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Bilingual Education Comes to Kansas

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In some areas as many as 90 per cent of our Mexican-American children will not graduate from high school. They have been scholastically crippled by an educational system which demands they speak two languages fluently while their classmates only have to cope with one.

bilingual education comes to Kansas

by George Hughes



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The discovery of bilingual education as a powerful social change agent is on the Kansas horizon. It has been long in coming, and is felt to be overdue by many educators, as well as political representatives of certain minority groups. Ever since Kansas farmers discovered that their fertile soil would produce bumper crops of sugar beets, as well as the lucrative wheat, soybeans and corn, migrant workers in great numbers have been employed annually in the growing and harvesting of these crops. At first the migrants were largely "invisible," localized in the western fourth of the state, and were of little concern to the local citizenry because of the temporary nature of their residency. This ranged anywhere between three months to as brief a period as a few days, depending on the nature of the employment available. More recently, however, the need for many hands to help with the seasonal work has led to the appearance of sizable migrant populations in almost any area of the state. These areas have been uniformly unable to provide adequate housing for the workers and their families, who must often content themselves with shelter of the most rudimentary nature, some even living for extended periods in pickup-campers. This unhappy situation has forced them to live on the periphery of community life, frequently deprived of community services, and often actively rejected by the community members in general.

The ethnicity of the migrant community, approximately 98% Mexican-American by heritage, has been strengthened by the semi-isolation inflicted upon it. This can be viewed as either good, bad, or both, depending on one's point of view. Good, in that culture and language have been preserved fairly well intact. Bad, in that the members of the group feel the lack of a sense of "belonging" to a larger community, a state, or even the nation. The migrant children are most acutely affected; for them social rejection is most injurious. This rejection is doubly injurious when it occurs within the peer group, and this is the case whenever the migrant child finds himself settled in a community for those brief months in each year when his family is not following the harvest northward. His limited ability to communicate in English with his peers causes, in large part, this rejection. He is "different." He is "foreign" to his school mates. He is also made to appear "dumb" in the eyes of anglo students because he is usually below grade level in his academic work. Since he is asked to function in English, that is, read, write, and orally communicate in English, he is scholastically crippled. What happens after a few years of this torment and frustration has been happening to Mexican-American

children for generations. (Chicanos, if this term is preferred.) They become drop-outs. The figures that depict the rate of attrition among Mexican-American children have been printed and quoted repeatedly through various forms of media. I feel that this repetition should continue until a majority of the nation's general public is made aware of the plight of these children and is made to see the monumental proportions of this waste of human resources. In some areas as much as 90% will never graduate from high school and nearly one million Spanish-American children in the Southwest will never continue past the eighth grade. What has been happening in the Southwest is now beginning to happen in Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska, because migrant workers are finding year-round employment, and so, are becoming permanent residents. Their numbers have been increasing at a rapid rate so that many school districts now have a sizable percentage of Spanish-speaking children in their student body year round. These school districts need help, and the federal government is beginning to answer that need.

Garden City District No.457 in western Kansas has approximately 15.5% Spanish surnamed children enrolled this year among its six elementary schools. This percentage is expected to increase steadily, and so those charged with educating the children of the district have designed an ambitious and comprehensive bilingual, bicultural program to be implemented in the six elementary schools with the aid of some Title VII funding from the federal government. The impact of this program on the future of public education in Kansas can only be imagined at this time, but it is very possible that it could become a viable prototype for other school districts of similar makeup. The Garden City project can best be defined in this manner: A bilingual, bicultural program within designated kindergarten, first and second grades of the city elementary schools, and a bicultural program in grades K-6 of the six city elementary schools. This latter element is the most ambitious part of the program, in my opinion, and will have the most far-reaching effects. It will allow any child in the district, minority or non-minority, to be educated in a classroom setting where both languages (Spanish and English) and both cultures are emphasized. In effect this should enable a parallel development of the self-

image and self-esteem of both minority and non-minority children. For the latter it will also allow for second language learning when the child is most apt and interested, and he will have numerous native-speaking models within his immediate peer group. In this shrinking world few will deny the value of being able to speak a second language, (and without an accent!) but the greatest value of all is that all children in a bilingual, bicultural program can grow into adulthood with an appreciation for the worth of the individual, and for the worth of culture(s) other than the dominant one. They will not be burdened with the prejudices that have been passed from one generation to another in the past; their prolonged exposure to another language and another culture will preclude that happening.

The Mexican-American children who have populated the Special Education classes (in this case, classes for slow learners), will no longer be required to perform the impossible task of learning their basic skills through the medium of a foreign language, but will be taught those skills in Spanish first, with immediate transferal to English. The difference between this approach and simply teaching English to Spanish-speaking children must be made perfectly clear. Although the teaching of English is an important part of any bilingual program, the true bilingual approach represents good conversation practice in that the emphasis is on the retention of skills with regard to **both** languages. Nothing is wasted. The language skills that the Spanish-speaking child brings to school are put to good use immediately in helping him to become a functioning citizen since both languages are employed as the medium of instruction. Besides this use of the child's first language as a valuable instructional tool, when one considers how many millions of dollars are spent each year in this country on foreign language instruction, it is only sound economic practice to give some attention to the preserving of the foreign language skills that so many of our young people already have.

Congratulations to Garden City, Kansas, and to all those districts in the Midwest that will follow suit in establishing these sensible, humanistic, and economically sound bilingual programs.

A society like ours, which puts so much of its resources into communications, inevitably overvalues communication. We begin to lose our sense of its proper values and proper boundaries. We begin to lose our sense of the difference between communication and expression. We begin to expect the impossible from the mere act of communication. We meet in conventions where people are expected to produce wisdom or knowledge out of their pooled ignorance or prejudices. We meet in committees, conferences, and discussion groups without knowing our purpose and then adjourn without knowing whether we have accomplished it.

Daniel J. Boorstin, **Democracy and Its Discontents: Reflections on Everyday America**
New York: Random House, 1974, p.9