

Myths and Realities: Best Practices for Language Minority Students. By Katharine Davies Samway and Denise McKeon. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999. Pp. xiii, 127.

This small and easily used volume is an invaluable resource, particularly for mainstream educators with little or no background in second language acquisition, attempting to incorporate an effective program for language minority learners into their schools. Organized around broad topics such as demographics, language acquisition, assessment and staffing, each section presents several commonly held notions, and the realities that disprove them. Research results that support the authors' positions are provided in a practical format that uses tables and figures, and well-founded possible scenarios. There is also a list of resources, including local and national organizations, research centers and professional organizations.

An enlightening fact is found in the response to the demographic myth that most limited English proficient (LEP) students are recent arrivals to the United States. In fact, only 20% of L2 students have been in the U.S. a year or less (Fleischman and Hopstock, 1993) (2). Less surprising would be that "LEP students are the fastest growing group of students in the United States today" (1).

Particularly informative is the section on L2 acquisition, which alerts educators to some of the stickier issues surrounding bilingual and ESL education. It is likely that many administrators have not considered that "The ability to speak a second language (especially in conversational settings) does not guarantee that a student will be able to use the language effectively in academic settings" (21). A brief summary of Collier's (1989) and Cummins and Swain's (1986) work, which found more complex and less contextualized language used in the instruction of successively higher grades, provides important input when considering the

academic consequences of increased language demands on students with indeterminate writing skills (21-4).

Also interesting to educators considering total immersion in English programs (which provide no instruction in L1 and often no ESL, but are temptingly easy to implement because they do not require specially trained teachers) would be data on the rate of L2 acquisition in various programs. Research consistently finds L2 literacy rates higher in children with strong L1 skills. Schools desiring to raise test scores and reduce drop-out rates need to accept that “Young arrivals with no schooling in their first language may take as long as 7 to 10 years to reach the average level of performance of native English speakers on standardized tests in reading, social studies and science” (Collier, 1989) (24). Since achievement test scores are now being used to evaluate and financially reward schools, the importance of implementing successful programs has grown beyond pedagogical experimentation into a survival skill for public education.

The authors lay out a basic framework of legal responsibilities that must be adhered to when framing language platforms in public schools. A clear and current rendering of often conflicting mandates is possibly the book’s finest accomplishment (28-36). Even experienced ESL and bilingual teachers and administrators are frequently uncertain whether they are implementing a program that meets all required standards. This is important because ethically and legally, a “school must not persist in a program that does not produce results” (Castaneda v. Pickard, 1981) (31).

The potentially destructive myths that this book dispels can be pervasive. Bilingual education, total immersion and ESL programs are controversial, steeped in bias, and often drafted without regard for success or practicality. The authors present linguistic research in an easy-to-use format that debunks myths and promotes the best-proven practices in language

minority education today. This volume would be a welcome addition to the bookshelf of any educator.

Mary Ellen Rice Wynn
California State University, Fullerton