

“Bilingual Education” By Lawrence Newman, *The Deaf American*, May 1973, vol. 25, pp. 12-13

One often wonders how to break the cycle of classroom failure in the education of the deaf. Does the answer lie in bilingual teaching? When I read two articles on bilingual education in the Sunday, June 25, 1972, issue of the **Los Angeles Times** I was struck by the similarities in problems faced by those involved in the education of the deaf with that of the Mexican-Americans.

The **Times** article states that Mexican-Americans who have limited or no English-speaking ability have been expected to achieve academically in English. The article further states that the rationale for bilingual teaching is uncomplicated: A child's first schooling should be in his mother tongue and he should be made literate in that language before attempting to learn another.

An administrator of bilingual programs for Los Angeles schools, Mr. Ramiro Garcia, stated that “One of our failures has been taking for granted that a non-English speaking child would be able to learn English and (academic) concepts simultaneously and do it at the same rate and same speed as English speakers.”

“What the latter approach in fact has too often produced,” adds Garcia, “is a child who falls behind academically as he struggles to learn English—at the same time losing ground in his native language— and who ends up barely functioning in either language.”

It was also mentioned in the **Times** article that “Bilingual teaching also sets social and cultural goals for these children—ranging from bolstering their self-image to building new appreciation for and pride in their cultural roots.”

One who is familiar with the persistent attempts to downgrade manual communication, with the failure to hire deaf teachers for the early and critical learning period, with the feelings of parents, with the approach taken by teacher training centers, cannot help but be struck by parallel aspects related to Mexican-Americans in the following quotations taken from the same **Times** article:

The barriers are usually several: finding qualified bilingual teachers, overcoming racial hostility, diverting funds into the purchase of bilingual materials and convincing a school board that teaching in a language other than English is not somehow un-American.

Sometimes the opposition is from Mexican-American parents themselves, either because of feelings that Spanish is somehow inferior or because of fears that their children will not “make it” in the outside world without learning solely in English.

Teacher training programs in colleges and universities have been slow to recognize the demand but there are a few now preparing bilingual teachers . . .

. . . parents whose children are in the programs seemed pleased by their progress, and teachers with experience in bilingualism are usually enthusiastic salesmen for the approach.

The move toward bilingualism in California has not been without its difficult moments, however. Some school systems have compromised on teaching by employing teachers only partially bilingual or not bilingual at all (assuming the presence of a bilingual teacher aide would make up for that shortcoming).

Some systems have not lived up to the spirit of the program, instead rushing their children into nearly total use of English as fast as possible, virtually ignoring the two-language approach.

The advent of bilingualism has not always been greeted warmly by teachers and administrators in English-as-a-second-language programs . . .

Another article in the same issue of the **Los Angeles Times** takes a closer look in the bilingual classroom:

–A Spanish alphabet on one wall, an English alphabet on the other, and if the bulletin board has heroes of the month pinned up, they will likely be not only Washington and Lincoln but also Hidalgo and Juarez.

–Sometimes, so many adults in the room that it is a minor problem to find the teacher. The adults turn out to be parent volunteers and salaried teacher aides needed for the small group and even one-to-one instruction that is vital in bilingual teaching.

–In the bookcase, an assortment of children's books in both languages including such favorites as “The Cat in the Hat,” and its counterpart in Spanish, “El Gato Ensombreado.”

. . . The first alphabet he learns will be in Spanish. He will learn to read and write first in Spanish, and he will listen as his teacher in Spanish introduces a new arithmetic concept for the first time. While this is going on, however, he will also be introduced to English as a second language in carefully paced steps; hearing and speaking it first, then reading and writing . . . much of the teaching is concurrent—the teacher immediately repeating

in the second language what he or she has just said in the first language. "We find," says Ramiro Garcia of Los Angeles city schools, "that children at an early age are very flexible with language learning. They don't recognize the linguistic barriers that we set up as adults."

One Los Angeles principal who has watched the progress of Mexican-American children in her school both before and after the arrival of bilingual instruction thinks the big difference is the pressure that is suddenly removed. She said she watched children grow frustrated and withdrawn under the strain of trying to learn in a language unfamiliar to them, but under bilingualism, "they blossom, they absolutely blossom."

Besides the frustration, bilingual experts argue, Mexican-American children were often made to feel ashamed of their language in school, especially when they were prohibited from using it. That shame, they say, affected the child's whole attitude toward himself and his school, often setting the child on the road to failure.

Thomas Casso, director of Rowland Unified School District's bilingual program, uses the phrase "psychological cripple" to describe the child caught in this dilemma. Bilingual teaching intends to accomplish just the opposite.

Says Mrs. Dolores Allen, a bilingual coordinator at City Terrace School in Los Angeles, "When children feel comfortable about school, they are ready to learn and they take right off."

The **Times** mentioned that bilingual teaching "has quietly been gathering momentum and may be on the verge of major expansion."

Most of us know that manual communication is the native language of the deaf people. It came to be that way because it has more visual surety than any other medium of communication. Many of us deaf people feel that the failure in the education of the deaf can be traced to the failure to accept manual communication as the deaf people's first language and, on this basis, to designate educational programs for them.

Critics of manual methods contend that it is just for a small group of people, that it is not society's language, and that it is too grammatically distorted to be of any value. Such critics miss the many factors involved that give rise to the merits of utilizing manual communication. Of course, the deaf are a small group of people, but it is their needs that must be met, not society's. With new signs being created, made possible in today's tolerant atmosphere, and the [judicious] use of

fingerspelling, there is much less grammatical distortion. What many critics overlook is the fact that manual communication complements spoken speech. It is able to keep pace with spoken speech which is not grammatically distorted. It reinforces speechreading, enables deaf children to be more aware of spoken language, and gives them a more sure, a more visible input of society's language. More importantly, it is a transference point to society's language in the same way that "Pepin busca la bola" in Spanish becomes "Pepin is looking for the ball" in English.

The sore point is how this transference takes place, its [page 13] quality and extent. How many times have our answers been ignored when critics say that manual communication has been in existence for generations in many schools with no better results than oral methods? Our answers have always been that manual communication was seldom, if ever, utilized during the critical early learning years. Family involvement was based largely on oral-auditory means. The addition of manual communication during the early learning years, both in school and in the home, is a phenomenon of the present decade. Such utilization has made possible startling success stories, without which there would not have been the great inroads made by total communication throughout our nation.

It would be an uphill battle to implement bilingual teaching in schools and programs for the deaf, mainly because too many teachers of young children refuse, or feel they are unable to learn manual communication effectively enough. Also, few teacher training programs make mandatory the learning of manual communication skills.

New approaches should be tried in view of the fact that the language, reading and academic achievement levels of deaf school leavers are nothing short of mediocre. There is some doubt as to whether many schools and programs will initiate such a bold move as the full utilization, commitment and support of bilingual teaching.

A course along bilingual lines has been offered and will be offered again by California State University, Northridge this summer. Perhaps other universities will follow suit, making it possible for research evidence to become available. Or perhaps the impetus for experimentation along bilingual lines will come from

more knowledgeable and informed parent groups aligned with deaf adults who will demand that new ways be tried.

[End article]

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