

Book Review

FORKED TONGUE: THE POLITICS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

By Rosalie Pedalino Porter

Written from the heart by someone who experienced firsthand the trials and rewards of adopting a new language with a new land, this is a must-read for an insider's perspective on bilingual education. Rosalie Porter, who struggled to learn English while raised in an Italian home, has dedicated her professional life to helping others master the English language. Experiences gained as bilingual teacher, then Director of Bilingual and English As a Second Language programs in Newton, Massachusetts, combined with her exhaustive study of educational theory and research, language-learning in other nations, and her analysis of the political debate, make this book a powerful weapon in the hands of people concerned about the future quality of our democratic nation.

For, as this debate illustrates, education is both that important and tied to politics. Government officials have long recognized that education has a political end: that of forming ideal citizens. Statesmen of old, said Aristotle, have "taken very great care about making citizens have a certain character." Dr. Porter reminds us anew: "In America, nationhood is based not on race or ethnic or tribal identity, but on a set of beliefs about liberty, equality, and individual rights."

Yet, politics has penetrated the practice of bilingual education in the reverse direction, harming both the students and our society. Here's just one example of the damage inflicted on Limited English Proficient students: "In 1986 the Boston School Department revealed that several hundred students (who) had been in bilingual classrooms for seven years...still had not learned enough English to be enrolled in a class taught in English."

Instead of statesmen, the dominant figures now are self-interested professional ethnics who preach the antithesis of civil rights by demanding separate but equal programs. A lone and unheard Hispanic civil rights leader of the 1970s, Alfredo Mathew, cautioned "bilingualism (may) foster a type of apartheid that will generate animosities with others." We now see this happening in the cities and schools around us.

As Dr. Porter explains: "The expectation of cultural pluralists that we may nurture concentrations of different cultures and languages and maintain them successfully in the United States is unrealistic and could only be accomplished either by government policies that most Americans would find offensive or by self-segregation of communities...Neither course seems to have wide appeal." Rather, her ideal is represented in an answer to Bill Moyers recently when he asked San Francisco-based Hispanic author Richard Rodriguez what ethnicity he considers himself. His answer was quintessentially American: "The longer I live here, I feel increasingly Chinese."

Dr. Porter's challenge is to inform lawmakers and the public what is really happening in bilingual education, in an urgent call for reform. That such public awareness will make a difference is implied by a National Institute of Education study presented in the March 1990 Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. It reported that "opposition (to bilingual programs) is greater among the well-informed, suggesting that opposition may increase further as the

issue attains greater national visibility. It also increases if bilingual education is presented as promoting linguistic and cultural maintenance among language-minority students rather than as a mechanism for teaching English."

Here's where Ms. Porter lays it on the line exceptionally well: "The basic misleading propositions come down to two. First, it is essentially dishonest to hold out the promise that development of native language skills for several years will lead to better learning of English. Second, pushing home-language-maintenance bilingual education programs as a means of making disadvantaged, limited-English students "balanced bilinguals" draws classroom time and resources away from the more urgent educational needs of these children. Fostering the notion that full bilingualism can be easily achieved at no cost to the development of English or of subject matter learning is surely a deception that effectively hardens class divisions along linguistic lines. Delaying the early learning of English while teaching subject matter in the native language clearly will inhibit the students' later development of the English language."

Despite the vigor of her presentation, it is unfortunate that Dr. Porter, in the chapter on political extremes, fails to recognize the virtual absence of extremes. While many people promote non-U.S. cultural maintenance at all costs, no one is seriously calling for a return to the "sink or swim" method of education, abandoning these children to chance or untrained teachers. Rather, the battle is between a separatist left and the middle. U.S.ENGLISH as an organization has fought consistently for the 'radical' center: that the first priority of "bilingual education" should be teaching the language of social and economic progress. The contrast in viewpoint was illustrated by a Mexican American Legal Defense Fund representative who, at a June 1989 conference of Latino elected officials, expounded on the "historical use of English in the United States as a tool of oppression."

Ms. Porter's final chapter, "Decisions For the Future," is a masterpiece of sensible program recommendations: "If you want children to learn another language really well, start them at an early age and give them lots of concentrated professional attention. But this makes sense only if you are more concerned with a child's civil right to the opportunity for self-fulfillment than with the self-interested, and thus segregative, agenda of political activists" (emphasis added). Her artful approach to this conclusion is uplifting reading.

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