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Immigrant Children in the Age of Educational Reform

Audrey Figueroa Murphy

The fastest growing population group among school age children is English language learners or ELLs (Center for Public Education, 2011). Between the years 1997 and 2003, the number of ELLs in U.S. schools increased by about two million, nearly doubling in size, with some estimates putting their number at more than five million (Batalovea, Fix, & Murray, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In fact, during the school year 2010-2011, ten percent of American public school students were ELLs (an estimated 4.7 million), a significant increase from the nine percent (4.1 million students) reported earlier for the years 2002-2003 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Consequently, the needs of these students are clearly a major issue for many U.S. schools and for our public education system as a whole.

One of the major difficulties U.S. immigrant children face is due to the emphasis that the current educational landscape places on testing. The standards-and-tests initiative was given force of federal law in 2001 with the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (Public Law PL 107-110) which decrees that all students must attain certain benchmarks by the end of each grade in order to be college and career ready by graduation. All students must be tested by these standardized tests within one year of attending school in the U.S. No special considerations are given to immigrant children who are English language learners.

However, what separates ELLs from non-ELL children is language. ELLs come into the American school system speaking a language other than English. They progress in English language acquisition at differing time periods. Conversational language or BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) is the language of the street and is easily learned within one to three years (Cummins, 1981). Moreover, the more challenging type of language, CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) or the academic language of the school, takes longer to develop. Research has demonstrated that it takes five to seven years for ELLs to acquire the English language skills necessary to fully understand and participate in a classroom in which instruction occurs in English (Corson, 1993; Cummins, 2012; Cummins & Danesi, 1990; Lopez & Tashakkori, 2006; Tarasawa, 2007/2008).

As the population of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the nation's schools skyrockets (NCELA, 2011), and new initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) are put into place, vigorous debate continues regarding appropriate educational services for these students. Some advocate for instruction totally in English, while others opt for Bilingual services, in which instruction is delivered in both the new language and home language (Goldenberg, 2008; Haas, 2005; Harper & DeJong, 2004; Just, 2009).

Many ELLs lack the fluency level to have most of their content instruction in English. Accordingly, Krashen (1999) advocates instruction that uses students' primary language so that they can acquire content knowledge at the same time that they are

learning English. After all, it is easier to learn to read in a language that the learner understands (Fillmore, 1991, 2000).

Some educators and researchers advocate for *dual language* (DL) programs, also known as two-way bilingual programs (Murphy, 2010). In the DL approach, both the home language and English serve as instructional languages on a permanent basis, with no attempt made to diminish the use of the home language over time. Moreover, DL classrooms include both ELLs and native English speakers, not ELLs alone. In essence, in the DL model ELLs and native English speakers are educated together using both languages, with the goal that both groups of students become proficient in two languages and use them in academic and non-academic settings

Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) has been implemented in many parts of the nation as a means for students to learn English through their home language (Cummins, 1999, 2001). TBE uses both languages in the classroom during a transitional period to support learners whose home language is not English. As the students gain mastery in English, the primary language is gradually phased out. The main difference between this approach and ESL-immersion is the transitional use of the home language in the classroom.

The theoretical framework for TBE is based on the relationship between the home and target languages. Researchers have demonstrated that transfer of skills, knowledge, and processes across languages occurs (Cummins, 1981, 1991; Krashen, 1996), so development of literacy skills in the first language is thought to enhance academic skills in the second language (Collier, 1995; Mora et al., 2001; Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991).

Both Transitional Bilingual and Dual Language Programs were in full force at the New York City public school in which I was Principal. The school housed over 1500 students, 87% living below the poverty level, and 92% living in a home where English was not the first language. As teachers and educators of the school, we offered these programs as well as a Newcomers' class for new immigrant students. These programs were created in order to find the best approach to support our students who were newly arrived to the U.S. Since our immigrant students were mainly Spanish speakers, we were able to provide them with Bilingual classes as well as Dual Language classes. In addition, we provided services in English as a Second Language, in either a self-contained class format or through the services of an ESL certified teacher, for the students who spoke languages other than Spanish.

As research has shown that it takes five to seven years for students to acquire academic language, it seems quite unjust for immigrant students to take a standardized examination in a language they are just beginning to grasp after being in school for only one year. The type of program schools offer to immigrant students is a step in the right direction but cannot make up for unfair testing given after students are exposed to their new language after such a limited time. The emphasis on increased testing is due to accountability policies which encourage teachers to teach for the test – i.e., devote instructional time to the knowledge and skills on the test, to the exclusion of virtually all else (Cizek, 2001; Ehren & Hatch, 2013; Kim & Abernathy, 2012).

The other factor is the parents. Many parents of immigrant children come from collectivist cultures, and as a result, are not vocal in speaking out against educational issues. Collectivist cultures, such as those in Japan, China and Russia, tend to value such

social indicators as a respect for authority, indirect communication, and saving face (Fernandez, Carlson, Stepina, & Nicholson, 1997; Hofstede, 1987). They trust school administrators, school policies, teachers and all educators. They may have difficulty understanding how to address concerns related to their children's educational needs. It is, therefore, up to us to be advocates for our students for fair testing, and for meaningful programs for them. If these children are indeed our future, it urges us, as educators and administrators, to lead the way to ensure that these children's needs are being met.

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