The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students
Volume 9, Fall, 1991 • Boise State University, Boise, ID 83725

Improving Educational Equity for Language Minority Students

Elizabeth A. Leone & René Cisneros

The Need: Preparing for the 21st Century

The need to be concerned with equity in education is greater now than it has ever been before. According to recent statistics, by the year 2000

- one in every three Americans will be nonwhite;
- 15% of Americans will have a language other than English as their first or

---

Elizabeth A. Leone, PhD, is the Director of Curriculum Development for the Bilingual Adult Literacy Project at Chicanos Latino Unidos En Servicio (CLUES) at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minnesota.

René Cisneros, PhD, coordinates the World Languages Program, teaches Spanish, and presents workshops on second language learning and multicultural education at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minnesota.

home language; and

•four out of five persons entering the work force will be women, minorities, or immigrants (Mid-Atlantic Equity Ctr., 1989a).

As teachers of language minority students (from other language backgrounds), we and our students (and the administrators and staff with whom we work) must increasingly find improved educational opportunities for these students and the communities from which they come. More importantly, we must value these students, their communities and cultures, and assist persons in the majority community to do so as well, because learners who are valued learn better than those who are not, and teachers who value their students and their cultures teach these students better than teachers who do not (Handscombe, 1989).

In this article, the various domains of a comprehensive view of educational equity are examined, with particular attention to policies, practices, conditions, and relationships within these domains. After a discussion of the issues in each domain, a few questions are raised for practical consideration in each domain. The five domains examined are the classroom, teacher-teacher relations, school-community relations, institutional operations, and the professional organization.

The Classroom Domain

The classroom has received more attention than other areas of concern in discussions of educational equity. These discussions often include the following areas of concern: student needs, instructional practices, classroom relationships, classroom climate, and procedures.

With regard to student needs, Tarone (1989) discusses basic issues relating to a teacher's assessment of students' authentic language needs, goals, and objectives for functioning in specific present and future contexts. This often involves going beyond textbooks to find out how native speakers use oral and written language and then using this data as the foundation for course materials for ESL students.

In the area of instructional practice, one widely cited philosophical orientation concerned with equity which has greatly influenced teaching in general as well as ESL and bilingual education is the Freirean perspective (Wallerstein, 1983; Freire, 1972). The three salient characteristics of a Freirean empowering approach to teaching are that it is reflective/active, holistic, and democratic. That is, the learner reflects, discusses, and acts on his world; the learners' needs are taken into account as part of a larger set of life needs, all of which are integrated with language learning; and learners play the central role in achieving

this holistic learning, with the teacher acting as a facilitator not a gatekeeper. The Freirean approach presupposes that the learner's needs are determined by the learner and facilitated by the instructor. Often, however, this approach misses the democratic aspect, as Holzman notes:

> Historically, even progressive educators have often allowed themselves to translate their pedagogical authority into forms of inadvertent paternalism. In Cuba, in Nicaragua, in many of the literacy projects using some Freirean techniques in the U.S., the crucial decision-making role all too often has been taken by experts and facilitators from outside the community, who decide what programs are to be offered and what they might include. (1988: 184-5)

Nevertheless, it is the learner-teacher relationships implied in this approach, among other aspects, that make it one that has greatly influenced current theory and practice in American education. These relationships can be characterized as empowering but not patronizing. The teacher is respectful and appreciative of the opportunities she has to work with the students in her classes, engendering this essential spirit of respect and appreciation in all students for each other. And, a teacher's verbal and nonverbal language in daily interactions with students as well as the students' language with each other are the most telling aspects of the relationships that exist in a particular classroom.

As part of the instructional setting and tied in with teacher-student and student-student relationships, ambience and procedures are central to establishing equity. Many studies attest to the beneficial climate for teachers and students in a cooperative learning classroom, which necessitates collaborative relationships all around (Kagan, 1986; Rigg & Allen, 1989). In a cooperative classroom, procedures and activities are aimed at teacher-student and student-student interactions which are interdependent and guided by a valuing of each other's expertise and experience. These classrooms are marked by sharing, students working together in small cooperative groups, and often a system of group rewards which take individual achievement into account. What's more, studies have shown that, especially for minority students, the cooperative learning mode is the most effective (Kagan, 1986).

Some practical considerations for classrooms are suggested by the following questions:

1. How often do teachers observe, record, discuss, and understand their students' cultural differences objectively, without evaluating them negatively, incorporating these negative judgments unconsciously into daily interactions and teaching behavior?

2. What specific classroom interaction differences are used by the children from different language and cultural backgrounds (e.g., naming routines,

discourse organization, learning styles, etc.)? Again, are these differences valued positively or negatively? Is it done consciously?

3. Can teachers use these differences positively to reinforce students' self-concepts (effective goals) and acquisition of learning content (cognitive goals)?

Such a value and genuine interest are especially important when addressing the needs of students who often are part of communities with limited access to the economic and political process in our country, resulting from society's devaluing of their cultural, economic, and personal contributions in general.

The ESL Teacher -- Mainstream Teacher Domain

Another aspect of the educational process that must be included in a comprehensive view of equity deals with the relationships between ESL/bilingual education teachers and mainstream teachers (Penfield, 1989; Urzura, 1989). Specific issues have been addressed and suggestions made relating to this important domain.

Urzua mentions the important issues of ESL teachers and mainstream teachers sharing their different perceptions of language minority students (Urzua, 1989). She shows that because of the differences in training and experience among different teachers, school specialists, and educators, each community of teachers uses a different paradigm and different perceptions for understanding language minority students. Little communication takes place among these various educators' special communities. Consequently, the teachers are usually uninformed about the experience and current developments in each other's professional groups and disciplines.

In the practical realm, Penfield proposes an inservice problem-posing model for collaboration with mainstream teachers to identify their needs when working with language minority students and to discover and create solutions for the needs. In this model, the trainer's role is to serve as a facilitator, to provide support as the group of teachers moves through collective action, and to provide expertise when called upon by the group. The process includes discussions to determine the group's specific needs and solution-seeking projects to address the group's specific needs (e.g., interviewing colleagues, educators, or community persons; researching a specific question; and inviting ESL/bilingual teachers to speak to them). In the final step, the newly found and formulated solutions are organized by themes and prepared as a final report to be shared by the ESL and mainstream teachers (Penfield, 1990).

This teacher-teacher domain is central to the equity questions. Without

communication across paradigms and among teachers, the students, often assigned to many classes, have less than the best instructional approaches and less than the best coordination in their schooling.

Additional practical considerations for the teacher-teacher domain are suggested in the following questions based on Cazden and others' articulation of primary issues in the educational process (Cazden, 1986).

1. What are the different types of effective and cognitive demands made on students learning English as a second language in L_1, ESL, and mainstream classroom?

2. What is the frequency of student-initiated questions in L_1, ESL, and mainstream classes?

3. What redundancy occurs in the teaching of concepts and skills in L_1, ESL, and mainstream classes; what concepts and skills have been missed? Is all of this redundancy useful (Ventriglia study reviewed in Cazden, 1986)?

4. What use is made of collaborative (ESL teacher, L1 teacher, and mainstream teacher) projects in preservice, inservice, workshop, and other teacher development courses?

5. What is the frequency of deliberately arranged communication among L_1, ESL, and mainstream teachers and aides? How could this be improved (Cazden, 1986)?

The School-Community Domain

A third area of concern is the relationship between the teacher and the community of which the bilingual learners are a part. Ovando and Collier directly address this domain in their chapter entitled "School and Community," and Bermudez cites the need for forming a coalition among the home, the school, the community, and the law, incorporating all of the socioeconomic variables, in order for the education of LEP children to be successful (Ovando & Collier, 1985; Bermudez, 1989).

In order for effective education to take place, Ovando and Collier state that parents and teachers must truly work together for the education of the children. And often, with language minority parents, this involves parents and teachers learning about each other's cultures and world views in an equitable peer relationship. In fact, the authors echo the theme of authentic democracy in action, mentioned by Holzman and others, in their quote from Alinsky: too often minority language parents are the passive receiver-objects of teachers' well-intentioned helping, and very often this, in turn, actually contributes to the academic failure of the children:

> To give people help, while denying them a significant part in the action, contributes nothing to the development of the individual. In the deepest sense it is not giving but taking—taking their dignity. Denial of the opportunity for participation is the denial of human dignity and democracy. It will not work. (1971, 123)

To be sure, this concise statement by Alinsky seems to shed much needed light on the persistent problem of school dropouts among U.S. language minority students.

Finally, Handscombe, a Canadian educator, reiterates that a quality and equitable educational program for language minority students must include community and parental involvement components (1989). She states that the involvement of parents adds to the positive aspect of education for these students, and implies, as Ovando and Collier do, that often schools need training in how best to work with language minority communities and parents. So often, the line is heard, these parents are not interested, while the real issue may be that the school needs to know how to value and communicate with these parents in an equitable and collaborative fashion.

Some practical considerations for this domain are suggested in the following questions:

1. What is the frequency of parent-teacher contact: face-to-face, over the phone, and via written messages?
2. What are the purposes of most of these parent-teacher contacts: disciplinary, social, civic, providing information on child or on ways parents can assist child?
3. What differences exist in the quality and quantity of parent-teacher contact: between teachers and minority culture parents and between teachers and dominant culture parents?
4. In what ways could teachers and language minority parents have occasion to communicate in peer relationships and to learn from the other?
5. What are language minority parents' goals for an ideal education for their children? What are their children's goals for this ideal?

The Institutional Domain

Finally, the domain that is dealt with perhaps the least, probably because it is so intrinsically political is the institutional domain. This domain involves the policies, procedures, and conditions that daily bear on all the other domains. Without equity in this domain, equity in the other domains cannot be fully realized. Classroom equity and teacher-teacher equity are often frustrated if the

institution has problems of inequity in administration, hiring, promotion, or other areas. This domain is often considered the macro level of educational equity, even though the day-to-day procedures, rules, and attitudes of personnel in an institution are what most clearly manifest these inequities.

The best source found for doing an institutional equity assessment is the American Institutes of Research's (AIR) set of four questionnaires for administrators, faculty, students, and staff (1972). Although these questionnaires are designed to assess gender equity, with a few modifications the questions can be adapted to assess the equity of an institution in the areas of race, class, national origin, or language minority.

Similar to other self-study approaches, this AIR-adapted assessment of institutional equity could consist of about five steps. First, the study group would adapt and use the AIR questionnaires to compile data about the various areas within the institution: admissions, attendance, record keeping on grades, awards, hiring, and promotion. Any area could be included in the questionnaire and data collection, though information from some areas may be less accessible. Second, the group would compile a list of resource persons to call upon or institutional channels to use in addressing equity issues. Third, they could compile a list of statements and observations they have recorded which suggest inequitable practices, attitudes, and conditions. This set of cases or data can be a type of window on attitudes at the institution, whether or not they are perceived as being representative of the institution as a whole. Fourth, the group would research any past or current attempts that have been made or are being made to address equity issues in the institution. Finally, the group would discuss its findings, determine which issues they need to address and which resources they want to use to create solutions, and develop a plan of action. An institutional self-study on educational equity can be a valuable step in addressing building-wide and system-wide needs for more equitable education (Cisneros et al., 1990).

In addition to the recommendations included in the AIR documents, some practical considerations for the institutional domain are suggested in the following questions:

1. What is the relative availability of resources (e.g., computers) for language minority and nonminority students?

2. What is the quality of these resources (e.g., is software used by language minority students of a less cognitively demanding type than that used by other students?)?

3. What is the interpretation of the legislative intent of state curriculum guidelines for majority versus minority language children (e.g., is a more integrated, holistic approach to language used with some students, but a more

fragmented approach used with children perceived to be remedial in their English language development?)?

4. What information is available that compares language minority students with nonlanguage minority students, with respect to all aspects of the educational process (e.g. attendance, attrition, parent contact with school, representation in student clubs, income of families). A broad-based, authentically committed institutional self-study aimed at the improvement of educational equity is a useful tool for determining the progress of an institution towards equity and its concrete agency for achieving that equity.

The Role of the Professional Organization

The fifth domain is actually one that involves teachers working with other teachers through their professional organizations, but these other teachers are both within and outside the specific institution or location in which a given teacher functions. In the case of ESL/bilingual learners, many organizations are concerned; The Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and The National Association of Bilingual Education (NABE) are just a few. It is important to review the efforts that these organizations have made toward educational equity in the form of position papers and other formal, written statements (Cisneros & Leone, 1990). The National Council of Teachers of English, for example, has written, revised, and published on several occasions in the last fifteen years several statements dealing with language minority students' concerns, all as official positions of the organization itself (NCTE, 1978; 1986).

Some practical needs that professional organizations, their affiliates, and members serving language minority students have are the following: (a) to form networks for educational equity; (b) to know the legal rights (federal and state) of the language minority students to effective education and the legal responsibilities of the educational institutions to provide effective educational programs; (c) to disseminate information to teachers, administrators, and institutions on the law and language minority students; and (d) to advocate for programs that meet the legal requirements for addressing language minority needs. For example, according to federal law, if a program for language minority students is not effective, the institution is under obligation to try another solution to make the program work (Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, 1989b). The professional organization by definition is obligated to address both the needs of the group of

peer professionals and the needs of the clients served by these professionals, since it is the professional-client relationship that gives meaning to an educator's role. A principle concern of the language minority client is the right to an effective education. Teaching professionals need to participate and collaborate in professional organizations to serve the needs of the profession and the needs of the clients as well (Cisneros & Leone, 1990)

Conclusion

The five domains discussed here: classroom, teacher-teacher, institutional, community, and professional organization, are all components of the educational process, each of which can counteract or perpetuate the inequities in education for linguistic minority students. Each of the components affects the other parts and the whole, and the effects of equitable, sensitive attitudes and behavior in one domain will be enhanced or limited to the extent that other educational domains are more or less equitable (Cummins, 1989, 1-5).

In order to work toward this greater equity and sensitivity, the recommendations offered here can be implemented in institutions serving linguistic minority students, always tailored to best fit the needs and styles of the particular K-12, adult, or higher education context. In fact, it is imperative that the achievement of equity, sensitivity, and a greater awareness of behavior and attitudes be attempted and achieved, for without these the growing educational and societal problems in this country, such as inequity, mislabelling of learning difficulties, and the rising number of dropouts, will only worsen and engender still other problems in the general economy, labor force, social and health care sectors, and law enforcement, to name just a few. These last worst case scenarios are not just predictions; in many parts of the country they constitute the present day reality. Nevertheless, they can certainly be considered strong reasons to promote educational equity. And so, as complex as the long term effects of inequitable education are, the effort put forth to accomplish the goals of educational equity is certainly worth the time and the cost to the lives of the language majority and language minority students whose lives we profess to improve.

References

Alinsky, S. D. (1971). *Rules for Radicals.* New York: Random House.

American Institutes for Research. (1972). *Institutional self-study guide on sex equity I: Conditions, policies and practices affecting sex equity for students.* Washington, DC: AIR.

American Institutes for Research. (1972). *Institutional self-study on sex equity II: Conditions, policies and practices affecting sex equity for faculty.* Washington, DC: AIR.

American Institutes for Research. (1972). Institutional self-study guide on sex equity III: *Conditions, policies and practices affecting sex equity for administrators.* Washington, DC: AIR.

American Institutes for Research. (1972). *Institutional self-study guide on sex equity IV: Conditions, policies and practices affecting sex equity for staff.* Washington, DC: AIR.

Bermudez, A. B. (1989). Examining institutional barriers to Hispanic education. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students,* 4, 31-40.

Cazden, C. (1986) ESL Teachers as Language Advocates for Children. In P. Rigg & D. S. Enright (Eds.), *Children and ESL: Integrating Perspectives* (pp. 9-21). Washington, DC: TESOL.

Cisneros, R., Heller, F., Leone, E., Penfield, J., & Valdez-Pierce, L. (1990) Improving Educational Equity: Who, What, How, When. Workshop presented at the Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, March 6, 1990, San Francisco.

Cisneros, R., & Leone, E. A. (1990, Spring) Enhancing International ESL Professionalism. *Cross Currents, An International Journal of Language Teaching and Cross-Cultural Communication.*

Cummins, J. 1989. *Empowering Minority Students.* Sacramento, CA: California Assn. for Bilingual Education.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* N. Y.: Herder & Herder.

Handscombe, J. (1989). A quality program for learners of English as a second language. In P. Rigg & V. Allen (Eds.), *When they don't all speak English* (pp. 1-14). Urbana, Ill: NCTE.

Holzman, M. (1988, February). A post-Freirean model for adult literacy education. *College English,* 50, 177-189.

Hudelson, S. (1984). Kan yu ret an rayt en ingles: Children becoming literate in English as a second language. *TESOL Quarterly* 18: 221-38.

Kagan, S. (1986). Cooperative learning and sociocultural factors in schooling. In *Beyond Language: Social and cultural factors in schooling language minority students* (pp. 231-298). Los Angeles: University of California, Evaluation, Dissemination, and Assessment Center.

Mid-Atlantic Equity Center. (1989a) Equity Assistance Service Brochure. Washington, DC: American University.

Mid-Atlantic Equity Center. (1989b) Legal Responsibilities of Education Agencies Serving Language Minority Students.

NCTE. (1986, Nov). *Expanding opportunities: Academic success for culturally and linguistically diverse students.* The task force on racism and bias in the teaching of English. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

NCTE. (1978, May). *Non-white minorities in English and language arts materials.* The task force on racism and bias in the teaching of English. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Ovando, C. J., & Collier, V. (1985) *Bilingual and ESL classrooms: Teaching in multicultural contexts.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Penfield, J. (1990). *An inservice model for collaborating with mainstream teachers to change conditions for ESL/bilingual students.* TESOL workshop presentation, March 6, 1990, San Francisco, CA.

Rigg, P., & Allen, V. (1989) Introduction. In P. Rigg & V. Allen (Eds.), *When they don't all speak English* (pp. vii-xx). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Tarone, E. 91989). Teacher-executed needs assessment: Some suggestions for teachers and program administrators. *Minnesota TESOL Journal* 7, 39-49.

Urzua, C. (1989). I grow for a living. In P. Rigg & V. Allen (Eds.), *When they don't all speak English* (pp. 15-38). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Wallerstein, N. (1983). The teaching approach of Paulo Freire, In J. W. Oller & P. A. Richard-Amato (Eds.), *Methods That Work* (pp. 190-204). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.