

**Bilingual Public
Schooling
in the
United States**

*A History of America's
“Polyglot
Boardinghouse”*

PAUL J. RAMSEY



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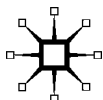
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Paul J. Ramsey

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BILINGUAL PUBLIC SCHOOLING IN THE UNITED STATES

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For Ronald Takaki (1939–2009), a remarkable scholar and an
immense inspiration.

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Acknowledgments

No historical work is a solitary endeavor, although, while sitting alone in a library, in an archive, or in front of a computer screen, it sometimes may feel as though it is. Despite the occasional feelings of solitude, historians recognize the contributions that others make to their work, and, therefore, I would like to thank those who, in a variety of ways, helped me with this somewhat ambitious project. Although I believe that this book is unique and fills a crucial void in the historical literature, it, because of its breadth, could not have been accomplished without standing on the shoulders of giants. Path-breaking researchers, some of whom I have never met or have long since passed, assisted me—without their knowledge—through their scholarship. Among those who aided this project most are Theodore Andersson, Carlos Kevin Blanton, John Bodnar, John Higham, Carl F. Kaestle, Walter D. Kamphoefner, Michael B. Katz, David M. Kennedy, John M. Nieto-Phillips, William J. Reese, George I. Sanchez, Steven L. Schlossman, Ronald Takaki, David B. Tyack, Robert H. Wiebe, and—although this study is critical of his work—Heinz Kloss.

This book emanates from my dissertation at Indiana University, and, in some respects, the topic came to me by happenstance. As a doctoral student, I had been doing a fair bit of research on the Indianapolis schools, particularly focusing on the influence of the powerful German element over the educational affairs of the city. Simultaneously, Kate Rousmaniere was recruiting authors for the education section of *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*. Kate contacted my academic advisor, Andrea Walton, and asked if she had any doctoral students willing to write an essay for the encyclopedia. Because of my interest in the nineteenth-century German-English program in Indianapolis, I agreed to write a short piece on bilingual education, a task that forced me to read more broadly in the dual-language literature. I was surprised to find that there were very few comprehensive studies of the history of bilingual education and that this handful of histories had, in my view, serious shortcomings. This enormous gap in the historiography essentially defined the

parameters of my dissertation. I cannot thank Kate enough for unwittingly helping me find my topic, nor can I fully express my thanks to my dissertation committee members—Andrea, B. Edward McClellan, Donald Warren, and Barry L. Bull—for allowing me a great deal of latitude for this slightly overzealous project.

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early stages of my project. As the historians began to graduate, the weekly get-togethers morphed into a philosophy group, which met on Monday nights at a local pub. Although I called it the “Goodbye Blue Monday” Reading and Drinking Society, the name never stuck because, other than me, no members were (obsessive) Kurt Vonnegut fans and, more importantly, Thursday evenings became the preferred meeting time. Nevertheless, Chris Hanks and Dini Metro-Roland, both gifted philosophers of education, read parts of this dissertation at our meetings and gave me valuable feedback. I am grateful for the assistance and support my fellow doctoral students gave me while I was working on this project.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my wife and children for putting up with my nearly obsessive behavior during the duration of this project. They patiently and lovingly supported me while I was researching and writing the dissertation and book. Unfortunately, now I do not have a readymade excuse for my neuroses.

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Introduction

Drafting the Blueprints for This Old Boardinghouse

In the midst of World War I, Indiana University's James Woodburn addressed the Indiana State Teachers Association. "Let us strive," the professor of history told the Hoosier teachers, "to save America from being a polyglot nation—a conglomeration of tongues and nationalities, like a 'polyglot boardinghouse,' as Mr. [Theodore] Roosevelt has put it."¹ Woodburn's fear of a multilingual society paralleled the attitudes of many political leaders, scholars, and educators during and after the Great War, attitudes that greatly altered the nature of bilingual instruction throughout the United States. While Woodburn and others' desire for a "*united nation*—with...*one* language" was largely an outgrowth of the anxiety that the international conflict had created, the fear of an America that served as a "polyglot boardinghouse" had deeper roots, and that fear—although ebbing and flowing—has lingered into the present, particularly with regard to bilingual education in America's public schools.²

Of course, Roosevelt's use of the phrase "polyglot boardinghouse" was intended to inspire fear, but the notion of a multilingual America need not necessarily hold a negative connotation; the response to this notion is often a matter of perspective. Senator Lister Rosewater, a character in a Kurt Vonnegut novel, underscored these diverse perspectives regarding a multiethnic society. Discussing the decline of ancient Rome, the conservative senator stated that the leftists "said what liberals always say after they have led a great nation to such a lawless, self-indulgent, polyglot condition: 'Things have never been better! Look at all the freedom! Look at all the equality!'" The liberals, Rosewater continued, "loved the barbarians so much they wanted to open all the gates, have all the soldiers lay their weapons down,

and let the barbarians come in!”³ While the senator feared a multi-lingual, pluralistic society, others, as Rosewater suggested, welcomed such changes, and that difference of opinion—although Senator Rosewater’s view has traditionally dominated the conversation—has long been a part of America’s past.

The United States has struggled with linguistic diversity throughout its history. Even before the nation’s founding, prominent Anglos sensed and often fueled English-speakers’ uneasiness with the growing linguistic pluralism in the colonies. Writing about his beloved Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin noted in 1753 that “unless the stream of” immigration could be quelled, the Germans “will soon so out number us, that . . . we will not, in My Opinion, be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious.”⁴ By the nineteenth century, when immigration from non-English-speaking nations dramatically increased, the fear of a polyglot America became, at various times, a particularly salient concern for many in the nation. It was, after all, during this century that the German-language myth—the myth that suggested the United States, in its founding years, was one vote shy of becoming a German-speaking nation—took root. Although simply a legend—the actual incident concerned the publication of official documents in German for the immigrants, not a switch in the national language—many German Americans were, nonetheless, fond of this bit of nineteenth-century lore.⁵

The coming of the common schools in the second quarter of the nineteenth century added new layers to the uneasiness over language diversity. Those early public schools, intensely local in their governance, often became institutions for maintaining the linguistic and cultural heritages of ethnic communities, particularly in those towns and sections of the ever-growing cities where immigrants controlled their own affairs. Bilingual education, therefore, became a staple of the common school experience in many ethnic enclaves, but it also sparked controversy and, at times, hostility. John B. Peaslee, for one, admitted that he was “prejudiced against teaching children any foreign language” when he first became a teacher in the German-English public schools of nineteenth-century Cincinnati; his “prejudice” quickly faded as he witnessed the remarkable success the city’s schools had with educating immigrant children.⁶ Unlike Peaslee, many onlookers were not convinced of the value of bilingual instruction in America’s schools, and the opposition to the polyglot boardinghouse only intensified as wave after wave of immigrants washed onto American shores during the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century.

These opponents, many of whom were nativists of various degrees, found in England the language and culture that should be the primary foundation of the United States. From their perspective, the diversity brought forth by the immigrants—particularly the politically powerful groups, such as the Germans—was essentially a declaration of “war against Anglo-Saxonism” in America.⁷

The fear of a polyglot America—a multilingual America that is partially sustained through dual-language instruction—is still far from being laid to rest. Even after the tumultuous post-WWII era brought forth calls for racial and ethnic equality (and the period witnessed several scattered accomplishments), many Americans today still feel uncomfortable with linguistic diversity, especially in the public schools. The current debate over immigration policies—a debate that includes not only naturalization, security, and economic issues, but also the place of English in American society—attests to this continued uneasiness.⁸ Of course, bilingual education is a controversial educational issue not only because of a fear of the “polyglot boarding-house,” but also because of ongoing specialist debates over the nature of language acquisition, as well as a whole range of pedagogical and policy concerns. For example, Margaret Garcia Dugan, Arizona’s deputy superintendent of public instruction, enforced the state’s Proposition 203, the 2000 educational policy that limited bilingual education in the public schools. Dugan was an enthusiastic supporter of the policy because she intuitively believed that “most of the studies [on bilingual education] are invalid” and, therefore, advocated a monolingual approach throughout the state.⁹

As important as the language-acquisition debates are, it is the frightening image of a multilingual America that alarms many opponents of dual-language instruction and fuels campaigns for an English-only society. William Bennett, former secretary of education, is dismissive of bilingual instruction, noting that “[t]o be a citizen is to share in something common—in common principles, common memories, and a common language in which to discuss our common affairs. Our common language is, of course, English.” Diane Ravitch, a former official in the U.S. Department of Education, also questions the idea of bilingual education because, in her view, its “aim is to use the public schools to promote the maintenance of distinct ethnic communities.”¹⁰ Of course, Ravitch is partially correct about the goal of bilingual instruction, and that potential “aim”—the perpetuation of “distinct ethnic communities”—is what inspires the anxiety over American pluralism.

Amid all of this tension surrounding bilingual education and its apparent goal of creating a polyglot boardinghouse, a historical study of the issues related to the controversy, surprisingly, has not yet emerged. A systematic history of public bilingual education's early years is also needed because many still do not realize that bilingual instruction has had a long and sometimes checkered past. This monograph attempts, at least partially, to correct some of these misunderstandings. The study explores the history of bilingual education in the public elementary schools in the United States (and in some of that nation's territorial holdings) from the 1840s to 1970s, from Cincinnati's adoption of German-English instruction to the federal government's involvement with bilingual schooling. The book examines the ways in which the larger society—its intellectual, cultural, demographic, economic, and moral currents—shaped the contours of bilingual education in America. This study also explores the power dynamics of bilingual education, dynamics that often shifted based on the larger context. That is, those who implemented and controlled bilingual programs in America's public schools were a diverse lot, ranging from ethnic leaders to nativists hoping to "Americanize" immigrant, colonized, and indigenous children. Naturally, power over these programs changed hands over time. Schooling, whether bilingual or not, imposed a set of values on foreign-language-speaking children, but they were not always passive recipients of America's public mores. Educational imposition frequently mixed with cultural traditions to create unintended outcomes within public schools and within ethnic communities.

The Drafters of the Blueprints: Historians, Linguists, and Educationists

In his 2004 study, *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1836–1981*, Carlos Kevin Blanton noted that "historians have yet to document the story of American bilingual education," a point that historian Steven Schlossman made twenty years earlier.¹¹ Historians, of course, have not entirely neglected bilingual education in America's past, but the issue has not received the sustained historical attention that one would expect from such a contentious educational practice. There have been several excellent studies of the dual-language programs of the twentieth century, but, for the most part, historians have paid only passing attention to its earlier

history.¹² Several prominent historians have touched upon bilingual schooling in their work, although the treatment of the topic is often of secondary importance, simply a supporting detail that demonstrates the immigrant experience in America.¹³ Even historians who emphasize the education of American immigrants have devoted very little attention to the bilingual institutions where many immigrant children were educated.¹⁴ While bilingual education has largely been on the periphery of historical inquiry, other scholars, particularly linguists, have not ignored the issue. Nevertheless, what has emerged from the scholarship of historians and linguists is a blueprint of the polyglot boardinghouse that has many shortcomings.

Resisting the all-encompassing concept of “American character” put forth by the “consensus” historians of the 1950s and 1960s, many contemporary historians who write on immigrants in the United States often focus on a single ethnic group. This literature does, occasionally, examine the bilingual educational practices of the various ethnic groups.¹⁵ One shortcoming of this emphasis on a single ethnic group is that it potentially leads to history that uncritically chronicles the triumphs of a particular group of people.¹⁶ In addition to the potential for celebratory history, a focus on a single ethnic group ignores the larger interactions and patterns among other immigrant, indigenous, and colonized groups; attitudes directed at one ethnicity—such as nativism—often have had an impact on other peoples, and solely emphasizing the experience of one group potentially misses those connections.

While many historians are engaged in examining a particular ethnic group, others, occasionally the same scholars, focus on a single location, which can lead to similar shortcomings. Yet, when exploring bilingual education, there is some justification for a local focus. Schooling, it should not be forgotten, was largely a local endeavor for much of America’s past. In his study of two German neighborhoods in Philadelphia, historian Russell A. Kazal has justified micro-studies by noting that “[w]hen looking for answers to large questions, it sometimes helps to dig in small places.”¹⁷ However, the sole focus on a particular community, like the emphasis on a single ethnic group, has the potential of obscuring the larger patterns of bilingual schooling. Whatever the flaws, these local case studies represent historians’ greatest contribution to the development of a history of bilingual education in America.

While historians of various sorts have, marginally, added to our understanding of bilingualism in American schools, it has been the