LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Dr. Sloan:

Permit me to share with your readers a major concern that I have on advice some speech-language pathologists and other language specialists are imparting to parents and school officials with regards to minority language children.

There are many such professionals who recommend English language reinforcement both in the home and at school, and at times even go so far as to say to parents that they should switch to English in the home to help their children develop better skills in English. Although such thinking at first glance may appear to be logical, it is quite inconsistent with what we know about dual language development and research in bilingual (first and second language) education. Based upon the studies of the last 20 years or so (Baker, 1987; Cummins, 1978, 1981, 1984; Genesee, 1987; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Landry & Allard, in press; Lapkin & Swain, 1982; Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1977), specialists in bilingual education are now almost unanimous in promoting the first language of minority children (as we already do with English language children) to ensure successful development in both languages.

There was a time prior to 1969 when bilingualism was viewed in a negative light and the first language was the thought to interfere with the acquisition of the second, majority language. Most examples had been taken from children obliged to take English before their own native language was reinforced. We now know that skills developed in the process of acquiring a first language serve as sources of transfer for a second language. If the first language and home culture base is not strong, then difficulties develop.

Most would recognize that the personal opinion of a professional is not part of a professional opinion (since the view does not reflect professional training and the studies that are the basis of that training). There can be serious consequences in taking of professional liberties that find their source in popular myths and not professional studies or disciplined training. Take, for instance, the question of assessment. Surely, there is something statistically wrong when a child is amissed cognitively and linguistically in a language and cultural context that is not his or her own. Some professionalism has to be exercised to ensure that children's differences are taken into account so that equal attention can be paid to their needs.

It is true that there exists limits on professional skills and resources, but to acknowledge these limits is a first step in the right direction. Very often, what is a natural need for the first language development in a child becomes a problem to the unilingual language specialist who does not recognize the existence of that need in the first place. The difference between a problem (as labelled by a professional) and a need (understood from the child's point of view) is usually that the perceived problem is an unresolved need not yet understood by the professional. Thus, the professional's problem (not the child's) is to understand and find an answer to the child's needs. It is an important distinction because minority language children have too often been targeted by professionals as having more problems (from their own perspective) than do majority language children.

There is no doubt in my mind that the profession as a whole is highly trained and competent to meet the needs of a majority language children. That is not the case, unfortunately, with regards to minority language populations.

Thank you for you interest and cooperation.

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