

THE BILINGUAL RESEARCH JOURNAL
Summer/Fall 1995, Vol. 19, Nos. 3 & 4, pp. 497-512

OYSTER SCHOOL STANDS THE TEST OF TIME

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Abstract

Oyster Bilingual School in Washington, D.C. is one of the oldest, continuously-running two-way bilingual programs in the nation. Some of the innovations that have helped sustain the school's success have been strong parental and community support, maintenance of high academic standards, and ongoing professional development efforts. Cultural, generational, and socioeconomic differences among staff; students, and parents have caused philosophical conflict in the school community; this situation needs to be addressed through professional development activities. Decreasing funds have limited the school's ability to expand and adopt new technologies; this may be resolved through Oyster community activism to garner political support for better financial and human resources.

Introduction

James F. Oyster Bilingual Elementary School, a tiny campus nestled in an affluent section of northwest Washington, D.C., houses an award-winning, internationally-acclaimed, dual language (Spanish-English) immersion program. Since it was inaugurated in 1971, Oyster has maintained a consistent record of high academic standards and student achievement. In the Fall of 1993, I interviewed Paquita Holland, the principal of the Oyster School. Holland spoke with pride and

enthusiasm about the selection of Oyster as one of five 1993 Schools of Excellence (sponsored by Hispanic magazine and Ryder Systems), chosen from among schools nationally.

In addition to this special national honor, Oyster is recognized locally in Washington, D.C. as an exemplary school. It ranked first in the city in sixth-grade test scores in 1990-91: the majority of students tested at the twelfth-grade level in reading and at the eleventh-grade level in math on the CTBS, and at the eighth- and ninth-grade levels on the *Aprنده* (Spanish language) test. Oyster has also produced National Merit Scholar finalists. When budget constraints forced the school board and superintendent to consider closing Oyster in the summer of 1993, students testified at a press conference (in Spanish and English) in favor of continuing the operation of the school, as did parents and community members.

How does Oyster achieve these amazing accomplishments in an urban school system setting? Holland attributes it to the richness of the curriculum, the involvement of the community, and the dedication of the staff. However, that is not to say that Oyster is not faced with significant challenges; in public schools, there is always room for innovation and improvement.

The Dual Language Model

The dual language model of bilingual education programs used at Oyster enjoys a reputation among educators as a good way to optimize the abilities of all students and prevent the segregation of language minority students. It is looked to as a way of valuing diversity while developing the potential bilingualism of both language minority and majority children (Baker 1993; California State Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Education, 1990; Crawford, 1989; Tucker and Crandall, 1989). This is because both languages are hypothetically afforded equal time and equal weight. Also called "two way bilingual," "developmental bilingual" or "dual immersion," this type of program is composed of an equal number (or as close as possible) of minority language and majority language speakers. For example, at Oyster, the classes are made up of roughly half native-English speakers and half

native-Spanish speakers. The time devoted to instruction in both minority and majority languages is equally divided.

Philosophical or societal goals include minority language maintenance, pluralism, and enrichment; and expected language acquisition outcomes are bilingualism and biliteracy (Baker, 1993). Integral to the dual language philosophy is the idea that both languages and cultures are equally valued and appreciated. According to an Oyster staff member, one flaw in the Oyster rendition of this philosophy is that D.C. Public Schools require students to pass their course work in English but not in Spanish, creating the perception that the Spanish portion of the program is "fluff," at least in the eyes of some observers. However, one of the reasons this model is popular with educators and parents is that it provides a real benefit for language majority children: proficiency in a foreign language, which is perceived as a plus in the brave new world of the "global economy." In fact, Goal Three of the U.S. Department of Education's *Goals 2000* plan calls for the following:

American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, arts, history and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.

Further, Goal Five states, "Every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship." These goals imply not only a requisite competency in English but also in a second language.

Oyster is reflective of many dual language programs in that it can be construed as a "public school for the elite." Because bilingualism is perceived as a mark of academic excellence for affluent kids, their parents will camp out for days outside the schools, or negotiate long waiting lists, to get their children into the programs; the fact that the school is "elite" drives up the academic standards, attracts the best teachers, increases parental and community support, and generates

money and advocacy for the development of school projects. Thus the less affluent Hispanic students and other "non-elites" in attendance benefit from the total school environment. Meanwhile, parents of students who cannot get entry into the program, and teachers who cannot get a foot in the school door, sometimes harbor resentment because of their perception that praise and dollars are heaped on the school to their exclusion.

The Oyster School Neighborhood

Oyster's attendance area includes the region bounded to the north by Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., and the National Cathedral, where many foreign embassies are found. This area of the city is home to upper class diplomats, politicians, and other powerful professionals. Another part of Oyster's attendance area includes the neighborhood to the east known as Adams Morgan, which, at the time of Oyster's inception, was Washington's *barrio latino*. However, in the last decade, the *barrio* has undergone a tremendous gentrification, resulting in the displacement of the Latino population to the North and East, where housing costs are more accessible. Nonetheless, the majority of Oyster's students continues to be Latino; approximately eighty percent (80%) were Hispanic in 1992-93. Interestingly, although the majority of D.C.'s population is African American, only twelve percent (12%) of the school's 321 students was African American during the same year. The remainder of the population in 1992-93 consisted of twenty-six percent (26%) white and four percent (4%) Asian students. In addition, most of Oyster's students, seventy-four percent (74%), were language minorities and one fourth of these were limited English proficient. Despite the fact that the school hosts children of the neighborhood's affluent residents, in March 1993 forty percent of Oyster students were participating in the free lunch program. Holland is proud of Oyster's "multicultural environment," and the school community is taking steps to proactively address the conflicts that seem inevitable when students, teachers, administrators, and parents of different cultural, racial, and economic backgrounds come together in one place.

Staff

Each classroom is staffed by two teachers: a native English-speaker and a native Spanish-speaker; all teachers are bilingual (that is, have had formal second language training as required for bilingual teacher certification). Holland estimates that the additional staff costs about 20 percent more than with traditional staffing patterns; however, she maintains that this added cost is recuperated by saving the school system approximately \$100,000 that is allocated to Oyster each year for substitute teachers. If a teacher is absent at Oyster, her teamed teacher is able to teach the class alone. Holland points to the team model as one of the school's ongoing challenges; it does have its disadvantages, it seems. Teachers do not always have the option of choosing their teaching partners, and sometimes generational, philosophical, and personality conflicts develop. This is especially true in the case of teachers who "resist moving ahead," in Holland's words. She cites whole language (a methodology and philosophy of teaching language arts) as an instance where the old guard sometimes clashes with the new teachers. Asserts Holland, "As in any school, the bottom line is the staff." Teachers interviewed pointed to a real lack of physical space as a possible source of conflict among teamed teachers. Since all lessons at Oyster are generally language-oriented, classrooms are noisy and appear to be chaotic to the unannointed. Several activities are usually in progress at the same time; and two teachers facilitate these activities. This seemingly does not affect the students, who have learned from the beginning of elementary school to work this way; but it can be disconcerting for the adults, who are accustomed to quieter kinds of classrooms.

Bilingual Methodology

According to Holland, all Oyster students must learn all content material in both Spanish and English. Says Holland, "The majority of students coming into pre-K or K are LEP (limited English proficient), but they are not labeled thus (nor are the Spanish learners labeled limited Spanish proficient)."

Students at the pre-K through sixth-grade school are immersed in both languages; half of the instructional time each week is in Spanish, half in English (see Christian, 1994, for further information on the allocation of languages of instruction in two-way programs). All content is taught and learned in both languages, although teachers are given the freedom to accomplish this in different ways; for example, in one classroom, the teachers chose to teach science only in English and Social Studies only in Spanish, according to their respective language/subject matter skill levels in those two content areas (the teachers would arrange to teach content vocabulary for the other language at another time). Ultimately, it is up to each team of teachers to work out a viable schedule, so long as they follow the framework of teaching all content in both languages in the space of a week.

At the end of the second grade, students' language proficiency is measured using the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) to see if they need English as a Second Language (ESL) or Spanish as a Second Language (SSL) pull-out classes. According to Holland, by the end of second grade, most students are well on their way to being literate in both Spanish and English. Oyster's success rate could be attributed to its philosophy that no student should be labeled deficient; rather, each student is perceived as bringing specific skills and abilities to the learning environment that will contribute to his own as well as his classmates' academic achievement.

Students who arrive at Oyster School after the second grade are provided with English as a second language or Spanish as a second language instruction, as needed, until they develop a level of dual language proficiency that allows them to function at grade level in the school's bilingual setting (the school discourages the admission of new students after third grade). For these students, Holland pointed out, it generally takes three years to develop the language skills necessary for success in English and Spanish.

But Matilde Arciniegas, an ESL/SSL resource teacher, had a different notion about the length of time it takes for students to acquire academic proficiency in the second language (often a source of controversy in the bilingual education public debate). Arciniegas agreed that students who arrive with a firm educational background are often able to transfer to the regular Oyster program within three years.

However, she dismissed a definite, standard length of time as too simplistic. Instead, she believes that the length of time needed to acquire CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, Cummins, 1981) depends upon a variety of factors, such as the age and grade at which the student arrives at Oyster and his or her individual strengths and academic background. Arciniegas points out that many students are able to be placed in the regular Oyster program before they could survive in a typical, non-bilingual ESL classroom because they receive native language support in the program at Oyster.

Writing Workshop

Three Oyster teachers participate in the Books Project of the Network of Educators on the Americas (NECA), which trains teachers how to set up writers' workshops in the classroom. This means that students participate in process writing and write and publish their own books. Oyster teacher Kathy Davin's first-graders are direct beneficiaries of her participation in the Books Project professional development component. Her students spend the first forty-five minutes of each day working in one large group. While they write in their journals in the language of their choice, other activities such as writing conferences and administrative tasks occur simultaneously. Next, the students split into their language groups to work with Davin or her teamed teacher, and begin science and social studies instruction. In the afternoon, Davin and her partner conduct thematic story groups. She strives to create a rich reading environment for her students by using folktales from Central America and Mexico with which they may already be culturally familiar, which increases their comprehension in English. Her students had been reading *The Legend of El Dorado* and she said that her team teacher was teaching Spanish by using European folktales that native English speakers could recognize. When I asked her how she teaches vocabulary, she mentioned dramatization (acting out the meaning) and a "word wall," a prominently-displayed list of unknown, interesting words which are discussed, explained, and reviewed frequently, and which students help her to maintain.

The Whole Language Approach

The techniques employed by Davin and her partner are part of what is known as the "whole language" approach, which has become increasingly accepted among educators as a valuable way of teaching language arts. Whole language is based in part on the idea that reading and writing are best learned "naturally" (that is, by doing them), through social interaction, and with a literature-rich environment as one important motivating factor (Freeman & Freeman, 1992). Oyster uses Macmillan's Spanish textbooks and is test-piloting their new whole language series for teaching Reading (Spanish) Language Arts. The English series used at Oyster is the Silver Burdett Ginn *World of Reading*. Whole language contrasts sharply with traditional "skills-based" instruction, which breaks reading and writing down into a salad of discrete skills that are sorted out and taught separately. The separate skills concept is illustrated by basal readers (e.g., "Dick and Jane") and grammar exercises taken out of context. Most students educated before the mid-eighties would have learned to read and write with this approach. Critics of whole language often cite poor spelling, grammar, and syntax as the usual result of this type of instruction. Whole language advocates respond that these are not problems, but part of the process of becoming a better writer, and that with time and sufficient teacher/student feedback, these problems or processes resolve themselves. The polar differences between these two approaches to language arts instruction have been a source of conflict at Oyster between staff members, exacerbated by the team teaching situation. Because teamed teachers share an extremely limited space, opposing philosophies can clash in a very real and practical sense in Oyster classrooms. Many of the Spanish teachers have been with Oyster since the school opened, and were educated abroad, where the skills-based/traditional approaches are the usual norm. Their belief in the skills-based approaches (a.k.a. "the basics") is often supported by parents who believe that the way they learned is the best way for their children to learn, the conventional wisdom being that the schools have all gone down the tubes since "the basics" were abandoned (see Johnson and Immerwahr, 1994). Because turnover has been higher among the English teacher staff, there are more young teachers who have been

exposed to whole language methods in their teacher preparation programs. Holland would like her veteran teachers to adopt the newer methodologies, yet concedes that there is a place for the teaching of phonics and other discrete skills in a language arts instructional repertoire.

Other Innovative Instructional Approaches

The Oyster hands-on science program has been "blessed" by the National Diffusion Network of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (13.5. Department of Education). The school has benefitted from a variety of partnerships with public and private organizations. For example, during the 1993-94 school year, students participated in "Project Satellite" with local television weatherman Bob Ryan; with Panasonic's "Kid Witness" public service announcement production project; and with the National Geographic Society, whose geography standards were incorporated into the Oyster Social Studies curriculum and which contributed other resources for learning. Oyster is also a pilot school of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). Math teachers have adopted the standards of the NCTM, which means that math learning focuses on critical thinking, problem solving, and the thought process, as well as linking mathematics with technology. While Oyster participates in the D.C. Public Schools' TEAMS distance learning program, use of computer technology has not yet been an important factor in the school's success. Holland calls computers the school's "Achilles' heel," since wiring problems at the aging campus have prevented the widespread use of that technology.

Community Involvement

School leadership, direction and planning are provided by a triumvirate of sorts which is composed of the Restructuring Team, the Cultural Diversity Committee, and the parents' association, the Oyster School Community Council.

The Restructuring Team is a site-based management team that is the "vision and brains" behind Oyster, states Holland. In accordance with the recommendations of Oyster's Local School Restructuring Team, the school wrote a proposal to become an "Enterprise School."

This proposal seeks to address four major areas the school would like to improve, and is driven by partnerships with the George Washington University School of Education and "a public-private partnership that will lead to an expansion and renewal of school space" (from the Enterprise School proposal, 1994). The school hopes to use the university as a resource for professional development and whole school evaluation, especially in the areas of technology, whole language instruction, and special education. A recurring theme in conversations with school staff is the lack of physical space as a source of many school problems; through the Enterprise School proposal, Oyster hopes to generate more space, possibly a new building, through a public/private partnership.

The Cultural Diversity Committee seeks to improve the multicultural environment of Oyster. The Community Council (PTA) is an integral part of the school, sponsoring activities, raising funds, and participating with Oyster's faculty and staff in establishing the school's educational priorities, all meetings are totally bilingual, ensuring full participation of all in attendance; half of each meeting is dedicated to information sharing and the balance is for problem solving by teams of parents, teachers, and administrators. Additionally, all communications sent from the school are written in both Spanish and English. Each classroom is assigned one Spanish-speaking and one English-speaking parent, and parent involvement also extends into the classroom. For example, as part of one school-wide project funded by the American Labor Education Center, The Program on Work, Oyster's parents, teachers, and students published *Qué Hace Usted En El Trabajo?/What Do You Do At Work?*, which featured drawings and interviews by students about their parents' work.

Peace Education

Holland feels that the minority parent often has a broader view of the school, and will fight for the whole school, rather than "just for my kid." That is one of the reasons that Oyster is looking to the Peaceworks "New Generation" program to promote multiculturalism and community building for all families linked to the school. Oyster's population is subject to typical urban problems, including some students whose

parents are drug users, HIV-infected, single, and very young. Holland hopes that a more global view of a shared responsibility for problem-solving will extend to the greater Oyster community.

Oyster's Cultural Diversity Committee and Community Council (Oyster's version of PTA) won a grant in 1994 to support a training effort for parents, teachers, and students based on a model by Peaceworks, a (Miami, Florida) Peace Education organization. The project, "Preparing the New Generation for a Decade of Non-Violence," has three phases for students. In the first phase, pre-school through second-graders are given training in peacemaking skills. In grades three and four, students are taught (in both languages) creative conflict-solving, building self-esteem, and sensitivity to diversity. By the fifth and sixth-grades, students are prepared for the last phase, in which they are trained as conflict mediators. This means that students arbitrate disputes among their peers by establishing groundrules for their dialogue and "facilitating" the way to a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict.

The training for their parents is called "fighting fair for families." This entails learning about active listening skills and how to express one's self in a non-aggressive manner. The component for teachers trains them how to work in a multicultural environment, how to build cultural bridges, and how to "fight fair" with their colleagues and students. This is especially important since each teacher team teaches with a person from another culture.

Critical Comments and Recommendations

Challenge: Elite School or Democratic Model ? Can the Oyster staff ensure that language minority students are receiving an education on par with the language majority "elites" in the school, especially when even teamed teachers are at odds over language instruction approaches? This challenge continues to haunt educators since the 1954 Brown decision. Despite experimentation with desegregation and categorical programs such as Chapter I and Title VII, educators are still at odds regarding the best instructional modes for effective learning by all students, regardless of language and culture. Is Oyster a truly "multicultural" school in the sense that all cultures are not only

appreciated, studied and respected, but also integrated into the curriculum and the decision-making processes? While it is certain that substantive and successful efforts are in place to proceed toward this ideal, there is still room for improvement. This is especially true in terms of language majority family attitudes and D.C. Public Schools policies, implicit or openly expressed.

Challenge: Acquiring Needed Resources. How will Oyster overcome its greatest challenges in the face of shrinking budgets, such as improving access to technology and increasing physical space for its crowded classrooms? While upper-class language majority children usually have access to technology at home, those students of lower economic status often do not. School is one of the few places where poor students are exposed to computers and other forms of technology. Equity demands, then, that Oyster school equip itself with state-of-the-art technological systems. Expansion of the physical space is another issue. This seems more problematic for teachers than students, however. While granting teamed teachers separate classrooms may ease their interpersonal conflicts, it does not require teachers to resolve them, and deprives the students of witnessing positive intercultural relationships and collaboration. It also encourages the segregation of the student language groups, who then must report to locations removed from their other-culture peers.

Challenge: Authentic Assessment Versus Standardized Testing. How will Oyster promote and incorporate authentic assessment into its curriculum in the context of a school system that relies on standardized measurements to gauge academic achievement? While it may seem reasonable to assume that all parents would rush to support an assessment system which is more representative of students' actual growth and achievement, this is not always the case. For parents whose children are perceived to be "achievers" through the widely-used standardized and normed tests, it may seem risky to adapt any innovations which could alter their children's academic status. The acceptance of this status quo is related to the philosophical concept that getting an education is the acquisition of a particular, ethnocentric body of knowledge, which is assessed through the examination of the student's verbal and written products. This contrasts with the view that education is the ongoing development of a variety of cognitive skills

across many domains assessed, for example, via a portfolio approach (see Del Vecchio et al., 1994).

Challenge: Maintaining a Philosophical Idea. A related issue is the ability of the Oyster community to stay true to the dual language model by continuously promoting the status of the Spanish language, in this time of widespread nativist (i.e., English-only) sentiment: Californians pass Proposition 187; a conservative senator publicly mocks Judge Lance Ito by imitating a Japanese speaking broken English; and a Texas judge scolds a mother for speaking her native Spanish language to her own child, to name a few well-publicized instances of bigotry. How do advocates for language minority children convince educators and the public that bilingualism is not a public safety threat, and that bilingual maintenance might actually have a positive impact for American society? And how do we remind individualistic Americans that accepting collective responsibility for social ills and then acting to promote social change is the basis of good community (and authentic family values)?

Recommendations

Oyster community involvement is a tremendous resource which should be utilized in order to bring about changes on various levels, from within the school itself to within the school bureaucracy. For example, Oyster parents could act as a powerful lobby in effecting changes in school system policies related to assessment and language policy, and for fighting budget cuts which affect schools' ability to expand, tap into social services, implement technology, conduct professional development and update materials. The Oyster committees should continue in their outreach efforts to the D.C. private and political sectors in order to continuously harvest financial and human resources. Professional development efforts should become an integral part of every aspect of the school's functioning, and should be tied to student outcomes. It is important that everyone in a school community be aware of the vision and mission of the school. It is equally important that each individual understand how he or she contributes to the realization of that vision and mission; this understanding can be achieved through comprehensive professional development efforts. All members of the

learning community should be targeted for professional development, from cafeteria/maintenance personnel to teachers to parents and other community members/organizations to administrators and politicians. To paraphrase the observation of a New York State Education Department staff person, professional development plans which neglect any part of the learning community are analogous to constructing a really sound house but stopping before the roof is completed. Staff development efforts must address the conflicts among teamed teachers and require strong leadership and mentor support from administrators, parents, and teacher leaders. The teaming of teachers offers a challenging opportunity for teacher research in the classroom regarding factors which affect language development and fluency, such as methodologies used, modes of assessment, time spent in native language instruction, and long-term versus short-term achievement. Collaborative action research projects in the Oyster classrooms would provide an incentive for Oyster teachers to examine their own teaching, as well as their partners', and give them the chance to work in a professional collaboration. This type of research could benefit through partnerships with local universities, which could provide research "mentoring" and technical assistance. Depending on the scope and success of this research, it could serve as a catalyst for the reexamination of policy, including assessment standards, and reform of public attitudes regarding bilingual education. In terms of changing attitudes related to ethnocentrism, anti-bilingualism, sexism and racism, the Oyster multicultural strand needs restructuring. Perhaps the adaptation of Banks' level four model of multicultural education (see Menkart, 1993) would be appropriate in encouraging change. Social action and multiple perspectives across the curriculum are integral to this approach. While sponsoring special festivals and ethnic celebrations are important steps toward multicultural education programs, they are not sufficient to produce meaningful change in the existing, persistent, and institutionalized practices and attitudes which can be described as discriminatory. Especially important in the D.C. sociopolitical context is reaching out to the African American community and building bridges among African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and European Americans.

Future Prospects

Paquita Holland is forthright about the school's problems and optimistic about Oyster's ability to overcome them. This honesty is reflective of the ongoing critical soul-searching that is perhaps the Oyster School's greatest strength: that is, the ability to reflect on progress and implement necessary changes. As an observer of many schools and districts, I bear witness to the widespread phenomenon of finger-pointing and the quiet desperation of so many unempowered educators who quietly surrender and hope that no one will blame them for the failure that they feel. Most of them are doing the best they can in the face of overwhelming responsibility and limited resources. I believe that Oyster can continue to spiral upward in its reform efforts if it accomplishes the following: 1) continues to support the creativity of its teachers, and encourages their ongoing professional development; 2) educates and mobilizes the community for political activism and 3) remains true to the dual immersion, bilingual education philosophy. If Oyster's past successes are any indication, the Oyster school community will soon be enumerating their latest accomplishments, in English and Spanish, to be sure.

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Acknowledgments

Thanks to the students, teachers and principal of Oyster School for welcoming me into their classrooms. Special thanks to Paquita Holland, Kathy Davin and Mathilde Arciniegas, who spoke to me at great length about their school. Special thanks to editors Beti Leone and Rene Cisneros for comments on earlier drafts of this paper and *muchísimas gracias* to Leona Marsh and Joel Gómez, my mentors and friends. Finally, but especially, thanks, Mom, for teaching me how to read.