

Educational success through bilingual education

Children in a bilingual program in Hamburg (Source: AlsterKind)

It is a key finding of contemporary educational research that the children of migrants experience educational disadvantage vis-à-vis their native-born peers. The educational disadvantage of bilingual children has been documented in education systems as diverse as those of [Britain](#), [Germany](#), [Japan](#) and the [USA](#). The discrepancy between the home language and the language of the school has been found to play a central role in educational disadvantage: while educational institutions continue to maintain a monolingual habitus, migrant children bring to school the experience of multilingualism.

Throughout the world, schools have been extremely slow to adapt to the realities of linguistic diversity; and the obsession of educational systems with linguistic homogeneity constitutes one of the great paradoxes of our time. While the benefits of bilingual education have been documented in a substantial body of research spanning a number of decades, the implementation of bilingual programs has been relatively slow, small-scale, discontinuous and often politically controversial. That is why academic monitoring of bilingual programs and dissemination of knowledge about bilingual programs continues to be important.

Much of the research about bilingual education for migrant students has been dominated by Spanish programs in the USA, and research in other contexts continues to be relatively scarce. A 2011 article by Joana Duarte about a six-year-monitoring project of bilingual elementary schools in the Northern German port city of Hamburg offers a fascinating exception.

Since the early 2000s, Hamburg has been offering bilingual programs in Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. These programs have been designed as dual-immersion programs and the aim is to enroll children whose stronger language is German or the target language in roughly equal numbers. Over a six-year period, the bilingual programs were monitored by researchers from the University of Hamburg, and Duarte's article focusses particularly on the Portuguese program.

Like many dual-language immersion programs, the bilingual programs under examination have three key aims:

- Development of high-level bilingual proficiencies in German and Portuguese, including the ability to read and write in both languages (biliteracy)
- Achievement in content areas such as mathematics, sciences and social studies at or above grade level
- Development of intercultural competences

In order to achieve these goals about half of the curriculum is taught bilingually: German and Portuguese language classes are taught contrastively and with a strong focus on linguistic form. Social Studies are taught through a team-teaching approach by a German- and a Portuguese-speaking teacher, and Music and parts of Mathematics are taught by a bilingual teacher who uses both languages.

Didactically, there is a strong focus on explicit and contrastive language instruction, and explicit grammar and form-focused instruction is an important feature of all instruction, including subject instruction.

So, how does this kind of program work for the students? The researchers conducted a three-way comparison of students in the program with Portuguese bilingual migrant students and native German monolingual students at a 'regular' German elementary school, and also with native Portuguese monolingual students studying in Portugal.

To begin with, the students in the bilingual program significantly outperformed their Portuguese-speaking peers in a 'regular' German elementary school on assessments of academic language proficiency and subject content. Their gains were such that, over the six years of elementary school, the initial condition of linguistic heterogeneity disappeared and their performance was equal to that of monolingual German children after controlling for socio-economic background and individual student cognitive ability.

This means that bilingual education in a dual-immersion program can completely erase the educational disadvantage of migrant students.

Comparison with Portuguese students in Portugal showed an additional bonus: Portuguese-speaking migrant children in the program in Hamburg reached proficiency levels in Portuguese that are comparable to those of monolingual Portuguese children in Portugal.

Migrant children are disadvantaged in monolingual schools because they face the double task of learning a new language and new subject content simultaneously and they do so in the presence of native-born monolingual students, for whom the educational system is designed, and who thus 'only' face the task of content learning. Where schools level the playing field through the provision of bilingual education, as the Hamburg programs described here do, they not only overcome language-based educational disadvantage but also enable migrants to accumulate cultural capital by institutionalizing and certifying bilingual proficiency.



Duarte, J. (2011). Migrants' educational success through innovation: The case of the Hamburg bilingual schools. *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l'Education*, 57(5/6), 631-649. [doi: 10.2307/41480148](https://doi.org/10.2307/41480148) ([available for download from academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu))