

Heroes of Multilingualism in the U.S.A.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les efforts de certaines institutions scolaires pour le maintien et la survie de la langue et de la culture grecques se butent à des obstacles majeurs aux États-Unis. Bien que les États-Unis soient un pays multilingue et multiculturel, les Américains ne sont pas bien disposés envers le bilinguisme. Dans cet article, l'auteur explore le paradoxe du bilinguisme chez les Américains -des plus fortunés aux nouveaux arrivés-, et décrit la capacité de la communauté grecque américaine à résister à la vague du "tout anglais".

ABSTRACT

Ethnic language and culture maintenance efforts of certain educational institutions and educators in the U.S. have met with major obstacles. Although in many respects the United States is a multilingual, multicultural nation, many of its citizens hold a negative view of bilingualism. This article explores the paradox of bilingualism among wealthier Americans and the poorest newcomers and describes the potential of the Greek-American community to withstand the "English-only" trend.

Ethnic language and culture maintenance efforts of certain educational institutions and educators in the U.S. have met with major obstacles. Although in many respects the U.S. is a multilingual, multicultural nation, it is apparent that many of its citizens hold a negative view of bilingualism and a multicultural conception of society. The promotion of bilingualism in the U.S. occurs primarily among the wealthiest Americans who recognize the value of bilingualism and support private schools where such language enrichment occurs, and also, ostensibly, among the poorest newcomers, through largely controversial public bilingual schooling. Whatever the shortcomings of public or private bilingual schooling, it can be argued that in a multilingual multicultural world, success in business, as well as satisfaction on a

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personal level, may well be enhanced through the efficacy of programs which stress the learning and respect for second languages and cultures.

Community institutions such as ethnic language private and parochial schools have tenaciously sought to maintain, or instill, a bilingual, bicultural or multicultural ethos and identity in students. This presentation explores the efforts of one U. S. ethnic community institution, Greek-American Day Parochial Schools, to overcome the "English-only", monolingual view which seems to characterize American society.

Education has been viewed by many as the key remedy for numerous societal problems such as illiteracy, intercultural/inter-racial conflicts, poverty, and the sense of alienation among America's youth.

For many Greek immigrants in urban areas of America, the transmission of Greek values, history, heritage and religion along with Greek language literacy development has been a priority. Greek-Americans, like Greeks in Greece, highly prize educational achievement. The value on education, coupled with the desire to preserve "Greekness", America, led to the formation of Greek-American "Day Schools", Greek afternoon (after school), and Greek Saturday classes. The first Greek parochial school was founded in Chicago in 1908 (Lagios, 1976). As a result of the entry of a large number of Greeks immigrants between 1966 and 1971, Greek schooling was strengthened. Many arrivals from Greece or Cyprus enrolled their children in the Greek schools or classes.

Most Greek education in the U.S. has involved elementary through middle school levels. Also, the Greek classes have typically been taught by native Greek speakers who have no training in teaching Greek as a second foreign language. In previous decades, the typical Greek student in America could speak Greek before entering the Greek classroom. This is no longer the case, and Greek schools are hard-pressed to accommodate new generations of the offspring of mixed marriages or from homes with little or no Greek usage.

There are still over 400 afternoon/Saturday schools and eleven day schools in the U.S. today. The majority of Greek parochial school students, over 20,000, study in afternoon or Saturday schools, while approximately five thousand study at Day Parochial Schools.

Because of the influx of Greek immigrants in the late 1960's whose English language skills were limited, Greek education also was offered through the public bilingual school programs in urban centers such as New York, Chicago, Boston, Lowell, Manhassetts, and Tarpon Springs, Florida. These public bilingual programs for immigrant students included academic content area instruction in the Greek language, along with an English language learning component.

The Greek day and afternoon/Saturday schools continue to be associated with the local religious community of the Greek orthodox church. The Greek Orthodox church contributed mightily both directly and indirectly to the maintenance of the Greek language in the U.S. Although each local religious community parish administers its own Greek education program, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese established an Education Department to assist the schools in various, non-economic ways, such as making recommendations for textbooks, curricula, and sponsoring occasional teacher-training conferences or symposia.

The Greek immigrants from the first wave of the late of 1880's through today have also formed and maintained topical or regional societies, in addition to ethnic religious and ethnic linguistic community centers. These organizations have all helped to strengthen ethnic identity among Greek-Americans.

In addition, the media of television, radio and press have also helped to preserve a sense of Greek identity as well as a sense of the relevance of the Greek language in the American context. Electronic networks have also allowed for daily publications from Greece as well as the U.S.A. to be made available to Greek-Americans.

Greek-American organizations, idealistic and ambitious in their goal of preserving Greekness in America, both linguistic and cultural, are also experiencing a diminishment in resources and population, as are the U.S. Greek schools. Understandably, the mother tongue of Greek is not expected to survive past the fourth generation of Greek-American ethnic background. In the U. S. there is little value placed on bilingualism or biculturalism, especially outside of urban areas. There is the general policy in American public schools of introducing a foreign language in middle or high school, rather than the early grades. America is one of the few countries which, by and large, does not introduce other language from the early grades, and which, as a practical matter, does not value bilingualism or biliteracy.

In spite of the research which attests to the exemplary cognitive, social, and academic benefits of attaining second language proficiency, American public education relegates the development of bilingualism to a very low priority. The baby is thrown out with the bathwater. In its zeal to assimilate masses of immigrants, American public schools, for the most part, encourage children to forget and even forsake the language of their ethnic grandparents or parents. The misguided and malicious notion promulgated by certain American social scientists at the turn of the twentieth century, that bilingualism was bad for the brain, and emotions as well as the security of society, still lives. These beliefs were supported by "evidence" secured through the administering of I.Q. tests in English to immigrants who had literally just arrived in New York and spoke little or no English! The test was calculated to reinforce the nativist, xenophobic milieu of American society and schools prevalent one hundred years ago.

We know now that formal learning of a second language, if it takes place in an appropriate educational environment, can enrich and enhance first language literacy. This awareness should result in more second language *aka* foreign programs at all grades levels of public schools.

There are also numerous other benefits of becoming and being bilingual. While becoming bilingual, that is, while adding a second language, the first language is simultaneously enhanced as a result of what psycholinguists call "the transfer effect"; a "common underlying proficiency" is enriched which in turn transfers "common" aspects of the second language learned to the development of the first language. There are also "social" benefits of knowing a second language in terms of achieving global awareness, multicultural sensitivity, and a wider array of career options.

The public spheres of American institutional life outside of ethnic homes and communities offer little support for the maintenance of languages other than English. In fact, the pressure to assimilate is so pervasive that even the ethnolinguistic private or parochial community schools such as those which teach Greek, have to justify the inclusion of more than one period of Greek per day. In spite of their success in promoting biliteracy among their students, the Greek parochial schools operate within, and mirror to a great extent, many of the misconceptions of second language learning expressed by the larger American society.

The efforts of Greek teachers to promote Greek literacy around the U.S. are compromised by the lack of clearly defined curricula, materials and elaborated methods for teaching Greek as a first and/or second language in America. Younger generations of Greek-Americans receive reinforcement for use of the language while in schools, but they experience little reason to be biliterate outside the classroom door. Hence, despite the desire, and extensive and expansive effort of the Greek community parochial schools to preserve the Greek language, erosion and language shift continue unabated.

There may come a time when second language learning and literacy achieve a status equal to first language literacy, to mathematics or science literacy, and to social studies. Ethnicns in America, are losing ground in efforts to promote biliteracy. Perhaps, given the new economic threat of the European Union, and the growing globalization of the business world, American society and public education will be persuaded to promote bilingualism and multilingualism out of necessity, if not affection.

Part of a movement to include second languages as integral components of the school curriculum for children and youth may also emerge in the perennial search to improve English language literacy. Whether the tenacity of parents and educators will be rewarded by biliterate, bicultural outcomes may well depend on a dramatic shift in the values and goals of American society vis-a-vis bilingualism.

In the words of Ezra Pound,

The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is capable of expressing all forms and degrees of human expression.

Studies such as the most recent examination of the condition of Greek schooling for children and youth in the United States (Spiridakis *et al*, 1998) reveal and reinforce certain common issues concerning these schools (Saloutos, Scourby, Costantakos, Spiridakis, Kontantellon, Defanos, Lagios, Fishman *et al*).

A critical issue has emerged from the research which has, for the most part, considered the attitudes of students, parents, teachers, and administrators towards the school, the Greek language, Greek culture, Greek religion, the curriculum, textbook materials, quality of instruction, and the role of the Greek Orthodox Church.

The research continually reveals that:

(a) students and parents are not fully satisfied with the quality of Greek teaching, especially in terms of motivation and relevance, and

(b) teachers and administrators are not fully satisfied with the curricula and materials, if any, available, especially for the early childhood and high schools grades. Teachers and administrators also bemoan the lack of professional development available to help teachers teach Greek more effectively to the increasingly less "ethnic" less Greek proficient student now enrolling in Greek Day, afternoon or Saturday programs.

What needs to be done, at this stage in the evolution of Greek language maintenance efforts through Greek schooling in the U.S. is a drastic revitalization and, therefore, a re-thinking and restructuring of these schools. Such a recommendation does not propose that the schools in their current manifestation, are unsuccessful or unable to promote, in addition to the effective learning of English, and the English academic subjects, some Greek literacy alongside a stronger Greek identity, both cultural and religious. However it is clear that there continues to exist various conflicts that affect the Greek schools from within, such as the perennial financial woes, the feeling of second-class status among the Greek teachers in the day schools, the continual attempts to secure decent materials and curricular to use in teaching, not to mention related classroom resources needed to achieve literacy in any language, as well as intense conflicts from without, in terms of the "English-only" xenophobic attitudes and misconceptions of non-ethnic public, governmental, and educational institutions. The percentage of Greek-Americans of the third, fourth, and fifth generations has grown to the point in American society where fewer Greek-Americans are seeing the need for using the Greek language opting instead to seek cultural, religious and moral outcomes of Greekness for their children rather than linguistic ones which are perceived to be difficult, irrelevant, and boring.

The aspect of the Greek schools today which transcends the problems and which needs to be focused on by educators, administrators, parents and community activists is the ultimate benefit that attaining biliteracy in Greek and English yield for English language literacy, as well as all other cognitive academic learning. There is little likelihood, except on a even smaller scale than the current U. S. Day Greek Parochial Schools, that Greek-

American communities would embrace a curriculum wherein academic subjects are also taught through the Greek language and Greek is utilized for at least fifty percent of the school day. Given the lack of understanding of the efficacy of learning through a second language, as well as learning that language, it is more realistic to expect a resurgence of interest in the Day parochial school only if it can claim benefits which sophisticated parents, Greek ethnic as well as non-Greek, desire for their children.

The United States is currently experiencing a revolution on several fronts in education which may provide a window of opportunity to enhance Greek schooling and the promotion of biliteracy. An essential component of the current movement in American education is to emphasize the articulation and promotion of higher standards on literary and cognitive academic achievement. This movement is creating reforms in public schools and institutions of higher education involved in teacher preparation. As part of the search for true quality in education, alternative educational environments and "cultures" are being considered and funded, under the title "charter schools". State governments in America, traditionally and constitutionally empowered to oversee education, are sponsoring such schools and relaxing many bureaucratic restraints concerning the various components of any school, such as the curriculum, approaches, and teacher backgrounds. Community leaders, parents, concerned citizens and educators interested in improving the education of the monoliterate students are considering alternative means. At the same time, another window of opportunity for private or parochial schools is in the possibility of the establishment of a "voucher-system". Such a system would allow parents to choose the school they desire for their child. Although the constitutionality of such a system has been challenged, especially in terms of the fundamental guarantee of the separation of church and state, the efficiency of such a system may yet be recognized on a certain scale, and the adoption of such a program may well generate the student population level needed for Greek Day schools to operate maximally.

What is needed now for The Day and afternoon/Saturday schools is a unified, forwarded effort which involves parents, administrators and educators from The Day Schools from as many of the numerous afternoon/Saturday schools as possible, from institution of higher education involved in training educators, from community organizations, and from Greek religious leaders. The time has come to fully articulate and address the highest standard of Greek

literacy, and Greek cultural and historical knowledge for children and youth in America. These standards must mirror the standards being promulgated for English literacy and academic achievement in content areas of science, mathematics and social studies. The same rigor must be applied to the development of materials, techniques, approaches, classroom management, and opportunities for professional development.

The roots of a full scale solution to the problem of revitalizing the Greek school system in America is emerging in the ambitious *Paedeia Omogenon* project led by Professor Michael Damanakis, at the University of Crete. The project involves the efforts of several nations where diaspora Greek ethnics are interested in maintaining Greek language and culture. The bold initiative seeks to transcend the various challenges and obstacles confronting Greek schools in countries such as England, Australia, and the United States by preparing strong, quality curricula, materials and culturally relevant resources which can help school improve their effectiveness.

The project also has a key component in the development of professional workshops for Greek teachers, to help them learn to use the new material and resources being produced, in a dynamic, interactive classroom setting. The synergy of the various countries involved, including the leadership and expertise of the University of Crete, is also expected to result in various models of Greek educators which can be considered for implementation in existing on newly developed Greek Schools in the U. S.

Greek schools must be prepared to present an educational program that will benefit the linguistic, cognitive, academic and cultural needs of the non-Greek ethnic background student as well. This challenge is powerful and critical. However, the adaptation of quality modern Greek teaching as well as a quality English academic environment is one key to success.

One current "parochial" mission of many Greek schools, however, which envisions the schools as islands of Greek ethnicity separate from the multicultural mainstream, must change too. Greek language and heritage needs to be promoted for all students, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. The desire for Greek literacy and promotion of the best in Greek culture requires opening of doors to non-Greeks, to the world, in fact.

The isolationist characteristics of any ethnicity, including that of Greek-Americans has helped reinforce an extending biliteracy and biculturalism. However, that attitude must give way to one which embraces and celebrates "Greekness" and a global, multicultural perspective. The Greek spirit, the Greek truth and knowledge, for self-reflection, for a healthy mind and body, for morality and virtue are to be extolled alongside world cultures.

Calls for reform of Greek-American Day Schools have been made in the past. (Spiridakis, 1990 Hellenic College) In addition, the "afternoon or Saturday" system are also in need of reform insofar as materials and teacher training is concerned. Prior to any successful reform, clearly articulated standards for what to teach to who, how to teach, and why are needed. Moreover, the optimal conditions under which children develop a bilingual or second language capability through schooling should be recognized.

Given the heterogeneous nature of students with regard to their level of Greek proficiency, it is imperative that the teacher employ classroom management to group students and tailor instruction according to levels. The afternoon/ Saturday classes also involve multiple ages which must be managed. The benefits of "peer-teaching" and tutoring are essential and the benefits of such a strategy have been well-documented.

The Day school model can accommodate a more organic school structure wherein Greek language and English language classes are viewed as integral and related. A negative attitude of students towards learning Greek is also engendered by the limited time Greek is actually used in the Day Schools. With few exceptions, such as the Socrates School in Chicago, Greek is relegated to one forty-five minute period per day. There is usually a different teacher for Greek. In many cases, the Greek teacher feels "pressured" to cover areas of language such as vocabulary and grammar in a manner which does not allow adequate time for freer, creative language interaction among the students. Another problem with offering Greek primarily as a language arts subject is the students' perception of the irrelevance of Greek for the balance of the school day.

In 1990 I recommended a "Two-Way" approach to resolving the problem of a negative attitude towards Greek, a sense of its inferiority or "second class" status compared to English. The "Two-Way" model applied to the Day School would involve the inclusion of certain content areas such as science, mathematics, or

social studies to also be taught through Greek. Given the current situation of fewer and fewer Greek-Americans proficient in Greek, such a curriculum would require Greek as a second language (GSL) methods and materials to be infused with the content of the particular subject area. While such an approach may appear controversial, its efficacy has been demonstrated with other language groups. The learning of a new or second language while simultaneously learning content involves challenging linguistic and cognitive skills which can motivate the student and improve Greek proficiency in an effective manner. Students will be exposed to a new dimension of language learning where the purpose of second language learning is now more fully integrated with and more relevant to English language learning activities.

Activities are designed and implemented which stimulate and maintain students' interest and which encourage second language comprehension and production tied to meaningful participation. A crucial aspect of the success of an approach which combines second language learning and content area learning is the careful selection and organization of items of language which reflect the students' proficiency levels. Questions by the teacher must also be chosen to encourage and engage students in open, comprehensible inquiry and discourse in the classroom. The *Paideia Omogenon* Project USA has produced a GSL curriculum which can be applied and adopted to the content areas by teachers. The curriculum attempts to organize essential Greek for different levels of proficiency. Techniques to foster natural, free language learning are also included. The Greek language curriculum seeks to supply teachers with clear standards and criteria for Greek as a second language learning. The next phase will seek to develop recommended activities and procedures to help teachers integrate Greek and the content areas. The curriculum represents an important milestone for Greek language classes for the day and afternoon/ Saturday programs. It begins with kindergarten and continues through the eighth grade. As the project's recent research indicated, there has been no articulated curriculum for the day and afternoon / Saturday schools which was promulgated to all communities.

Another promising venture which is just beginning to make an impact in the U.S. as well as Canada, Germany, Australia, England and other countries, is the production of new, structured Greek language curriculum units, activities and resources by the *Paideia Omogenon* Central Team at the University of Crete.

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