

Bilingualism and Self-Identity

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FIVE years ago, in a paper delivered to the California Association of School Psychologists and Psychiatrists in San Francisco, I voiced my concern regarding categorizing the disadvantaged. Once again I want to repeat this basic concern against categorizing human beings.

Bilingualism is used as a catchall in many areas. The differentiation within bilingualism is vast. These varying degrees must be considered when working with parents and children. Many children are considered bilingual when in reality they are completely monolingual. A Spanish surname does not automatically mean bilingualism and, on the other hand, an Anglo surnamed child may be Spanish monolingual.

The complexity of varying degrees of bilingualism with biculturalism must be considered by the professional in dealing with an individual child, as opposed to categorizing all children who are able to communicate in two languages. It is important for all professional people to understand the diversity of language competency of each child and his ability to communicate his feelings and ideas as well as he communicates and projects himself as a person.

Assessment of each individual child's language and cultural context is essential. Self-identity is a product of the child's experience, learned sometimes in subtle and implicit ways, as by the teacher's manner in working with a child. Identity must have depth of reference to the culture. This is

what Sullivan described as "Learn about self from the mirror of other people."¹ The child learns from the way he is treated by those people he comes in contact with as he is growing up.

After drawing a self-portrait, a first-grade child wrote on the drawing, "This is I. Myself. Me.", expressing compulsion to identify as an individual in the group. Another child wrote, "This is my casa. It is roja." Erik H. Erikson, in describing the eight stages in the life of man, provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of growth and self-development.² These stages should give direction for the school in working with children and parents.

Our small district for many years has endeavored to work with children as individuals. The complexity of bilingualism is vast. Bridging the gap between parent expectation and teacher attitude is difficult and never ending. We recognized that many of our children were not achieving in school although we knew they were capable. Many changes have occurred in the past five years through staff development activities and through community awareness of the prob-

¹ Harry S. Sullivan. *Conception of Modern Psychiatry*. Washington, D.C.: William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation, 1947.

² Erik H. Erikson. "Growth and Crisis of the Healthy Personality." New York: Josiah Mach, Jr. Foundation, 1950.

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lems of educating youngsters frequently categorized as bilingual.

Staff Development

Staff development was one of the first areas to be dealt with. An intensive program of teachers working, in teams of six, in assessing and observing groups of children from kindergarten through high school was held during a summer session. These teachers became involved in looking at students as individuals, diagnosing, and then prescribing.

Juan was a first grader during that summer session. He did not communicate verbally when he arrived. Gradually, through much planning and assessment by the teachers, with a consultant's reassurance and guidance, we were able to accept and build upon Juan's interests and provide support and assistance so that by the end of the five-week period, Juan was telling long tales of his experiences and was well on his way to beginning reading.

The questioning, guidance, and support of the curriculum consultants, working as members of the team during this summer session, was of tremendous value in helping teachers look at their own behavior in working with students at all levels. The awareness of abilities hitherto unrecognized created a genuine disposition toward a positive assessment of children and how they learn.

This initial experience of participation and involvement in in-service activities has produced continuing effects in staff development. The experience in techniques in problem solving relevant to human behavior contributed to continuing individual staff development.

Parent Involvement

Another important area of concentration has been that of parent involvement. Many parents of Mexican ancestry in the Southwest have had unfortunate or even miserable school experiences. Traditionally, society and the school have had the attitude that "They can't learn"; "Their parents don't

care"; and "They aren't interested." The school for many was a threatening place. Parents were told, "Send your children, we'll teach them." The schoolroom was the private domain of the teacher. The "open door policy" was not an easy one to initiate, either for parents or for teachers. Teachers were fearful of criticism and involvement and many parents were apprehensive when invited to participate in school. Education is a joint endeavor and development of self-identity occurs wherever a child is. The two—home and school—must join in mutual understanding in support of the child.

An example of the interaction necessary between home and school is the story of Maria Garcia:

Because the family car had broken down, the school nurse provided transportation for Mr. Garcia to a job interview. Mrs. Garcia, dragging Maria and balancing the baby, arrived hot and upset in Mrs. Jones' kindergarten classroom. Mrs. Jones perceived the situation and invited Mrs. Garcia to sit in the back of the room with the baby and Maria. After the class was set to various tasks, Mrs. Jones returned to her guest. Mrs. Garcia revealed that Maria is abnormally shy at home and is fearful of school.

While the adults were talking, Maria wandered to the floor toys, observing children using these toys. The teacher's acceptance of Maria's fear is the first step toward helping Maria overcome that fear.

This was the first of many parent-teacher conferences, in both the school and the home, for Mrs. Garcia and Mrs. Jones. The teacher will undoubtedly present her problem to the interventive committee for suggestions and assistance in helping Maria become more comfortable in the learning situation.

In nurturing the child's growth in self-identity, teachers and parents must work together so that they develop mutual understanding, trust, and respect.

Involvement of Children

Bilingual children in middle and upper grades spend time working with children in primary grades. The realization of self as a "teacher" is ego building. "Mrs. Smith needs

my help with the first graders in reading," proudly stated, tells a great deal about how low-achieving fifth grader Jorge feels about himself. Both fifth- and first-grade teachers plan together for Jorge. Jorge's reading has improved dramatically since he has participated in this cross-age teaching program.

This way of working was begun by cooperative efforts in group planning and instruction, and has continued and expanded in many areas of our total program. Large group and small group instruction, resource teachers, and subject matter specialists work in a classroom with the classroom teacher. Paid aides and volunteers assist in providing support and encouragement to the children.

Interventive guidance committees have been organized at each building. The purpose of these committees is to help teachers to determine more creative ways of assisting a child in moving into better and more effective learning.

The consultant helps teachers to discover more creative ways of individualizing instruction. Administrators, in turn, aid parents and teachers in conducting dialogues which further teacher-parent understanding of individual children and of learning. As a large team, parents, consultants, teachers, and administrators modify the curriculum and school organization so that children may more nearly reach their learning potential. □

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