

**The social and academic consequences of two approaches: meeting the needs of English Language Learners through the most integrated program.**

BY: Gemma Cabrera

## **CONTEXT AND RATIONALE**

Nationwide, schools are being challenged to meet the demands of students that come from diverse backgrounds and with a plethora of needs. The enormous influx of minority students in past years has been overwhelming. Quoting Garcia: "Nonwhite and Hispanic student enrollment will grow from 10 million in 1976 to nearly 45 million in 2026" (Garcia, 2001). The same challenges occur in schools such as Georgetown Elementary where I am a first grade English Language Learner (ELL) teacher. Currently, the school houses Pre-Kindergarten through third grade and will add fourth and fifth grades consecutively in the next two years. Approximately 37% of the student population is Hispanic, 40% is Caucasian, and 23% is African American.

Due to the overwhelming influx of Hispanic students to our school and the lack of certified ELL teachers, instruction at Georgetown Elementary has been primarily provided through a pull-out program, also called an early exit program. In the ELL pull-out program, students are pulled-out from their mainstream classes for a period of 45 minutes a day for special instruction in the English language. While aimed at meeting the academic and social needs of second language learners, this program became problematic as the number of students increased and instruction time decreased. Furthermore, this program was too confusing for first graders, as it did not provide a structured environment. Instead, students became anxious, as they had to travel to other classes. Consequently, the administration, ELL teachers, and Special teachers

(Art, Music, Gym) at Georgetown Elementary came together to study the implementation of a different instructional program. The program chosen was a structured immersion program. Again, like the pull-out program the structured immersion program would only be implemented for a trial period.

The ideal program to implement would have been a bilingual program in which students are taught in the native language part of the time and in the second language the other part. Due to the scarce number of bilingual teachers this was not an option. Therefore, the perspective of the parties involved was taken into consideration and the consensus was for the ELL teachers to pursue a structured immersion program on a trial basis.

In the past years, first grade ELL students at Georgetown Elementary have been taught by an ELL certified teacher that in most cases is bilingual in self-contained classes. As an ELL teacher, I use the same curriculum as the other first grade mainstream teachers, yet adapt it to the students needs and mark the pace according to their academic level. ELL students are taught the language within content and in thematic units that are fully interdisciplinary. Since I am fluent in Spanish, I use the Spanish language to clarify any concepts that the students have difficulty with. In the disciplines of science and social studies students are integrated with the other mainstream first grade classes. The same happens for recess and lunchtime.

It was with much enthusiasm that I embraced this program as I thought it could give ELL students at Georgetown Elementary a greater opportunity to have a sense of ownership in both the academic and social disciplines. Although the structured

immersion program is still under review, I do hope that by this action-research paper I can convince the administration to continue promoting it.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

**In what ways does the structured immersion program provide the most integrated learning experience for first grade English Language Learners?**

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the research on both the ELL pull-out program and the ELL structured immersion program a clear distinction is made on the effectiveness that each program has on meeting the needs of language minority students. Since 1996, George Mason University researchers Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier have done extensive studies on programs for language minority students. In their study entitled *Study Effectiveness*

*for Language Minority Students*, they analyzed over 700,000 student records to find out “1) how long does it take ELL students to reach 50<sup>th</sup> NCE(Normal Curve Equivalent) score... and type of program attended? and 2) what is the influence of school program and instructional variables on long term academic and social achievement of ELL students?”( Cummins 2000). Their findings revealed that in the ELL pull-out program students who had been instructed in that program from first through eight grades only reached a 24% NCE score (50 being the median) when tested at 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. This was mainly due to the fact that students were given minimal instructional time and the teaching of the curriculum was not done as content embedded, but rather in isolated and un-meaningful lessons.

As a result of this program, students felt marginalized and embarrassed as they were singled out when they left their homeroom. Furthermore, there was little opportunity to build camaraderie among the students, as they were not long enough in the classroom to interact with their teacher or with the students their age that are native speakers. Some students felt reluctant to leave their classroom because they were afraid they would miss out on something while they were gone. A positive aspect of this program was that it “gave the children greater access to comprehensive language and provided more opportunities to speak in small, less threatening ESL groups” (Hruska 2000).

By contrast, students who had been instructed for most of their elementary schooling in an ELL structured immersion program taught through academic content presented a mean NCE score of 40% at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. This score is significantly

higher than in the pull-out program. Brisk states: "More credible are the results of Ramirez study (1992) who evaluated structured immersion programs ... students in structured immersion programs scored on English reading and math tests at comparable levels to students in early exit transitional bilingual education"(Brisk 1998). In other words, when ELL students experience a program that is taught by quality teachers that teach the curriculum through the content area, use appropriate instructional strategies, set high-expectations of students, and promote socio-cultural integration like it is done in the structured immersion program, the results are going to be both academically and socially better.

Another very important aspect of the structured immersion program that does not occur in the pull-out program is that the teacher can adapt the learning to the needs of the students by clarifying words or phrases in their native language. This is a very important aspect of language development as a positive attitude on the teacher's behalf builds competence in the student, which eventually leads to higher language proficiency. "Promoting a positive attitude toward the home language affects proficiency in the second language as well"(Brisk 1998).

Not only academically, but also socially, students demonstrate greater ownership and are less xenophobic about language learning when they are in an immersion program. English language learners feel more empowered when they are in a classroom with students who have their same needs, study the same units, and go to special events at the same time. Quoting Hruska: "students drew strength in their identities as Latino children by being together ... they served as resources for each

other which was a foundation from which they could have greater participation in classroom interactions and events” (Hruska 2000).

Like in the pull-out program there are also some downfalls to the immersion program. Researchers caution that it could lead to segregation. Therefore, great care has to be taken to integrate the minority students with other native English speakers in the non-academic classes. At Georgetown Elementary this is done in academic areas of social studies, science and Specials. In the social areas for lunch and recess ELL students are integrated with the other first grade mainstream classes.

## **TOOLS AND DATA COLLECTION**

I used the following two different tools to collect my data, teacher surveys and student interviews.

### **TEACHER SURVEYS**

All the English language learners at my school come in contact one way or another with the teachers I surveyed. Among the teachers I polled there were the Special teachers, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade ELL teachers, the school counselor, the Reading Specialist, and the principal. I used this diverse group of teachers because they had in some way or another been part of ELL programs at Georgetown Elementary and felt they could give an informed perspective of both programs.

The questions on the survey were specifically about the pull-out and structured immersion program for first grade ELL students. Some of the questions inquired about

the benefits and/or downfalls of each program. Also, the teachers were asked to express their opinions about how they perceived the ELL students' assertiveness, comfort level, social implications, and even achievement in each program. When the teachers had completed the surveys, I put all the information together and made a data table with all the answers my colleagues wrote on the survey (See appendix A).

### **STUDENT INTERVIEWS**

The second tool that I used for this action research paper was to conduct interviews with the students. I chose four of my former students who I had taught in a pull-out program and are now in a structured immersion program. The interviews were informal and in groups of two. Before the interview started, I told the students that I wanted their honest opinion about Their experience in both the pull-out programs (how they were taught in Kindergarten) and the structured immersion program (the program they are in now) and that they could speak openly about their teachers. Also, I let them know that I had a set of questions I would ask them, yet I wanted them to guide and shape the discussion when they wanted. It was hard for two of the students to remember about the ELL pull-out program, but when I mentioned their teacher's name they had that year it seemed to help them. Regardless of the young ages of the students and lack of recollection of the programs, I feel their opinions were honest and some common ideas emerged from the interviews. In order to protect the identity of the students I used different names.

Among the questions I asked the students were:



- What do you like about your class this year? / What don't you like about it? Why?
- What did you think about being in one class and not having to be pulled-out to other classes?
- In what program do you think you have learned more? Why?
- Do you want to be in the same class you are now next year? Why?

(For the full interview see Appendix B)

## **ANALYSIS**

In analyzing the data gathered in both the teacher surveys and the student interviews, there is a clear sense that both teachers and students at Georgetown Elementary favor the structured immersion program. Even though these groups are on opposite sides of the spectrum in ages, thinking abilities, and goals, they still came up with the same conclusion.

All along as an ELL teacher I thought that the main benefit of an immersion program was solely for academic purposes, yet the data collected for this action research project taught me that it goes beyond the academic arena. The teachers that were surveyed reflected that for ELL students a very important factor is to build their "comfort zone" and this can be done more effectively in the immersion program than in the pull-out program. Teachers can build students' self-confidence and assertiveness by teaching in a classroom with students that have the same struggles and are not embarrassed by not speaking the English language proficiently. Furthermore, teachers

can adapt the curriculum more easily so that students are taught at their pace and receive all the support needed to achieve success.

Consequently, students in the immersion program enjoy being taught by a teacher that knows their language and culture. Students show greater ownership when they stay in one classroom, get to know their peers and teacher, and are willing to take chances. ELL students become empowered by this sense of belonging and this in turn provides them with the ability to be more successful academically. Hence, it also prepares them for immersion into the mainstream program in the years to come. In conclusion, I learned that for first and second grade ELL students at Georgetown Elementary, the immersion program provides a more effective way to become proficient in the English language.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **FOR SCHOOL:**

- Continue providing the structured immersion program for first and second grade ELL students
- Integrate the immersion program to school community
- Provide leadership and support by hiring quality personnel that will set high expectations for ELL students
- Establish opportunities for full collaboration between the mainstream teachers and ELL teachers by providing planning time and in-service training

## **For Students:**

- By placing them in the structured immersion program provide ELL students with less fragmentation in their routine and greater integration with their teacher and other peers
- Provide classroom methodology that challenges students' learning
- Flexibility in meeting the individual needs of students
- Foster positive attitudes by the school community toward the ELL students' language and culture
- Integrate content, language and culture
- Language assessment should be ongoing and authentic

When the reforms were made at Georgetown Elementary to change the pull-out program to an immersion program a convincing explanation was not given of why this change was taking place, other than we were better able to serve a larger number of students. Now that I have finished this action research project I have come to a deeper understanding of the impact both the pull-out program and the immersion program have on the ELL students. An effective program addresses both the academic and social needs of the students. In the academic arena research showed a significant difference between the NCE score of both programs. The higher score of the immersion program can be attributed to a more personalized instruction on behalf of the ELL teacher to meet the needs of the minority students. The ELL teacher adapted the mainstream curriculum to the needs of the student by finding creative and diverse ways to convey the methodology.

The social aspect of an effective program empowers students to have self-confidence and create a classroom environment that is supportive of the needs the students. Unfortunately, many of the ELL students come to school already feeling displaced and have a low self-esteem, as they are not proficient in English language. In order to avoid bad outcomes the ELL teacher can provide students with greater ownership by providing opportunities for interaction with a teacher that acknowledges their culture and speaks their language, opportunity for interaction with grade level peers, and high expectations in learning the curriculum.

By no means am I promoting the structured immersion program as the ultimate program for every situation. However, given the number of minority students at Georgetown Elementary the most *effective* program to meet the needs of the first grade ELL population is the structured immersion program. It is not the utopia of programs, but it empowers ELL students as it allows for language, culture, and content to be integrated.

## REFERENCES

- Brisk, M.E. (1998). *Bilingual Education: From Compensatory to Quality Schooling*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Collier, V.P. & Thomas, W.P. (1996). Language-Minority Student Achievement and Program Effectiveness. *NABE News*, 33-36.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power, and Pedagogy*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, Ltd.
- Garcia, E. (2001) *Hispanic Education in the United States*. Lanham,MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Hruska, B. (2000). *Prioritizing needs/negotiating practices: student placement at River Valley Elementary*. A paper presented at the Puerto Rican Studies Association Conference (Amherst, MA). Retrieved 1/8/05 from <http://www.eric.ed.gov>.
- Meyers, E. & Rust, F. (2003). *Taking Action with Teacher Research*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Seaman, A. (2000). *Evaluating an Innovative Elementary ESL Program*. Paper Presented at Annual Meeting of Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Vancouver,BC). Retrieved 1/8/05 from <http://www.eric.ed.gov>.

# TEACHER'S SURVEY - IMMERSION PROGRAM

BENEFITS	DOWNFALLS	STUDENTS' ASSERTIVENESS	STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT	SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS
Participation is high	Not around other English speaking students that can help with the language	Self Confidence!	Through different skills students achieve higher standards	None, students feel right at home with other ELL students that have their same needs
Students are more involved in lessons	Students are not mainstreamed until higher grades	Students feel more comfortable when asking questions or participating in discussions. "Mistakes" are not so traumatic.	Given time to acquire the language and show greater improvement	Students take risks
Comfort zone	Isolated until they acquire enough language		Prepares students quicker for immersion into the mainstream program	
Mistakes are overlooked and peers don't tend to ridicule				
Receive more help				
Use of native language can be used more frequently to fall back on				
Consistency since students stay with same teacher all day				

# TEACHER'S SURVEY - PULLOUT PROGRAM

<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Downfalls</b>	<b>Students' Assertiveness</b>	<b>Students' Achievement</b>	<b>Social Implications</b>
Smaller class sizes	Missing regular class instruction	It vanishes!!	Students do not actively participate or engage in the lesson	When students return to their regular classroom feel inferior
Individual instruction	Not getting regular classroom materials or pacing	Students do not look or appear comfortable	Confidence may drop due to unfamiliar environment	Some students do not adjust
Slower pace	Misses other programs such as Specials, Social Studies or Science	Students are not in their familiar place		Students need security of a sheltered environment
Willing to take chances in a smaller setting	Time being pulled out is not long enough	Students appear to be intimidated		
	Become dependent on being in a "safe" smaller environment	Difficulty to fit in		
	Are not able to cope well when making transition to regular setting			
	Distracted by moving from classroom to classroom			
	Lack of structure			

## **Student Interviews:**

In order to protect the identity of the students, I used a different name for each of them.

Interview with Yoselin, Jose, and Mrs. Cabrera

Mrs. Cabrera: What do you like about your class this year?

Yoselin: I like the class I am in now (structured immersion class). I am not afraid to raise my hand ... um I know the students in my class ... many are my friends. Also, you (referring to me as her previous teacher) speak Spanish and helped me when I did not understand something.

Mrs. Cabrera: What did I do when you did not understand something?

Yoselin: You would go over it again – you would say it in Spanish.

Mrs. Cabrera: What would she say in Spanish?

Yoselin: The word or talk to me in Spanish and I would understand. I like that.

Mrs. Cabrera: Did your teacher in the pull-out program last year speak Spanish?

Yoselin: No, Mrs. Baker did not so I would copy what the other students would do and get in trouble.

Mrs. Cabrera: Did you tell her why you were copying the other students?

Yoselin: No.

Mrs. Cabrera: Jose, what do you like about your class this year?

Jose: I like my friends - Owen is my friend.

Mrs. Cabrera: Do you have friends in the other classes such as science and social studies or even at recess?

Jose: Yes, I play with others but they are not the same. They speak all the time English and I like to speak Spanish with my friends uh - my friends in this class help me with my work and sometimes doing homework in La Casita (A community after school program for Hispanic students).

Mrs. Cabrera: Do you speak Spanish or English when doing the homework?



Jose: Sometimes we speak in Spanish and sometimes in English.

Mrs. Cabrera: Yoselin, would you like to be with the same students next year?

Yoselin: Yeah, they are my friends – they have the same problems as I have – we don't talk English right. We help each other when we are together.

Mrs. Cabrera: Jose what about you, would you like to be with the same students next year?

Jose: yes. It is funner when we stay together.

Mrs. Cabrera: Jose or Yoselin anything else you want to say?

Jose: I like you Mrs. Cabrera

Mrs. Cabrera: I like you too Jose, you are a good student.

Yoselin: No.

The next interview was conducted between Juan, Adriana, and Mrs. Cabrera

Mrs. Cabrera: So Juan, tell me. Do you like being pulled out of your class?

Juan: No, everybody looks at me when I leave.

Mrs. Cabrera: Juan, they look at you because you are making noise and the teacher needs to stop the class to send you out.

Juan: Yes, I don't like that ... I go out of the room and have to wait for the other students that come form other classroom. I feel I don't do the fun things they do in the class when I am gone.

Mrs. Cabrera: When you go back to your classroom (mainstream class) does your teacher tell you what you missed?

Jose: Uh, I don't know, sometimes.

Mrs. Cabrera: Adriana, do you like to leave the class and go with another teacher?

Adriana: Yes.

Mrs. Cabrera: Why is that?

Adriana: I get to go with a teacher that I like and I have friends in the other class ... we do things together and the teacher does not yell much.

Mrs. Cabrera: You do not mind missing class with Mrs. Taylor (mainstream teacher)?

Adriana: No, eh, eh, - silence - I don't know what she says all the time.

Mrs. Cabrera: You mean you don't understand when she speaks English?

Adriana: Yes.

Mrs. Cabrera: Juan and Adriana in what program do you think you have learned more in the pull-out program – when you go with other students to a small class – or in the immersion program when you stay with me?

Adriana – (jumps in) with you

Mrs. Cabrera: why do you think that?

Adriana: you tell us in English and then if we don't know ... you help us in Spanish.

Mrs. Cabrera: Juan, what about you?

Juan: I like the stories we read and I like playing games in math.

Mrs. Cabrera: Do you want to say anything else?

Adriana and Juan: no.