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Fall 2002

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Eva Núñez-Méndez

Portland State University, enunez@pdx.edu

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Citation Details

Núñez-Méndez, Eva (2002) "Linguistic Diversity and Education," Faculty Focus 12 (1): 3. Portland State University, Portland OR.

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Power, Linguistic Diversity and Education

Eva Nunez-Mendez, Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures, enunez@pdx.edu

Population mobility has always been present in human history. Movement of people around the world has brought together diversity in languages, cultures, societies and religion since Roman times. This shift in demographic realities, especially nowadays in the United States, seriously challenges educators and policy-makers who feel the unity of the nation is threatened and use education as a tool to straighten it up. It is evident that language, power and pedagogy are closely intertwined to determine the educational system, which has policies and practice based on assumptions (some of them with questionable validity) about the nature of human learning and second language learning. Within a xenophobic discourse, one of this patently false assumptions claims bilingual education (specifically Spanish-English bilingual education) as the cause of underachievement at school. While this idea is broadcast across the United States, we need to remember that this country has probably the strongest legal protections (on paper) regarding equity in education of any country in the industrialized world. It also has some of the most successful bilingual programs in the world; certainly, to promote linguistic enrichment for those non-dominant groups. Why is bilingualism good for the rich but bad for the poor? This contradiction is evident with respect to policies and practices regarding the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students. We are bombarded with contradictory discourses about virtually every aspect of education: what was a dogma yesterday, today is heresy.

Diversity, bilingualism and multiculturalism are framed within social, power and educational contexts. The educator's orientation to issues of equity and power in the wider society is decisive to his commitment to educate the student rather than just teach the curriculum. His interpersonal interactions with students represent the direct determinant of bilingual student success or failure in school. Teacher education programs have consistently ignored issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity. The generic teacher has been prepared to educate white, middle-class, monolingual and monocultural students. The failure to ensure that *all* teachers are prepared to teach *all* students (non-white, non-middle-class, multilingual mainstream) represents a sociological framework that could be analyzed in terms of coercive power policies hiding behind multicultural rhetoric. It is a vicious circle. Bilingual students' outcomes could be improved with better interactions between educators and students; those interactions are conditioned by teacher education programs, which are regulated by policy-makers who see bilingualism and diversity as "the enemy within" to nationhood and a catalyst for Quebec-style separation. Political discourses need to negotiate their perception of a broader diverse society to reverse educational underachievement, instead of dooming those that use some language other than English to second-class citizenship. The widespread assumption of a skill-based English-only literacy for bilingual students as the

solution for education programs lacks foundation. Encouraging biliteracy in the classroom, integrating the native language and culture in a supportive learning environment will lead to success in academic potential. With this framework in mind, policy-makers and educators need to readjust their perspectives of power and identity to chart more equitable educational opportunities for *all* students. And also we, as educators, need to ask ourselves: why is the exception rather than the rule that teachers try to help bilingual children feel proud of their linguistic accomplishments rather than ashamed of their linguistic differences? Why are we not more conscious of the fact that our interactions with bilingual students communicate powerful messages in terms of what is accepted, respected and seen as "normal" in the classroom community? If first language loss is common among bilingual students, with its problematic personal and academic consequences, why is it that few "mainstream" teachers know anything about this issue? Why is it uncommon for educators to encourage bilingual students to maintain and develop their home languages?

Bilingualism brings up intellectual advantages when both languages are encouraged to develop. Seeing the world through two lenses—two linguistic systems, two cultural modes—to access and interpret knowledge and information offers broader perception and depth of reality, enriching the intellect. Creativity, imagination, flexibility, openness, and environment originality can be developed easier in a bilingual than in a monolingual. The uses of two or more languages give the student a better sense of metalinguistic knowledge; bilinguals are more linguistically conscious, and therefore, more analytic in language skills. The fact that they work with or between two systems makes them improve communication awareness; that is to say, bilinguals are more sensitive to the social and communicative nature of language as they code-switch according to the context. In short, responding to the question "*does bilingual education work?*", recent research shows clearly that in well-implemented programs students do not lose out in their development of academic skills in the majority language despite spending instructional time in the minority language. Furthermore, those programs that aspire to develop bilingualism and biliteracy get better outcomes than English-only or transitional bilingual programs that do not intend to develop both languages. Let us learn from our northern neighbor, providing linguistic education for its two dominant groups.

The claims that "bilingualism shuts doors" and "monolingual education opens doors" are laughable if viewed in the context of current globalization and the needs of American business for MULTILINGUAL human resources and education. That one speaks with an accent does not mean that one thinks with an accent.