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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the education of Mexican-American students along the Mexico-United States border. A brief review of historical and cultural perspectives suggests that the Mexican population in the border area continues to increase because the area is culturally and linguistically accomodating. Schools that teach the dominant Anglo culture fail in providing equal educational opportunities to students whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are different. Mexican-American students along the border score lower on achievement tests when compared to their ethnic counterparts away from the border and when compared to Anglo students. The assignment of Mexican-American students to special education classes in border schools is disproportionately high. Mexican-American students along the border have successfully resisted acculturation. Limited English proficiency, however, is a major obstacle to the students' educational achievement. The goals of bilingual education programs are to build on the cultural strengths that the child brings to the classroom, to reinforce native language, to capitalize on the biculture elements in constructing a curriculum, and to retain teachers who are trained and identified with both traditions. Although in Texas all elementary schools are required to have bilingual education programs, it is questionable how effective these programs are in meeting the needs of Mexican-American students and in encouraging cultural and linguistic diversity. (LP)

BILINGUAL EDUCATION: A NEW BEGINNING

Manuel T. Pacheco

Speech to Rio Grande Forum
University of Texas at El Paso
April 3, 1985

Open Forum No. 1

I wish to thank you for this opportunity to speak to you tonight on a subject that is not just of concern to speakers of a language other than English, but to all Texans and to this nation.

I want to preface my remarks, however, with a thought expressed by George Bereday, an expert on comparative education. His view of education is especially pertinent this evening. Bereday wrote:

> Education is a mirror held against the face of people: nations may put on blustering shows of strength to conceal political weakness, erect grand facades to conceal shabby backgrounds, and profess peace while secretly arming for conquest, but how they take care of their children tells unerringly who they are.

The large number of recent reports critical of American education point to the conclusion that we have not taken very good care of our children. If we consider the educational achievement of minority youth we find that the result is worse. Using almost any criterion that we may wish to select, we find that the situation along the border from California to the southernmost tip of Texas is appalling. The serious under-education of Mexican Americans on the U.S.-Mexico border implies numerous shortcomings about our society and its commitment to educational opportunities for its young citizens. In spite of our statements concerning the goals of democratic education, the facts clearly indicate that the educational enterprise continues to fail in its mission to provide equal educational benefits to students whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds are not compatible with what the schools continue to expect. For example, a review of TABS (Texas Assessment of Basic Skills) scores, SAT and ACT scores, and standardized achievement test scores shows that Mexican Americans on the border are less successful than their ethnic counterparts away from the border. Similarly, assignment of Mexican-American students to special

education classes for learning, mentally or emotionally disabled continues to be disproportionately high. Other data indicate that the Mexican-American student has successfully resisted acculturation and does not fully participate in the larger society or in its educational institutions.

Schools very consciously attempt to teach the dominant culture to all children and especially to ethnically distinct groups. Educational institutions use a number of methods to test or sample the degree to which an individual or group has internalized the culture which is taught, i.e., the knowledge and skills of the parent society. These methods include all forms of achievement tests, IQ tests, and mental maturity tests as well as less formal, more subjective measures in the form of grades. Mexican Americans on the border as a group fail to achieve as well as their Anglo counterparts in the more subjective evaluations of achievement. In the area of language arts, they achieve at a rate substantially lower than national norms or their local Anglo classmates. In the area of reading, they generally fail to reach the level of proficiency generally acquired by others. Since the American culture is carried in the English language, such low performance indicates that there is also low group acculturation. Needless to say, there are numerous individual exceptions and many schools that violate these generalizations. Achievement in computational skills also is low; however, it is generally higher than in language arts.

A brief historical and cultural perspective may help to understand the situation better.

As you well know, the extraordinary development of the border culture can be attributed principally to the confluence of Indian, Hispanic and Anglo cultures. The first cultural interchange between indigenous and European peoples occurred in 1528 with the Spanish explorers and, with the founding of Santa Fe in 1609, the colonization of the region began. The attempts of the Spanish crown to colonize the border eleven years before the

arrival of the Pilgrims on the east coast was not as successful as the colonization of the Aztecs, Incas, and Chibchas. Nonetheless, after two centuries of Spanish dominance, a certain amalgam of a few native and European cultural elements could be found. By 1821, when Mexico won its independence, the foundation for a regional culture on the border had already been established even though the area was sparesely populated. The Spaniards had left social, economic, political, and cultural systems as a legacy to their Mexican descendants that persist to some degree today. The Spanish introduced systems of ranching, irrigation, mining, architecture, laws to protect the family, culinary arts, music, and the Spanish language, which has always remained strong.

These cultural characteristics that typify the border area have continued their natural evolvement despite the fact that the entire area was ceded to the United States after the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. The Anglo adopted many Mexican cultural practices while, at the same time, Mexicans assumed many Anglo cultural characteristics. This interchange has continued without interruption despite the fact that Anglo and Mexican-American communities within the United States have not always had completely amicable relations.

The Anglo domination signified an economic, political, and social conquest to the Mexican natives of the region. However, it did not mean a cultural conquest. The Mexican persisted in retaining his culture, his religion, and his language. At the same time, little attempt was made by the Anglo to incorporate the Mexican American into the social and cultural milieu of the United States as was done with immigrant Europeans who were arriving in large numbers on the east coast. On the contrary, over the years a large number of Mexican Americans suffered through many instances of loss of land and reduction to the status of second-class citizens. The situation was greatly exacerbated with the massive influx of Mexican refugees who crossed the border

fleeing from the ravages of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917. Included among the immigrants were upper-class Mexicans who were political refugees and impoverished farm workers who hoped to improve their economic lot.

With the advent of the Depression in 1929, many of these Mexican workers were deported. However, by 1942 the United States again needed Mexican workers' labor and established the bracero program that brought almost four million new Mexicans to this country by 1960. More recently, poor economic conditions in Mexico and the relative prosperity of the United States have combined to attract large numbers of Mexicans to this country and to border cities in Mexico.

Thus, the border area continues to increase its population by Mexicans who view the border as a "home away from home" that is culturally and linguistically accommodating. Some decide to move further north where there are more opportunities for economic gain. Many remain, however, The result is that there is more communication and interdependence between border communities in Mexico and the United States than between these communities and their respective national political centers. The recent devaluations of the Mexican peso, for example, influenced the economic situation of border cities much more severely than elsewhere. This process of interchange in almost all aspects of life along the border has encouraged the development of a regional culture that combines elements of Mexican and American sociocultural characteristics.

Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that the social and cultural exchange has not necessarily been equal in effect or influence. These exchanges have taken different forms. Thus, while some communities of Anglos and Mexican Americans in the United States have been kept separate due to geographic conditions, others have been obligated to share the same territory, which has given rise to dual communities. There are cities and towns along

the border which are identifiable by ic group and where economic development or the lack of it are clearly marked. This situation has produced a variety of results. In some instances we can find extreme racial conflict, in others an extraordinary sense of peaceful coexistence, and in still others a cultural and social integration of Anglos and Mexican Americans. These social foras of cooperation and competition, separation and assimilation, and conflict and tolerance between these two groups has not interrupted the flow of ideas, technology, and goods between the two groups. Each ethnic group has been able to adopt various cultural characteristics from the other without losing its own ethnic or cultural identity.

Among the cultural characteristics that the Mexican American has assiduously guarded is the Spanish language. It has been preserved in a remarkably standard form generation after generation. Accompanying this linguistic perseverance has been the strong traditional value system that depends to a large extent on the reinforcement it gets from the closely knit family. It is still true that in many instances these characteristics are identical with those in Mexico. However, as length of residence in the United States, degree of urbanization of the family, and degree of economic and political strength increase and identity with Mexican history decreases, these cultural characteristics have become less well defined. Consequently, a range of attitudes, bilingual skills, and strength of traditional values can be found in children and their parents. Thus, when children go to school a variety of educational needs can be identified that may be similar to those of majority children in some respects but very often are different and require special attention.

As you know, education has been the traditional entry point into mainstream America for millions of children. American schools have fostered an unprecedented degree of social mobility, cultural cohesiveness, and respect for traditional democratic

values essential to our culture. For that, we have much to be proud of. In the transmission of society's values, the American schools have ministered to children who brought with them many cultures and a multiplicity of tongues. More often than not, the school has found its children in poverty and sometimes in neglect. Increasingly, the schools have recognized that their success in taking the child lies not only in meeting his academic needs but also in confronting the reality of the social context in which the child was found. Thus, a philosophy has developed in the educational system that the student must be changed so that the schools may ultimately incorporate the student into the existing system.

Early immigrants to America entered an education system geared to prepare them for a labor-intensive market. The early industrial economy of the twentieth century did not require a great amount of formal schooling. Many of these immigrant groups had upward of three generations to assimilate into the mainstream of American culture.

Today that scenario has changed dramatically. Jobs in America require a basic knowledge of English. Our economy has changed from what economists call labor intensive to capital intensive. An immigrant who wants to succeed in America today must either arrive with money or quickly gain a diploma, a degree, or some other credential to compete in America's fast-paced and increasingly information-based society. To get the credentials necessary to compete in American society today requires formal schooling and an ability to speak and write the English language.

Families no longer have three generations to assimilate into the American culture. If a family is to remain economically independent, an efficient and effective program of education is essential. A recent report noted, "Simple literacy will not suffice in today's labor market. A high school diploma is the bare minimum for most jobs in the modern job market, and is an

essential prerequisite for attending college and specialized schools which increase earning potential."

Today the nation has approximately 4.5 million children of limited English proficiency. They are one of the most undereducated groups of children in the United States. These children have tended to fall so far behind their peers in subject matter mastery that even after reaching a degree of English proficiency they never catch up. The drop-out rate is far in excess of that for other groups. Of the millions of children with limited proficiency in English, more than 70 percent are Hispanic. The failure of traditional public schools with Hispanic children has created an enormously large number of children who are and will remain undereducated in a society where education is the key to success.

Statistics indicate that 40 percent or more of Hispanics, up to the age of 25, completed four years of high school compared with more than 70 percent of the population as a whole. In this context, then, we must devise an educational system that does two things: teach students English and make sure they learn the things they have to know to succeed in the broader economy and society.

In its efforts to assimilate all of its charges, the American school has attempted to change the cultural identity of the child. It has often forced an abandonment of the ancestral language, and it has developed in children the ambivalence of language, culture, ethnicity, and personal self-affirmation.

Yet, a persistent theme in all of the literature that deals with the minority child is the absolute necessity for the school to build on the cultural strengths that the child brings to the classroom, to cultivate cultural pride, to reinforce the language that is spoken natively, to capitalize on the bicultural elements in constructing a curriculum to reflect both traditions, and to retain teachers who are trained and identified with both cultures.

Many social, political, and economic forces have brought the serious conditions of the Mexican-American population to society's attention, and educator-scholars, school practitioners, and community leaders along the border are taking an active role in providing knowledge and leadership that is leading to innovations in the education of students in schools along the border. An increasing number of communities recognize that the school is the only primary social institution under their control; as such, it is being pressured to initiate programs that will radically improve the academic achievement and school attainment of children of Mexican descent. In so doing, it is believed that students will be provided with the skills and credentials that are essential to climb the social ladder. Many educators have willingly accepted this role in spite of the many problems and controversies that exist.

The most common educational response to educational underachievement for the limited English proficiency student on the border is programs of bilingual education for elementary schools and English as a second language for secondary schools. Bilingual education programs have two primary objectives: to enable limited English proficiency students to continue learning until English has been mastered and to enable students to learn English. In order to accomplish these two objectives, students are taught the basic subjects in the existing language which assures that normal cognitive and conceptual development will not be hindered and English is taught as a subject, intensively but in a comprehensible manner. Normally, as English language skills are acquired, the burden of learning through English is increased with a concomitant reduction in the dependency on Spanish for learning school subjects. Typically, students will be exited from instruction in both languages after it can be shown that students have enough mastery of English to learn through that language. Acceptable language proficiency and standardized

language achievement test scores are used for this purpose. English as a Second Language (ESL) programs have the primary objective of providing language skills in English that will enable students to continue to learn in the regular curriculum. While several models of ESL instruction exist, they are all intensive and focus on classroom survival and academic language proficiency skills. Several federal court decisions in the 1970s and legislation in Texas in 1974 and 1980 have gone beyond the mere encouragement of such programs and have mandated instruction in other languages in schools where there are concentrations of children who do not master English well enough for the purposes of learning in school.

In Texas, S.B. 477 requires that a school provide a program of bilingual education in the elementary grades where there are twenty or more students in a single grade level who are dominant in a language other than English. A school may provide either a program of bilingual education or ESL at the middle/junior high level and must provide an ESL or other special language development program at the high school level. Schools that are not mandated to have bilingual education programs must provide an ESL or other special language development program to all limited English proficiency students regardless of the grade level.

Almost all elementary schools on the Mexico-Texas border implement programs of bilingual education. Thus, the controversy surrounding this educational innovation is very intense. Many misunderstandings arise concerning (1) handicapping the limited English proficiency child by slowing progress in English, which is necessary for educational and economic achievement; (2) encouraging "un-Americanism"--that is, loyalty to another language and culture; and (3) using bilingualism as a screen to cover neglect of learning English. Judging the merits of introducing and maintaining bilingual education

programs becomes complicated because concerns other than the children's educational progress are intruded.

On one side there often is the fear that loss of the mother tongue may accentuate the generation gap in the families of newcomers. On the other side is the fear that maintenance of the mother tongue will accentuate nationalistic pride and will widen the gulf between minorities and the dominant culture. Unsympathetic persons view bilingual education programs as a sign that the minority is getting too many favors. An often expressed criticism is based on patriotic considerations: "We had to learn English; why don't they?" Yet there is no disagreement over the fact that the ability to function in English is an indispensable part of the move toward social and economic attainment. Unfortunately, this basic fact influences the schools to de-emphasize the importance of using the home language for instructional purposes so that the potential positive effects of bilingual instruction are still not being realized in a majority of the schools on the border.

It is still common to find in bilingual education programs not only that English is the primary language in which subjects are taught but that English dominates the entire school life. Children cannot understand or make themselves understood even in the most basic situations because they are required to speak in English first. The effects of this treatment on a child are immediate and deep because language and the culture it carries is at the core of a youngster's concept of himself. It is the instrument of thinking and feeling, the entry to the world. With English as the primary medium of instruction, the child is asked to carry an impossible burden at a time when he can barely understand or speak, let alone read or write, the language. Children immediately fall behind in their schoolwork and may never catch up. One need only review retention rates in border schools to verify that this is happening. They range up to forty

percent in the first grade and up to thirty percent in the third among Mexican American children. Humiliated for their language and values, forced to endure the teaching of a culture that is not yet related to the realities of their lives, it is no wonder that children withdraw mentally, then physically from school. Thus, there are still many instances of denying whole generations of children an education and condemning them to the same poverty and despair that their parents, some of whom suffered the same experiences in school, have endured. Yet, these schools claim to have programs of bilingual education. In point of fact, only a few minutes a day or an hour are devoted to instruction in the mother tongue. Obviously, such programs do not do justice to the educational concept and fail miserably. Yet, sometimes it is the results of such programs that are pointed to as illustrative of the failure of bilingual education.

Fortunately, there is a growing number of bilingual education programs that are experiencing success. Many schools aim to include rather than exclude children by recognizing that bilingualism can be an advantage, not a disadvantage, and by seeking to develop bilingualism as a precious asset rather than to stigmatize it as a defect, such schools teach that diversity is to be enjoyed and valued rather than feared or suspected. Thus a positive cultural milieu is established first for the entire school. Then, by allowing children to begin their schooling in the language they understand best, it is more likely that first experiences with schools will be positive rather than negative. Such practices recognize that language is one of the principal tools through which children learn problem-solving skills in crucial early years. It also takes into account the basic principle that it takes time for a child unfamiliar with the language to achieve a proficiency in it approaching that of a child raised in an English-speaking home. In bilingual education programs, children are taught to read

their own language and to understand, speak, read, and write English. When children enter school already speaking and understanding a language, they are more likely to be able to read it first. Furthermore, recent research from this country and many others indicates that development of literacy in one's native language actually enhances the ability to learn English. Having learned the mechanics of the reading act in a familiar language, students are able to apply their skill in learning to read another language which is simultaneously being developed.

In addition to facilitating the learning of English, many recent research studies show bilingual education to have other benefits. And although this educational alternative has not been researched extensively on the border, those studies that have been conducted indicate that:

(1) The drop-out rate of students who participate in bilingual education programs has improved dramatically.

(2) Self-concept measures show that students have a higher esteem of themselves and their family.

(3) Where students have been continued in bilingual education programs for four or more years because schools have a philosophical commitment to continued development of the home language beyond that mandated by legislation, more and better learning of academic subjects can be documented in both languages.

(4) Students who have participated in bilingual education programs for five or more years have better problem-solving skills and are more creative than their monolingual fellow students. Test scores indicate that these bilinguals are superior to monolinguals in concept formation and in tasks that require mental or symbolic flexibility.

(5) English-dominant students who participate in bilingual education programs achieve as well in content areas as their counterparts in monolingual programs in spite of having been taught Spanish. The converse for Spanish-dominant students taught in English is not true. Apparently, sociological factors and the fact that English has a different national priority accounts for this finding.

Conversely, it has been found that when formal education does not take into account the native language, children will be high risk for underachievement, alienation, and dropping out of school, as has been the case even to the present time.

Recently, a border columnist accurately summarized the status of bilingual education on the border when he stated that bilingualism, like the prophet, is without honor or home. In calling for programs of bilingual education for the gifted, he suggested that average students would then try to become bilingual too. Furthermore, if the assets of bilingual children should be recognized, the schools could become a model for the nation. However, he stated, in all probability the total schools would continue to grumble about the burden of mandated bilingual education in the early grades and continue to exit students from these programs as soon as they get the hang of English.

Perhaps at some future date recognition will be given to the principle that education builds on strengths, not weaknesses. When that day comes, education on the border will have lived up to its potential.

Manuel T. Pacheco is President of Laredo State University in Texas. Formerly Associate Dean of the College of Education at the University of Texas at El Paso and Education Policy Aide for the Governor of New Mexico, Dr. Pacheco has held various faculty and administrative positions at universities in Florida, Colorado, California, and Texas. He also has done consulting work for over 100 school districts across the United States and serves on a number of state, regional, and national committees and boards dealing with education issues. He received his Ph.D. in Foreign Language Education from Ohio State University in 1969 and has published widely in the fields of bilingual education and second language teaching. Dr. Pacheco's speech for the Rio Grande Forum was based on his article, "Embracing a Culture: In Defense of Bilingual Education," Texas Humanist, March-April, 1984, pp. 34-35.

The purpose of the Rio Grande Forum is to provide opportunities for interested persons in and outside the university to participate in the discussion of issues of importance to our border and Hispanic community. Each semester two sessions are held at the University of Texas at El Paso, featuring knowledgeable speakers with a discussion period following the presentation. It is hoped that through this program participants will gain reliable information that will serve to expand their understanding of local and regional issues that have become increasingly complex in recent years. The Forum is sponsored by the Center for Chicano Studies and the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso.

In the tradition of open forums throughout history, the Open Forum series offers a broad range of topics in a variety of formats and serves as a marketplace for open discussion. The authors' opinions and ideas may or may not be in accord with those of Chicano Studies, but in the spirit of free discussion and interchange of ideas, this series will provide a platform for all voices. The only criteria for this series is that the material be relevant to Hispanics and Hispanic issues and that it reflects the concept of *"Nuestra Voz."*