NEW PROGRAMS ARE WIDENING SCOPE OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

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Body

THE influx of Asian and Hispanic children into the public school systems of metropolitan areas in the last decade and the increased availability of funds under Title VII of the Federal **Bilingual Education** Act have broadened the focus of **bilingual education programs**. Now these **programs** include seminars for teachers on the cultural and behavioral differences of their students.

"Initially **bilingual education** meant finding teachers to teach a child in his native tongue, but the population is changing too fast; we can barely keep up with that," said Dr. Esther Eisenhower, a member of the National Advisory Council for **Bilingual Education**. "We now understand how important it is for teachers to be able to read the behavior dictated by their students' background - language has become almost secondary."

Although there are no figures available on the number of foreign-born children now attending schools in the United States, figures kept by the Immigration and Naturalization Service show that in 1984 nearly 300,000 people immigrated to this country from Asia, Central America and South America. Those immigrants have gone to places like Fairfax County, Virginia, where only 10 years ago there were 50 foreign-born children registered in the public schools. Today, there are 14,000 foreign-born children from 75 countries speaking a total of 57 languages who go to school in Fairfax County, the nation's 10th largest school district.

To provide resources to school districts with culturally diverse student populations, there are 16 multifunctional centers currently funded under Title VII, which offers training and technical assistance to local school districts. At one such center, at Hunter College in Manhattan, Dr. Joseph Woo, a native of Hong Kong, leads workshops for teachers of Asian students, focusing on differences in learning styles and behavior.

"Most often teachers want to know what it means when an Asian child sits silently and does not respond," Dr. Woo said. "In some Asian cultures, emotional privacy is very important. In many family settings in Hong Kong, for instance, it is the only kind of privacy there is - physical privacy is nearly nonexistent. A well-meaning teacher who asks her students to share their feelings may be putting the Asian child under a great deal of stress."

Even when a teacher asks a child whether he understands a concept or an instruction, cultural differences may lead to the wrong response. "The Asian child will answer yes because they don't want the teacher to feel like a failure and therefore lose face," Dr. Woo said.

Teachers must not only try to understand the behavior of their students, but also must take into account the method of the students' previous schooling.

"In some countries children learn by rote," said Evelyn Rivera, who leads teacher-training seminars in District 10 in the Bronx under Title VII. "In the United States, most school systems prefer to have children learn through discovery. Some children have to learn how to learn all over again."

For the foreign-born child who has had no formal schooling, there are more complex problems. "What grade do you put that student in?" asked Olga Garcia Harper, a ***program*** specialist at the Department of ***Education***. "That child does not have the most rudimentary academic survival skills. Yet, we can't put a 14-year-old in a first-grade classroom."

At the Office of ***Bilingual Education*** in Washington, professionals are working to answer questions like those raised by Mrs. Harper.

"I'm not pleased with what we have done in this field so far," said Carol Whitten, director of the Office of ***Bilingual Education***.

"We're studying all of these very complex and serious issues related to ***bilingual education***. We don't yet have answers, but certainly we have to head in the direction of increased teacher training."

Just as there are challenges to the teacher and the foreign-born student in a classroom where many cultures are represented, there are challenges to classmates as well.

At South Boston High School, the diverse student body - 18 percent of the students are Hispanic, 31 percent white, 38 percent black, 12 percent Asian and 1 percent American Indian - "gets along well, but everyone is still learning," said Jerome Winniger, the principal.

To illustrate his point, he described this incident: "During a friendly hockey game, things got a little out of hand, and a fight broke out between two members of opposing teams."

Adhering to the unwritten hockey code of conduct, "John, who has lived all his life in the United States, dropped his hockey stick and put up his fists," he said. "Sophay, a Cambodian, held onto the stick and braced for battle."

"One boy grew up fighting with his fists and another with sticks," Mr. Winniger said. "They didn't understand that each was acting in a way that was appropriate for their culture."

At some schools, students and parents are trying to find subtle ways of dealing with cultural differences. At the ***bilingual*** Public School 211 on East 179th Street in a largely Hispanic neighborhood in the Bronx, the students and their parents voted two years ago to adopt a school uniform.

"This has been a great equalizer," said Dr. Peter Nigrone, superintendent of District 12. "It has eliminated some competition and erased some of the differences among students. It's had a very positive psychological effect."

Instead of the usual blue jeans seen in most schools, P.S. 211 students wear yellow shirts; the girls can wear navy jumpers or navy skirts; the boys wear navy slacks and, if they like, a navy blazer. These uniforms "give the students a feeling that they all belong to the same place," said Ida Kivelevich, a reading and math teacher. "It also gives them a feeling of pride."

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