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The need for Mexican American students to become fluent in Spanish as well as proficient in English has become of prime importance in the Southwest. There are several substantial reasons why it is imperative that Mexican American youngsters become fluent in Spanish. The student's capabilities in Spanish will be important in his search for a self-image. Language fluency will strengthen his retention of his cultural heritage. The communication level which he must achieve in school, home, employment, and social relations will be strengthened. Our Nation will have conserved and used a valuable human resource. The image of the United States as a Nation with a commitment to recognition and concern for the richness of differences in people--not just racial but linguistic and cultural--will be reinforced. Prior to achieving any of the above, the Mexican American must recognize the values of fluency of Spanish, followed quickly by acceptance and use of this language by the Anglo. (CM)

[1969]

THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN AND HIS LANGUAGE

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As bilingual education moves deeper into the educational environment of our schools, particularly in the Southwest, the question will arise frequently, what shall be the goal of the program to teach Spanish to the Mexican-American. Is it to be taught to make the Mexican-American literate in what is supposed to be his mother tongue? Is it taught to the extent necessary to enable him to learn in it while learning English--perhaps at a slower pace? Is it to be taught to him with the idea that he shall retain it, and use it, for communication during the rest of his life?

Bilingual education is the teaching of educational concepts in the subjects of the curriculum in Spanish--the mother tongue of the Mexican-American student--while he is learning English. A most desired bilingual education program would have the teaching of educational concepts in the subjects of the curriculum in English to the Anglo students while they learned Spanish. Then when competency in both languages for both groups of youngsters was achieved a teaching program with both Spanish and English being used for instruction would be developed. This, I am sure, will be the type of program that will become more common in the Southwest. But even with this program, the real need for the Mexican-American student becoming fluent in Spanish will be overshadowed by the compelling desire to make him most proficient in English.

There are, in my opinion, five very substantial reasons why it is imperative that the Mexican-American youngster become fluent in Spanish--and retain the fluency throughout his entire educational career; and if he leaves the school fluent in Spanish, his chances of retaining the fluency and of making his language an integral part of the rest of his life are greatly enhanced. First, his

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capabilities in Spanish will be important in his search for a self-image. Second, his language fluency will strengthen his retention of his cultural heritage. Third, his communication level with the many areas of expression he must achieve--school, home, employment, social relations will be strengthened. Fourth, our Nation will have conserved and used a valuable human resource. Fifth, the image of the United States as a Nation with a commitment to recognition and concern for the richness of differences in people--not just racial--but linguistic and cultural will be reinforced; and this image needs a good uplifting right now.

I want to dwell to some extent on each of these five reasons in the rest of this paper. Let's take his self-image. Dr. Hilario Pena of the Los Angeles City Schools in a recent paper for the National Conference on Educational Opportunities for the Mexican-American points out, "The Spanish-speaking student (and he is talking about the student whose Spanish competency is weak) faces an uphill fight, mostly with himself and his background, to identify with the American culture and not become lost. He needs encouragement, praise, and a push in his striving to achieve status, dignity, without loss of pride or individuality." Dr. Pena is stressing in his observations that unless the Mexican-American youngster is very capable in his mother tongue, he begins to have doubts about his communication capacity and this quickly is translated into doubts about himself. And these doubts manifest themselves in his inability to determine what his role should be in what he thought to be a society that rewards individualism. He is told about the "worth of the individual" as a dominating characteristic of democracy, then finds out that unless he can compete in a single track of communication he is shunned. It is important that the Mexican-American have such a high command of Spanish that he never doubts his worth in expressing himself in any level of communication he encounters. I cannot stress too much the absolute

need that the Mexican-American youngster must become as competent in Spanish as the society in which he lives expects him to be in English. To regard his use of Spanish as a tool for a brief period of endeavor and then to be thrust aside or even discarded as English becomes more proficient is a grave error. Mexican-Americans can never become Anglos no matter what assimilating process may be developed.

The retention of his language and the competence in it is the most important asset the Mexican-American has to maintain his personal confidence and personal identification as an individual with a meaningful role in a democratic society. And this leads us into the second point--the impact of his language on his cultural heritage.

There is a real need on the part of the Spanish-speaking youngster to awaken and discover the traditions and customs, art and music, literature and humanities of the Hispano-American culture. Many Mexican-Americans are completely oblivious of their great cultural heritage and its place in the American way of life. Dr. Sabine Ulibarri of the University of New Mexico puts it so well. "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was made flesh. It was so in the beginning and is so today. The language, the Word, carries with in it the history, the culture, the traditions, the very life of a people, the flesh."

The concept of a bilingual-bicultural integrated way of life is predicated on the premise that both languages, both cultures must be strong and independent. The value of a cultural trait does not rest on its origin but on its contribution to life in the present and future. The culture of the Mexican-American is not going to be judged by society on what it has done--much that this may be--but on what it will do to make the American society a stronger fabric of human relations. The Spanish language as a tool for communication between

Mexican-Americans and Mexican-Americans and between Anglos and Negroes and Mexican-Americans is only as strong as the bridge of cultural acceptance can make it. If the Mexican-American speaks his language with authority and pride and with confidence, his culture will ride with him in each word and with every thought. This does not imply a rigid hewing to cultural heritage without recognition of the need for an embracing and mixing of the multi-cultures of the American scene, but the competence and confidence in language will enable the Mexican-American to place his cultural contributions in proper perspective with all the others.

The third element which supports the proposition that the Mexican-American must become and remain fluent in Spanish is the intra-group relations such competency provides. Ability and desire to communicate with all members of the family and the cultural community is most important. In many cases the parents or grandparents may not be very competent in their language. They do, however, use their Spanish as the main tongue in their homes and in the barrio and feel great pride and comfort when their youngster is sharing all his life with them. The inevitable generation "conflict" is just as real a problem in the Mexican-American home and community as it is in the Anglo and Negro. Though the ideas and desires of the younger generation may differ from their elders, the language retention and use from the culture does give some ease to these difficulties.

The ability to use Spanish in the school is most important for the young Mexican-American just starting in school. It provides him with a tool for assistance as he adapts himself to the environment of a structured learning situation. It enables him to move immediately along with his peers in the school assignments. But even more, his ability in his language gives him an opportunity to make a unique contribution to the enrichment of his school which places

him in a position of status so necessary to strengthen his inner fight for a positive position in his new society. The more fluent he is, the better he will be able to maintain and broaden this position of enrichment. I realize that some of the statements I am making will be soundly denounced by those who feel that the sooner the Mexican-American youngster drops his use of Spanish in the school and uses only English the more effective he will be as a student and a participant in the American "monolingual" society. It is this position that has crushed the heart and soul of thousands of Mexican-Americans during the past century. His whole being and what he will do with himself is based on his ability to find a place which is his in our complex society. Acceptance of English alone, and rejection of his language--hence his whole cultural being--will not make him an Anglo nor will it make him a full member of the American society; it will simply place in the society a part of a person. Therefore, it is imperative that the school be a catalyst that makes him literate in his language and provides the additional arena where he can use his language for communication and as a tool for personality development.

When we look at language and society in general, I am concerned with two specific areas. Obviously, the school and the home are two major segments of any society; but the area of inter-group relations in the society as a whole and the area of making a living are very important. The Mexican-American has become extremely sensitive to prejudice because of his previous experience with the Anglo--sometimes reacting negatively when no prejudice exists. Inter-group relations programs are rare when the Mexican-American is involved; most of them deal with the Negro or the Jew. The schools, particularly, have closed their eyes to any organized inter-group relations programs, probably because it is controversial in the community. But this must change. And I suggest that one immediate and firm step toward this change can be the encouragement by the school

of the Mexican-American's broadened use of his language. It will be some time before we will bring out of our schools a new generation of young adults who will have a more accurate background on the contributions of the Mexican-American to the richness of America. But the recognition and encouragement of the bilingual person by the school will almost immediately have a profound effect on the attitude of those adults whose children are becoming bilingual. The Anglo and Negro child who learns Spanish in school, or who picks it up on the school playground because his playmate is using it with freedom and confidence, will have additional respect for the Mexican-American youngster and who he is and what he is and will transmit these feelings to his home. I can see nothing but a better climate of inter-group relations as a result of recognition and promotion of the language of the bicultural individual. This imposes upon the Mexican-American the task of becoming fluent in his language so he can hold it high with pride and confidence.

In the area of work, hardly a day passes that I do not hear of some desirable job which requires competence in Spanish; and I am talking now of jobs in the East, the Midwest, as well as the Southwest--positions which pay well and are challenging and exciting; positions which very often also carry in their specifications cultural needs. Certainly the Mexican-American who has been given the opportunity to make his language a vital part of his life will also have made his cultural heritage a vital part of his life. Our economic society is seeking these unique people; it is important that they be ready.

The fourth point in the significance of the Mexican-American and his language is that of a national resource. In much of what I have said previously I have touched on this point. I want to emphasize it just briefly. Commissioner Harold Howe of the United States Office of Education in a recent speech entitled, "Cowboys, Indians, and American Education," struck hard at this point. He mentioned the early cultural segments of our country's colonial period such as

the Dutch, the French who either returned to Europe or faded away or became assimilated through adopting the English language and abandoning their distinctive traditions. By being in the Southwest before the English colonization of America and being removed geographically from the English area of concentration, the new culture "that mingled elements of the Spanish, the Mexican, and the Indian traditions grew up, and stubbornly refused to melt away with the advent of the Anglo-American culture."

Much of what could have been richness of the Dutch and the French is gone except for isolated enclaves in Canada, Louisiana, and perhaps some parts of New England; but the richness of the Spanish Southwest is still here. And it seems to me that we have a responsibility to use it as the base to retain and begin to create a truly bilingual or multi-lingual and cultural society. A society that reflects the world in which we live. The preservation of the language of this culture, and the encouragement of use of this language by the Mexican-American and also by the Anglo and the Negro will be the first step toward the development of such a society. This means that the Mexican-American must lead this way by setting the example of being fluent and competent in his cultural language.

The fifth point, our international image, is one which needs little defense but some explanation. Those who remember "The Ugly American," a best seller over a dozen years ago, recall the picture that the American too often presented to people of other countries. The first impression most nationals of a country got of the American visiting them was that of the American's belief in his "cultural superiority." This impression, mistaken or not, and I'm inclined to believe it was not mistaken, has seriously harmed the United States in this century in its dealings with other peoples. We have, particularly since 1945, been thrust into the family of nations as an international force; and we were ill-prepared to assume this role. The result was that we often offended people

whom we were trying to help or befriend. Commissioner Howe in his speech puts this dilemma so well, "Many former colonies of the great nations of the world have themselves become independent nations, their citizens as proud of their distinctive languages and traditions as any free people should be. If we are to gain the friendship of these new nations, and strengthen our ties with much older nations that have felt the strength of American parochialism in the past, we must give our children the ability to move with ease and respect in cultures other than our own."

The first step in achieving what Commissioner Howe sees as vital for our national and international interests is the recognition of values of fluency in Spanish by the Mexican-American, and followed quickly by acceptance and use of this language by the Anglo. But, I must not close without saying again the Mexican-American must realize that heavy responsibility lies on him to retain his language, make it a vital part of his being, his whole life.