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## LANGUAGE MINORITY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: IMPLICATIONS OF THE RAMIREZ REPORT

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### OVERVIEW

Controversy continues over the most reasonable conclusions to draw from the accumulated research evidence on the effectiveness of various program models for students who are not proficient in English. This paper examines a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Education on three program models for language minority children: structured English immersion strategy and early-exit and late-exit bilingual education.

The most conservative, uncontroversial conclusion drawn from the report is that there are no differences in results among the programs studied (Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991). The author of this paper draws additional conclusions. An obvious implication is that the amount of time spent using a second language can no longer be considered the most important influence on learning it. A number of other factors can be critically important in minority language children's second language learning and school success. Teacher qualifications and parent involvement are two such factors that receive strong research support and are rightly emphasized by Ramirez et al.

Teachers in late-exit programs, for example, had more graduate education and more specialized training for working with language minority children than teachers in immersion or early-exit programs. They were also more proficient in Spanish and as proficient in English as teachers in the other programs. In addition, late-exit parents reported more participation in their children's education.

Although there is other evidence of the long-term benefits of late-exit bilingual programs (see, e.g., Rosier & Holm, 1990), the author reasons that bilingual programs are not feasible for all language minority children. In instances where bilingual education is not feasible, carefully implemented immersion strategy programs are clearly better than the lack of any support that too many language minority children confront today.

### A BRIEF HISTORY

One early action in the Reagan administration's attack on bilingual education was to review program

evaluations conducted in this country and Canada. Baker and de Kanter (1983)' reviewed 28 studies that met certain methodological criteria, and concluded that the case for transitional bilingual education was weak.

As an alternative approach to the education of language minority children, Baker and de Kanter advocated what they called restructured immersion"--"structured" to differentiate it from English-only programs with no special provisions for non-English-speaking children, "immersion" after the successful French programs for English-speaking children in Canada. (It should be noted, however, that in Canada, the total immersion experience is bilingual from the first day of school. The children's first language, English, is the language of the school offices, halls, and playgrounds; and in the earliest grades when all instruction is in French, the teachers must be bilingual so the children can always be understood.)

Controversy has continued over the most reasonable conclusions to draw from the accumulated research evidence on the effectiveness of various program models for students who are not proficient in English (e.g., Imhoff, 1990; Mulhauser, 1990; Secada, 1990). Throughout this controversy, evidence supporting structured immersion within the U.S. context has been weak. Baker and de Kanter could find only one U.S. study of structured immersion involving Spanish-speaking children (Pena-Hughes & Solis, 1980), and that was a program that existed only in kindergarten.

Further research was clearly needed. Thus the decision by the U.S. Department of Education to initiate and finance a study of educational programs for language minority children. The study was conducted by J.D. Ramirez, S.D. Yuen, and D.R. Ramey.<sup>2</sup>

I was asked by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning to discuss the implications of Ramirez et al.'s research for our knowledge about language minority education in the United States. I understand that someone else has been asked to do a technical review of the research. In what follows, I therefore assume no technical flaws that would negate significant findings; rather, I discuss what I see as the important implications of the research as it is reported. I first describe briefly the three programs for language minority children that are compared in the Ramirez study, then summarize the study's main findings and discuss what seem to me the most important implications.

## **THE THREE PROGRAM MODELS**

The three types of programs studied by Ramirez and his colleagues were structured English immersion strategy and early-exit and late-exit bilingual education. All three "have same instructional goals, the acquisition of English language skills so that the language-minority child can succeed in an English-only mainstream classroom." They differ "primarily in the amount and duration that English is used for instruction as well as the length of time students are to participate in each program" (Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991, Executive Summary, hereafter ES, p.1):

All instruction in an immersion strategy program is in English.... Drawing on the Canadian Immersion program models, the target language (in this study, English) is taught through the content areas....

In an early-exit program there is some initial instruction in the child's primary language, thirty to sixty minutes a day. This is usually limited to the introduction of initial reading skills. All other instruction is in English . . . [and] instruction in the primary language is quickly phased out . . . so that by grade two, virtually all instruction is in English....

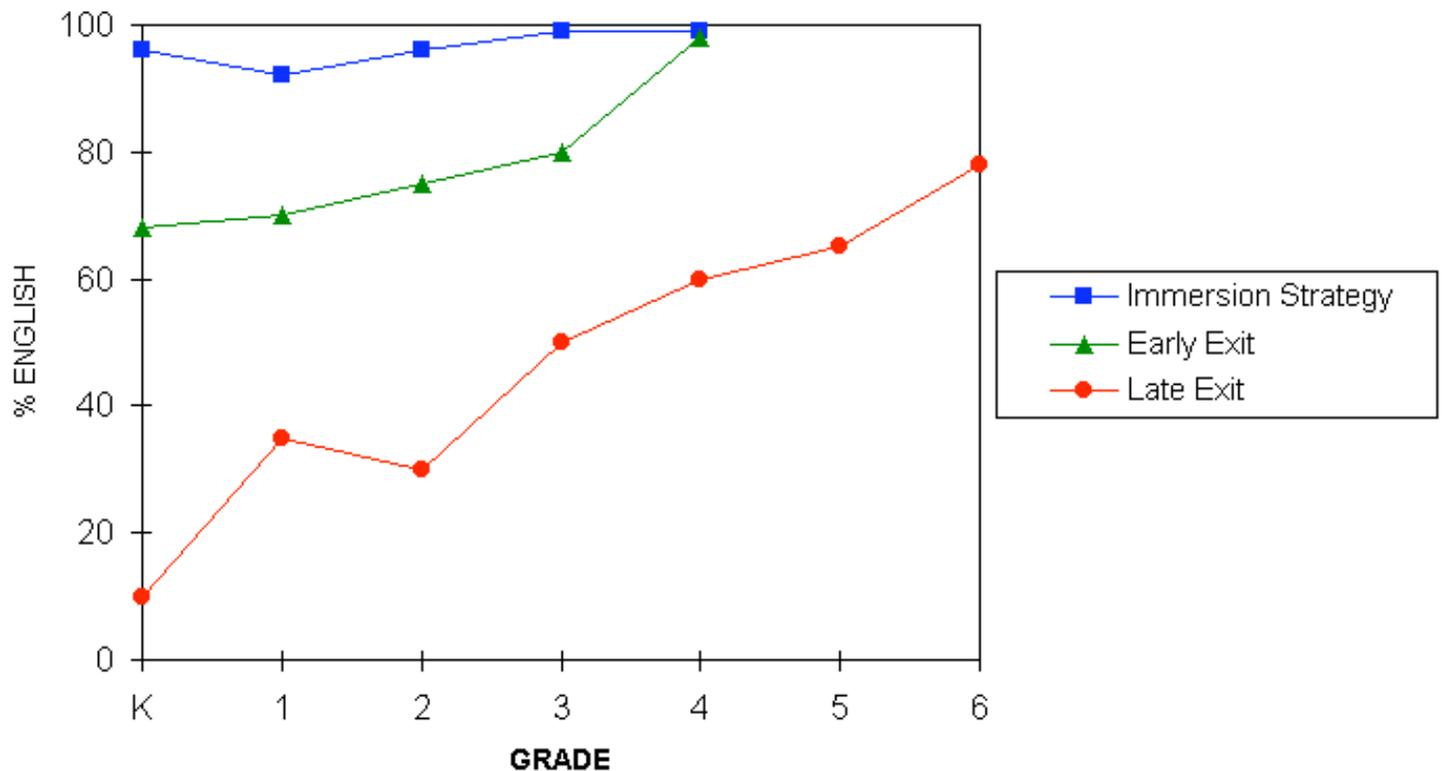
In contrast, students in the late-exit program receive a minimum of forty percent of their total instructional time in Spanish.... Students are to remain in this program through the sixth grade,

regardless of when they are reclassified as fluent-English-proficient. (ES, p. 2)

Figure 1 from ES, p. 5) shows that in the classrooms of the three programs, the actual proportions of teacher utterances in English fit the definitions that guided the initial program selections. On the dimension of teacher English language use, these are three markedly different programs.

**FIGURE 1**

**Mean Proportion of Teacher Utterances in English**



Adapted from Figure 1, ES, p.5

**RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE THREE PROGRAMS**

Program effectiveness was measured by children's scores on tests in English language arts, reading, and mathematics, all administered in English. The scores were compared in two separate ways. Because immersion and early-exit programs existed either in the same school (though without random assignment of children) or within the same district, a direct comparison could be made of these children's achievement through the third grade. But because late-exit programs were found only in school districts that had neither of the other two, and because these programs were the only ones to go through sixth (rather than third) grade, a three-way program comparison could be done only indirectly.

**Immersion vs. Early-Exit (Kindergarten - Grade 3)**

The clearest comparisons in the Ramirez study are between immersion and early-exit within the four schools

that had both programs. There were no within-program differences in effects from one school to another. That is, children in immersion programs had comparable test scores regardless of the school they attended; the same was true for students in the early-exit programs (Ramirez et al., 1991, Vol. II, p. 96). Therefore, in all analyses, the achievement test scores from all four schools were combined within each program type.

The results are clear and uncomplicated: At the end of third grade, there is no difference in student test results between the immersion and early-exit programs. The same results were obtained from comparisons in those districts that had both programs but in different schools.

In sum, after four years [K-3] in their respective programs, limited-English proficient students in immersion strategy and early-exit programs (as defined in this study) demonstrate comparable skills in mathematics, language, and reading when tested in English. (ES, p. 20)

As would be expected, the immersion programs gave the youngest students an initial advantage when tested in English, but this advantage disappeared by third grade.

### **Immersion vs. Early-Exit vs. Late Exit**

A three-way comparison was done indirectly by comparing the achievement growth of the children in each of the three programs with that of a norming population. "As the scope of work required that the test date for this study had to be comparable to that of other federal studies . . . an older version of the CTBS [California Test of Basic Skills] was used" (ES, p. 22).

As Ramirez et al. acknowledge, the norms from that version of the CTBS were established in 1972-73, and there is ample evidence for (and considerable controversy about) the increase in norms in the 15 years between then and the late 1980s, when the tests were given for this study. As the authors say, the children in the three programs can still be compared with each other, because "any potential overestimation in performance would likely affect each group equally" (Vol. II, p. 57). But any comparison of these language minority children's progress with that of the norming population must be tempered by the possible invalidity of the old norms.

Overall, the most conservative, uncontroversial conclusion is that there are still no differences in results among programs:

There appears to be no difference in the academy growth relative to the norming population between Immersion strategy and early-exit students. Moreover, the form of this growth [in the years through the third grade, when comparison of all three programs is possible] is similar to that found for late-exit students. (Vol. II, p. 641 )

However, the picture of the effects of the late-exit programs is complicated by the fact that, in contrast to the homogeneity among the immersion and early-exit programs, there were differences among the three late-exit district sites--both in program characteristics and in their effects on students' achievement. Through the fourth grade, the programs in all three sites fit the late-exit model in their use of English:

Kindergarten: less than 10%  
 First and second grade: about 33%  
 Third grade: about 50%  
 Fourth grade: about 60%.

Beyond the fourth grade, however, only sites D (one school in Florida) and E (seven schools in New York) continued to fit the model, using English about 60% of the time in fifth grade and about 75% of the time in sixth grade. In site G (six schools in California), English was increased abruptly to 92% in fifth grade and 94% in sixth grade.

Here are the achievement results:

In sum, there are differences between the three late-exit sites in achievement level for mathematics, English language, and English reading at the end of sixth grade. Students at the site with the highest skills in English language and reading in first grade (site D) also completed sixth grade with the highest scores in these two areas. Students in the two remaining sites (the one with the most use of Spanish [E] and the one with the most use of English [G]) ended the sixth grade with the same skills in English language and reading. However, although all three late-exit sites had comparable mathematics skills in grade one, by the end of grade six, students in the two late-exit sites that used the most Spanish for instruction (sites D and E) posted higher growth than the site which had abruptly transitioned into almost all English instruction (site G). (ES, p. 21)

Conclusive statements cannot be made about the long-term comparison of immersion, early-exit, and late-exit programs because of district differences, and because only late-exit students were studied through sixth grade (in two separate cohorts, K-3 and 3-6). The report suggests, however, via the indirect comparisons with the norming population, that the late-exit students in the programs that fit the model as defined in the study (especially the seven schools in site E) may--by the end of elementary school--be achieving the best results of all:

There are differences in the growth curves between immersion strategy, early-exit, and late-exit students. While the growth curves for immersion strategy and early-exit students show growth for first to third grade in mathematics, English language, and reading skills, they also show a sawing down in the rate of growth in each of these content areas as grade level increases. This deceleration in growth is similar to that observed for students in the general population. In contrast, the growth curves for students in the late-exit program (particularly in the implementation that was most faithful to the late-exit instructional model) from first grade to third grade and from third grade to sixth grade suggest not only continued growth in these areas, but continued acceleration in the rate of growth, which is as fast or faster than the norming population. That is, late-exit students appear to be gaining on students in the general population. (ES, p. 22)

If we take into account the problem of the 15-year-old norms, the suggestion that the late-exit students in site E are "gaining on students in the general population" may be overly optimistic. But if they are the only students about whom this can even be suggested, it seems a reasonable inference that the pattern of their growth was more accelerated than that of students not only in the other late-exit schools but in the immersion or early-exit programs as well.

This result is all the more striking when we consider social class differences among the late-exit sites. In site D (Florida), the families, many of them from Cuba, had slightly higher incomes and educational levels than families in sites E and G. In site G (California), the mostly Mexican-American students came from suburban low-income and blue-collar homes. In site E (New York), arguably the most effective site of all, largely Puerto Rican students lived in the community the most needs":

Site E has all of the characteristics of an inner-city area: high crime, violence, transiency, lack of community resources, minimal school resources, overcrowding, less than ideal school facilities, neighborhoods drastically in need of physical repair, no parks, etc. Without question, site E students have the most stress in their school environment. (Vol. II, p. 553)

## IMPLICATIONS

The simplest policy recommendation was headlined in *Education Week* when the Ramirez report was released:

**Three Types of Bilingual Education Effective....** As relayed by the Education Department, the study results appear to affirm the agency's current policy, which holds that a variety of programs can be effective and that the methodology should be chosen at the local level. (Schmidt, 1991, p. 1)

It would be a mistake, however, to take from the research only that one conclusion. In fact, to equate simplistically "a variety of programs" is dangerously misleading. There is evidence in this study, for example, that changing the language of instruction abruptly, as happened in late-exit site G, is detrimental to students' learning, especially in mathematics.

The most obvious implication is that the amount of time spent using a second language in school can no longer be considered the most important influence on learning it. Such a correlation has been an important assumption in all arguments against bilingual education. Yet here, students in the immersion program classrooms were at an advantage on English language tests only in the first year or two of school. After that, children receiving more of their education in their native language at least caught up, and may even have been pulling ahead.

Clearly, other factors can be critically important in minority language children's second language learning and school success. Two factors receive strong research support and are rightly emphasized in the two-volume Ramirez report: (1) teacher qualifications and (2) parent involvement in their children's learning.

### Teacher Qualifications

Teachers in the three types of programs studied were very different. Late-exit teachers had more graduate education and more specialized training for working with language minority children (i.e., a bilingual or ESL credential) (Vol. I, p. 186). This was also true of the late-exit principals (Vol. I, p. 306). Among the late-exit teachers, "teachers in site E have the most education and training of teachers in all of the study sites" (Vol. II, p. 553).

Moreover, the late-exit teachers were more proficient in Spanish than the other teachers, and were as proficient as the others in English. Their language proficiency was assessed in individual oral interviews adapted from the Defense Language Institute oral proficiency interview. On a scale from 0 (no ability to speak the language) to 5 (proficiency equivalent to that of an educated native speaker), "it was posited that a minimum of 3.5 would be needed to allow a teacher to manipulate the language with sufficient facility to teach effectively" (Vol. I, p. 182). The test results are shown in Table 1. For simpler comparison, the combined scores for the two language tests for each grade and program group of teachers have been added in parentheses.

**TABLE 1**

Mean Ratings of Teachers' English and Spanish Proficiency <sup>+</sup>, by Program and Grade

### Program

<b><u>Grade</u></b>		<b>Immersion</b>	<b>Early-Exit</b>	<b>Late-Exit</b>
K	English	4.8	4.8	4.3
	Spanish	2.3 (7.1)	2.9 (7.7)	4.0 (8.3)
1	English	4.7	4.8	4.4
	Spanish	2.8 (7.5)	3.2 (8.0)	4.3 (8.7)
2	English	4.6	4.6	3.7
	Spanish	2.8 (7.4)	2.6 (7.2)	4.6 (8.3)
3	English	4.8	4.6	4.1
	Spanish	2.2 (7.0)	2.7 (7.3)	3.9 (8.0)
4	English	4.5	4.9	4.4
	Spanish	1.3 (5.8)	2.2 (7.1)	4.2 (8.6)
5	English	*	*	4.2
	Spanish	*	*	4.2 (8.4)
6	English	*	*	4.5
	Spanish	*	*	4.2 (8.7)
weighted number of responses:		171	172	163

+ Teacher speech samples were rated on a 12-point scale ranging from 0 (for no practical ability to function in the language) to 5 (for ability equivalent to that of an educated native speaker).

Adapted from Table 59, Vol. I, p. 184

In this table, the superior language proficiency of the late-exit teachers is very clear. Whereas no grade level group of immersion or early-exit teachers reaches an average of 3.5 in Spanish, all the grade groups of late-exit teachers average above 3.5 in both languages.

The significance of these scores for classroom performance is that some early-exit teachers do not have sufficient Spanish proficiency to teach effectively the Spanish-language portion of their program, and immersion teachers may not have strong enough listening comprehension skills in Spanish to meet that program model's requirement that they be able to understand their youngest students when they speak in their first language.

These data on teacher qualifications have policy implications as well. Its opponents often assert that bilingual education is mainly a job program for Hispanic adults. Imhoff, for example, ends his article, *The Position of U.S. English on Bilingual Education*, with this sentence:

When the bilingual-education establishment controls jobs and separate empires within school districts, non-English-speaking children are reduced to pawns in their game. (1990, p. 61)

Yes, more of the teachers and principals in the late-exit program are Hispanic; but the Ramirez study shows that they are more qualified teachers and that they are considerably more bilingual than their non-Hispanic, majority language colleagues.

There is one other clue to a possible factor influencing the success of the children in the late-exit program. Late-exit teachers report assigning more homework (Vol. I, p. 224). Aside from homework's direct value as more student time spent on academic tasks and as a content bridge between school and home, the assignment and monitoring of homework may also be an indication of the teachers' higher expectations for their language minority students' academic success.

### **Parent Involvement In Their Children's Learning**

There is much rhetoric today about the virtues of parents' involvement in the education of their children (e.g., the Bush administration's promotion of school "choice" schemes). But too little attention is paid to what kind of involvement actually aids children's learning, and how schools can act to increase effective parental involvement. Two recent studies have attempted to address this issue. In Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill (1991), Chapter 6 ("Parent-school partnership") reviews research and reports the authors' findings on the benefits of parent-teacher contacts about academic, not disciplinary, matters for working-class language majority students in the Northeast. Moll (1991) describes his ongoing innovative work of creating and studying new "mediating connections between homes and classrooms" for Latino students in the Southwest. One notable feature of the Ramirez et al. research is the description of greater parent involvement in the late-exit program.

First, more of the late-exit parents said they had participated in the choice of program for their children (92% of late-exit parents vs. 63% of immersion parents and 78% of early-exit parents) (Vol. I, p. 360). Then, once in the programs, "More late-exit parents tend to monitor their child's homework and slightly more tend to help the child complete homework." The concluding comment of Ramirez et al. seems entirely reasonable:

The higher proportion of late-exit parents monitoring and ensuring that their children complete their homework might be facilitated by the provision of homework in Spanish and/or the encouragement of use of Spanish for instruction by school personnel. (Vol. I, p. 361)

Two other issues merit discussion, one about teaching and the other about research: the quality of classroom learning environments across the three programs and the generalizability of the research findings.

### **The Quality of Classroom Learning Environments**

While there is much that is encouraging in this research report, we should not conclude that all is well in these classrooms. The one feature of the learning environments studied in detail was the quality of teacher and student language. From analyses of tape recordings of classroom interaction in both English and Spanish, Ramirez et al. conclude, "Teachers in all three programs offer a passive language learning environment, limiting student opportunities to produce language and develop more complex language and thinking skills" (ES, p. 8). In more detail, they report:

Direct observations reveal that teachers do most of the talking in classrooms, making about twice as many utterances as do students. Students produce language only when they are working directly with a teacher, and then only in response to teacher initiations. Of major concern is that in over half of the interactions that teachers have with students, students do not produce any language as they are only listening or responding with non-verbal gestures or actions. Of equal concern is that when students do respond, typically they provide only simple information recall statements. Rather than being provided with the opportunity to generate original statements, students are asked to provide simple discrete close-ended or patterned (i.e., expected) responses. This pattern of teacher-student interaction not only limits a student's opportunity to create and manipulate language freely, but also limits the student's

ability to engage in more complex learning (i.e., higher order thinking skills). (ES, p. 8)

This is not a new finding (cf. Cazden, 1984), nor is it confined to classrooms of language minority children. But it is disappointing to find it reported once again in this otherwise encouraging report.

### **The Question of Generalizability**

Ramirez et al. are careful to say at many points that their findings can be generalized only to programs for Spanish-speaking students, and then only to programs with characteristics (such as teacher qualifications and division of time between the two languages) similar to those studied here.

There is other evidence of the long-term benefits of late-exit bilingual programs for other U.S. language minority students. For example, Rosier and Holm (1980) provide a longitudinal study of an excellent school for Navajo students. Their report was one of those excluded on methodological grounds from Baker and de Kanter's review, but the school, Rock Point, has continued to develop as a strong bilingual/bicultural school through high school. (Holm & Holm, 1990, give a detailed description of Rock Point's history and program.)

On the other hand, late-exit or even early-exit bilingual programs are not feasible for all language minority children, either because the numbers of any one language group are too small, or because parents do not want that option for their children. For them, carefully implemented immersion strategy programs are clearly better than the lack of any support that too many such children confront today.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Although Baker and de Kanter's report was published in 1983, an earlier version issued in 1981 was widely influential as an unpublished draft.

<sup>2</sup> Copies of the report are available from the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, ~~1118 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037~~ (see [new address](#)) ([Executive Summary](#) \$4.00; Vol. I \$48.30; Vol. II \$74.10).

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