Bilingual Education in Mexico

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While policy makers in the United States debate the merits of bilingual education, the Mexican Ministry of Education is in the process of completing bilingual textbooks for students who do not speak Spanish.

In Mexico, over three million people speak between 125 and 150 different languages and dialects (Miller, 1981). They tend to be poor and live in rural areas of Mexico accessible only by horse or donkey. Since it is difficult to reach these people, it is important to educate them as quickly and as economically as possible.

The Mexican government recognizes the implications of research that shows students learn faster when they are instructed in their native language. Studies in Mexico (Modiano, 1966), Canada (Lambert and Tucker, 1972), and the United States (Zappert and Cruz, 1977) all conclude that bilingual education is beneficial to students.

Several years ago, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) began developing materials, based on the work of Paulo Freire, in which students become literate by first learning 17 or 18 words in their native language that contain all the sounds of that language. The words have special meaning to their culture and center on adult occupations, animals, food, or holidays. These words are printed in a primer and a picture is attached. Students discuss each word, divide the word into syllables to make new words, and continue this process until they learn all the basic words. In about six weeks, students can read the newspaper and write simple letters. After they become literate, they are introduced to Spanish words. By teaching literacy first in the native language, students learn about symbol-sound relationships, left-to-right progression, the concept of sentences, and the idea that words are printed speech (Miller, 1982).

Four years ago, the Mexican government recognized the success that INI was having with bilingual education and created a department within the Ministry of Education. The original textbooks produced by INI were replaced with full-color textbooks, teachers manuals, and specific goals and objectives for the teachers.

As of June 1982, the Mexican Ministry of Education had developed primers in 40 languages and 30 dialects (Torres, 1982). The series begins with a book without words in which students manipulate pictures and numbers to learn reading readiness skills such as shapes, color, and direction.

The controversy between cultural pluralists and cultural uniformists seems to have been temporarily settled in favor of the uniformists. Emphasis is on "transition" programs and "mainstreaming," along with a general movement toward federal deregulation. At the state level in California, for example, there is no longer any mention of the possibility of a full bilingual maintenance program. Bilingual education bills now require strict entry criteria into programs that limit the number of participating students. At the same time, exit criteria encourage early student withdrawal and set a maximum of five years for all students in the program, regardless of their competence in English.

Conclusions

It is perhaps indicative of the American pragmatic tradition to approach a reform such as bilingual education without clear pedagogical definitions of expected results. And true to form, federal, state, and local education agencies never reached a clear consensus over the specific goals of bilingual education. A problem existed, it became acute, a solution was proposed, and monies were appropriated to "see if it worked." "Optimals" were vague: to give learners a "better start," or "greater access to education." Federal funds,

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