



On Hispanic Education:

By Michael J. García, Ph.D.

Spanish for Hispanics

Bringing up Hispanic children speaking just English and not Spanish so that they can "make it in America" or "be good Americans" or to "conform to the norm" is more harmful than helpful. It is not true that Hispanics must sacrifice their language and their ethnic identity to be good Americans. Only a dictatorial government would promote such a fallacy. Hispanics can be and have been model citizens and still be bilingual! Although it is important to learn English in a country that is predominantly English-speaking, it is also very important for Hispanics in the U.S. to learn Spanish—so important that they should not learn just English at the sacrifice of Spanish. Whereas English is the linguistic glue that holds us (all U.S. citizens) together as a nation, Spanish is the glue that holds us (Hispanics) together as a language minority in the U.S. As such, we Hispanics must preserve and maintain our native language (Spanish) as well as learn our national language (English).

Our economic survival in a predominantly English-speaking country and the survival of our identity as a language minority require that Hispanics in the U.S. be bilingual. Since the need to learn English in the U.S. is self-evident, let us focus for now on why it is important for Hispanics to learn Spanish. Five reasons why Hispanics should learn Spanish are as follows: 1) Exercise of their Freedom of Speech, 2) Preservation of their culture, 3) Development of their self-image, 4) Enrichment of their lives, and 5) Transfer of linguistic skills. While the above reasons are not exhaustive of all the reasons, they are, nevertheless, some of the most important reasons.

Freedom of Speech includes the right to speak two languages even though one of those languages is not the dominant language of the country in which we live. Hispanics should exercise this right and defend this right whenever anyone tells them to speak only English. Furthermore, Hispanic students who are limited-English-proficient have the right to be instructed in Spanish until they are proficient in English (U.S. Supreme Court, 1974). Basic to the importance of learning Spanish by Hispanics, however, is the exercise of their basic Freedom of Speech guaranteed to them by the U.S. Constitution!

Language is the umbilical cord to a culture. If we sever this cord, we will sever ourselves from our mother culture. Speaking Spanish will better enable Hispanic children to know, appreciate, and preserve our sentiments, our humor, our music, our literature, our customs, our foods, and all those beautiful things that go into being "Hispanic." Those who would have us downplay, forget, reject, or eventually lose our Hispanic culture would love nothing better than to have our linguistic cord severed. Such people know that taking a child away from its ancestral mother language will have the same results as taking a child away from its real mother—he or she will forget or disrespect their ancestral heritage. This must not happen to our Hispanic children.

If our Hispanic children lose their language, they will go the way of many other U.S. citizens who have developed an

"I'm a Heinz 57" personality because they have not learned enough about their cultural and linguistic ancestry. Such Americans have a problem of self-identity or self-image. Hispanic children should learn Spanish so that they can learn more about who they are and where they came from, i.e., their heritage. In addition, a Hispanic child must never be made to feel inferior or deficient because he or she has a Spanish-speaking background. Prohibiting a child with such a background to speak or learn Spanish is the same as telling him or her that he or she is inferior, inadequate, unworthy, or somehow deficient. On the contrary, we should be praising a child from a Spanish-speaking background for whatever ability they have in speaking, reading, or writing Spanish. We should use the child's Spanish-speaking abilities to help him or her be proud of themselves and therefore strengthen their self-esteem and self-image. A healthy self-image is essential for a child to go on learning other things without being handicapped by feelings of inadequacy or inferiority.

But even if a Hispanic child did not suffer from a poor self-image, that child should learn Spanish as part of his or her enrichment needs. Children must be exposed to an environment that stimulates, activates, and motivates the desire to learn. One way of doing this for Hispanic children in particular is through speaking, reading, and writing a language other than just English. Monolingualism is boring. Speaking one language is like having a big beautiful house in which to roam around, but living in only one room. No one likes being cooped up in one room all of their lives! Learning Spanish will expand the breadth and depth of a child's mental world—this enrichment will make them a more interesting and intelligent person.

It also makes good pedagogical sense to teach Spanish to Hispanic children. This is because language learning, in whatever language, transfers to learning other languages. We can actually help Hispanic children to learn English by having them speak, read, and write Spanish better! Children from Mexico, for example, who are newly arrived in the U.S., who are monolingual Spanish, but who have been taught reading and writing skills in Spanish, have been known to outperform their U.S. born Hispanic peers. This is because these formerly Spanish monolingual students have learned the skills of spelling and reading very well in their native language and then merely transferred these skills into learning English. Another benefit of Hispanic students learning Spanish is that they can better grasp concepts in other subject areas such as math, science, and social studies before they have to deal with these concepts in an all-English-speaking learning environment. Learning these concepts in Spanish while attaining their English proficiency will keep limited-English-proficient Hispanic students from falling behind their English-speaking grade peers in school.

Any way we look at it, learning Spanish well is essential to the education of Hispanics. Educating Hispanics in the U.S. to learn English only must be avoided if we are to have effective Hispanic education.