Para-Educators: A Source for Remedying the Shortage of Teachers for Limited-English-Proficient Students.

Abstract:
Discusses barriers to preparing bilingual para-educators to assist in the teaching of limited English proficient students. These include financial, social, and academic obstacles. Effective recruitment of para-educators requires critical factors such as financial aid, social support, academic counseling, and improved working conditions. (28 references) (CK)
PARA-EDUCATORS:

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

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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 needed to meet the instructional needs of the rapidly growing numbers of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students (Olsen and Chen, 1988). This paper proposes that bilingual para-educators, teacher assistants currently working in classrooms with LEP students, are a promising source of future bilingual teachers. It will 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 the public education systems throughout the country to adequately serve a more diverse student population.

BACKGROUND

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 (Macías, 1993; Olsen, 1991). Consider California, a state that continues to lead the nation in identifying LEP students. The results of the 1992 language census, conducted by school districts during the Spring of 1992, identified 1,078,705 LEP students in California public schools, an increase of 9.4% over the 986,462 reported in 1991. The number of LEP students increased from 14.0 to 21.1 percent of the total enrollment in California public schools between 1987 and 1992. In Los Angeles County alone there are 433,681 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 Dept. of Education, 1991, 1992). 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 and Hentschke, 1992).
Demand for and Supply of Bilingual Teachers

While the student LEP population is large and increasing, the supply of teachers qualified to serve these students is not large. Macías (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 is desirable as 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".

3) The concept of providing "supportive environments for children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987, p. 131)... 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".
Relatively few currently employed teachers are minority, however. Table 1 shows that minority students represented over 54% of the total school population, 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. Students</th>
<th>% Total</th>
<th>No. Teachers</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1,702,363</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>16,501</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>524,326</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>9,157</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>426,356</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>12,336</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>38,112</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1,610</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2,259,317</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>179,183</td>
<td>81.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,950,474</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>218,787</td>
<td>99.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This under representation of Latino teachers sends numerous negative messages to students and the general population. Most importantly, more generations of students will be lost if we are unable to provide teachers who understand these students and 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 presently does not match the population growth of LEP students (California Dept. 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 personal experience of acquiring English as a second language, and they are sensitive to differing cultural values and attitudes. Another reason for considering 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 Dept. of Education, 1992). It is very interesting to note that the total number of para-
The large number of para-educators provides a significant source of future bilingual teachers. It is estimated 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 Dept. of Education, 1991). Additional survey research estimates that 50% or more of the para-educator population have aspirations of becoming teachers (Lavadenz, forthcoming).

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. It is essential that these obstacles be identified in order to activate this resource as a potential remedy to the current bilingual teacher shortage. Many minority students do not attend college or, if they do attend, 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 and 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 institutions have made notably few efforts to secure funding in order to increase their minority enrollment (Contreras and 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 and obligations imposed by spouses, parents and children, in addition to other social pressures encountered by para-educators, are obstructive. Harper (1992), considers the case of a para-educator from San José, 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 Lucía and Carol and I talked, I realized that they had the same problem. Just knowing that made me feel better--less guilt--you know what I mean?"

This statement is indicative of the problems many para-educators encounter. Houston and Calderón (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."

We should point out, however, that while the impact of family has been articulated repeatedly to us by participants in career development programs as they discuss their reasons for success, a review of the literature shows that there has been 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 and Aburto, 1991), and on teacher certification exams (Gillis, 1991). Gillis, for example, presents typical data, based on 49,000 students taking an examination for admission to teacher education programs in Texas (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETHNICITY</th>
<th>No. Taking</th>
<th>No. Passing</th>
<th>% Passing</th>
<th>% of Those Passing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2,342</td>
<td>758</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>6,365</td>
<td>2,973</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>39,814</td>
<td>32,086</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>88.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49,600</td>
<td>36,434</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The typical reaction to such a situation is to provide counseling and "study skills" classes. There is evidence 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. There is also evidence suggesting that supplementary "adjunct" classes, supplements to regular history, mathematics and composition classes 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, we propose, 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 very 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. Needless to say, 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 assistant, in many instances, is the only link, both linguistically and culturally, with the parents and community as well as the classroom. Therefore, as well intentioned as they may be, they deliver conflicting messages by encouraging these participants to stay at school to continue providing needed services (Genzuk and Hentschke, 1992).

Other examples of the psycho-social and financial barriers faced by para-educators exist within the school district bureaucracy and is revealed in their treatment as "second-class citizens" and "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 impact 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 the typical younger college bound student (Hollis & Houston, 1991). If the aforementioned themes are indeed the obstacles to para-educators becoming teachers, and the research is scant, then the following issues need to be addressed:

1) Financial: grants, scholarships, financial aide, wages and benefits.
2) Social: Provision of special programs and events for sensitizing the para-educator's entire support group to academic and social pressures that they may be encountering. This would include family, university faculty, school site personnel and community.
3) Academic: The role of counseling, adjunct courses, and other means of increasing academic language proficiency.
4) 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 above mentioned obstacles are overcome, especially those related to salaries and to underwriting college and training fees, a large number of para-educators would be within reach to try 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 personal 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.

REFERENCES


