

# A Sociological Case Study of Bilingual Education and Its Effects on the Schools and the Community

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### **About the Author**

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## SUMMARY

This study was designed to examine the complexities of implementation of bilingual bicultural education and its effects on both the community and the schools. The Washington, D.C. bilingual program was chosen as a manageable unit for this ethnographic study, as it serves a small, heterogeneous population using a variety of models of bilingual education in eleven elementary and three secondary schools.

The case study description provides details of administrative decisions and negotiations, federal influence, bilingual teachers' and counselors' perceptions, relationships between bilingual and regular school staff, parent and community involvement in schools, effects on students as perceived by adults connected to the program, and Hispanic and Chinese community development, from 1970 to 1980.

One overall theme of the analysis focuses on the gradual emergence of the Hispanic community as an identified political factor in the schools and the wider community. The second theme examines the change process within schools created by the bilingual innovation. This case study illustrates the importance of holistic study for a fuller examination of the complexity of school programs, rather than relying on narrow evaluations that only stress student outcomes as a measurement of the success or failure of a school program.

## BACKGROUND AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Bilingual bicultural education<sup>1</sup> as it has developed in the United States in the last two decades is highly political and complicated to implement. As the most recent educational strategy for students of limited English proficiency, models of implementation have increased in complexity as federal and state legislation and court orders have mandated or encouraged some form of bilingual education. After projects are begun, refunding decisions become highly politicized as target constituency groups become advocates and monolingual, assimilationist opposition groups form. Deep-seated questions are raised in debates in legislatures as to whether it is the role of federal and state governments to encourage a culturally pluralistic society or to follow the pattern of the early twentieth century of assimilation through immersion into the dominant mainstream.

Yet those committed to bilingual education claim that it is worth the pains of implementation: it provides an optimal environment for learning a

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this study, the shortened term *bilingual education* is used to refer to bilingual bicultural education. Without going into detail on the controversy surrounding the relationship between language and culture, it is assumed in this study that culture is an integral part of language and is expressed in many ways through the vehicle of language. Therefore, *bilingual education* implies that bicultural teaching is an integral component of any instruction given in two languages.

second language, for both students of limited English proficiency and English speakers (Dulay and Burt, 1976); it enhances self-concept for students of minority status in the society (Troike, 1978); a two-way model including English speakers provides for learning in an integrated, equal-status setting (Fishman, 1976); and bilingual education provides an avenue for closer school-community relations (Read, Spolsky, and Neundorf, 1976). These affirmations concerning the effects of bilingual education in the United States are like articles of faith; they have a small empirical base. Researchers are just beginning to examine seriously some of the most basic questions. In an emerging field<sup>2</sup> with this type of complexity, holistic studies are useful in shedding light on the nature of an innovation and providing insight into research questions for future studies.

To date, a very limited number of studies have examined the total context of a bilingual program. Most of the studies available at this time are program evaluations. Federal- and state-required evaluations tend to place emphasis on measurement of short-term outcomes, such as student achievement; yet research on bilingual education in other countries has concluded that only longitudinal studies of at least three to four years in a stable program demonstrate the effectiveness of bilingual education (Swain, 1979; Tucker, 1980). An equally serious limitation of current evaluation practices is the emphasis on measurement of the effectiveness of the policymakers' goals, rather than examination of broader sociocultural dimensions that consider the total context of the school environment, including its relationship to the community (Spolsky, 1978).

Therefore, the approach to this research is in the form of a sociological case study of one particular school innovation, the bilingual program of the Washington, D.C. public schools. This study has been carried out to shed light on the complexities of implementation of bilingual bicultural education and its effects on both the community and the schools. The study was born out of the researcher's intimate knowledge of the Washington, D.C. bilingual program as a parent and teacher over a five-year period and grew through physical separation from the program with two years of reading and reflection on that experience. The research culminated in sixteen months of total immersion in the setting through observation of school and community activities; data collection from Bilingual Office and community files, the Census Bureau, administrative offices of the D.C. public schools, and the local media; and 204 formal and informal interviews with randomly selected participants among Hispanic, Chinese, and English-speaking bilingual and regular school staff and community members.

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<sup>2</sup>Bilingual education is "new" only for the United States in modern decades in the public schools. It has been in existence in countries all over the world for centuries. In the United States, instruction in languages other than English was used in public schools during the nineteenth century, and there have always been bilingual schools in the private sector (Fishman, 1966, 1976).

The research design of this study has been guided and influenced by anthropological and sociological descriptions and analyses of schools such as those by Hargreaves (1967), Kleinfeld (1979), Levy (1970), Modiano (1973), Ogbu (1974), Peshkin (1978), Philips (1970), Rosenfeld (1971), Spindler (1974), and Wolcott (1973, 1977). These studies attempt to tell a whole story by being inclusive rather than narrowly focusing on individual variables. They try to capture several levels of reality in all their complexity, through examination of unintentional as well as conscious goals and outcomes of schooling. Similarly, this study describes many levels of reality as perceived by the adults who participated in or were affected by this school innovation, and the analysis examines conscious, changing, and unconscious processes taking place.

### **OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDY DESCRIPTION**

The overall focus of the study centers around how change occurs in a school system and its impact on the community. Within this focus, two broad themes are developed: the gradual maturation of the D.C. Hispanic community and its relationship to the public schools, and the process of change within schools. The case study description begins with background information on the Hispanic community and the D.C. public schools in the mid-1960s, as each is perceived by Hispanics and school personnel involved in public school politics of that time. The reader is introduced to the process through which the idea of bilingual education evolved, the early stages of adaptation of bilingual staff to the school system and the resistance of regular staff, and the gradual evolution of a complex and expanding innovation. The emerging Hispanic community is described, along with its close connections with the D.C. bilingual program. Parent and community participation in schools is analyzed with focus on the Hispanic community, although some of the impact on Chinese and English-speaking parents is also described. A shift away from innovation and toward institutionalization of the program is increasingly evident as federal funding adds more office staff positions, beginning in 1974, and federal legislation and court decisions influence the course of the school reform. The analysis ends with the school year 1979-1980, with all bilingual positions supported by federal funds absorbed into the local school budget.

### **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

Throughout the case study description, analysis is woven into the story. One overall theme of the analysis focuses on the change process within schools. Whereas the literature on institutional change generally has examined the goals of federal or centralist planners and measured the implementation process by fidelity to the original goals combined with adaptation to the local school system (Farrar, DeSanctis, and Cohen, 1979; Rand, 1974-1977), this study extends the change literature through focus less on

an original plan and more on a complex view of evolution of a program in response to multiple changing local and federal influences. None of the observed changes in schools in this study can be seen as linear progressions from A to B; rather, change is seen as the creative use of conflict between A and B, here labeled unresolved tensions, which emerge, disappear, reappear, or find new manifestations in the course of evolution of the bilingual program.

The subtheme which best captures this characteristic of change is the tension between a desire to remain innovative, flexible, and charismatic, and to prod the local school system from outside, on the one hand, and the need to institutionalize the program, which is associated with bureaucratization and standardization, on the other. Additional subthemes which exhibit similar characteristics are the unresolved tensions between continuing flexibility in teaching methods and use of materials, and the push for standardization through curriculum writing and testing; between the reality of constantly expanding, shifting, never-ending problems, and the desire to solve one fixed, predefined problem; between informality and professionalism; between democratic decisionmaking and authoritarian patterns; between deep concern for and direct involvement with students in schools, and office isolation from school problems; between pressing for new rules for international students and accepting the system's rules; and between the desire for cohesion among staff and the development of professional distance. This study illustrates how both sides of each tension manifest themselves in a variety of ways throughout the nine years covered in the research. These tensions are not seen as problems to be solved but as sources of constructive and unending, complex change.

This kind of unresolved tension may especially characterize the nature of bilingual education because of the many inherent conflicts the innovation is intended to address in the United States. For example, in Washington, D.C., the informal knowledge among bilingual staff exists that the full, two-way maintenance bilingual education has been highly successful in student achievement and attitudes, with full equal-status integration of both Hispanics and English speakers. Yet the reality of small numbers of Spanish speakers in other schools necessitates providing only transitional bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) services, which are regarded by staff and students as a lower-status, compensatory program with somewhat limited success. The same tension exists in bilingual education viewed from the federal level. Goals of bilingual programs are frequently broadly stated and unspecific because they reflect the value conflicts inherent in the legislation and program guidelines, which in turn reflect legitimate differences and conflicts within the broader society itself (Marsh, Cassidy, and Mora, 1980).

The second theme of this case study focuses on the maturation of the Hispanic community and its relationship to the public schools. Within this theme, the following issues come into the discussion and analysis: the

process of emerging leadership within a small, new, maturing, urban ethnic community; use of the schools as one vehicle for community empowerment and consciousness raising; negotiations between groups for control of schools in a pluralistic urban setting; and the process of greater parent participation in schools and the limits of parental involvement in decision-making.

Over the ten years covered by the study, many changes have taken place within the D.C. Hispanic community. It has moved from early experimental, haphazard efforts at community organization to the present, more organized, but democratically expanded, base for decisionmaking in the community. Even though the Hispanic community is relatively small, Hispanics have made considerable progress toward becoming a working, effective, politically visible, lively force within the total D.C. community. This study found that the public schools have served an important function in this process of community development. Members of the Hispanic community were able to use the schools as one means of providing support for a sense of community identity. They then built upon that raised consciousness to make full use of a minority community's rights within this society.

The bilingual program was an integral part of this process through roles played by the school-community coordinator and bilingual counselors, actual hiring of Spanish-speaking bilingual staff and teacher aides, close contact with and leadership in the Hispanic community, parental training, and many structures for direct parental involvement in schools. The even smaller Chinese community seems to be following a similar pattern since bilingual services were established in 1975.

### **The D.C. Setting**

The D.C. bilingual program serves a relatively small population in comparison with other large urban school districts, providing direct instructional services or counseling for approximately 1500 students who speak languages other than English and 500 English-speaking students in eleven elementary and three secondary schools. The program has thus served as a manageably researchable miniature which can be compared with the experience of others. It is hoped that the detail described will yield insights for others implementing bilingual education programs around the country. No one bilingual program can provide others with an exportable model, because the social and linguistic context of each school system that has students with limited English proficiency is unique. Therefore, this study is not meant to serve as a prototype for other bilingual programs but rather as a guide to the complexity of evolution of this innovation, along with the hope that it provide for a different kind of school environment for both students with limited English proficiency and for English speakers.

One characteristic unique to Washington, D.C. is that the minority Hispanic community (estimated to be roughly 5-10 percent) exists within a Black majority (73 percent), with Blacks dominating local politics and school

administration. The give-and-take at the central administrative level in local school politics is therefore largely negotiated with a minority group already somewhat sensitive to the need for different school structures for the variety of school children being served.

Another feature is the great heterogeneity of the linguistic groups being served by the bilingual program. For the last fifteen to twenty years, the Washington, D.C. area has played host to an increasing number of immigrants from many different parts of the world. Within the D.C. public schools, the largest group of international students is Spanish speakers (1,053 in 1979), but this group is very heterogeneous, with no single dominant group. Central Americans are a slight majority when the six countries are counted as one unit, but those who dominate the Hispanic community power structure are of middle-class background and come from a variety of Latin American countries. Likewise, the second largest linguistic group in the public schools, the Chinese, is greatly varied in background, with 279 students (in 1979) who speak seven different Chinese dialects and come from many different parts of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Bilingual Office, 1979). Because of the heterogeneity of students to be served and the fact that they are scattered throughout the schools of the District, the D.C. bilingual program has a variety of models being implemented in each school, ranging from two-way maintenance bilingual education, to transitional bilingual classes, to English as a second language (ESL) classes with some content area instruction in the native language, and including Spanish as a second language (SSL) instruction for English-speaking students in schools organized around a cluster concept. Therefore, this study discusses a variety of models of implementation of bilingual education within a very heterogeneous school setting.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

With this type of study, there can be no true beginning, middle, or end. No problems are solved (Diesing, 1971). For the researcher, each new insight uncovered new areas that raised additional questions and concerns. In trying to be as comprehensive as possible in a study of this nature, one must check and cross-check data through community and school office files, through interviews with many people at many different levels, and through participation in day-to-day activities in the schools and community. This process of soaking in the total environment is endless. Therefore, the analysis does not present tidy answers; rather, it tries to describe the many layers of reality that are a part of everyday school life. No one can say that the Washington, D.C. bilingual program has solved all problems for students who speak other languages. There are many questions left unanswered, and many unresolved tensions, unaccomplished goals, and new concerns. Yet some changes have taken place in both the community and the schools that seem to be significant in various ways for many of the people involved. This case study tries to show the constructive nature of that complexity.



## IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The case study description has significant messages for bilingual program administrators, bilingual school personnel, program evaluators, parents, and community members. It extends the change literature through focus on the priorities of local planners as central to the successful evolution of a project, rather than evaluation based on implementation of an original federal or centralist blueprint. It provides detailed description of the complexities of a school innovation, demonstrating the need for school personnel to be open to constant adaptation to changing priorities matched with the unpredictable realities of school politics. It illustrates the creative use of many aspects of what are termed unresolved tensions in working toward constructive change.