

# Linguistic Human Rights and Education

By Alma Flor Ada

- A young Mexican man working as a carpenter in my house asked every day about my children's ability to speak Spanish. His insistence was surprising. Finally, with deep emotion he told me: "My mother died recently, unexpectedly. Now I realize I knew nothing about her. I always lived at home with my mother, and yet never really talked to her. Being the youngest of seven children, I don't remember having spoken Spanish. I always spoke English and there was always someone around who understood me. At the end, I was the one who stayed home. I know my mother loved me, she cooked for me, ironed my shirts, hugged and kissed me every day. But I never, never had a conversation with her, since she spoke only Spanish. And now I go around, begging my brothers and sisters for crumbs of my mother's memories. For me it's unbearable that I know nothing of her, of who she was, of what she thought, of what dreams or feelings she may have had. No one understands me, but my pain is unbearable. And all I can ask myself is why? Why did I not learn Spanish as a child?"
- At the end of one of my workshops, a school administrator in Southern California tells me about her German mother. A college professor, her mother was a well-educated woman who spoke English fluently. When the family came from Germany, she and her three sisters stopped using German and eventually forgot it. All the conversation at home happened in English. They never thought they had missed anything until the day the mother went into a coma. Having thought the mother would never recuperate, she and her sisters were resigned to the loss; then the mother woke. She looked intently to each one of her daughters and talked to each one extensively, before dying. All three felt that the mother's words were tremendously significant, but none of them knows what the mother said. She spoke in German – the German of their childhood – which they had totally forgotten.
- One of my friends in New York, an only daughter who always loved and admired her learned father, now has to accept that all communication is impossible between her and her father. Her father, after a lifetime in the United States, has reverted in his old age to speaking only his native Yiddish, which she heard as a child at home but never learned to speak.

- A Mexican mother in Seattle tells me in anguish and despair that she is unable to speak to her teenage son. She never realized before to what extent he did not understand Spanish, the only language she speaks, because the older daughter was always there to translate. She thought that he simply preferred to speak English, like most young people. She could not even imagine that he had completely lost the ability to speak Spanish. The balanced bilingual daughter had now successfully moved on to college. The young boy is being dismissed from high school and sent to an alternative continuation school. His mother can not find out how the boy feels or what he thinks. He meanwhile is unable to understand his mother's words of encouragement and support.
- A group of Vietnamese parents in Portland tell me about their children (through an interpreter). If they had only guessed how far their children would drift away from them, separated by the lack of a common language in which to transmit values and family history, they would have never chosen to come to the United States. "We did not want to lose our children to the State in a communist regime, and yet we have totally lost them in a declared democracy."
- A bright Mexican-American high school graduate cannot enter any of the universities of her choice because she lacks sufficient second language knowledge.
- A young Puerto Rican engineer does not get a position he worked towards. The job goes to a person with no Hispanic heritage but who did a year of study of Spanish in Seville and can communicate with South American engineers, while the Puerto Rican can not.

### **A Parent's Rights**

Do parents have the right to be able to communicate with their children in their own language? Do children have a right to preserve the language in which their parents and relatives can transmit family history, cultural values and world view? Do minority groups have the human right to preserve the most fundamental element of their culture, their own language? Are there ethical and legal implications when a school district allows, facilitates or promotes the loss of the student's home language when that home language is also an academic subject that could offer the opportunities of advanced placement, enhance admission potential to the best universities and constitute a source of income and better jobs?

All of these questions may sound unnecessary and even absurd, but they are not. As recent as 1995 a judge in Texas ruled that speaking the

mother tongue was a case of child abuse and prohibited the mother from doing so. The fact that the decision was appealed and overruled does not erase the fact that a judge would make such a ruling. The English-only movement carries on with strong economic support.

The development of human language is one of the highest achievements of human beings. Each language has taken thousands of years to develop as a comprehensive system, capable of expressing thoughts, feelings and new discoveries. Language is the tool used to describe what exists and to dream things that have never existed. It is through language that we retain the past and that each generation experiences an enriched tradition. It is through language that we engage in social action and generate projects that can shape the future.

The disappearance of any one language is a terrible loss for all of humankind. To neglect the opportunity to learn a language with which one is in contact is a terrible waste. The loss of the ability to speak one's own mother tongue is a great misfortune. Linguistic human rights need to be viewed socially and individually. They are the rights of a community to its own survival and the rights of an individual to her/his full development.

## **Linguicism**

Linguistic human rights are threatened by racist attitudes based on a belief in the superiority of some languages to others. Inherently all languages are equally effective tools of communication. The differences between languages are linked to the history of its speakers and their own needs. The apparent superiority (in number of speakers, in relationship to professional or scientific usage, etc.) of some languages over others is certainly not reflective of any linguistic feature, but of the relationship to power and wealth of the language. Any language of the world can be used for any use its speakers require, be it technological, scientific or diplomatic. The fact that some languages seem to have the prerogative to be used in those contexts does not have a linguistic base, only a power base, be it political or economic or both.

Racism is the arguments and structure created to promote and maintain inequality. It aims to validate unjust distribution of power and resources among individuals belonging to different groups. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson have coined the term *linguicism* to refer to the institutional prejudice against certain languages.

Language is a gift that provides understanding of ourselves and other people. It is a gift for communication and social action. It is a gift for learning. If one language is a gift, two or more languages are a double, or a multiple gift. There is no sane argument to defend that having the ability to speak only one language is better than having the ability to speak two. Monolingual persons have to make do with the limitations that an exclusive view of the world creates. Bilinguals have the advantage afforded by a dual

view of the world, and those who learn several languages have the added benefit of understanding the human experience from multiple view points. The number of speakers one is able to communicate with also multiplies in proportion to the number of languages one knows.

### **Language Acquisition**

Language acquisition happens in a natural way during childhood. It is a lengthy process, but children are particularly well equipped for it. When language is presented as a desirable tool for communication, children's efforts to acquire it are seen as natural. They receive positive feedback and encouragement. When there is no stigma attached to the language, children can achieve near native or native mastery in approximately six years of constant or frequent exposure. Unfortunately, when minority students perceive their language to be considered inferior to the language of power, and/or when they are made to believe that they need to choose one above the other, they frequently lose the ability to speak their own home language. The pain involved in denying a part of themselves can cause a future inability to recapture the language. The pain involved in denying a part of themselves can cause a future inability to capture the language.

One common attitude in the United States is that parents should shoulder all the responsibility of maintaining and developing the home language. A frequently used argument is that it is the school's responsibility to teach children English, but that if parents want children to speak the home language they should take care of that at home. The fallacy of this argument can be seen easily if we recognize that schools spend a major amount of time teaching English language arts to English speaking students from kindergarten to college. They do not believe that home is equipped to do this task and rather than leaving it as a parental responsibility, schools train specialized personnel and devote substantial resources to the development of curricula and the acquisition of materials for this purpose.

There is no question that the responsibilities of schools have increased noticeably in the second half of the twentieth century. The extended family has disappeared, technology has created a different kind of attention and interest in young people, and the knowledge revolution has both increased the curricular content and placed additional demands on the type of preparation needed to compete in the work force. Poverty has become more devastating, and social crime and illness have become greater threats.

Precisely for those reasons, schools cannot afford to alienate the families or prevent them from meaningful participation in the schooling process. Rather than seeing the development and maintenance of the home language as an added burden they need to see it as a priority and a source of hope for the overall success of the students. Research has proven once and again that students who maintain their home language have, in equal conditions, a better opportunity for academic success than those who lose

their home language. Adding a second, and even a third or a fourth language as the first language's development continues, is an enriching process. Additive bilingualism contributes to developing cognitive flexibility, the ability to confront and resolve new and challenging problems, as well as enriching the child's world view. The cognitive process is not interrupted. Language abilities are transferred and the new knowledge is supported by the previous knowledge.

The typical process of supplanting the first language with another frequently leads to multiple problems: loss of self-identity, internalization of blame about parents, home and community, language uncertainties and academic difficulties. Furthermore, it is a loss for the individual, community and nation. It can make true communication within the home impossible.

The gift of two languages should not be restricted to those born to families who speak a language other than the majority language. It is a benefit that all children should enjoy.

Young children are particularly well-suited to acquire languages. Linguists and child development specialists continue to marvel at the extraordinary feats young children accomplish in the process of acquiring the phonology, morphology and syntax of the language, as well as their ability to learn many thousand words in their first few years. At an early age, children spend most of their waking hours acquiring language. Language becomes a very important tool for understanding and organizing the world, for developing a view of the world, and for relating to family and friends. The innate ability of all children should be tapped to insure that all children acquire at least a second language, preferably three or four.

We may never be able to truly understand the extent of the identification of the child with the mother tongue. It is a connection that begins in the womb. As soon as the ears of the unborn child are formed, the unborn child listens to the mother's voice. Sound is carried by amniotic fluid; the mother's voice is usually the closest and most constant sound. Her voice holds the inflections and intonations of a particular language. Babies can recognize their mother's voice among many others just a few hours after birth. That voice is intrinsically connected to the particular inflections of a given language.

One of the major stimuli of language development in children is the encouragement, praise, support and success which children experience as they say their first words and sentences. They capture the parents' and caretakers' attention. They are praised, lifted and cuddled. Many times they see their needs fulfilled by being able to ask for what they need. But the language a child learns does not belong exclusively to herself or himself, it is rather the language of the parents, the family, the home. And as such, the language is a marker of identification, of belonging. When a child's language is ignored, scorned, rejected, put down, or disregarded, the strong

identification with the language causes the child, and the child's family, to feel ignored, scorned, rejected, put down or disregarded.

### **A Commitment to Language Diversity**

The messages concerning the value of bilingualism that society and schools (except in the specific cases of two-way immersion and developmental bilingual programs) are giving young people are highly detrimental. Why is participation in bilingual programs left to the parents' discretion, when other academic decisions are not? Schools determine the full extent of the curriculum and the methodology to be followed without asking individual parent consent to teach their children math, spelling, or social studies. Yet they are not willing to take the same academic responsibility when it comes to the teaching of a language. What message does this give parents and students?

No child coming to school with advanced knowledge in math or geography is told to forget that knowledge and not mention it in class. Yet children who speak a second language find themselves being asked to put it aside and ignore it. Students are not transferred out of math or reading, but moved forward to more advanced learning. Yet they are transferred out of bilingual education as if their literacy in another language was disposable, something to be forgotten. Their knowledge is then condemned to stagnate or die.

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