

Monolinguals and Bilinguals: Changing Values in a Globalized World

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Washington, DC – Election year talk of immigration and the Spanish language has included views by some that former Florida Governor and Republican candidate Jeb Bush should not have spoken Spanish. He speaks it well– and proudly. His wife, Columba, was born in Mexico.

Curiously, he and Florida Senator Marco Rubio are bilingual, and Texas Senator Ted Cruz speaks it a little. Democratic vice presidential candidate Tim Kaine is also proudly bilingual in English and Spanish. They are among the approximately 50 million Spanish-speakers in the United States, the world's second largest number of Spanish-speakers – after Mexico. Spanish is ubiquitous. Anyone who uses an ATM or many other services has an option to do business in Spanish.

Despite many years of opposition to bilingualism in many quarters, it has received greater recognition lately as a valued asset in society in general, in business and in international communication. Educational Testing Service, for example, funded a study that led to a 2015 report titled “*Is There Really a Labor Market Advantage to Being Bilingual in the U.S.?*” The study was led by noted UCLA author and scholar Patricia Gándara.

Gándara also wrote a book, *The Economic Advantages of a Bilingual Workforce*, in which she argues that there is a clear workplace advantage for bilinguals. An outspoken advocate for the approximately 5.5 million English Learners in our public schools, about 80 percent of whom are Spanish speakers, Gándara is a member of the Presidential Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics.

Her book, other research, international corporate values and marketplace behaviors demonstrate conclusively that bilingualism and multilingualism are growing in importance. It is time for the United States to get with the program. Research and practice notwithstanding, many in our country harbor attitudes that are clearly hostile to bilingualism.

To be sure, attitudes toward bilingualism have ebbed and flowed throughout our history – after all, we are a nation of immigrants. For decades, American Indian children were “Americanized,” sent to schools where they were obliged to speak only English and to discard their traditional clothing, customs, language and values. Today, however, scholars are at work trying to rescue tribal languages in danger of extinction. The Navajo people require that candidates for their president be fluent in their language.

Dual Language Education of New Mexico (DLENM), ably led by David Rogers, holds an annual conference in November called *La Cosecha* (the harvest) that attracts upwards of 2,400 participants from 38 states. Clearly, DLENM believes that bilingualism is to be valued and pursued, including among New Mexico's Indian peoples.

This brings us to a related and very important subject. On March 11, 2016, the New York Times published an article entitled “The Superior Social Skills of Bilinguals.” Author Katherine Kinzler cited research by psychologists that demonstrated that bilingual children “may enjoy certain cognitive benefits, such as improved executive function – which is critical for problem solving and other mentally demanding activities.”

Kinzler highlighted a University of Chicago study published in 2015 in *Psychological Science* that maintains that “multilingual children can be better at communication than monolingual children.” An associate professor of psychology and human development at Cornell University, Kinzler also argues that recent research shows that monolingual children exposed in some fashion to family members who speak another language appreciate better the perspectives of others.

Demographic diversity in the United States is growing inexorably. In a generation, our nation, like California and many

major cities across the country today, will be “majority minority.” And many in the new majority – Hispanics, Asian Americans and others, are bilingual, or multilingual. Our growing linguistic diversity enables. Let us value, let us treasure bilingualism as a true asset for global competition, understanding and tolerance.

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CONTACT:

Frank GÃ3mez is the quadrilingual Secretary of the Board of the nonprofit, New York City-based Research Institute of United States Spanish (www.RIUSS.org). RIUSS focuses on plain language issues in health care and law enforcement-justice. He can be reached at fgomez@riuss.org.

Note: The New York Times article by Katherine Kinzler can be found at http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/opinion/sunday/the-superior-social-skills-of-bilinguals.html?_r= Information about the ETS study is at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ets2.12054/abstract>.

For information on Dual Language Education of New Mexico, visit www.dlenm.org