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THE EDUCATION OF LANGUAGE-MINORITY CHILDREN: IMPRESSIONS OF LONDON FROM A NEW YORK PERSPECTIVE

This study is based on a deep knowledge of minority language teaching provision in New York and a brief study of the provision in the ILEA made in the summer of 1985. Their impressions, based on a relatively small sample, give a fresh view on the differences in provision and attitude between the two cities, although the situation here is probably not as homogeneous across the ILEA as they imply. ILEA are now initiating training schemes for minority language speakers.

Introduction

The education of language-minority children in urban schools has been a subject of much recent discussion throughout the world. Beginning in the 1960s, the increased immigration of foreign workers to cities such as New York, London, and Berlin created or, more likely, accelerated a crisis in many urban schools; school systems designed to teach a linguistically homogeneous population met with widespread failure when faced with language-minority children.

The immigration movement coincided with what some have termed the "ethnic boom", which fostered sympathy and interest in ethnolinguistic minorities and their children (Beer 1980, Fishman 1985). In this context, school systems in large urban centres in North America and Europe struggled to find innovative ways to more effectively educate the immigrant population, each coming up with very different solutions to their common problems.

This paper compares the approaches taken by two urban school systems: those of New York City and of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). The authors have for many years lived in, worked with, and been members of the Hispanic community of New York City. They spent a summer of intensive study in London, focusing on ILEA schools with large numbers of language-minority children. It is on this very uneven level of knowledge and experience that we offer a comparison which, nevertheless, we think is of interest and value.

An Overview of Bilingual Education in the United States

Throughout their history, public schools in the United States have had children with native languages other than English (Kloss 1977). Indeed, one of the major functions of public schooling in the United States has been precisely the rapid assimilation of these children (Cordasco 1976, Green 1972). In general, ethnolinguistic groups racially similar to the dominant Anglophone group have been successful in assimilating. However, racially different groups such as Native Americans and Mexican Americans have been considerably less successful. Although these groups have tended to assimilate linguistically, tending to speak English almost exclusively, they have not been educated effectively, nor structurally incorporated into United States society. Despite speaking English, Hispanics and Native Americans have by and large failed and dropped out of public schools.

As part of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s in the United States, Blacks demanded the end to segregation in schools and other institutions. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 guaranteed that there would be no legal discrimination "on grounds of race, colour, or national origin". It was within the favourable legal and political climate of the Civil Rights movement that linguistic minorities in the United States, especially Hispanics, started demanding improvements in the education of their children.

Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, the two most numerous Hispanic groups in the United States, have been United States citizens since 1848 and 1919 respectively, but their children have continued to fail in the schools. For example, the 1960 census revealed that "in the five Southwestern states the population with Spanish surnames had completed an average of only 4.7 years in school compared to 8.1 for the non-white and to 12.1 for Anglo students fourteen years of age or over" (Kloss 1977:36). In the 1960s, liberal politicians supported by the Hispanic community lobbied for an educational program that would alleviate this failure of language-minority students in the nation's schools.

The federal government responded by taking legislative and judicial action. In 1968 the Bilingual Education Act was passed as Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This law, reauthorized since in 1974, 1978, and 1984, provides financial assistance to schools that establish special programmes for those children from the ethnolinguistic group whose level of proficiency in English is inadequate. These programmes must be temporary and must restrict

the use of the native language to that initial period when the student does not speak English well.

There thus emerged in the 1960s a sharp distinction between the original community demands for bilingual education and what the federal government offered in response. Bilingual education was proposed as an all-encompassing educational alternative to monolingual instruction for all children from ethnolinguistic minorities who were failing in the schools, many of whom in fact spoke only or primarily English. But the federal government chose to support bilingual programmes that treated this educational failure as a narrowly technical problem of lack of linguistic proficiency, which meant making the programme available only to those children from the ethnolinguistic group who were deficient in English, and only for as long as this deficiency lasted. To a complex educational problem the government offered a simple linguistic solution.

But even the linguistic solution was narrowly conceived from the start. Despite providing for some bilingual instruction, the ultimate goal of all federal bilingual education legislation has been not bilingualism, but monolingualism in English. Federally supported bilingual instruction in US public schools has been only for monolingual speakers of languages other than English for the purpose of making them monolingual speakers of English. In fact, the most recent 1984 version of the Bilingual Education Act even allows funding for programmes that are specifically designed to teach students who are not proficient in English but that do so using English exclusively.

Judicial actions taken by the federal government have likewise been limited. Inspired again by the Civil Rights movement, a group of Chinese parents took the San Francisco School Board to court in the early 1970s on the grounds that their children were being denied a meaningful education because they did not understand English. The Supreme Court's ruling on 21 January 1974, known as the Lau decision after the plaintiff's name, mandated local school districts to address the needs of non-English speaking students by providing bilingual instruction or special English instruction. The federal government's task force that was set up after the Lau decision ordered school districts to set up bilingual education programmes. But again, this very forceful position adopted by the task force provided bilingual instruction only for the non-English speaking students until they learned English.

The federal position, then, has been (a) to ignore children from the ethnolinguistic minorities who already know English but who continue

to fail and drop out of schools and (b) to limit the help for those deficient in English to a narrowly focused effort to remove the deficiency.

Despite the limited interest of the federal government in a true bilingual education, the Bilingual Education Act and the Lau decision did create both a source of funds and a positive atmosphere in municipal and federal bureaucracies, and in the public at large, that facilitated the establishment of numerous bilingual programmes. Local school districts — which in the US tend to cover small areas and can in certain cases come under direct pressure from minority communities — responded by creating bilingual programmes that many times relied only partially on federal funds and suffered only partially from the narrow federal conception of bilingual education. In these programmes, some use of languages other than English became common.

This use of non-English languages in the education of language-minority children soon became the subject of much controversy, a favourite of politicians, journalists, and commentators who in many cases had little prior interest in or current knowledge about language, children, minority communities, schools. Even when addressed by educators, the issue of languages other than English in the schools soon became clouded by all sorts of myths and false assumptions about both the past and the present of ethnolinguistic minorities in the US. Before we describe the situation in New York City schools, then, it would be instructive for us to reflect on some of these common American educational myths.

A common historical myth relates how from 1880 to 1920 the many immigrant children who came to the United States were submerged in English in the schools and were none the worse for it. The schools, the myth says, helped these immigrants "make it" and get good jobs. Yet, the historical reality is that these immigrants had not only less success but also considerably less schooling than is thought. Whatever level of success was reached by immigrants reflected societal conditions at the turn of the century that made it possible for economic advancement to be independent of schooling. At any rate, schooling for most families followed — and could not therefore have been the cause of — economic success. That is, second and third generation children became educated only after their parents acquired a measure of economic wellbeing without the benefits of formal education (Greer 1972, Otheguy, 1982).

There are likewise myths about the present educational situation of language-minority children. Some object to the many services these children receive, though it is not difficult to show that in fact they get

very little. In New York City, as we shall see presently, schools are not providing any legally-required bilingual instruction to more than 44,000 language-minority children, a figure that encompasses nearly 40 per cent of all those entitled to services (Educational Priorities Panel, 1985).

Other critics object to the extensive use in school of languages other than English. The evidence shows, however, that on an average nationwide the native language is used in bilingual programmes "only an average of 8 per cent of the time" (Wong Fillmore 1982). Still other critics of bilingual education propose that there is little interest in learning English on the part of language-minority families, an attitude that is passed on to their children. Yet, the non-English speaking community in the United States continuously demands that their children learn English well, as evidenced by the heavy use made of all programmes that provide English instruction at affordable prices.

Another myth that surrounds bilingual programmes in the US is that bilingualism is impossible for poor children, and that development of a native language (henceforth L1) undermines mastery of any second language (L2), in this case English. Yet, the evidence clearly shows that mastery of L1 promotes mastery in L2 (Cummins 1982). Moreover, studies ranging from that of Peal and Lambert (1962) to that of Kenji Hakuta (1985) support the finding that children who have achieved communicative and academic competence in both L1 and L2 show superior cognitive abilities.

The Education of Language-Minority Children in New York City

New York City is a port of entry for many immigrants to the United States. Forty percent of kindergarteners who first enter schools in New York City come from homes where a language other than English is spoken, Spanish-speaking children making up the vast majority of this group (New York City Board of Education 1983-1984). Thirty two percent of the entire New York City public school population is Hispanic. Of the 113,831 students who were officially identified as "Limited English Proficient" on the basis of tests during the 1984-85 school year, 72 percent were Hispanics (Educational Priorities Panel, 1985).

Most Spanish-speaking children in New York City come from Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and countries in Central America. Hispanics in New York City are as different as their countries of origin. Whereas most stay in the United States, others travel back and forth. Whereas

some speak mostly Spanish, others speak English exclusively, and yet others code-switch between Spanish and English. Some are white, others are mulattoes, and yet others are black. Whereas a few have attained middle-class status, most are poor. Despite the differences, Hispanics in New York City are not unlike Hispanics in the rest of the United States. It could be safe to generalize that Hispanics in New York are mostly poor, mostly uneducated and mostly seen by themselves and by Anglos as non-white.

The New York City Board of Education has no internally initiated policy on the use of languages other than English for instruction. Recently, a Puerto Rican was named to the top job of Chancellor (the Chancellor is the chief educational authority for all New York City schools, whether they are primary schools under a local district or secondary schools under direct Central Board supervision). Until then, the New York City Board of Education had taken only a reactive stance toward language-minority children. Efforts under the new Chancellor are too recent to merit comment.

In 1974, after *Lau vs Nichols* was decided, the New York City Board of Education entered into a Consent Decree with *Aspira* of New York, a leading Puerto Rican Civil Rights organization, guaranteeing bilingual instruction for children who were dominant in Spanish and who did not speak English. (Speaking or not speaking English or Spanish meant in this case scoring above or below the 21st percentile in the relevant section of the Language Assessment Battery, a test designed to measure language dominance, which does so rather poorly.) The rationale for the *Aspira* Consent Decree was that children who don't know English need a different programme of instruction.

Despite the legal mandate of the *Aspira* Consent Decree requiring bilingual instruction, many schools in New York City fail, even today, to provide any educational services to these children. Of all children entitled to bilingual education in the Elementary schools, only 34 percent in fact participate in a full bilingual programme (Education Priorities Panel, 1985).

Furthermore, there is enormous variation between schools that serve language-minority children in New York City. Whereas some schools are flagrantly out of compliance with the *Aspira* Consent Decree, most schools pretend to be, even though they are not. For example, many principals convince recently arrived immigrant parents to sign letters releasing their children from the legally-required bilingual programme. In other cases, children are coached to score above the

cut-off score in the Language Assessment Battery so they can test out of the bilingual programme. Sometimes bilingual classes in these schools look no different from monolingual classes, since Principals order bilingual teachers to use English exclusively. Even though these schools are in compliance with the letter of the law, they are clearly not in harmony with the spirit of the Aspira Consent Decree.

There are yet other schools that are in true compliance with the Consent Decree. But even here an atmosphere of remediation and deficiency prevails. Having a bilingual programme in these schools simply means having a teacher who speaks English as well as the minority language in a classroom where children mostly speak the minority language. It is most often a remedial programme that lasts from one to two years until the student learns English, where the minority language is used simply as a tool to facilitate the acquisition of English. Typically, the use of English and of the minority language in these schools follows no recognizable pattern and is not the result of any well thought-out policy.

There is also a small, but growing, number of schools in New York City that go beyond compliance. In these schools the goal of the bilingual programme is bilingualism. These schools most often serve the Hispanic community. They have well designed maintenance programmes where both Spanish and English have clearly defined roles. Children's Spanish is developed along with English. And parents refuse to move children out of the programmes even if they speak English.

In general, most bilingual programmes in New York City, with rare exceptions, have one very positive and one very negative feature. The positive feature is the heavy presence of members of the ethnolinguistic group in the professional and paraprofessional staff. Teachers, teacher aides, guards, and paraprofessionals of all kinds from the ethnolinguistic group, particularly Hispanics, work in many bilingual programmes in large numbers. The negative feature is the remedial philosophy that informs all official policy and much of the actual practice, and that is shared in varying degrees by all Anglo members of the professional staff and, in many cases, even by those professionals from the ethnolinguistic community.

These two features of New York bilingual programmes tend to balance each other. The remedial philosophy regards Hispanic and other language-minority children with tunnel vision, focusing only on their deficiency in English. The presence of educators from the Hispanic group, as well as from others, compensates for this. The Hispanic educator, even when working within a remedial programme, tends to see minority children in a better light. The minority educator will of

course note that some of the children do not speak English, but this very familiar problem (lots of people in the community do not speak English) is placed in the context of the whole child and is seen as a passing and minor part of a complex human being who has many other traits besides the deficiency in English.

The Education of Language-Minority Children in London: Philosophical and Practical Differences with New York City

As bilingual educators in the United States, we were immediately surprised by what appeared to be the very positive philosophical stance taken toward the education of language minority children that we encountered in London. The Inner London Education Authority has taken a leadership role in the promotion of mother-tongue teaching in the London's schools. Whereas the New York City Board of Education had to be taken to court in order to establish bilingual instruction, ILEA has issued very progressive guidelines concerning the use of non-English languages in the schools. It has furthermore instructed schools to write language policies, as well as anti-racist policies.

ILEA's promotion of the use of non-English languages in the education of immigrant children fits well with its support of child-centred schools. Primary school authorities in London believe and practice a philosophy of development of the whole child. Schools build on the experiences that children bring. (The phrase "good primary practice" is on the lips of even very inexperienced teachers, with a fairly clear sense of what it means and how to put it into effect.) The mother-tongue is seen as an integral part of the child in need of nurturing and development. This principle is not questioned, and the use of the non-English language in schools does not seem controversial. We found very few teachers — and we are talking about white Londoners, not about members of the ethnolinguistic groups — who would consider the use of the non-English language as detrimental to the educational experience of the child. We were impressed by the socio-educational and sociolinguistic sophistication of the ILEA teachers, who seem at home with the view that L1 is a tool for the educational development of the whole child, as well as for the enhancement of L2. They do not view the ethnolinguistic communities and their languages with suspicion, as it is often sadly the case among white teachers in New York, and even in some cases among teachers from the ethnolinguistic groups themselves. (We do not think that we fell victims to traditional English distance and courtesy, having been duped by teachers who said what they knew we wanted to hear; we spoke to the teachers without giving them practically any information

about who we were, and encouraged them to express recalcitrant views at every turn, but were able to elicit few or none at all.)

ILEA has set the tone for a positive philosophical stance toward the use of the non-English language. The educational programmes that have been established are not permeated with the atmosphere of deficiency and remediation that is the hallmark of even the good programmes in New York City, and mother-tongue classes do not end when children become fluent in English. We did not hear in circulation any such terms as the — in the United States — ubiquitous designation of "L.E.P. children" (for "Limited English Proficient" children. In many ILEA schools, the use of the mother-tongue in reading and writing is not at all limited to the mother-tongue teacher. We saw many ILEA teachers encouraging Bengali children to write in Sylheti. We saw signs in Cantonese, Vietnamese, Urdu, Gujerti, Dagbani, and Arabic all over the schools. We attended morning assemblies that included songs and stories in the children's mother-tongue.

The socio-historical factors prevalent in the 1960s and the 1980s might reveal the reason for the philosophical difference between the two cities regarding the education of these children. Bilingual education in the United States was proposed in the 1960s as a form of compensatory education. By the 1980s, when inner London schools were forced to find a solution to the education of these children, the compensatory movement had been largely discredited. As an example, the draft Human Rights Directive issued in 1981 by the European Economic Community specifically called for support of all children's mother-tongue and generally embodied a positive and non-deficit attitude toward children from ethnolinguistic minorities. [The 1985 final version of the Directive shows marked changes from this draft — Editor's note.]

Our visit to ILEA's Argyle School was part of the basis on which we formed our opinions. The office of the Head Teacher had a colour-coded chart illustrating the mother-tongue of each of the children in the school. We have visited scores of schools in New York City and have never seen anything like it in its affirmation of children's separate identities; the closest thing one can find in New York is a popular bar-graph of "countries we came from", which offers a characterization of divergence oriented to the past, leaving untouched the homogenous, all-English-speaking, all-American present. Although 50 percent of the children in the Argyle School were Bengali, there were an additional 19 languages spoken. The school has written and printed a mother-tongue policy whose aims are: To give every child the opportunity to develop

his/her spoken fluency and to become literate in the mother-tongue. Bengali mothers come to the Argyle School to print books to be used by their children.

In New York City, school principals and teachers rarely recognize the students' race, ethnicity or mother-tongue; what they recognize is children who do not speak English and who are to be quickly relieved of this handicap. Indeed, the very term "mother-tongue", suggestive of what the child has, rather than of what the child lacks, is common in London but almost never used in New York. The assumption is made by school authorities in the United States that if one is colour-blind and sound-deaf all children will be treated equitably and fairly, even though we know that this is not the case, given the high percentage of failure among language minorities in American schools (and, for that matter, of racial minorities too).

In summary, whereas in inner London the authorities clearly and wholeheartedly support the use of non-English languages, in New York City they have only taken a reactive stance; whereas white teachers in London support the mother-tongues of the children, white teachers in New York City, with only some exceptions, are most often critical of their use in school; whereas in New York City most schools only use the non-English languages when children do not speak English, in London the children's mother-tongue forms an integral part of their educational experience whether they speak English or not.

A comparison of ILEA and New York City schools with regard to language-minority children requires a keen sense of irony, and a willingness to perceive the difference between what is achieved intentionally and through official plans and what is achieved as an unintended by-product. For it turns out that the clear theoretical superiority of ILEA schools when compared to schools in New York City cannot overshadow the more positive, actual reality of children of ethnolinguistic minorities in New York City schools. The problem is that although we sensed a more coherent philosophy regarding the education of these children in London, educational practices that actually include the ethnolinguistic community in London are few, and we think that this exclusion of the community is a major flaw in ILEA as is its inclusion a great achievement in New York.

Before we spell this out, some additional facts about the two systems must be taken into account. There are fewer children who speak languages other than English in London than in New York. London's rolls contain 55,000 such children. This is a much smaller group than in New York, where 114,000 children were categorized as limited-English-

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proficient in 1984-1985. School children in London speak over 150 different languages, with none having an overwhelming lead. In New York City the majority of the language-minority children speak Spanish. There are only 5 other ethnolinguistic groups that represent more than 1 percent of limited-English-proficient students in New York. The issue in London schools, then, is of smaller scope, but of greater variety.

This leads to what we think is the most important difference between the two systems, greater even in its significance than the positive and sophisticated stance of ILEA. The most important factor in the reality of the two educational systems is that the ethnolinguistic community is much more in control of the education of its own children in New York City than in London.

Whereas there are 2,645 licensed bilingual teachers in New York City, ILEA only has 30 mother-tongue teachers. In ILEA's Argyle School where there are 267 non-English speaking children, including 134 Bengali speakers, there is only one Bengali mother-tongue teacher who works one and a half days in the school. Although she works alongside teachers in the infant and nursery classes, she withdraws groups of children from the junior classes.

In New York City, bilingual teachers from the ethnolinguistic communities complain of lack of respect from some of their white colleagues, but the fact remains that these bilingual teachers are equal to their colleagues in their licensing, salary, faculty privileges and, most important, in that they, like their colleagues, have a classroom full of children of their own. They are fiercely proud of their *de jure* and *de facto* status as "regular classroom teachers". In ILEA, mother-tongue teachers do not seem to enjoy the same privileges or status. Ironically, the ethnolinguistic adult community itself seems to be mostly excluded from the majority efforts to recognize it. The white English-speaking professional establishment thoroughly understands, truly appreciates, and genuinely respects the multilingual and multicultural situation of the children in their charge (a great intellectual and moral achievement, we think). But in doing so, it celebrates the ethnolinguistic community without including it in practice and without recognizing it as equal co-participant in that part of British society constituted by the schools, particularly by the professional staff of the schools (we saw some Bengali parents, but very few or no Bengali teachers).

In New York, however, bilingual teachers, most often Hispanic, are

responsible for the education of their own children, if only for a few years. The ethnolinguistic group is represented not only (and who knows, perhaps in the child's eye not even most importantly) by the teachers. School guards, lunch aides, street crossing guards, teacher aides and other workers from the ethnolinguistic group fill the schools.

The presence of these professionals, it seems to us, validates the minority language and culture for the children to an extent that no amount of good will and understanding on the part of white, English-speaking professionals can match. True, as we have seen, white teachers in New York rarely express the joy and affirmation of minority languages and cultures that we heard in London, nor do they have the theoretical understanding of immigration and bilingualism that we saw in their English counterparts. But, willingly or not, these white teachers share their professional life with minority people much more than ILEA teachers, and work in an environment that, though meaner than London's on its approach to minorities, has nevertheless opened its doors to them far more than seems to be the case in London. This is an accomplishment of bilingual education in the United States that is well worth noting and that, as far as we can see, remains unattained, perhaps even unsought for, in London.

Conclusion

Philosophically, the ILEA system of primary education is much more supportive of the child, any child, than is the competitive educational system of the United States. The ILEA child-centered philosophy of education has informed their stance of inclusiveness toward non-English languages in the schools. There is harmony between the philosophy of supporting the child, which developed quite independently of the need to educate immigrant children, and the desire to support the mother-tongue of children from other cultures.

In the United States, however, the inclusion of the mother-tongue in schools grew out of social conflict between the ethnolinguistic minority that demanded educational services, and an educational system that was not philosophically ready to accept changes. The philosophical conflict between these two positions has remained, and continues to divide the bilingual education profession with regard to theoretical foundations and goals.

In practice, however, the struggle by linguistic minorities in the United States has had many beneficial consequences, chief among them being, at least in New York, the massive presence of adults from the ethnolinguistic community in school buildings from which they had

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been excluded hitherto. The poor Hispanic child in New York has made only very modest gains with regard to the educational programme that the authorities plan for him. It continues to be narrow-minded, unaccepting, suffused with the idea that the child is in very serious trouble and needs help badly, while at the same time, paradoxically, neglecting to provide the very help that this deficit model so loudly prescribes.

But in point of fact this child now spends a considerable part of the day with people who, regardless of what the authorities say, accept him as a normal, happy child, who speaks (and never shuts up!) a familiar language, behaves in familiar ways, and needs no more "help" than any other child. True, in some cases, the child is not very proficient in English, a condition that in the eyes of the adult from the ethnolinguistic community requires attention, but causes no alarm, being after all the condition of one's dearest and nearest and, on occasion, of oneself.

One contemplates the treatment of these children in London and New York wishing that the understanding and sophistication of the one, and the energy and praxis of the other, could somehow be merged in the benefit of children who stand to benefit a great deal from both.

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