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Title this:  
Review of  
James Crawford,  
Bilingual Education

## Read this book if you want to gain a foothold on the slippery terrain of bilingual education

By Kenji Hakuta

One sure way to stir up a dull dinner party is to bring up bilingual education. Throughout its brief history—from the 1968 Bilingual Education Act to the Supreme Court decision in *Lau v. Nichols* in 1974 to the current English-only backlash, bilingual education has left a wake of controversy, with debate slipping back and forth, almost unpredictably, between social policy and educational methodology (with an occasional anecdote about an immigrant relative who received no help at all, thank you, slipped in on the side).

That slippery terrain is the province of James Crawford's *Bilingual Education: History, Politics, Theory, and Practice*. Crawford was congressional editor for the *Federal Times* and subsequently worked for *Education Week*, where he chronicled much of the current debate. In the process, Crawford became one of the most seasoned and astute observers of the politics of bilingual education. In addition, he collected a wealth of material, some of which he reported in *Education Week* and much of which fleshes out the argument of this book. Indeed, Crawford brings the whole picture into focus in this highly readable and engaging book, which provides a fascinating glimpse into this complex policy issue.

The book bears the stamp of journalism at its best, with chapters that concisely treat a broad array of issues. Chapters on history discuss language loyalty, bilingualism, and the role of English from colonial times through the beginnings of federal involvement in the 1960s. Chapters on politics cogently describe the movement to legislate English as the official language of the U.S. and the general political landscape that surrounds this highly charged issue. Chapters on theory describe the de-

### *Bilingual Education History, Politics, Theory, and Practice*

By James Crawford  
204 pp. Trenton, New Jersey  
Crane Publishing, \$16.98  
(To order, call 609/586-6400)

bate on the effectiveness of bilingual programs and proposed alternatives (such as structured immersion), and Crawford aptly summarizes the major findings about language acquisition and bilingualism. Chapters on practice show bilingual programs at work in diverse settings, with considerable emphasis on California's attempts to turn bilingual theory into practice. At the end of the book, Crawford provides a useful list of resources and suggested readings.

In short, though this book is appropriate for many audiences, it is required reading for policymakers, administrators, and education advocates—or, for that matter, for anyone with an interest in the awkward, ambiguous, and at times sinister treatment immigrants and their languages often receive. I plan to keep a copy to lend anyone I run across who is possessed by the many myths about bilingualism and language policy in the U.S. I would also find the book useful in graduate seminars on educational policymaking, for it teaches the lesson of serendipity and the illusion of research-based rationality.

One of the great advantages of a brief and readable book is the opportunity it affords to take in the large, complex picture in one swallow and see what impressions remain.

First, a crossing of messages clearly occurs in the debate: Advocates try to appeal to rationality and equity, using basic research findings and theory, while op-

ponents rely on the symbolic politics of race and language and appeal in large part to cultural conservatives and xenophobes.

Second, the historical parallels with the 19th-century debates, such as those involving German-Americans, are striking; for then as now, in the words of historian Joel Perlmann, "The debates did not focus on whether kids would learn math better in German or in English, or whether they were emotionally better off learning German skills first. The central issues, the ones that were always raised, had to do with being a good American and creating a good America."

Third, bilingual education is a tremendously potent issue for politicians seeking attention in the news media, as the actions of former Education Secretary William Bennett attest.

Fourth, research has had trivial impact on the policy-making process; indeed, research has seldom made its way outside the immediate professional groups serving language-minority students.

And finally, lost somewhere in the ambiguous shifting sands of debate is the preciousness of the humanitarian dimensions of bilingualism.

The book is not without its weaknesses. Crawford has increasingly associated himself with those who favor bilingual education (the so-called "English-plus" movement), and perspectives do shade even a good reporter's style (as they should). Thus, his book will be of greater appeal to bilingual educators than, say, to a member of U.S. English. The chapters on research are choppy than the others, and at times Crawford gets bogged down in detail.

On balance, however, Crawford has written an excellent book by applying his extensive Washington journalistic experience to the inner workings of bilingual education. His book is a readable and objective encapsulation of a complex problem that cannot be handled without understanding its multidimensional and often ambiguous faces. □

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