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

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 type, 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.

Dr. Hughes is an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Kansas where he also serves as Director of Modern Language Education, Bilingual Education, Education as a Second Language, and Migrant Education Programs. He has taught at the University of Nebraska and he also has taught Spanish in the public schools in Oregon for fifteen years. Dr. Hughes earned his Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska and his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the University of Oregon. He has also studied in Mexico and Ecuador.

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
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