

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR NEW YORK'S NEWEST

Appropriately Assessing the Needs of Newcomer Students and the Pre-Service Training of Teachers to Address Those Needs

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the vision of the American public education system in providing newcomer students with an education that will make possible full economic, social and cultural citizenship has been considered an equity "birthright" of all children in America, regardless of their country of origin. Nowhere has this been more of an ideal, and, at times, more of a failed dream, than in New York City, the port of entry for millions of immigrants from countries around the world.

During the 1990s--the decade of standards-based school reform--newcomer children in the United States came from highly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, making the need to provide equity and excellence in education for every student all the more urgent. In New York City alone, as of January 1998, nearly 112,000 immigrant students from 195 countries, outside U.S. commonwealths and territories, registered in New York City public schools during the prior three years (1995-98).¹ Such a heavy influx of newcomer students places a great demand on districts and public schools to appropriately assess and place students from highly diverse cultures and linguistic backgrounds when they register for school.

Once students have been placed in a specific class or grade level, teachers need to provide newcomer students with both cultural sensitivity and effective instructional strategies to facilitate their transition to U.S. schools and educational standards. To this end, most immigrant students are placed in either bilingual or ESL programs--which also serve students whose native language is other than English who may or may not be foreign born and who may have been in the U.S. for longer than three years. During the 1996-97 school year, 84,552 students received bilingual instruction and 70,440 students received English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction--totaling 154,992 students receiving a mandated bilingual or ESL-only program in the New York City public school system.

Assessing, Placing and Instructing Newcomer Students. While many factors enter into how well children perform in school (e.g., parental support, disability, poverty, special needs), current research has redefined the nature of linguistically and culturally diverse students' educational vulnerability.² Appropriate assessment of immigrant children needs to consider each child's linguistic and content proficiencies in the context of their native culture. Once placed, teachers need to be able to effectively instruct and assess newcomer children with an understanding of and

¹ New York City Board of Education, Emergency Immigrant Education Census, Citywide Summary, January 1998.

² "Is It Real for All Kids? A Framework for Equitable Assessment Policies for English Language Learners," LaCelle-Peterson, M. and Rivera, C. Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 64, No. 1, Spring 1994, pp. 55-75.

sensitivity to their prior educational and cultural experiences.

When misplaced in classes that are not able to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate instruction, newcomer students often fail to make good adjustments academically and socially to their new school, and to develop the education skills they need to succeed in the United States. Traditionally, teachers have lacked the pre-service training necessary to provide the cultural sensitivity and instructional strategies needed to effectively teach newcomer children from diverse backgrounds who are English language learners. Likewise, unless bilingual programs are well administered and staffed, students' linguistic and academic progress can be impeded rather than enhanced.

Objectives of Policy Memorandum. As we approach the year 2000 and the reality of a global community, the requirements for appropriate assessment, placement and instruction of children from many different cultures and language backgrounds, needs to be re-examined on a systemic basis, particularly in light of current research findings as well as newcomer parents' and students' experiences with the New York City public schools. To address these critical issues, the objectives of this policy memorandum are two-fold:

- (1) to make recommendations for more appropriate assessment of newcomer students; and
- (2) to make recommendations for better preparation of teachers to instruct students in multicultural, multilingual classes and students in bilingual classes.

This paper examines these issues in three sections, drawing on case studies, focus group interviews with newcomer parents, research findings from the literature, and data on newcomer students. The sections include:

- II. What Happens to Newcomer Students?
- III. Newcomer Assessment: Eliminating Barriers to Accurate Assessment
- IV. Newcomer Placement: Enhancing Sensitivities and Supports in the Classroom

While these issues are examined separately, they need to be addressed together as systemic policy issues in order to effectively impact the appropriate assessment, placement, and instruction of newcomer students in the New York City public school system.

Transforming Education for New York's Newest is a project to support New York City schools in their efforts to respond to the increasing numbers of immigrant students in the school system. Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. (AFC) and the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) have joined together in this effort to create a broad network of support for school staff and administrators working with newcomer students and their families.

II. WHAT HAPPENS TO NEWCOMER STUDENTS?

Focus groups and interviews conducted by Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. (AFC) with newcomer parents from Russia, Haiti, Arabia, China and other countries have revealed many concerns about the assessment and placement of immigrant children in the New York City public schools. Below are four case studies describing the experiences of families from different countries and cultures.

- Assessment as "Problem Child" vs. Lack of Literacy Skills. The L. family has been in the country for six years. They fled Haiti for political persecution stemming from the 1991 coup that ousted their country's first democratically-elected president. They resettled in Bedford-Stuyvescent, where they were isolated from the Haitian community. This was the beginning of the family's woes. The five children (then age 12, 11, 6, 4, 2) were shuffled around while looking for culturally-appropriate bilingual programs. Due to lack of information and time, they were all conveniently enrolled in neighborhood schools. As a result, many problems have since occurred.

R., the eldest, upon attending school, was placed in an age-appropriate class (6th grade). Several months later, his parents were getting reports from his instructor that he was a "problem child." His mother was convinced that his problem was not innate, but rooted in his inability to speak English. He was unable to do the work and his frustration grew, in addition to being picked on in school. He began cutting classes and was suspended on several occasions. His uneducated mother who spoke no English and was preoccupied with making a living felt powerless in this situation. Two years later, he had managed somehow to make it to eighth grade, but the same problems continued.

After several attempts by a community-based agency (Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees) to tutor him, it was discovered that he was illiterate and he tried to keep this secret. The school fights became frequent, as the teasing and harassment by African-American children increased. He was regularly suspended, and consequently began to cut class to spend more time at home. His unemployed father, although he lived with the family, was of little help or influence. Dad spoke minimal English and was barely literate. While he attended the many parent/teacher/principal meetings, he understood little about the education system and became frustrated by his own limitations and inability to understand and demystify it.

R. has been left back three times. Although he is eager to learn, he is still unable to read and write. He is acclimating better to the culture, but like most teenagers he is still trying to "fit in." Currently a 9th grader at Bushwick High School, he has had several brushes with the law. While his parents are seeking counseling at the Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, the solution lies in transferring him to a culturally sensitive school with an intense literacy program that deals with students with no or little formal education, as he had received very little schooling in his country of origin. He is beginning to keep company with the wrong

crowd, often sleeping away from home without his parent's consent. His parents feel utterly helpless and unable to guide him. They worry that one more arrest could lead to deportation proceedings. Though the family last year was granted political asylum, they still have not yet received their green cards. This, too, is of major concern.

- Special Education Assessment for Newcomer Student. A Spanish-speaking parent seeking assistance from AFC reported that her daughter, who has Down's Syndrome, is nine years old and has never been to school in this country. The family has been in the United States for over three years. The case advocate assigned to assist the family reported that Mrs. S. took her daughter to a school shortly after she arrived in the country. The principal said that her school, which was located in Washington Heights, had no program for children with educational disabilities. Furthermore, she discouraged the parent from attempting to obtain a special education program until after the family had been in the country for one year. It was reported that the principal of the school said that the Committee on Special Education's policy was to not have children referred to special education immediately upon their arrival in this country. When Mrs. S. asked if her child could be registered in a regular class until the year was over she was told no.

Mrs. S. waited nine months before locating the community school district office. They referred her to the local Committee on Special Education. When the parent called the CSE, they asked her to send a letter. By the time the CSE received the letter, logged it in and contacted the parent, another three months had elapsed. The CSE process, unfortunately, was not timely and Mrs. S. had to wait another three months before a review meeting was held. The CSE recommended a MIS 5, which is a life skills program for students who are mentally retarded, and mandated that the program be provided in Spanish. No such program existed so the parent was given a NICKERSON letter. This letter allows the parent to enroll their child in any private school which is on the New York State Education Department list of schools that serve children with disabilities. The NICKERSON letter was a useless piece of paper since there is no private school offering appropriate instruction in Spanish. However, Mrs. S. did not know this. She spent the rest of the school year searching for such a school. When she called CSE and requested assistance, they told her that she had a NICKERSON letter and that was all they could do for her.

Finally, after three years, she came to AFC for help. AFC staff requested an impartial hearing which is an administrative legal process that allows a parent to challenge the Board of Education's actions on behalf of their child. Only after a lengthy hearing, did the Board locate an appropriate MIS 5 class for Mrs. S's daughter.

- Kindergarten Child Inappropriately Switched from Bilingual Program into English Program. Ms. M's kindergarten son was enrolled in an elementary school in Brooklyn. As a Haitian parent involved in her child's educational endeavor, Ms. M. made it her business to keep abreast of her son J.'s development. As a woman born and raised in Haiti, she contends it was important that her child maintain his cultural identity and continued to speak Haitian

Creole as well as English, thus she enrolled him in a school that would provide this bilingual opportunity. After all, Haitian Creole was the dominant language, as it was the only language spoken in the house.

J. was a bright student who was extremely enthusiastic about school and learning. So much so that he often caught on to lessons immediately after it was explained. According to his mother, he required no help with homework assignments. His teachers were impressed with his skills and recommended that the child be placed in the school's gifted program. She was reluctant at first because he would be placed in a competitive environment with highly intelligent students. But her primary concern was not whether or not he could handle the extra work, but whether it would be a disservice to a child whose primary language skills are Haitian Creole, since the program would be English only. But because he was still young enough to flip-flop adequately between languages, she was reassured by teachers that they did not anticipate any problems. Not wanting to miss a good opportunity for J., she allowed the transfer on good faith of the teachers' evaluation and also their reassurances that, should she decide, she was free to remove him at any time.

Within two months, J. began to display signs of regression. He became disinterested in his school work and began to show signs of attention disorder. His mother grew concerned and spoke to teachers regarding this change. She had decided that rather than push him, she would prefer that he return to normal classes where he was comfortable with the language and would therefore continue to be enthused and eager to learn. Unfortunately, the teachers begged to differ. Again they reassured her that it may be an adjustment period and that aside from an occasional disruption, he was generally a well behaved kid, and that he would be fine. She wanted him removed from the class, but the teachers refused. She even went to the assistant principal who threatened her and explained that LEGALLY she was at the mercy of the school to allow them to do what best suits the child.

J. is now in third grade and was pulled from the English only gifted program and returned to normal classes. But his mother is deeply concerned that since the incident he has lost interest in school and has regressed academically and has expressed very little desire to learn, much less enthusiasm. This year he risks being left back--she is terribly disappointed by this and feels guilty that she was somehow responsible for his academic decline. Furthermore, she is convinced that he couldn't handle the English only and that the other children were at an advantage, since their lessons were reinforced in their homes, through their culture, where his were not. She wants him to undergo I.Q., neurological, psychological speech and psychological testing to get the answers she seeks, yet she is concerned if this is done through the school, there may be some bias, and she doesn't want this to further stain his record. She is also adamant about changing the school so that he could start anew.

Gifted Newcomer Who Needs Appropriate Bilingual Classes. Mrs. Y came to AFC's office to explain her difficulty with her daughter's educational placement. Yi was a bright, well

educated student from Asia. She had always been a top student. Her family was in the United States for eight months and Yi and her family were very discouraged about her school. Yi was assigned to a bilingual class at one of the city's better schools. Her family was grateful that such a class existed. They were concerned, however, that Yi's class had 36 students. THERE IS NO STUDENT CAP IN A BILINGUAL CLASS.

Yi made an excellent adjustment to her school and at the beginning of the next school year the family inquired into the gifted program. They were advised that students had to be tested. Her parents located a psychologist and paid out of pocket for a bilingual evaluation that proved that Yi was quite gifted. When her parents returned to the guidance coordinator with the evaluation they were shocked and dismayed when told there were no bilingual gifted programs for a student who spoke the language that Yi did. Her parents were faced with no choice but the following: (1) try to locate a gifted ESL class, (2) leave her where she was, the overcrowded bilingual class. They felt they were not offered any choice.

This is a serious problem, especially among newer arrivals whose children are bright and require a more stimulating educational environment. While one could argue that there are not enough gifted classes for anyone, the other issue is that there is no cap on bilingual classes. *The overriding issue is that newcomer students are forced to take second choice in many areas. In some districts, very little material is translated and some of the material is critical for parents to know: eligibility for gifted classes, eligibility for vocational programs, testing for specialized high schools, notices concerning either school or district wide activities.* The districts often do a lot of translating but they often cannot get to everything and translate material into all languages. This is one of the areas that should be addressed by the Central Board of Education through translation services or extra money.

III. NEWCOMER STUDENT ASSESSMENT: ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO ACCURATE ASSESSMENT

The experiences of these four newcomer students and their parents illustrate the kinds of experiences that have been reported to Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. regarding inappropriate assessment and placement of newcomer children in the New York City public school system. At the core of appropriate assessment for immigrant students is the issue of equity, particularly in an era of standards-driven reform. LaCelle-Peterson and Rivera note:

"Assessment, the gathering and interpreting of information about students' knowledge, achievements, or accomplishments in relation to an educational goal or goals, must be appropriate for the learners being assessed assessment systems must be designed with the whole learning experience--linguistic and academic--of each group of students in mind ... [While English language learners] share one

educationally relevant variable--the need to increase their proficiency in English--they differ in language, cultural background, and family history."³

In addition, newcomer children are generally expected to come into the education system with a working knowledge of "reasoning" skills as well as how to learn and process information in ways that are familiar to students who have attended U.S. schools. Teaching techniques, however, vary from country to country, making these expectations unrealistic.

Common Issues With Assessing and Placing Newcomer Students

As the four case studies reveal, common assessment/placement problems associated with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds include:

- The problem encountered by Haitian and other children entering the New York City public school system who have had no formal education in their homeland has not been addressed. In many cases, these children have been placed in special education and labeled as being "learning disabled," when in fact they were illiterate.
- Without real structures in place for effective assessment, bilingual Haitian and Spanish children with different needs may be placed in the same program simply because it is bilingual. Assumptions about ethnicity are partially responsible for misplacement.

Misplacement into special education is frequently the solution for children with "behavioral" problems which often stem from misplacement, thus becoming a vicious cycle. The root of the problem, however, goes unaddressed. For example, a lack of proper socialization in children who come without prior schooling makes it difficult for them to function at their potential. Signs of no socialization prior to current schooling include: illiteracy, not responding to authority, and not relating to classroom rules and standards/misbehaving.

- The processing of information of second language learners is different from "mainstream" students. There is a middle step of "mental" translation that many of these children undergo; this isn't factored in. Thus, lacking speed in comprehension can easily be misperceived as a learning deficiency by those who are not bilingual.
- Failure to assess content proficiency also has serious academic consequences. For Russian parents, the limitations of age-appropriate assessment later present a great problem for parents who feel that their child's mathematical skills are too advanced in comparison to their American peers, yet they cannot be placed into a math-appropriate classroom.

³ "Is It Real for All Kids? A Framework for Equitable Assessment Policies for English Language Learners," Harvard Educational Review, LaCelle-Peterson, M., Rivera, C., Vol. 64, No. 1, Spring 1994, pp. 55-75.

Cultural Competence of the Assessor as a Factor. As illustrated by the above issues, assessors who have developed "cultural competence" with newcomer students is critical. Cultural competence is "the ability to function comfortably in cross-cultural settings and to interact harmoniously with people from cultures that differ from one's own."⁴

For this memorandum, cultural competence includes an understanding and knowledge of how the native culture of a newcomer student has shaped his or her educational experiences. An assessor's cultural competency would encompass the use of appropriate assessment techniques and conditions that take into consideration a newcomer child's cultural and educational background (e.g., ability to distinguish illiteracy from learning disability). Thus, both assessors and teachers may, or may not, have cultural competence with students from their own ethnic background, or with students from other cultures, if they have not had prior training and experience in this area.

Options for Appropriate Assessment of Newcomer Students. Appropriate assessment of newcomer students also needs to take into account the conditions under which assessment is done (e.g., time allotment, comfortable setting), student familiarity with assessment formats (e.g., prior experience with standardized test formats), and whether the assessment is being administered in the student's native language or in English. When a student's level of content proficiency is being assessed:

"Information about the student's academic achievement in content areas should be collected in ways that allow students to show their knowledge, skills, and abilities, through the medium of the language or languages in which the material was taught. Since individuals differ in the process of learning a second language in terms of whether spoken or written expression develops more quickly, latitude should also be provided in terms of the mode of expression used, the length of time allowed for completion of a task, and the degree to which fluency of expression, as distinct from substantive content, is counted in scoring the results."⁵

Likewise, a combination of assessment frameworks, rather than a single assessment tool, is most likely to provide an accurate picture of a student's linguistic and content proficiencies. The following assessment approaches provide a sense of the range of options that are available to assess student development.

- Standardized Testing. Test developers have long recognized that whenever one is tested in a language in which one is not fully proficient, the test results will reflect one's language proficiency as well as one's accomplishment in whatever is being tested. Making valid interpretations of the results of such testing is extremely difficult, especially with regard to

⁴ "Preparing Teachers from Multicultural Classrooms," Chisholm, I.M. The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, V. 14, p. 43-68. Winter 1994/

⁵ "Symposium: Equity in Educational Assessment" *ibid.*

large-scale assessments developed for broad target populations and normed on exclusively native English-speaking populations.⁶

New York State Commissioner's Regulations Part 154 specify the use of a standardized test to assess the English language proficiency for all students newly entering the public school system who indicate the use of a language other than English in the home language survey. (Currently, the New York public school system uses the Language Assessment Battery (LAB) test which is available only in English and Spanish.)

Scores are used to determine student entitlement to LEP services. The ASPIRA Consent Decree and the LAU Plan require English as a second language (ESL) classes and/or bilingual programs if 15 or more students with the same native language are present in two continuous grade levels at a school. LEP students are to be assessed annually through the LAB tests to determine their English language progress for the purpose of continuing or exiting bilingual/ESL programs and entering mainstream classes conducted exclusively in English. The criterion for exiting LEP entitlement is the 40th percentile which is the state reference point.

- Alternative Assessment. To address the need for equitable assessment for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, researchers have begun to develop alternative assessment paradigms⁷ and techniques during the past two decades. These include:
 - *"Advocacy oriented" assessment*: requires a critical examination of the traditional role of assessments and the influence of social and educational contexts of the academic performance of the student.⁸
 - *"Ecological" assessment*: locates the student within multiple layers of social contexts and evaluates the effects of these influences on student performance.⁹
 - *Alternative assessment techniques*: given the need for multiple measures to assess a child's linguistic and academic development, alternative assessment procedures could include: curriculum-based assessment, criterion-referenced measures, interviews, observations, spontaneous (non-elicited) language samples, among others.¹⁰ These

⁶ Promoting Excellence Initiative publication.

⁷ "Practical and Theoretical Considerations for Assessment of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students," Baca, L. and de Valenzuela, J.S. Bueno Center for Multicultural Education, University of Colorado at Boulder, July 1996.

⁸ "Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention," Cummins, J., *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(1), 18-36.

⁹ "The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design," Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. 1979.

¹⁰ Baca, L. and de Valenzuela, J.S., *ibid.*, p. 6.

are often used by classroom teachers, on a formal or informal basis, to track students' progress during the school year.

Maintaining portfolios of students' work is another alternative assessment method that allows teachers to keep accurate progress notes on each student and fosters teacher/school accountability for recommendations and effective follow-up.

- Culture-Specific Assessment. Equity for newcomer students through alternative assessment requires specific attention be paid to each ethnic group's specific cultural and linguistic background. In New York City, for example, *Assessment of Caribbean Students*,¹¹ a guide by Dr. J.A. George Irish and Coleen Clay at Medgar Evers College, presents an alternative assessment framework to appropriately assess Haitian/Caribbean students.
- Second Language Learning vs. Language Related Learning Disabilities. Other assessment frameworks being developed for English language learners include ways of distinguishing second language learning behaviors from language-related learning disabilities.¹² This type of assessment can help prevent English language learners from being misplaced in classes for students with disabilities.

Districts 24 and 25: Assessment and Placement Challenges

As noted earlier, Districts 24 and 25, in Queens, both have a large percentage of newcomer students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Because of the many immigrant families moving into these districts, the issues of assessment, placement and instruction of newcomer students are of special concern. These districts illustrate the cultural diversity and linguistic challenges that many districts throughout New York City are confronting in educating newcomer students. The following profiles of Districts 24 and 25 highlights some of these issues.

Community School Districts 24 and 25: Profiles in Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Community School District 24, located in the borough of Queens, had approximately 35,610 students (not including special education) registered in 20 elementary and seven middle schools during the 1997-98 school year. Community School District 25, also located in the borough of Queens, had a total for 24,068 students registered in 23 elementary and middle schools as of May 29, 1998. Student data from the New York City Board of Education reveal culturally and

¹¹ "Assessment of Caribbean Students: A Guide for Assessing Children from CARICOM Nation States and Dependent Territories, J.A. George Irish and Coleen Clay, Caribbean Diaspora Press, Inc., Medgar Evers College (CUNY) 1995.

¹² "Distinguishing Between Second Language Learning and Language Related Learning Disabilities." SETRC Open Forum, May 4, 1998, Presented by Maria Cruz-Torres, Bilingual Training Specialist, Buffalo City SETRC.

linguistically diverse student populations in both districts. For example, during the 1997-98 school year:

- Major Language Groups: District 24 students in grades K-8 spoke eight (8) major language groups other than English as their native language. These language groups included Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Bangali, Italian, Polish, Urdu, Romanian, and Punjabi (See Appendix A for detailed breakout).

District 25 students in grades K-8 spoke seven (7) major language groups other than English as their native language. These language groups included Spanish, Russian, Chinese (including Mandarin, Cantonese, and other dialects), Korean, Dari/Farsi/Persian, Hindi, and Urdu.¹³

- Total Number of Languages. The total number of languages other than English spoken in District 24 was 91. (See Appendix B for breakout). Five schools (I.S. 73, I.S. 125, I.S. 93, I.S. 61, and P.S. 7 had students with at least 38 native languages other than English (See Appendix A).

District 25 reported 98 different home languages, other than English, spoken by 14,679 students--61% of its total student population.

District 24: Services for Newcomer Students and Families

In District 24, since 1986, the total number of Hispanic students and "LAU" students (children whose native language is other than English or Spanish) in District 24 has increased from 67% to 73%; the number of students entitled to bilingual or ESL services has increased from 60% to 67%; and the number of major language groups has increased from five to eight (Bangali, Polish, and Punjabi have been added) (See Appendices A-C for detailed breakout). To meet the educational needs of its multicultural and multiethnic student population, District 24 provides a range of assessment, placement, and instructional services for newcomer students and their parents. These include:

- Bilingual, ESL and Bilingual Specialist Teachers. During 1997-98, District 24 employed 142 bilingual teachers, 103 ESL teachers, and 12 bilingual specialists. Of the 142 bilingual teachers, 138 were Spanish and 4 were Chinese. (During the seven previous school years, the district also had two-five Korean bilingual teachers each year as well as Spanish and Chinese teachers.) (See Appendix C).

In 1986-87, District 24 employed 89 bilingual teachers, 46 ESL teachers, and six bilingual specialists. Between the 1986-87 and 1997-98 school years, District 24 had an 82% increase in the number of bilingual, ESL and bilingual specialist teachers.

¹³ New York City Public Schools, Home Language Report, District 25, 1998..

- Language Assessment. As in other New York City school districts, the Language Assessment Battery (LAB) is administered to determine limited English proficiency and entitlement to ESL and bilingual programs. According to District 24's 1996-97 report, "Transitional Services for Limited English Proficient Students," ongoing assessment of newcomer students includes:

"... growth in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing is measured by administering the appropriate grade level LAB pre- and post test in the Spring of each year. Other measures of assessment including monitoring students needs and progress through classroom performances and teacher observation. Data is recorded in students' individual instructional profiles and used as a basis for developing learning objectives and prescriptive instruction LEP students receive semiannual reports from their ESL teachers. Translated versions of progress reports are provided."

- Bilingual Specialists' Program. District 24 has also developed a program to promote closer ties and involvement of newcomer parents with their child's progress in school. Specifically:

"Bilingual Specialist Teachers are assigned to schools with a heavy influx of LEP students in an effort to provide a meaningful program that will facilitate a closer collaboration between the district office, the schools and the community at large. Twelve experienced master teachers are trained to work with the parents on a variety of levels. They usually begin by helping out the newly arrived family by translating during the initial registration process ... They are also the personnel in the school buildings who are designated to identify and correctly place newcomers in the appropriate programs.

"These key personnel also keep parents informed about issues and programs related to their individual schools. They provide monthly workshops to the parents to help parents become active participants in their children's education, to help them adjust to a new culture and to learn about the community resources available to them in addition to assisting parents in acquiring effective parenting skills Classes in English as a Second Language are also provided to parents so they may be able to effectively participate and become part of the new culture. In terms of staff development, the Bilingual Specialists also provide school-based training on an ongoing basis ..."

- Other Instructional Programs for Immigrants. District 24 has also designed and developed a number of projects to meet the need of newcomer students and their families. These programs encompass such activities as ESL classes for parents; parent involvement workshops; arts, dance, and music summer classes; summer tutorial in remedial reading and

mathematics.

District 25: Services for Newcomer Students and Families

Newcomer students in District 25, as in other community school districts, take the mandated New York State and New York City standardized tests. Limited English proficient (LEP) students are assessed by the English version of the LAB test. In addition, a variety of authentic assessments are utilized by teachers to assess student progress. These authentic assessments may include portfolios, projects, presentations, and teacher made tests. During the 1996-97 school year, 837 students received bilingual services and 3,312 received ESL services in District 25.¹⁴

District staff noted that in those schools that serve substantial numbers of LEP newly arrived students, a Vestibule Program is implemented. In the Vestibule Program, students receive intensive instruction in survival English. The students remain in the vestibule program for a limited number of weeks when, at the recommendation of the teacher, they are transferred into the regular ESL program at the school. In those schools where there is a sufficient concentration of students on a single grade speaking the same language, full service bilingual classes are implemented.

The district has prepared a Resource Guide, "Directory of Support Services" that is available for use in all schools. The guide summarizes the support services available in the community for all students and their families, including newly arrived immigrants. Opportunities for parent involvement, ranging from parent teacher association activities, parent/teacher conferences, curriculum fairs, parent orientations, school committees and other activities provide a range of opportunities for parents to meet with teachers and other parents.

What Creates a Successful Newcomer Placement?

As illustrated by District 24, the task of creating appropriate placement for all newcomer students is a major challenge. Mr. Ron Woo, Superintendent for Bilingual and General Education Monitoring of the New York City Board of Education Office of Monitoring and School Improvement, observed that he would define a successful placement of a newcomer student a "making sure the right thing is done for each student, not just things done right" so that each student is receiving the service most appropriate for him/her.

Mr. Woo also noted that "Districts 24 and 25 are generally in compliance with state law" with regard to what is required for identification and placement of limited English proficient students, including newcomer students. Assuring successful placement requires careful attention to and follow through on every student's school progress. Even in a district that has significantly increased the number of teachers and programs for bilingual and ESL classes over the past decade, the task of successfully assessing, placing, and instructing limited English proficient students who speak *91 native languages other than English* is an ongoing challenge.

¹⁴ New York City Board of Education, Office of Bilingual Education.

Mr. Woo observed that, in the best of all possible worlds, newcomer students would receive a full assessment including a social history to determine prior opportunities for learning, and the kind of learning environment. For older students, it would be helpful to be able to evaluate a student's prior academic records, including transcript equivalents, to make a real comparison. The problem, he noted, is that, if the transcripts and course equivalents were available, the Board of Education often does not always have enough trained staff to do all of this work in the beginning as a student enters the school system.

Likewise, all newcomer students should be assessed in the native language of the student, but there are feasibility issues such as cost effectiveness, validation of tests, and psychometric reliability. For example, to develop a Chinese LAB test, Mr. Woo asked, "What dialect would the test be administered in? What character set (i.e., simplified or traditional) would be used? Would there be enough students to validate the test?" Currently, there is movement underway to revise the Spanish LAB test and the English LAB test. There are no other assessment tools for evaluating newcomer students as they enter the public school system.

After a student is placed in a bilingual class, school staff look at four elements of the LAB test score: the expressive and receptive scores; including reading and writing as appropriate. If a student is misplaced and has more proficiency than indicated by the LAB test, the parent can withdraw the student from bilingual services. Annually, in March, the full version of the LAB test is administered to determine progress and continued LEP entitlement.

In response to a question on what transitional services are mandated by the Board of Education, Mr. Woo noted that bilingual classes are supposed to include attention to transition in culture. Newcomer schools (i.e., schools established specifically to work with newcomer students such as International High School and Liberty High School) include enhanced language instruction and acculturation. Some schools have established "vestibule classes" or "newcomer classes" for newcomer students.

Advocating for Newcomer Students' Success in School

Transforming Education for New York's Newest advocates for appropriate newcomer student assessment and placement in New York City public schools. Issues that must be addressed by newcomer parents and schools include:

- (1) What must newcomer parents do to obtain appropriate assessment and placement for their children?
- (2) How effective are current efforts to provide translation for newcomer students and parents?
- (3) How does age-based assessment/placement fail newcomer students, especially for those students with limited education backgrounds?

- (4) What is the impact on newcomer students of inappropriate assessment and placement?

Systemic Recommendations for Assessment of Newcomer Students

Transforming Education for New York's Newest advocated for the implementation of the following systemic recommendations for assessment of newcomer students. Specifically:

- (1) Conduct subject content assessment in newcomer students' native language to assure that language barrier is not misconstrued as long term disability.
- (2) Perform thorough review of students' histories so that emotional, health, and cultural factors are considered.
- (3) Conduct assessment with combination of standardized and alternative assessment measures in conducive atmosphere that allows student to feel comfortable.
- (4) Verify prior assessment through follow up assessment within the first semester.
- (5) Provide information, including orientations in their native languages, to newcomer families and workshops for social service agencies serving new arrivals, regarding the rights of newcomer students in the public school system.

These recommendations, implemented consistently in New York City's elementary, middle and high schools, will make a significant contribution to the goal of "making sure the right thing is done for each student, not just things done right."

IV. NEWCOMER PLACEMENT: ENHANCING SENSITIVITIES AND SUPPORTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Once newcomer students have been initially assessed and registered in a particular school, their success in school depends greatly on the cultural sensitivity and classroom teaching skills of their teachers. Teachers confronting the current new wave of immigration in New York City public schools today face significant problems. Their professional background has not prepared them to teach multicultural and multilingual classes, yet they are working with diverse student populations. To be effective, two areas in which teachers need pre-service preparation prior to actually teaching include:

- (1) developing the cultural competence to function comfortably, interact appropriately and

communicate effectively with students from diverse cultural backgrounds;¹⁵ and

- (2) creating multicultural, multilingual classrooms and implementing effective teaching strategies for newcomer students.

Teachers and Newcomer Students: Costly Mistakes and Long Term Impact

Focus groups with newcomer parents and caseworkers described how easily newcomer children can "fall through the cracks" when placed in classes where teachers ignore or are not able to meet their individual academic and linguistic needs. Sometimes this is due to teacher expectations with regard to ethnic stereotypes; or, a lack of sensitivity to/knowledge about an individual child's circumstances or cultural background.¹⁶ A caseworker at a Haitian community agency commented:

"The biggest struggle I've had with the school system was just trying to find literacy programs for children who can't read or write ... [even if they are illiterate,] they go into the age appropriate class. Some people just pass the children although they don't know how to read. The result is that the child is frustrated, has no interest in school, and is more at risk.

"In the past, when there was less bilingual Haitian Creole, there was the classic case of children being placed into the special education classes because of a language problem or the cases of the many children from Haiti that had never gone to school. They could be ten or eleven years old but when they couldn't read, the teachers assumed it was some type of learning problem and they were automatically placed into special education classes.

"Students are also placed in bilingual classes that are different from their native language. One Haitian student in Bushwick was placed in a Spanish bilingual education class. The parent was not aware that the student was entitled to a Haitian Creole bilingual education. The student was retained in the 7th grade a second year because her reading scores were too low. This went unnoticed for more than one year until it was brought to our attention. The student was then enrolled in a reading program after the parent decided that she did not wish to send her child to a bilingual program in another district."

A caseworker at another CBO remarked, "We have children being placed in bilingual education just because of their last name. Children being evaluated and placed in special education and not being re-assessed the following year. Children who are emotionally disturbed and not allowed to take their medication because there are no nurses to administer medication. Children being illegally suspended whenever the school staff feel that the child is acting up--then the parent

¹⁵ Chisholm, I.M., *ibid.*

¹⁶ "Preparing Teachers for Multicultural Classrooms," Chisholm, I.M., *ibid.*

leaves the child alone at home."

Parents also expressed similar frustration when ESL or bilingual programs were not well administered. For example:

- One Chinese student who speaks Cantonese was placed in an ESL class in which the teacher spoke Mandarin. The parent feels that the teacher might as well have taught in English, because his child can not understand a word she is saying.
- A Chinese mother with a son and daughter in ESL classes, along with their schoolteachers, felt that her children are quite capable of taking the Citywide examinations, but cannot because they have not been in the program for five years. She feels that this regulation has hindered her children's educational growth.
- A Russian parent with a daughter in an ESL class found out months after she began the class that her child was being taken out of her regular class when they were correcting their homework. The parent was furious. She met with the principal and had them change the time in which her child attended ESL class.

Diverse Cultures: Contrasting Values

Teachers of multicultural, multilingual classes also need to understand the cultural backgrounds and values of students. How newcomer children adjust to new educational settings is shaped by the prior experiences and expectations they and their parents bring with them from their native countries. "Language is only one of many educationally relevant characteristics of any individual English language learner ... English language learners come from families of differing socio-economic status and differing educational orientations ... Research shows that each of these communities may interact with schools differently."¹⁷

Focus groups with Arab, Russian, Chinese and Haitian parents of newcomer students in New York City public schools revealed this wide diversity of educational backgrounds and expectations. Parents who were interviewed by Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. expressed a wide range of cultural values regarding education. Specifically:

- Arab Parents. The Arab educational experience in New York seems to have been overall a favorable one. The parents described their school system as being very cut-throat in terms of competition and felt that the lecture-style teaching did not motivate or encourage students to reach their full potential. There is no hands-on or cooperative learning in their countries. The parents described an overcrowding situation that far exceeds the one we are currently faced with in the New York City public school system. A class could have as many as 40 students.

¹⁷ "Symposium: Equity in Educational Assessment," *ibid.*

The parents and their children appreciated that the American education system encourages students to be actively involved in the learning process. The parents appreciated how the American education system balanced academics, field trips, extra-curricular activities, etc. and showed how they are interconnected and important in a child's life. The parents felt that the change was good for their children and that their children were more enthusiastic about going to school in America, whereas in their home countries there was a lack of enthusiasm.

The parents' main concern was expressed with regards to the cultural differences. due to the great emphasis placed on religion in their home countries many of the parents and their children were astonished at the behavior, style of dress, etc. of the other students and in some cases the teachers. (The focus group had both Jewish and Moslem representatives.) For example, one newcomer student saw for the first time a young man and woman (both school students) kissing in the hallway. According to his religious faith, such behavior was unacceptable and inappropriate.

The parents expressed the most concern while discussing the conflict between the American value system and their own. For example, encouraging women to pursue an education is a value conflict for some. One parent says that Arab women are usually married at a very young age, and are not expected to focus on their education but to prepare themselves for a domestic life.

Most schools in Arab nations are not co-ed. Many of the Arab children are attending school with the opposite sex for the first time. In some cases (especially for Arab females), there was little or no contact with members of the opposite sex unless they were family members. The Arab community is faced with addressing the issue of value conflicts.

- Russian Parents. Russian parents who were interviewed feel that the expectations of the American schoolteachers for their children fall short of their own expectations for their children. In many cases, the parents felt chased away by teachers because their children were properly behaved in class and in many cases above-average students. One parent was frustrated because she could not get feedback from a teacher on how her child could improve. The teacher praised her child for being well behaved and a good student and simply dismissed the need for discussion about how the child could improve.

One parent felt that the constant changing of classrooms, classmates and teachers was disruptive to the student's education. In Russia, they worked with the same teacher and the same set of students over a period of time. They feel that in Russia, the students are more competitive and challenged by the curriculum. When their children come to America they feel the curriculum is not challenging. The parents feel that the standard for success and achievement is significantly lower than in Russia.

Another concern of the Russian parents is that the parent is often the last to know about what

is going on in their child' education because the teachers do not inform the parents. One parent noted that in Russia each student has a notebook in which the student makes note of all assignments and their due dates. The parent is to sign this notebook everyday as proof that the parent is aware of the student's performance in school. The teacher at any time may ask to review the notebook to make sure the parent has checked it.

The Russian parents feel that parent teacher conferences fall far short of the system they had in Russia ... that American teachers spend more time babysitting than teaching and because their children are typically well behaved and quiet in class (which in many instances is due to an inability to express themselves in English) they are ignored. Because these Russian students come from a background of rigorous study, they spend much of their educational careers in public school unchallenged.

- Haitian Parents. The parents had a limited relationship with the teachers because there was a language barrier. The parents were unable to meet with teachers unless they found translators. One mother explained that not only is she unable to speak English, but she does not know what to expect from the school. In Haiti, the teachers were in charge and they were completely responsible for the education and discipline of the children during school hours. The teacher's authority was never questioned in Haiti, but in America she could not understand why the teacher were so insensitive and apathetic. Overall, the Haitian parents explained that they have too many reasons to stay away from the school because of the language barrier, demanding work schedules, their lack of understanding of what to expect from the American education system, and also concern about their immigration status.

Due to the current political situation in Haiti, the government does not exercise a sufficient amount of control over the education system. The result of this has been that many schools have been established that are not regulated and/or have unqualified teachers. Anyone that can afford to do so can open a school in Haiti. In addition, there are many Haitian children that due to economic reasons quit school in Haiti at a very young age or can not attend school at all.

Of those who have attended schools in Haiti, they encounter many differences. In Haiti, there is no interaction between the teacher and student whatsoever. The method of teaching is lecture-style. The students are required to remember materials, there is no emphasis placed on critical-thinking. Examinations are very important, and result in a very competitive atmosphere.

- Chinese Parents. Most of the Chinese parents have a limited relationship with the schoolteachers. One parent, who is also a school teacher, felt that Chinese parents were well informed of the student's academic performance and behavior in comparison to China. In China, the teacher contacted the parent only if there was a problem. All of the parents felt that there was too much freedom in the public school system and not enough homework. In China and Hong Kong, there were more subjects to study, more work to complete, and more

emphasis on tests. In China, students are more competitive, and parents are inclined to inquire about their child's standing in class.

One parent felt that teachers in America had less control over their students and should be allowed to spank them in order to keep them in line. He felt that Chinese students are more disciplined than the average American student. The Confucius philosophy is held in high respect in China and this influences the teaching model found in China. For example, the idea that teachers are role models and must always act accordingly; teachers are not allowed to wear jewelry, with the exception of wedding rings.

One parent felt that in China, educators "stuffed" information into the student, whereas in America, teachers "pull out" information from the student. In China, there was much more emphasis on examinations. In China, oral expression is not important and discouraged. Written expression is what is encouraged. One parent shared that a good Chinese attorney will be an excellent writer. This is what accounts for the difference in behavior within the classroom between American and Chinese students. American teachers spend much time encouraging Chinese students to orally participate in class.

Due to language barriers, Chinese parents are unable to become actively involved in their child's education. The language barrier has created another problem for Chinese students. In many cases, Chinese students are intimidated by the school system and find certain procedures to be different culturally. They are not accustomed to changing classrooms and classmates so many times throughout a school day. In many cases, where there is a language barrier, the students do not know where they are going, what is expected of them, and are overwhelmed by the differences. In a few cases, Chinese students have joined gangs as a result of this confusion and others become truants.

Preparing Teachers for Multicultural, Multilingual Classes

As the case material presented in this section so vividly describes, "... culture affects how people categorize and organize the world, as well as what they attend to and consider important."¹⁸ Likewise, "teachers' attitudes and perceptions about students from diverse cultures play a major role in their expectations of students."¹⁹ If schools are going to succeed in meeting the academic and linguistic needs of newcomer students, adequate preparation of teachers in *all* classroom learning contexts--bilingual, ESL, and mainstream--is necessary.²⁰

Teacher and School as Cultural Broker. A critical role that teachers and schools fulfill for

¹⁸ Chisholm, *ibid.*

¹⁹ Chisholm, *ibid.*

²⁰ "Re-Thinking the Education of Teachers of Language Minority Children: Developing Reflective Teachers for Changing Schools," Milk, R., Mercado, C., Sapiens, A. NCBE FOCUS: Occasional Papers in Bilingual Education, Number 6, Summer 1992.

newcomer students is that of "cultural broker"--a facilitator of the transition from one culture to another to help students succeed both academically and socially in the larger society.²¹ For this paradigm to function effectively, its articulation as newcomer students move from one aspect to another of the school system needs to encompass:

- pre-service training of teachers
- multicultural/linguistic school environment
- multicultural/linguistically appropriate assessment
- parent/home link

To empower teachers in their role as "cultural broker," Chisholm has identified five critical skills that teachers need to develop--all of which are grounded in the complex relationships between language, culture, and learning. Specifically:

- (1) becoming a reflective practitioner of how children from diverse cultures and language backgrounds learn;
- (2) developing cultural competence, "the ability to function comfortably in cross-cultural settings and to interact harmoniously with people from cultures that differ from one's own";
- (3) effective cross-cultural communication skills, including "creating classrooms that encourage good interpersonal relationships" and knowledge of nonverbal communication;
- (4) understanding the interrelationship between language and culture; and
- (5) recognizing the cultural roots of cognition and its close link to language.

Teacher training in these areas provides multicultural/lingual teachers with an "awareness of the cultural underpinnings of logic and thought that enables multicultural teachers to make their thinking explicit to students, to be less judgmental of students' reasoning, and to look beyond learning disabilities to cultural and linguistic differences that may explain students' academic performance."²²

Effective Teaching Strategies for Multicultural, Multilingual Classes. In addition to a teacher's role as cultural broker for newcomer students, creating successful multicultural, multilingual classes also requires the knowledge and implementation of effective teaching strategies for English language learners. Pre-service training for teachers of multicultural, multilingual classes needs to address such issues as:

- how to cover subject content when there are students who speak different languages;

²¹ Chisholm, *ibid.*

²² Chisholm, *ibid.*

- how to prevent English language learners from being marginalized in class;
- how to be sensitive to students from several different cultures; and
- how to maintain high standards of performance for all students.

Current research studies indicate that:

"... a convergence of research and theory in the areas of bilingual education and second language acquisition has led to consensus among bilingual and second language specialists that language minority children are best served by instruction that is characterized by high levels of interaction framed within collaborative instructional modes."²³

Studies sponsored by the National Center for research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning also found, "In effective classrooms, teachers consistently organized instruction so as to insure heterogeneous small-group collaborative academic activities requiring a high degree of student-to-student interaction ... [establishing] an *interactive, student-centered learning context*."²⁴ Garcia also notes that common attributes in the instructional organization of these classrooms included: an emphasis on *functional communication* between teacher and students and among fellow students; instruction of basic skills and academic content consistently organized around *thematic units*; and instruction organized in such a way that students were required to interact with each other utilizing *collaborative learning techniques*. Teachers were also highly committed to the educational success of their students and served as student advocates. [Italics added.]

Additionally, teachers of multicultural, multilingual classes need to understand the processes by which students acquire language. This includes being able to distinguish between the differences between social language and academic language as well as the difference between acquiring English language and learning the English language as content. Parker notes, "Once an ESL student learns to use and function with a language for both social and academic communicative purposes, he can learn about it as content. Comprehending the metalanguage of language study and applying language rules is part of becoming proficient in academic language."²⁵ Other second language learning principles that teachers need to consider when developing instructional strategies include:

- "Students must always comprehend the bigger context of the communicative situation or content area lesson he is acquiring or learning... the learning situation must match how the brain processes and stores information garnered from experiences.

²³ Milk, R.; Mercado, C.; Sapiens, A., *ibid*.

²⁴ "The Education of Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students: Effective Instructional Practices," Garcia, E.E., National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1991.

²⁵ "Resources for Developing Performance Standards," Parker, Robert C., Educational Alliance/Brown University, Providence, R.I., 1997.

- "What is presented or taught to students must have connections to their perceived learning needs and to their life experiences.
- "Language acquisition and learning requires repetition and consistent re-entry of language features and forms. However, if they are drilled in meaningless and abstract ways, the learner tends to "tune out" and not internalize the target language features and forms."²⁶

Effective Training Contributes to Successful Multilingual, Multicultural Classes. A teacher paraprofessional studying in the International Program at Columbia University who was interviewed by AFC observed that "what is taught formally in the classroom is often difficult to incorporate in "real life" classroom settings." As part of her pre-service training, she is fulfilling a one year field requirement for Columbia University's International Program which attempts to provide teachers-in-training with first-hand, practical exposure to multicultural classes prior to going it alone. While multicultural, multilingual courses provide theory and content training, preservice training should combine academic coursework with hands-on opportunities for education students to spend time in real schools with real children. This could take the form of a one year paraprofessional job, a bilingual teacher internship, or even a series of informal classroom observations.

Recommendations for Teacher Preparation

To enhance teachers' cultural competence and sensitivity in working with culturally diverse students as effectively teaching students whose native language is other than English, Transforming Education for New York's Newest advocates the following recommendations for teacher preparation in the New York City public school system:

- (1) While the State of New York currently requires a course of study that prepares teachers to work effectively with students from homes where English is not spoken, the State should require course(s) on multicultural, multilingual education as part of the curriculum at education schools that include the following perspectives:
 - Teachers in training should have a course that addresses stereotypes related to different ethnic groups.
 - Teachers in training should examine case studies of newcomer students who are ill-served because of lack of cultural competency.
 - Teachers in training should be given specific content training in the nature of language and the processes of language acquisition for limited English proficient students.
- (2) Schools should develop collaborations with community groups to enhance cultural

²⁶ Parker, *ibid.*

competency and improve responsiveness of school to newcomer students and parents.

- (3) The New York City Board of Education should identify effective bilingual education programs and disseminate information about their strategies and methods as part of a comprehensive professional development initiative.

Preservice and inservice preparation for teachers is critical if they are to be adequately equipped as reflective practitioners with instructional strategies that meet the educational needs of students in multicultural, multilingual classrooms. Likewise, cultural competency and sensitivity on the part of teachers is essential in working with newcomer children and their parents, if schools are going to carry out the standards-based reforms of the 1990s on an equitable basis for all students.