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Are Parent Voices Being Lost without Translation? The Importance of Spanish in Communication between Parents and Los Angeles Public School Administrators

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ABSTRACT

*In light of the recent scandals that have surfaced in Los Angeles area schools, this article explores the importance that the Spanish language has in public schools, beyond instruction, particularly in communication with parents and the surrounding community. Although there is no doubt that most of the student body is bilingual, a considerable portion of parents are not, creating a situation in which they are left without a voice. Both anecdotal and statistical data will be presented to support the claim that having bilingual administrators will help ensure that the concerns and complaints of all parents are heard and addressed.**

KEYWORDS: *Los Angeles Unified School District, parent communication, public school, Spanish*

The topic of Spanish-English bilingualism in Los Angeles public schools is a controversial one that often brings to mind related subjects such as English only policies and Proposition 187. While the relevance of these issues is indisputable, it is important to recognize that they relate only to the use of Spanish for instruction in the classroom and completely neglect the possibility that Spanish may be necessary or even essential for other purposes, such as communication between parents and administrators. At no level is this more important than at that of the elementary school,

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when children must rely completely on adults for their protection and well-being. Often overlooked, the interaction between parents of grade school-aged children and principals is crucial for ensuring children's safety and strengthening ties with the local community, a practice that increases school attendance and helps ensure the vitality of the public school system. Administrators who speak Spanish and can help parents voice their concerns about anything from the school lunch menu to a teacher they may suspect of abuse are able to take action that benefits not just their Spanish-speaking students, but the entire school.

This article begins with a brief examination of statistical data regarding the Hispanic population of Los Angeles,¹ highlighting in particular the strong presence that Hispanics have in the public elementary schools. Although most of the students in these schools are proficient in English, their parents often are not. After commenting on this numerical data, I will provide the perspective of a Los Angeles area elementary school principal, obtained through a personal interview which focused on topics such as communication with parents and the practices of an effective administrator. Finally, I will discuss all of the data presented so far and offer some ideas regarding its relevance to the scandals that arose in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) in recent months.

The presence of the Spanish language in Los Angeles is undeniable to anyone who spends much time in the area. The validity of such a claim is supported by data obtained from the California 2010 Census Profile, which states that Latinos make up nearly half (47.7%) of the population of Los Angeles County (NALEO). Upon focusing on the age of this population, it should be noted that an article from the Los Angeles Times states that 58% of the children in the greater LA area are Hispanic (Bloomekatz 2011). While such figures are often referred to indicate the growth of this group, the young age of this population also serves to identify the services that are most heavily impacted by this particular demographic distribution.

As mandated by the California Compulsory Education law, all children between the ages of 6 and 18 must attend school. It should come as no surprise that vast numbers of children of Hispanic origin are enrolled in public schools, constituting 73% of the population of public school students in LAUSD (Kewalramani et al 2007). Although some are scattered throughout the city, the majority are concentrated in the primarily Hispanic neighborhoods of Los Angeles,² such as Huntington Park, Pico-Union, East LA and Boyle Heights. While conducting research on the

Hispanic populations of LA area elementary schools, it was found that 99 of these have a student body composed of at least 95% Hispanics, three of these being completely Hispanic.³ As far as language is concerned, it is doubtful that all of these students speak Spanish. Those that are native-born, simply by virtue of growing up in this country, tend to be, at the very least, bilingual. The same cannot be said, however, of their parents and guardians. In fact, the adults who care for these children and are their greatest advocates and protectors in issues ranging from bullying to safety from sexual predators, often lack the proficiency in English to voice their concerns to administrators. While the relevant numerical figures regarding parents' English proficiency are simply unavailable, it must be acknowledged that the number of parents who are unable to communicate in English is far greater than that of students who lack proficiency in English. A recent study by Bleakley and Chin which focuses on linguistic assimilation among Spanish speakers in the United States reports that English proficiency is correlated with age of arrival. Its authors state that,

For each year past age 9 that an immigrant from a non-English speaking country arrives, the probability of speaking any English decreases .6 of a percentage point, speaking English well decreases three percentage points and speaking English very well decreases seven percentage points (2009: 11-12).

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that, while most of the Hispanic children born in Los Angeles will become proficient in English after a short amount of time, their parents will continue to struggle to learn the language.

Although the large numbers of Hispanics residing in Los Angeles underscore the prominence of Spanish in LA, these figures alone do not explain the importance of the language in the area. A close look at the distribution of these students, however, does. Children of Hispanic origin are highly concentrated in just a few areas, the majority of which constitute Local Districts 5 and 6.⁴ Spanish matters in this situation because it is the primary and, in some cases, the only language in which parents of the overwhelming majority of nearly 100 schools can communicate. As any teacher will attest, and, especially in the case of young children, parent participation is essential to the academic success of a child and, to some extent, to the survival of the public school system. Clearly, language now becomes an issue of utmost importance.

In order to encourage and facilitate parent involvement in a child's education, it is important that administrators in these schools have basic knowledge of Spanish. Comments obtained during an interview with a principal at a mainly Hispanic school serve to explain not only the benefits of knowing Spanish, but also the disadvantages of not speaking it. Diego Rivera Elementary⁵ is located in the heart of the area known as Westlake, which is 'bounded by Figueroa Street (near the Harbor Freeway) on the east, Washington Avenue (roughly adjacent to the Santa Monica Freeway) to the south, Vermont Avenue to the west, and Temple Street (near the Hollywood Freeway) to the north' (Chinchilla et al. 1993: 54). Prior to becoming principal at Diego Rivera, Mr. Russell, a native Southern Californian, taught a bilingual class of fourth and fifth grade students. Not a native speaker of Spanish, he began learning the language in middle school and continued his studies throughout college, attending university extension classes and even traveling to Mexico. Although he struggles somewhat when a conversation strays from the topic of education, he is a more than proficient speaker and has tested at an A level, the highest level possible on the district fluency examination. Diego Rivera Elementary has a student body composed of 97.5% Hispanics.⁶ Given that most of these are immigrants or children of immigrants, Principal Russell's affirmation that most of the students entering his school are more proficient in Spanish than they are in English is to be expected. For the most part, however, these children's knowledge of English progresses rather rapidly, as evidenced by the amount of English heard throughout the campus, especially among older students. While Principal Russell rarely addresses his students in Spanish, he does use the language on a daily basis. A very concerned and involved administrator, Principal Russell maintains an open-door policy, which means that he welcomes parents to talk to him informally about any concerns they may have. Being bilingual, he is able to do so without having to find a third party to interpret. The great rapport that Principal Russell has with his students (he often greets them by name and asks them about activities they are involved in) applies to their families as well. The extended family is of great importance in the Hispanic community, and it is not uncommon for grandparents, aunts or uncles to accompany mothers, fathers and/or siblings to the school to pick up their children or attend school-sponsored events. Having knowledge of Spanish allows Principal Russell to speak with these individuals and treat them with the respect that the culture accords them.

His knowledge of Spanish also makes it possible for him to speak to the parents of preschool aged children who are interested in enrolling their sons and daughters in kindergarten or preschool.

When principals and other administrators lack knowledge of Spanish, the rather simple but important tasks of greeting families or answering the questions of prospective parents become much more challenging. It should be noted that principals of schools such as Diego Rivera, which is located in a primarily Hispanic neighborhood, are not required by the District to have any knowledge of Spanish. The lack of such a requirement is a misleading indicator of the need for administrators to speak Spanish since it belittles the role that the language has in parent communication and underestimates the importance of such interaction. In reality, not speaking Spanish greatly reduces an administrator's efficiency and, furthermore, places a considerable burden on others to act as interpreters. A case in point would be the example of Principal Russell's vice principal last year, a monolingual English speaker. Any time that this individual wanted to communicate with Spanish-speaking parents, she had to find a third party to interpret for her. This task often fell on the office staff, all of whom are bilingual, and even, on occasion, on the students. While relying on office managers and administrative assistants may seem like an adequate solution, it should be noted that recent budget cuts affecting public schools have greatly increased the ratio of students to office workers, and these particular employees are extremely overworked. They barely have the time to attend to the tasks included in their job description let alone do extra work. Assigning the task of interpreting to children can prove equally problematic. This is harmless and can even be beneficial for the student when a conversation centers on an innocuous topic like a lost sweater or an upcoming field trip.⁷ Serious problems arise, however, when the topic at hand relates to a parent's complaints about a teacher or an issue involving the child who is interpreting the conversation, such as a stealing incident in which a child's honesty and truthfulness are being questioned. In such situations the wisdom and benefits of asking children to serve as interpreters comes into question.

In these previously mentioned scenarios, parents' involvement and communication with administrators affects, for the most part, their own children only. Rarely can it be said that a parent's conversation with the principal about, say, enrolling her son in kindergarten, will have consequences for other children attending that school. There is, however, one

set of circumstances in which a parent's communication with a school administrator can have a direct impact not only on one's own child, but also on the entire student body. This occurs when the topic of a parent's conversation relates to the behavior of a teacher, especially when the parent feels that the instructor is acting in a way that is inappropriate or that endangers the children. These types of parental suspicions are taken very seriously and have the potential to expose the criminal actions of the teachers of which others may not yet be aware. The role of parents, therefore, cannot be underestimated nor discounted. They are a valuable resource in the fight against teacher abuse of students, and must be able to express their concerns to principals or other administrators.

Somewhat recently, the issue of teacher abuse of children became a source of shame for the LAUSD when two teachers at Miramonte Elementary school were arrested on suspicion of lewd conduct with students. In the many articles and news reports that followed the scandal at Miramonte Elementary, the conclusion was reached that it was silence that had allowed such atrocious behavior to go on undetected for so many years. Repeated references were made to the culture of silence that led fellow teachers and staff to turn a blind eye to the unusual interactions they witnessed. On a more literal level, however, it is important to recognize the silence of the Spanish-speaking parents who were unable to speak out in defense of their children. An online article from USA Today points out that the populations that are most vulnerable to abuse are those who are least likely to speak out (Welch and Bello 2012). These include children from single-parent households as well as those whose families often struggle with problems such as poverty and illegal immigration status. Hispanic families, which tend to meet all of the above-mentioned criteria, are, of course faced with an additional obstacle: the language barrier. As Principal Russell mentioned in his interview, maintaining open the channels of communication between parents and administrators can be extremely challenging if an administrator does not speak Spanish. Turning back to the Miramonte school scandal, it should be noted that parents specifically mentioned interactions with the previous principal, who worked at the school from 2000 to 2009. Spanish speakers reported that he was 'difficult to communicate with' and that they did not recall regular meetings with him (Watanabe and Caesar 2012). The current principal is a fluent Spanish speaker who 'began building a more cohesive school environment' by 'reach[ing] out

to parents, [and] offering them workshops on how to help their children with reading and math' (Watanabe and Caesar 2012).

It would be farfetched to claim that the abuse going on at Miramonte could have been more readily identified or even prevented had the previous principal spoken Spanish. It is clear, however, that the type of environment that they are able to create by understanding the language and culture of the students' parents and involving them in their children's school experience is one in which the actions of teachers like those at Miramonte probably would not have gone unnoticed for long. Further support for this claim can be found upon examining the ethnic profiles of the six other LAUSD schools where similar cases of sexual abuse came to light immediately following the Miramonte scandal. The Hispanic populations of four of those six schools are 90% or higher.⁸ While no definite statements can be made regarding the role that Spanish may have played in these situations, there is a strong possibility that the parents' lack of a voice due to language barriers with the administrator was one of the reasons why the topic remained ignored. There is certainly a need of further investigation on matters such as this.

NOTES

1. Although not all Hispanics are Spanish speakers, the lack of data regarding speakers of particular languages such as Náhuatl, Mixtec, Zapotec and other languages makes it necessary to rely on data for Hispanics since this is widely available and is the closest data to that regarding Spanish speakers.

2. This distribution reflects the ethnic niche model of settlement patterns for immigrants as explained in Allen and Turner 1997.

3. This was determined by examining the enrollments by ethnicity for every elementary school in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

4. Local Districts 5 and 6 have 36 and 28 schools, respectively. Local District 2 also has a larger number than other Local Districts: 16.

5. Fictitious names are being used to maintain the anonymity of the school and its administrators.

6. This figure was obtained by consulting LAUSD 2010-11 school enrollments by ethnicity (LAUSD).

7. Children who act as interpreters for their parents can also benefit from such experiences. See research by Faulstich-Orellana for further discussion of the advantages available to children who serve as language brokers.

8. Miramonte Elementary, Roosevelt High, Fremont High, Telfair Elementary and Francis Polytechnic High

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