

Paper name: From integration to bi-cultural education:
a Mexican experience

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Synopsis

The project described here belongs to a new line of research on intercultural education in Mexico. We use the same principles when working with deaf children as we do with indigenous children. Minority ethnic groups, endangered languages, bilingual education, and diversity must all be taken into account as part of our multi-cultural country. Our work is based on listening and observing before making any intervention, and forming social networks and open learning communities. We are committed to the promotion of policy, legal and judicial changes consistent with the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). In this article we report on the progress made by eight profoundly deaf students who were integrated into a public secondary school in Mexico City. There were twelve hearing students in their class, and they had the support of an interpreter. The deaf students had previously attended a primary school for deaf children and their academic standards were low, so they were given extra tutoring by the researchers. The hearing students, however, demanded equal access to the additional tutor time allocated to the deaf students! The researchers observed that the class gradually became bi-cultural, using the two languages of signed and spoken Spanish. This had not been possible in other settings, where only one or two deaf children had been integrated into a large class.

Background

It is ten years since the Mexican Constitution guaranteed the mainstreaming of children with special needs. The mainstreaming process was defined as giving universal access to the basic curricular programs to all children - regardless of their characteristics. The Federal Law for the People with Disabilities was approved in April 2003. It recognizes Mexican Sign Language as an official language, part of the cultural heritage, and declares the need for a bilingual public education facility for deaf students, as part of their right to have access to language. However, the statistics show¹ that there is a serious lack of support for deaf students, and there

¹ SEP (Subsecretaría de Servicios Educativos para el DF), 1998, **Perspectivas Siglo XXI, Especial**, México:SEP; DGIE/SEP, Programa Nacional de Fortalecimiento de la Educación Especial y de la Integración Educativa, 2002.

are enormous regional differences. Only 1% to 27% of the public schools are practicing mainstreaming².

With the scarce data available³, we can infer that about 60% of deaf students have access to an educational service, leaving almost 40% without attention. Only 4,400 of 26,000 are mainstreamed in primary programs⁴. At the secondary level special education teachers provide support services in 6% of regular schools - 270 schools all together. In Mexico the support provided is described as a 'scaffolding process'. We don't have access to the number of children with special needs in secondary school, nor to the type of educational needs supported, since all the efforts are still concentrated in the first years of primary school.

In this context, eight profoundly deaf students were integrated into a public secondary school in Mexico City. They had attended an after school computer course, while they were finishing their primary education in a special education facility. The class took place in the multimedia lab and since the multimedia teacher was the child of deaf parents, sign language was her first language. She contacted our research group, and arrangements were made to hire an interpreter as a part time teacher. The eight children were put together in the same classroom along with 12 hearing students.

Access to quality education

Besides these local factors that promoted the development of this bi-cultural group a new education policy helped to create a positive climate. In 2001 a national "quality school program" was launched with a financial stimulus, to which the schools could voluntarily apply.

Some of the criteria that defined school quality included: curricular flexibility or differentiated learning opportunities adapted to the different capacities, styles and rhythms of learning; anticipatory teaching strategies to meet diversity; and attitudes of respect, confidence and support for the learning process of the students.

This policy was targeted to deal with unequal access to education. It was an important step towards accepting that school failure is not an individual problem, and cannot be managed through exceptional intervention, but through a systemic and participatory approach from all the actors in the educational process. This politics of positive discrimination has contributed to turn around the attitude towards "special educational needs", from a problem and an obstacle, to an argument to receive financial support as part of a "quality program".

² DGIE-SEP, **Programa de Fortalecimiento de la Educación Especial y la Integración Educativa**. Resumen, Mayo 2002
http://basica.sep.gob.mx/dgie/II_resumen.html

³ INEGI, **Censo 2000**, Población 0-14 años.

⁴ DGIE/SEP, **Programa Nacional de Fortalecimiento de la Educación Especial y de la Integración Educativa**, 2002

One class - two cultures

The task was not an easy one. Normally there are two or three students with special educational needs in a class, and in the past we had dealt with resistance, stigmatization and aggression coming from their peers and parents, or with attitudes of neglect. Some teachers kept the children by their side all the time in order to protect them, and so they segregated them. Seven of the young people were pre-lingually deaf and so had very limited ability in written Spanish, as well as in sign language. The interpreter also had some problems in finding appropriate signs, as Mexican Sign Language does not have an academic tradition.

Besides the linguistic problems, it was obvious that the deaf young people had a poor academic background. Still, we had various unexpected factors on our side: their strong motivation to thrive, and what we may call the “emotional intelligence” that was evident through their high self esteem, their social openness, their active participation and their willingness to be supported as anyone else in the class. With the support of the interpreter, they made sure during the first week of school, that every classmate in the first grade would learn that there was a way to communicate with them, teaching them the basic alphabet and assigning a personal sign to each peer. This had the effect of presenting themselves not as deaf with poor expressive skills, but with different linguistic competence. Instead of grouping themselves together, you could see them scattered in the classroom.

This prompt and active integration created a strong demand on their teachers and took them by surprise. For example, the students would confront a teacher for not coming to class on time. We think that these resilient characteristics were expressed due to the high number of deaf students integrated in the class, which transformed an “integration problem” into a bi-cultural issue. The class began to use both spoken and signed communication, and their classmates made efforts to elicit oral imitations of common words and basic vocabulary from them, while the physical education teacher forced himself to learn basic signs to make himself understood. Although not all teachers showed this sensitivity, others changed their perceptions towards the deaf students, recognizing their responsibility and persistence in overcoming their limitations.

Paradoxically, there were times that the hearing students would demand “equal attention” from their teachers, as their deaf peers were receiving. On several occasions they asked to be allowed to participate in the tutoring classes which we gave to the deaf students. It was much later that we realized that a real inclusive program would necessarily take into account the participation of the whole group - although not necessarily at the same time. In the second school year we facilitated their assistance to a sexual orientation course for deaf adolescents and their parents. The mothers questioned the reason for having excluded the rest of the group because of the importance of the themes presented. We then proposed that they may organize a similar course in the school and offered them assessment and materials to do it.

Equal participation

As part of this compromise in achieving the goals the school had set themselves in the “quality program”, the teachers began to evaluate the process, rather than the end result. They considered their daily participation in class, and their completed homework as an important indicator of achievement, rather than relying on the tests as the major indicator of learning⁵.

We have to recognize that they worked very hard, given the comprehension difficulties and the parallel processing involved in focusing on the interpreter, the teacher and the notes written on the blackboard. We were really concerned that their learning should be supported by explaining key concepts, and not just on memory skills. So we used a significant number of images, pictures and graphic displays made visual didactic units on key notions⁶ with careful control of vocabulary and sentence syntactic construction. The effort was to balance simplicity in form, while maintaining the complexity of content⁷. Special emphasis was made to try to articulate the concepts we were explaining, in order to promote transfer learning⁸.

We used the argument that their second language was written Spanish, and so they were allowed to use the time allocated to the teaching of a second language (English) for our tutoring sessions, and also dedicated part of the time to the basic sentence structure of the written language (so that they would be able to apply principles related to number, verb tense, phrase order, etc.). Although at first we decided to communicate with them directly in written Spanish to immerse them into the language, we came to the conclusion that the problem was also on our part, and that we had taken the typical monolingual attitude of those who expect that others had to learn our language with no corresponding effort on our part to learn theirs. The team had to rely on the interpreter for meaningful communication, and we experienced the same limitations as their parents. We had to make up idiosyncratic gestures to compensate for our lack of competence in sign language.

Creating a mothers' network

In this way, the students managed to make their way through the year, and were promoted to the next year - thanks to their hard work, but also to their mothers' networking. The mothers had two-hour after-school tutoring sessions with the interpreter in the university library twice a week. In those sessions, the interpreter would explain what had been seen in class to the mothers and the students, both

⁵ The study guides were structured in such a way that they had to resort to memorization techniques in order to be able to respond to the tests. This strategy would of course fail if there was a slight change in the phrasing, or if the question was embedded in a complex sentence structure.

⁶ Notions that involved temporal structuring (the timeline, time zone, coordinates), or social construction (kinship and the family concept, ethical /civic notions).

⁷ We had a hard time discussing theories of evolution. It was hard enough to explain the concept of change, and then move on from the level of the real to the level of beliefs.

⁸ We would link a theme from geography, such as the concept of universe with the atomic or molecular notions of biology; or else use the timeline for ordering chronological historical events (history), as well as geological stages (geography) or to explain the evolution of man (biology).

in sign language and orally for clarification purposes. In this way the interpreter contributed to the development of the mothers' sign language abilities.

Although most of the mothers had had just six years of schooling, they functioned as a study group; they would come to an agreement about the tasks that needed to be done and learned to navigate the Internet with the help of their children, to search for information relevant to the topics assigned. They supported each other and resolved questions by phone and helped to construct concept maps. They would wait each day at the school gate to complete the information about the homework. The classmates would present the necessary information in the occasional absence of the interpreter. The results were evident: their school exercise books were at the same level of their classmates, and this had a great impact on raising the expectations of the teachers.

Inclusion – not assimilation

We should also emphasize that the deaf students were never involved in any disruptive events at school. This is very important since in other integration experiences of young deaf children we had seen the tendency of bullying developing into aggressive-victimized vicious cycles, with all the complications in their parents' ambivalence toward the mainstreaming process. Although the parents described the process as hard, they participated actively at school as part of the parents' board and communicated easily with the other parents.

During this school year we are trying to support this crucial, informal parents' network of support by making the necessary links to get the mothers into the open adult education program. If they can get their secondary certificate at the same time, they could support the learning process of their sons and daughters, and they could share their (the mothers') learning materials at no extra cost. These learning kits, designed for adults, have been very useful with the deaf students, because of their schematic structure, their plain but relevant examples, and the simpler use of language. Adults don't have much time to study, but they do have experience of the themes.

Through this experience, we have become more conscious of the importance of maintaining the cohesion of the whole bi-cultural group⁹. We have done this by designing inclusive strategies, and extending the concept of education beyond the school environment. This has involved acting as links between educational opportunities, such as their participation in a computer clubhouse at weekends or in summer vacations, and the assessment of their hearing status so that they may make more effective use of their residual hearing. This has emerged as a new possibility because of a recent increased effort to speak and to use auditory clues. We think that this is part of the effect of having moved from a silent educational facility, a school for the deaf, to an environment where spoken language is used.

⁹ In a short survey we made, most of the classmates defined their group in terms of union and solidarity, and were self-conscious enough to say they should all improve in neatness, discipline, and in diminish the use of rude vocabulary, which compromised the respect between them.

Although we know that there are still many knowledge gaps to be filled, we would like to conclude by saying, that, the interpreter has reported that the students are beginning to ask systematically for the Spanish written form of each new concept that they learn. He has also observed that they are beginning to use finger-spelling as a “lingua franca” between sign language and Spanish when they want to answer a hearing person (through the interpreter). They use signs when they are communicating between themselves as deaf students. He has also noted the expansion of their sign language vocabulary, as well as a lower rate of errors. We have still a long way to go, but we are confident that this project may grow, attracting more networks as those we have described here.

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