

Cassandra Ramirez

Instructor L. Peterson

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The Importance of Nurturing Bilingualism in Mexican Migrant Children

The Latinx population constitutes one of the larger minority groups in the United States, specifically Mexican families that migrate to the United States in search of increasingly appealing career and educational opportunities. Raising bilingual children becomes a challenging reality for Mexican migrant parents, as the children born into this multicultural environment are consequentially burdened with assimilating into society. A major concern for bilingual children is their early education and, given, the Latinx youth population, as of 2012, constitutes a large portion of minority students in the United States, (National Center for Education Statistics) there is increased focus on educational programs intended for this community. With about 3.6 million Latinxs participating in English learning programs there is an interest in discovering it's long-term benefits and detriments toward the language development of bilingual students. Since learning two languages, simultaneously, has its challenges, there is an emphasis on improving language learning programs established to facilitate a student's language acquisition. In the case of Mexican migrant children, and other Latinx's, these learning programs enforce their English acquisition. Unfortunately, such programs, mainly focused on English development, negatively profile bilingual students by associating their literacy diversity as the limiting factor to their ability to communicate "effectively."

This racialization toward the Spanish language is discouraging for Mexican migrant children that could permanently form a negative association toward their Spanish-use. As

Barbara Pearson suggests, "...the quantity of input has the greatest effect on whether a minority language will be learned, but language status and attitudes about language also play a role" (399). There are multiple social factors that influence this community's literacy identity and language development not solely based on the availability of educational opportunities. By, nonetheless, being a part of a minority community in the United States, the pressure to increase English literacy development is constantly present. Robert Jiménez defined this pressure as a "cultural borderland," and went further by stating it was reflected in, "the challenge of learning English and English literacy, [a Latinx student's] fear of Spanish language loss and the gaping hole left behind in terms of their identity..." (995). Subject to racialism and educational vulnerability, Mexican migrant children are often conflicted with their literacy identity and fear for the loss of their heritage language. The challenges associated with the development of English and Spanish, and social circumstances define strong components in the life of Mexican migrant children, which have the greatest influence toward their language-use and its presence in their life. Understanding their effect provides the chance of bettering the education available for these communities and discourages ubiquitous misconceptions negatively targeting Spanish and English speakers. Contrast to the belief that Mexican migrant children in the United States limit their education or future success in U. S. society by pursuing bilingualism, there are labor market advantages, serving as long-term attributes, that stand-out in comparison to a monolingual individual. Yet, the extent they benefit from their bilingualism is directly affected by their personal literacy identity, built from their early childhood experiences and education.

DISCUSSION

Origin of Bilingualism. As individuals who have migrated into a new culture, striving to expand their opportunities for success, Mexican migrants encourage their children to learn English. English is the language of the majority in the United States, therefore placing pressure on the parents of these children to prepare them for integrating into society. In a study done on the integration of school, language, and identity of a Spanish and English speaking student, researchers, Louise Wilkinson and Robert Danzak, acknowledge a bilingual student's "...need to use English in both social and academic contexts" (52). Agreeably, when asking the son of a Mexican migrant family, Adrian Vigil (age 23), he explained his mother, a Mexican immigrant of the United States, had been his strongest influence to his overall language acquisition. It was his mother that had the greatest desire for him to, as Adrian stated, "blend-in and not struggle [with] day-to-day speaking, reading and writing, [in] both, English and Spanish." The development of English is a priority for these families since all schooling and communication is requires standard English knowledge. In order to benefit from the education available in the United States and engage in society, acquiring English is necessary. These children, with no involvement in the decision of the early stages of their life, are forced to Despite the pressures to assimilate, Mexican migrant parents, as gathered from the interview with Adrian, decide to expose their children to their mother tongue, their heritage language, anyway.

Why Mexican migrant parents choose to, regardless, encourage their children to learn their heritage language too is beyond the pressures to conform into U. S. society. Mexican migrant parents would like to minimize the result of complete abandonment of their children's heritage or roots. Through assimilation into any new community, as seen with migration events, there is constant pressure to oppress the heritage language and learn the social language. Given the limited exposure to Spanish and presence of language oppression, studies observed and

analyzed the reasoning for Spanish-speaking parents in the United States to encourage teaching two languages in the lives of their children, instead of only pursuing English. Researcher Bryan Taylor, found Spanish-speaking parents want their children to "... [be] able to communicate with family and other Spanish-speaking people (13%); relating to his/her heritage (11%); and being comfortable relating to other people and other cultures (11%)" (97). Spanish-speaking parents enforce their connection to their heritage language and culture because they want their children to understand their diversity and maintain or develop a connection to their heritage. Adrian explained his mother strongly believed lacking the ability to speak Spanish would be dishonoring for her family. This thought is common for the Latinx community. Exposure to their heritage language is important for the Mexican migrant children to understand and build their culturally diverse identity. Therefore, Spanish becomes the language that maintains their connection to their Mexican heritage and culture. Combined with the reasoning for encouraging English, these are the motivations for embracing bilingualism in multicultural individuals, yet the extent of proficiency in both languages actually achieved depends on many factors for any single individual. Parents may be strong advocates for their children's education, but their support only accounts for a small portion of what truly builds on their children's language acquisition.

A parent can only hope for the best outcome in their children's life but the reality of it is that a child will receive both, the pressure to learn English from society and the pressure to stay connected to their mother tongue from familial influences, in their own manner. As children, they are most vulnerable to the exposure of any negative associations with the two languages they learn just as much as they are benefitted by the positive associations to their bilingualism. Revealing the factors that went into the birth of a Mexican migrant children's bilingualism

provides insight into what factors become large influences in their language development in their early education.

Childhood Experiences In Relation To Language Development and Identity. Managing two languages in the United States, including Spanish, proves to be difficult when social factors negatively impact a bilingual student. For Mexican migrant children, during their language development in primary and secondary school, it is difficult to maintain a positive outlook on their biliteracy when social factors can be detrimental to their literacy identity. Most evident are the racialized efforts against Spanish-use which are difficult to ignore. A study done on the experiences of Mexican migrants in the United States observed the effects racialization has on the decisions for these families. The basis of the pressure to assimilate into the culture of the U. S. is largely due to the distribution of privileges amongst those who are what U.S. society perceives as fit, or “society's particular conception of what and who is white” (Davis and Moore 679). Researchers, Tiffany Davis and Wendy Moore, analyzed this social construct and found it represents the attempt to exclude the Spanish language and limits the freedom of this community by attempting to restrict their language use. The children, themselves, being exposed to this, could create a negative associate this racialization with their Spanish-use and could go as far as to diminish their own motivation to acquire Spanish. Consequently this social construct becomes the basis of the language-use for Mexican migrant children since the varying exposures of both languages requires constant managing of each and relies heavily on social cues.

The differences in the exposure to each language affect their association or level of comfortability in speaking both languages anywhere. A study focused on the relationship between literacy and identity of bilingual students, emphasized the influence the experiences of managing two languages had on their literacy development and their identity (Jiménez). In an

interview with Johana Ramirez, a first generation child of Mexican migrant parents, age 23, she described the code-switching in her life as the constant need to “speak in Spanish with [her] mom, since she only knew Spanish, and speak English with [her] dad, who learned English, and at school.” This is where the difference between the use of the majority language and that of the minority language takes a toll on how these children identify with their literacy. As seen with Johana, children begin to form circumstances that their use in one language is acceptable versus when the other may not be appreciated or acknowledged. Naturally, Mexican migrant children receive more exposure to English than to Spanish, therefore, receiving persuasion of favoring the English language. These exposure differences have an effect on how much one language is used, which influences the development of each language and could permanently create a negative association toward their biliteracy identity. Similarly, the misconception of knowledge acquisition in one language limiting the language development of another, can reduce a bilingual students desire to seek the use of both languages in their life.

The idea that developing two languages simultaneously leads to the progression in one language negatively affecting the development of the other, is misleading. This mythology rises from the majority community or educators concerned for the educational programs available for bilingual students. Jimenez noted, “the fragility of their sense of self surfaced on occasion when students mentioned that English might supplant Spanish...” (988). By saying the issue of acquiring two languages lies with the increased development of the majority language, then limiting the acquisition of the minority language, fails to acknowledge the differences in exposure to each language the Mexican migrant children inevitably comply with. Research conducted on this same concept has been able to explicitly detail the relationship, if any, between

the language development of English and that of Spanish for bilingual children. The study found, “no across-language relationships in which Spanish levels affects subsequent English growth” (Hoff et. al). Researchers conducting this experiment concluded the progress or measure of input of a language is specific to that language, proving the concept of one language suppressing the acquisition of another is nothing more than a false claim. The claim alone could potentially create negativity toward bilingualism placing it as a detriment in the education of the Mexican migrant children. This is useful when considering how to go about teaching Spanish and English for these children. Educators should encourage the development of both languages instead of favoring the majority language, since developmental studies found their development of each language are completely independent of each other. In other words, programs that are especially articulated for the benefit of students raised as bilinguals should incorporate teaching of both their heritage language, spoken at home, and the academic/social language, with no fear that pursuing both will rise issues in the education of the student.

There are various educational programs available for bilingual students in the United States including the more recent, Dual Language Immersion programs that incorporates the concept of nurturing both languages equally throughout Primary and Secondary school. Students in this program are taught literacy and academics in both English and Spanish. A study analyzing the Dual Language Immersion Program found that children with constant access to interactions in English and Spanish “benefit [the] children’s level of language proficiency in the minority language” (Pearson 399). These programs are beneficial to the students since it increases their exposure to their heritage language they otherwise would lack in the academic/social circumstance. This positively promotes their bilingualism in a productive manner. Since

Mexican migrant children will be exposed to both English and Spanish in their life regardless of their schooling, programs incorporating both can only help develop them effectively. Promoting bilingualism in the schooling provided for Mexican migrant children benefits the children in their education and identity, as a result decreasing the chances of loss of minority language. Beyond the schooling efforts for this community it is important to consider how a Mexican migrant child's education is reflected in their future endeavors.

Bilingualism Beyond, A Focus on Labor Market. Mexican migrant parents believe their children's biliteracy could serve as a positive attribute specifically in employment opportunities. This belief is rooted from a misconception that bilinguals in the United States receive an advantage in to receiving more opportunities in the labor market. Research analyzing why parents believe a child's bilingualism should be nurtured and not denied, found that parents believed being bilingual would result in an "...increase [in] employment opportunities in the future" (Taylor 94). Parents understand how crucial acquiring the English language is, in terms of their children integrating into the U. S. society, but they also have the intent of providing them optimal opportunities to establishing economic stability in the future. Hence, they encourage their children's literacy diversity and push for the ongoing development of both, Spanish and English. This idea is echoed into the expectation the children also form in regard to their bilingualism and the labor market. Interviewee, Johana explained the benefit she sees in her ability to speak in both English and Spanish, "is considered a perk or sought for in job positions that require communicating with costumers/clients, since the U. S., especially in California, has a lot of native Spanish speakers." Children of these families notice the presence of minority groups inhabiting the U. S. therefore establishing a connection between the need for equally providing services or opportunities to these communities. More specifically, Mexican migrant children

believe they have an attribute that would be well received in the labor market, given the great diversity present in population of the United States. It is not incorrect to say bilingualism is beneficial in the labor market, but this statement fails to analyze the extent of its validity that includes considering the availability and requisites of employment opportunities.

Due to an employer's consideration of the variation in educational attainment in employees and the position sought to be filled, there is difficulty in predicting outcomes in the labor market for a common bilingual individual in the United States. Therefore, Mexican migrant parents or their children, are not wrong in thinking they benefit from being bilingual in job opportunities, but it is only to the extent of the employer. A study analyzing how bilingualism is received in the labor market discovered that "as the Latin[x] population has grown and dispersed throughout most states in the nation...employers have sought workers who can interact with clients a customers who speak Spanish..." (Gándara 6). This directly shows, a Mexican migrant child's bilingualism does provide them job opportunities provided by employers that rely heavily on communications and international relations that a monolingual individual is not eligible for. The same study revealed advantages, if any, on being bilingual in the labor market found employers are willing to pay bilingual employees more when considering the "...higher educational attainment they bring to the labor market rather than their bilingualism" (Gánarda 4). This demonstrates a Mexican migrant children's literacy diversity can, indeed, stand out in employment opportunities, only in accordance to their level of education. An eligible employee must have the level of education the position sought to fulfill requires, which is the main focus when deciding which applicant will receive the position. In other words, solely identifying as a bilingual individual does not serve as an attribute in employment opportunities in comparison to a monolingual individual.

However, benefitting from their literacy diversity depends on the level of proficiency in each language. This places a critical dependence on the language development Mexican migrant children achieve for their ability to benefit from their bilingualism, economically speaking. When the variations of educational level is considered amongst multiple bilingual individuals, a study found that not only were "...balanced bilingual workers... more likely to be employed full-time and less likely to be unemployed than respondents who are proficient in English only" (17), they also earned significantly more (Gándara). This results in bilingualism, in fact, providing a positive effect on earnings, in comparison to a monolingual individual, but the effect increases with the level of bilingualism proficiency. This is reasonable because employers who seek for dual language speakers want to fulfill their position effectively. Therefore, for children of Mexican migrant families to receive optimal positions in the labor market and use their biliteracy effectively, their acquisition of both languages needs to be proficient or higher. This defines another pressure on their language acquisition, properly managing the use of two languages throughout their language development in a manner that encourages growth in both.

CONCLUSION

Mexican migrant children in the United States are given the unique opportunity to simultaneously develop their heritage language, Spanish, and the majority language, English. Unfortunately, negativity associated with bilingualism contribute to the hardships and in-acceptances the children from these families are forced to endure daily. Consequently, these inevitably shape their identity and influences the language development of these vulnerable children. At early ages, a child's language acquisition is crucial and extremely important. Although it is common belief that the development of one language in a bilinguals can decrease

the acquisition of the other, research findings contrarily assure any "... vocabulary and grammar growth...were strongly and positively related within languages"(Hoff et al.), hence language specific. This further proves the major challenge this community fights to overcome are the uneducated radicalized efforts formulated by the majority, seeking to oppress their biliterate tongue and demean their multicultural identity. By encouraging the implementation of Dual-Language immersion programs in primary and secondary schools across the United States provides these children's biliteracy a fighting chance to encourage and equally nurture their growth of both English and Spanish. Promoting bilingualism and raising awareness of the misconceptions accepted by many, benefits the proficiency levels acquired by these Mexican migrant children in both, English and Spanish, which has proven to be an advantage in the labor market. Further research should be conducted to identify any differences in these beneficiaries for females and males, especially in the labor market. Nonetheless, it is the lack of information that contributes to minimizing the opportunities available for Mexican migrant children to flourish in their biliterate tongue and demeans their multicultural identity. By reducing language oppression and increasing positive educational opportunities, Mexican migrant children can learn English and Spanish in a safe and encouraging environment and healthily embrace their biliterate identity.

Bilingual children should be comfortable with developing both English and Spanish which is extremely important to build early on. By bettering the understanding of their multicultural diversity there is a better chance of providing beneficial educational opportunities that encourage a Mexican migrant children to positively associate their English and Spanish acquisition. Efforts that may discourage the Mexican migrant children's comfort or self-expression during their early language development should be diminished; and their biliterate tongue should be nurtured

throughout their life. This will allow them to effectively reach their full potential by allowing their bilingualism to serve as an asset in their future.

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ABSTRACT

Raising bilingual children has become increasingly common, especially for the Mexican migrant community in the United States. These bilinguals experience difficulty in nurturing both, Spanish and English, because bilingualism is often discouraged and overlooked. Contrast to the belief that Mexican migrant children in the United States limit their education or future success in U. S. society by pursuing bilingualism, there are labor market advantages, that stand-out in comparison to a monolingual individual. Yet, the extent they benefit from their bilingualism is directly dependent on their early childhood experiences and education. Considering their need to use English "...in social and academic contexts" (Danzak and Wilkinson 52) and Spanish to "relat[e] to his/her heritage" (Taylor 97) helps establish the connection between the formation of their multicultural identity and education. Misconceptions of language acquisition in bilinguals and the pressure to conform, represent negativity surrounding bilingualism that can reduce a bilingual student's desire to develop their minority language. Researchers have found that language development in bilinguals is language specific (Hoff et al.), hence encouraging implementing programs in schooling that can positively associate the simultaneous development of both English and Spanish. Researcher Patricia Gándara found bilinguals proficient in both languages "[were] more likely to be employed full-time... than respondents who are proficient in English only" (17) and earn significantly more. To effectively allow Mexican migrant children reach their potential as bilinguals, efforts against their biliteracy should be diminished and instead their biliterate tongue should be nurtured throughout their life.