

BILINGUALISM AND THE LINGUISTICALLY GIFTED

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Children who grow up speaking two languages display superior cognitive abilities and are more sophisticated than other children in their understanding of language (Hakuta, 1985). Educators who have worked in bilingual schools in Mexico know from experience that this is true. It is part of the philosophy and goals of most of these schools to maintain instruction in the first language as well as the second; and by doing so they achieve their objectives of graduating students who are quite adept in the two languages of the school.

Monolinguals are at a definite disadvantage now more than ever and it is disconcerting to sometimes come across articles by monolinguals which criticize or discuss the negative aspects of being bilingual or multilingual; the decline of language; the need for pursuing instruction only in the host country language and so on.

Monolinguals can not appreciate how wonderful it is to be bilingual, to be able to compare and contrast the first language with the second. For the gifted child who develops verbal abilities early and also learns to read quickly, this is especially true. For them language is not only for communication but also for experimentation. Creativity flourishes as they learn to switch back and forth between both languages. The child who is gifted in general intellectual abilities as well as specific academic abilities (see chart) related to language, benefits not only from the comparative aspects of language, but also from the contact with two cultures. Arsenian (1937) first suggested that, "the two different language systems for the same referent may carry different connotations and put the bilingual person in contact with two worlds of experience." Psycholinguistic research in bilingualism and bilingual education points to the dual language ability itself as the main causal agent in earlier mental motivation. (Gardner and Lambert, 1972, Ginford, 1956). Recent evidence has shown that bilingualism and

biculturalism are not detrimental to cognitive development, cognitive skills are transferable across cultures and languages and that bilingualism may encourage the development of divergent thinking and creativity. (Lambert, W.E. and Paul E., 1962)

It is tragic then, that in some countries, children who do not speak the dominant language are forced into dominant language classes which can be not only counter productive, but also emotionally and intellectually damaging. There are some educational systems in the United States which do try to maintain a bilingual education program for at least one to two years before total immersion into an all-English program and there are other systems which are maintaining a bilingual program through 5th or 6th grade, but few systems are following the recommendations of Cummins who recommends a gradual increase in instruction of the second language over a period of five to seven years in order to manipulate the second language with precision. (Cummins 1981).

There are many examples of successful bilingual educational programs. The program in Nigeria which combines English with the native language is one, (UNESCO 1953) and another is the Mexican program whereby bilingual natives (Spanish and local language) are trained to be teachers among their people and teach using material prepared in both languages. (Aguirre - Bethon, 1954)

In Mexico there exist numerous private schools which have various degrees of bilingual education programs. The level of bilingualism attained by the students depends on factors such as the language level, quality and training of the teacher and time spent in instruction in each language. However in research currently being conducted by graduate degree students from the University of the Americas, an unusually high percent of academically gifted children are being identified in several bilingual schools. (Saenz, et. al, 1986)

It has taken a long time for research to show the positive aspects of bilingualism. The language issue in the United States for those in homes where a language other than English is spoken has been debated for a long time.

Now Dr. Hakuta has found through research among Hispanic children that the more a child used both languages, the greater his intellectual advantage in skill underlying reading ability and in nonverbal logic.

"The enhanced cognitive abilities of these children shows that the mind benefits from diversity of experience. I think that what matters most from our research is the finding that there are no negative cognitive effects of bilingualism." (Coleman 1985).

Also discovered was that what was learned in one language seemed to help in intellectual development in the other language.

Other research reported by Hakuta found that bilingual children scored higher on tests of mental flexibility (the ability to consider alternative solutions to problems) than

children who spoke only English. Hakuta suggested that children who do not speak the dominant language in a school system be instructed in their native language from three to five years with the dominant language being introduced gradually.

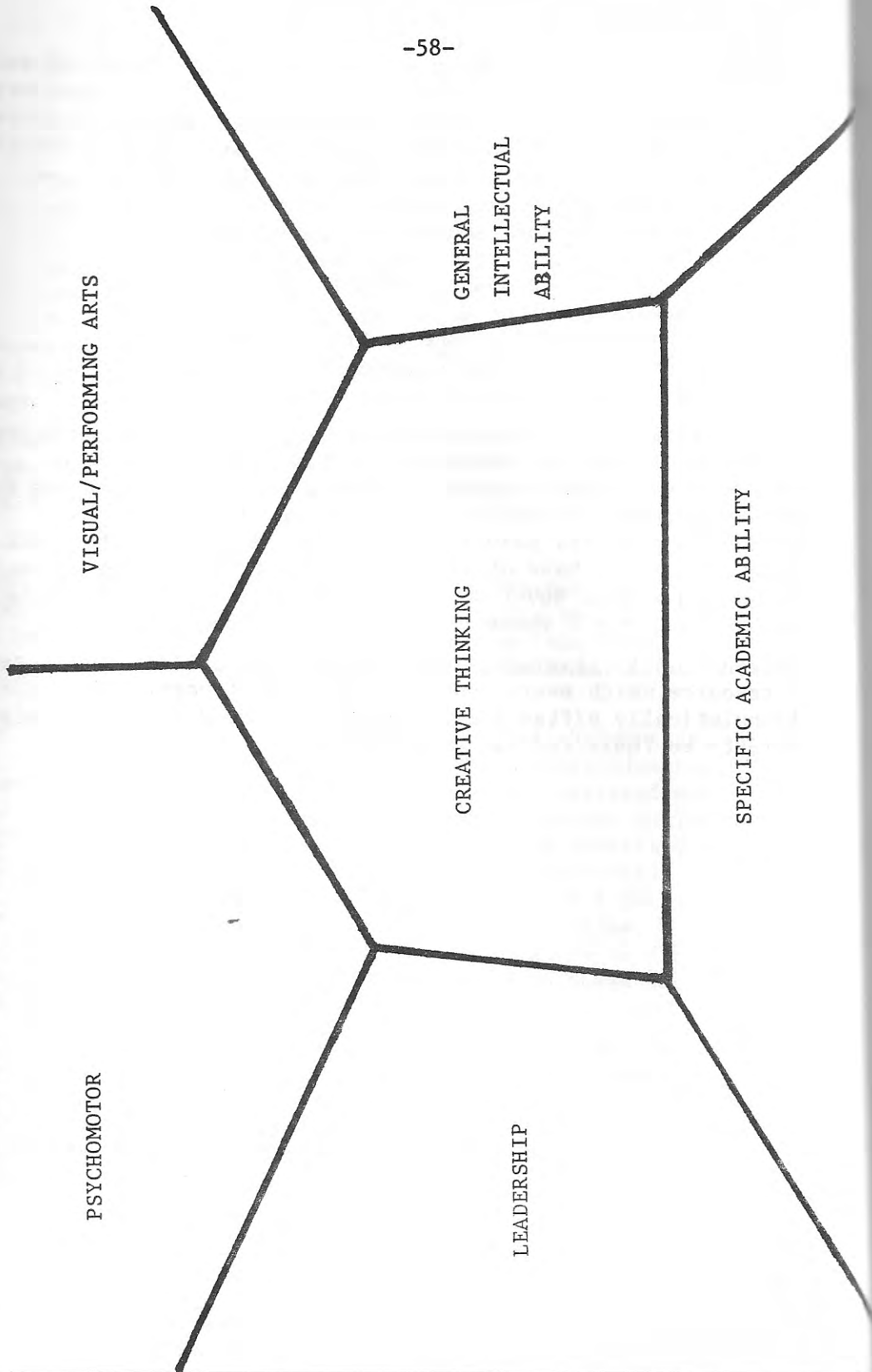
Dr. Donald Taylor, a researcher from McGill University agrees that bilingual programs provide intellectual advantages but also emphasizes that the way the program is designed and how the staff is trained can determine whether or not children are subjected to emotional harm. If a bilingual program does not respect the child's native language, the child could suffer a degrading experience. If the child is in a pull-out schedule where he is sent to a remedial language class, he can often interpret this as meaning that his native or first language is not good enough or that it is bad to speak his first language.

Some countries are suffering a deficit in the ability of its citizens to speak a foreign language. One such country is the United States. President Reagan's National Commission on Education (1983) found that U.S. high schools are graduating fewer bilingual students than ever before and they recommended immediate attention to this problem,

"achieving proficiency in a foreign language ordinarily requires from four to six years of study, and should, therefore, be started in the elementary grades. We believe it is desirable that students achieve such proficiency because study of a foreign language introduces students to non-English speaking cultures, heightens awareness and comprehension of one's native tongue, and serves the nation's needs in commerce, diplomacy, defence and education".

More research needs to be conducted in various countries, but educators who are working in both public and private bilingual education programs in Mexico as well as programs for the development of special abilities and talents welcome studies such as Dr. Hakuta's because he is bringing to light facts which they have observed in their work over the years. Bilingualism does develop more intellectually adept students who can help their respective countries to develop better international relations, and economic competitiveness; it is a resource which every country should not ignore; the linguistically gifted child should be allowed to realize his talents to their fullest potential.

CHARACTERISTICS OF VARIOUS AREAS OF GIFTEDNESS



PSYCHOMOTOR

VISUAL/PERFORMING ARTS

GENERAL
INTELLECTUAL
ABILITY

CREATIVE THINKING

SPECIFIC ACADEMIC ABILITY

LEADERSHIP

CHARACTERISTICS OF VARIOUS AREAS OF GIFTEDNESS

PSYCHOMOTOR:

- challenged by difficult athletic activities
- exhibits precision in movement
- enjoys participation in various athletic opportunities
- excels in motor skills
- well coordinated
- good manipulative skills
- high energy level

VISUAL/PERFORMING ARTS:

- outstanding in sense of spatial relationships
- unusual ability for expressing self feelings, moods, etc., through dance, drama, music, etc.
- good motor coordination
- exhibits creative expression
- desire for producing "own product" (not content with mere copying)
- observant
- often composes original choreography, music, etc.

LEADERSHIP:

- assumes responsibility
- high expectations for self and others
- fluent, concise self expression
- foresees consequences and implications of decisions
- good judgement in decision making
- likes structure
- well liked by peers
- organized

CREATIVE THINKING:

- independent thinker
- exhibits original thinking in oral and written expression
- comes up with several solutions to a given problem
- possesses a sense of humor
- creates and invents
- challenged by creative tasks
- improvizes often
- does not mind being different from the crowd

GENERAL INTELLECTUAL ABILITY:

- formulates abstractions
- processes information complex ways
- observant
- excited about new ideas
- enjoys hypothesizing
- learns rapidly
- uses a large vocabulary
- inquisitive
- self-starter

SPECIFIC ACADEMIC ABILITY:

- good memorization ability
- advanced comprehension
- acquires basic skill knowledge quickly
- widely read in special interest area
- high academic success in special interest area
- pursues special interests with enthusiasm and vigor.

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