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## The Politics of the Language of Literacy: Spanish Literacy for New York Latinos

by Ofelia García

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**A**lthough the limited literacy of adults has long been regarded as an exclusive problem of third world countries, the United States is now facing the reality of its own problems with functional illiteracy. And in New York City, a complex multilingual city with a dysfunctional public school system, literacy efforts have been mounted in the last decade. But along with an increased interest in literacy education for adults, there is much ignorance of the socio-political aspects of language(s) and a lack of recognition of the many language minorities that make up most of the functional illiterate population in New York City. I will present theoretical arguments of why the use of non-English languages in literacy instruction is a must, and in particular, I will focus on the Latino population in New York City and its need for Spanish literacy programs.

Although literacy efforts have been mounted internationally, illiteracy continues to plague the world. And in many instances, countries with a very high degree of illiteracy are also those where the State ignores the language minorities in their midst and carries out their literacy efforts in a single language. The reason for this one-language-literacy policy is clear. Literacy campaigns most often have two goals (as seen by Unesco and the World Bank). One is nation building, that is, the development of an awareness of belonging to one nation. The other is development and modernization, that is, the rapid spread of new technologies and ideas through education. It is thought that both goals would be better met by imposing one common language of education (Skutnabb-Kangas, forthcoming). But while the State pursues this goal, language minorities continue to feel the oppression, rejection and exclusion that comes about when the school system functions in a language with which they can't identify. Despite literacy campaigns, the absolute numbers of illiterates worldwide is on an

increase (Unesco's Statistical Yearbook, 1988).

The United States claims to be a monolingual country, and English is indeed the language of power, prestige and access. But the linguistic diversity and cultural heterogeneity in our midst cannot be ignored, especially in New York City. Children of immigrants who come to the United States quickly learn English, and their parents yearn for the same. Some of these immigrants were professionals in their country of origin or members of the middle class. For these immigrants, English as a Second Language classes suffice, for they have the skills and values that are necessary for success in a market economy like the United States, once they learn English (see Greer 1972; Otheguy 1982). But many of those who come to our shores have no such skills. And expecting them to become skilled and literate in English-only classes shows how naive we are about the role of language in society.

Latinos in New York City are a diverse group. Although Puerto Ricans, citizens of the United States since 1919, make up the majority, in the last decade immigration from the Dominican Republic especially, and also from Central America and South America has been on an increase. And along with the professionals who represent the continuous "brain drain" from Latin America, there are many poor urban and rural dwellers who are victims of ineffective educational programs in their countries of origin. Victims also of the historical relationship of the United States with Latin America, Latinos arrive in New York City with dreams, dreams of a better life for themselves and their children. All expect to face the challenge of learning English, but few are ready for the literacy inadequacy that they will soon experience in a city in which filling out forms is a daily activity.

Literacy is societally defined (García et al., 1988). Although the limited Spanish reading and writing skills that many Latinos have was adequate in their

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less technological societies, it is just not sufficient to function in our complex city. While some efforts have been made to translate social service forms and applications into Spanish in the city, little thought has been given to why after all that, "Maria, still can't read."

The nature of the massive Latino (im)migration to the United States and the nature of the complex city into which they come makes it mandatory that we are ready with literacy programs in Spanish. Only in Spanish will we be able to give them the literacy tools they will need in order to function in this society. By insisting that adult education for these Latinos take place exclusively in English, we are effectively excluding them from the process, and we are denying the evidence of much sociolinguistic, pedagogical and psychological research.

There is much research evidence to support the fact that the rate of English language acquisition is positively correlated with the literacy skills in one's native language (Cummins, 1981). Therefore, for the Latino population with limited literacy in Spanish, English as a Second Language classes can neither advance their literacy skills or their English language skills. For them, a more integrative approach, taking into account their literacy needs, as well as their second language needs is necessary.

As literacy educators we have a responsibility to learn more about the role of language in society and the socio-political aspects of language. The language of education is an instrument both for inclusion and exclusion. By defining it narrowly as English-only, ignoring the multilingual population in our midst, we're only excluding the millions that we claim to want to help. As literacy educators we must be ready to combat "linguicism" in the United States, assuring that our literacy policy puts "basic human needs, not economic growth, in focus" (Skutnabb-Kangas, forthcoming). We must advocate that more Spanish literacy classes be offered, and that these be supplemented, when necessary, by carefully planned English as Second Language classes. Only an integrative approach, including both time for native literacy development, as well as second language development which builds on the first, could address the complex

needs of the Latino population with limited literacy.

We have taken some steps in the right direction. For the last four years, El Barrio Popular Education Program, presently housed at Casita Maria has served as an example of a well-designed and integrated language/literacy effort for the Latino population. The efforts of Pedro Pedraza who dreamed of the project, Rosa Torruellas who directed it during the first years, and its present director, Klaudia Rivera, have been fruitfully corresponded. As a member of its Board of Directors, I have witnessed the development and growth of a bilingual literacy program that could be a model for our multilingual city. Our efforts as literacy educators should be in that direction.

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