
The US needs to embrace multilingual education – our children will benefit from it

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By the end of 2018, Google Assistant will support more than 30 languages. This shows the importance the private sector places on multilingual communication. Unfortunately, the U.S. education system lags behind in reflecting the value of a multilingual society.

Fifty years after the walkout by Latino students in Los Angeles protesting the lack of bilingual education, dual language learning remains inaccessible to many American children. This is despite the fact that one in four children in the U.S. speaks Spanish, a number that continues to grow.

At the same time, 80 percent of adults in a nationwide survey agreed that children in the United States should learn a second language fluently before they finish high school.

Not teaching American children another language is part of a larger problem in the U.S. education

system, which currently lags behind other industrial nations in reading, science, and math. Most students in Europe must study their first foreign language by age 9 and second foreign language later.

The benefits of a better-educated and more informed society are obvious. If we intend to have U.S. students perform as well as those from other industrial nations, we need to examine how we teach language to our students.

We know dual language education is effective from a pedagogical and developmental point of view and that it provides a linguistic foundation for further cognitive advancement in all academic areas.

As a professor at Northwestern University, I have studied bilingualism for two decades. My research shows that both minority- and majority-language children benefit from dual language education.

For example, in a district-wide research study in Illinois, we found that not only did minority Spanish-native students in a two-way immersion program outperformed their Spanish-speaking peers in other programs on both reading and math, but majority English-native students enrolled in the immersion program also outperformed their English-native peers in mainstream classrooms.

Yet, when it comes to dual language education, there remains a disconnect between research and practice. The issue is frequently distorted in public discourse and the term bilingual education is often used incorrectly to refer to education in a language other than English – instead of, rather than in addi-

tion to, English.

Some argue that dual language education is expensive.

However, by not supporting dual language education, we may end up paying more over time. If a child cannot understand the teacher, he or she may be unable to learn. The student may not acquire literacy, end up frustrated and drop out of school. This pattern can end up costing the U.S. economy several hundred billion dollars.

Another frequent argument against dual language education is that children from homes where English is not spoken often perform worse on academic tests.

To be sure, some students from non-English speaking families may also come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Access to healthcare, quality nutrition, and a safe environment play an important role in achievement. When the needs at the lower levels in A.H. Maslow's hierarchy of needs are not met, those at the higher levels can not be actualized.

To understand why supporting dual language education is important, consider the Iceberg Model of bilingual education proposed by University of Toronto's Jim Cummins, a model that distinguishes between surface and deeper levels of language proficiency.

The surface level is what we think of when we think of everyday language proficiency, and includes pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension. But underneath that surface is a deeper level of linguistic skill, which includes evaluation, synthesis, cognitive analysis and semantic and functional meaning.

This underlying cognitive proficiency overlaps across languages in bilinguals. Just like the small tip of an iceberg belies the enormous base underneath the water, so are the surface features of a language not always indicative of the deeper foundation and advanced critical thought of the person who is bilingual.

What happens if instead of focusing on developing deeper cognitive proficiency in any language, we focus on the surface level of one specific language? A child could learn the surface levels of that language, but fail to acquire the deeper linguistic skills altogether.

But, when done right, an education program that allows English learners to continue growing the deeper cognitive skills in their native language—while learning English—makes it possible to gain a strong conceptual and academic foundation that transfers across both languages.

To accomplish this, we must provide support for English learners to successfully acquire English by

investing resources into bilingual education in schools with diverse student populations.

The other side of the coin is teaching a second language to native English speakers so they too can benefit from the cognitive, neurological, economic, and cultural advantages that knowing another language bestows.

Research shows that investing in education raises educational attainment and earnings, and reduces the likelihood of both poverty and incarceration in adulthood.

Let's stop disadvantaging all our children, whether they speak English, Spanish or another language or dialect at home, and start getting smarter about language learning across the board.