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ECE 210 –

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Advocating for Emergent Bilingual Children in New York City

Although it is slowly growing, the idea of multicultural and multi-language schools in the early childhood education setting is still not nearly what it should be in 2020, particularly in a global city such as New York.

Language immersion programs in the early childhood education field are few and far apart in the grand scale of programs. In a city of millions, where a great amount of the population is made up of immigrants, immersion programs should be the standard and not the exception.

Work has been done in the recent years to grow the concept, but it hasn't been a priority. All of the data available points towards an understanding of the major importance for immigrants and children from bilingual families to continue learning in their native language and being immersed in their native culture, so why is it still not a priority?

Children who are able to experience cultural immersion are more likely to retain what they learn and reach levels of comprehension closer to natives of the secondary culture. It also means that they are more likely to continue using their language and cultural skills throughout life, instead of giving them up as soon as they leave school. This has

huge implications for job potential later on. Cultural immersion is an important part of childhood development, will continue to increase in importance as the global culture changes. Children who are immersed in a variety of cultural and linguistic programs will benefit from better social and learning skills later in life.

“Why Cultural Immersion is Important in Early Childhood Education”, AuPair4Me.com

There is a lot more to educating “the whole child” than most early childhood education centers, educators and politicians are even acknowledging. Language development is an important part of every child’s development, and the lack of more immersion and bilingual schools is not only a disservice to bilingual children but is also hindering their development.

The New York City Department of Education needs to give immersion early childhood programs the value it holds and make it a priority. Before that can happen, the message needs to be spread. Early childhood educators and center directors need to ask for these changes and encourage parents to also fight for it, and make it clear to the department of education how much bilingual children would benefit from an educational system where immersion schools are the standard of New York City and not the few and far exception.

To understand the importance of bilingual education, it is important to first understand the importance of culture to a developing child and the importance of immersion and support for children coming from bilingual families. “Cultural norms and values are transmitted by families... High-quality programs honor children’s cultural backgrounds and incorporate their traditions into the curriculum” (Barbre, J. (2013) *Foundations of responsive caregiving: infants, toddlers, and twos*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press. Pg 72). A child’s home culture has great impact

when they are building their personal identity, and most educators understand that for that child to be completely stripped away from it while in school is harmful to their development, so it is already in place in curriculums and educators are aware of the importance of incorporating some of that child's culture into the classroom, the problem is: it isn't enough. The quote by the famous Canadian singer Buffy Saint-Marie, explains it well:

Language and culture cannot be separated. Language is vital to understanding our unique cultural perspectives. Language is a tool that is used to explore and experience our cultures and the perspectives that are embedded in our cultures.

The real culture immersion happens when everyone is involved in receiving the same education in more than one language, in which case there would be children that would be getting extremely beneficial education by learning another language, and there would be bilingual children (who already come from a different cultural-language background) also receiving extremely beneficial education by being supported in both languages. My hope is that one day, all schools in New York City will be bilingual and I can already see the doors of possibilities for all children, that would be opened up by a change in education such as that. The benefits that come from immersion in early childhood are not only for bilingual children, but also can be seen at a global perspective.

“Dual language immersion programs offer students a way to become global citizens starting at a young age and to be able to view their education from a cultural, global, multilingual lens. These programs create global citizens that are able to communicate in

multiple languages and who are able to understand others from multiple perspectives, which will allow them to address gross injustices, racial inequalities, poverty, and environmental concerns at a global level.”

Angela Palmieri, *sixth grade teacher at a Spanish dual language immersion in Glendale, California.*

As a bilingual person (and future educator) myself, I will advocate for educating emergent bilingual children as much as I can. I will continue on finding ways I can use my native language when working with children and I plan on advocating for creating more immersion early childhood programs by creating awareness on the benefits that dual language and immersion programs would bring to our society.

A principal in the Bronx started what I believe to be one of the best ways of transitioning a school into a dual language program, and if more principals or early childhood center directors took this initiative, in a few years there could be a big change.

Christopher Eustace, the longtime principal of P.S. 105 in the Bronx, was able to build the city's Albanian program by thinking ahead to solve that problem. He began noticing some years ago that more and more of his students came to school speaking Albanian. So, whenever he could, Eustace hired teachers and office staff who speak the language. Eventually he had laid the groundwork for a dual language program, pulling from teachers he already had on staff. He said the education department is helping with tuition

reimbursement for other Albanian-speaking teachers who are working towards earning certifications to teach English learners.

“It’s something about knowing the importance of, while still learning English, maintaining that native language,” he said. “It helps you connect as a person.”

(New York City to add almost 50 bilingual programs, the latest in a push to help English learners. Chalkbeat New York. 05/03/2018)

Some public schools and early childhood education centers in New York City already have a dual language program in place, in which only a certain number of spots are available for students – I believe this is progress, but the department of education needs to find ways in which these dual language immersion programs within the school become the school. More and more parents see the importance and benefits of it and want their children in these programs but there just isn’t enough available. A way in which the change could be slow but effective in these schools that already have some sort of program in place would be if they started from the earliest grade and worked their way up. Meaning that for example, for the first year, instead of having 1 out of 4 classrooms for pre-k in a dual language program, they would make all classrooms immersion. And each year after that they would expand it to the following grade. Eventually the whole school or center would be bilingual.

I encourage every educator and parent in New York City who believes in the great importance of culture and language to the development of a child to get involved. Small steps make a big difference. You can find several surveys on the New York City department of Education website that would help advocate for bilingual education, and there you can also find

resources such as community organizations that help English language learners and by contacting these organizations you can find out more ways to advocate for this cause.

Cited

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Resources

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