

Is Dual Language a Family Affair?

Jay Parkes and David Rogers present the findings of the latest research into Family Support for Dual Language Enrichment Programs

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Families are of the utmost importance to a child's success in school, and families of dual language students are no different. They have hopes and expectations; they support and encourage; they work with teachers and other parents to realize the goals set for their children. The Dual Language Consortium of New Mexico wanted to know more about how and why parents are committed to dual language enrichment education. So in 2005, the Consortium, a collaboration of eight Albuquerque public schools, the University of New Mexico, the New Mexico State University, and Dual Language Education of New Mexico, surveyed the families of students in dual language enrichment programs.

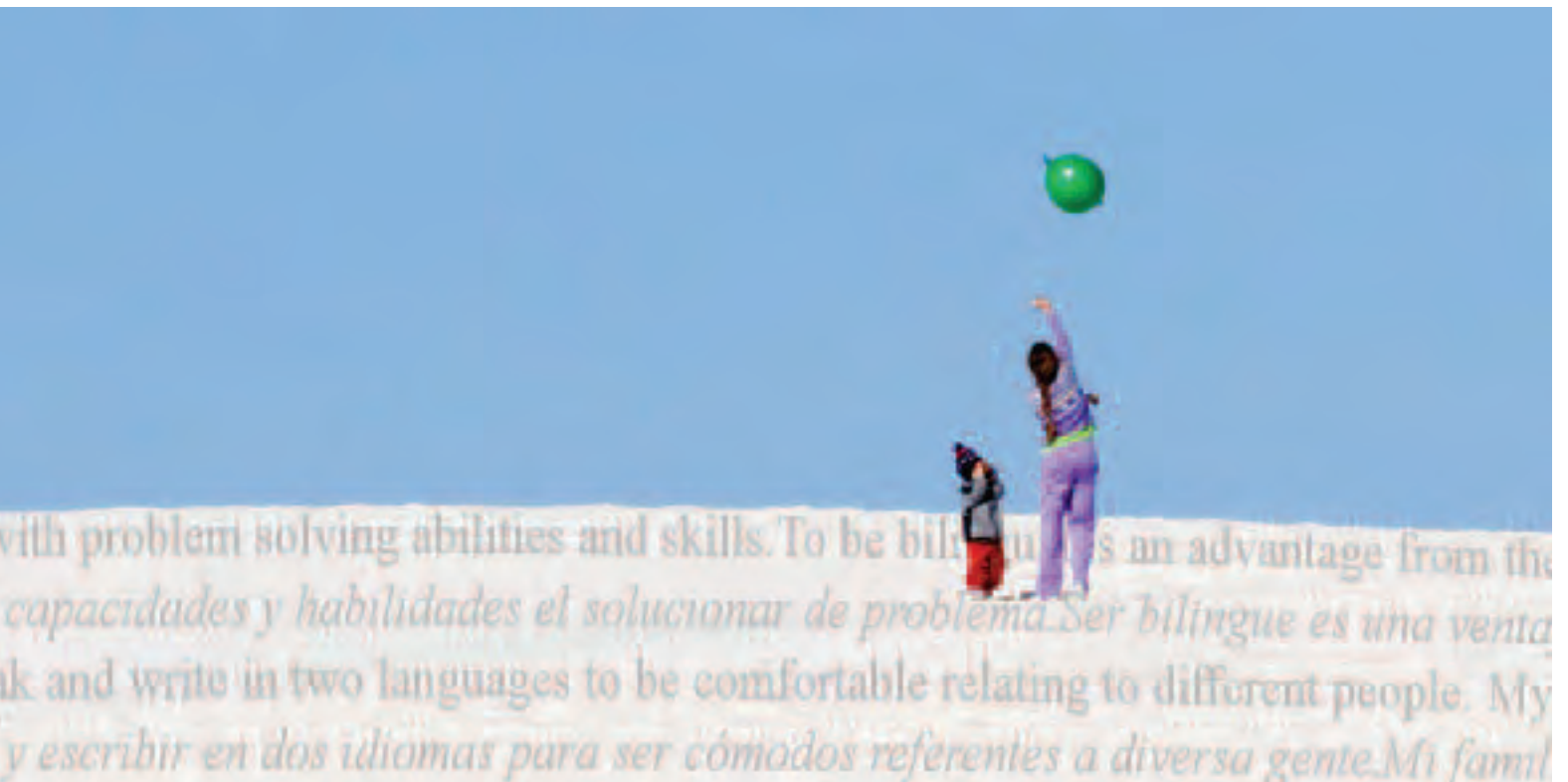
Dual language enrichment is a bilingual education model that serves both native English speakers and English language learners (ELLs) to achieve high academic achievement through two languages, to develop true bilingualism/biliteracy ability, and to gain a multicultural appreciation with strong cross-cultural competence. The specific schools (seven elementary and one middle school) that participated in this survey were all in Albuquerque, New Mexico; and all considered Spanish as the target language of their programs. These programs differ in several ways including the percentage of ELLs they serve and the socioeconomic status of their communities. The percentage of students at each school designated as English Language Learners ranged from 25 percent to 80 percent. The percentage of students who were eligible for free and reduced priced lunches ranged from 60 percent to 100 percent. All of the elementary schools were kindergarten through grade five programs except for two. One was a pre-school through grade five program and one was a kindergarten through second grade program. The oldest programs date back to 1996 while the newest began in 2005.

Parents' motivations for enrolling their child in a dual language enrichment program spanned from the impassive ("...we live in the neighborhood") to the passionate ("to be the one in our family to learn a second language and be proud of it"). The survey revealed that a family's goals for their child's participation in the program were sometimes pragmatic ("learning two languages helps with problem solving abilities/skills"), sometimes personal ("because I am the product of bilingual/dual language education myself"), and sometimes principled ("we think it's important to preserve the Spanish speaking ability of native New Mexicans"). Although some families in Albuquerque had the convenience of dual language enrichment at their neighborhood school (58.7 percent), others had chosen to bring or transfer their child to a specific school (23.6 percent) in order to participate in the dual language program, sometimes traveling as much as 40-60 minutes per day to do so.

Who are these parents enrolling their children in dual language enrichment? What are their reasons for choosing the program? How involved are they at home and at school? And, how long do they intend on keeping their child in a dual language program? The Dual Language Family Survey Project generated a lot of data about this community with several implications.

Who was surveyed?

The survey was distributed to 1,908 eligible families with children in dual language enrichment, 725 (38 percent) of whom chose to participate in this survey. Of those completing the survey, 95.2 percent were parents of a student and the rest were "other" family members or guardians of a student in a program. Approximately two-thirds (65 percent) reported speaking primarily Spanish with their child while



27.3 percent reported speaking primarily English. Concerning the education level of this community, 31.4 percent reported having less than a high school education, 20.4 percent reported having graduated from high school and 20.9 percent had at least an associate's degree. While these parents' children are in grades kindergarten through eighth grade, nearly half (49.2 percent) had children in kindergarten through second grade.

Who chooses Dual Language Enrichment?

Most families enrolling in the program are in the neighborhood of the school in which they choose to enroll. Of these families, 21.3 percent primarily speak English to their children while 78.7 percent speak Spanish with their children. Most neighborhood parents had a high school education or less (84.2 percent) with 11.5 percent having an undergraduate degree and 4.3 percent having a graduate education.

Of those families traveling to participate in a program, or "transfer families" as referred to here, 24.7 percent were English-dominant, 34.2 percent Spanish-dominant, and 40.5 percent bilingual. Concerning the education level of this portion of the community, 50 percent had a high school education or less, 32.1 percent had an undergraduate degree, and 17.9 percent had a graduate education.

Why Do They Choose Dual Language Enrichment?

For all of the participating families in the dual language enrichment program, enrollment is a choice. However, it must be noted that in two of the school communities, dual language enrichment is the only available educational program, and so neighborhood families not choosing dual language enrichment must enroll/transfer to another school in the area (within 1/2 mile) in order to enroll in their program.

Of all families surveyed, 93.6 percent said they chose dual language enrichment so that their child would be able to speak, read, and write in two languages. Other reasons chosen included: to be successful in a global society (63.1 percent), to be more successful in school (61.3 percent), and to be comfortable relating to different people (60.7 percent).

It is important to note that 50 percent of parents hoped that dual language enrichment education would help their child "better... relate to his/ her heritage." Of those highlighting this as a reason for enrollment, 60.1 percent were bilingual parents, 55.3 percent were English-dominant, and 43.4 percent were Spanish-dominant parents. "Being more successful in school" was selected by 70.5 percent of bilingual parents, while English-dominant (59.6 percent) and Spanish-dominant (56.3 percent) selected it at nearly equal rates. "Comfortable relating to different people and cultures" was selected by 57.7 percent of Spanish-dominant parents, by 64.7 percent of English-dominant parents, and 67.8 percent of bilingual parents. Finally, 71 percent of bilingual parents, 60.9 percent of Spanish-dominant parents, and 64 percent of English-dominant parents selected "to be successful in a global society." This may be an indication that families are aware of the potential of dual language enrichment in promoting multicultural appreciation and developing cross-cultural competence, something to be more fully explored in a future research report.

How Committed Are These Families to the Program?

When asked "How long do you intend to keep your child in dual language enrichment?" an impressive 72 percent of families said they would keep their child in the program through the 12th grade. English-dominant (70.1 percent) and Spanish-dominant (69.8 percent)