...on the nation’s schools, colleges, and universities is and will continue to be enormous” (p. xi). The key elements to multicultural education, known as the “five dimensions”, help teachers to implement this framework effectively and are known as “content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure” (p. xii).

Another reason why multicultural education is becoming more important is that businesses in America are more international and need employees versed in the languages of other nations (Comission on Language Learning, 2016). As businesses become more international, more Americans must learn to speak foreign languages and become familiar with

other cultures, creating a better environment for communication. Now more than ever, “the federal government continues to struggle to find representatives with enough language expertise to serve in diplomatic, military, and cultural missions around the world” (p. 4) According to one study in Massachusetts, there has been “a sharp increase in online job postings seeking a candidate who could speak a language other than English: from 5,612 openings in 2010 to 14,561 in 2015” (p. 4). It may seem that being versed in another language is a simple requirement, but bilingual and polylingual Americans are few and far between.

Krystyna Bleszynska (2008), member of the Polish Society for Intercultural Education, defines intercultural education as “an applied social science that engages in exploratory-explanatory, adaptive and transformational functions for individuals, institutions, and social groups” as well as “one of the newest areas in the field of studies on education” (p. 537). Because the “scope of interests and objectives related to intercultural education” (p. 538) are so vast, many “argue for viewing it as an interdisciplinary applied science” (p. 538). These disciplines include but are not limited to: “sociology, psychology, and the educational studies” (p. 537) as well as “ethnic, cultural, religious studies, political science, social work science, ethnology and ethnography and the science of laws, as well as disciplines dealing with specific cultural areas” (pp. 537-538).

Portera argues (as cited in Bleszynska, 2008, p. 538) that while multicultural education “highlights the cultural diversity of human societies and aims to develop student awareness of cultural differences, as well as develop anti-discriminatory attitudes,” intercultural education “switches the attention of learners from static and stereotypical images of cultures to the dynamic perspective of cultures in contact, intercultural relations, and intercultural competencies” (p. 538). In other words, multicultural education emphasizes respecting and accepting cultural

differences, while intercultural education aims to shift the focus of students to the relationships between cultures, or intergroup dialogue. The stated goals of intercultural education of valuing diversity, intergroup dialogue and social cohesion (Pica-Smith, Contini, & Veloria, 2019) happen through the process of intergroup dialogue, which is, then, both a means and an end as it leads to cultural competence. One may note that these are inextricably linked to multi-linguistic competence.

According to Bleszynska (2008), because of “high mobility and cultural hybridization” (p. 542) in twenty-first century societies, “issues of migration, social and cultural change and inter-group and intercultural relations [have] become fundamentally important” (p. 542). Bleszynska (2008) outlines four objectives of intercultural education, that are categorized as “intercultural dialogue, co-existence and competencies” (p. 543), “adaptation, acculturation and integration” (p. 543), “social justice, human rights, and combating racial/ethnic prejudice” (p. 543), and “civic society, transnational communities and social cohesion” (p. 543). All four objectives stress the importance of respecting and understanding every culture, as well as calling for integration of intercultural education into educational systems.

“Borders and boundaries in intercultural education” can further divide “[immigrants] from mainstream Americans” (McGee Banks, 2005, p. 109). Referring to children born in the U.S. as “children on the hill” and immigrants as “children across the tracks,” Ruth Benedict, “a member of the Commission on Intercultural Education,” stresses the importance of changing attitudes beginning with American natives, not with those of differing cultural backgrounds. According to Benedict, there are problems with the progressive education movement of the 1930’s and the PEA, or Progressive Education Association. Benedict and others argued that the PEA “caters to a middle-class clientele,” and the movement puts “low-income students... at a

disadvantage” and thus, “low-income students [would] be viewed by educators as having less ability than middle-class students” (McGee Banks, 2005, p. 112-113).

Intercultural Education and Language Instruction

Further research shows that many bilingual students in many states and territories “have been reported as being limited English proficient, as measured by English language tests” (Brisk, 1998, p. 4). This is likely because they have been forced to try and forget their native language, while attempting to live and thrive in a country where they speak a completely different one and, as Maria Brisk puts it, “English speakers are encouraged to learn Spanish and Spanish speakers are forced to forget it” (p. 13). While studies in the early 1900’s “contended that bilingualism caused mental retardation and failure in school,” current and more reliable research “demonstrate[s] that bilinguals had higher scores in verbal and nonverbal IQ tests and displayed higher verbal and cognitive flexibility and increased ability to analyze syntax than monolingual students of the same age and general intelligence level” (pp. 7-9).

Mary Georgiou, a professor of languages at the University of Nicosia in Cyprus, stresses the importance of language learning not only for linguistic proficiency but also as a measure of global citizenship. She states that “foreign language education (FLE) is implicated in citizenship issues” and that “citizenship education aims at the preparation of learners to become active and responsible citizens willing to exercise their rights and responsibilities and to engage with the different communities to which they belong” (Georgiou, 2009, pp. 453-454). She quotes von Humboldt (2009), saying “learning to express oneself in words other than one’s own is ‘to acquire a new standpoint in our world-view’” (p. 453). She notes a critical aspect of why many people do not choose to learn a language besides their own: pride. Learning a language “entails losing control, sounding less intelligent than in one’s mother tongue, and learning new

socialisation patterns of another culture at the risk of acting the ‘wrong’ way” (p. 454). They must “abandon the familiar for the unknown” and “[place themselves] in a position of uncommon subordination and powerlessness” (p. 454).

“A further, explicitly intercultural purpose for education consists of fostering positive interactions between all people, but most particularly young people who are growing up using different languages” (Singh & Ernest p. 334). Singh & Ernest (2012) also note that this purpose entails “encouraging children as early as possible to learn how to understand and to use one another’s concepts, metaphors and conventions, with a view to establishing lifelong habits of inquiry and communications” (p. 334). According to Singh and Ernest, encouraging intercultural education at an early age can greatly influence patterns of positive interaction for the future. Integrating better foreign language education into school systems automatically establishes language education as an important discipline and therefore a respect for language and culture for future generations to build upon.

America’s monocultural, monolingual society has been stuck in a vicious cycle of both xenophobia and a sense of arrogance often mistaken for “patriotism” as exemplified through its promotion of its own culture as superior to others and insistence that everyone assimilate themselves into the English language. The lack of willingness to show appreciation and interest in other cultures of the world is further demonstrated in the fact that most Americans do not know any other language besides English while most non-native English speakers know one or multiple languages. According to “the UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education,” “‘language’ is recogni[z]ed...as ‘one of the most universal and diverse forms of expression of human culture, and perhaps even the most essential one’” (Singh & Ernest, 2012, p. 335).

Exposing young people to different values and cultures at a young age and teaching them to be inclusive and affirming towards others is a way that the cycle of toxic monoculturalism can be broken. Integrating a foreign language curriculum that allows children to become as tolerant as possible through their abilities to exchange dialogues in each other's tongues is a way to make an impact in the school systems.

Bilingual Education Programs as a Possible Solution

A national survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 1996 and 1997 about foreign language education revealed many common problems faced by elementary and secondary institutions in their foreign language programs, including "funding shortages, inadequate inservice training, inadequate articulation,... shortage of teachers,... lack of quality materials, ... and poor academic counseling." (Branaman & Rhodes, 1999, p.101). These findings reveal another reason for the lack of importance placed on education, as programs are often underfunded and the first department on the chopping block for budget cuts. Though foreign language programs have certainly increased in number and continue to be part of many educational curricula, the quality of the education received seems to be questionable, as so few American students are bilingual or multilingual (p.1).

As noted in the results section of this survey sent to "1,534 elementary and 1,650 secondary schools across the United States, both public and private" (Branaman & Rhodes, 1999, p. 1) immersive programs were few and far between, and instead had "more of the introductory foreign language experience model that does not aim at a high level of proficiency" (p. 102). The researchers provided several recommendations for improving language education, both through the quality of the language learning itself and through more adequate funding to increase value for language education programs. They also recommend that schools should

“[offer] more intensive foreign language programs” (p. 104) because there has been so little “positive growth” in “sequencing patterns for those schools that already offer language classes in the early grades” (p. 104). Immersive programs are not very common in the US, and foreign language classes are currently recognized as an elective type course rather than part of the core curriculum. For example, the website for Norwood Public Schools (n.d) states that “while Foreign Language is not a graduation requirement, for those students considering college, a minimum of 2 years of study at the high school level is necessary” (para. 1). Though language classes are still offered and the website mentions several benefits for taking a foreign language, it seems to suggest that the primary reason that students should enroll in foreign language classes is for students “to be competitive in the admissions process” (para. 1) and that two years would be sufficient to constitute a foreign language education. This is just one example of how language education in American schools has been pushed to the side and labeled as an optional educational enhancement rather than the core of a well-rounded education.

A response to these problems is bilingual education programs, with its prime emphasis on immersive learning. There are several different types of language programs, of which the “majority are designed to help students make the transition from one language to another; that is, they take monolinguals and produce monolinguals. In this sense, they are considered ‘subtractive.’ Immersion programs and maintenance bilingual education, on the other hand, are ‘additive’ in that they develop and maintain proficiency in two languages” (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1990, p. 38). Though there are still a few “practical limitations... [for] the ‘ideal’ bilingual [program model],... such as teacher availability and the general issue of program implementation,” (p. 38) the bilingual program model is very beneficial. The following principles are set forth by researchers Hakuta and Snow (as cited in Malakoff & Hakuta, 1990,

pp. 41-42), and they are supported by “basic research on bilingualism and second-language acquisition in assessing the theoretical soundness of bilingual education programs.” (pp. 41-42)

-Bilingualism is a good thing for children of all backgrounds-when bilingual children are compared with monolingual children on different kinds of skills, bilingual children are superior.

-To be “proficient,” “to be fluent,” “to know” a language means many different things: You can have good conversational skills, but that is different from being able to use the language in other settings, such as in school. Bilingual children are often informally evaluated in their conversational skills but not how they can use English in school.

-The two languages of the bilingual child are interdependent- they do not compete for limited space and resources.

-The stronger the native language of the children, the more efficiently they will learn English.

-Knowledge and skills learned in one language transfer to the other language- they do not have to be relearned.

-It is a myth that children are like linguistic sponges; they may take anywhere from two to seven years to acquire a second language, especially to master the academic uses of English.

-It is a myth that the younger the children are, the faster they learn a second language. For example, 10-year-olds are faster learners than 5-year-olds.

(p. 41-42).

From these points it is evident that no foreign language education program is flawless; however, it is notable that bilingual programs, especially those with immersive learning techniques are quite effective.

International High School

According to T. A. Osborn, author of *Future of Foreign Language Education in the United States*, “while for many educators the linguistic ability of these new immigrants may represent an academic liability and an impediment to the learning of English, language educators inside and outside the United States generally agree that the ability to speak more than one language is an asset and a skill to be nurtured” (Osborn, 2002, p. 139). Osborn provides an example of a high school that favors bilingualism as an asset and a skill, known as International High School at LaGuardia Community College:

It is a multilingual public high school that serves 460 [students] from sixty countries who enter the school speaking forty-one different languages. A typical class of twenty-four students might have representatives of as many as fifteen different languages. The school admits only students of limited English proficiency who have been in this country under four years at the time of application. (p. 141)

Teachers at the school were challenged to figure out how to “promote students’ native languages,” and students were grouped together both “with others who spoke their language” and those who did not (p. 142). The school offers other programs, such as the “Native Language Enhancement initiative” which “requires teachers to be facilitators of content learning as they promote native language development” (p. 144). Not only do students learn through their own languages, but being able to “[translate] both from the native language to English and vice versa

serves multiple purposes in this process: content learning, native language development, and English language acquisition” (p. 147). Many students were given questionnaires to discuss their attitudes toward learning new languages and one student “wrote of her ‘profound love’ for Spanish, a language she acquired as a second language” (p. 149).

In addition, teachers who initially “felt like ‘outsiders’” in their classrooms, learned to overcome the challenges of teaching about a language which they did not speak and “were eager to adapt and learn new things” (Osborn, 2002, p. 151). This is unlike most of the schools in the US, where “there is still the issue of language education and its relative importance in a society which values monolingualism so highly” (p. 161). Initiatives like this program celebrate the diverse citizens of America and their different native languages while also unifying them in the language of English.

Most high schools in the United States, however, are not like International High School. Despite America’s reputation as a celebrated place of freedom, where those who are persecuted can find a haven to freely be who they are, it is becoming increasingly less so. Even from its founding, those who emigrated from outside countries were encouraged to leave their native tongues behind and adopt the English language, as well as Americanize themselves in any way possible, including changing their ethnic last names to sound more English. As one of the great world superpowers, it seems that the US should have many people learned in other languages to be able to communicate socially, economically, and politically with the rest of the world.

Methodology

There were several important research questions that guided this project. My experiences abroad and general interest in foreign language education led me to question whether a bilingual program can be a good solution to America’s perpetually monolingual culture. This coupled with

the themes that emerged in my initial literature search led to my development of these research questions. What is the experience of individuals in a second language program in a monolingual country? How do students from different backgrounds learn in linguistically diverse settings? How do teachers make meaning of bilingual education? In addition to a literature review on language, intercultural education, and language education in the United States, I decided to take advantage of a local school district's rare bilingual education initiative to study it in vivo. Using it as a qualitative descriptive case study, I visited, observed and interviewed teachers and administrators from the Two-Way Bilingual program offered at Framingham Public Schools to better understand how bilingual education programs are designed, implemented and experienced in real communities. Through interviews and observations of this program and school document analysis, as well as testimonies of four teachers, I hoped to discover successful methods of teaching and learning language, as well as participants' thoughts on their experiences as bilingual individuals. This in-person experience would add dimension and depth to my literature review and vice versa. While I am not a trained qualitative researcher, and I did not conduct a systematic qualitative research analysis, I completed many of the steps involved in qualitative research except for analysis. I thought about my motivation to conduct research and wrote a positionality statement. I designed an interview protocol, applied and received permission by the Institutional Review Board's to conduct interviews, interviewed my participants, audiotaped and transcribed interviews with participants, and made meaning of themes I saw emerge in participants' interviews to come up with conclusions that would inform my thinking about the literature, as well as the data collected.

The Two-Way Program website for Framingham Public Schools defines a dual-language program as follows:

A dual language program is a model designed to promote bilingualism and biliteracy, cross-cultural competency, and high levels of academic achievement for both native English speakers and English Learners (ELs) who are native speakers of Portuguese and Spanish. Students in dual language programs develop and maintain their home language while adding a second language to their repertoire. They receive the same core curriculum as all students in FPS and instruction is provided through two languages throughout the program. The percentage of time spent learning in each language varies based on the school and grade level. (Framingham Public Schools, 2002-2019)

Through this program, teachers conduct classes in both Spanish and English to students who are both native English speakers and native Spanish speakers. Students “begin in kindergarten spending 80% of their day in Spanish... by 3rd grade 50% of instruction in language arts, math, science and social studies is in English, and 50% is in Spanish” (Framingham Public Schools, 2002-2019, para. 4). Program goals for students include to “become bilingual and biliterate in Spanish and English, progress academically according to the same curriculum used in the standard classrooms, and develop positive cross-cultural relationships and positive attitudes toward their own culture and that of others” (para. 3). Both groups of students work side-by-side, cooperatively learning in both languages.

According to longitudinal studies conducted by Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier in 2012, “two-way dual language programs are the most effective [method of foreign language education], since students from both groups [of different language speakers], can help each other in acquiring their second language” (Collier & Thomas, 2012, para. 2). They consist of “both English learners and English speakers schooled through their two languages” (para. 2). This type

of instruction “allows students, whether they be heritage speakers of a minority language or native English speakers, to acquire two languages through all the subjects of the curriculum,” (para. 3) so students are not only learning a language but learning their other fundamental subjects in that new language as well. Thomas and Collier concluded the following about the advantages of dual language instruction for English learners from their study:

When English learners get bogged down in ESL or mainstream English classes, where the curriculum is only instructed in English, they typically only close half of the achievement gap with English speakers, and they tend to fall further behind in school. Dual language education, when implemented properly, prevents this from happening; Thomas and Collier argue that dual language education is the only model that allows English learners to fully close the achievement gap and even outperform their native English speaking classmates on standardized tests.

(Collier & Thomas, 2012, p.1).

Participants

Ms. Angela Hernandez	Walsh Middle School, Spanish Language Arts teacher of grades 6-7 Two-Way Program Director at Secondary level
Ms. Maria Garcia	Walsh Middle School, Spanish Language Arts teacher for grades 6-8
Mr. Juan Rivera	Walsh Middle School, Spanish Social Studies teacher for 8 th grade
Mrs. Kelly Smith	Framingham High School, Principal

For my research, I visited Walsh Middle School and Framingham High School, two of the three institutions in association with the Framingham Two-Way Bilingual Program. I interviewed three middle school teachers, as well as the principal of the high school, on their

experiences as a bilingual individual and an educator in America as well as their thoughts on the value of a bilingual education and the current foreign language education curriculum. All three of the teachers whom I interviewed come from a Hispanic background and are fluent in both Spanish and English. I have also given each teacher a pseudonym to protect their identity. Ms. Angela Hernandez is the Secondary Two-Way Bilingual Program Department Head at District Level and Spanish Language Arts teacher of grades 6-7 at Walsh Middle School. Ms. Maria Garcia is the Spanish Language Arts teacher for grades 6-8 and the team leader of the Two-Way program at Walsh Middle School. Mr. Juan Rivera is a Spanish Social Studies teacher for 8th grade at Walsh Middle School. The fourth interviewee is Ms. Kelly Smith, the Principal of Framingham High School, who does not come from a bilingual background. Through my interviews, I found several common points made by each individual about bilingual education. Clearly, these four individuals value bilingual and multicultural education and have made it a central focus of their lifestyles.

Language as an Asset

Firstly, bilingualism is not only an asset for communication with others but also a key advantage for a successful academic future, especially through college applications and career opportunities. Yet, what I noted is that this seems to apply more to dominant and privileged students. In other words, for white, middle-class students, bilingualism was seen as an asset, while stigma was still attached to the bilingualism of students whose first language was a language other than English. Teachers echoed classist stereotypes.

As Mr. Rivera says, “when it comes to jobs, more and more it’s a highly valued skill to be able to speak more than one language” and it also “gives them the option for certain careers that they might not have thought of before if they weren’t a bilingual speaker” (J. Rivera,

personal communication, October 17, 2019). An interesting point brought up by several of the teachers was learning language “[can] depend on how stimulated [the students] are at home” (A. Hernandez, personal communication, September 26, 2019). They suggest that native English speakers tend to have more support at home because parents see the second language as a future advantage for their child to succeed; on the other hand, native Spanish speakers might have less support at home because their parents do not see the value, and they tend to have a lower socioeconomic status than those who speak English as their first language. Though this is certainly a generalization, it is still an interesting and notable observation made by at least two of the teachers.

As Angela says, “the English-speaking kids see the benefit and their parents put lots of effort and put trust in the system...they see the value for college applications and some even invest in a Spanish-speaking nanny” (A. Hernandez, personal communication, September 26, 2019). Maria explicitly says that “monolingual English children tend to have strong academic parents at home” and that she “tends to focus on the native Spanish speakers since they don’t have as many benefits” (M. Garcia, personal communication, September 26, 2019). Something here that is interesting to note that though these bilingual native Spanish speakers may have the clear advantage linguistically, they may still be disadvantaged due to other factors. As Angela notes about some of the middle school students, “they don’t always want to be identified as Spanish speakers due to their own self-image” and “English is the main language spoken at the school and they want to fit in” (A. Hernandez, personal communication, September 26, 2019). Their age and personal development also factors in to their language proficiency, as well as their home backgrounds.

Language as an Appreciation of Diversity

Teachers note that because the current system for foreign language and multicultural education is assimilation to the American monolingual culture, the aim of the bilingual program is to promote an environment of open-mindedness and acceptance among all those of different cultures, especially for the children within the program. As individuals who have experienced a second culture in addition to their American identities, they “see the value and how much [you] can learn from different cultures.” They note several positive impacts of bilingual education on students, including “learn[ing] to be tolerant and respectful of each other,” which leads them to be “curious about each other and want to learn more,” as well as “push[ing] them to go beyond social norms” (A. Hernandez, personal communication, September 26, 2019). Also, “it gives them a different perspective...[on] the friends they make... from different cultures...and it just lets them see that the world is a mix of different cultures and races” (J. Rivera, personal communication, October 17, 2019). Though Ms. Kelly Smith does not share the same bilingual characteristic as the program teachers, she agrees that “we can learn so much from each other” and says, “I always stop and talk to the kids and I’m like ‘so what language are we speaking and tell me what you’re saying so I can try to say it...too’” (K. Smith, personal communication, October 17, 2019). It is clear that she aims to set an example of tolerance for students to follow. This seems to be in line with the literature, both the multicultural and intercultural literature, which points to the importance of intergroup contact and intergroup dialogue to support valuing diversity and social cohesion (Pica-Smith, Contini, & Veloria, 2019).

Language as Core

Mr. Juan Rivera suggests that standard foreign language courses in America lack the value and effectiveness of immersive courses. He says:

“I think [regular courses fall] short because the students don’t see it as a core class. They just see it as an elective, and so it’s harder for them to see it as a class they need to do well in sometimes because most of them see it as an elective that doesn’t really matter if they fail it or not as long as their core classes are fine.

When it’s part of your core classes, it makes it harder to just disregard trying to learn the language. So when you’re learning a foreign language somewhere else, you get 45-50 minutes, depending on how long the classes are, of that language and it’s mainly focused on grammar and vocab and syntax and sentence structure. When it’s an immersion class, it’s about the language, it’s about the culture, it’s about just academically being able to speak it rather than just socially being able to speak it, which is what a [regular] foreign language class tends to focus on.” (J. Rivera, personal communication, October 17, 2019)

The teachers value the immersive environment and bring their own bilingual learning experiences into the classroom. Ms. Hernandez notes that “all [students] have been learning [Spanish] since kindergarten... [so they] understand about 60% [of the language]” by the time they arrive at the middle school (A. Hernandez, personal communication, September 26, 2019). The immersive method of teaching differs greatly from the current American foreign language education system, but is a common practice in most other countries to learn a language. As noted by Principal Smith, “if you travel...to other countries, people know many languages, but here... in America, we’re not as well versed in that from the beginning of our education, so this is a great opportunity for kids” (K. Smith, personal communication, October 17, 2019).

It also brings language into a position of prominence as a core requirement rather than an elective type class. This would agree with David Coulby’s perspective in his *Intercultural*

Education: theory and practice, where he says that “interculturalism is a theme, probably the major theme, which needs to inform the teaching and learning of all subjects” (Coulby, 2006). Though every discipline certainly has value, they argue that the American education system puts language learning on the backburner, especially in a formal education setting; moreover, this view can certainly be confirmed through the aforementioned statistics of the lack of polylingual Americans. The reason that knowing a second language is such a prized skill is because there is a great need for it due to the shortage of qualified Americans.

Language as Facilitator of Intergroup Relationships

Finally, these educators see language as a bridge to having intercultural relationships and intergroup dialogue that otherwise does not happen without this program. The program “lets them see that the world is a mix of different cultures and races” and “gives students a different perspective” (J. Rivera, personal communication, October 17, 2019). Principal Smith notes that “because the United States is so rich in diversity, the more languages we know, the more opportunities we have;” moreover, a person knowing a second language can talk to anyone who knows that language, including those outside of their own culture (K. Smith, personal communication, October 17, 2019). Ms. Hernandez makes an intriguing observation: “some kids do not like to be bilingual, especially Spanish speakers who recognize the lower class stereotype associated with them... and they don’t always want to be identified as Spanish speakers due to their own self-image because English is the main language and they want to fit in” (A. Hernandez, personal communication, September 26, 2019). Though these native Spanish speakers are bilingual, they can see it as an obstacle rather than a skill; however, when they encounter native English speakers in their program attempting to learn Spanish, I think that it would be something that instead brings them together. The teachers try to create an uplifting

environment for the students, especially focusing on the native Spanish speakers, and provide a good role model for the success that can be achieved through being bilingual. Angela says that she uses her “positive experience” as a bilingual and “always let[s] [her] students know that being bilingual is a blessing” (A. Hernandez, personal communication, September 26, 2019). The Two-Way program elevates Spanish as an important and valuable discipline and allows the students to communicate in ways they would never have initially thought.

Kelly says that the teachers and parents are very dedicated to the program and “making sure [the schools] have those opportunities for all students to learn multiple languages...[to] become global citizens and communicate effectively” because “the world is getting smaller” (K. Smith, personal communication, October 17, 2019). Thus, if students want to travel, “just being bilingual...opens the possibility to communicate with so many different countries...and so they are able to interact with the natives more than if they didn’t speak the language or...understand the culture” (J. Rivera, personal communication, October 17, 2019). Not only can they find their way around the country, but they would also be able to have full-on conversations with locals and truly immerse themselves in a new culture. This connects to the notion that intergroup contact and intergroup dialogue is a necessary condition for positive intergroup relationships in a multi-ethnic school (Pica-Smith, Contini, & Ives, 2018), which has been demonstrated to reduce prejudice and increase intercultural competence.

Conclusion

It is indisputable that bilingualism is a valuable skill because it uncovers so many opportunities for those individuals. Through my observations and interviews, I discovered that though bilingual education programs are uncommon, they are very successful and are generally very supported by the school systems. If other schools would be willing to adopt these programs,

perhaps even at the college level, I believe that they would find it very advantageous, but the problem is starting them up in the first place. Bilingual programs and other immersive programs like it have certainly proven to be the most successful methods of teaching language. Even those who are heritage language speakers learned through being immersed in the language in their households at a young age.

The students in the Framingham program are very successful, and as many of the teachers said, they have no problem getting a job or college education because of their bilingual abilities. As I hypothesized, language acquisition at a young age is a factor in proficiency, but one of the most interesting observations I found in this project was the fact there are so many additional factors, such as socioeconomic status, personal experiential development, and a support system. As a student with no background in any foreign language prior to high school, I certainly see the value myself in learning a new language at a young age, but I never would have thought of development in middle school as having a strong correlation to foreign language ability.

There were also some limitations of my research, specifically the small sample size. It was very difficult to find teachers who had the time to be interviewed, and I was not able to interview any teachers from the elementary school. In addition, I only looked at one bilingual program in depth, and it would be helpful to look at several different programs to compare and contrast. There are also so many interconnected topics and external factors related to polylingual and multicultural education that I was not able to cover in this thesis. For example, future research could perhaps incorporate a developmental framework when evaluating bilingual education programs to learn when students are best able to learn additional languages as there are sensitive periods for language development. Looking at additional external factors of foreign

language learning would certainly yield a more detailed picture of the effects of bilingualism on individuals.

In accordance with the findings of my interviews, integrating foreign language into core curricula would increase the number of students versed in foreign language. Because there is presently so little value placed on foreign language in America, it makes sense that language is a dying department in formal education. Revitalizing multicultural education and language programs in schools would promote appreciation of diversity and understanding of people from other cultures, especially immigrants. These programs are not simply a way to learn a foreign language but a way to combat the continuous cycle of toxic monoculturalism starting with the youth.

The four themes derived from the interviews show how language can play so many roles in a society. Language is highly valued because it shows that the individual has excellent problem solving skills as well as the ability to converse with and understand an entirely different culture from their own. It has the power to unite people from any kind of background if they take the time to learn each other's tongues. In countries outside of America, bilingual and multilingual individuals are prevalent, and their ability to know English and other languages has united the world in so many ways. English is a language of power because of America's history of colonization and white nationalism, and immigrants were forced to assimilate and suppress their own languages. Now that the immigrant population is so high, the population of native Spanish speakers in the US is growing, and due to America's history of these phenomena, they sometimes have to overcome the oppression felt from embracing their own cultures and languages. Though it is helpful to have English as an international language, limiting discussions

to only those who speak English creates communication barriers among nations, and that is why interpreters are so valued and important to international business and relations.

Bilingual programs and immersive learning methods have proven to be one of the most effective ways to become fluent in a second language, but it can generally be said that foreign language education in America needs to be restructured. A multilingual society not only comprises very intelligent individuals who are adept at problem solving and communication but also cultivates a people better equipped to understand those who come from different backgrounds and have different values. It would be nearly impossible to completely restructure foreign language education throughout the US, but with the constant growth of the international population, a change is necessary. Potentially, through these programs and others like it, the face of American foreign language education can be changed for the better, and this country can become a more accepting and refined society.

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