

Meeting the Bilingual Needs of Romanian Children in the U.S. Public Education System

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Abstract: Currently, public education in the United States is undergoing major changes in hopes for reaching significance between training and graduation. This literature synthesis focuses on the Romanian student population and its integration into the American school culture via bilingual education as the instructional tool, and the public charter system as the vehicle. The synthesis will present work collected from journal articles, book chapters, interviews, reports, and reference handbooks.

1. Introduction

Among studies done about Romania in the United States none could be located about Romanian children in the U.S. public schools. Considering the purpose of this paper, it is important to highlight at the beginning the origins and some important values of this nation. History and cultural heritage are the foundational element that defines the identity of a nation, a major factor defining the people and descendants of that nation (11).

2. Romanians

Romania, situated in central Europe, is a cultural settlement dated eight thousand years B.C., according to the latest archeological discoveries (28). Romanians are the descendants of Dacians (a powerful kingdom where Romania, Moldova, Ukraine and northern Bulgaria are today) who partially mixed with Romans after Emperor Traian conquered Dacia by defeating king Decebalus in 101 A.D. (26). As a traditional agrarian society, Romanians give values to family relations through developing a collective type of society. Never invading other nations, for centuries

Romanians were forced to transform Romania into a battlefield almost every decade. Starting with the Barbarian Migration (400A.D. to 800A.D.) and finishing with the German and Soviet troops of the WWII, Romanians had to protect their identity against almost all European nations (east and central) and nations from northern Asia (32).

2.1 Romanian-Americans in the United States. Romanians were first mentioned in the U.S. Census in 1882, though they started immigrating to the United States in the 1850's (65), but Romanians came earlier than that. George Pomutz, a famous Romanian who became a general in the American Civil War, migrated to the United States in 1849 (22). The most recent official Census data show a number of 518,653 individual Romanians (61). As a statistical number, Steve Bonica, editor-in-chief for the Romanian Tribune Newspaper and president of the Romanian-American Network Inc., organized a survey in 2002 that shows a number up to 1.2 million Romanian-speaking people of Romanian heritage living in the United States. His

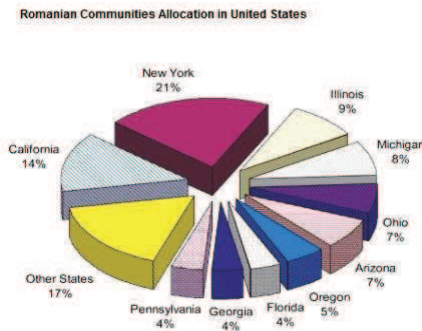


Figure 1.

study comprised 1,300 participants made of influential people from Romanian communities from 24 States (Figure 1). The survey was defining as Romanians those people born of either both Romanian parents, or of only one parent, Romanian-Jewish, Romanian-Gypsies, Romanian-Hungarians, and Romanians from Banat, Bucovina, and Bessarabia. This choice of targeting Romanians of full or half descent can explain the difference between the official Census and this study (9).

2.2 Romanian children and Romanian schools in U.S. public education.

Romanian children being fully immersed in English language in the United States' public education are showing troubling signs. Some Romanian parents are attempting to avoid sending their children to public schools, trying hard to enroll them in private schools or to do homeschooling. As all emigrant families, the majority of Romanians have a hard time in finding well-paid jobs, working hard for their monthly income (Laurentiu Murg, personal communication, February 7, 2014; Priest Vasile Muntean, personal communication February 16, 2014; Steve Bonica, personal communication, February 24, 2014). Because of the high costs of private schools, and difficulty of home schooling, many Romanian children are going into public schools, where they are exposed to a process of acculturation (7) and academic disidentification (14). Acculturation is defined by the process involving cultural

and psychological modification because of intercultural contact (6), where academic disidentification can be understood as a missing relationship between self-esteem and academic results (48), meaning that the student is no longer interested in academic achievement trying to protect her/himself against an unhealthy pursuit of self-esteem.

Romanian-American public schools in the United States. Looking for Romanian-American public schools in the United States gives not many hopes. The U.S. Department of Education does not have any records regarding the existence of any Romanian-American public school – if they exist the only possible form would be as a charter public school (Tryna M. Luton, personal communication, February 20, 2014). According to influential people from Romanian communities (personal communications) across the United States, only two private Romanian schools exist in the U.S.: Ekklesia and Logos Christian Academy.

Romanian children in U.S. schools. It can be difficult to identify Romanian people since many change their name after they arrive in the United States, when they get their American citizenship or when they get married. It is also possible that Romanian children in public schools are not recorded as English language learners (ELL); although no study was found that suggested this theory.

3. Socio-psychological Value of Language

Language represents a powerful instrument to learn, understand, navigate, participate and attain a cultural heritage, where cultural heritage should be understood as a lifestyle of a group, community or nation, defined in: language (including dialects), traditions, meanings, beliefs, artistic expressions, ideas, ideologies, and value systems that have substantial traces from antiquity to present (8). Every nation has the tendency to be

proud of its inherited cultural heritage, defined by the blueprint of shared group behavior (68). Cultural pride preserves culture, and in return culture defends socio-psychological wellbeing and health (35).

3.1 Cultural-pride and emotions.

Cultural-pride is an emotion generated by the feeling of pleasure in what ancestors did well and what has remained through time; a passion that occurs in childhood and continues in adulthood and will bind to long-term moral actions (30). Being proud of one's cultural heritage creates a strong bond to morality and ethicality of that culture. The process of enculturation starts without the knowledge and will of the new born; seeing facial expressions and attitudes of her/his parents and siblings is a first step into enculturation, and when the child says his or her first words s/he is already on the road of her/his family's cultural heritage. It is hard, nearly impossible, for one to not be proud of something that is within her/his mind and behavior (19). Even if someone would be forced to lose her/his language – to forget it – the cultural heritage cannot leave the body; people are enculturated not only with their mind but also with what their biological apparatus fills that mind (45). Forcing someone to put aside her/his culture, to lose her/his cultural pride, will end in psychological disorders (54). Cultural pride, as a self-conscious emotion, involves a complex of self-evaluative processes in regards to motivating social behavior, becoming the “most important human emotion” (59).

Education, as a process of acquiring new knowledge and a way of building character, is an environment in which emotions are at its core. Pride, as one of the self-conscious emotions, is inter-connected with the other two: embarrassment and shame (60). Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs (1995), show that pride is a reflection of high-self-esteem, where high self-esteem has the important

role for promoting achievement. In this equation, if we reduce or destroy pride (self-conscious emotion), then we reduce also the chance for achievement. Self-esteem is also a major factor for personal development (53). The development of language and the enculturation process build the social identity of the child. There are three main components of social identity: (a) the cognitive component, as being aware of a group membership - self-categorization; (b) the evaluative component, as the negative or positive implication of this membership – group self-esteem; and (c) the emotional component, as a sense of emotional involvement with the group – affective commitment (20).

3.2 Language. Language is nothing more than phonemes (sounds); a group of phonemes that for some make sense, for others can make some sense but not entirely, and for others they are just unintelligible sounds. A group of phonemes make up what we call a word, and words are divided by short pauses. To be able to make all sounds that humans can make into a way of communication, into a language, there needs to be not only an apparatus adapted for such function (our body) but also an environment that helps for such communication (36). This environment is what we can call the culture that creates the language (31). This specific environment (culture) is first defined by characteristics of parents and siblings (it is the first contact that a baby's consciousness has), moving to a bigger group (larger family: uncles, aunts, cousins), and then to an even bigger group (the community) and so on. Therefore, language is not something that we created because we are speaking it and is our product; rather, it is something that was “given” to us because we have the apparatus to “use” it. A language of a group-community-nation defines that group-community-nation with the first sounds of

that language; the older the group, the bigger the history; the bigger the history, the more cultural heritage to bear (36). Saville-Troike (1973), one of the leading experts in culture, language and bilingual education, shows that the nature of each language represents the moral and ethical norms defined in the behaviors of the society that uses it. Language can be considered the tip of the iceberg that represents the culture from which the language arose.

Body language. As a primary factor of our social communication, body language represents the first contact with others. Before we start to speak, we see gestures, facial expressions, body positions, that unconsciously give us signs to pursue, or not, the connection with those around us (21). To quickly understand how strong the communication with our body language is, one just has to think of the silent movies. The messages given by our body language are mostly unconscious, excepting for those people that learn how to control them (50). Baldwin & Moses (1994) consider that children are becoming “active participants in the social flow” from the moment of birth. Children, as babies, are learning first from the body language of near actors (parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, etc.) what to expect from their actions and reactions; babies are experts on reading faces and gestures (24). Learning the meaning of body language accompanied by vocal intonations and social behaviors is enclosed in the cultural context of those surrounding the child, stimulating their active minds, contributing to their emotional and social development; these are the first steps into the family cultural accommodation (58).

Spoken language. Language can be defined as the expression of cultural dimension through its meanings, intonations, and symbolic understandings of life relations; all of these being embedded

into a specific code transmitted by speech and decoded by the hearer. The language learned from the first days of life is called native or maternal language. Neuroscientific studies, searching if there is a brain activation difference between maternal and second language, found that when thinking in a second language, different brain areas are activated compared with when thinking in the maternal language (51). The results of such studies suggest that maternal language creates a specific modality of thinking different from the second language, as a specific imprint on the modality of thinking (51) and social behavior (29).

3.3 Second language education (SLE). Romanian children, regardless of whether they are born in Romania or in the United States, will learn the English language as a second language. The studies of English immersion programs show that ethnic students develop a low self-esteem when they are immersed in second language instruction (57). Psychological studies suggest that low self-esteem determines a tendency to pursue self-esteem as a normal reaction of self-worth; pursuing self-esteem can lead to depression (16). ELL students immersed in English language are decreasing in reading and math by fifth grade, which pushes back the power of understanding the instructions that follow; later on students in this situation represent the largest number of high-school dropouts (57).

At-risk learners. The fact that there are not empirical studies related to how Romanian children are doing in public schools does not mean that these children cannot be at-risk learners. Romanian children, by definition, are children born in Romanian families, which is one statistical factor that makes them prone to be at-risk learners. Romanian children in the United States are part of the demographics of at-risk learners as an ethnic minority group, or

as members of low-income families, as well as immigrant English language learners (38).

School dropouts. A study done in 2011 showed that a high-school dropout can earn on average \$270,000 less in a lifetime than those who graduate from high-school and more than a million dollars less in their lifetime compared with college graduates (27). Not being able to have well-paid jobs, the dropouts have a socio-economic influence: not being able to pay taxes, or paying small amounts, they negatively influence tax revenues and indirectly they negatively influence the public educational system; also, drop-outs increase Medicaid costs (34) education (academic disidentification) as they cannot find recognition or peer appreciation among their classmates they are searching for peer appreciation in other places, such as street gangs, where education is less appreciated (13). Being a member of a street gang is not far from being a delinquent, as a study done in St. Louis, MO, shows a strong relation between gang membership, delinquency and early adolescence (17).

The socio-psychological value of language stays at the education level of the people who speak that language. Not knowing well the cultural heritage behind the language can bring powerful disturbances into an ethnic group. Romanian history and culture brings powerful pride which makes Romanians to rely their identity on this aspect, as a way of conserving their identity and their sanity. As an example, the communism is a small part of Romanian history (just 44 years out of more than 8,000 years) but creates a feeling of shame among some Romanians, feeling that is transmitted to their children. And if children, are not helped to understand the significant part of Romanian history will face disturbances that can be severe for their identity (60).

4. Bilingual Education

The largest minority groups who speak another language other than English in the United States are Spanish (50.5 million in 2010) and Asian (14.7 million in 2010) (62). Due to this statistical weight, most studies that were done in bilingual education target these two languages. The Romanian language is very similar to Spanish; both languages belong to the so-called Romance language category (50). Because at this time there are not any bilingual studies about Romanian language, I will refer more to studies done for Latino students in USA. Bilingual education in the United States originated on the assertion that linguistic differences are the basic causes for low academic achievement of students in American public schools who have a background different than English language (25). Students from a different heritage than the American one, immersed in English as a second language, are at a big disadvantage facing the understanding and the communication of a new language, especially because they have to compete with students who have already mastered English. The decision of the Supreme Court of United States in the case *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974) clearly indicates this argument.

Romanian children are starting a process of enculturation when learning the language and culture of their parents. Going to school as ELL students, Romanian children are immersed into an acculturation process. These two processes not being about the same language and culture automatically may create pressure from both sides, resulting in the assimilation of the native culture (56). To avoid the psychological stress resulting from losing the native heritage, the Federal Government of the United States approved in 1968 bilingual education under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (66).

Bilingual education, as a concept, has the main purpose to create a bilingual and bicultural environment where children have a smooth transition from their native language to English, having the chance to learn, understand and preserve their heritage. Merging into learning a second language, studying a language, which is the essential component of a culture, implies studying also its culture; they go hand-in-hand (55). Based on recent studies, researchers arrived at the conclusion that the school failure of minority students could be the result of mismatches between cultural practices of their homes and the school they attend (41), where at home the child learns family language and culture and at school s/he is fully immersed into a different language and culture. In the child's home environment, an important factor that affects the second language learning is the attitude toward the acculturation process (education given at school). This attitude is defined by the parents' educational level, the degree of the child's interaction with the second language of the community and of the ordinal rank the child has among her/his siblings (55).

4.1 Types of bilingual education. Bilingual education is presently designed in three types of programs: (a) transitional bilingual education, (b) one-way developmental, or late-exit bilingual education, and, (c) dual-language; all three types are offered as full and partial immersion (25). Thomas and Collier (2002) conducted a five-year longitudinal national study, from 1996 to 2001, analyzing the variety of education services offered to children of language minority in U.S. public schools and the academic achievement of these students. They found statistical difference between all types of bilingual settings and traditional public school system (58).

4.2 More studies on bilingual education. It was found that early native language education would have a positive impact on personal and collective self-esteem of minority language students in comparison with second language instruction, which takes place at a later age (69). As a major key for language learning, motivation is defined by the child's need to communicate; native language is the first tool use for communication and where the child is immersed into the second language s/he loses not only the ability to communicate but also the self-confidence in doing it (55). Besides building a healthy self-esteem and self-confidence, bilingual children demonstrate a stronger cognitive plasticity, manipulating symbols or using language as a tool to gain cognitive ends, compared with monolingual children (2). Having the chance to explore the nuances of two languages, the bilingual child will increase her/his ability to decipher meanings that a monolingual child cannot (25).

Bilingual education, as constructing bilingualism and biculturalism, leads to a development of a more complex and integrative representation of cultures, which in turn leads to a better acceptance and understanding of multiculturalism (5). Speaking of frame switching among bicultural individuals, Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000) explain the cultural lenses shifts possible for these individuals based on their two internalized cultures. Bicultural individuals' feelings and thinking defined by their learned notions of biculturalism (animated daily by cultural cues integrated in contexts and symbols from their social environment) is the engine for the Cultural Frame Switching making easy to apply the knowledge and understanding of both cultures (33). Studies focusing on positive effects of Cultural Frame Switching show the value of using multicultural work teams. Earley and

Mosakowski (2000) found that multicultural work teams are used because they outperform monocultural work teams. It clearly seems that bicultural education does not only have an early positive effect on high IQ and larger vocabulary, self-esteem, self-consciousness, and cultural pride, but also on Cultural Frame Switching helping the bicultural individual to better integrate into a multicultural society. The present optimal educational environment to increase the value of Cultural Frame Switching for bilingual children is well defined by the possible settings of public charter school system existent in United States.

5. Charter Schools

There are two primary sources governing ELL education: civil rights laws (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 - EEOA), and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), 1965. For a better instruction, bilingual schools' teachers must demonstrate fluency in both languages taught in that school; they should be able to instruct literacy and content in both languages (25). In the last twenty years, approximately 5000 charter schools were open and are operating in 42 states and the District of Columbia, offering education to more than 1.6 million K-12 students (67).

5.1 What are public charter schools and how they can help bilingual education? Public charter schools are a hybrid between traditional public schools and private schools, where anyone (no matter of race, ethnicity, religion, or sex orientation) is free to register in taking the offered courses (23). As independent schools, charter schools are mainly financed from public money received from the State in which they are located, through an authorizer (sponsor), and they also can receive Federal or State grants (depending on the State) and donations (63). In Oregon, a charter school must be a non-

profit organization in which parents, educators and members of community interested in creating an innovative high-quality school will elect a board that conducts the school's business in close collaboration with the authorizer (sponsor); the authorizer has the duty to make sure that the school respects the state regulations and the charter contract under which the school was accepted for sponsoring (47).

Authorizers are usually local districts and state boards of education (or state departments of education), but in some states they may also be higher education institutions (universities), municipalities, and other institutions (43). Two types of charter schools exist: (a) brick and mortar, where the school operates inside a building, and (b) virtual charter schools, where the school operates on-line. The Oregon Public Charter School Handbook (2013), published by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), stipulates that the purpose of charter schools must be in concordance with the ORS 338.015, to:

- Increase student learning and achievement
- Increase choices of learning opportunities for students
- Better meet individual student academic needs and interest
- Build stronger working relationships among educators, parents and other community members
- Encourage the use of different and innovative learning methods
- Provide opportunities in small learning environments for flexibility and innovation, which may be applied, if proven effective, to other public schools
- Create new professional opportunities for teachers
- Establish different forms of accountability for schools
- Create innovative measurement tools

Charter schools are expected to have high standards of performance for academic quality (student achievement), financial operations, governance and parental satisfaction (64). Considering that charter schools must bring innovative ways of teaching and that they have at their core creation the offering of another option than traditional public schools to better meet the children's specific needs (44), they seem to offer a good alternative that might improve education and achievement for Romanian children. The needed bilingual setting (Romanian-English) is hard to be developed in a traditional public school considering the focus of teaching literacy and content only in English language. However, charter schools might be more willing to offer a bilingual program for Romanian children.

A Romanian-American charter school could have the opportunity to hire licensed teachers who know both English and Romanian languages, considering that there are already Romanians teaching in the United States. The design of such a charter school could use one, or a combination, of the three methods: transitional bilingual education, one-way developmental or dual-language education. The chosen method, or methods, should be selected to best fit the children's needs, the available space, and the financial support that the school's board can assure. The methodology that charter schools can adopt creates a strong attraction for parents that are more involved in their children academic success.

Some studies suggest that parents who register children in charter schools are more similar to those that choose private schools, because they are looking for schools that can offer a better academic environment and average class size (10). Charter schools are competing with both public and private schools, based on their possibility for a specific academic design. Some argue that public charter schools are competing more

with private schools than with traditional public schools considering their autonomy in creating their academic design and class size environment (10). Also, another important aspect of charter schools is that parent involvement is more than welcome; in fact, the success of the school is mainly existent because of this type of involvement. Barnard (2004) found that parent involvement is directly proportional with long-term school success and student success at age 14 and age 20.

5.2 Charter school challenges.

Zimmerman and Vaughan (2013) show that there can be some lack of resources especially regarding transportation for low-income families. Taking in consideration that Romanian families are scattered all over in big cities it is possible that a Romanian-American charter school to face the same situation. Researchers, experts in charter schools, are arguing that the existence of charter schools is threatened by the public schools which have priority in receiving state funding. When the authorizers are local districts, the challenges of charter school performance may be due to the authorizers' lack of support: charter schools take away from the student population and therefore funds from district schools (70). The local districts are already struggling with funding challenges because of poor state allotment; therefore, the approval of opening charter schools is an extra burden to deal with, and it means less enrollment and less resources for the district.

The tight nuisance regarding funds between districts and charter schools creates a pressure over placed on charter school's accountability for operational success. In some cases the created struggle, for funding from school districts to charter schools, pushed the charter schools' management to decide on closing their schools. Vergari (2001) found that nearly all charter school

closures were caused because of fiscal deficiency. When a state has only one authorizer the rising of qualitative charter schools is challenged by the relation between the authorizer (e.g. local school district) and the charter school; school districts not being supportive on having too many charter schools in their area (64).

A study made by the Center for Education Reform (2013) shows that the quality of education in a state depends on the number of charter schools; the number of charter schools depends on the diversity of authorizers. States where there are multiple various chartering authorizers have three times and a half more charter schools than states where the authorizers are just local districts and the board state of education, or state departments of education (12).

6. Conclusion

Despite all these challenges, a public charter school design remains the only suitable bilingual school setting for a Romanian-English education. The important aspect that must be considered is that districts cannot refuse the approval of charter schools because there is a demand from parents for an innovative high-quality education (1). Romanians believe in school education but also they are aware of the cultural challenges that their children have to face in the American public school system. When the school is bilingual designed, respecting and considering the Romanian heritage, will increase the children's self-esteem and motivation raising successful academic achievement (15).

The principal from the private school Logos Christian Academy (LCA), Laurentiu Murg, reported that the graduation rate in his K-12 school is 100% (Laurentiu Murg, personal communication, February 7, 2014). Steven Bonica, one of the founders of this school, declared that even though the school has a high rate of children from low middle

class families, 80% of graduated students have at least one bachelor degree; 20% of them have masters and doctorates. Furthermore, he explained that those students who get into colleges always have good scholarships that pay for their tuition as a result of their good grades in previous years. Sadly, LCA is the only K-12 Romanian School in the United States.

Considering that only one Romanian K-12 school exists in the United States, and that it serves only 193 students the rest of Romanian children are fully immersed in English in public or private American schools. These children are exposed to the same academic disidentification as children from other minorities. It is important to consider that children who sense that their mother language and cultural identity are respected at school are more inclined toward positive self-esteem, which in turn increases and benefits their motivation for success in both languages (46), specific that can apply also to Romanian-American students.

A bilingual public charter school may be the answer to providing an innovative education for Romanian children which is not so difficult to create based on two main properties: autonomy and cultural environment. One of the initial goals for public charter schools was teacher autonomy (37). Renzulli, Parrott, and Beattie, (2011) show in their study that the problem of teacher dissatisfaction and teacher turnover can be solved by allowing teacher autonomy and teacher ethnic match offered by the public charter school academic design (considering that a bilingual school requires teachers to master both languages and cultures). Moolenaar et al. (2013) show that the innovative climate of a bilingual charter school resides in teachers' social interaction process, a process defined by the school's network of teachers and parents that can communicate,

share, develop and transform ideas for the best academic outcome.

7. References

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