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PARA-EDUCATORS: A SOURCE FOR REMEDYING THE SHORTAGE OF TEACHERS FOR LIMITED ENGLISH-PROFICIENT STUDENTS

Michael Genzuk, Magaly Lavadenz, Stephen Krashen

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Introduction

Despite recent attempts by State Departments of Education and local education agencies we have failed to increase the supply of bilingual teachers required to meet the instructional needs of the rapidly growing numbers of limited English proficient (LEP) students (Olsen & Chen, 1988). We propose that Bilingual para educators, teacher assistants currently working in classrooms with LEP students, are a promising source of bilingual teachers. We also discuss possible barriers to the process of preparing this potential work force to take its place among the ranks of the nation's teachers. The importance of this information is rooted in the need of public education systems throughout the country to adequately serve a diverse student population.

Estimation of Limited English Proficient Student Population

Estimates of the number of students in the United States in need of bilingual instruction range between 3.5 and 6.4 million students of school age (Macias, 1993; Olsen, 1991). Consider California, a state that continues to lead the nation in identifying LEP students. The results of the 1993 language census, conducted by school districts during the spring of 1993, identified 1,151,819 LEP students in California public schools, an increase of 6.8% over the 1,078,705 reported in 1992. The number of LEP students increased from 14.0 to 22.2 percent of the total enrollment in California public schools between 1987 and 1993. In Los Angeles County alone there are 493,859 limited English proficient (LEP) students. The state's rate of growth in the number of LEP students has averaged 18% since 1985 with a total of 77% of all identified LEP students speaking Spanish (California Department of Education, 1991, 1992, 1993). The public school system must transform itself in order to more adequately serve this diverse student population. Students must be presented with understandable, relevant instruction in order to be successful in the school environment (Genzuk & Hentschke, 1992).

Demand for and Supply of Bilingual Teachers

While the LEP student population is large and increasing, the supply of teachers qualified to serve these students is not large. Macias (1989) estimated that in 1980 there were about 56,000 teachers with minimal or basic bilingual preparation nationally, but there was a need of from 68,000 to about 120,000. These numbers are more than a decade old, however. Since then, there has been a minority student population explosion in

the nation's schools. The California Department of Education estimated that in 1992, there were about 9,000 qualified bilingual teachers, but more than 28,000 were needed, a gap of about 20,000. This discrepancy between total numbers of minority students and teachers represents a significant hurdle.

Minority teachers are clearly one of the most appropriate teaching forces for this population. The bases for this assumption are:

(1) Minority teachers who speak the child's first language can deliver subject matter instruction and provide literacy development in that language. The advantages of these kinds of contributions have theoretical justifications: subject-matter knowledge gained through the first language makes second language input more comprehensible and thus leads to second language competence, and literacy development in the first language transfers to the second language. In addition, there is widespread empirical support that bilingual education providing these features is very effective (Cummins, 1989; Krashen & Biber, 1988).

(2) Cultural and linguistic identification between students and teacher are desirable since teachers provide positive role models that both enhance the self esteem of their students and provide greater contextual and interaction opportunities (Walker, 1987). According to Cummins (1989), role definitions are central to the "empowerment of language minority students" (p. 4). Furthermore, minority teachers serve as role models for children and professional colleagues of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

(3) The concept of providing "supportive environments for children" in which the validity and integrity of the home culture of the student can be confirmed as an extension of the knowledge base of the teacher is educationally enhancing (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987, p. 131).

Relatively few employed teachers are minority, however. Table 1 shows that minority students represented over 54% of the total California school population in 1992, but minority teachers made up only 18% of the teaching force. While 34% of the students were Latino, only 7.5% of the teachers were, the smallest proportional representation of any ethnic group (California Department of Education, 1992).

Table 1. California K-12 Student Enrollment and Teacher Labor Force

	No. Students	% Total	No. Teachers	% Total
Latino	1,702,363	34.4	16,501	7.5
Asian	524,326	10.5	9,157	4.1
African American	426,356	8.6	12,336	5.6
Native American	38,112	0.8	1,610	0.7
White	2,259,317	45.6	179,183	81.9
Total	4,950,474	99.9	218,787	99.8

This underrepresentation of minority teachers sends negative messages to students, educators, and the general population. These negative messages may include perpetuating negative stereotypes and low academic expectations. The most important issue is that more generations of students will be lost if we are unable to provide teachers who understand these students and who are sensitive to their unique needs.

Bilingual Para-Educators as a Source of Bilingual Teachers

The number of candidates entering teacher training programs in universities and colleges and in local school settings does not match the population growth of LEP students (California Department of Education, 1992). We must look in other directions.

A promising approach is to help bilingual teaching assistants become credentialed teachers. In many ways, para-educators have the potential to become the ideal teachers of LEP students. As native speakers of the students' languages, para-educators, in many cases, have the experience of acquiring English as a second language, and they are sensitive to differing cultural values and attitudes. Another reason for encouraging teaching assistants to become teachers is the large number of such individuals currently employed in schools. Table 2 depicts the number of para-educators providing primary language instruction to LEP students in California (California Department of Education, 1993). The total number of para-educators involved in primary language instruction in California (27,000) would provide the remedy to the current need for nearly 20,000 bilingual teachers.

The large number of para-educators provides a significant source of future bilingual teachers. The California Department of Education estimates that about 25 percent of para-educators might try to complete college and become credentialed teachers during the next five years. About 6,000 more bilingual teachers would then be available (California Department of Education, 1991). Additional survey research estimates that 50% or more of the para-educator population have aspirations of becoming teachers (Lavadenz, forthcoming).

Table 2. Number of Para-Educators Providing Primary Language Instruction to LEP Students in California

Language	LEP Students (K-12)	Para-Educators
Spanish	887,757	23,634
Vietnamese	48,890	778
Cantonese	22,771	512
Cambodian	21,040	438
Filipino	20,755	223
Korean	16,496	155
All others	134,109	1,690
TOTAL	1,151,819	27,430

If we can clear obstacles to additional education, those aspiring to become teachers will have a better chance of succeeding, and perhaps more para educators will consider becoming credentialed teachers.

Barriers to Para-Educator Teacher Production

Based on a review of the literature, the following are hypothesized obstacles related to the potential credentialing of para-educators as teachers. These obstacles must be identified in order to activate this resource as a remedy to the current bilingual teacher shortage. Many minority students do not attend college, or if they do attend, they may encounter problems due to socioeconomic, attitudinal, and motivational factors, as well as personal needs and backgrounds. Following are four primary obstacles that need to be overcome to provide a pathway for para-educators to teacher certification.

1. Financial: Para-educators are not well paid. A report prepared by the National Paraprofessional/School Related Personnel Committee of the American Federation of Teachers found that the mean wage rate for teacher assistants was only slightly higher than cafeteria workers and less than the average wage paid to bus drivers and custodians (Pickett, 1989). Because of their financial situation, para-educators clearly need help to continue their education.

Aid, however, is not easily available. There has been a shift from grants for minority students to loan programs (Garcia & Baptiste, 1991). It is understandable that those already struggling will be hesitant to take on more indebtedness. In addition, higher education institutions, from community colleges to four year colleges and universities have made notably few efforts to secure funding in order to increase their minority enrollment (Contreras & Engelhardt, 1991).

2. Social: The vast majority of para-educators are women who also bear family responsibilities and who generally represent the minority groups prevalent in their communities. Lack of support in addition to obligations imposed by spouses, parents, and children, plus other social pressures encountered by para educators, are obstructive. Harper (1992) considers the case of a para-educator from San Jose, California. Alicia, enrolled in a career ladder program, describes her experience:

I was having trouble with my family. They were upset because I was not at home to cook and to do the things I used to do. I was always either going to school or studying for a test. After Lucia and Carol and I talked, I realized that they had the same problem. Just knowing that made me feel better--less guilt.

This statement is indicative of the problems many para-educators encounter. Houston and Calderon (1991) point out that "minorities, particularly first generation immigrants, often have no role models to emulate. Many are the first persons from their family to attend college, and emotional support and encouragement comes only from college peers" (p. 43).

We should point out, however, that while the effects of family have been articulated repeatedly to us by participants in career development programs as they discuss their reasons for success, a review of the literature shows limited documented evidence other than anecdotal records in affirming this hypothesis.

3. Academic: Though there is little direct evidence, there is reason to hypothesize that para-educators attempting to become teachers will run into more academic problems than most other teacher education candidates. Research has documented, for example, that Latino candidates have a lower than average pass rate on admissions tests for teacher education (Gillis, 1991), on teacher competency tests (Valencia & Aburto, 1991), and on teacher certification exams (Gillis, 1991). For example, typical data based on 345,628 students taking an examination for admission to teacher education programs in Texas are shown in Table 3 (Texas Education Agency, 1994).

Table 3. Number Passing Exam for Certification of Educators in Texas ExCet Test by Ethnicity. September 1986 to August 1993

Ethnicity	No. Taking	No. Passing	% Passing	% of Total Passing
Black	15,307	9,010	58.9	3.0
Hispanic	42,851	30,967	72.3	10.3

White/Other	287,470	258,488	89.9	86.7
Total	345,628	298,463	86.4	100.0

The typical reaction to such a situation is to provide counseling and study skills classes. Evidence shows that counseling for Latino teacher education students is inadequate: Wink and Flores (1992) have found that 58% of Latino teacher respondents report insufficient individualized faculty counseling in their college years; only 29% received help in the form of counseling, and only 11% received help in the form of mentoring. Evidence also suggests that supplementary classes to regular history, mathematics, and composition courses emphasizing study skills can help (Caswell, 1991).

There are, however, problems with these traditional approaches. First, study skills classes may simply be providing students with strategies of succeeding in traditional study-and-memorize classes, methods that may be in conflict with the philosophy of education students are learning in their educational theory and practice courses.

Second, traditional approaches may not be attacking the real problem. Like other working class students, para-educators do not lack intelligence, but may need fuller development of what Cummins (1991) terms academic language.

A powerful means of developing this kind of language is reading, free reading in both the first and second language (Krashen, 1993). Free reading in either language will supply some of the knowledge base as well as the advanced literacy competence that will help contribute to university success in a way that is consistent with the philosophy of education that underlies our bilingual teacher education programs. Course work in popular literature as well as individualized reading may be helpful, especially when they occur early in the para-educator's academic career, so they can provide the knowledge and literacy base that will lead to success in academic life. The advanced competence gained through reading in two languages will also improve the para-educators' instructional delivery capabilities.

4. School Site Personnel and School District Bureaucracy: Surveyed teaching assistants have suggested that school site administrators and classroom teachers have indicated their willingness to support them in their pursuit of a teaching career. However, when the time comes for teaching assistants to leave to attend class, this support may dissipate. Classroom teachers and school site administrators recognize that the bilingual teaching assistants, in many instances, are the only link, both linguistically and culturally, with the parents and community as well as the classroom. Therefore, as well intentioned as administrators may be, they deliver conflicting messages by encouraging these participants to stay at school to continue providing needed services (Genzuk & Hentschke, 1992).

Other examples of the psychosocial and financial barriers faced by para educators exist within the school district bureaucracy and are revealed in their treatment as second-class citizens and their exploitation at their school sites (Barron, 1980; Dalgety, 1990). Low salaries, lack of health benefits, unstable job security, and lack of career advancement opportunities have created this feeling of exploitation, which leads to low self-esteem and a lack of confidence to pursue higher education and a teaching career. The effects of these work site issues are further compounded when experienced with the numerous other obstacles encountered by para-educators.

Conclusion

Critical to and essential for effective recruitment and retention of para educators into the teaching force is a program designed for this specific population. They have not, will not, and, often, can not take the traditional programs that were designed for typical younger college bound students (Hollis & Houston, 1991). If the aforementioned issues are indeed obstacles to para educators becoming teachers, and the research is scant, then the following issues need to be addressed: (a) Financial: grants, scholarships, financial aid, wages, and benefits; (b) Social: provision of special programs and events for sensitizing the para-educators' support groups to academic and social pressures that they may be encountering. This includes family, university faculty, school site personnel, and community. (c) Academic: the role of counseling, adjunct courses, and other means of increasing academic language proficiency; and (d) School Site: improved working conditions (salary, benefits, job security, etc.), nurturing, supportive environment while following career pathway into teaching.

Para-educators are a potential source of credentialed teachers. If the obstacles are overcome, especially those related to salaries and to underwriting college and training fees, a large number of para-educators would be able to complete college and become credentialed teachers.

Para-educators have the capacity to become the ideal teachers of LEP students. As native speakers of the students' languages, para-educators, in many cases, have the experience of acquiring English as a second language themselves, and they are sensitive to differing cultural values and attitudes. They bring with them a great deal of classroom experience and a sense of how children learn. They will probably stay in the profession where their dedication to children and to learning has been demonstrated.

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