

Should Bilingual Ed Improve Students' Earning Prospects?

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COLLEGE PARK, MD.--In the debate over Proposition 227, the Ron Unz initiative that would, in effect, end bilingual education in California, "scientific" studies play a prominent role. Both opponents and proponents of the measure have built their own arsenal of academic studies purporting to prove why their side is "right" about the effectiveness of bilingual education. Typically, these studies focus on two questions: Do bilingual-education programs improve the English proficiency of limited-English-speaking students in a timely fashion? And do they enhance these students' academic performance?

At first glance, this approach seems sensible. The main purpose of bilingual education is to teach limited-English-proficient children to speak English without affecting their performance in math and science (these subjects are taught in their native language). There is, however, another issue. Students' lives do not end in elementary or high school, so we need to know some of the long-term, nonacademic effects of bilingual-education programs. One such area is the future earning power of bilingual students once they enter the job market.

It seems reasonable to expect that since students with limited-English skills tend to drop out of high school, bilingual-education programs may help reduce the probability of that happening, thus improving their job prospects upon graduation. And once bilingual students graduate and get jobs, their earnings, on average, should be greater than their counterparts who did not enroll in bilingual programs.

In our research, a colleague, Marie Mora, and I have used a sample consisting of high school sophomores from across the nation who were enrolled in bilingual-ed programs in 1980 or before. Ten years after their graduation in 1982, these students were surveyed to determine how they were faring in the workplace. A group of contemporaries who were qualified to enroll in bilingual ed but did not, for whatever reasons, served as the comparison group.

Contrary to expectations, enrollment in bilingual programs generally did not play a significant role in a student's decision to drop out or stay in school. Rather, it affected when a student dropped out. Bilingual-ed students tended to quit school earlier than their nonbilingual-ed counterparts. Moreover, once having dropped out, the bilingual-education students were less likely to return to school to earn a general equivalency degree. They were also less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree. These findings on education attainment are particularly important for Latinos, since approximately 30% of all Latino students participate in some form of bilingual education.

When we looked at income levels of all bilingual-education students, regardless of ethnic background, they did not significantly differ 10 years after graduation relative to a comparison group. But bilingual education did not affect all students similarly. For example, our study found that Latino immigrant bilingual-ed students earned approximately 37% less than Latino immigrants who did not have bilingual education, and that children of Latino immigrants who took bilingual education earned about 27% less. These differences in income levels disappeared among the Latino grandchildren of immigrants.

While these results are striking, there are other potential explanations for them besides enrollment in bilingual-ed programs. It must be noted that the students spotlighted in our research graduated from high school 15 years ago and participated in bilingual programs in the '70s. Accordingly, it would be unfair to conclude anything about today's bilingual-ed programs, which may be better organized than their predecessors, and their students' earning prospects. Research involving more recent graduates of bilingual programs is needed.

Second, there is solid evidence that bilingual-education programs have been and continue to be stretched to their resource limits. More and more students of differing language backgrounds are entering schools that are already ill-equipped to handle the increasing demand for bilingual education. As a result, poor student performance may be more a reflection of the quality of strained programs than flaws in the concept of bilingual ed.

Finally, most students in bilingual programs, then and now, come from disadvantaged backgrounds, a factor that no bilingual program, no matter how well-funded, may be able to overcome. Indeed, this disadvantage alone may explain the disappointing earnings of former bilingual students. If so, targeting bilingual ed as the "culprit" would be counterproductive.

Still, is it fair to evaluate bilingual education in terms of the future earning power of its graduates? More than 25% of California's public school students are identified as limited-English proficient, and the vast majority of them participate in some form of bilingual education. California's political leaders, as well as the Clinton administration and state education agencies around the country, regularly criticize the public schools for graduating students unprepared for the workplace. Corporate leaders in California continue to worry that the state's education system is not producing a work force competent enough to compete in a technologically demanding world. It follows that future earnings should count as one measure, not necessarily the most important, of the success or failure of bilingual education.

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