COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT LEARNING BILINGUALLY

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Misconceptions are very common in relation to the benefits and challenges of learning in bilingual settings. Many myths persist about the negative impact of bilingual learning on literacy development in the main language of society.

International research has shown over many years that, in fact, additional language learning within strong bilingual programs can enhance students' learning of both the new language and the societal language.

Recent research in bilingual schools in New South Wales has supported the international research and disproves some common misconceptions.

THE MAIN THINGS WE NOW KNOW FROM RESEARCH ARE THAT STRONG BILINGUAL PROGRAMS:

- CAN HELP STUDENTS IN THEIR OVERALL LITERACY SKILLS
- DO NOT DETRACT FROM LEARNING IN OTHER SUBJECTS
- CAN BENEFIT ALL LEARNERS

Genesee, 2015; Fielding & Harbon, 2020

MISCONCEPTION 1

ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNING DOESN'T SUIT STUDENTS WHO ARE ALREADY BI/MULTILINGUAL

Research has shown that students who start school with a language other than the school language actually benefit from participating in a rich language program (such as a strong bilingual program) which helps to develop their literacy in multiple languages. These students will do better if their home language(s) are also developed through to full literacy. Learning a third, fourth or fifth language through a strong bilingual program which focuses on developing literacy skills in that language can also assist their overall literacy development. The underlying literacy skills become transferrable between languages giving children an understanding of how languages work as systems and giving them the tools to control and manoeuvre within and between their languages.

MISCONCEPTION 2

ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE LEARNING DISADVANTAGES STUDENTS WITH LEARNING CHALLENGES

Research has shown that strong forms of bilingual education can benefit all students regardless of any other learning challenges that they may experience. Fred Genesee, a Canadian researcher, has shown that students who experience learning challenges in other settings often find the bilingual classroom to be the first place where they feel on a level playing field with their peers. This confidence boost can counterbalance other learning challenges and position the child for more success within the bilingual program. Genesee has researched student achievement within bilingual settings for several decades and has found that students with additional learning needs can succeed as well as other students in a bilingual program (Genesee, 2015).

This resource was developed by the MLTAV with funding from the Victorian government.

MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA
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MISCONCEPTION

3 CHILDREN IN BILINGUAL PROGRAMS WILL STRUGGLE WITH THE NAPLAN TEST

(STANDARDISED TESTING OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY)

Our research found that many teachers and parents were concerned about how children within the bilingual programs would perform in the NAPLAN tests in years 3 and 5. Historical research from other countries had indicated that there may be a dip in success in English to start with and that it may take some years for children to experience the benefits of being in a bilingual program. However, our analysis of NAPLAN results across four bilingual schools in NSW demonstrated that this was not the case. Children in the bilingual programs outperformed their peers in NAPLAN at both years 3 and 5 and we saw a statistically significant higher performance from children in the bilingual program compared to those not in the bilingual program at Year 5.

MISCONCEPTION

4 BILINGUAL PROGRAMS ARE ONLY ADVANTAGEOUS FOR 'CLEVER' CHILDREN

International research has already shown for some time that all children benefit from a strong bilingual program (Genesee, 2015). Yet many people in the wider community think that language learning is difficult and only suited to students with a "gift" for learning a language. In order to challenge this assumption we looked at NAPLAN results in NSW bilingual schools. Our research showed that in one school where the "Gifted and Talented" stream of students were withdrawn from the bilingual program from Year 4 onwards, the group which remained in the bilingual program significantly outperformed the non-bilingual group. This non-bilingual group incorporated the "Gifted and Talented" students in the Year 5 NAPLAN results. We can see that the benefit from remaining in the bilingual program outweighed joining a separate "Gifted and Talented" stream. We can therefore state that students who were not selected for the "Gifted and Talented" program outperformed those that were chosen by remaining in the bilingual program through to Year 5 and beyond.

BILINGUAL PROGRAMS ENHANCE LITERACY SKILLS

WHAT HAS OUR RESEARCH IN AUSTRALIA FOUND?

We compared two distinct streams of students across three schools. Approximately half of the students opted in to a bilingual stream in which they learned other subjects through an additional language for 1 to 1.5 hours a day. The remaining students did not participate in the bilingual stream of learning at all, they learnt an additional language as a subject for approximately 30 to 60 minutes a week.

We found that the 'bilingual stream' outperformed the 'non-bilingual stream' on all literacy aspects of the NAPLAN test. At Year 3 they outperformed by an average of 8%. At Year 5 by an average of 6%. Further statistical analyses revealed that students in the bilingual stream performed at a statistically significant higher level than their peers in the non- bilingual stream in all four of the literacy test subsections of reading, writing, spelling and grammar and punctuation.

KEY FINDING:

BILINGUAL STREAM STUDENTS PERFORM AT LEAST TO THE SAME LEVEL AS THE NON-BILINGUAL STREAM AND MANY SHOW SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER RESULTS IN LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT.

THE STATISTICS FOR THE YEAR 5 RESULTS WERE:

2014 Reading = a significant difference in scores between bilingual (M = 555.82, SD = 67.44) and non-bilingual streams (M = 496.03, SD = 70.23; t (286) = 7.24, p = 0.000).

2014 Writing = a significant difference in scores between bilingual (M = 518.58, SD = 54.97) and non-bilingual streams (M = 479.48, SD = 57.54; t (286) = 5.79, p = 0.000).

2014 Spelling = a significant difference in scores between bilingual (M = 570.94, SD = 51.48) and non-bilingual streams (M = 522.88, SD = 68.55; t (286) = 6.46, p = 0.000).

2014 Grammar and Punctuation = a significant difference in scores between bilingual (M = 584.54, SD = 78.78) and non-bilingual streams (M = 516.17, SD = 85.47; t (286) = 6.91, p = 0.000).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

- Prof Lesley Harbon as co-researcher in the overarching project
- Department of Education NSW for funding the research
- Dr Nick Gamble for assistance with statistical analysis

If you would like to read the full piece of research it is published in the International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism: Ruth Fielding & Lesley Harbon (2020) *Dispelling the monolingual myth: exploring literacy outcomes in Australian bilingual programmes, International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, DOI: 10.1080/13670050.2020.1734531*

https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/dispelling-the-monolingual-myth-exploring-literacy-outcomes-in-au