

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY. THE USE OF THE HOME LANGUAGE AS A HUMAN RIGHT OF THE IMMIGRANT♦

### A relação entre o idioma e a identidade. O uso do idioma materno como direito humano dos migrantes.

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The immigrants who settled in a country where a different language is spoken, face unique challenges as children while grown ups assimilate the issue and have to handle matters of personal and cultural identity. The circumstances can get even more challenging when dominant culture in the host country underestimates the native language of the immigrant. The present paper studies the correlation between language and identity from the perspective of researches made regarding the theme, as well as the author's personal and professional experiences as an Hispanic in the United States. It also beholds educational practices that enhance students' identity, and those that have a negative impact on it. Finally, the role of the Catholic Church concerning the subject is addressed.

**Keywords:** Identity; Culture; Xenophobia; Linguistic Genocide

*Os imigrantes estabelecidos num país cuja língua não é a mesma de sua terra de origem enfrentam singulares problemas quando crianças, enquanto gerações posteriores a assimilam e precisam fazer frente às questões de identidade pessoal e cultural. A situação coloca desafios ainda mais complexos, quando a cultura dominante no país anfitrião subestima a língua materna do imigrante. Este artigo analisa a relação existente entre idioma e identidade, a partir da perspectiva*

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♦ The Spanish and Portuguese versions are available at: [http://www.csem.org.br/artigos\\_port\\_artigos08.html](http://www.csem.org.br/artigos_port_artigos08.html).

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*de pesquisas realizadas sobre o tema, assim como das experiências pessoais e profissionais da autora, hispânica, nos Estados Unidos. Consideram-se também, os métodos pedagógicos que promovem a identidade dos estudantes e os que exercem, sobre ela, um efeito negativo. Por último, a apresentação faz referência ao tema do papel da Igreja Católica acerca da temática apresentada.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Identidade; Cultura; Xenofobia; Genocídio Lingüístico*

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was made flesh. It was so in the beginning and it is so today. The language, the Word, carries within it the history, the culture, the traditions, the very life of a people, the flesh. Language is the people. We cannot even conceive of a people without a language, or a language without a people. The two are one and the same. To know one is to know the other.

Sabine Ulibarrí, 1972<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This quote by Sabine Ulibarrí has significant relevance to the topic which I will address in this paper. However, she uses a biblical citation and gives it a secular meaning. If in fact we were to take the biblical meaning of the Word, this quote by Ulibarrí would have much greater significance. Language is the code we have to express the experiences of a people. In this case, our language is impregnated with the Word, that is to say, with God's presence amongst the people and their faith experience.

I am so happy and honored to be here to share with you today thoughts on a topic that is so much a part of who I am. The immigrants' maintenance of the home language and the relationship between language and identity are passionate subjects that have guided much of what I have done in my professional life. It has taken me on a journey from teacher to administrator in a large urban public school system, from local to national advocate for the educational and linguistic rights of immigrants in the United States. I also stand here today as an exiled Cuban, a teacher, an administrator, and above all a woman of strong faith.

I have organized this presentation around the following questions:

- What is identity?
- What is culture?
- What is the role of language in the development of a person's identity?
- What language policies dictate the educational experience of immigrant students in the United States?
- What is linguistic genocide? What are its consequences?

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<sup>1</sup> GARCIA, Ana. *Language and identity*, p. 1.

- Is the maintenance of your home language a human right for immigrants?
- What is the role of the church in this area yours, mine?

The answer to these and other questions are based on current research. More importantly, my comments are based on my own personal experiences as an exiled Cuban, an immigrant, a Hispanic woman in the United States, and my professional experiences as an administrator in the fourth largest school system in the United States and an advocate for the linguistic rights of immigrant students. However, my experiences are not uncommon for immigrant groups in many other parts of the world, particularly when the immigrant moves to a country where the language is different from the one spoken in their country of origin.

When I meet a new person, the first question that is always asked is: "What is your name?" to which I respond, "Lourdes." That is my first identity, my name. The second question that typically follows in the society where I live is, "Do you live here?". Since I know where this conversation is going, I limit my answer to the precise question asked, so I respond, "Yes, I live in Miami". I know that the question the person wants to ask is, "But where are you really from?". My second identifier is now revealed, "I am Cuban.". This second identity element tells you much more about who I really am than knowing my name and where I live.

Our name, our national origin, and our citizenship, constitute very intimate elements of our being and our identity. People have fixed ideas and stereotypes, often inaccurate ones, which dictate whether we are embraced or ignored, accepted or rejected. Today, I will attempt to unpack the correlation among language, culture, and identity. I will also address the right of immigrant families to maintain their home language, even after they are fully fluent in their new country's language. Hopefully my comments will provide a better understanding of the intrinsic need to battle any attempt at erasing a person's home language and the need to advocate for the immigrants basic human rights which are being violated every day across the world.

### **Identity, culture, and language**

What is identity? Identity, simply stated, is who you are; individuality; the condition of being a certain person. In the social sciences, identity

is defined as the way that individuals label themselves as members of a particular group; in psychology, it refers to an individuals' self-esteem or self-image.<sup>2</sup> We can speak about social identity, gender identity, cultural identity, religious identity, national identity and many other identities. However, I want to focus this conversation on those aspects of identity that deal with the self as a member of a particular group and how that image of self is shaped by our language and the social experiences that we have.

Culture is a defining feature of a person's identity. The shared values, customs and histories characteristic of a particular culture have a very strong influence on how a person behaves, thinks, and views the world. Cultural identity then encompasses for me all that relates to self, belonging, systems of beliefs and sentiments of self-worth. It is the total sum 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? 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>3</sup> Words, language, have the power to define and shape the human experience. It is because of language that I can name my experiences.

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. As powerfully said by Benjamin Baez, losing his original language meant losing, "the intimacy associated with Spanish and the closeness to my family and past it allowed. I lost, essentially, all the 'sights and sounds' associated with my native language".<sup>4</sup> This loss of language, which inevitably leads to loss of cultural identity, carries with it many dangerous implications. In the words of the renown linguist, Joshua Fishman, when we take away the language of

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<sup>2</sup> FISHMAN, Joshua. *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*, p. 448.

<sup>3</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>4</sup> BAEZ, Benjamin. *Learning to forget: reflections on identity and language*, p. 123.

a culture we take away, “its greetings, its curses, its cures, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its rhymes, its proverbs, its wisdom, and its prayers”.<sup>5</sup>

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 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>6</sup>

The search for identity is most powerful during adolescence when the ties to one’s parents begin to weaken and the adolescent begins to ask the question, who am I in relation to everyone that surrounds me? My family migrated to the United States in 1961 fleeing from a tyranny that engulfed the minds of children and adolescents with Marxist and atheist doctrines. My parents struggled in a new and strange land, they suffered and were forced to adapt to different customs and a different language. With their radical decision to choose freedom over tyranny, they instilled in me a sense of honor and pride for who I was and for my roots. They also instilled in me a sense of obligation to our adopted land, the United States, and a love for my country of birth and my Cuban heritage. From my parents I acquired my obsession with freedom and education. However, I vividly remember my own experience when as an adolescent I only spoke English, listened to American music, rejected everything that sounded or smelled Cuban, and sadly, could hardly speak the language in which I had first learned to speak, sing, and pray. My world was divided in two, the outside world of school and friends, where English was the medium of communication and Americanism was embraced, and the world of home and family, where Cuban traditions and values were instilled. The two worlds were constantly clashing. And I, I honestly had no clue what my place was or who I was. Fortunately for me, my parents forged ahead emphasizing a strong ethnic identity and family communication which eventually helped me form a sense of pride and the gift of being bilingual. But the road was paved with much rebellion and many tears.

<sup>5</sup> FISHMAN, Joshua, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> PEREC, Georges in BOOTH, W. James. *Communities of memory on witness, identity, and justice*, p. 81-82.

This complex relationship between language, culture, and identity has been at the core of the immigrant experience for centuries.

Culture, identity and language may be inextricable from each other; all create identity, or, at least, important aspects of identity. But language not only creates the contours of identity, it also may set up the conditions for other kinds of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and not belonging, success and failure... Language gives meaning to social structures, identity-creating and oppressive ones.<sup>7</sup>

## The immigrant experience in the United States

The United States is a country of immigrants. It was built on the hard labor of Europeans and other immigrant groups who came to the United States seeking work, religious freedom, and liberty from oppression and wars. Others came because they were bought and sold and had no choice but to board the ships that brought them to America. They were welcomed with the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty from the poet Emma Lazarus:

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.<sup>8</sup>

Immigrants today continue to arrive in the United States in large numbers from all corners of the world. They work hard, practice their faith, love their families, and contribute to the economic growth of the country. They come full of hopes and the dream of securing a better life for themselves and their children. Yet, unlike the arrivals of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, today's immigrants are not particularly welcome. Many of the same ones, whose ancestors came centuries ago, today are full of nativism, racism and fear of competition from foreign laborers. In fact, immigration is perhaps one of the most divisive and challenging issues facing the upcoming presidential election in the United States.

According to the Global Commission in International Migration, there are approximately 200 million immigrants across the world.<sup>9</sup> There are roughly 44.2 million Hispanics living in the United States. It is by far the fastest growing minority group, constituting 15% of the total

<sup>7</sup> BAEZ, Benjamin, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> LAZARUS, Emma. *The New Colossus*. Poem engraved on a plaque in the Statue of Liberty.

<sup>9</sup> SUAREZ-OROZCO, Marcelo. *Learning in the Global Era*.

population. According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2003, 53% of total immigrants came from Spanish-speaking countries.<sup>10</sup> They, we, are perceived as the invasion of the browns for brown is how Hispanics are referred to in the country regardless of the color of your skin. Anti-Spanish campaigns have moved across the country and, in several states, have succeeded in passing legislation that forbids the use of Spanish in schools and in the work place. We tread dangerous waters when a society denigrates a group because of the language they speak, when a society singles out a particular group of immigrants as less deserving of rights, less worthy, or less equal.

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. For Americans, English is much more than a language, it is equated with patriotism. At the heart of the issue, is a fear of the unknown manifested as xenophobia. This xenophobia is seen in many ways, some overt and some not so overt. In June of 1995 in a child-custody case in Texas, Judge Samuel Kiser accused Martha Laureano, the mother of a 5-year-old girl, of child abuse for speaking only Spanish to the child. Judge Kiser told Ms. Laureano that she was abusing the child and relegating her (the child) to the position of a housemaid. He further warned her that she was to speak to the child only in English or he would have the child removed from the mother "because it was not in her [the child's] interest to be ignorant".<sup>11</sup> I would dare to ask Judge Kiser since when is a person who speaks two languages considered ignorant? A Spanish proverb has it that an individual who speaks two languages is worth two persons. In 2000, Nickelodeon children's television network introduced "Dora the Explorer" a cartoon about a Hispanic girl and her adventures in the United States. Some parental comments, quoted in an article by Nicole Guidotti-Hernandez, capture the country's xenophobic phenomenon: "Dora used to be an ok show. Now I do not let my children watch it. There is too much Spanish speaking in it." Another comment: "It's bad that even our cartoon programs have gone so far as to teach our children Spanish as much as it has. I feel that if you live here you need to speak our language. If not leave".<sup>12</sup> Situations like Judge Kiser's and the comments of the above referenced parents are examples of the

<sup>10</sup> LARSEN, Luke. *The foreign-born population in the United States: 2003*.

<sup>11</sup> VERHOVEK, Sam. *Mother scolded by judge for speaking in Spanish*. New York Times, August 30, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> GUIDOTTY-HERNANDEZ, Nicole. *Dora the explorer: constructing "latinidades" and the politics of global citizenship*, p. 209.

racism that has historically riddled a country that, oddly enough, has been built on the shoulders of its immigrants.

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, if Jaime, James. 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. "The past of one's original name, its ties to places, to communities, and to earlier generations of one's family, is dissolved, or at least suspended in the night of forgetting".<sup>13</sup>

### Language Policies in the United States

Language policies in the United States favor a homogeneous, monolingual society. Hispanics are perpetually erased from US national narratives except when they are identified as an immigration problem or cheap labor. Today, socially, culturally, and linguistically homogeneous communities are no longer the norm, since diversity has taken over. Those of us present in this symposium know that human mobility is a global reality which will only continue to escalate. Yet, at the present time immigrants in the United States are quickly brainwashed to believe that in order to become American, in order to succeed, they have to turn their back on everything that they brought from their home country, including their language. The message that children receive in school is that English makes you American and Spanish keeps you poor – as if the two languages were mutually exclusive or one had to be traded off for the other.

Approximately 5.1 million students in elementary and secondary schools in the United States are classified as English Language Learners (ELL's) making up 10% of the total school population.<sup>14</sup> Their knowledge of English is so limited that without linguistic supports they are excluded from active participation in their educational experience. In 1974, the Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* that these children must be provided linguistic supports to make instruction comprehensible. This historical decision made school boards, not children or parents, responsible for providing an adequate education to children whose language barriers impeded their access to the curriculum. When children arrive in school with little or no

<sup>13</sup> BOOTH, W. James, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS. *Relative growth in English language learners and total enrollment in U.S. schools, 1989-90 to 2004-2005.*

English-speaking ability, “sink or swim” instruction is a violation of their civil rights. *Lau* remains the major precedent regarding the educational rights of language minorities.

Yet 34 years after this landmark case, over half of the states continue to violate children’s civil rights to receive effective help in overcoming language barriers that impede their access to the curriculum as guaranteed by *Lau v. Nichols*. I am wholeheartedly in support of children becoming proficient in English as quickly as possible; then again, I am also in support of the right of every human being to maintain their home language and to be praised and respected for that desire. In the words of James Crawford, in his book *Educating English Learners*, “There is no contradiction between promoting fluent bilingualism and promoting academic achievement in English; indeed, these goals are mutually supporting”.<sup>15</sup>

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 because she no longer could communicate with them at an intimate level due to the language obstacle. That is a travesty!

For young children and adolescents alike, school is the central setting for socialization. In order to be accepted, to fit in, they quickly realize that they must be able to communicate in English. They soon feel the stigma of having a language which is perceived as the language of poverty for Spanish is commonly referred as a low-status language.

They quickly discover that in the social world of the school, English is the only language that is acceptable. The message they get is the following: ‘The home language is nothing; it has no value at all.’ If they want to be fully accepted, children come to believe that they must disavow the low status language spoken at home.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> CRAWFORD, James. *Educating English learners*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> WONG-FILLMORE, Lily. *Loss of Family Languages: should educators be concerned?*, p. 207-208.

These practices inhibit and force one to lose the shared personal, intimate interactions brought about by language, identity, and the migration experience. This model of how language subordination takes place seeks to explain how prejudice against non-stream individuals and bias towards middle-class Anglo speech is ingrained in the institutions of power in the United States (i.e., education, law, social services). Let us not forget that children who lose their first language are not only losing a language, they are losing part of their culture and a part of themselves.<sup>17</sup>

## Linguistic Genocide

I want to address the topic of “linguistic genocide” a term first coined in 1948 by the United Nations in the draft of *The Convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide*. This term was defined at the time as “prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group”.<sup>18</sup> Article III of the draft report had definitions of linguistic and cultural genocide and saw them also as crimes against humanity. This Article was voted down by 16 states in the United Nations General Assembly and was not incorporated in the final Genocide Convention.<sup>19</sup>

In 1999, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, distinguished professor at the University of Roskilde, Denmark, and linguistic human rights activist, refined the term in what she called linguistic genocide in education. She argues that schools are everyday committing linguistic genocide. It is done by forcibly moving children from one group (indigenous or minority) to another group (the dominant group) through linguistic and cultural forced assimilation in schools. Linguistic genocide inevitably includes a consideration of power relations. Educational systems are willing participants in maintaining and reproducing unequal power relations especially among linguistic minorities and others. If the speakers of the language of power totally disregard the importance of other languages it will result in unequal relations (unequal treatment and opportunities) towards the minority, or ethnically different group.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> BAEZ, Benjamin, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Terralingua. Definition of Linguistic Genocide.

<sup>19</sup> SKUTNABB-KANGAS, Tove. *Linguistic and cultural genocide in education signals lack of linguistic human rights* – but why no discussion? Lecture.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*. *Linguistic genocide in education – or worldwide diversity and Human Rights?*

When students are forced to shift to another language, and their native language is forgotten, the incoming new language can function as a killer language. 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. As such, it becomes a killer language. However, languages do not kill each other, but rather people with xenophobic attitudes do. Today, English is the world's most important killer language posing serious threats towards the linguistic diversity of the world.<sup>21</sup> I have seen Spanish become a killer language in the Dominican Republic where sugar cane workers are brought from Haiti and speaking their native Creole signals to others a lack of education and job opportunities. Today I ask you, is Portuguese a killer language in Brazil when immigrant families are forced to learn Portuguese at the expense of their home language and not in addition to it?

### **Educational Practices**

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. Regrettably, these are still the most common models for educating indigenous and minority children.<sup>22</sup> The education of these children seems to counteract sound scientific evidence. Enabling access to education in the language in which the child feels most comfortable significantly increases that child's opportunities in life. It is my professional opinion that mother-tongue based bilingual or multilingual education plays a significant role in accessing the goal of education for all. Educational programs that build on learner's strengths, specially the language in which they communicate best, benefit all students. Schooling for ethnic minorities needs to be relevant and recognize the learner's knowledge and languages. A study conducted at the University of Calgary, Canada concluded that programs which incorporate the student's home language are most effective, particularly when sanctioned by the school and integrated into the regular school curriculum.<sup>23</sup>

Research across continents demonstrates that the policy of solely using the dominant language as the language for instruction of minority

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>23</sup> LEE, Wen-Shya. *The effect of ethnic identity and language learning on Chinese adolescents' self-esteem.*

children may contribute to stunting, rather than promoting, academic and cognitive growth. In a study on the issue of language education in South Africa, Kathleen Heugh concludes that bilingual education for each child within a multilingual education policy does not mean a choice between either English or an African language. She asserts that it means both and goes on to state, "It means developing the first language and adding a second language in the best possible manner to ensure the successful learning of the second language".<sup>24</sup> A conclusion that we can extend to the various situations all of us have encountered in our advocacy role. Heugh also reports on a countrywide longitudinal statistical study of final exam results of black students in South Africa that the percentage of black students who passed their exams went down every time the number of years spent studying in their mother tongue decreased.<sup>25</sup> Pay Obanya, former professor of language education and director, Institute of Education, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, states the following in a published lecture delivered in 2004:

Education on the African continent has long failed the majority of its learners. This systemic failure can be measured in high drop-out and repeater rates, low learner participation and poor academic results. A major cause of this failure has been the under-utilization of learners' home or first languages in schooling, in favor of the former colonial languages.<sup>26</sup>

Obanya skillfully supports the argument that the educational value of the first language can not be ignored, as it is the tool *par excellence* for inter-generational transmission of cultural heritage. Furthermore, he argues that even though one can point to examples of brilliant world-class persons, from Nigeria and other countries in Africa that went straight into English, French, or Portuguese from their first day of school, this argument misses the large number of individuals that such a system has failed and who prematurely stopped learning.<sup>27</sup>

In Canada, a 1996 report from the Commission on Aboriginal Peoples concludes that: "submersion strategies which neither respect the child's first language nor help them gain fluency in the second language may result in impaired fluency in both languages".<sup>28</sup> In the largest longitudinal study in the world on the education of minority students with over 210,000

<sup>24</sup> HEUGH, Kathleen. *The case against bilingual and multilingual education in South Africa*, p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> OBANYA, Pai. *Learning in, with, and from the first language*. Lecture.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON ABORIGINAL PEOPLES. *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*.

students followed, the authors demonstrated that the strongest predictor of academic achievement in the second language is the amount of formal schooling in the mother tongue. Furthermore, the length of mother tongue medium education was more important than any other factor in predicting the educational success of immigrant students. The worst results were with students in submersion programs where the students' mother tongue was not supported at all.<sup>29</sup> These and other studies confirm the positive results of additive mother tongue maintenance education, and the negative results of subtractive dominant language education.

The question then becomes, why do we continue to intentionally impose educational policies that use a dominant language as the only or main medium of education for minority children when the negative results of this policy have been clearly shown through empirical and theoretical research evidence dating as far back as the 1800's? Why can't we see through this pretense of care for the welfare of "those children?" Are the voices of advocates like us not loud enough? Not convincing enough? Do we have the moral fortitude to continue the fight? Do we believe that education is the great equalizer, and if so, how do we convince the unbeliever of the best course of action?

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 places administrators in a conundrum. 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. It requires an inner transformation. If we want to be heard 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! I strongly believe that the only way to influence organizational structures is to get involved in them. I can not influence language policies if I am not willing to work as an advocate for the rights of language minority students in the United States and pray that my words and those of others like me will find an echo in the hearts of the citizenry and their policymakers.

<sup>29</sup> THOMAS, Wayne; COLLIER, Virginia. *A National study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement.*

Is it always feasible or even possible to instruct every single child in their home language in a country where hundreds of languages are spoken by immigrant populations? Certainly not! It is however, very possible to do so for language groups that represent a sizable number of students and in languages where personnel, instructional materials, and other resources are readily available. For the other languages where mother tongue instruction is not possible, the minimum that needs to occur is to insist with parents that at home they continue to speak the mother tongue, read books in the mother tongue, and avoid all temptations of succumbing to the advice of those who will tell them that for their children to be successful, they have to stop using the mother tongue and only use the language of the dominant culture. This is a travesty as families will recognize that young children and adolescents will soon begin to lose their family and cultural identity. When children lose the home language, they begin the process of alienation and lose the intimacy with the family and the past as vividly expressed by Baez.

Before addressing the role of the Church, I would like to offer some general advice from my years of experience as an educator and an immigrant myself.

- As advocates, we must promote multilingual education and reassure local education planners that using minority languages for learning strengthens rather than undermines students' skills in the national language.
- As advocates, we need to spread the message that language rights must be recognized as a fundamental human right at the political and educational levels.
- As advocates, we must push for social justice and self-determination and create educational programs based on the learners' culture that will allow them to benefit from the multicultural and global world in which they are growing up.
- Finally, as advocates we need to influence policy-makers by creating methods of reporting success and mechanisms for monitoring long-term academic progress.

## **The Role of the Church**

Moving to a new country is a very difficult and often traumatic decision. It requires giving up everything that is familiar and venturing out to embrace the unknown, a new culture, and often times, a new language. It is, however, a decision faced daily by millions across the world. Human

mobility is much more prevalent today than in 1895 when Bishop John Baptist Scalabrini set out to accompany the people from his diocese in Northern Italy who were embarking on their journeys to Brazil and the United States. As far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bishop Scalabrini strongly supported the need for legislative and institutional instruments for the human and judicial protection of the migrants against all forms of exploitation.<sup>30</sup> I am sure that he battled linguistic genocide wherever his followers went.

The Old Testament compels us to love the immigrant amongst us. "When an alien resides with you in your land, do not oppress him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no different than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the Lord, am your God."<sup>31</sup>

In 1963 Pope John XXIII addressed the treatment of minorities in his encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*. "It is especially in keeping with the principles of justice that effective measures be taken by civil authorities to improve the lot of the citizens of an ethnic minority, particularly when that betterment concerns their language [and]...their ancestral customs".<sup>32</sup>

In 1975 Pope Paul VI issued his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* which states:

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their particular lives (...). The split between the gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times.<sup>33</sup>

The 1985 Vatican-sponsored World Congress on the Pastoral of Emigration observed in its final document, "Experience has shown that the inability of expression in the mother tongue and the elimination of religious traditions (...) greatly damage the conscience, impoverish the cultural surroundings, provoke separation and even schism, and reduce the numbers of the faithful."<sup>34</sup>

The United States Catholic bishops recently launched a national campaign called "Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope" to increase awareness about immigration issues. The campaign will challenge President

<sup>30</sup> FATHER STELIO FONGARO. *The Blessed John Baptist Scalabrini Bishop and Founder*. A portrait.

<sup>31</sup> *New American Bible*. Leviticus 19, p. 33-34.

<sup>32</sup> POPE JOHN XXIII. *Pacem in Terris*.

<sup>33</sup> POPE PAUL VI. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

<sup>34</sup> POPE JOHN PAUL II. *Address to the participants of the World Congress on the Pastoral of Emigration*.

George W. Bush and Congress to adopt not only comprehensive but compassionate immigration reform.<sup>35</sup>

The Catholic Church's position on immigrants and the treatment of immigrants goes back to biblical times. The Old Testament has abundant instructions for the Jews on how to treat foreigners. As such, none of us here today should be asking ourselves if we have a role in this phenomenon. As baptized Catholics we are called to be active participants in the building up of God's Kingdom on earth. It is, therefore, our duty to become a prophetic voice in the quest for justice for all immigrants worldwide. As a congregation, the Scalabrinians have at the core of their mission to serve migrants wherever they are found. This service must include the protection of the human right to the maintenance of the mother tongue. Failure to get involved in this fight is a sin of omission, failure to fight for the preservation of a group's cultural heritage and identity goes against the gospels' call for social justice.

## Conclusion

As I was praying and preparing for this talk, I picked up a little inspirational book that a friend gave me when we both finished our doctorate. The title of the book is "for I know the plans I have for you." The title comes from a verse in the book of the prophet Jeremiah that reads, "for I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for you to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you a future full of hope"(Jr 29: 11).

My years in educational leadership have been marked by a deep sense of sacred responsibility. The conviction that thousands of children and teachers have been entrusted to my care has been an ever present driving force in my administrative career. I have not been driven by ambition, I have not been driven by competition, I have not been driven by money. I have been driven by a desire to become all that God wanted me to be.

I have a strong sense of urgency that drives me to be passionate about my work and my fight for the educational and linguistic rights of immigrants, because if they do not understand where they come from, they will never be able to understand who they are or where they need to go. My passion for quality education for immigrant students, black and white, Nicaraguan and Haitian, rich and poor, was born of a call that came from

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<sup>35</sup> UNITED STATES CONFERENCE FOR CATHOLIC BISHOPS. *Justice for Immigrants: a journey of hope.*

the heart and from the womb. I have faced criticism and skepticism, ridicule and humiliation, but nothing has deterred me in my mission of opening the doors of justice for I have lived in my own flesh the consequences of misunderstandings and inequality.

As people actively involved in ministry to immigrants, you can decide to become actively involved in the educational future of our student population or you can choose to remain on the sideline as spectators. I doubt that I would have been asked to participate as a speaker in this important symposium if as leaders you did not feel the need to play a role in this challenging issue.

The social doctrine of the Church is very clear in its message to all Catholics. The gospel message must be applied to our present day educational reality. As such, we have duties and responsibilities toward our fellow human beings. If we are truly called to be salt of the earth and leaven for transforming our society, we must work together to bring about the necessary changes that will ensure that the educational and linguistic rights of immigrant students are upheld. If we dare to call ourselves Christians, we must be passionate about our resolve to do away with that which causes human pain and social inequalities, including unequal educational opportunities.

I challenge you today, I implore you today, to recommit to the challenge of breaking down the barriers that obstruct the creation of God's kingdom; this kingdom where the fundamental rights of immigrant youngsters, including the right to quality education, are not only respected, they are guaranteed. The church, our church, has always been prophetic. Today, we are called to become a prophetic voice in our social, educational, and political structures. We must respond to this urgent call to action. Our indifference and/or refusal to get involved in the educational struggles of immigrant students, wherever they are, is a refusal to serve the same God that we profess to follow.

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