

Language, Culture and Identity  
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Lourdes C. Rovira, Ed.D.  
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Bon dia

Quero agradecer pela oportunidade de participar neste encontro que e muito importante para todos.

I am very happy to be here to share with you some thoughts on a topic that is so much a part of my professional and personal life and that is, the importance of maintaining the home language when one is away from the home country. I especially want to thank my friends Adriana Sabino and Leila da Costa who worked tirelessly with others and myself in order to establish the Portuguese dual language program at Ada Merritt.

We could address the language topic from the perspective of the educational and cognitive advantages of knowing more than one language, the home language and the language of the new country. We could also address it from the perspective of the need for biliteracy for the global economy. Who would question the economic advantages of knowing more than one language when conducting business? But today I am going to address the topic from a slightly different perspective although it is all intertwined. I want to talk a little bit about the relationship between language and culture and language and identity.

For 35 years I worked in the public school system in Miami - first as a teacher and then as an administrator. My professional life mostly dealt with immigrant students and their education. I witnessed first hand hundreds of immigrant student who enrolled in our schools as monolingual speakers of their home language, be it Spanish, Portuguese, Creole, or any other, and eventually graduated still as monolingual students but this time as monolingual speakers of English. Somewhere in their educational experience they had exchanged languages. In order to acquire English, we helped them to forget the language in which they had first learned to talk, to sing, to pray and to love. This my dear friends, according to the famous Danish linguist, Tove Skutnabb Kangas, is called linguistic genocide in education.<sup>1</sup> We accomplish this by forcing linguistic and cultural assimilation in our schools. For most immigrants in the United States, English is learned at the cost of the mother tongue, rather than in addition to the mother tongue. Dr. Skutnabb-Kangas points out that models of instruction which deny students the right to receive instruction, or at least instructional support, in their home language are insufficient in reaching the goals that they purport to reach and violate linguistic and cultural human rights. On the other hand, dual language programs, such as the one that

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<sup>1</sup> SKUTNABB-KANGAS, Tove. *Linguistic Genocide in Education-or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?*

we have at Ada Merritt K-8 center, that build on learner's strengths, specially the language in which they communicate best, benefit all students.

Let us turn to the issue of language, culture and identity. Cultural identity for me encompasses all that relates to self: belonging, systems of beliefs, sentiments of self-worth, etc. It is the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings transmitted from one generation to another. It is **me**, and I have a right to know and understand my cultural identity. As I embrace who I am it is likely that I will engage in positive identity practices. If, on the other hand, I am forced to reject this identity I will develop a repertoire of negative identity practices to distance myself from who I am.

So, what is the role of language in the development of identity and cultural identity in particular?

In the words of Karl Gibson

Language is intrinsic to the expression of culture. Language is a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. It is the means by which we convey our innermost self from generation to generation. It is through language that we transmit and express our culture and its values. "Language—both code and content—is a complicated dance between internal and external interpretations of our identity."<sup>2</sup>

The renowned linguist Joshua Fishman asserts the following:

It is through language that we transmit and express our values and our culture. When we strip a language from its people and their culture we take away their greetings, their curses, their praises, their laws, their literature, their songs, their rhymes, their proverbs, their wisdom, and their prayers.<sup>3</sup>

One repeatedly encounters poignant stories of having to forget one's language in order to assimilate or acculturate to a new environment. Sadly this forgetting often includes losing one's roots. This loss of language, which inevitably leads to loss of cultural identity, carries with it many dangerous implications.

Georges Perec, a Polish Jew who migrated to France during World War II writes that his parents' memories were not transmitted to him. Their language, their traditions and hopes, were lost. In reflecting on this loss he states:

I am a stranger in relation to something of me...I am different, but not different from others, different rather from what is mine, from my people. I do not speak the language my parents spoke, I do not share the

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<sup>2</sup> GIBSON, Kari. *English Only Court Cases Involving the U.S. Workplace: The Myths of Language Use and the Homogenization of Bilingual Workers*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> FISHMAN, Joshua. *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*, p. 448.

memories they might have had, something which was theirs, which made them what they were, their history, their culture, their hope, was not transmitted to me.<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin Baez also very powerfully states:

She helped me learn to forget. I mean, my second-grade teacher. I don't remember her name, or her features exactly, or the tone of her voice, or much else except that, as I said, she helped me to learn to forget. What I mean is that she helped me to become fluent in English, but in doing that, I had to learn to forget Spanish. I still know Spanish... But I lost the intimacy associated with Spanish and the closeness to my family and past that it allowed. I lost, essentially, all the sights and sounds associated with my native language.<sup>5</sup>

This complex relationship between language, culture, and identity has been at the core of the immigrant experience for centuries. Language, culture and identity are inextricable from each other.

If we were to survey the world, we would find that most countries are multilingual and multiethnic. The United States is one of the few countries in the world that continues to embrace the notion that having a language other than English is un-American and disloyal. Most students entering an American school for the first time will find that the teacher immediately Americanizes their name. If you were baptized Maria you soon become Mary. Last names are pronounced differently to the extent that one would often not recognize that you are the person being called. Why is this significant? Names link us to a family history. Names bind us to past and future generations. In changing one's given name, a rupture is created leaving a void in our experience of things, a loss of heritage.

Language policies in the United States favor a homogeneous, monolingual society. Yet we know that human mobility is one of the greatest phenomena of this century. According to the Global Commission in International Migration, there are approximately 200 million immigrants across the world.<sup>6</sup> According to some estimates, as of 2008 over 1 million Brazilians live in the United States, about 300,000 of them in south Florida. From south Kendall to Delray Beach we are as likely to hear Portuguese as Spanish and a lot more likely than hearing English.... Brazilian owned businesses, cultural centers, restaurants, nightclubs, markets, and churches with services in Portuguese are all over the area.

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<sup>4</sup> PEREC, Georges, in BOOTH, W. James. *Communities of Memory on Witness, Identity, and Justice*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>5</sup> BAEZ, Benjamin. *Learning to Forget: Reflections on Identity and Language*, p. 123.

<sup>6</sup> SUAREZ-OROZCO, Marcelo. *Learning in the Global Era*.

So what is happening to the language skills of all of these Brazilians living in the United States? As with all immigrant groups, first and even second generation immigrants maintain the home language in addition to acquiring English. However, I would venture to claim, that those of you living here are already struggling with your children and grandchildren when they come home and only want to speak in English. Acquisition of English is perceived by American educators as the biggest challenge faced by immigrant children. However, after 35 years as an educator, I have yet to meet a child who did not learn English. I have met, however, hundreds who in the process of learning English have lost their mother tongue. English quickly displaces and replaces the primary language of most immigrant students. It is at this point that the family unit begins to break apart. The children become ashamed of their parents because the parents cannot speak English as well as the children. Grandparents cannot communicate with the grandchildren because there is a language barrier. Childhood memories, songs, riddles, and many other family traditions are quickly erased. I have personally met families where communication is limited because the children have forgotten or refuse to speak their mother tongue. A Peruvian grandmother who lives in Miami recently told me that she felt like she had given up her children and grandchildren for adoption for she no longer could communicate with them at an intimate level due to the language barrier.

My friends, speaking the mother language at home is not enough. Don't misunderstand me, it is critical that families continue to communicate in the mother tongue, but at best, with second generations you will only achieve social language skills. If we have any hope that our children and grandchildren can be biliterate in English and Portuguese, we must strive for more. We must become advocates to ensure that our educational community understands, accepts, and embraces, the notion that a language needs to be studied in school from an early age; that it is not enough to rely on the fact that the language is spoken at home. If this were the case, our American students should not have to study 12 years of English for after all, they speak that language at home!

Schools like Ada Merritt K-8 center should be replicated in other communities. But that is a very difficult task. A shift to research-based dual language education models is at best controversial and in many instances divisive. Monolingual teachers and parents feel threatened. School restructuring is always painful. As research demonstrates, language acquisition is not an overnight process, it takes years. It disrupts established patterns. It requires a change in the curriculum, change in organizational patterns, and the hiring of personnel with additional qualifications. More importantly, and much more difficult to attain, it requires a change in people's attitudes towards immigrants and languages other than English. It requires an inner transformation. If we want change, we must work relentlessly to change the attitudes of those who want to erase the home language of immigrant students; we need to offer solutions based on proven practices that work. We need to influence policy makers, program designers, and the public at large. A daunting task indeed!

This is the challenge that you and I face. Are we willing to see our future generation of Brazilians living in the United States surrender to the same fate of so many immigrant groups whose home language has been forgotten or are we ready to face the establishment and become advocates in our community? I am placing my bet on the latter. We owe it to our ancestors. We owe it to our children. Ultimately we also owe it to ourselves. Obrigada.