

Article 21

Elements of a Bilingual School Counselor Training Program for Spanish Speakers

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Abstract

The goal of this project was to prepare Spanish-speaking bilingual educators in Southeast Texas to become bilingual school counselors by reducing barriers to higher education, providing financial assistance, academic tutorial support, and personal support. This article presents those elements found to be essential in training of bilingual school counselors.

As the English Language Learner (ELL) population of the United States continues to increase, the need to assist ELLs to meet the expectations, rules, and requirements of the school system rises proportionately. Currently, the ELL population struggles to meet the standards set by educational agencies throughout the country. For example, the Texas Education Agency (TEA; 2010a) reported that in 2008-2009, the grade 7-12 dropout rate for Latino students (2.6%) was almost three times as high as that for White students. In addition, Latino students, although comprising 44.8% of the total student population in the state, made up 58.1% of the total state dropouts. In 2007-2008, retention rates for Texas Latino students in grades K-6 (3.4%) were nearly double their Caucasian peers (1.8%), while retention rates for Texas Latino students in grades 7-12 (9%) were nearly triple the retention rates for their Caucasian peers (3.6%; TEA, 2010b).

Similar trends have been noted throughout the country (Gewertz, Swanson, & Guidera, 2010). While the overall national graduation rates for the class of 2007 indicated that 68.8% graduated from high school, only 55.5 % of Latino students graduated in 2007. Graduation rates for Latino males were cited at even lower rates; only 50.6% of Latino males graduate from high school (Gewertz et al., 2010). Although states with high Latino dropout rates are scattered throughout the country, California, New York, Texas, and Florida lead the nation as the epicenters for dropouts (Wilde, 2011). While statistics from the past 10 years suggested progress in reducing the Latino dropout rate over the 1990s, statistics gathered in 2005 through 2007 indicated that the Latino graduation rate is again slightly on the decline (Gewertz et al., 2010).

Demographic projections indicate that by the year 2040, 60% of Texas will be of Latino ethnicity, yet less than 68% of Latinos will have a high school diploma (Murdock, 2005). The impact of this achievement gap reaches beyond high school graduation. In 2004, only 8.9% of the overall Texas Latino population had earned a bachelor's degree (Murdock, 2005). These statistics are accompanied by high Latino unemployment rates (Murdock, 2005), and, in 2009-2010, 79.3% of the Latino students in Texas schools were identified as economically disadvantaged (TEA, 2010c). Additionally, although the Latino teen pregnancy rate appears to have slowed in 2006, nearly half of Latino women become pregnant before age 20 (Guttmacher Institute, 2010).

Lack of English proficiency obviously impacts the academic success of ELLs in the school setting. Research (Smith-Adcock, Daniels, Lee, Villalba, & Arce, 2006; Sue & Sue, 2003; White House Initiative, 2005) indicates that numerous factors negatively impact the overall success of these students including:

- 1) negative academic experiences, retention, and poor school attendance;
- 2) incidence of social and economic disparity that precludes parents from actively participating in their children's education due to job requirements;
- 3) lack of access for bilingual parents including communication skills, financial assistance, or knowledge of available supportive resources;
- 4) psychosocial difficulties due to immigration, poverty, and discrimination;
- 5) teen pregnancy and the need for teenagers to care for siblings or to work to increase family income;
- 6) traditional cultural expectations that conflict with mainstream societal expectations;

- 7) lack of knowledge for both parents and educators regarding postsecondary vocational and higher education opportunities; and
- 8) school personnel who lack understanding of the distinctive needs of ELLs and how to provide support services to close achievement and access gaps.

Meeting the Challenges of Counseling English Language Learners

Smith-Adcock et al. (2006) have stressed that effective communication and a strong working relationship between home and school are essential to the success of the Latino student. The U.S. Surgeon General suggested that bilingual/bicultural counselors are most effective in bridging the gaps that exist among the student, home, and school (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Administrators agree that bilingual, Spanish-speaking school counselors could best address personal, academic, and career needs for Latino students (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006).

Behavioral, affective, and cognitive insights are not meaningful unless the counselor and client evaluate these insights within appropriate cultural perspectives. Counseling interventions designed for the mainstream but that ignore the cultural context are actually dangerous because they present “the illusion of ‘doing something’” when in fact the counselor’s views are possibly either ethnocentric or stereotypic” (Pedersen, 1997, p. 21). Concurrently, counselors must be cognizant of individual differences and they must be cautious of over-generalizing specific cultural values to all members of that culture. The opportunity for transcending language and cultural barriers between the family, home, and school is significantly limited when the supportive link, the school counselor, speaks only English and has little experience with the culture of the ELL. Coupled with this, the cultural norms, values, and expectations of the mainstream culture and native culture often conflict, thus, further complicating the relationship between home and school. Although 19% of the children of immigrants are considered to be English language learners, Wilde (2011) asserts that 61% of these children had parents with limited English proficiency and 22% of immigrant children live in poverty. The parents of many ELLs are intimidated by the school culture and ill-equipped because they neither read nor write English; English-only support is beyond their reach. Despite the many new opportunities that arise each year to support these families in learning the English language, with supportive instruction, the time needed to develop English proficiency still ranges from three to seven years (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

Comprehensive, Developmental Guidance and Counseling Programs

Mastery of a solid academic curriculum is imperative for the potential success of ELLs. However, there is a significant danger that students will not be able to learn and retain academic knowledge without the implementation of an equally important support system designed to provide a socio-emotional foundation and direction for seeking solutions to both academic and personal issues that are often beyond the reach of their traditional support system, the family (Davis, 2010). Familiarity with a comprehensive, developmental guidance and counseling curriculum that specifically addresses the diverse needs of the ELL population is a crucial component of the counselor training process (Baker & Gerler 2007; Stone & Dahir, 2006; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

Professional school counselors support ELLs by providing opportunities for children to learn the value of education as well as ways to cope with the influence of negativity, poverty, drugs, gangs, and abusive situations. Counselors also help parents understand the resources available to help ELLs succeed in the school setting, access options available for financial support for vocational and higher education, and learn to access social services that can accommodate the mental health needs of a family in transition.

To meet the socio-affective needs of Latino ELLs, the most effective option is for districts to hire qualified professional school counselors who understand both cultures and are fluent in both English and the students' native language. Mayo (2005) clarified the differences between the roles of a bilingual counselor and that of a traditional mainstream counselor with comments gained during a focus group discussion with several bilingual counselors serving ELL populations. One elementary bilingual counselor stated that the bilingual counselor addresses traditional counseling responsibilities such as scheduling and large group character education, as well as works with ELLs and their families about discipline, health, or social concerns in both English and in Spanish. Having an in-depth knowledge of community resources, being able to interpret at 504 meetings, and providing parenting workshops in Spanish are also responsibilities of the bilingual counselor. A veteran secondary level bilingual counselor noted that his responsibilities included communicating in Spanish with high school students and their parents regarding options for vocational and higher education and trying to bridge generation and cultural gaps. Another bilingual counselor emphasized that the parents of ELLs were often reluctant to attend school functions or ask questions because they were not familiar with the language or customs and stressed that there must be counselors and administrators within the school to help parents communicate on behalf of the children (Mayo, 2005).

Addressing Barriers Contributing to the Shortage of Bilingual School Counselors

Nationwide, there is a documented shortage of certified bilingual teachers, counselors, and administrators (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006; U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE), 2010). In a study from the OPE (2010), Texas is listed as needing bilingual teachers every year since 1990. Of the other states, nearly all indicated that they have needed Spanish (or other language) teachers, ESL or bilingual teachers either currently or between 2005-2010. This study also inferred that only five states indicated that there was a shortage of counselors between 2005-2010. Although, the document addressed teaching rather than counseling needs, it seems logical to infer that if a state cannot find bilingual/ESL teachers, then there will also be a shortage of bilingual counselors. Research indicated that the shortage of bilingual educators across the U.S. can be attributed to factors such as financial barriers, inadequate advising, need for advanced written and oral language skills in two languages, and need for linguistically and culturally reflective faculty and supervision for counselors-in-training (Crawford, 1997; Sawyer, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to present a counselor training model that would reduce the barriers to continue higher education and to train bilingual educators to become bilingual school counselors and supervisors. In the Collaborative Bilingual Counselor Training Project-1 (CBCT), 35 Spanish-speaking bilingual school counselors

were trained as part of a federal grant from the United States Department of Education Office of English Language Learners (OELA). An additional 57 participants are either in the process of or have completed training in current CBCT projects by addressing the barriers mentioned in this paper. The CBCT-1 project provided financial assistance, facilitated collaboration with local school districts for recruitment and retention, provided support for counselors in area schools, and provided academic tutorial support for participants. All of the training took place via face-to-face classes over nine semesters; all participants worked full-time as either teachers or counselors throughout the training process. The project focused on identifying, addressing, and including those components that could help prepare bilingual/bicultural counselors to positively impact the success of English language learners within the school setting. In order to reduce the barriers to continued higher education and facilitate the training of bilingual educators to become school counselors, the project addressed the participants' financial barriers, retention barriers, and linguistic and cultural barriers.

Financial Barriers

The ability to obtain higher education is an unreachable dream for many due to lack of financial resources. Of the bilingual counselors who completed the CBCT-1 project, 22 participated in a survey and focus group to evaluate the program: 64% of those surveyed had one or more parents that did not complete high school; 86.4% indicated that they would not have been able to acquire this certification without the financial support of the CBCT-1 grant (Mayo, 2005). One evaluation focus group participant elaborated that the CBCT-1 project not only provided the financial means to help her decide to work on her Master's degree but also helped her complete her goal of becoming a counselor. Focus group discussants also stressed that many bilingual educators could not become school counselors because they did not have the money to pay for the tuition and books (Mayo, 2005).

Retention Barriers

The current shortage of bilingual counselors (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006) is exacerbated by the current shortage of bilingual teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000; OPE, 2010). The pool of potential bilingual counselors is limited to those individuals who have completed a bachelor's degree; in 2004, only 8.9% of Texas Latinos had earned a bachelor's degree (Murdock, 2003). In some states, such as Texas, school counselors must first be experienced school teachers, thus limiting population pools from which to recruit bilingual school counselors. Issues surrounding school district economics, immigration, financial difficulties facing first generation high school graduates, and attrition all contribute to the shortage of bilingual teachers. In addition, many school districts are reluctant to encourage bilingual teachers to seek counselor certification because there are so few teachers to replace them in the classroom. Finally, some bilingual teachers receive a stipend and would have to forfeit that extra money to become a professional school counselor. This forfeiture may mean a cut in pay for the bilingual teacher. In an effort to promote retention of the bilingual stipend, this project created an in-university bilingual counselor certificate that could be used by the participant to approach the district with a request to retain the bilingual stipend as a result of extra training. Participants who earned this certificate were required to take two additional

college courses, participate in workshops that specifically addressed the needs of Latino learners, counsel Spanish speaking clients in both the Practicum and Internship settings, and create/implement projects designed to help the families of ELLs better understand the school system.

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

Effective bilingual counselors must have advanced dual language ability and an in-depth grasp of the expectations and needs of both cultures. The nuances involved in emotional expression, colloquial jargon, blended languages, body language, and cultural interpretation cannot be easily learned in an academic setting. Sawyer (2006) strongly stressed that the population pool for attracting effective bilingual counselors should be narrowed to individuals who had the ability to speak, read, and write in both languages and had a strong understanding of the culture and traditions of both the mainstream and the minority culture.

Many first generation students receive somewhat ambiguous support from families: advice and support is limited to the understanding of the family. Sometimes the families are supportive at first but as the stressors associated with higher education become more demanding, the family has less ability to advise and little knowledge of how to support (Davis, 2010). In addition, some female Latino students come from families that expect them to adhere to the traditional views of *marianismo*: the woman should be subservient, the woman's needs should not come first, the woman should not strive for anything except those responsibilities associated with being a housewife, and the woman should not discuss personal or family issues outside of the family (Gil & Vasquez, 1996). First generation Master's students must often decide which cultural values to keep and which to leave behind. When a woman is working toward a degree in higher education, she needs for her family to accept a more balanced concept of *marianismo*: she needs for them to support the woman in her quest to become more than a housewife as well as understanding that the woman should know when and how to seek help outside of the family (Arciniega, Gallardo-Cooper, & Tovar-Gamero, 2011).

Collaborative Partners for Bilingual Counselor Training

The CBCT-1 project provided financial assistance, facilitated collaboration with local school districts for recruitment and retention, provided support for counselors in area schools, and provided academic tutorial support for participants. Several collaborating school districts provided the following support throughout the project:

- 1) recruited and recommended bilingual teachers who demonstrated the ability to become effective counselors and professed commitment to serve the community for at least 5 years;
- 2) provided mentors for both counselors-in-training and supervisors-in-training;
- 3) provided building space and utilities for practicum counseling clinics;
- 4) hired project graduates to serve as counselors and counseling supervisors;
- 5) reviewed formative evaluative data and recommended continuance or change to project and/or university counseling program course content and practices; and
- 6) supported the evaluative component of the project by facilitating data collection.

Project Goals

The goals of the CBCT-1 are enumerated and explained in the following sections. These goals provided the foundation for preparing the bilingual school counselors and are the essential elements of a successful program.

Goal 1: Recruit and prepare Master's level bilingual school counselors to address the needs of ELLs. To increase the number of bilingual certified school counselors within the university service region, a recruitment program for potential counselors was established. Project personnel worked closely with area school district personnel directors to coordinate recruitment efforts and to identify Spanish-speaking teachers who demonstrated potential ability and interest in serving as bilingual school counselors. Recruitment efforts within the school districts included informational meetings and presentations on counselor certification as a career choice as well as the availability of financial support for qualified bilingual applicants.

Applicants were then interviewed to assess their interest in counseling as a profession, willingness to dedicate time and energy toward completion of this project, and commitment to remaining in the educational profession as school counselors to serve ELLs. Three strong letters of reference were required with at least two of the letters from counselors or school administrators who could attest to the applicant's interest in working with ELLs. Empathy and understanding of the social and cultural aspects of the Latino community as well as Spanish and English proficiency was assessed through written essays combined with oral interviews by a panel of practicing bilingual school counselors. Applicants were asked to sign a letter of promise to serve as counselors for at least 5 years after the completion of the program. All selected participants-in-training received tuition, fees, mentoring, and textbooks as part of the funded federal grant training project.

Goal 2: Provide an intensive support system and mentoring for bilingual counselors-in-training. The stressors involved in acquiring a Master's degree while maintaining a full time teaching job and managing a household may interfere in the ability of the counselors-in-training to complete their graduate programs. The required academic curriculum required students to maintain a 3.0 or better grade point average, and students who did not meet programmatic standards were dismissed from the program. Tutorials in writing and statistics were often needed for struggling students; the CBCT-1 project funded tutorials to ensure student success and reduce attrition. In addition, many of the counselors-in-training entered the program burdened with past trauma, family-of-origin issues, inadequate support systems, and other emotional or social issues that potentially interfered with some of the participants' ability to learn. The sum of these difficulties potentially interfered with some of the participants' ability to effectively serve as counselors; thus, one supportive component of this project included voluntary participation in introspective examination, personal growth activities, and personal counseling in order to address these issues. Mayo's (2005) focus group participants indicated that 86.4% of the 22 graduates felt personal counseling was very valuable and helped them to become more capable of serving as advocates for ELLs and addressing the issues related to working with both the mainstream and ELL communities. These same counselors also indicated that support with time management, study skills, and organization was helpful. This support was provided through a variety of sources, including the project director, program coordinator, the student assistant, other

counseling program faculty, and university student services. Mayo (2005) reported that 78% of the project participants responded that they met with their mentor on a weekly basis, and 96% responded that their mentor was always available when they needed professional support. The majority of the students (65%) anticipated they would continue the mentoring relationship after program completion.

The CBCT-1 project also created student cohorts to facilitate networking, collaborative relationships, peer tutoring, proof-reading, and working together as teams. Participants in all focus groups emphasized the cohort experience was crucial for their success in classes and completion of the program (Mayo, 2005). The students moved through the program as members of a group or cohort; students then developed close relationships and provided peer support. One project evaluation focus group member clarified that being part of a group of encouraging peers in the program was an incentive for her to remain in the program; the peers supported each other both academically and emotionally. Mayo's (2005) study concluded that Latino students were more likely to complete the graduate program with a strong people-oriented support system including being part of a cohort group, personal tutoring, and encouragement from their peers, school, and the counseling program staff.

Goal 3: Provide free counseling and support services to ELL public school students and families as part of the counselor training process. Service-learning and supervised practicums are crucial components of the counselor training process. In the CBCT-1 project, the bilingual counselors-in-training learned theory and basic skills within the classroom setting but practiced and refined these skills at university-school-based clinics that provided free counseling services for low-income children and families. The university clinics were held in neighborhood elementary schools during the evening hours so that families could walk to the clinic and thus avoid transportation issues. Clients were referred to the clinic by the school counselor or administrator because the referral source indicated that the client needed more support than the school counselor could offer within the regular school setting. Counseling services were made available to the referred client as well as any other family member living in the client's household. These clinics, closely monitored by university supervisors, have given families who would have no other resources the opportunity to receive counseling and guidance.

The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (2005) cites that although the vast majority of surveyed Latino parents wanted their children to go to college, more than two-thirds of surveyed parents did not possess the information or resources to turn these dreams into reality. Counselor training programs must address ways to help parents locate appropriate resources as part of the counselor training process. In this project, counselors-in-training demonstrated their ability to help parents learn more about helping their children and accessing resources by presenting at least four ELL parent workshops. The content of these workshops focused on age-appropriate information to support the ELL and the family in their quest to help the child be more successful. For instance, some workshops centered on helping the parents of ELLs understand the importance of two-way communication with the child's teacher. A series of secondary school level parent workshops guided the parents of ELLs through the often confusing process of selecting appropriate courses, applying for financial assistance, completing the college application and scholarship process, and emotionally

supporting their ELL in his/her quest for completing high school and entering higher education.

Project administrators estimated the counselors-in-training involved with this project provided approximately 2,230 hours of counseling and parenting workshops in English and 2,430 hours in Spanish, totaling 4,664 hours of *pro-bono* community service under the supervision of university faculty over a three year period of time. Clearly the students were able to experience using their counseling skills as part of their coursework while providing a valuable contribution to the community (Sawyer, 2006).

Goal 4: Facilitate employment placement assistance for project-trained counselors and monitor post-training performance of trainees for one year. Due to the significant need for bilingual counselors, approximately 90% of the project counselors-in-training were hired by collaborating school districts *prior* to the internship-capstone semester. The few participants who were not hired prior to internship were offered district positions soon after graduation. In the final project evaluation, these graduates discussed the impact and changes that occurred within their schools resulting from the introduction of a bilingual counselor effectively trained in addressing the needs of ELLs and their families. One project participant hired as a bilingual counselor stated, “I was told by the school’s previous monolingual counselor that the ELL parents had no interest in their child’s education and that inviting them to a parent workshop was a waste of time. During my first week as bilingual counselor, I sent home a letter to all parents written in both English and Spanish to introduce myself and assure them that these workshops would be conducted in both languages. About 200 Spanish speaking family members came to my first parent workshop. I know I made a difference” (Mayo, 2005).

Conclusion and Implications

Focus group data indicates that the CBCT-1 project trained bilingual counselors that could address the needs of the community and effectively serve both the monolingual and ELL populations; 100% of the project graduates indicated they felt they were enrolled in a quality counseling program. Approximately 95% of the project graduates were hired as counselors prior to their internship semester or within three months of graduation; 5% chose to stay within the classroom due to personal reasons; 100% of the graduates passed the state licensing examination on the first attempt; and 96% of surveyed graduates indicated their counseling professors and supervisors were competent counselors, instructors, student development professionals, and clinical supervisors (Mayo, 2005).

The ultimate goal of the CBCT-1 project was to better prepare counselors of ELLs in order to assist K-12 students achieve high levels of academic success and increased access to post-secondary education. Implementation of the project involved an increased collaboration with participating school districts in order to effectively recruit, advise, select, train, and mentor CBCT-1 participants. Thirty-five bilingual counselors were trained as part of this specific project, and subsequently an additional 57 participants are either in the process or have successfully completed training in current CBCT projects using the components suggested. This project also incorporated key elements that would help increase the likelihood project participants would continue in the counseling profession. The documented success of this project suggests that counselor

training programs should consider including the components suggested in this study as essential elements in any future training of bilingual counselors.

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