

# *Key Issues in Bilingual Special Education Work Paper #1 Cultural and Linguistic Diversity*

*Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Children with Disabilities  
New York State Education Department*

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An understanding of the needs of limited English proficient students with disabilities is dependent on an understanding of the child's native and acquired language and culture. That process is the focus of this work paper.

News stories more and more often call our attention to the United States' changing demographics. In fact, in some areas, the minority population is in the process of becoming the majority. In 1997, the Office of Vocational and Educational Services wrote:

*The number of limited English proficient students is increasing in New York State. The number is substantial and reflects a diversity of language backgrounds and learning styles. . . . The special challenge in the education of students with disabilities is to ensure that assessment methods and placement recommendations, which may be appropriate and traditional with English speakers, are not applied unquestioningly to students with whom these methods and recommendations were not designed.*

## **Who Are These Children?**

Many educators admit confusion about their "limited English proficient" or "culturally and linguistically diverse" population. Some educators falsely believe that the "limited English proficiency" is limited to Hispanic students. It is important to realize that children from over 160 different countries are enrolled in schools in New York State. Any child who comes from a home in which a **language other than English** is spoken must be evaluated to determine if he/she is limited English proficient, as defined in Part 154 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education.

The fact that a student speaks another language does not automatically mean that he or she is "limited English proficient". A child who is a native speaker of Spanish, for example, may also be a competent speaker of English. It is important to review the results of the Home

Language Questionnaire and other school records, including the results of language screenings, to help determine the student's language status.

In summary, the student considered to be "culturally and linguistically diverse" is a student who comes from a home in which the primary language spoken is one other than English, and who may be limited in his or her use of English.

## **Why Understand a Student's Culture?**

Language does not exist in a vacuum. In other words, language must be considered within the culture that is its environment. We often pay an off-hand attention to culture when we celebrate cultures during holidays. However, there is much more to culture than holiday celebrations. Language is born within a culture. The use of language preserves the culture and its traditions. Language and culture cannot be separated if we wish to truly know someone.

*Culture involves more than "behaviors" or "strategies"; culture and languages are inseparable from identity and social connectedness. (Guidelines for Services for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Preschool Students with Disabilities Ages 3-5)*

As educators, we know that we should teach using the student's strengths as a springboard. If a child is a visual learner, we make maximum use of the strength in the preparation of our lesson plans. In a similar fashion, educators should adapt instruction to address a child's cultural background and the learning style that is often closely linked to culture. The educator may discover that cultural differences exist in areas such as decorum and discipline; rules for adult, adult-child, and child-child communication; and religious influences on topics such as roles, expectations, and diet (Saville-Troike, 1978 in Garcia and Malkin, 1993).

The educator's challenge is to recognize the

richness of every child's culture. Educators must realize that even though the child is only beginning to share in the majority culture, she or he most definitely brings a culture to the classroom that the teacher can use to reach the child.

### **Diversity among Diverse Populations**

One of the major misconceptions held by educators is that all "culturally and linguistically diverse" students have the same needs. Somehow, we feel that there is one, singular "diverse" culture to which all these students belong. This is not a feeling that holds up when examined.

Students in our classrooms today come from many different countries, each with a majority and most likely multiple minority cultures. To make it even more complex, and confusing, a single language group such as Spanish includes speakers from Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean, South America, and Central America, as well as children who grew up as Spanish speakers in Puerto Rico or the mainland United States. Each of these environments has its own customs and traditions; although the students may be too polite to point out our ignorance if we overlook the differences, they are quite apparent to community members.

### **Factors Affecting Performance or Behavior**

To fully understand the issues associated with cultural diversity, we must also consider that some children who are culturally and linguistically diverse also may have:

- come to the United States after an extended stay in another country to which they were forced to immigrate from their homelands,
- experienced traumatic events such as war and other civil disturbances,
- been subjected to forced family separations,
- had little or no formal schooling before arriving in the United States, and/or
- live lives of chronic poverty and disruption in the United States.

In summary, children are born within a family in a specific country, learn to speak one of the country's languages, and may have experienced traumatic events before they arrive at our classroom doors. Our recognition of and

attempts to understand these factors will help us make the educational experience a worthwhile experience for them as students.

### **Implications for the School District**

A culturally-responsive school district should have a student registration process in place that at a minimum collects information on the student's country of origin and language use. The New York State Education Department has developed a Home Language Survey form available in English and in other languages to be shared with parents or guardians to solicit this information. The district should also employ bilingual personnel who can interview parents concerning the student's prior home and educational experiences. This information must be shared with the classroom teacher.

The school district should also use the free technical assistance services available in New York State for general education culturally and linguistically diverse students by contacting the Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Centers (BETACs) and in special education through the bilingual specialists assigned to the Special Education Training and Resource Centers (SETRCs). Bilingual SETRC Professional Development Specialists are particularly helpful to districts in the process of separating potential disabilities from cultural and/or linguistic differences. These resources can provide information on cultural differences and educational programs which have been successful with the children.

### **Resources**

New York State Education Department (1997). Guidelines for Services for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Preschool Students with Disabilities Ages 3-5.

Toward Defining Programs and Services for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners in Special Education. Garcia, Shernaz and Diana Malkin pp. 32-38 in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Fall (1993)

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## **The Assessment and Placement of Language Minority Students. ERIC/CUE Digest, Number 89.**

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In the fall of 1992, a nine-year-old boy from Beijing, China, came to New York City. His neighborhood school, without asking his parents about his language abilities or testing him--either one of which would have shown that he spoke no English--placed him in a monolingual English fourth grade classroom. There, his teacher, who did not believe in the value of bilingual education or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, gave him a Chinese-English dictionary and expected him to learn the language on his own. Needless to say, he did not do well in class.

### **BACKGROUND**

Unfortunately, the boy from China is not unique; as of 1990, a full 14 percent of the school-aged population in the United States came from language minority backgrounds, an increase of 38 percent over 1980 ("Census Reports," 1992). In cities like Los Angeles, the growth in the enrollment of language minority students has outstripped the growth in total district enrollment--a trend likely to continue (Wasney & Wilde, 1987).

Significant numbers of these students are not being properly identified by educators. A recent study of Asian and Hispanic eighth graders, three-quarters of whom came from bilingual homes, found that teachers identified only 27 percent of the Asian students and 39 percent of the Hispanic students as language minority (Bradby, Owings, & Quinn, 1992).

Although the 1974 Supreme Court decision in *LAU v. NICHOLS* required schools to provide LEP students with educational opportunities reflecting their language needs, it did not specify how to do this. Accordingly, districts across the country have met the law's requirements with a wide variety of services, including transitional bilingual programs, pullout ESL classes, individualized courses of study, and even sink-or-swim English "immersion" classes.

Most districts place new language minority students into age-appropriate grade levels, but they must also determine whether the students need bilingual or ESL services. And, unfortunately, the accurate identification of students for language services--as distinct

from other compensatory services--remains among the most serious problems facing schools today (Rossell & Baker, 1988).

## **THE RANGE OF POLICIES**

Because the story of bilingual education in the United States has been as much about political controversy as about actual practices, assessment procedures in a school often reflect local politics as well as student needs. And, since the number of students in special programs often determines financial support, funding policies can have a direct impact upon student placement (Clements, Lara, & Cheung, 1992).

Thus, no single universally accepted model has been developed for any aspect of the language assessment process; the screening and evaluation of students vary widely from state to state and even from school to school. Still, all districts must address two fundamental issues with regard to their students: (1) determine which students to test; and (2) develop the testing mechanism.

● **IDENTIFICATION.** Some districts attempt to evaluate all incoming students to identify those in need of language services, while others simply place students into classes and wait until problems emerge; some districts fall somewhere in between. In New York City, for example, all students with Hispanic surnames are automatically evaluated, while others are evaluated only if there is some reason to do so. This policy, instituted in 1975 as a "temporary" measure in the wake of a lawsuit brought against the city's schools by the city's Puerto Rican community (Santiago, 1986), remains in place today.

● **ASSESSMENT.** Some districts have few, if any, formalized assessment procedures, while others perform extensive multi-dimensional testing (De George, 1988). Still, most districts employ some combination of measures, including one or more of the following (Department of Education, 1991):

- \* information from teachers, or teacher referrals;
- \* information from parents, often in the form of a formalized Home Language Survey;
- \* evaluation of records from previous schools;
- \* appraisal of the student's academic level; and
- \* appraisal of the student's language skills.

Most common among these alternatives is some variety of formalized testing, with 49 states using either language proficiency exams, criterion-referenced achievement tests, or both. Thirty states use information from teachers and 27 use a Home Language Survey to screen students (Department of Education, 1991). Unfortunately, none of these methods is ideal, in large part because there is no national consensus on a workable definition of a limited English proficient (LEP) student (Department of Education, 1991).

## **TEACHER INFORMATION AND THE HOME LANGUAGE SURVEY**

In most cases, information from teachers and the Home Language Survey act as screening mechanisms for schools to determine if further evaluation is necessary. Of the two, the Home Language Survey is the most standardized, since teacher information can be subjective. The California Home Language Survey, which is supposed to be given to all incoming students, and is typical, asks four questions (California State Department of Education, 1989):

- \* What language did your son or daughter learn when he or she first began to talk?
- \* What language does your son or daughter most frequently use at home?
- \* What language do you use most frequently to speak to your son or daughter?
- \* What language is most often spoken by the adults at home?

If the answer to any question is something other than English, the student must take a language proficiency exam.

While the Survey can provide important student information, some parents, whether out of fear (particularly if they are undocumented residents), misunderstanding, or a desire to ensure that their children are placed in mainstream classrooms, may indicate that English is spoken in the home even if it is not (Clements et al., 1992; De Avila, 1990). Still, if used carefully--and if the parents actually visit the school rather than simply fill out a form--the Home Language Survey can be both a useful assessment tool and an important method for establishing a home-school relationship (Nelson, 1986).

### **TESTING MECHANISMS**

A wide variety of achievement and language proficiency tests has been developed to determine student eligibility for language services or special education programs. To be as accurate and effective as possible, the tests should be coordinated to measure all aspects of student language use, including both oral and written proficiency, and comprehension in both English and the student's native language (Clements et al., 1992).

Unfortunately, many states evaluate only oral skills when testing students for placement, including those states which use the Language Assessment Scales (LAS), the most widespread of language proficiency tests (De George, 1988; Williams & Gross, 1990). This practice measures a minimum level of language proficiency, but bypasses the more complex language skills that students must master in order to succeed in school.

The use of a single test to determine eligibility for language services is made even more problematic because the criteria for such eligibility--often only an arbitrary cut-off in test scores--vary greatly among states and even within districts.

### **HOW TO IMPROVE ASSESSMENTS**

Great care is needed to develop truly equitable and useful mechanisms for identifying language minority students and providing them with appropriate services, since no uniform or single fully adequate measure exists. Further, while it is important to maintain some degree of school autonomy in determining assessments to meet local needs (Rood, 1989), state and district support must supplement school initiatives.

● **STUDENT CENTERS.** Some districts, as in Philadelphia, have founded "Welcome Centers" designed to ensure the equitable treatment of incoming language minority students in multicultural schools (Brenner, 1989). Although they still rely on referrals from local schools, these centers have some control over the assessment of language minority students, and can provide a sympathetic setting. In addition, because the centers specifically address the needs of the language minority population, they can serve not only as testing sites, but also as clearinghouses for student health services and parent support facilities.

● **MULTIPLE ASSESSMENT METHODS.** Since research demonstrates that no single practice can work in isolation, schools should set in motion multiple testing mechanisms. Because teachers often have the most direct knowledge of their students' abilities, they must continue to be involved in their evaluation, preferably through formalized channels (Nelson, 1986; Rossell & Baker, 1988). In addition, parents should actively consult on Home Language Surveys, not simply fill out a form. Finally, standardized tests should measure all aspects of students' language use, not just achievement or oral skills; they should be only one measure among several, and never the sole means of determining eligibility for language services (Nelson, 1986).

Clearly, the experiences of the boy from China are not unique. He, though, is lucky; at the insistence of his parents, he is now in a different school, where he has received help with his English language skills as a supplement to his normal curriculum. His English--and his performance in the classroom--has improved dramatically.

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