



School policies, practices and attitudes regarding bilingualism in students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Big research question

Why are parents still being advised to raise their children with ASD as monolinguals despite research showing the benefits of bilingualism for children with ASD?

Significance

It can be detrimental for professionals to advise parents to raise their children to speak only English when the rest of the family speaks a language other than English in the home. It can impair the child's ability to communicate with family, friends and cultural community.

Key concepts and terminologies

Autism Spectrum Disorder - neurological and developmental disorder that affects the ability to communicate, social interaction and behavior

Bilingualism - fluency in or use of two languages

Multilingualism - use of one or more language competently

Key concepts and terminologies

CR part 154 - The commissioner's regulation part 154 that establishes the legal requirements for the education of ELL (English Language Learners) in NYS

Dual language - a model that promotes bilingualism and biliteracy, cross-cultural competency, high levels of academic achievement for native English speakers and English learners from a single background

Transitional bilingual program - an approach to bilingual education where the child becomes fluent in their native language before acquiring fluency in second language, fluency is defined as linguistic fluency as well as literacy

‘Narrow’ research question and hypotheses

What advice are professionals giving parents of children with ASD with regard to language choices in the home?

Hypotheses:

Parents believe that children with ASD can become successful bilinguals as language demands increase.

Professionals are still advising parents to raise their children as monolinguals although there is literature today that supports bilingualism.

Main points of literature review

- Children with ASD can be successful bilinguals and it does not impede language development or further delays (Beauchamp & MacLeod 2017)
- Results from a study of preschool-aged children with ASD show that bilingual children diagnosed with ASD can keep up at the same pace of their monolingual peers as it relates to intellectual abilities (Beauchamp, Rezzonico & MacLeod (2020))

Main points of literature review

- A survey study based in Canada showed that 75% of families are raising their children as bilinguals (Kay-Raining, Lamond & Holden 2012)
- Detrimental effects for children and families when raising them as monolinguals were also found in the study (Kay-Raining, Lamond & Holden 2012)

Methodology

Participants: 12 Teachers, Psychologists, Speech-language pathologists and 9 parents

Procedure:

- Nine parents completed a questionnaire that asked about their experience raising a bilingual child with ASD and what they were advised. Also their take, what do they think is best for the child.
- Twelve professionals completed a questionnaire on their stance on the topic in an elementary school setting. Professionals ranging from teachers, psychologists and speech pathologists. Their perspectives on the issue will give insight on the advice they are giving parents.

Methodology

I researched whether there were any policies that overtly discourage bilingualism in neurodivergent students, including students with ASD. Finding policies that are in places regarding bilingualism in NYC schools. This information will help us further understand if teachers and other professionals are required to follow certain policies even if they are detrimental to students or go against current research. Many policies take a long time to be updated.

Further Assumptions

- Professionals today are possibly still advising parents to raise their children as monolinguals, although research has been revised over the years
- Professionals are possibly advising parent to raise their children as bilinguals
- Lack of resources and services for the families and children
- Language barriers between children and families as well as between families and professionals

Questionnaire Results: Nine Parents

- Three parents stated they haven't been advised to raise their child as bilingual, six parents stated they have been advised to raise their child as bilingual
- Eight parents stated they believe their child can become a successful bilingual, one parent disagreed
- Overall, parents felt children with ASD will benefit from becoming bilingual. They expressed the importance of their child being exposed to both languages so that they are confident and comfortable speaking languages.

Questionnaire Results: Nine Parents

- Parents also felt that it would be beneficial for the children to have access to a variety of resources and opportunities.
- Only two parents have had access to resources to support the child in becoming a successful bilingual. On the other hand, seven parents haven't had any resources to support the child in becoming a successful bilingual.
- One participant stated their child has a bilingual speech-language pathologist, while eight parents stated the child did not have a bilingual Speech Pathologist.

Questionnaire Results: Twelve Professionals

- About half of the twelve professionals are advising parents to raise their child with ASD as bilingual while other professionals stated that either language is comfortable for the child. Very few professionals were against bilingualism in children with asd. One professional stated their advice for the parent may vary depending on the child's verbal abilities; if the child's verbal abilities are limited, they may advise against it.
- Professionals have been trained to advise parents that their child is capable of learning multiple languages. They advise parents to make sure the child is able to speak fluently and comfortable in one language before learning a new one. Overall, professionals state there is no evidence-based practice suggesting that bilingualism will “confuse” a child. It's in the families' best interest to continue speaking in the native language especially when parents/grandparents who don't speak English live in the home. Speaking English only will hinder opportunities for exposure to their culture and other communication opportunities
- While the majority of professionals stated there are no specific policies in place that require them to advise parents to either raise their child as monolingual or bilingual. One professional mentioned CR part 154 NYS, which mandates that if a school has 20 or more students with the same native language, a bilingual program must be offered.

General Findings from Questionnaire

- The majority of parents and professionals agree that it's best for the child to be bilingual. They emphasized the importance of the child being comfortable and confident in speaking both languages. However, one of the professionals stated they think monolingualism is best for the child, noting that it can be confusing for the child to learn grammar, literacy and syntax for both languages simultaneously. In addition, one professional stated an effective education is needed and another professional mentioned a one way dual language and transitional bilingual program.

Key finding: A Lack of Resources

Parents and professionals expressed their thoughts and concerns regarding bilingualism in children with autism spectrum disorder. Children with asd face many challenges and are at a disadvantage with the lack of resources that are presented. The vast majority expressed that the child didn't have a bilingual speech language pathologist. It is extremely difficult for the child to be comfortable in both languages if one is spoken in school and the native language is spoken at home. If the child received therapy in both languages interchangeably, the child can be successful and learn rules of both languages.

In a recent article that examines bilingualism and additional language learning in students with autism, Davis et al. (2021: 3) reveal that “practitioners, including speech and language therapists, do not have confidence in the tools available to conduct diagnostic or language assessments with bilingual children (Davis et al., 2020),” and that “many standardised tools are culturally inappropriate for children from culturally and linguistically diverse populations (Mdlalo et al., 2019).”

Davis et al. (2021: 3) further emphasize that “[p]ractitioners themselves have stated they do not feel confident the tools available for use with culturally and linguistically diverse populations are acceptable, and frequently rely on their observations or asking for advice from colleagues or other professionals (Oxley and De Cat, 2019)” and that “speech and language therapists report that they have few opportunities to access additional cultural training after they qualify, and they do not have the time or opportunities to keep up to date with relevant research findings (Davis et al., 2020).”

Key references

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