



On Hispanic Education:

By Michael J. García, Ph.D.

Hispanic Adult Literacy

Hispanic adult literacy programs are a must in school districts with at-risk Hispanic students. School districts without Hispanic adult literacy programs may be indirectly contributing to the at-risk status of our Hispanic children (see my article entitled "At-Risk Hispanics," *El Renacimiento*, June 29/July 26, 1987). If schools are going to break the cycle of educational deprivation experienced by at-risk Hispanic youngsters, then the significant adults in their lives who cannot read and write must be helped, too. In order to provide a greater equal educational opportunity for at-risk Hispanic children, public schools may very well have to provide greater literacy opportunities to the Hispanic adults in the community who are limited English proficient or not native English speakers.

In addition, failure of school districts to provide Hispanic adult literacy programs hurts the Hispanic adults in that community and contributes to the overall at-risk status of the community. Hispanic adults who cannot read, for example, cannot vote intelligently, understand laws, read bus schedules, follow safety rules in the workplace, nor oftentimes protect their families from health, social, or economic dangers. A school district without a Hispanic adult literacy program is a school district that could very well be undermining the safety and welfare of its community. School districts with significant numbers of Hispanics need to establish, therefore, adult basic education programs targeted specifically to attain literacy for Hispanic adults without the basic skills to function properly in society.

School districts with significant numbers of Hispanic students enrolled in migrant education programs, bilingual education programs, or headstart programs, for example, are in a good position to recruit Hispanics for Hispanic adult literacy programs. Such literacy programs, obviously, need to work effectively with undereducated Hispanic adults and need, therefore, to make strong efforts to having the following: a) staff who are trained in literacy and adult education, b) staff who gain and keep the trust of Hispanic adults in literacy programs, c) staff that have bilingual bicultural skills, and d) opportunities for attaining literacy in both Spanish and English. Let's discuss.

Individuals working in literacy programs as paid staff of volunteers, need to have knowledge and skills on "what works" to eliminate illiteracy. Staff development and training in various methods and techniques in literacy assistance must be made available to literacy providers. Attitudes of literacy program staff need to be such that they are sensitive to use of the term "illiterate" in reference to their students and these staff need to be oriented to viewing literacy as a continuum in a person's grasp of a language, rather than as a rigid state of being. Adult literacy providers need also to have preparation in teaching adults as contrasted to teaching children; sufficient adult and continuing education background for literacy providers should therefore be stressed. Literacy programs with literacy providers not possessing all the necessary skills should have as a minimum someone in charge who

does.

Individuals working in Hispanic adult literacy programs need also to have good human interaction skills. Such skills include being a good public relations person and being able to gain and keep the trust of participants in adult literacy programs. One of the greatest problems in adult literacy programs is the dropout rate of participants, many of whom previously dropped out of school and haven't got the trust in schools that may be needed to stick with a program to its end. Undereducated Hispanic adults many times, too, are unsure of themselves or scared of being assessed as deficient or inadequate; literacy providers must therefore be sensitive to the trust factor in the populations with whom they work.

Research into literacy education for non-English adults in the U.S., and into race and cultural similarity between teacher and student, shows that similarity between the teacher's and the student's ethnicity and sociocultural background contributed to preventing dropouts and maintaining high attendance (Darkenwald, 1971, 1975). While this does not rule out that ethnically and socioculturally dissimilar service providers can have some positive effect, it does argue for Hispanic adult literacy programs to have bilingual bicultural individuals as literacy providers as often as possible. Darkenwald (1975) also found that minority group teachers, more often than white teachers, put more emphasis on subjects such as consumer education, health, coping, and heritage. White teachers who also emphasized the same were more effective in holding minority students that white teachers who did not. This research points out the importance of pre- and in-service education to sensitize teachers to the bilingual bicultural needs of undereducated Hispanic adults.

Finally, Hispanic adult literacy programs should make every effort to help Hispanics become literate in either Spanish and/or English. Spanish literacy as a first step to learn English should not be ruled out in literacy programs. Hispanic adult literacy programs that are oriented to attaining literacy only in English are not maximizing the literacy potential of Hispanics. As I noted in my articles entitled "CALP for Hispanics" (*El Renacimiento*, May 25/June 28, 1987) and "Spanish for Hispanics" (*El Renacimiento*, July 28/August 24, 1986), literacy skills in Spanish can transfer to literacy skills in English! Literacy in Spanish at the start is also cost- and time-effective because it is easier for Hispanics to attain literacy in their native language than to attain literacy in English first! Even if literacy skills did not transfer from Spanish to English, however, it would still be useful for Hispanics to be literate in Spanish than in no language at all. While they might be limited English proficient for a time, they could meanwhile read Spanish ballots, bus schedules, and health, safety and other useful information. It is in a community's public interest therefore to have Hispanics who can read and write in Spanish as well as in English. More importantly, it is in the interest of our at-risk Hispanic children.