

Immersion Curriculum:
The Best of Both Worlds
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Abstract

This paper explores the ideas and concepts that support immersion curriculum and the benefits of being bi- and/or multi-lingual. Bilingualism is something that is very important in today's global market and the benefits of being bilingual or multilingual are never-ending. Some of these benefits include: intellectual growth, better listening skills, better all-around communication skills, and flexibility. (Griggs, 2010) These benefits not only help students while in school, they benefit them throughout their entire lives. In today's schools, there are multiple models that exemplify immersion and bilingual curriculum. With these different models, students gain countless skills that will benefit them for the rest of their lives. Research backs these benefits and helps give a better picture as to what we should be doing when it comes to teaching foreign languages.

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Bilingual, according to dictionary.com, is “the ability to speak two languages with the facility of a native speaker.” This is the central idea and concept behind immersion curriculum. This up-and-coming teaching style is an advance in education that fosters global awareness in students by deeply immersing the students in a new language and culture. By having students enter this kind of program, they are able to experience multilingualism and multiculturalism on a personal level. (Howard, 2002) These programs make students more aware of the world around them and helps make them better all-around students. There are numerous benefits and factors that contribute to the successes of the students that are enrolled in such programs. By having students enter immersion programs at an early age, they are often more able to acquire a foreign language easier and faster, than if not immersed. Research shows that learning a second language at an early age has a positive effect on intellectual growth. It leaves students with more flexibility in thinking, sensitivity to language, and improves listening skills. (Redbord & Sachetti, 2003) The immersion curriculum model of schooling is becoming the future of education and multilingual literacy in today’s world. By having students enter such programs they become literate, multilingual people, all while attending a regular school.

Immersion curriculum programs integrate native English-speaking students with native speakers of another language, while providing academic instruction to all students through both languages. Immersion programs normally share three common goals. The goals are that students will perform on grade-level academically, develop high levels of

language and literacy ability in their first and second languages, and develop positive cross-cultural attitudes. (Howard, 2002) These three goals are the basis of this academic model. Students that enter such programs reap the above listed benefits, as well as many others. Research indicates that language-minority students, or non-English speakers, perform better academically when provided with education in their native language.

These students must maintain a strong grasp of their first language in order to provide a solid basis for the acquisition of English literacy. (Howard, 2002) This goes to show the importance of this type of curriculum when dealing with students that do not speak English fluently. Not only does this model benefit non-English speakers, but English speakers as well. Research on immersion education for language-majority students, or native English speakers, shows that instruction in a second language enables students to maintain grade-level academic achievement and English literacy skills as well as acquire proficiency in that second language. (Howard, 2002) This again, shows the benefits of this style and or model of teaching.

There are many key advantages that immersion programs have that come when working with an integrated education setting. In most second-language programs, the teacher is the only model of that language; whereas, in immersion programs, half of the students serve as native language models regardless of the language of instruction. This aids both the teacher and students because they all can work together to help when needed. This helps the students, when the teacher isn't always able to help. These additive bilingual models allow students to develop strong skills in both the native and the second language without sacrificing mastery of the core academic content. (Howard,

2002) The benefits of this model seem to be never-ending. The students are able to learn and help each other, all while learning in an academic environment.

The most obvious advantage to immersion programs is bilingualism and bi-literacy. Numerous research studies have shown that fluent bilingualism contributes to the cognitive growth of children. Many researchers believe that knowing two languages and perspectives gives bilingual children a more diversified and flexible basis for cognition than their monolingual peers. (Latham, 1998) With this research in hand, immersion programs use it as a basis for their academic practices. Students within the immersion programs are expected to maintain and develop their first language abilities while acquiring skills in the second language. (Howard, 2002) By doing so, many researchers praise the idea of being bilingual. For example, Cataldi (1994) believes that learning two languages well “gives rise to mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, and a more diversified set of mental abilities”. (Latham, 1998) This shows, in the eyes of researchers, that students not only reap benefits academically, but in everyday life. Diaz (1985) argues that strong knowledge of two languages enhances a child’s “metalinguistic awareness.” This awareness serves as a critical component in the child’s development of intelligence. Diaz also feels that bilingual-bicultural children experience the world from two perspectives, allowing them to mature more quickly than their monolingual peers. (Latham, 1998) This further exemplifies the idea of the importance of immersion/bilingual education.

The last benefit from immersion programs is a positive cross-cultural understanding. Many schools that foster the immersion program have adapted their programs to effectively capitalize on the diversity of its student body by enriching the

curriculum and creating a cross-cultural understanding among its students. (Howard, 2002) This not only helps the students see what other cultures are like, but it gives them a first-hand look at what other people live and go through on a daily basis. It is something fabulous that all teachers should incorporate in their classrooms. By being in immersion programs and knowing more than one language, students gain a better understanding of how diverse our world really is, and that not everyone is like them. Throughout their education, they come to appreciate other languages and cultures, which is something that not only opens their minds, but gives them a deep appreciation for their own culture and environment. This in turn, makes them more flexible in their daily lives when it comes to problem solving and other related skills. (Redbord & Sachetti, 2003)

In conclusion, the immersion curriculum program is something that not only is beneficial to students, but beneficial to today's society. The students that leave such programs, are more open-minded and well-rounded people in today's every –changing society. They not only appreciate their culture and language, but others as well. Research shows the importance of bilingualism, and how it impacts children's intelligence and learning. By having these immersion programs, students learn the necessary skills it takes to master two languages at once. They not only gain profit from these programs, but they are able to open their minds and see things in a different light. There really needs to be a push for more of these programs as they reap too many benefits to count!

References

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