A Bilingual Future for the United States?

For a "nation of immigrants" it is not surprising that public education has often become the initial battlefield of emerging controversies that ultimately involve the entire society. In recent years, debates over such major issues as racial balancing; the boundaries for public expressions of religious beliefs; and initiatives to limit local taxing powers all began as "local school issues." Before long, they all mushroomed into national concerns. A new topic that is high on the local school districts in many widely separated areas of the country is the topic of bilingualism in the classroom. It too is destined to become a national topic in the form of the desirability of a bilingual society.

In its evolving context, bilingualism does not have a general reference which would pertain to a person's ability to speak and to understand any two languages. Rather, it refers to a specific language in addition to English: namely, Spanish.

Of all the non-English speaking ethnic groups who have populated the United States, it is a virtual certainty that only those of Hispanic heritage will have the legacy of contributing their language as the second lanuage of the nation. Most citizens today are, of course, quite unaware of the growing influence of Spanish in our society. As the issue does surface, it is likely that there will be increased resistance to legislative proposals to spread the teaching and understanding of Spanish. But these counter thrusts are likely to be futile in their actions and petty in their motivations.

It is true, of course, that for most non-English speaking ethnic

groups, reliance upon their own languages gradually gave way to solve reliance upon English. For most of these ethnic groups, the rate of their group assimilation was gauged by the rate at which they acquired a knowledge of English. Even the one major racial group that has had the greatest difficulty in assimilating--the black population--is today totally English-speaking. For this reason, it is understandable that many people will oppose the idea that any language other than English should be tuaght or learned. For except for some Indians on isolated reservations; or the members of some ethnic religious groups; or the residents of a few ethnic urban enclaves who continue to use their native languages for purely local and personal activities, no other language portends even the most remote possibility of becoming of national consequence. But Spanish does.

The catalytic factors that are contributing to the emerging role of Spanish in the United States are many and they are complex. But they are both real and they are substantial. They represent the culmination of long run trends and, therefore, are more subtle in their development than abrupt changes.

The Importance of Size

The most important of these factors pertains to the number of persons of Spanish heritage in our population. As of March 1978, the Spanish heritage population totaled over 12 million persons (or 5.6 of the nation's official population). This figure excludes the population of Puerto Rico and, probably, several million more illegal aliens of Spanish heritage. Between 1973 and 1978, the "officially" defined Hispanic population grew by 14 percent whereas the non-Hispanic population increased by

only 3.3 percent over the same interval. Increased migration and immigration (both legal and illegal) from Spanish speaking nations as well as extremely high fertility rates (i.e., the ratio of the number of children under age 5 divided by the number of women aged 15-49) of the Hispanic female population relative to all other racial groups makes it certain that these inordinately high growth rates will continue. If so, not only will the proportion of Hispanics continue to increase as a percent of the total population, but it is certain that they will surpass the black population as the nation's largest minority group well before the year 2000.

In addition to sheer numbers, there is a diversity of continuing sources of Spanish origin persons. The largest Spanish speaking group is of Mexican heritage. Historically, this population has been concentrated in the five southwestern states of California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado. But sizeable Mexican heritage populations have also developed outside the region. The Chicago metropolitan area, for instance, now has more persons of Mexican heritage than does the State of Colorado. Many other midwestern as well as west coast communities are rapidly developing significant Mexican American populations. Puerto Rico, of course, is also a continuing source of Spanish speaking persons. Spanish is the official language of the island commonwealth. As citizens of the United States, Puerto Ricans have the freedom to move to the mainland at any time. Over the years, many have migrated on either a temporary or permanent basis. The Puerto Rican population of the New York metropolitan area currently exceeds that of the largest city in Puerto Rico, San Juan. The Puerto Rican population of the mainland has tended to concentrate in the urban areas of the Northeast but they too

have begun to disperse. Cities like Lancaster, Pennsylvania now have sizeable Pureto Rican communities. In addition, the influx of Cubans into southern Florida has been substantial since the advent of the Castro regime. Although there were some initial federal efforts to disperse the Cuban refugees, they were largely unsuccessful. The refugees exercised their freedom to live where they pleased with a majority electing to reside in southern Florida. In addition, there are numerous other Spanish speaking countries of the Caribbean and from Central and South America as well as Spain itself which annually supply immigrants (legally and illegally) to the United States. Mexico, of course, has been the major source of Spanish speaking immigrants but there have also been substantial movements of people from other Spanish speaking nations such as the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Columbia, Panama, and Honduras. In addition to these, the Phillipine Islands of Asia have long been a source of largely Spanish speaking immigrants to the West Coast of the United States.

The point is that all of these Spanish speaking groups have established communities of significant size in geographical areas that are widely dispersed across the country. All of these groups are continuing to expand both by natural biological growth and by migration (for Puerto Ricans) and immigration (for all others). Obviously, it would be a serious mistake to regard these Spanish-speaking groups as a homogeneous group. In fact, they are culturally and racially quite diverse. But they do have one common characteristic: the Spanish language.

The Importance of Being "New"

The migration and immigration of Spanish speaking persons to the

United States is essentially a development of the Twentieth Century. Although it is true that Spanish explorations and settlements long preceded those of England in the land area that has become the continental United States, it can hardly be stated that those surviving enclaves were the basis of the present day Spanish speaking population. Fewer than 75,000 citizens of Mexico lived in the land area that became the American Southwest as a result of the treaty ending the Mexican War in 1848. Almost three-quarters of that total were concentrated at the time of the treaty in the northern region of what is today the State of New Mexico. Most of these people considered themselves to be of Spanish heritage and not persons of Mexican ancestry (Mexico had only revolted from Spain In 1821). Whereas the Mexican political boundaries did include this vast geographical region, the cultural boundary and the area of actual governmental influence of Mexico as of 1848 were no where near the borders of the ceded territory.

The presence of the Mexican American population of today (who are often referred to as Chicanos) stems overwhelmingly from the mass migration that began during the decade of 1910-1920. During that interval, Mexico engaged in a convulsive civil war. In the ensuing violence, it is estimated that a million persons lost their lives. Many more were injured. The war set forth a northward exodus of persons seeking to flee the bloodshed. Since that era, millions of Mexican citizens have legally immigrated to the United States. Millions more have come illegally after border restrictions were first imposed in 1924.

Likewise with respect to the movement of the other sources of Spanish speaking immigrants, their influx has also been of relatively recent

vintage. Puerto Rico was ceded by Spain to the United States in 1898. After U.S. Citizenship was extended to all Puerto Ricans in 1917, migration to the mainland became a feasible option that has been frequently exercised. The Cuban heritage population, as indicated earlier, began immigrating en masse with the success of Fidel Castro's social revolution in 1959.

Thus, the fundamental key to understanding the current status of the nation's Spanish speaking population is the realization that collectively they were the last major language group to enter the United States in sizeable proportions. A significant proportion of the Spanish-speaking population are, in fact, post-World War II arrivees.

The Era of Ethnicity

The importance of the relative "newness" of the Spanish-speaking group is vital to the question of bilingualism. For one of the unexpected side-effects of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's has been the rapid decline of assimilation as the ultimate aim for the ethnic and racial subgroups of our society. It may seem ironic at first thought that a movement for inclusion into society should spawn a retreat from the historic goals of the previous eras. Yet the Civil Rights movement launched an era of defensive narcissism by the nation's black population. As a mandatory first step, the development of self pride was essential. The very fact of being black had to be extolled as a virtue since it was that condition alone that had been the cause of their denial of opportunities by the white population. This development was soon emulated by other subgroups of the population who had also felt the effects of

discrimination. As a result, ethnic consciousness has become the standard of the post-Civil Rights era. Cultural assimilation per se has given way to exhaltations of ethnicity as the unifying appeal by leaders of the major ethnic groups of the population. Hence, during the earlier times when other language groups entered the nation, the goal of cultural assimilation led to pressures to abandon one's language in favor of learning English. But the accelerated growth of the Spanish speaking population has taken place in a time when subgroups do not feel such pressures. Expressions of racial and ethnic pride are not only tolerated by the broader society but actually hailed as attributes by minority group leaders. Obviously, the speaking of Spanish is one of the strongest cultural expressions of all of the diverse Spanish origin subgroups.

Practically speaking, therefore, many non-Hispanic businessmen will find it increasingly necessary to speak Spanish if they are to compete for customers among the Spanish-speaking population. In the Southwest, bilingual abilities are already common for telephone operators and medical workers. Information in public buildings, emergency signs in airplanes, and even election ballots are often written both in Spanish and English. Many employers are finding it increasingly necessary to speak Spanish if they are to communicate effectively with some of their employees. Bilingual capabilities are also becoming important to union organizers in the region.

Thus, bilingualism is not only essential for Hispanics but it is also rapidly becoming a functional necessity, as well, for non-Hispanics. The trend is not only obvious to businessmen and union organizers but it

is also rapidly becoming a fact of life for many politicians. For not only are Hispanics running for public offices but they also represent significant voter blocks that can spell the difference as to which Anglo or black politician will be a victor. Many politicians are already bilingual. It is not surprising, therefore, that Roselyn Carter has been studying and learning Spanish ever since her husband was elected President.

The Proximity of Mexico

Unlike most other ethnic groups, Spanish is the predominant language of one of the two neighboring nations to the United States. Mexico, with its 2,000 mile common border with the United States is a constant source of cultural rejuvenation for the Chicano population of the Southwest. The frequency of border crossings as well as the extensive binational trade which has developed has accentuated the importance of Spanish to all racial groups in that region. The likelihood that Mexico may become a source of oil and gas supplies to this nation will greatly increase the importance of Spanish fluency in a wide array of businesses and industries. If the United States does buy oil and gas from Mexico, it is likely that many of these "peso dollars" will be spent to purchase goods and services from the United States. Accordingly, many merchants and workers will find it increasingly necessary to speak Spanish if they are to be successful in international commercial ventures with both Mexico and the many other Spanish-speaking nations of the Western Hemisphere.

The Necessity of Bilingualism

Up until this point, the discussion has focused upon the growth of the

Spanish-speaking population and some of the factors contributing to this group's ability to retain its own language. But it is in the education area that the issue of bilingualism is currently being debated. For many years schools in the Southwest banned the use of Spanish in the classroom and, in some instances, even on the school grounds. The belief was that it was essential that the children of Spanish families learn English if they were to succeed in life. As the U.S. Civil Rights Commission has documented in a series of reports in the early 1970's, the effects of these policies were disastrous in terms of high dropout rates; poor performance; and the development of ill-will within local communities. It was for this reason that the Bilingual Education Act of 1967 was enacted. It sought to provide funding for school programs that would permit non-English speaking children to develop their latent capabilities as bilingual and bicultural Americans. At the same time, such programs enable English-speaking children also to benefit by developing similar bilingual and bicultural abilities and sensitivities. Bilingual programs have been enacted in a number of school districts but the full potential of these programs has yet to be realized due to the shortage of good bilingual teachers; an absence of general support by English speaking members of the community; and shortages of school funds for what too many people consider to be "a frill."

In many instances, the ability to teach in Spanish is the only way to reach some children. Without such instruction, the abilities of many youngsters will never be fully developed. All of the studies of legal and illegal immigrants from Mexico and the migrants from Puerto Rico indicate that a substantial proportion of these people are economically disadvantaged.

Without educational experiences that are capable of reaching their children it is unlikely that they will ever be able to improve their economic position as they become the parents of the next generation. In contrast to the past when other language groups were immigrating to the United States, educational credentials are now more important as keys to unlocking doors of opportunity than ever before. Bilingual education offers the prospect of overcoming both the credential obstacle and the real educational barriers that exist for a significant number of citizens. Bilingualism is an effective way to learn English. It is also an excellent way to enhance the general quality of education for both Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish speaking students alike.

The only real danger inherent in bilingual instruction is that it may be carried to an excess. This has happened in some predominately Hispanic communities. That is to say, in some instances teachers will take advantage of the opportunity to teach in Spanish by only speaking Spanish. This is the fear of reverse monolingualism. Teachers, after all want to convey their ideas to their students. If the students prefer to speak Spanish, there is sometimes a tendency to respond by doing so exclusively. This fear is a legitimate concern since it effectively undermines the entire rationale of bilingual instruction.

Extreme care in teacher selection as well as on-going monitoring of the instructional program should be able to control these abuses. Obtaining and retaining qualified teachers, however, is the potential Achilles Heel of such programs. It will require broad based community support; a much wider acceptance of the merits of bilingualism by the educational establishment than is presently the case; and it may even

require a significant pay differential for those teachers who can actually do it.

The efficacy of bilingual instruction in Spanish and English will no doubt continue to cause much debate among educators, parents, children, and tax payers. It will also generate jealousies by other ethnic groups who feel that their language should be substituted for Spanish. In some instances educational need may actually warrant such considerations. Such is presently the case on some Indian reservations. But despite all of these opponents, and potential roadblocks, it is likely that the momentum of national events will soon escalate the topic of English and Spanish bilingualism out of the confines of local school interests and into the arena of national necessity. Spanish and Spanish alone will be the second language of the United States.

Bilingual education deserves more attention than it is currently receiving. It is symptiomatic of a long run trend of momentous change that is occuring within American society. The causitive factors are real. The consequences must be confronted as they will soon prove themselves to be impossible to ignore.

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