

Mona Romandia previously submitted for our consideration her master's thesis, *Case Studies of Minority Students in a Transitional Bilingual Education Program*, which was an extensive study on four of her former students. Only a portion of her work was published in the 2007 edition of *The AMAE Journal*. In this issue of the *AMAE Journal*, a second case of her study, Alex, is presented.

**Case Studies of Minority Students
in a
Transitional Bilingual Education Program
(Continues)**

By

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The educational system in many of our schools fails to meet the academic needs of minority students. The dramatic shifts in student demographics are demanding changes in the ways we are teaching them. It is essential to understand the long term effects of our past educational practices and bilingual programs. Research indicates that there are many academic, historical, socioeconomic and language factors that can contribute to minority students' success in schools. This research looked into the factors that have influenced the academic success or failure of native Spanish speaking students who were placed in monolingual English instruction programs in their early schooling. The project presents case studies of these students over

thirteen years in one district. The students' case histories reflect many of the same academic and social problems encountered by minority students in our school system. The parents' lack of formal educational experiences provided limited home support for the students. The families' and students' language and cultural backgrounds were in conflict with the school district's focused method of delivering academic instruction. The students' academic history showed the limited academic skills learned through their English instruction. Test scores did not show a steady upward growth of skills and students never reached parity with their English speaking peers.

Alex, 18 Year Old Male Student

Family Background

Alex was born in Visalia, California in 1982. He was raised in the small rural town where this study took place. He and his siblings have lived in the same house for the last eighteen years. Alex's nuclear family consists of his mother, father, two older brothers, a sister, and three younger siblings. Alex's parents came from Mexico as young adults. His mother, Toni, came at the age of twenty to California, where she met his father, Mario, and they were married. They settled in this town to raise their family. Both parents have worked in the fields for many years. This agriculture employment dependence has been hard for the family due to the limited seasons of full employment and therefore, limited potential income. The average income for the family is around six to seven thousand dollars a year.

For the past four years, Toni, Alex's mother, has played the role of a single parent because Mario, Alex's father has been away. Mario has been serving time in jail for several years. Although Mario is away, his influence and place as a father figure is maintained by phone calls and letters. During the interviews, Alex and his older sister both referred to their father with respect and sadness due to his absences.

The parent interview revealed that there are many relatives in town and in a nearby town. Toni comes from a large family that included five sisters and six brothers. Four of the sisters and two of the brothers are living in town. On Mario's side of the family, there are four brothers and three sisters. The extended family in town includes a number of uncles, aunts and cousins from both sides of the family.

Family Educational Background

Neither of Alex's parents received any formal education as children. Toni cannot read or write and only learned to write her name as an adult. Both parents speak Spanish, understanding very limited English and are not able to speak English. Toni explained, "*Por que no tuve educación en la primaria, yo no puedo aprender o ir a clases de adultos*". (Because I did not have any primary education, I cannot learn or attend adult education classes). Alex completed his high school requirements in

February 2000 and reported for basic training in the army on May 15, 2000. In the family's history, Alex's oldest sister finished high school with an "A" average. She completed basic training in the army and planned to enter a college in September 2000. In June of 2001, it was learned that Alex's sister had married, was six months pregnant and working at a local store. Her present plan was to return to the army with her husband after the baby was born.

Family and Community Language at Home and in the Work Place

Alex's family lives in a community where both English and Spanish are spoken. The children use both languages to communicate with neighbors and family members. At school the children use English with their teachers, but use Spanish and English with their friends. Adult members of the family use Spanish with each other and the children. In Alex's family, the children use Spanish to communicate with their mother. At the parents' work place,

Spanish is spoken with peers and the employers who speak both languages.

Toni feels that it is important to be bilingual for employment opportunities and that it is easier to learn two or more languages as a child. Furthermore, she believes that bilingual persons are more intelligent than monolingual speakers. She believes that it takes one year to learn to speak, read and write a second language.

Alex's Academic Background

Elementary

Alex's elementary school records show that he was in a bilingual setting during his kindergarten and first grade school years. The teachers were bilingual in English and Spanish. While in the second through sixth grades Alex received only English classroom instruction. During the second grade, the "Reading Transition Entry Recommendation Form, indicates that Alex had scored a four on the English Bilingual Syntax Measure II. The

teacher wrote that "the student functioned in English and refused to read in Spanish". Attendance information shows an average of 165 days of attendance and nine absent days each school year. No behavior problems were noted during these seven years. Alex did not participate in any after school programs or band during the elementary grades. Academic grades were in the "A" and "B's" ranges from the third to sixth grades.

Middle School

Alex's attendance during his two junior high years showed that he was present 159 days with 5.5 absences during the school year. There were no indications of behavior problems noted in the cumulative folder. Alex's mother did mention that "*Alex tuvo unos problemitas en esos dos años*" (Alex had some problems during those two years"). She explained that "*Alex contestaba mal a los maestros y pasaba su tiempo con sus amigos*". (Alex would talk back to teachers, and he spent his time with friends).

The questionnaire indicated that he did not participate in band or after school sports programs during the middle school years. The student's academic profile during the seventh grade year showed low academic grades in math and science/health classes. At the end of the year, his cumulative grade point was at 2.08. An update on the Redesignation Recommendation Form during Alex's seventh grade year indicates a Bilingual Syntax Measure score at level 6 N. His Holistic Writing score was a four. The

Language Arts teacher for this Redesignation Recommendation update also wrote that “the student is doing well in class”. Alex’s semester grades of a C- and C+ in the Language Arts class contradicts her reported success in his English class. In the following eighth grade year, Alex had failing grades in science and social studies. His academic year ended with cumulative grade point of 2.08.

High School

Alex’s academic plan for the four years of high school was based on following the pattern for required course work, and included whatever was available during the open enrollment period of classes each year. The student did not indicate that he requested or was offered extra guidance from counselors when selecting classes. During the parent interview, his mother indicated that Alex had problems in high school “*El tuvo problemas con sus maestros por sus amigos. El iba a las clases tarde y le contestaba a los maestros*”. (He had problems with teachers because of his friends. He was late to classes and he would talk back to the teachers). Alex did not show any interest in band, sports, or extra curricular activities while in high school.

Alex’s grade point average at the end of his freshman year was 1.80. Alex explained his low academic grades with the following reasons: He went to Mexico for a month from December through January, and missed the end of one semester, and the beginning of the second semester. By working hard during the second semester he brought up his grades and the two semesters averaged out to passing grades. He admitted he was also influenced by friends and cousins. He either did not attend classes or arrived tardy for class often. The most repeated reason given was, “*I did not care about the class*”.

In his sophomore year, his cumulative grade point average was raised to 2.00 by the end of the school year. The second semester grades were lower than the first and he showed excessive tardiness to class. He described his high school experience as: “*I was hanging around with friends, not completing group/individual assignments or not turning in the homework. The Spanish class was too easy, and I did not take the class seriously, and I did*

During the second student interview Alex was asked to review each subject, and to explain his failing grades for each of these two academic years. He explained the failing grades and C’s with the following comments; “*I did not care about the class. I was not into the subject. I hated the teacher. I was messing around too much. The advanced class had smart boys and I just wanted a passing grade.*”

not complete the group/individual project. I got a “C” and now thinking about it I could have gotten a better grade”. His English reading class required lots of writing, and the vocabulary was hard for him. Alex could not pronounce or read the long words in reading passages. There were too many words to keep looking in the dictionary for their meaning and after a while he gave up reading the words. He explained that “*The math class and the world history course tests were too hard. They required lots of memorization of information.*” In addition, Alex did not put much effort into homework assignments for these classes during the semester.

Improvement in his grades in some of the subjects was observed in the junior year. His grade point average for the end of the year was 3.14. When asked why the grades improved or dropped, Alex explained the changes with several reasons. He did extra credit work in the science class. He was a teacher’s aide in biology and was able to do the extra work. He learned to type in the computer class. He said that his low grade in the U.S. History class was due to incomplete references for writing the term paper. He also explained that the class was hard because they had a daily quiz and projects.

During the first semester in the senior year, Alex completed five classes with a cumulative GPA of 2.17. Alex’s grade in math dropped because it was hard learning and working the formulas. He did not like the class and expressed great respect for those who can do the math. The “C-” in the English 4 class was due to the class focus on reading for comprehension and poetry. Once again he repeated that he could not read or pronounce many of the words. The major difference this time was that the teacher helped him pronounce long words when they read aloud in class.

Grades in the other two subjects were maintained at a “C” in order to pass the classes. In order to complete credits for the last two classes during his second semester, Alex chose to attend Adult Education classes. He earned the credits needed

to graduate early from high school with a “C” average in one month by going through the Adult Education program. The student’s goal for his senior year was to complete high school credits needed in order to enter the army.

California Achievement Test Scores

In the following table are Alex’s California Achievement Test scores from second grade to eleventh grade. These yearly test scores show the strengths and weakness in the core areas which are an important foundation for academic growth in the later years. By reviewing the California Achievement Test scores in the core academic areas of vocabulary,

reading comprehension, math, reading and language, any pattern of weakness during the elementary years is evident. Any low scores in reading comprehension, math, reading and language totals can be matched with the failing academic grades earned during high school. No scores were reported in science and social studies for the 7th through 9th grades.

Yearly Scores and Grades

Alex’s elementary school records indicated that he was in a bilingual kindergarten and first grade. He earned satisfactory grades for the kindergarten year. During the first grade in 1988, Alex finished the year with three “C’s” in reading, English, and math. He had a “B” in spelling. No CAT scores were found for the first grade. Alex took the Spanish Assessment Basic Education exam in second grade. That test reported only four skill areas had been tested. His lowest test score put him in the 1st percentile in reading comprehension and reading and the highest score was 20th percentile in math. Alex’s classroom grades in second grade were in the “C” to “B” range. It was not possible to compare the grades earned in his English instruction class to the SABE scores.

The final six grades recorded for the year are one “C” and three “B’s” and two “A’s”. Alex’s CAT scores in the different skills tested went both up and down from the previous year. Scores dropped in vocabulary (8th percentile), social studies (50th percentile) and language (38th percentile). Scores were higher in reading comprehension (29th percentile) reading total (14th percentile) and math (70th percentile).

In the third grade, the lowest scores were below the 23rd percentile in all six skills area and he had a 58th percentile in math. Alex’s CAT scores did not match grades earned in class. Alex’s grades were a “C” for reading, a “B” for English, and “A’s” in spelling and math. His fourth grade CAT scores were very low in vocabulary, reading and reading comprehension. The final classroom grades of all “A’s” do not match the CAT test scores.

The CAT scores in seventh grade dropped in vocabulary (1st percentile), reading total (4th percentile), and language (34th percentile). His scores in reading comprehension and math were a little higher than the sixth grade scores. Alex’s grades ranged from “D’s” to “B’s” with one “A” earned during the year. Grades in the core subject areas were “C’s” and below.

In the fifth grade, his classroom grades were in the “B” to “A” range in all subjects. The CAT percentiles were higher in all area except in the total reading scores that dropped to the 2nd percentile from the fourth grade year of 5th percentile.

Alex earned classroom grades in the “F” to “B” range and with one “A” on a elective class during the eighth grade. His grades for core subjects were passing grades one semester then his grades dropped during the second semester. CAT scores dropped in the four areas tested, reading comprehension (13th percentile), reading total (14th percentile), and language total (15th percentile). Alex’s test score dropped and grades dropped in the core subjects.

Alex’s California Achievement Test scores in high school reflected a lack of preparation in the core subjects, and his lack of attention to completing course requirements. During the ninth and tenth grades, Alex did not

attend classes on a regular basis. His academic focus was drawn away by peer influences not to attend classes. He ended the ninth grade with one “B” in math for the year and with “C’s” and “F’s” in other subjects. Alex’s test scores went going up and down on the different subjects tested. The higher test score from the eighth grade do not match the failing grades earned during the school year. Alex’s grade point average at the end of the year was at 1.80.

In the tenth grade, the CAT exam was changed to the Stanford Achievement Test (“SAT-9). Alex had passing grades starting with a 2.60 grade point average then dropping to a 2.00 by the end of the year. His SAT-9 scores dropped in four out of seven areas tested. His lowest scores were in language and social studies

(7th percentile), while the highest score was in math (46th percentile). Alex’s passing grades for the years do not match failing SAT-9 scores.

The eleventh grade SAT-9 scores continued to improve from the previous test year but five areas are below the 25th percentile. The scores dropped in math (25th percentile) and science (30th percentile) while scores in vocabulary, reading comprehension, social studies and language showed little improvement from the previous year. Alex’s passing classroom grades did not match the SAT-9 test scores. His grades were lower in the first semester (“C’s” and “B’s”), only improving a letter grade in one core subject and one elective during the second semester. Alex ended the school year with a grade point average of 3.14.

Case Study 1 Test Scores, Alex

SABE, CAT and SAT-9 Scores

GRADE	YEAR	GRADE	YEAR	GRADE	YEAR
Second	1990	Third	1991	Fourth	1992
Test	SABE 87	Test	CAT 85	Test	CAT 85
Scores	NAT%ILE	Scores	NAT%ILE	Scores	NAT%ILE
VOC	1	VOC	6	VOC	2
RDGCMP	1	RDGCMP	21	RDGCMP	21
RDGTOT	1	SCI	19	SCI	25
MHTTOT	20	SOCSTD	14	SOCSTD	30
		RDGTOT	12	RDGTOT	5
		LNGTOT	13	LNGTOT	32
		MHTTOT	58	MHTTOT	28

GRADE	YEAR	GRADE	YEAR	GRADE	YEAR
Fifth	1993	Sixth	1994	Seventh	1995
Test	CAT 85	Test	CAT 85	Test	CAT 85
Scores	NAT %ILE	Scores	NAT %ILE	Scores	NAT %ILE
VOC	19	VOC	8	VOC	1
RDGCMP	27	RDGCMP	29	CMP	36
SCI	41	SCI	41	SCI	N/A
SOCSTD	63	SOCSTD	50	SOCSTD	N/A
RDGTOT	2	RDGTOT	14	RDGTOT	4
LNGTOT	45	LNGTOT	38	LNGTOT	34
MHTTOT	66	MHTTOT	70	MHTTOT	77

GRADE	YEAR	GRADE	YEAR	GRADE	YEAR	GRADE	YEAR
Eighth	1996	Ninth	1997	Tenth	1998	Eleventh	1999
Test	CAT 85	Test	CAT 85	Test	SAT-9	Test	SAT-9
Scores	NAT%ILE	Scores	NAT%ILE	Scores	NAT%ILE	Scores	NAT%ILE
VOC	15	VOC	70	VOC	21	VOC	23
RDGCMP	13	RDGCMP	22	CMP	13	RDGCMP	18
SCI	N/A	SCI	N/A	SCI	42	SCI	30
SOCSTD	N/A	SOCSTD	N/A	SOCSTD	7	SOCSTD	9
RDGTOT	14	RDGTOT	51	RDGTOT	12	RDGTOT	18
LNGTOT	15	LNGTOT	27	LNGTOT	7	LNGTOT	55
MHTTOT	71	MHTTOT	42	MHTTOT	46	MHTTOT	25

Key to SABE, CAT and SAT-9 Scores

VOC= Vocabulary.....RDGCMP or CMP= Reading Comprehension
 SCI = Science.....SOCSTD = Social Studies
 RDGTOT = Reading Total.....LNGTOT = Language Total
 MHTTOT = Math Total.....NP = National Percentile

SABE = Spanish Assessment Basic Education
 CAT= California Achievement Test
 SAT-9 = Stanford Achievement Test 9

FIGURE 3.1 Alex’s Test Score Summary

Influences That Affected Alex’s High School Years

There were several positive influences on Alex during his high school years. His parents were supportive of all the family’s children completing high school and continuing into college. His mother believed that the school system had prepared the student for middle school, high school and college. Alex credits his completion of classes to his older sister’s help during the four years in high school. In addition, there was a computer in the home for Alex’s use beginning his freshmen school year. He also had his own room for studying and working on homework assignments.

Through information gathered in the second interview, it became clear that the most eventful year of high school, was during Alex’s freshmen year when his father had to go away. This had a major impact on Alex’s mental state and efforts in his academic grades. During this period he did not care about school or passing his classes. In addition, his older cousins and friends were negative influences and they often dissuaded him from attending school regularly.

Summary of Influences on Alex’s Schooling

The important key points of this case study are the home support for academic success, and the student’s personal investment in his academic work. First, the student’s family influences were divided into two issues. The nuclear family encouraged and supported Alex’s academic efforts. His two older brothers and sister were able to help with his development of

oral English skills, and supported his academic development during the early years in elementary school. At home, Alex had a computer and a personal place to study. Alex felt that resources were available from the school or the library whenever they were needed for homework assignments.

However during his high school years, Alex was also under daily negative influences not to go to classes. In his freshmen year he was greatly influenced by his cousins, many of whom dropped out of school after the first two years. Later Alex was persuaded by his friends not to attend class. Alex was often not prepared with homework assignments. He accumulated many tardy points, or just missed classes in order to be with his friends. This was clarified when he admitted that he did little homework, only the bare minimum to pass the class with a "C". He acknowledged that he was not a straight 4.0 student nor was he going to be a doctor. He compared his success and passing grades to those of other friends who did not seem to care or did not graduate. Alex was a far better student, because he could have gotten higher grades and he was graduating. From now on he was going to work hard to be successful.

In addition, Alex lacked the necessary skills to handle academic course work. He did not develop the academic vocabulary that was needed in many of the core subjects. During his interview, Alex constantly repeated, "*That class*

was too hard, and I did not like the class". When asked if the teachers made an effort to make assignments clear by using handouts, overhead presentations, or vocabulary lists, Alex said that the teachers did use those strategies, but he could not recall or understand the assignments when he got home. He never indicated that he requested extra help from teachers outside of class.

A final factor to consider was that Alex did not consistently use good study habits. In spite of the fact that his home environment offered a place to study, he spent most of his time watching T.V. or visiting with friends. The average time spent on homework was half an hour. He would work on the assignment if he could do the work, but he often could not. When studying for a test, Alex spent about an hour going over the book. He never took class notes or used them to study for a test. He explained he would spend a maximum of four hours on major assignments. Alex felt it was easy to wait until the last days because he had learned to type on the computer.

Alex's Personal Reflection on His Schooling

During the second student interview, the last half hour was spent summarizing the academic grades and answering any of student's personal questions. Alex had previously shared that he did not have a picture of his first grade class. The researcher gave him a copy during the interview. He was very happy to learn that he could keep a copy of the class picture. He spent time looking and laughing at his old friends. Alex pointed out students who were still in high school, and those who had dropped out of school. Alex asked about other students that might be included in the interviews. He explained that there had been a total of six cousins in this first grade class. As he named each one, he laughed and commented on their hair or clothing. Alex was surprised at how much they all had grown up. Alex reflected that the elementary years were normal and happy times for him. He talked about his favorite teachers, and expressed how he would like to relive his fifth and sixth grade years.

In a more serious tone, he shared that during his freshmen year; he had gone to Mexico during the winter break and returned to learn that his father was going to jail. After that, his school

life was not important and held little meaning. Somehow during the sophomore year, his father made him aware that he needed to go to school. Alex's body language and mood changed as he described his freshman year experience. It was clear that Alex did not have an understanding of what to call these "feelings". The description of his feelings and attitude toward his life indicated a case of depression. When I suggested this term to help explain these feelings, Alex reacted in silence then repeated the word. He sat up, raising his head to indicate that he understood. He agreed that he had been depressed for the first two years of high school.

Alex continued to explain that in his junior year there had been a girl friend and a change in his attitude. He decided to change his circle of friend and his plans for his senior year. His plan was to finish school as soon as possible and to enter the army. He wanted to make the army a career. The army would offer him an opportunity to continue his education at the college level, and a chance to travel the world.

When asked if there were any regrets or changes he would like to go back and make, he

said that he would have liked to learn to speak Spanish better. He would have liked to have learned the correct academic Spanish with a good vocabulary and to be able to read and write it. Alex explained that for now his Spanish was at a “Rancho Spanish” level. He understands a great deal of Spanish but he can not speak it

correctly. He is able to speak with his mother and father but can not express himself using long academic words. His lack of this level of Spanish has led to teasing by family members, and friends who are more fluent with the Spanish language.

Analysis

In Alex’s situation, there was misunderstanding on the part of the parents about their role and from the school system about the support Alex needed. His mother felt that by sending Alex to school, encouraging him, and providing a stable home environment, she had completed her role as a good parent. She believed that the schools had prepared her children academically during the elementary, middle school, and high schools years. She also believed that Alex was given equal treatment and opportunities in the educational system. She believed he was prepared to enter a college setting if he wished to do so. In this case, she believed that the overall behavior and low grades were due to the negative influences of friends. Because his parents lacked an understanding of how the education system works and the school skills needed to succeed in the academic areas, they were not able to monitor Alex’s academic progress in an adequate manner.

writing and vocabulary indicates that he was lacking the academic language explained by Cummins’ (1989) as a higher level of cognitive development. Alex’s development of oral language skills were begun with the help for his older sister and this gave him a false indication of his readiness for English only instruction. His lack of primary language development and lack of academic language in English led to many of the academic difficulties reported by Alex.

Valdés (1996) explains some of the issues and conflicts encountered by the families of these students. Alex’s parents had not asked him to sacrifice his education. Alex’s parents wanted him to take advantage of the opportunity to finish high school because they had not been able to finish a primary education. The family’s misunderstanding of the school system and the inability to monitor Alex’s education was due to two major points. The first point was they did not understand the differences between the two educational systems. Secondly, they didn’t understand the difference in the role of parents in the education of their children. Alex’s parents believed in his education but did not understand how to help in the education process.

The fact that Alex completed high school credits for a diploma was a big accomplishment for the family. Conversations with him indicated that out of twenty cousins of approximately the same age, he was only the third or fourth male to graduate from high school. He explained that compared to his older sister, he did not have the academic grades, or talent to compare to his sister’s accomplishments during her years of high school. Due to this fact, Alex’s alternative plan was to join the army as soon as possible. He believed the army would provide him with opportunity to attend a college and have a career. Leaving the family and his home town was a very important decision, which he made with the approval of his parents.

Alex agreed that his behavior was influenced by friends and cousins. His low grades were a reflection of his lack of understanding of the academic content which required high levels of thinking skills in English. Alex’s difficulties with reading comprehension,

In June 2001, it was learned that Alex’s sister was married, six months pregnant and working at a local store. Her present plan was to return to the army with her husband after the baby was born. In a conversation with Alex in July 2001, it was learned that he had been in the army and stationed in North Carolina up until April 2001. He had to return home upon his mother’s request. He was needed at home to help with his younger siblings. Alex was working full time at a local chicken processing plant. He plans to attend the local community college this fall and major in criminology. Alex is waiting until he turns 21 years old to apply for correctional officer’s training with the state of California.

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