

NEA says schools slow in embracing lingual and cultural diversity

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Millions of minority children still face disheartening language and cultural barriers in American public schools, the National Education Association has told its members.

Although most educators have abandoned the traditional "melting pot" concept that would fuse all minorities into a homogenous, English-speaking, monocultural society as abruptly as possible, the majority of school districts still seem to be trying to do so.

A major aspect of the problem is that only 15 states yet have any type of bilingual or bilingual/multicultural education legislation and that progress under the federal Bilingual Education Act of 1974, although a big step forward, still has far to go.

Of the more than nine million school-age non-Caucasian children, more than five million come to school speaking a language other than English, says a special feature on bilingual/multicultural education in the April issue of the NEA Reporter.

"The remaining four to five million minority children speak English, but they too are culturally and ethnically different from the dominant Anglo population," says the feature, which will be circulated to nearly two million teachers and other educators. "These children too, because of their differences, are subject to alienation, exclusion, poor grades, and high drop-out rates."

In fact, these youngsters from ghettos, reservations, and barrios have drop-out rates as high as 50 to 60 percent. In no small part, this situation stems from the fact that "historically, they have been considered 'marginal' children—barely worth educating, just as marginal products are barely worth producing," says the NEA publication.

In America's recent past—and in no small way still today—education has been used as an attempt to transform peoples from diverse ethnic backgrounds into a somewhat bland, homogeneous citizenry. Those who climbed the ladder of success generally had conformed best to the melting pot's monocultural ideal. But these, perhaps having changed their names, cut their family ties, denied their cultural heritage, and shunned their backgrounds, often paid a high emotional price.

John Aragon, president of Highlands University, Las Vegas, N. Mex., and a former

NEA-New Mexico staff member, points out that the "ponds of different people" outside the mainstream no longer include the white European groups such as the Italians, Irish, Germans, and Polish.

"All the ponds have dried up except for four—Asian, Black, Indian, and Spanish-Speaking," he notes in the NEA feature. Whereas the disenchanted Europeans came to America with a desire to change, the Spanish wanted "to spread the glories of their culture," the American Indians have liked themselves "the way they are," and the blacks have been kept from the mainstream by white racism (as have, to a considerable extent, the Asians).

"The conflict in this country," says Aragon, "is whether these groups will have to subject themselves to the filtration process or whether they will be allowed to enter as they are."

"Come as you are" is the invitation of today's bilingual/multicultural emphasis in education. It stresses that the child be taught in the language that he brings to school, while at the same time learning English as

a second language. It emphasizes a multicultural curriculum, fosters pride in the child's culture, shows that America is richer for cultural diversity.

At the same time, it firmly rejects the schoolroom subjugation of the past, with such evidences as signs commanding "Speak English"; considering non-English-speaking children as "dumb" or "retarded," and relegating such boys and girls to "special education" classes or allowing them "to sit in regular classrooms and remain quiet, passing on from grade to grade until they realized it was hopeless."

Such approaches were all too common just a decade ago, when NEA sponsored a national conference in the Southwest at which teachers urged a commitment to build "bridges of understanding." The conference had dual goals—taking steps to help all Americans value our variety as a nation, and providing educational opportunity for these "other" children.

Progress has been all too slow, the feature indicates. It notes, for example, that a recent

federal study revealed only about 4% of the 1.6 million Mexican-American children in schools are being reached by bilingual programs.

The NEA feature commends efforts that are being made, such as those in Arizona where 34

local school districts are operating bilingual programs in the absence of state government backing. NEA's state affiliate, the Arizona Education Association, has been a strong force in promoting bilingual/multicultural education there.