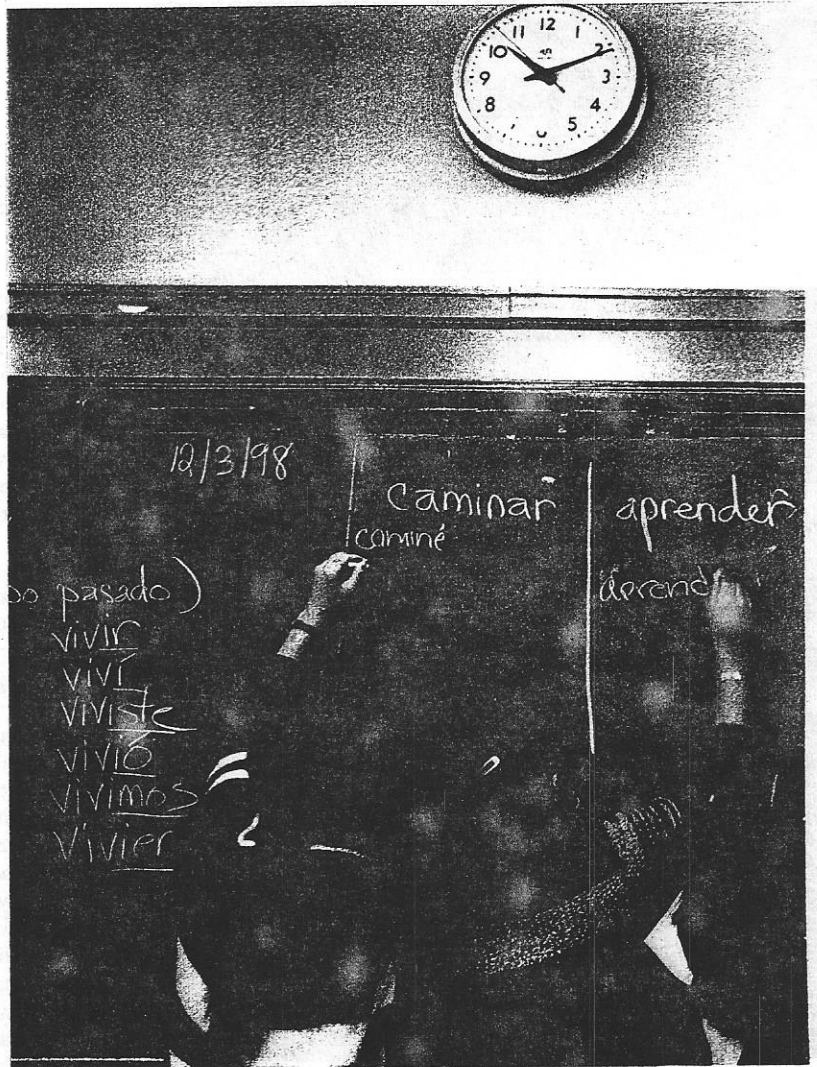


# The Bilingual Barrier

Why is it that bilingual-education programs work least for the Hispanics who put the most stock in them? A junior high in Brooklyn may hold the answers.

**Intermediate School 223**, a junior high school in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, is a square brick building with a paved yard in back where kids chase one another around after lunch. Everything about it looks worn and scuffed and old-fashioned, right down to the ancient desks and fold-down seats mounted on cast-iron frames. The Montauk school, as it is rather incongruously known, is one of the venerable institutions in New York's public-school system. It opened its doors in 1925, and in streamed the children of the newly arrived Irish, Italian and Eastern European immigrants. History has repeated itself, and the students who now swarm through the door are Mexican, Russian, Chinese, Pakistani, Yemeni, Bengali, Polish, Dominican — the children of the second wave of immigration.

The first-wave immigrants, by and large, eagerly embraced their New World identity, in a process of assimilation that seems brutal in our own multicultural age. The children who attended the Montauk school in those days learned English by sitting in class until they got it. Many of them probably never did get it — high-school graduation was a rare achievement in the early years of this century — but the schools were often more concerned with assimilating children than with educating them.



By James Traub

Left to his own devices, Montauk's principal, a silver-haired veteran educator named James Hayden, would be teaching children pretty much this same way today. The school is a stubbornly old-fashioned institution that greets visitors with a big sign that reads, "A Traditional School, and Proud of It." But Hayden is not left to his own devices. I.S. 223, like schools everywhere, is obliged to offer bilingual instruction to its non-native speakers. What makes the Montauk school unusual is that it offers bilingual classes not only in Spanish but also in Russian and Chinese.

"I've got so many new Bengali-speaking kids coming in that they could make me offer Bengali bilingual," Hayden said last summer. "I'm just hoping they won't notice." By "they," he meant school officials at the city's central board of education. Hayden has a low opinion of bilingual classes in general and doesn't think his Bengali students would benefit from bilingual instruction in particular. (To his relief, school officials apparently didn't notice, and besides, there was no guarantee he could find a Bengali instructor.)

Bilingual education is one of those human interventions on behalf of the disadvantaged that date from the 1960's. The question is whether, like some of those other interventions — say, special education — it is

Photographs by Sylwia Kapucinski



In Mr. Garcia's seventh-and-eighth-grade bilingual class, Spanish is the language of the instruction, textbooks and homework. English is reserved for key words.

doing more harm than good for its intended beneficiaries. Certainly the tide of public opinion appears to be turning against it. Last year, voters in California passed Proposition 227, forbidding mandatory bilingual instruction. Hispanic parents in both New York and California have filed lawsuits to get their children released from bilingual programs where, parents allege, they are often being held against their will.

Nothing so significant is happening at I.S. 223. But what is intriguing about the school is that it provides a kind of laboratory of comparative cultural and linguistic adjustment. Although in theory the program should be the same for all students, the Russian, Chinese and Spanish bilingual classes at I.S. 223 vary widely. That shouldn't come as a shock. Assimilation is, after all, an interaction between an institution and its values and immigrants and their values. Most of the Chinese kids, and even more of the Russian kids, seem to be progressing well toward the mainstream curriculum. Bilingual instruction seems to be hurting only the Hispanic kids — the one group it was initially designed to help.

BILINGUAL-EDUCATION ADVOCATES ARE PERFECTLY CANDID ABOUT its origins. "It was not a pedagogical response to a previously document-

ed problem," writes a scholar and a former bilingual teacher, Ursula Casanova, "but rather the result of political strategies designed to funnel Federal poverty funds to the Southwest." Chicano leaders, looking for some means to address the dire problems of immigrant children in the schools, pressed Senator Ralph Yarborough of Texas to introduce the Bilingual Education Act, which passed in 1968. Bilingual programs began to proliferate over the ensuing decade as a result of court decisions and new state laws. Various experiments led to the practice that is now known as transitional bilingual education, in which a student moves from native-language instruction to English instruction over the course of three or so years. Only afterward did a body of theory emerge to explain academically a practice whose roots were really in ethnic and identity politics.

The idea of bilingual education is that students can learn a subject in their native tongue, and then "transfer" their skills to English once they have gained English proficiency. Some bilingual theorists, like the linguist Jim Cummins, argue that children should not switch to English until they have attained academic mastery in their native tongue, which takes at least five to six years — a staggering idea given the speed with which young children attain verbal fluency. If this is true, of course, transitional bilingual education can't work — which is Cummins's own position. More orthodox advocates also draw a sharp distinction between conversational fluency and formal language skills, although most insist that children are ready for the transition after a shorter period.

It stands to reason that children could learn math or science more easily in their own language, but it's harder to see how they could learn English faster that way. After innumerable studies, the empirical support for transitional bilingual education is scanty. A major study commissioned by the United States Office of Education in 1974 found that the Bilingual Education Act "does not appear to be having a consistent significant impact in meeting its goals as set forth in the legislation." Kenji Hakuta, a strong advocate of bilingual instruction, writes: "An awkward tension blankets the lack of empirical demonstration of the success of bilingual education programs. Someone promised bacon, but it's not there." A recent review of 72 studies by two critical scholars, Christine Rossell and Keith Baker, found "no consistent research support for transitional bilingual education as a superior instructional practice for improving the English-language achievement" of children with limited English proficiency. They also found no evidence that bilingual programs boosted achievement in other subject areas.

The guidelines in New York stipulate that any student whose native language is not English and who scores under 40 on a language-assessment test has a right to special language instruction. If there are 15 or more such speakers of any one language in a grade, or two adjacent grades, they must be provided an entire bilingual program. Students in bilingual classes study all their subjects — and often English, too — in their native tongue. They also get one period a day of instruction in "English as a second language," or E.S.L. If there are fewer than 15 children who speak a language other than English, or if the language they speak is so uncommon that an instructor can't be found, the students take only one period of E.S.L. — a rule that, were bilingual instruction truly indispensable, would be condemning tens of thousands of Arabic and Czech and Urdu speakers to academic failure.

Another rule, however, is that teachers can do pretty much whatever they want once they close the door, and the differences between the various bilingual programs inside I.S. 223 are startling. The sixth-grade Russian class seems to spring directly from Alfred Kazin's or Irving Howe's memoirs of Jewish immigrant life. The students are earnest and eager. When their teacher, Nonna Yelan, asked one morning who wanted to read from the day's story about a billy goat, the kids shouted, "Ooh,

ooh, me, me!" Yelan spoke to them only in English; they responded only in English. They read textbooks only in English. Almost all of them had a sufficient stock of English words to read with a fair show of fluency.

One girl, Daria, had arrived from Russia all of three weeks before. The other kids were slumped over their desks, but Daria sat with her back perfectly straight, her arms crossed; she was wearing polished saddle shoes. She watched and did whatever the other kids did. And even Daria, in her reedy, little-girl voice, plowed her way through a paragraph.

I sat in on three of Yelan's classes, and they were all conducted in English. Most of the kids had come here in fourth or fifth grade; the only English they knew when they arrived was "hello" or "get lost." Yet they had mastered conversational English their first year and were making real progress in reading. How? By violating the tenets of bilingual education. They had not used their Russian proficiency to gain English proficiency. They hadn't "transferred" their skills. They had simply spoken English from the moment they arrived in school. The fact that they had arrived in this country without English was much less important than the fact that they came from educated, middle-class backgrounds and had been taught early study habits that made them good at school. One boy, Yuri, said that five of his six uncles were doctors. The mother of another boy, Ilya, had been a pediatrician back in Tashkent. When I spoke to her, she said, "When Ilya came to school, I help him because he didn't know English for homework, and I study English with him." She hadn't needed bilingual instruction any more than Ilya had.

It was a matter of not only preparation but also attitude. "The parents only want them to learn English," Yelan said. A recent poll by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research organization, found that 75 percent of recent immigrants oppose bilingual instruction. Very few immigrants care about multiculturalism or bilingualism; they want their children to learn English as fast as possible in order to make it into the American mainstream, where good jobs are available — and they take the common-sense position that the best way to learn English is by, well, learning English. The beneficiaries are much less attached to bilingual instruction than its advocates, the professionals and academics who already have the luxury of being firmly ensconced in the middle class.

Christine Rossell, an expert on bilingual instruction who has recently been studying the New York City school system, says that Russian as well as Chinese classes are typically conducted in English, no matter what the rules say. At I.S. 223, however, the Chinese instructor, Wang Ip, conducted the class almost entirely in Mandarin or Cantonese. Ip is an old-fashioned figure who taps on the kids' desks with a metal ruler and countenances no back talk. The kids answer in short sentences, often in unison. It is, in short, a very Chinese classroom, just as Yelan's is a very Russian one.

At the same time, Ip did not practice bilingual orthodoxy. "They want me to use Chinese books for every subject," he said. "But I use English books. This is the math book I use" — he pulled out an English-language text. "If I use Chinese books, they can never learn." Fluency was not an issue with Ip, but academic mastery was. He used English terms for math and social studies, and then, when it came time to take the mandatory subject tests in Chinese, gave the students translations. "All the students want to take the test in the English version," he said. Several of his kids, in fact, were taking advanced math in English instead of regular math in Chinese.

The Chinese students were not working their way from conversational fluency to proficiency in academic English (or transferring their mastery from Chinese to English, as Cummins would have it); they were taking a shortcut directly to academic English. Their spoken

English was far below the level of the Russian children, but they knew that the royal road to success lay through reading and textbooks, and so they studied in English. Chinese parents often came to Aaron Oberstein, a six-foot-five Orthodox Jewish version of Mr. Chips who coordinates the school's second-language program, to ask to have their children moved into mainstream classes. During parents' night, I sat with Oberstein as he met with Lilly, an eighth grader in the Chinese bilingual program, and her cousin Ying. Lilly's mother was worried that her grade-point average had fallen, from 90 to 78; she was a cashier in a Chinese restaurant and couldn't get away from her job, so she sent Ying, a college freshman, to talk to Oberstein. Ying wanted to get Lilly out of bilingual. Ying had been placed in bilingual his first year in America, when he was a high-school sophomore, and had got himself transferred out.

"You don't learn very much in bilingual," Ying said. "And if you don't speak with the American people, you don't know how they speak or write. You learn to write in a very formal way, not the way people really write." He told Oberstein that he was worried that Lilly would have trouble gaining admission to a good high school if she stayed in a bilingual class. "Lilly's mother doesn't want her to be a cashier in a restaurant," he said.

The Spanish bilingual classes presented yet another picture. During one math class I attended, the teacher, Luisa Martinez, asked the students to write down numbers as she recited them in English — this in a class for seventh and eighth graders. "Si no comprende, raise your hand," she said. Most of the children raised a hand. The contrast with the Russian children, who had probably spent less time in this country on average than the Spanish kids, was almost unfathomable. Martinez and her colleague, Jose Garcia, used slightly more English than Ip did, but classes were nevertheless conducted largely in Spanish. The class's science textbook had English and Spanish on alternating pages; all the other texts were in Spanish, and the kids did their written work in Spanish.

This was precisely how bilingual instruction was supposed to operate. Indeed, Christine Rossell says, "The only kids getting bilingual education by the theory are the Spanish kids." Bilingual instruction was created by and for Spanish speakers; and while others used it as an expedient, the Spanish bilingual teachers typically follow the rules. Martinez explained: "In social studies, we'll use key words in English. Instead of saying 'Pennsylvania' — with a Spanish accent — 'I'll write it on the board. I'll say 'New York,' not 'Nueva York.' I'll teach grammar in Spanish, and when I feel like they've really got the whole thing set, I'll say it in English."

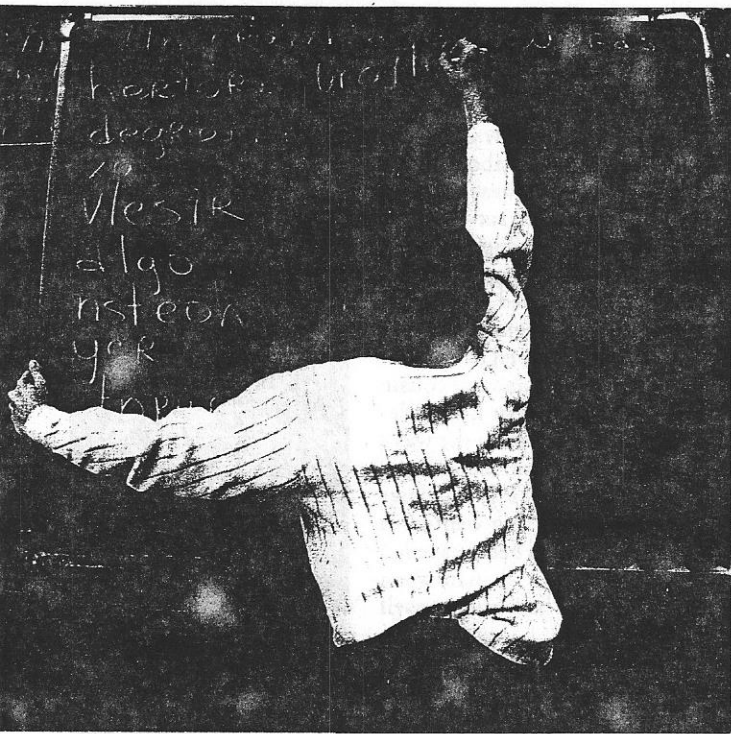
This seemed like an extremely modest foray into English. I asked Martinez if she could teach in English, as Yelan did, and she said, "There's no way they'll understand me."

"Wouldn't they catch on?"

"Absolutely not." Neither Martinez nor Garcia was a bilingual-education ideologue. Neither worried about linguistic or cultural imperialism. But both believed that many of their kids would fail in an English-only environment. "With Dominican kids," Garcia said, "you can talk about science and math in English. But the kids from the farms and villages, mostly the Mexican kids, they have a very hard time." Some of them, Garcia explained, had been selling trinkets by the highway when they should have been learning to read. It was unreasonable to expect

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Violating the tenets of bilingual education, the students in Mr. Yelan's sixth-grade Russian bilingual class speak only English. Most are already conversationally fluent.

children who had never been in school before to learn English. "The Mexican parents feel that at least their children are learning to read and write their native language," Garcia said.

Perhaps they do. And yet the Public Agenda poll found that 56 percent of recent Hispanic immigrants opposed bilingual education. (Thirty-seven percent of Hispanic voters favored Proposition 227.) Virtually all the Mexican parents whose children attend the Montauk school were poorly educated immigrants who were in no position to challenge whatever orthodoxy the school advanced. They could scarcely manipulate the system, or perhaps fathom it, as fully as the Russians could. There's no reason to believe that Mexican immigrants have different values from, say, the equally rusticated Italians who came to New York a century ago; the differences lie in the institutions, and in our own culture. It is educators who have lost faith in the old assimilationist ideal.

For many students, bilingual classes are a well-upholstered trap. Martinez said she had three children in her combined seventh-and-eighth-grade class who had been born in the United States. "There are some kids who don't want to get out of bilingual," she said, "even if they don't read Spanish." One pint-size boy, Oscar, told me in accentless English that he'd been in his bilingual class for seven years. "My mother wants me to stay in bilingual," he said. "She's worried that I'll lose my Spanish." When I asked if he'd like to go into regular classes, he said, "No, I want to stay."

There were no such children in either the Chinese or the Russian classes; anyone who had attained that level of fluency would have left bilingual for mainstream classes, and perhaps taken E.S.L. on the side to help complete the transition. Whatever wish they might have had to stay inside the comfort of their own language group was not as strong as their ambition to escape. They could not, in any case, readily live in an all-Chinese or all-Russian-speaking world. You can, of course, live in an all-Spanish-speaking world in New York. "I try to tell the kids at least to watch TV in English," Jose Garcia said. "But these kids go home and they speak Spanish; they watch TV and listen to music in Spanish; they go to the doctor, and the doctor speaks Spanish. You can

go down the street here to the Chinese fruit store, and the Chinese grocer speaks Spanish." Spanish-speaking children don't ever have to break out of their enclosed world: New York has high schools that are virtually all Spanish, and even a bilingual community college. Only when students leave school do they discover that their English isn't up to the demands of the job market.

It's possible to forget, when reading learned critiques of monolingualism, that assimilation is not one of several interesting options for new immigrants, but a matter of survival. This is especially true for impoverished Spanish-speaking children, who are in far more peril of failure than less disadvantaged immigrants from Russia or Pakistan or even Cuba. Garcia and Martinez are absolutely right in thinking that the language barrier that these children face masks a deeper and more stubborn academic problem. Like so many inner-city students, they haven't had the exposure to the range of words and phrases that would allow them to interpret even fairly rudimentary written passages.

What these children need is a serious grounding in basic reading and computing skills. The real problem is that so few schools are providing that.

And yet it's terribly hard to be a 13-year-old boy or girl dropped down in the middle of Brooklyn from the other end of the earth. Children at I.S. 223 who spoke less common languages like Vietnamese told me that their initiation into school had been lonely and frightening. Indeed, all the bilingual teachers favored at least a year of bilingual instruction in order to provide the children with a familiar environment. It's not a harmful proposition — unless the children aren't learning English in their safe harbor. And many aren't. The argument for compassion is creating a self-reinforcing situation in which kids don't learn English well enough to leave their bilingual classes, and so stay in a setting where they continue to fail to learn English. Ninety percent of the

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There ought to be a way to soothe their loneliness without retarding their progress. One possibility is "structured immersion," which consists more or less of what Yelan does with her Russian class. Second-language students are grouped together with a teacher who speaks their language, but they are taught in English. Christine Rossell describes it as "a warm, protective environment, with a teacher moving at a slower pace." This is, in fact, the method used with Spanish-speaking elementary-school students at a nearby parochial school, St. Mary Mother of Jesus.

Aaron Oberstein offers his own version of sanctuary for the Chinese kids, who tend to get picked on more than the other children. They are free to sit in his empty classroom and play chess or checkers, or homemade card games, or a version of Scrabble involving English and Chinese words, or they can just horse around. One day I dropped by and talked to the girls sitting in the back. Eunice, a short, dark girl with her hair parted down the middle, was telling me how her mom, who doesn't speak any English, was always after her to speak English at home. Eunice said that her parents would like her to be in a regular class. I asked if she thought she would learn English faster that way, and she and her two friends looked at me, and all said at the same time: "Of course." ■