

BILINGUAL EDUCATION: TEACHERS' VOICES

The Problem and the Purpose of the Study

Much of the literature on bilingual education focuses on its legal, political, and methodological aspects. What is missing from the literature are the teachers' voices. Rarely is the perspective of the practitioner included in discussions about bilingual education programs. This is unfortunate because bilingual teachers have deep insight into the true nature of this educational approach. Because bilingual education has been so politically controversial, bilingual educators have continually been challenged to prove the efficacy of the programs.

All teachers must contend with the uncertainties arising from lack of support for their profession, but this situation is doubly difficult for bilingual teachers. Education in general is often criticized, but its critics talk of improvement, not elimination. Bilingual education on the other hand, faces opposition from a large portion of the population, who would willingly do away with it. (Ada, 1986, p. 386)

The purpose of this study is to give voice to bilingual teachers' experiences, with the intent of making the implicit explicit (Everhart, 1983). Through interviews, the researcher documented four bilingual teachers' experiences and explored their perceptions of changes in bilingual programs and policies, school and community influences, and teacher education.

Research Methods

This qualitative study falls within an area of research that regards the teacher as one who knows her profession holistically. The perspective of the study is that of the bilingual teachers

on bilingual education. This study has implications for administrators, teacher educators, other teachers, and researchers. Because these bilingual teachers have perspective of the past and the present, their insights can contribute to the creation of more informed and workable programs.

The cultural and linguistic connections that the teachers made with students and their families contributed their effectiveness. The teachers' stories support the need for developing and enhancing cultural sensitivity and knowledge through direct contact.

The teachers' stories imply a need for clear policies that support bilingual instruction. Policies that encourage native language development should to be articulated and supported in schools. The teachers voice a strong need for better assessment instruments and testing procedures for LEP students. Their experiences suggest that language assessment tests and standardized English tests should be re-evaluated and redesigned in order to better meet LEP students' needs.

Increased opportunities for formal teacher education are needed so that bilingual teachers can make a better connection between theory and practice. Because Title VII teacher education programs were so new when these teachers attended them, research on effective bilingual teaching practices was limited. This may have made it more difficult for these teachers' to learn how to teach bilingually. Since those first programs, much has been learned that could help bilingual teachers. Dissemination of

recent research to bilingual teachers could greatly improve their practice. In addition, the teachers expressed a need for more staff development as well as opportunities for collegial exchanges.

The teachers' stories exemplified how important parent-teacher relationships are in bilingual settings. The valiant efforts that the bilingual teachers made to help students and their families deserve recognition. Because of their role as community liaisons, bilingual teachers may need more training and support in dealing with community needs and problems.

These teachers' voices have provided accounts of their actual experiences in bilingual classrooms and expand the knowledge base on practice. Their stories support the use of qualitative case studies to add the practitioner's perspective to the literature.

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