

## My People Made It Without Bilingual Education What's Wrong With Your People?

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I eagerly embraced the question. There was strong reason to believe that history would be on the side of the proponents of bilingual education.

But it was not meant to be. The critics were correct. A careful search of the historical record clearly indicates that immigrants on the eve of the 20th century and before did not have anything that can remotely be compared to bilingual education in the educational diet. When the critics argue that "my folks made it without bilingual education." they are correct.

As I poured through the dusty records of history and socio-economic political arena facing the brave newcomers of yesterday, however, I realized that the absence of bilingual education for that generation of future Americans was related to something bigger than just the language issue. The whole history of immigrant education lay before me and I could now put the issues of yesterday's newcomers in its proper perspective.

Yes, it is true that the newcomers of yesterday did not get bilingual education: but that is because they did not get any education. Entry into the economic system was possible without formal education. When the immigrants came from Europe they did not need middle class English language skills and high school diplomas or college degrees to get into the economy. Those brave souls transplanted into what they labeled as the "new world" came with the basics strong backs and a willingness to work.

When Swedes ran out of farmland on their native soil, they came to the land which had belonged to American Indians and which, through conquest became available to these Scandinavian Lutherans. They transplanted themselves into a terrain and geography not unlike the one they left behind, and on the very day they arrived, Swedes began to work. They could speak to those cows in Swedish and the cows would give them milk. Germans in Pennsylvania could speak to the corn in German and it would grow in effect the newcomers would have success in the economy, build their homes, their centers of worship, and later on, schools were established. Several generations would pass in the process. The society did not need to build schools to prepare the first generation of non-English speakers and their children for productive lives in the economy. Today's newcomers confront not the cow nor the corn, but the computers.

While the generations of yesterday could wait one, perhaps two, and even three generations before their offspring could enter high school and then college, the newcomers of today have to leap-frog from the agricultural period well over the industrial period of strong-back and willingness-to-work to the age information.

Most people who today sit on boards of education administer school programs and teach in the classrooms are the third or fourth generation descendants of immigrants. Their parents may have earned a high school diploma: but their grandparents did not. The father back they go, the less formal schooling. In fact today's education professionals represent for the most part, the first generation of college graduates in their individual families. It is not accurate to say "we made it without bilingual education" when history says that public education did not exist at all or simply did not figure in any significant way in the progress of immigrants in an economy that required for the most part, the strong backs, the farming skills the entrepreneurial skills of the merchant, the traders, and the fishing skills of newcomers. America was built by non-English speaking people without former education.

At the turn of the century the dropout rate for everyone was about 94 percent but there was no dropout problem. Schools were irrelevant to the bulk of newcomers. When schools did not

absorb the children of the immigrants to the degree that public schools existed at all the economy did.

The dropout rate is a problem only if the lack of diploma is combined with the inability to get into the economy without such certificates. The newcomer yesterday faced a large dropout rate but a low dropout problem. Today, we have a low dropout rate, about 30 percent overall, but high dropout problem. Why? because to get into the economy, the workforce needs success in high school and post-high school education.

The newcomers of today come to the U.S. with a strong back and willingness to work, with the same intelligence of those farmers of old but at the wrong time. They cannot get into the economy and expect a real future for their children, in the age of computers, by growing corn and milking cows. They cannot have success in the economy until they have success in schools. Latinos, along with the Asians, Pacific Islanders and limited English proficient groups, some native to the soil of the Americans must do what no other group had to do before in the history of American education: attend middle class institutions, compete with mainstream classmates, and achieve success in classes which transfer information in English. That's a tall order. Knowing how to transfer information in English is basic to such expectations. As Moore and Pachon wrote in Hispanics in the United States.

"It is hard for some critics to understand why other immigrant groups managed without bilingual instruction. Actually, arrivals did not manage. Young children left school in such large numbers and at such an early age that failure was scarcely noticed. Furthermore, the dropouts survived by fitting themselves into a much less demanding economy. A high school diploma is now a bare minimum for many jobs. A wider range of children are now expected to remain in school - not just a chosen few from upper income groups."

However, we must not fall into the trap of teaching Limited English Proficient (LEP) students English at the expense of their education. That happened to me. When I first went to public school in New York City. I didn't know any English and there were no programs to help me understand what the teacher was saying to our class. So I would look around and initiate my classmates.

One day the teacher asked a question. I heard the noise pregnant with meaning fill the classroom and looked on to see the response of my classmates. I was prepared to follow the lead of my peers. But something strange occurred. I panicked as I witnessed only 50 percent of the class raising their hands. What was I to do? With which group should I vote? I always tended to do what the majority of the students did. But I was trapped, since the response was not very clear. I listened intensely as the teacher made the same series of noises and I watched for the response. This time about 60 percent of my classmates raised their hands. And then more. When about 80 percent responded with raised hands, I did so, mindful of the fact that mine was hidden in the masses of hands. My response to what I could not understand was at least keeping pace with what everyone else was doing.

I ran home. My feet pounded the concrete sidewalk. I ran up the stairs of my apartment building and I pushed the door open. "Mamy, mamy," I asked. "Que significa la palabra finish?" ("Mom, mom, what does the word 'finish' mean?") She said, "Terminates la terea, mi hijito?" (Did you finish your task, my son?) So that's why only 50 percent raised their hands. I thought. Only 50 percent were finished! I now understood what the teacher was asking and why the class responded as they did.

That evening at the dinner table, I noticed a long pause between the bites by my older brother Charlie. I asked him, "Charlie, are you finished?" I felt good about how quickly I put my new vocabulary to work. I felt proud that I knew what the word "finish" meant. I now knew the word "finish," but I had not finished my task. I was learning English at the expense of my education.

Bilingual education is the process whereby LEP students can learn English and finish their task. The issues are separated to create a positive transition of both empowering newcomers to

the language with new verbal skills; but learning in the language they know the important curriculum tasks. Bilingual education is an important legitimate education reform for today's youth.

Bilingual education programs respond to the real problem of making instruction understandable. Anyone who argues that one can get along without English in the U.S. is a fool! English has replaced German as the language of science and French as the language of diplomacy. English is the lingua franca of the world. The world's commerce largely takes place in international settings in English. When most of the world studies a foreign language, it tends to be English. That's reason enough for us to insist that newcomers who come to the U.S. school must learn English. But there is even a more powerful reason: English is the common language of American citizens. It must be taught, required strengthened and perfected in our schooling initiatives.

At their core, all bilingual educational programs worth their salt aim to teach English to LEP students. But while those LEP students are learning English so they can learn in English, they can be learning their math and science in the language they know.

Monolinguals who have never had to learn a second language to compete in a new and different environment, but who have an appreciation for history, know that the conditions facing us on the eve of the 21st Century are very different from conditions faced by those who came on the eve of the 20th Century.

We must realize that not only do these newcomers need our enlightened policy; but we may go one step further. Not only must these newcomers learn English, it might be good if we didn't move in too quickly and tell them to forget Spanish or Vietnamese, or Chamorro, or Togalo. Maybe we can come of age and realize that we cannot, in the name of turning out good American limit the freedom of speech of those new to our shore and or tell people to forget what they know. In the name of education we cannot argue that it is better to know less than more. Bilingual education enriches our best hopes for a democratic society, making it safe for differences as well - powerful, practical reasons why we need it today: even though such programs did not exist for yesterday's arrivals.

Editor's Notes We are pleased that Dr. Betances agreed to contribute his viewpoints on bilingual education to this issue. Dr. Betances was a popular speaker at our December Annual Conference '85 where his topic was "Diversity, Equality and Reform in American Education in the Age of Technology. Tapes of this speech are available through Photo and Sound Company.