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ABSTRACT

Mexican American children have made poor progress in special education programs as currently structured. Existing data appear to indicate that minority children, particularly Mexican American, continue to be placed in special education out of proportion to their numbers in the general population. Although the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) requires that each child referred to special education receive a comprehensive assessment using valid tests administered in the child's dominant language, current assessment practices lead to mislabelling and misplacing Mexican American students. Lack of trained personnel makes it impossible to provide appropriate services to bilingual special education children as mandated by PL 94-142. The development of instructional programs is hampered by lack of knowledge about the learning styles and cognitive development in minority group, bilingual children. Comprehensive, evaluated programs taking these factors into account have not been developed or proven effective for minority group handicapped children. A school district's philosophy of bilingual education and the type of language instruction provided will have a major impact on bilingual special education students. Parental involvement in a child's total educational program has recently become a principle intervention strategy and should be used with minority group parents. (JH2)

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ERIC DIGEST

# MEXICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

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## Bilingual Special Education Is Appropriate For Mexican-American Children With Mildly Handicapping Conditions

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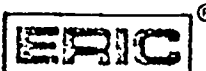
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By

Richard F. Rodriguez

January 1988

RC 016 591



CLEARINGHOUSE ON RURAL EDUCATION and SMALL SCHOOLS

BILINGUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION  
IS APPROPRIATE FOR  
MEXICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN  
WITH MILDLY HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS

It is apparent that for a certain number of handicapped children, the goal of receiving an appropriate public education may not be achieved. This category of handicapped children includes those of cultural and linguistic groups dissimilar from the majority culture, children whose handicapping condition creates special difficulties in fostering adequate educational experiences.

Determinants in the Education of Mexican American Handicapped Children

There are several factors which are indicative of the poor progress Mexican American children have made in special education as presently structured. These factors demonstrate the need for developing more appropriate special education programs and for training personnel to deal with the diverse needs of this unique group of handicapped children. These factors include the following:

Overrepresentation of Mexican American Children in Special Education

Existing data appear to indicate that minority children, particularly Mexican American, continue to be placed in special

education out of proportion to their numbers in the general population. The area where the data have proven most noticeable has been in classes for the mildly handicapped (Ortiz and Maldonado-Colon, 1986; Ortiz and Yates, 1983; Maestas, 1981).

### Policies & Procedures Related to Assessment

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) requires that each child referred to special education receive a comprehensive assessment using valid tests administered in the child's dominant language, but current assessment practices lead to mislabelling and misplacing Mexican American students (Rodriguez & Others, 1984; Archuleta & Cervantes, 1981). Adequate standardized assessment instruments which can fairly assess children of different linguistic or cultural groups have not yet been developed. In addition, there do not exist sufficient numbers of professional personnel trained to properly interpret the results by taking into account discrepancies related to non-traditional or atypical students. At least one research study has shown that evaluation procedures for some Hispanic students fail to consider language status in identification, assessment and eventual placement (Wilkinson & Others, 1986). Research by Cummins (1982) emphasizes the distinction that needs to be made between the strictly psycholinguistic aspects of language mastery and sociolinguistic or pragmatic aspects. Although the psycholinguistic aspects appear to play a major role in cognitive development, the

pragmatic or communicative aspects of language need also be considered to play a major role in such development and in social competence.

### Lack of Minority Personnel in Special Education

One of the foreseeable problems in providing services to previously unserved or inappropriately served minority children, as mandated by recent federal legislation (PL 94-142), is the lack of trained personnel. Appropriate assessment methods, curriculum development, consultation, and program and material evaluation are only a few of the areas where specially prepared professionals and programs will be needed if the intent of PL 94-142 is to be realized. However, at present, few minority professionals exist in special education and related fields, especially at the Master's or post-Master's level of training. In fact, Hispanics constitute approximately 2 percent of all teachers in elementary and secondary schools (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1976).

Another problem is that few, if any, of the non-minority personnel presently working with bilingual special education children have ever had formal training in systematically evaluated, appropriate techniques useful in working with this group of children. At present, there exist few formal programs of training for those wishing to work in special education settings with bilingual children.

Research efforts have identified specific competencies deemed important for inclusion into the training of personnel to teach minority handicapped children (Prieto & Others, 1981). Although these training competencies cannot and should not be interpreted as the definitive answer to content changes needed in teacher preparation curricula, they do provide some pertinent information useful to program development and curriculum specialists in public school or university settings, thereby offering appropriate, systematic educational experiences to prospective and/or continuing teachers. These competencies include familiarity with the following:

The cultural characteristics of bilingual/multicultural, exceptional children.

The language and/or dialects of certain bilingual/multicultural children, i.e. with the code-switching ability of Chicano children.

How to assess bilingual/multicultural exceptional children in terms of classroom performance, through the use of criterion-referenced tests or a task analytic approach.

Specific method/materials, i.e., of readings which are relevant and appropriate to the population.

The different learning styles and learning characteristics of bilingual/multicultural children.

How to utilize the role of the family and involve parents in the educational process.

Methods of training parents to work with their children on school related tasks at home.

Knowledge of federal and state laws governing the education of bilingual/multicultural children.

The competencies listed above and suggested as important for inclusion into teacher-training curricula include skill in

assessment, reading methods, and parental involvement. The relative importance attached to the need for criterion-referenced measurement techniques may suggest that criterion-referenced data is more useful to teachers working with this population than is normative information. If so, the implication for teacher training program changes is obvious (Prieto, & Others, 1981).

### **Developing Instructional Programs**

There have been suggestions in the published literature that education as presently structured does not take into account diverse learning styles and cognitive development in minority group, bilingual children (Council for Exceptional Children Handbook, 1980). In support of this, other research shows that children from various cultural/linguistic groups differ with respect to such important educational variables as preferred styles, relational and other personality configurations, perceptual-cognitive patterns, family structure, attitude toward the educational process, sex role development, linguistic development and maternal teaching strategies (Lacsa, 1978). At present, comprehensive, evaluated programs taking these factors into account have not been developed or proven effective for minority group handicapped children. With few exceptions, minority group exceptional children remain unserved.

It is important to exercise caution in the development of educational programs for this population. A review of the

literature indicates an increase in the amount of empirical research and the knowledge base concerning bilingual children. It is important to avoid the temptation to adopt this information uncritically and apply it to bilingual handicapped populations. Before wholesale adoption takes place, there are some important questions that need to be addressed. For example, although recent studies have found bilingual children to exhibit certain cognitive advantages (Cummins, 1978, 1982), does the same hold true for a handicapped bilingual child? Are there interactive effects due to handicapping conditions as well as to cultural/linguistic status? For example, is an emotionally disturbed bilingual child rejected both for inappropriate behavior and minority status? The solutions to these and other questions will have significant impact on the development of instructional materials.

Along with the above questions, there is also a major concern which has to do with the different bilingual programs established by the local education agencies. There are a variety of ways to describe the types of programs that may be used. One way to address the problem is by "non-response," that is, to ignore that non-English speakers exist in the school. Another way can be termed "extinction," that is, to forbid the use of the non-English language.

A third alternative is the Transition Program, one based to a large extent, on the melting pot concept of assimilation. With this type of program, instruction is in both languages, but



transition is planned and the program aims at shifting to a monolingual English program. This program stresses the learning of English with no or little reinforcement of the native language, except as a "starting point."

A fourth alternative, which is somewhat controversial, is the Maintenance Program. This program begins with instruction in both languages and continues in both languages with the deliberate goal of building and extending both linguistic systems. The Maintenance Bilingual Program is often referred to as a self-sustaining program of developing the native language while learning English with equal proficiency and competence. This program is based on the concept of cultural pluralism, which stipulates the incorporation of the language, culture and learning styles of individual children into the educational process, thus allowing them to remain identified with home socialization experiences.

Programming for children as well as teacher-training programs will be affected by the bilingual philosophy adopted. Without a philosophical direction, programs will at best develop serendipitously rather than parsimoniously. Those who argue for maintenance programs do so by objecting to transitional programs as essentially a burnt bridge approach; that is, the ethnic language is seen only as a bridge to the non-ethnic language - one to be crossed as rapidly as possible-and then destroyed as a legitimate medium of general instruction. On the other hand, those who favor transitional programs do so on the basis of

assimilation and acculturation into the dominant culture. Since these philosophies are quite different and hold out very different goals, we, as educators and citizens, must assist in determining which philosophy our school district will adopt.

### **The Role of the Parents**

Parental involvement in a child's total educational program has recently become a principle intervention strategy. Communicating with parents, particularly minority group parents, requires effort in searching for ways to convey information. Attempts aimed at involving minority group parents should be continued until the right one is discovered, that is, until the parents come. It requires an openness on the part of the teacher to accept the parent, not as a combatant in a battlefield, but rather as a useful and reliable resource in the classroom (Kroth, 1975). It is a challenge for which there is assistance. The State of New Mexico Title I Advisory Board on Parental Involvement (1978), as one example, developed some suggestions for educators to use with parents of Title I children, suggestions consistent with PL 94-142. These are as follows:

#### Involving Parents in Policy/Decision-Making

The framework of PL 94-142 allows more inclusion of parental input than parents are accustomed to. Parents are indeed capable of participating in policy and decisionmaking, but need sufficient information and instruction in order to do so.

Passing out information is frequently not enough to train parents adequately; therefore, a workshop where such materials are explained and where there is an opportunity for parents to ask questions in a non-threatening atmosphere is needed. It is important that money be allowed at the district level for parent training workshops.

### Parents in the School and in the Classroom

It is of major importance to persuade parents to feel free to come into the school as visitors or as helpers. Their presence and participation should be sincerely welcomed and eagerly solicited by teachers and administrators.

Parents can make a valuable contribution as tutors to reinforce classroom learning. The most important step in this direction is to keep parents informed about what is going on in the classroom so that they may follow up classroom activities in the home. In this regard, it would be useful to train parents on techniques to help children practice new skills. They might be included in workshops provided for teachers, as well as in Parent Effectiveness Training or other self-concept related training.

When parents become trained classroom assistants or volunteers, there are many tasks that they can perform, such as providing audiovisual assistance, preparing materials, assisting in laboratory classes, recordkeeping, and working as teachers' aides to provide more individualized instruction. Their presence in the classroom, particularly in the primary grades, helps

children make the transition from home to school much easier.

### More Effective Parental Involvement

In districts with sufficient funds, it is most advantageous to hire a full-time person who can devote time to parent involvement and make the personal contacts which are so very important. This is a justifiable expenditure under PL 94-142 and perhaps one of the best ways to insure that parental involvement receives the attention it needs.

Parents must be kept informed in order to be helpful in meetings and to their children. A district newsletter could be useful in this regard, both for announcing and reporting about meetings and for keeping parents informed on activities in the classroom. Parents might either assist with the newsletter or produce it themselves. Another service the newsletter could perform would be to keep parents and teachers aware of changes in regulations or new requirements.

### Evaluating Parental Involvement

In evaluating the effectiveness of a parental involvement program, the following questions might be asked:

How many total parents are involved in the school program?

How many parents are involved in the classroom, decision-making, and other phases of the program?

How often are parents making suggestions or asking questions about the district's educational programs?

Are there any cognitive or affective changes in the children?

What changes have occurred in teachers in relation to parental involvement?

Is the parental involvement component changing in response to changing needs and skills of parents, community, teachers, and aides?

Are there other local, state, and national agencies that would coordinate and complement the efforts of PL 94-142?

Are parents disseminating information to other parents and community agencies?

Are parental attitudes toward school and teachers changing?

Are teacher attitudes toward parents and community changing?

Are the attitudes of children toward parents, teachers and the community changing?

The answers to the above questions can give parents, teachers and administrators a good measure of the commitment and effort that is being put into a parent involvement component.

### Some Final Points

In applying the educational principles of "meeting the child at his/her level," teachers must also address the language and cultural background of the child, thereby helping to individualize instruction. This skill becomes an absolute must in a classroom setting where the language and culture of the child become variables to consider as important as the handicapping condition itself.

It is no mystery today that the special education teacher is no better prepared to teach bilingual exceptional children than the regular educator who first referred them. Non-discriminatory assessment methods, appropriate and relevant curriculum, and

program/materials evaluation are only a few of the areas where information is critically needed. The need, then, exists not only for training educators to teach bilingual exceptional children but also for developing more appropriate methods and materials.

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