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ABSTRACT

A study examined linguistic minority parents' views on bilingual education, motivated by recurrent controversy surrounding public school provision of bilingual education for language minority students. Multiple-choice questionnaires in English and Spanish were answered by 299 Latino parents whose children were enrolled in bilingual education classes at six elementary and four middle schools in the Los Angeles (California) area. Responding parents had been in the United States an average of 13 years. About 73 percent of the children were foreign-born. The questionnaire asked about parents' understanding of the goals, objectives, and design of bilingual education programs and their views on appropriate Spanish and English language use in the bilingual classroom, desired language skills for their children, and preferences concerning bilingual and regular education. Results indicate that the majority (83 percent) supported bilingual education, and about three-quarters felt use of two languages facilitated development of English skills. Two-thirds reported that if given the option of enrolling their children in mainstream classes, they would prefer this placement. The questionnaires are appended. (Contains 10 references.) (MSE)

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The Linguistic Minority Parents' Perceptions of Bilingual Education

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## **Abstract**

### **The Linguistic Minority Parents' Perception of Bilingual Education**

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to examine the linguistic minority parents' perceptions of bilingual education and (b) to investigate their views on bilingual education. This study was motivated by the re-emerging controversy surrounding the issue of whether or not public schools should continue to provide bilingual education programs for linguistic minority students. It was hypothesized that most parents of linguistic minority students do not fully understand the objectives and goals of bilingual education. It was also hypothesized that irrespective of their understanding level, most linguistic minority parents support bilingual education as long as it provided their children opportunities to develop English skills while providing them equal access to the core curriculum. Based on a sample of 290 adult subjects, all of whom were of Latino background, the study found that the majority (83%) of the parents surveyed supported bilingual education. In addition, three in four parents (76%) thought that the use of two languages--students' home/primary language and English--facilitated their children's development of English skills. Interestingly, if provided the option to enroll their children in mainstream classes two-thirds (67%) responded that they would prefer that their children be placed in regular classes.

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## **The Linguistic Minority Parents' Perceptions of Bilingual Education**

### ***Introduction***

Controversies related to bilingual education in the United States are not a recent phenomenon. Ever since the first Europeans set foot in the New World, inevitably bringing with them their native tongue among other cultural resources, the people of the United States have dissented on whether monolingualism or multilingualism should prevail in the country. Although English had become the dominant language as early as the late seventeenth century (Crawford, 1995), the continuous influx of immigrants made language “assimilation” difficult, particularly for the newly arriving immigrants to the United States. Although there has been numerous attempts in the past couple of centuries to proclaim English as the official language of the United States, the general approach of the federal government has been to delegate vis-à-vis enforce language policies and strategies to state governments. Nevertheless, ambitious movements within a segment of the American population to create an “American-speaking” citizenry have prevailed throughout the history of the United States (Baugh & Cable, 1978).

The federal government enacted into law the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, partly in response to the social and political climate of the late 1960s. The influx of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries enabled the formation of a stronger social base from which to demand recognition for the existence of cultural pluralism in the United States (Lessow-Hurley, 1996). The linguistic minority communities became increasingly more resistant to the idea of language and cultural assimilation, which devalued and restricted their social and political mobility. The 1960s also coincided with research findings, notably the Coral Way project, which revealed the benefits and

effectiveness of dual-language instruction. Prior to the *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) decision in which Superior Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs under the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, only one state, Massachusetts, offered a state-mandated bilingual program in the United States (Lessow-Hurley, 1996). The Superior Court decision affirmed the need for schools to provide “education on equal terms” for all children, including linguistic minority students. Although the number of states mandating dual language instruction for linguistic minority students eventually increased subsequent to the decision, the goal of the law was in essence to provide remedial English instruction (compensatory and transitional) to children who were disadvantaged due to limited English proficiency than to provide opportunities for the children to become proficient bilinguals (enrichment instruction). Thus, dual language programs were for the most part aimed at mainstreaming the children into the English language rather than encouraging them to develop skills in two languages.

With the continuous influx of immigrant children from non-English speaking countries entering our schools, coupled with America’s perceptions of dismal academic achievement of our students, anti-immigrant sentiment is becoming increasingly popular in many parts of the United States, particularly in those states with high proportions of linguistic minority residents, including California. In June 1998, Californians will vote on Proposition 227, or the “English for the Children” initiative, to decide whether to continue or discontinue bilingual education in the public schools. If this initiative is approved by voters, linguistic minority students enrolled in California’s public schools will no longer be entitled to instruction or assistance in their native language. Teachers

are prohibited from using any language other than English to instruct and communicate with their students.

In California alone, there are some 1.4 million limited-English students enrolled in the public schools. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, which has an enrollment of about 681,000 students, 310,000 (46%) of its students are classified as limited-English proficient . Opponents of bilingual education argue that bilingual programs are “watered down” programs that are ineffective in preparing linguistic minority students to engage in academics using English as the medium of communication. They also cite that bilingual programs are a waste of financial resources. In 1997, California allocated approximately \$240 million to bilingual programs in the state. California school districts also received nearly \$90 million in bilingual funding for fiscal 1997 from the federal government (California Dept. of Education, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perspectives and views of linguistic minority parents whose children were enrolled in bilingual education programs. This study examined questions, such as the following: Are they aware of the goals and objectives of bilingual education?; Are they cognizant of the different models and programs of bilingual education?; Do they believe their children should be taught in English and/or in the home language?; Do they support bilingual education? The motive for this study was to understand the basic underlying issue manifested in the bilingual education controversy: Do linguistic-minority parents’ possess sufficient understanding and knowledge to take a stance on this debate? Also, do most linguistic minority parents support the movement to discontinue bilingual education? Any decision at the district or

state level must take into consideration the views of the linguistic minority parents who are most affected, but often most powerless, in making educational decisions.

### ***Method***

Multiple-choice type questionnaires, written in English and Spanish, were distributed to 400 Latino parents whose children were enrolled in bilingual education classes at six elementary and four middle schools in the greater Los Angeles area. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 290 questionnaires (73%) were returned. Of the 290, 121 (42%) were from parents whose children were attending elementary school and 169 (58%) were from parents whose children were attending middle school. The subjects had been in the United States on an average of just over 13 years and their children have lived in the United States for approximately seven years. About 27% of the children were United States-born and 73% were foreign-born. On average, the children have been enrolled in a bilingual education program for just over three years. All the subjects responded that they use Spanish as the primary language in the home to communicate with their children.

The questionnaire contained 11 questions, of which three were optional questions related to previous responses, and one was a fill-in-the-blank question. The questions were as below.

1. *Do you understand the objectives/goals of bilingual education?*
2. *If so, the objectives/goals of bilingual education are?*
3. *Do you know the different models/programs of bilingual education?*
4. *If so, what are the names of the models/programs you know?*
5. *What language(s) do you think teachers should use in the classroom to teach your child(ren)?*

6. *Do you believe learning in the home/primary language retards the development of English for your child(ren)?*
7. *Do you believe learning in two languages retards the development of English for your child(ren)?*
8. *What language(s) do you wish your child(ren) to develop?*
9. *Do you support bilingual education?*
10. *If not, why do you oppose bilingual education?*
11. *If you had a choice, would you prefer to have your child(ren) in enrolled in regular classes?*

### **Results**

#### **Questions 1-2:**

Approximately two-thirds (68%) of the subjects responded that they knew or understood the objectives/goals of bilingual education. Of those who responded that they knew or understood the objectives/goals of bilingual education, the majority (58%) of the subjects responded that the objective/goal was to help students develop both English and Spanish. Just under one-third (30%) of the respondents thought that the objective/goal was to help students develop English skills only and approximately one out of ten (12%) responded that bilingual education was to help students develop and maintain their home/language skills.

#### **Questions 3-4:**

Of those who responded that they knew or understood the objectives/goals of bilingual education, only 26% answered that they knew the different models/programs of bilingual education. However, when asked to write the name of the model/program, only six subjects responded. Two subjects wrote simply as "Bilingual Education," two as



“ESL,” one as “SDAIE,” and one as “Integrated Bilingual Education.” Thus, even among those who claimed to know the different models/programs, only a few could identify them.

**Question 5:**

When asked what language(s) teachers should use to instruct linguistic minority students in the classroom, about three-fourth (76%) responded that teachers should use both English and the students’ home/primary language. About one-fifth (21%) responded that teachers should use only English, and 3% thought only the students’ home/primary language should be used in the classroom.

**Question 6:**

In regards to the subjects’ views on whether or not they believed instructions in the students’ home/primary language slowed down the development of English, 41% responded that it did and 59% said that it did not. Thus, although more than half of the subjects did not think using the students’ home/primary language interfered with the development of English, a significant percentage thought that the use of the home/primary language had a negative effect on English development.

**Question 7:**

When asked if the subjects thought the use of two languages to instruct their children interfered with their English development, the majority (76%) of the subjects responded that it did not and about one in four (24%) responded that it did.

**Question 8:**

Related to the parents’ desire for what language(s) they would like their children to develop, the majority (70%) of the parents hoped that their children develop two

languages, Spanish and English. However, almost one out of three (27%) parents responded that they would like their children to develop English skills exclusively. Only 3% of the subjects expressed their desire for their children to become monolingual in Spanish.

Questions 9-10:

On the question related to whether or not subjects supported bilingual education, the majority (83%) of them supported bilingual education. Only 17% of the subjects responded that they do not support bilingual education. Among those subjects who opposed bilingual education, approximately half (52%) of them objected to bilingual education because they believed all students should be treated equally; about one out of four (26%) believed that only English should be used in the schools; about one out of ten (11%) responded that bilingual education was ineffective; and 5% stated that bilingual education was a waste of tax dollars. Almost 6% declined to respond to this question.

Question 11:

Pertaining to the parents' preferences for their children's program assignment, approximately two-thirds (67%) of the subjects responded that they would like their children to be enrolled in mainstream classes, if given a choice, and one-third (33%) of the subjects preferred that their children remain in the bilingual education program.

### *Discussions*

Several interesting observations can be made from this study. First, although the majority (68%) of the subjects claimed that they knew or understood the objectives/goals of bilingual education, and 26% responded that they knew or understood the different models and programs of bilingual education, only a few could actually name the

models/programs of bilingual education. This seems to suggest that although parents of linguistic minority students were aware that their children were enrolled in a bilingual program, they may have little understanding of the different models and programs of bilingual education. Only six subjects could name the models/programs, of which two subjects simply responded as "bilingual education."

Second, approximately 76% of the subjects thought that teachers should use both Spanish and English to teach linguistic minority students. When subjects were asked whether or not using two languages to teach students may retard the development of English, the same percentage (76%) of parents responded that using two languages did not interfere with their children's English acquisition. However, 41% of the subjects responded that using only the home/primary language for instruction interfered with the development of English language skills. Thus, it is quite evident that parents believed programs in which two languages--Spanish and English--are used in the classroom are most effective in helping their children to develop English skills. This perception on the effectiveness of dual language immersion program is in fact supported by many researchers (e.g., Bykont, 1994; Cummins, 1978; Hakuta, 1985; Krashen, 1988; Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991).

Third, and perhaps, most interesting was the questions related to the parents' support for bilingual education and their preferences for their children's program placement. In contrast to most media polls (e.g., Los Angeles Times & Orange County Register, 1998) in which they reported high support for the "English for the Children" initiative within the linguistic minority communities, the majority (83%) of the parents surveyed supported bilingual education programs. Thus, the results of this study did not

support the results of the polls taken by the media. Interestingly, however, approximately two-thirds (67%) of the parents surveyed responded that they preferred that their children be placed in mainstream classes if given the choice. Two hypotheses could be developed to explain what appear to be contradictory responses. It is possible that in spite of their support for bilingual education, the subjects may feel that (a) their children no longer need to be enrolled in bilingual education classes and/or (b) there is some stigma attached to having their children enrolled in bilingual education classes.

The majority of the parents indicated that they thought the use of two languages in the schools was helpful to their children's English development, and that they desired their children to become bilinguals. Yet, two-thirds of the parents responded that they would prefer to have their children placed in mainstream classes. It is possible that there were many parents who believed that their children possessed adequate Spanish skills, and that they had developed a sufficient level of proficiency in English to be in mainstream classes. If such is the case, the issue for these parents is no longer one about preference but one related to language assessment. It is also possible that as a result of anti-bilingual sentiments, the parents may have developed a perception that bilingual education is a form of segregation in education. Thus, although linguistic minority parents may value the educational benefits of bilingual education in principle as found in this study, they may prefer to have their children enrolled in mainstream classes to prevent them from becoming "victims" of what they perceive as "separatism."

This study has shown consistencies in many questions related to bilingual education. For example, 21% of the subjects responded that teachers should use only English for instruction, 24% thought that using two languages negatively affected the

development of English, 27% desired their children to develop English competency (and not Spanish), and 17% did not support bilingual education. Thus, the results of this study seem to indicate that only about 17% to 27%, or about one in five parents supported the English-only instruction in the schools. A close analysis reveals that among those parents who indicated preferences for their children to become monolingual English speakers, 83% were those parents whose children were born in the United States and 17% were those parents whose children were foreign-born. Thus, it is quite apparent that parents of American-born children placed less value on their primary/home language than those parents whose children were born in another country.

### *Conclusions*

Based on this study, the majority of the linguistic minority parents surveyed supported bilingual education. Most subjects thought that the use of the students' primary/home language and English in the classroom was essential to helping their children become bilinguals. However, a significant number of linguistic minority parents did not possess an adequate understanding of the different models and programs of bilingual education. About one in five parents indicated that they want their children to become monolinguals--English only--and about the same percentage desired teachers to use English as the medium of instruction in the classroom. Among those who opposed bilingual education, the majority (52%) of the subjects responded that all students should be treated equally. Thus, rather than being concerned about equal access to education, their interest lied mainly on equal treatment.

The implications from this study are as follows.

1. Educators must help linguistic minority parents to develop an increased understanding of the different models and programs of bilingual education. Parents cannot make critical decisions if they are not properly informed of and educated about bilingual education programs to assume those responsibilities. It is suspected that their perception of a bilingual education program is one in which the primary language is used almost exclusively in the classes.
2. Schools must develop better procedures and instruments for assessing linguistic minority students. Those students who have developed a cognitive-academic language proficiency in English and whose parents wish their children to be placed in mainstream classes should be given the option to enroll their children in regular classes.
3. Most parents support dual immersion (two-way) type programs in which students are provided the opportunity to develop two languages simultaneously. The majority of the parents supported bilingual education classes in which both the primary/home language and the target language were used. Only 3% of the parents surveyed supported the use of the primary/home language exclusively in the classroom for instructional purposes. Thus, exclusive use of the students' home/primary language in the classroom was perceived by linguistic minority parents as debilitating to their children's English development.
4. Of those parents who did not support bilingual education, 52% opposed bilingual education because they believed all students should be treated equally. This seems to suggest that there are parents who believe bilingual education is a form of institutional segregation. Some parents may be taking a position on bilingual education not so much from a pedagogical perspective but from a pseudo-cultural debate. In the latter case,

there is potential for opposing bilingual education solely based on social and political viability. Educators must lead in the efforts to educate parents to demonstrate that the primary concern of the academic community is to provide optimal learning opportunities for all students.

Although the majority of the linguistic minority parents surveyed supported bilingual education, there were between 17% to 27% who did not support the effort to educate public school students to become bilinguals—in practice and in goals. It is this segment of the population worthy of further examination: Are public schools not providing effective bilingual education programs to respond to the needs of the children of these parents?; What type of bilingual programs are most supported by parents?; Have linguistic minority parents developed inaccurate perceptions of bilingual education?

The results of this study suggest that bilingual programs in which only the home/primary language is used across the curriculum are least likely to receive support from the linguistic minority parents. It is suspected that parents whose children are in classes where only the home/primary language is used are most critical of bilingual education. This study has also revealed that most linguistic minority parents do not possess an adequate understanding of the different models of bilingual education. Thus, parental involvement must include education on bilingual education programs. Nonetheless, it is interestingly to note that, among those subjects who opposed bilingual education, only 11%, or about 5% of the total sample thought that bilingual education was ineffective. And, less than 2% of the total sample stated that bilingual education was a waste of tax dollars. Thus, what seems more critical at this time--at least for the linguistic minority parents--is not one about whether to continue or discontinue bilingual

education, but one about helping parents to develop accurate perceptions of bilingual education. Their support for bilingual education is unquestionably fervid.



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## **The Minority Parents' Perceptions of Bilingual Education**

The attached questionnaire is part of a study to better understand the minority parents' perceptions of bilingual education. Your completion of this questionnaire is voluntary. Please be assured that the information obtained from this questionnaire will remain strictly confidential. The information will not be used for any purpose other than as research data for this study. Please complete this questionnaire objectively and to the best of your ability. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions contained in this survey.

Your participation in this study will assist the educational community, including your school, in better understanding instructional programs for the linguistic-minority students. Please complete the questionnaire and return it in the envelope provided to your son's or daughter's teacher by 1/16/98. If you have more than one child enrolled in a bilingual education program, please complete a separate questionnaire for each child. The estimated time to complete this questionnaire is approximately five minutes.

Your participation in this important study is very much appreciated.

Name of Your Child's School:

Grade Level of Your Child:

Your Child's First/Primary/Home Language:

Number of Years in the United States (Parents):

Number of Years in the United States (Child):

Number of Years in Bilingual Education Program (Child):

Please respond to the questions by circling the appropriate letter.

1. Do you know or understand the goals/objectives of bilingual education? If you circled "B" skip to No. 3.
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  
2. The goals/objectives of bilingual education are to
  - A. help students develop English language skills.
  - B. help students develop first/primary/home language.
  - C. help students develop English and first/primary/home language.
  - D. None of the above.
  
3. Do you know or understand the different models/programs in bilingual education? If you circled "B" skip to No. 5.
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  
4. Name the model(s)/program(s) you are familiar with?  

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5. What language(s) do you think teachers should use to teach linguistic-minority students?
  - A. English
  - B. Students' first/primary/home language
  - C. Both English and students' first/primary/home language
  
6. Do you believe teaching in students' first/primary/home language retards the development of English?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No

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7. Do you believe teaching in two languages (English and students' first/primary/home language) interferes with the development of English?
- A. Yes
  - B. No
8. What language(s) do you hope your child develop?
- A. English
  - B. Child's first/primary/home language
  - C. Both English and child's first/primary/home language
9. Do you support bilingual education? If you circled "A" skip to No. 11.
- A. Yes
  - B. No
10. Why do you oppose bilingual education? Circle all that apply.
- A. It is instructionally ineffective
  - B. Only English should be used in the school
  - C. All students should be treated equally
  - D. It wastes tax dollars
  - E. Other \_\_\_\_\_
11. If you had a choice, would you want your child to be in mainstream (regular) classes?
- A. Yes
  - B. No

End of the Questionnaire

Thank you for your cooperation in completing this questionnaire. Please insert this questionnaire in the envelope provided and return to your child. Instruct your child to take this questionnaire to his/her teacher by 1/16/98.

## **Las Opiniones de Padres Minorias Hacia Instrucción Bilingue**

Esta encuesta es parte de un estudio para mejor entender las percepciones de los padres de estudiantes en instrucción bilingue. Esta encuesta se llena voluntariamente. La información adquirida en esta encuesta es confidencial. La información no sera usada para otro motivo mas que para datos de investigación para este estudio. Por favor complete esta encuesta objetivamente y lo que pueda. No hay respuestas correctas o incorrectas contenidas en esta encuesta.

Su participación en el estudio asistira a la comunidad educativa, incluyendo su escuela, para mejor ayudar a entender programas de instrucción bilingue para estudiantes. Por favor termine la encuesta y regresela en el sobre con su hijo/a al profesor antes de o el 1/16/98. Si usted tiene mas de un hijo/a recibiendo instrucciones bilingue, por favor llene una encuesta para cada hijo. El tiempo para terminar la encuesta es cinco minutos.

Su participación en este estudio es muy apreciado.

Nombre de la escuela de su hijo/a:

Grado de su hijo/a:

Primer idioma o idioma de casa de su hijo/a:

Años en los Estados Unidos (Padres):

Años en los Estados Unidos (hijo/a):

Años en el programa de instrucción bilingue (hijo/a):

Por favor responda a la encuesta poniendo un circulo alrededor de la letra apropiada.

1. Usted entiende o sabe que son los propositos/metast de instrucci3n bilingue? Si circula "B" siga al numero 3.
  - A. Si
  - B. No
  
2. Los propositos/metast de instrucci3n bilingue son
  - A. ayudar estudiantes desarrollar destrezas del idioma ingles.
  - B. ayudar estudiantes desarrollar su primer idioma o idioma de casa.
  - C. ayudar estudiantes desarrollar ingles y el primer idioma o idioma de casa.
  - D. Ninguna de las respuestas.
  
3. Entiende o sabe los diferente modelos/programas de instrucci3n bilingue? Si circulo "B" siga al numero 5.
  - A. Si
  - B. No
  
4. Nombre los modelos/programas que usted conoce.  

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5. Cuales lenguajes piensa usted que los profesores deben usar para ense1ar a los estudiantes?
  - A. Ingles
  - B. El idioma de casa o primer idioma del estudiante
  - C. Los dos, ingles y el primer idioma o idioma de casa del estudiante
  
6. Usted piensa que ense1ando a un estudiante en su idioma de casa o primer idioma lo retrasa en su desarrollo de ingles?
  - A. Si
  - B. No

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7. Usted piensa que dando instrucciones en dos idiomas (ingles y el idioma de casa o primer idioma del estudiante) estorba el desarrollo de ingles?
- A. Si
  - B. No
8. Cuales idiomas quiere que su hijo/a desarrolle?
- A. Ingles
  - B. Primer idioma o idioma de casa
  - C. Los dos, ingles y el primer idioma o idioma de casa
9. Usted soporta instruccion bilingue? Si circulo "A" siga al numero 11.
- A. Si
  - B. No
10. Porque opone instruccion bilingue? Circule todas que apliquen.
- A. Instruccionalmente es inefectivo
  - B. Nomas se debe que usar ingles en las escuelas
  - C. Todos los estudiantes debieran ser tratados iguales
  - D. Gasta el dinero de impuestos
  - E. Otro \_\_\_\_\_
11. Si usted pudiera escojer preferiria que su hijo/a estuviera en clases regulares?
- A. Si
  - B. No

Fin de la encuesta

Gracias por su cooperacion en esta encuesta. Por favor ponga la encuesta en el sobre y regresele con su hijo/a al Profesor antes de o el 1/16/98.



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