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RESEARCH BRIEF

The Positive Implications of Dual Language Programs on English Learners

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Introduction

Finding and implementing best strategies to help English learners (ELs) be successful in schools across the nation is an area of focus in urban education (Milner & Lomotey, 2014). The highest population of ELs is found in urban school districts where this student population accounted for 14% of total students enrolled in cities in the fall of 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018a). Although federal policies such as No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act have attempted to ensure this group of students is not falling behind their non-EL peers, the achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs persists (NCES, 2018a, 2018b). It is essential that schools have valuable research findings to guide their decision making on ways to best support this group of students. This research brief will highlight the positive implications that research findings have shown Dual Language (DL) programs can have on English learners.

The Issue

The National Assessment of Educational Progress assessed fourth and eighth grade students in 2017 from public and private schools in the areas of reading and math, disaggregating the data specifically for ELs (NCES, 2018a, 2018b). The national data revealed that ELs in eighth grade had a larger achievement gap in comparison to their non EL peers in both reading and math than the achievement gap that existed in fourth grade (NCES, 2018a, 2018b). While the achievement gap between ELs and non ELs was 37 points in reading in Grade 4, the achievement gap in Grade 8 was larger, with a total gap of 43 points (NCES, 2018b). Regarding mathematics, the National Center for Education Statistics (2018a) reported the achievement gap between ELs and non ELs was a total of 26 points in Grade 4, and that this achievement gap widened to a total of 40 points in Grade 8. The achievement gap is growing as ELs progress from fourth to eighth grade in both reading and math. An effective and research-based solution must be put into place for ELs. While longitudinal research has shown that DL programs have the ability to completely close the achievement gap for ELs (Collier & Thomas, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 2017), not all schools are implementing a DL program as a possible solution to this critical issue.

Potential Outcomes

DL programs can have positive outcomes in cognitive functioning, social and emotional well-being, and academic success and have shown to be the best solution for EL success. Vela, Jones, Mundy, and Isaacson (2017) investigated the performance of approximately 2,000 ELs in an urban school district in Texas, disaggregating the data by the type of program (DL, transitional bilingual program, and English-mainstream) in which the ELs were enrolled during third grade in the 2014-2015 school year. Vela et al. (2017) found that the ELs in the DL program scored significantly higher than the other two program types on their third grade state STAAR math exams. Further, Marian, Shook, and Schroeder (2013) researched the effects of program type on 2,009 students in third, fourth, and fifth grades in a public school district in Chicago. The sample of students who were Spanish-speaking included a total of 157 students, with 134 of them enrolled in the two-way (TW) DL program and 23 enrolled in a transitional program/English as a second language program (Marian et., 2013). TW is the type of DL program where there is an aim for an equal distribution of Native English speakers and speakers of the partner language (Thomas & Collier, 2017). The TW student sample included a larger number of students with low socioeconomic status (SES) in comparison to the group of students enrolled in the transitional program (Marian et al., 2013).Marian et al. (2013) measured the students' performance using standardized tests mandated by the state in reading and math. Across the grade levels the students in the TW program demonstrated significant gains in both reading and math while the students in the transitional program did not demonstrate such gains (Marian et al., 2013).

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Additionally, the fifth-grade students in the TW significantly outperformed their fifth-grade peers in the transitional program in math (Marian et al., 2013). The findings by Marian et al. (2013) resonate analyses done by Thomas and Collier (2017) that demonstrated DL programs have the ability to reduce the effects of SES from 14-20% to less than 5%. The outcomes of these studies add to the existing body of research that show the positive implications DL programs have over other program options. Such findings lead to the insistence that DL programs be implemented in schools across the nation to wholly support EL success.

The benefits of bilingualism have been researched extensively. Existing research on the cognitive benefits of bilingualism demonstrate that there is "a robust bilingual advantage in executive control that is apparent as early as the first year of life, holds across various language pairs, and is distinct from the effects of culture, immigration history, and language of instruction" (Barac, Bialystok, Castro, & Sanchez, 2014, p. 704). Additionally, bilingualism activates areas of the brain that otherwise would not be activated, increasing the skills of problem-solving and increasing creativity as well (Thomas & Collier, 2012). Giving ELs the opportunity to continue to develop their home language while at the same time providing a school environment where ELs stay within their classroom rather than being pulled out for services have also shown to have positive outcomes on their social and emotional well-being (Thomas & Collier, 2017). The benefit of a two-way model is that it allows for EL students to be surrounded by non-EL peers within their own classroom (Lindholm-Leary, 2005), and this integration of both students that are native speakers of the partner language and English leads to such sociocultural and emotional benefits (Thomas & Collier, 2012). Further TW allows for friendships to form between students from different language backgrounds. As students from each home language interact as peer tutors to one another in the two languages of instruction, students begin to rely on one another and value one another for the support they can each provide (Thomas & Collier, 2017). The cognitive benefits of bilingualism, the inclusion of EL students in the classroom, the social and emotional benefits, and the value placed on students for their unique assets makes DL a superior program model for ELs.

Beyond the cognitive benefits of bilingualism (Barac et al., 2014; Thomas & Collier, 2012; Thomas & Collier, 2017) and the positive social relations ELs can develop with non-EL peers, DL programs have shown that they have the power to completely close the achievement gap (Collier & Thomas, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 2012; Thomas & Collier, 2017). Collier and Thomas (2009) analyzed data from their research in many school districts, looking specifically at annual gap closure and annual effect size in the following different DL program types: one-way 90:10, one-way 50:50, two-way 90:10, and two-way 50:50. While two-way programs aim to have a mixture of students from the two languages, one-way consists of students mainly from one language group (Thomas & Collier, 2017). In regards to 90:10 and 50:50, this refers specifically to the language allocation in the DL program (Thomas & Collier, 2017). The 90:10 DL model is where the instruction begins in kindergarten with 90% in the partner language and with 10% being allocated to English, with students learning to read first in the partner language (Thomas & Collier, 2017). English increases in the second grade when English literacy lessons are formally introduced and then the instructional time in English gradually increases to 50% by grade 4 and remains as such for the remainder of the grades (Thomas & Collier, 2017). A 50:50 DL program is where the instruction begins in kindergarten with language instruction divided equally and students learn to read in both language from the start (Thomas & Collier, 2017).

A two-way DL immersion program with a 90:10 language allocation in the early years of the program leads to students in both language groups having the most academic success (Collier & Thomas, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 2012). The two-way 90:10 program is the most effective model in closing the second language achievement gap in the least time with 95-100% gap closure by the fifth grade (Collier & Thomas, 2009). Additionally, when ELs are able to stay in TW for six years, they not only close the gap but continue on or above grade-level achievement in English for each continuing year (Thomas & Collier, 2017). It is essential that the stakeholders making program decisions recognize that this research explicitly states that the ELs with this success were in the program for six years. DL programs are not a quick fix that can be implemented for one year and then removed. Instead, these programs must be viewed as an investment that demands time and patience.

Recommendations

For those who are making decisions regarding EL success, it is crucial to understand that DL programs, when constructed wisely, can close the achievement gap, promote bilingualism, and foster positive relationships between ELs and non ELs. Implementing more DL programs for EL success is a plausible solution for best meeting the needs of this group of students. Ideally, ELs would be placed into a two-way 90:10 DL program where the EL home language matches the partner language. When schools choose to implement a DL program for their EL population, it shows that bilingualism and students' cultures are valued. ELs should have the ability to maintain and nurture their home language development while simultaneously acquiring the English language, especially considering the positive implications bilingualism has on student success. It is essential to implement this program type, following the recommendations listed, to best support the growing EL population in urban schools across the nation.

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