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THE SEMI, SELF-CONTAINED CLASSROOM:  
AN ISLAND OF INNOVATIONS

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**Abstract**

The needs of each child & often in conflict with pre-set delivery models. In a small school district in Illinois, the bilingual teacher was able to adapt her program to the many different types of needs exhibited by the students. Children with no English were able to receive the majority of their curriculum from the bilingual teacher in a semi self-contained" model, while children in varying stages of English language acquisition received adjusted amounts of time and curriculum in a resource, pull-out model. This concurrent delivery system allowed the bilingual teacher, with the collaborative efforts of the homeroom teachers, to meet most of the varying needs of over 60 children.

The successive cutbacks in education made annually by the State of Illinois have made maintaining quality education quite the challenge. Smaller school districts such as School District #104 in a suburb of Chicago is not unaffected by this increasing hardship. Although the local community is of middle socioeconomic status with a growing multi-ethnic population, the district's bilingual program is especially at risk. State bilingual funding has decreased from 95% in 1991-1992 to its current level of 53% for 1993-1994. School District # 104 is not able to make up the difference in revenues.

The bilingual program is currently in place at three out of the five district schools: two elementary and the only junior high. The programs at one of the elementary schools and at the junior high school follow the more traditional format. There are three teachers, each with a teacher's aide teaching native language and ESL classes to almost 50% of the school population. Two of the elementary schools in the district receive no bilingual or ESL services at all. Walsh, the other elementary school receiving services, is not as well staffed and has been forced to find creative, innovative ways of servicing the language minority student population.

Since there is no busing provided, the district has open enrollment allowing the parents/guardians to choose which school they prefer for their children. Language minority families are encouraged to (and almost always do) enroll their children in the schools with services. The language minority population of the two schools without services is approximately 3%.

### **Student Population**

Walsh Elementary School has a total enrollment of approximately 350 students with over 50% speaking a language other than English at home. Of these language minority students, between 60 and 70 qualify for bilingual/ESL services. The students in the bilingual/ESL program are 85% Latino (primarily of Mexican origin), 10% Polish, and 5% other (e.g., Albanian, Turkish, Vietnamese). The language minority community is somewhat transient forcing the school enrollment and demographics to change almost on a daily basis. Newcomers with zero- English are a common and frequent reality throughout the school year. The Walsh School bilingual faculty consists of a sole bilingual teacher. Two native language teachers' aides were available two years ago, but budget cuts prevent the positions from being filled at this time.

### **Teacher**

The bilingual teacher has over fifteen years experience in education including all age groups from preschool to post graduate school. She has taught in Germany and the United States and is currently an educational consultant in Central America, where she completed a special education

internship. She is fluent in English, German, and Spanish. While completing her Master's in English as a Foreign Language, she also studied Japanese, Polish, and Russian. Most recently, she completed her Doctorate of Philosophy in Education specializing in learning disabilities, bilingualism, and reading. She is now studying Polish to be able to communicate better with the growing numbers of Polish immigrants in the community and the school.

### **Community**

The surrounding community is a well-established Midwestern town; descendants of the founding families continue to live in the area. Industry from Chicago has infiltrated the area attracting immigrants from around the world. As is typical of new arrivals, the length of a family's stay in the area is determined by a combination of job security and the familial support available. New immigrants are a much more transient part of the community. Indeed, some families are forced to move back and forth between Mexico and the United States several times within the same school year. This, of course, completely disrupts the education of the children.

### **Creating an Island**

With an unusually high number of zero-English students enrolled every year (sometimes as many as 1/3 of the qualifying language minority students), the traditional pull-out model of service delivery is tragically inadequate. The past two years have been used to pilot a new type of program model. Subsequently, the bilingual program has been divided into two parts. The first part administered in the morning reflects a semi, self-contained format allowing the zero-English speakers 3 1/2 hours with the bilingual teacher. The other 2/3 of the qualifying students participate in a pull-out program in the afternoon with classes ranging from 30 minutes to 45 minutes. These classes meet either daily or three times per week.

*Overview*

The language minority students are in kindergarten through sixth grade. Although the intention is to keep the semi, self-contained class during the morning limited to first, second, and third graders, small group work is arranged as needed for the older students, who arrive throughout the school year. The afternoon pull-out classes are scheduled with increasing frequency per week depending on the language development of the students and the teacher time available. Groups are determined from a combination of language ability and age appropriateness. This is often difficult, since each homeroom from which the students are pulled attend special classes (e.g., Art, Gym) at different times. For example, students in a single ESL class may come from three different third grades and two different fourth grades. This means that there are, in this case, five schedules of specials to accommodate. Students are not pulled out of special classes if at all possible.

With only one teacher on staff, language groups cannot be separated for the purpose of native language instruction. Each class currently has two or more languages represented. This prevents any native language (i.e., Spanish only) instruction to the class as a whole. The bilingual teacher uses the students' native language only in small same-language groups and for parent-teacher conferences. Small, native language group instruction is provided for older zero-English speakers who would not otherwise receive academic instruction. Native language classes, which are determined by the principal and bilingual teacher, have included some of the following in the past: Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies in Spanish; and vocabulary development in Polish if the enrollment of these populations is high enough.

*Entry Criteria*

Entry criteria for the semi self-contained class include 1) a score of 1 on the English version of the Language Assessment Scales-Oral (LAS-0), 2) an interview to determine functional skills (in both languages if possible; e.g. reading readiness skills, 3) the parents' permission to participate, 4) a review of the student records and/or a parent interview to determine school history, and 5) curriculum-based assessment from the Sesame Street, ESL series to ensure correct placement within

morning grouping. Entry criteria for the afternoon pull-out program include 1) English LAS scores of 2 or 3 on either the oral or reading/written portions, 2) below grade level assessment of reading skills within the mainstream curriculum, 3) curriculum-based assessment from *I Like English* series to indicate which group the student can participate in during the afternoon program, and 4) parent's permission.

#### *Self-Contained Morning*

The two major goals of the semi, self-contained program are 1) to help children acculturate in the American culture and the school environment through survival vocabulary and cultural activities, and 2) to develop Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) (Cummins, 1984). A Whole Language approach with process writing forms the foundation of the curriculum. Target vocabulary, beyond that of immediate survival skills, is often generated by the students. Discussion topics and writing activities are also determined by student interest. These, of course, increase student motivation through ownership while providing the teacher with easy vehicles for individualizing instructional levels and expectations.

To help alleviate feelings of isolation and frustration often experienced by newcomers, zero-English speakers stay together as a group in the morning semi self-contained class. They take all their special classes together, such as Art/Music, Gym, and Library/Computers. In the afternoon, they are mainstreamed back into their homerooms in regular education.

The morning class is conducted primarily in English and uses the *Sesame Street ESL* series by Oxford University Press. Students are assessed and placed into one of three groups. Students placed in the first group do not know the alphabet or numbers. Their instruction is centered around prereading readiness skills, pronunciation and conversation practice. Students in the second group have readiness skills but have not yet learned to read in any language. Their instruction focuses on the acquisition of reading skills through vocabulary learning and process writing. Students in the third group can read in their native language but not yet in English. Their instruction attempts to transfer existing skills into the target language with additional vocabulary acquisition and

listening comprehension. An emphasis is placed on study skills and note-taking practice.

After lunch, these students return to the regular classroom for *Moving into Math* by Rigby and hands-on science. The use of manipulatives and experimentation is emphasized. Peer tutoring is encouraged. By Spring 1995, a new bilingual science program was implemented for grades 1 and 2. *Project VISUALS* (Visual-based Interactive Science Utilizing Alternative Learning Systems) by Optical Data Systems is a state and federally funded grant which includes the provision of a bilingual aide who will float from one room to another assisting the language minority students.

VISUALS is in English and Spanish and uses laser videodisk technology from the Optical Data Corporation. Hardware and software will be in place in every classroom by January 1996. This is a science curriculum covering first grade through eighth grade. The design of the curriculum is similar to that found in regular mainstream books, but the media is laser discs which appeals to the "TV and video game" generation. Each grade level has its own discs which contain still pictures, film strip mode, and movies (both narrated and unnarrated). The initial visual draws on the students' interests and allows the teacher the flexibility of following up with more traditional presentations. Each lesson is accompanied by Optical Data reading and listening exercises. These topics and exercises are coordinated with the regular science materials. This 3 year, \$1.2 million grant was secured by the district's director of special programs.

The morning bilingual students also benefit from a pilot program called "student teachers." Started last year, this program permits Honor Roll students from the fourth grade rooms across the hall to skip spelling classes and help out in the bilingual classroom. These "student teachers" lead small groups in reviewing numbers, phonics, and vocabulary. Participating fourth graders must be able to maintain their spelling grade without the benefit of daily, direct instruction. Honor Roll students are recommended by their homeroom teachers. Both their parents and the school principal must approve the homeroom teacher's choices.

*Pull-out Afternoon*

The instructional goal of the afternoon program is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 1984). The afternoon pull-out program is designed to bridge the gap between BICS and CALP. In this portion of the bilingual instruction, the ESL curriculum more closely resembles the regular education curriculum, although it is still within the sheltered English approach. Activities from the homerooms are simulated in the bilingual room to provide the students with more academic language. One example is mathematical problem-solving vocabulary from actual 5th and 6th grade tests are taught and practiced with the bilingual teacher. Another example is the use of identical book report formats. All language minority students participate in such activities as Science Olympiad and Young Authors Week in addition to putting on their own Cinco de Mayo show celebrating different cultures.

The textbooks of the ESL component of the program vary according to age appropriateness but include big books such as *The Lion and The Mouse* and *The Ugly Duckling* from Curriculum Associates, Inc. for the younger children with weak reading skills to *Missing Persons* from Longman for note-taking and listening comprehension exercises for the older students. The *I Like English* series from Scott Foresman is used with each group and complemented by the *GrammarWorks* series from Prentice Hall Regents. Although initial lessons are based on ESL materials, every effort is made to gradually use one or more of the students' mainstream texts by their second semester in the afternoon program.

Computer time and homework help is also available on a regular basis during ESL classes and after school. The bilingual classroom is well equipped with a VCR, 3 Apple IIe computers, and 3 Franklin Language Master LM4000 Computers. (These are hand-held "talking" dictionaries.) An IBM-CD-ROM computer is on order. This much technology allows for frequent, fun lessons and review activities. The bilingual teacher also volunteers her time during lunches and for 20 minutes twice a week after school to assist students with homework from mainstream classes.

Reflecting the traditional pull-out service delivery model, the afternoon program is on a very tight schedule. Over 40 students rotate in and out daily or every other day. Credit for the progress that these

students are making in their English acquisition must be shared with all homeroom teachers. Homeroom teachers make themselves available to the bilingual teacher with increasing frequency. Discussions held at the copy machine or in the faculty workroom are usually student specific. Also, it is not uncommon for the bilingual teacher to invite homeroom teachers and/or the principal to lunch in her room. Also, the school principal is open to an occasional unplanned prep period. For example, if the lower grades are watching a movie together on fire prevention and safety, the teachers may use that time for additional consultation and collaboration. Each teacher shares his/her homeroom curriculum with the bilingual teacher and attempts modifications suggested in consultations with the bilingual teacher. This frequent reinforcement of language instruction outside the bilingual classroom contributes enormously to the overall success of this bilingual program.

#### *Exit Criteria*

The exit criteria for the morning, semi, self-contained group are the entrance criteria for the afternoon pull-out program. These criteria are a combination of LAS scores and reading skills (see previous discussion). No time limit is set on how long a child may stay in the morning group, but to date 80% of the children from the morning qualify for the afternoon within two years. The remaining 20% are showing gains towards being mainstreamed in the homeroom this year, the third year of their program.

The exit criteria for the afternoon include a 1) LAS-0 score of 4 or 5 and a 2) LAS-R/W of 3, 3) ESL curriculum-based assessment score which places the student in *I Like English, Book 6* as well as 4) the homeroom teacher's recommendation. Many of the homeroom classes are working below grade level, so mainstreaming seems to present less academic stress for the language minority students than one might expect. Ideally, students would be mainstreamed into grade appropriate work, but the majority of Walsh School classes are not reading at grade level.

#### *Problems*

There are several problems with this split approach to the bilingual/ESL program. First, no substantial amount of time can be



allotted for native language instruction when all classes contain more than one language group. Although parents are directed to the two schools providing content courses in Spanish, the proximity of living within walking distance to Walsh often causes parents to enroll their children in the ESL only format. This situation is compounded by the no-busing policy.

Secondly, some students are forced into a very segmented day. For example, one student who also qualifies for Learning Resource-Special Education assistance often bounces between the bilingual room, the homeroom, the specials, and the special education program all within the first three hours of the morning. This particular scheduling problem is handled one student at a time and addressed by a committee of faculty members and the principal. Also, afternoon students often find their ESL classes canceled, because the bilingual teacher is needed elsewhere to assist with a Spanish language translation.

Finally, some homeroom teachers have voiced concerns about using the LAS-0 scores as part of the entrance criteria. If a child speaks zero-English, it is obvious to all teachers that this child requires services. The dispute involves the students who have acquired enough BICS to be communicative but not enough CALP to be as independent and successful as the native English speakers. The old myths about children learning a second language faster and more easily continue to haunt this school district. The 'three years then transition' rule for bilingual programs just does not give students the language foundation necessary to achieve native speaker reading and writing skills. Monolingual, English speaking adults have trouble empathizing with the trials and tribulations of the intermediate stages of second language acquisition. The teacher training grant described below should help overcome this last concern.

This grant allows for approximately 20 homeroom teachers to receive Master's in English as a Foreign Language with the Letter of Approval for Teaching from the State of Illinois. Through a new program at Governor's State University in Chicago, these homeroom teachers will take one class a semester including summers for three years. Although there is no second language proficiency requirement for this training grant, this program should help put some of the old myths in their graves. Teachers learning ESL methods are more sensitive to the

less obvious problems of language learning. These teachers are also more likely to reinforce language learning, especially CALP, in their own classrooms. The initial collaboration being experienced at Walsh School will take on new dimensions as the homeroom teachers progress through the Master's program.

If the homeroom teachers can take on part of the ESL instruction, the bilingual teacher will be able to offer native language instruction again. At this time, native language instruction would be Spanish only. With her continued enrollment in Polish classes, the bilingual teacher hopes to expand the native language curriculum beyond Spanish.

### **Evaluation**

As is her tradition, the bilingual teacher assesses her program at the end of each semester. An annual written assessment is given to the principal at the end of every year. Looking at data from the ESL classroom and the homerooms, she then invites the classroom teachers and the principal to offer comments and suggestions. To date the semi, self-contained morning program has been quite successful for the zero-English speakers. Teachers are reporting that these students are spending more time on task in the afternoons and are making fewer health complaints (e.g., "I have a headache." "My stomach hurts, teacher."), and the bilingual teacher has noted that the children are less likely to use their native language during English instruction. The intermediate bilingual teacher at district's middle school has received such positive feedback from students exiting the Walsh School program that she is revamping her program to model the semi, self-contained classroom. The students frequently state that they prefer this model over the traditional pull-out program.

There are many successes to be celebrated in the Walsh School bilingual program. The decision of "which student is the neediest?" is faced by any understaffed program, yet it has almost been eliminated at Walsh School. The bilingual program provides services to most of the bilingual students. It is incredible that a sole teacher should take on the responsibility of teaching English to 60 or 70 language minority students at a time, yet with the assistance of the principal and the collaboration of the homeroom teachers, this is occurring.

Needs are still unfortunately defined by limited English proficiency instead of also academic achievement and level of acculturation. There is still a small group of students (< 1% of the school's bilingual population) not receiving direct language instruction; i.e., students who score native or near native on the LAS often continue to need some assistance. These students cannot be helped at this time. The teacher training grant will eventually enable the classroom teacher the skills needed to help these students continue to develop their CALP through the content-areas.

Ideally, the future will include a second teacher for the Walsh School bilingual program. This would allow an expansion of the program to include preschoolers and to offer more time to kindergartners. The enrollment of language minority, zero-English, speakers in this year's preschool and kindergarten classes is over 50% or more than 40 children! Also, without additional personnel, the exit criteria cannot be tightened. For example, students who have an LAS- R/W score of 3 should rightfully continue receiving services. Currently, there is no time slot in the program available for the older students with LAS-R/W scores of 3, 4 or 5. Considering the predictable lag time between the acquisition of BICS and the acquisition of CALP, it is highly recommended to offer services for these students as well. They would benefit from additional language instruction.

Additional personnel could also assist in other areas. Two critical areas are monitoring the recently mainstreamed students for classroom progress and beginning of the school year testing. The follow-up of students mainstreamed full-time consists of brief dialogues between the bilingual teacher and the homeroom teachers. With more personnel on staff, brief follow-ups could be expanded to a systematic monitoring of former students' progress. Also, each school year starts with the language assessment of newcomers and the reevaluation of currently enrolled students. With the percentage of students needing services, this initial testing can take well over a month. The current solution to this problem is that the semi, self-contained morning class starts on the second day of school. The bilingual teacher, then, is able to use the afternoon to administer the language assessment instruments. Another solution under consideration is that the language assessment battery might be administered over the summer, either by the bilingual teacher

or by the teachers enrolled in the teacher training grant but this would require local district funding.

Considering the budget constraints and subsequent lack of personnel, the semi, self-contained model of service delivery is considered a success and will continue receiving the support of the bilingual teacher and hopefully that of the school principal.

### **Critical Comments and Recommendations**

Every school has its unique problems, and solving these problems requires risk-taking and innovative decision-making. The budget constraints and staff cutbacks experienced in School District # 104 are becoming a way of life for educators. With these limitations as the norm rather than the exception, educators are challenged to create novel service delivery models like the semi, self-contained classroom.

Within this distinctive model, the acculturation needs and the ESL requirements are being met for the zero English students at Walsh School. Student use of English is on a dramatic increase, while complaints and observable frustrations are decreasing. But as is often the case with risk-taking innovations, new problems arise in place of the old. For example, the morning time block afforded to the semi, self-contained curricula severely limits direct instruction of ESL to the growing number of afternoon students. Their time in the bilingual classroom is limited, many not even receiving daily instruction. The collaboration between the bilingual teacher and the homeroom teachers is a key to their continued success.

Schools that do not experience this level of cooperation and collaboration are limiting the education of these students. If all or at least most of a school's faculty were trained in language teaching techniques, a top-down, structural change would occur in the curriculum. Each content-area addressed in the homeroom would continue to develop the students' academic skills, CALP, and possibly self-esteem. Students qualifying to exit out of the bilingual program would continue to receive language instruction support in the homeroom. This model of structural change would enable the homeroom teachers to offer "sheltered English" and other ESL support to even the most advanced bilingual student. One can only speculate that their time

with native English speaking students would be enhanced as would their standing in the community. Often language minority children experience an unseen level of prejudice and discrimination. This structural change in the curriculum might have additional positive effects within the school community.

Another critical issue is the scheduling nightmare of students who receive other services in addition to bilingual services. Recognizing the need to not fragment a child's school day does not actually solve the problem of having the student pulled into two or three different directions. A one-student-at-a-time solution used at Walsh School is only appropriate in small school. This level of a solution is not suggested for everyone.

School District #104 has benefitted from two major grants (see previous discussion). It is highly recommended that other school districts apply for the funding that is available. Even though there is some administrative resistance to the unique innovations at Walsh School, there have been no additional financial burdens created by the implementation of a new service delivery model.

Finally, almost 20% of the teachers enrolled in the Master's in English as a Foreign Language have dropped out of the program. Incentives from the local school district for completion of this program are necessary. Fortunately, 80% of the original cohort of teachers is nearing completion. Their willingness to learn and explore alternative attitudes and methodology is now and shall always be an asset. Such teachers should be sought out in all schools. Their efforts to modify homeroom curricula is a key to the success experienced by our bilingual students.

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