

Divisive and Damaging Effects of Official Multicultural, Diversity, Multilingual Policies on American Public Life

BY ROSALIE PEDALINO PORTER, Ed.D.

The United States, since its earliest years, has been a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country with a societal ideal that generations of newcomers accepted, each new group of arrivals adapting, fitting in, and thriving, perhaps in one to two generations. This unifying ideal was challenged in the 1960s when the very notion of “assimilation” became anathema, an attack on personal identity. This essay proposes that three closely related concepts influence legislation, court rulings, and education policy: multiculturalism, diversity, and multilingualism.

Dividing us officially by race and ethnicity

The rejection of the “melting pot” metaphor bred the new imperative to remain as separate, identifiable groups, a “salad bowl.” This notion was codified in federal law, both in the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The first act proclaimed us a nation divided by law — *temporarily* — into five groups:

- Africans-Americans — an oppressed minority, the original group for whom this legislation was intended, to redress the evils of slavery
- Native Americans — also an oppressed minority, various tribes, various languages
- Hispanics — a newly invented title, creating a power bloc of new arrivals from 35 different countries who share a language (official sub-groups: Hispanic White, Hispanic Non-White)
- Asians/Pacific Islanders — a bloc representing people from a variety of countries, cultures and languages
- Whites — the prevailing majority, the dominant elites, of Western European origin

Rosalie Pedalino Porter is the director of the Institute for Research in English Acquisition and Development (READ), the editor of READ Perspectives, author of Forked Tongue: The Politics of Bilingual Education, and a ProEnglish board member.

The first four groups were granted official protected status, with preferences in hiring and in admission to higher education. The basis for this “affirmative action” was to correct for a history of discrimination against African-Americans and Native Americans. Legitimizing “positive discrimination,” might be temporarily justified, but why extend such privileged status to people who had just arrived in the U.S. from, say, Korea or Argentina or Panama? No distinction is made, for example, between upper middle class arrivals from the Dominican Republic or Costa Rica and the poor, uneducated from El Salvador or Haiti—all are equally entitled to preferential advantages.

Educational separatism

The ethno-centric, multiculturalist agenda has played a damaging part in the field of education since the 1960s. The 1968 Bilingual Education Act aimed “not to maintain separate languages but to help Mexican kids learn English.” Instead it spawned a radically new, substantially separate education for children lacking a full command of the English language, an estimated 5,000,000 in U.S. public schools today.

Massachusetts passed the first Transitional Bilingual Education Act in 1971, forcing schools to teach non-English speakers in their native language for years, delaying their learning of English. Sixteen other states soon followed suit. Massachusetts then added “bicultural” to the state regulations, specifying that the history and culture of each student’s country of origin must be incorporated into classroom lessons. At a time when the integration of African-American students was vigorously pursued, a separate program was organized for non-English speaking children, taking time away from academic content learning for “feel good” language and culture maintenance. Two-thirds of English Learners are Spanish speakers, but the rest are from 322 different language backgrounds. (2000 Census) Thirty years of this bold experiment proved bilingual programs fail to meet the goals of the legislation: students do not learn English more rapidly for regular classroom work, do not

master subject matter better when taught in their native language, and do not have higher “self-esteem” from having their family language used in the classroom. (Porter, Selected Studies 2009)

Voting and driving in two languages

Meanwhile, back at the multicultural ranch, the 1975 extension of the original Voting Rights Act created a new government obligation: voting information services and ballots must now be provided in two languages if a district includes 5 percent or more eligible voters who speak a language other than English. This federal mandate imposes an expensive obligation on local districts. Two questions arise: how is the 5 percent determined and why do this at all?

lingual ballots was not for immigrants but for resident groups that were deemed to have had inferior access to educational opportunities, i.e., Native Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Asian-Americans. This unfunded federal mandate is expensive enough, for instance, when ten counties in Florida must provide Spanish language ballots, but what of the expense to districts in California where voting materials must be provided in 4-6 other languages such, as Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese? The divisive effect of this ill-begotten initiative encourages the maintenance of separate enclaves and resistance to the mastering of the common language of the nation, and of a unifying culture.

Hard to find any humor in this situation, but the U.S. Justice Department actually decided in 2007 that



Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa) and Rosalie Pedalino Porter reply to CPAC attendees during the question and answer part of ProEnglish’s CPAC forum, “The Failure of Multiculturalism,” February 9, 2012.

The Bureau of the Census answers the first question. The Bureau asks people who say they speak another language at home to answer if they speak English “very well,” “well,” “poorly,” or “not at all.” Incredible as it may seem, all those who answer “well,” “poorly,” or “not at all” are assumed to need a voting ballot in their native language. As to the “why” part, since it has been federal law for over a century that naturalized citizens must demonstrate the ability to read, write, and speak English, who are the people for whom a bilingual ballot is necessary? This accommodation for new citizens makes no sense at all since naturalized immigrants must reside in the U.S. for five years and pass a citizenship test administered in English. The original reason for bi-

it was not enough for Boston to have voting materials printed in Mandarin, Cantonese, and English: even the *names* on the ballot must be translated. Because the writing of names in the Chinese dialects is phonetic, finding characters that closely match the sound of each syllable is complicated and there is enormous probability of error. Massachusetts Attorney General William Galvin rejected the edict from Washington. He offered evidence that the name Mitt Romney would appear as Sticky Rice or Uncooked Rice; Mayor Tom Menino’s name would appear as Imbecile or Rainbow Farmer. Galvin declared this transliteration of names would cause chaos and have no effect on reducing fraud. (Phillips, 2007)

A development related to that of bilingual ballots

is the practice of having driver's license tests translated into several languages. In 2012 thirty-one states have official English laws in place, but the law has not prevented the driver's license test in Alabama, for example, from being given in fourteen different languages. This accommodation weakens a new immigrant's impulse to master the English language, not to mention the safety issue of licensed drivers who cannot read road signs. Each state is responsible for crafting its own laws covering the issuance of driver's licenses, but advocates of multilingual driver's license tests claim that states not allowing the use of other languages would lose federal transportation funds over the language issue. This threat has no legal validity, as it has never been attempted in the nine states that offer license tests in English alone. (www.ProEnglish.org)

Revolution on the education front

From the 1980s on, research studies documented the failure of bilingual education programs. State legislatures did not take the lead in initiating changes in state laws. It was up to groups of citizens to begin demanding the removal of bilingual programs and their replacement with intensive English language teaching. The revolt started in California, the state with the largest proportion of "English Learners" in the U.S., one in every four public school students. The Question 227 referendum, "English for the Children," received 60 percent of the popular vote in the 1998 election, in spite of a lavishly financed campaign against it led by the Spanish-language TV network, Univision, and the California Teachers Union. Twenty-five years of damaging, separate "bilingual" teaching were finally nullified. California reports its students are learning English rapidly, demonstrating better performance annually on state tests of reading, writing, and math in English, since the change in the law. (Jacobs, 2008)

In Arizona, a state on the Mexican border with a high proportion of Spanish speakers, the same campaign was waged in 2000, with an even higher percentage, 62% voting in favor of "English for the Children." In both states the funding to pay for collecting signatures to put the question on the ballot, came from Ron K. Unz, a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur and political activist. Arizona, too, has reported documented academic improvements for "English Learners" since the change in the law. (Porter, 2010)

On to Massachusetts with "English for the Children," where I reluctantly agreed to co-chair the campaign. In this most liberal of all the 50 states, I feared defeat for the initiative. Once again Mr. Unz funded the

signature gathering and contributed his expertise in public relations. As in California and Arizona, both major political parties opposed our campaign, as did the teachers' unions. But here, for the first time, we received the support of a candidate for public office—Mitt Romney, who was running for governor. He declared publicly that children should be given special help to learn English from the very first day of school, to make the best use of educational opportunities in our society. Massachusetts voters, to their credit, voted 68 percent in favor of changing state law.

The new law mandating English Immersion teaching was twice challenged in California in federal court and upheld as constitutionally correct. (*Valeria G. v. State of California*) Only Alaska, Illinois, New Jersey, and Texas still retain their bilingual education mandates. Initiative, and referenda are not allowed in New Jersey and Texas, and although permitted in Illinois, the process is so difficult that it is effectively moot there. Citizen activists can succeed in overturning unjust laws, but it takes decades of hard work and adequate funding.

Damage done — beyond education

Two generations of American students have been nurtured on the multiculturalist/ diversity concept, being taught the equality of all cultures and to expect all groups to achieve at equal rates and be proportionately represented in every institution of public life. This is a fallacy, of course, but it has encouraged the rewriting of school textbooks to present a historical view in which every group is recognized for something, while the role of the important founders and historical leaders of our country (dead white males) is diminished.

Higher education has enormously enlarged this preoccupation, with the proliferation of identity politics on college campuses, victims' studies departments for all "minorities." The "diversity" agenda is not to tolerate differences of intellectual, religious, political, or artistic attitudes or beliefs, but to use skin color and ancestors' national origins as the defining elements of groups. The demand for ever-growing numbers of "under-represented" groups to be preferred — women (who actually comprise 55 percent of college students), gays, latinos, blacks, whatever. What should we think when the University of Massachusetts announces that 18 percent of its students are African-American but this group makes up less than 11 percent of Massachusetts residents? Will the University now reduce the percentage of African-American students to conform to the correct degree of "diversity?" Of course not.

Multiculturalism/diversity, the underpinnings for racial

preference legislation, have prevailed for decades. The notion of individual preference or choice is superseded by considerations of group identity. The wide-spread acceptance of civil rights for all Americans is not in question, uniformly strengthened since Martin Luther King, Jr. fought and died for its realization. His highest hope for America was respect and tolerance for all of us united “in a single garment of destiny.” (Clegg, 2005) But the “diversity” concept is diametrically opposed to King’s ideals and America’s genius as a nation. Supreme Court Justice Powell first pronounced “diversity” as a compelling interest in the 1978 *Bakke* challenge to affirmative action. The concept was reaffirmed in the 2003 *Grutter* decision, when Justice O’Connor wrote that this temporary “diversity” rationale must be extended for at least another twenty-five years. The true agenda of multiculturalism/diversity favors racial and ethnic discrimination to achieve a predetermined demographic mix while opposing merit and assimilation to American culture, a static rather than dynamic view of society.

Help may be at hand

The U.S. Supreme Court announced in February 2012 that it will hear a case involving race-conscious admissions at the University of Texas in the fall session. (*Fisher v. University of Texas*) The University argues for continuing to use race in its admissions policy because of the educational benefits of “diversity”; Ms. Fisher, who was denied admission, sued to challenge that policy. The crux of the matter is this: the high court held for the first time in the 2003 *Grutter* decision that “...racial diversity in higher education qualifies as a compelling governmental interest.” *Such a state interest is essential when a government classifies individuals by race.* (author’s emphasis) (Bravin, 2012) This statement raises the most basic question of all: *Why must we continue to be classified by race?*

Last considerations

Is it not past time that we consider some attitudinal changes in these related areas:

- Do we encourage assimilation by helping newcomers enter the larger U.S. society by learning the majority language, or do we continue to promote ethnic and linguistic separateness in the name of multiculturalism?
- Do we continue to spend public funds to enforce ethnic/racial/gender identity enhancement, or do we resolve to leave these activities to family and community initiatives?
- Do we try to preserve 322 languages through

our public schools, or focus on giving students the essential skills in English to take advantage of educational opportunities?

- Are we capable, as a country, of getting beyond artificial divisions of racial and ancestry labels, the “diversity”-inspired spoils system hurting our national unity?

Hopefully the U.S. Supreme Court, in its next session, may well take us in a positive new direction. ■

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