A Seminar for School Psychology Students:  
Working with Second Language Learners

Eleanor T. Robertson  
Trinity University

Abstract

This study describes a seminar created to prepare school psychology students to work with second language learners. Third year interns who are themselves bilingual attend a series of four sessions led by a practicing Spanish speaking school psychologist to discuss cases and best practices. At the end of the first year of implementation, students described the experience positively and were making plans to continue meeting throughout the following year. A focus group was held to determine what factors made this an effective educational approach for these graduate students in their school practices. The factors cited were an experienced leader who is fluent in two languages, a process oriented teaching approach, timing of the seminar during the full-time practice year for students so discussions can address real issues, and a structured schedule of sessions placed in an informal setting.

According to the 2000 United States Census (2001), the population of the United States is becoming increasingly diverse. On this latest count, approximately 21% of the population considered themselves as belonging to a group other than White Only. Twelve and a half percent of respondents identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino, representing over 35,000,000 people throughout the United States. This category may overlap since more than one affiliation was allowed on the census response form. Although the White Only population is numerically greater, this group increased by only 5.9% from the 1990 census, while the Hispanic/Latino numbers grew by 57.9% during this same period. The states on the border of Mexico and the United States have always had a population that included many individuals of Hispanic descent. Today the border states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas have Hispanic populations of between 25% (Arizona) to 44% (New Mexico). Many counties directly on the Texas-Mexico border have populations in the 90% range (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The experience and expertise demonstrated by schools in the border region in bringing all students into the community in a meaningful way and utilizing their backgrounds in a positive manner could serve as a model for other areas that are now being challenged to meet the needs of children and families immigrating from Spanish speaking countries.
In addition to providing a good education for students from homes in which English is not the first language, students who also have a specific disability present additional, unique needs for educators. School psychologists are often the first professionals called upon to assess a student and provide recommendations for interventions. The need to provide school psychologists with the training, supervision, and experience relevant to working with students from homes in which English is a second language is critical. The various credentialing groups responsible for monitoring school psychology training programs have recognized the importance of this area in creating their standards. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the American Psychological Association (APA) include specific guidelines that address training students to work effectively with clients and students from a variety of ethnic and racial groups (National Association of School Psychologists, 1994-95; American Psychological Association, 2004).

Beyond teaching effective practices, the recruitment of Hispanic school psychologists who themselves come from Spanish speaking families with cultural backgrounds similar to those of their students is important (American Psychological Association, 2003). Again, the accreditation groups have recognized and addressed this need in their standards (National Association of School Psychologists, 1994-95; American Psychological Association, 2004). In addition, both NASP and APA offer scholarships to promote the recruitment of Hispanic students (National Association of School Psychologists, 2004; American Psychological Association, 2004). In spite of these efforts, the number of Hispanic school psychologists is relatively low. According to a survey of 1,902 NASP members conducted by Curtis, Hunley, Walker, and Baker in 1999, only 32 were Hispanic. This amounted to 1.7% of the total psychologists surveyed. A count of the school psychologists with Hispanic surnames listed as members of the Texas Association of School Psychologists indicates that there are eight (Texas Association of School Psychologists, 2003-2004). This would represent approximately 2% of the total membership. In contrast to these numbers, 120 individuals with Hispanic surnames are listed as Licensed Specialists in School Psychology in the 2003 roster of the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists, or approximately 6% of the total number (Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists, 2004). These statistics support both the low number of Hispanic school psychologists and also suggest that this group is not currently well represented in professional organizations.

What is being done to change these numbers and to provide those school psychologists interested in working with Hispanic students the necessary training in effective assessments and interventions? In addition, what are school psychology programs offering to educate those who will be working with the sub-group of Hispanic students with special education needs? A related issue would be what would inspire this group both to continue in the field and to become more involved with supporting their Hispanic colleagues professionally?

A few studies have specifically addressed the training of school psychologists to work with bilingual students. Palmer, Hughes and Juarez (1991) described a program designed to attract and prepare Hispanic school psychologists at Texas A&M University. The authors outlined factors that were important for recruitment and the requirements for the students enrolled in this doctoral level program. Achievements of the graduate students
are impressive, but this article does not cite the elements of the program that were significant from the students’ perspectives. In 1992, Rogers, Ponterotto, Conoley, and Wiese surveyed directors of APA accredited and PhD level school psychology programs to measure the extent of training in areas important for those planning to work with students from diverse cultures. Forty percent of the programs sampled did not offer specific courses in multicultural issues or integrate them into the core psychology courses. In addition, the exposure to students from diverse cultures was limited in practicum and internship experiences. In 1997, Ochoa, Rivera, and Ford conducted a survey of 1,507 school psychologists from eight states to assess an important component of graduate level education, specifically training in the psycho-educational assessment of bilingual Hispanic students. These researchers found that respondents cited only one graduate program as adequately addressing all the competencies they cite as essential for good assessments. Seven other programs offered training in some of these competencies.

Best practices for working with second language learners have been addressed by several authors. Good summaries and lists of references can be found in Ortiz and Flanagan’s chapter in Best Practices in School Psychology IV (2002) and in Lopez’s chapter in Best Practices in School Psychology III (1995). The focus of the present study was determining the factors in training programs that students new to the field find helpful in the learning process.

The Seminar

The Trinity University School Psychology Program is located in San Antonio, Texas, a city in which approximately 53% of the population is Hispanic. School Psychology is a part of the Education Department that has a philosophy of attracting diverse students to all three of the included degree programs. The percentages of Hispanic students in the School Psychology Program have been 75, 29, 36, and 20 for the classes graduating in 2002-2005, respectively. This means that of the 48 school psychology students trained during these years, 17, or 35% have been Hispanic. This is certainly a contrast both to the national and Texas averages for numbers of school psychologists. Serving the needs of students in the surrounding schools is the priority for the training program. School psychology students are already placed in school settings for assistantships for their two years of academics. A full-time, school-based internship is completed during the third year of the program.

Responding to the need to effectively prepare students to work with second language learners, a unique program was created for the Trinity school psychology students who are Spanish speaking. The students who participated for this first year of implementation all also described themselves as Hispanic, although this was not a specific criteria. All students in the Trinity School Psychology Program work in an internship setting during their third year and virtually all sites include Hispanic second language learners. In addition to working on a public school campus fulltime, all third year students are required to attend a seminar at Trinity as part of the internship course. The seminar meets six times during the school year for two hours each session. Prior to four of the seminars, a one and a half hour meeting was planned for the four bilingual interns. The meetings were led by
the school psychologist in charge of bilingual assessment for the Northside Independent School District. Fluent in Spanish herself, she has had many years of experience testing, counseling, and planning appropriate interventions for second language learners.

The title of the seminar for the bilingual interns was Seminar in School Psychology Practice with the Second Language Learner. It is described in the following summary paragraph:

This seminar is designed to give the student an appreciation for working with the second language learner in the public school setting and the role of the school psychologist in this process. Particular emphasis will be placed on the student becoming knowledgeable regarding the importance of: consultation/collaboration through use of an early intervention process, data-based decision-making through the use of informal and formal assessment instruments appropriate for the second language learner, and effective counseling intervention for the second language learner. While this seminar will focus on the Spanish dominant student, the knowledge attained in this seminar is applicable to all second language learners (Gonzalez, 2003).

Topics for the four sessions were listed as follows: 1) The importance of an early intervention process; 2) Informal and formal assessment instruments, determining eligibility, and report writing; 3) From evaluation to ARD and intervention; and 4) Counseling interventions. Students were asked to bring in cases from their internship sites as they related to the class schedule. Students were also advised to include one of the cases discussed in their final program portfolios.

The factors that made our approach somewhat unique were the time of implementation within the training program sequence, the experiential component, and the unique characteristics required for participants and for the leader. These were important in the planning of the experience, however we did not know if these would indeed be viewed as significant in evaluating the success of the group. At the end of the internship year, all participants stated that the additional seminar on bilingual issues had been an important part of their educational experience at Trinity and recommended continuing with the approach. I was interested in determining what factors were important in making this group a positive part of the students’ training. A focus group was held to discuss these issues.

Results of Focus Group

The group of four participants was gathered at the location where they held their bilingual issues seminar, a local dining establishment. The group convened outside on a patio in the late afternoon when there were no other diners present. A tape recorder was used to record the responses to the questions posed. A series of ten open-ended questions were presented and participants responded and interacted with a minimum of leader direction. The tape was then transcribed and the typed document examined for common themes and repeated points. The following conclusions are offered from this analysis.

The first important factor cited by the group was the leadership provided. They unanimously stated that the leader had been a key element for providing the needed struc-
ture and direction for the discussions. The combination of practitioner and teacher that she brought to the group was critical. The students were all in agreement that to lead a seminar such as this, both current practical experience and a broad knowledge of the field of bilingual issues are essential. Although this was not specifically mentioned, the fact that this individual is fluent in Spanish and has lived in several Spanish speaking countries are important aspects of the experience she brings to her teaching. The conclusions from the student comments is that an effective leader for a group seminar for school psychology students on working with second language learners needs to be fluent in both languages addressed and familiar with the cultural issues involved, the school environment, and best practices for school psychologists.

In conjunction with the effective leadership repeatedly mentioned by the group another important positive factor that emerged from the discussion was a specific teaching style. As the participants brought up cases and issues they wanted addressed, the leader would encourage a process of discussion and problem solving rather than provide a solution. Group members were all able to contribute to working out appropriate interventions and approaches. As one student stated, “It’s definitely a learning experience. It wasn’t just here’s my question and here’s my answer. You were learning and processing it all together. I think that’s what made it very helpful.” Although hand-outs and reading lists were provided, much of the teaching was focused on discussions of individual cases brought in by the participants and aimed at teaching them a problem solving process. This promoted a collegial interaction and helped students begin to view themselves as resources for each other.

The placement of the bilingual seminar at the internship level was a positive factor for the students. This is a time when they are really moving from the role of graduate student to professional educator. At the internship level, students are at a point in their training when they know the basic skills but still need real experiences to continue in their professional development. The first two years of the Trinity School Psychology Program combine academic coursework with 25 hours per week of graduate assistantships in school settings, however, the internship consists of a full-time, 40-hour work week in a school placement. Each of the four students in the seminar worked in a different school district, and each site each contained a large percentage of Hispanic students. According to focus group feedback, the seminar made the transition to the real world of school psychology practice as related to the second language learner more successful.

Related to the placement of the seminar in the sequence of educational experiences for the graduate students is the experiential component itself, mentioned repeatedly by the group. Many of the topics covered had been addressed earlier in the school psychology program in the context of classes taught in a more didactic manner. With the addition of real-life situations and examples for the participants, the information attained a new level of importance. The pressure of finding effective interventions encouraged discussions of both the practical and the theoretical.

In their two years of coursework, school psychology students had studied socio-economic and culture bound factors impacting many Hispanic students, but encountering these issues in cases that required immediate intervention suggestions was more mean-
The high teen pregnancy rate in one district, close to 70 percent of the girls in one high school, is a statistic made highly relevant when one of the interns was involved in counseling a young woman regarding her plans for the future.

Another important issue discussed as especially meaningful when experienced in the context of a specific real-life setting was school climate. The different factors comprising a school's climate were articulated and related to students’ and families’ comfort levels. For example, one intern described the contrast between two schools in her district. One presents many problems for the family newly arrived from Mexico, while the other offers numerous welcoming features, such as Spanish speaking staff and students, and even familiar music being played by the custodians during their break times.

Each intern had specific cases as well as different district policies and approaches to share. The systemic response to second language learners was an especially important topic of discussion since these professional educators in training will be the leaders of the future and will undoubtedly have an impact on future school district policies. One student expressed her hope of being able to make some important programmatic changes in her district, commenting, “I think that's what compels me to stay because I haven’t finished my project….I feel I just can’t move yet.”

An important logistics factor cited by the students as positive was the time and location of the seminar. The hour and a half was adequate considering the many demands from school districts on the interns. The casual location of the seminar in a nearby restaurant was mentioned as positive. Students felt they could talk in an informal, collegial manner in this setting. The scheduling of the meetings approximately every six weeks also was cited as appropriate.

Finally, all participants expressed their intention to continue with the group the following year even if they had to organize this themselves. The four members discussed the importance of having a supportive group of school psychologists to assist with real problems in the school setting. Since interns will again be involved in this experience, the individuals already finished and working in the schools will act as mentors as well as on-going group members. Hopefully, these initial members will become a core, on-going group for support and problem-solving for the future. The commitment articulated by all the school psychology students to continue working in settings that serve the second language learner was an important theme in this discussion. The students expressed hope for the future and a feeling of pride at being able to make a difference for students. As one intern expressed, “through the seminar we became more aware and talked more about the reality of these people’s lives, and in talking about the reality of their lives you realize how different you look and how to respect their opinions…what their lives must be like and what it must look like when these kids go home. You realize what it looks like from their eyes when they look at you when they come to the school and how important it is to be dependable and how important it is to be consistent and how much they need you even though they don’t necessarily show it… how important it is just to be there.”
Summary

The intern bilingual seminar was organized in an intuitive manner, however, the positive comments from the members and the leader motivated me to examine the factors that contributed to this enthusiasm. Those school psychologists working with special needs students from bilingual backgrounds have many challenges and the number of those who are Spanish speaking themselves is so small that it seems important to discover factors that support them in their training and work. From our experience with this project, the first important element for offering a seminar that will have a positive impact on students appears to be good leadership from an individual who brings both experience and theoretical knowledge to the situation. The second factor is utilizing a process oriented teaching approach. Student experience is also critical. Individuals need to be at a point in their education when they have completed some theoretical courses and are involved in meaningful work in real-life settings with students who are learning a second language. The casual, collegial climate of the group is positive, as is the structure of a regular, hour and a half to two hour time frame.

In the future, it will be important to follow this group of school psychology students in their careers to determine if indeed they will continue to meet and support each other. Retaining them in this field is critical to developing effective interventions for second language learners in our schools. Developing meaningful ways to provide support beyond the training years is the continued challenge. As one student stated, “I feel like I’ve grown a lot but don’t feel like I’m some expert at this point. I’m not done with running into problems.” At least creating training programs that address the important needs of educators of second language learners is a beginning.
References


