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Lost in Translation: Language, Identity, and the Right to a “Meaningful” Education

This paper considers the question of language, identity, and the right of linguistic minority students to a “meaningful” education. It specifically examines the role that the home language plays in maintaining the child’s ties to the family and community. It challenges the prevailing view that family background, including language, merely presents a barrier to the child’s educational and social mobility. It argues, in the alternative, that through language the young child learns the cultural beliefs and practices of parents and community, in essence what they value. While learning the majority language is essential to the child’s educational success and social integration, abandoning the home language, in the process, represents a break in those fundamental bonds, setting the child adrift on a sea of cultural uncertainty. To support this position, the paper uses research findings from the United States demonstrating a positive connection between native language use and the transmission of cultural norms, values, and traditions within the family, on the one hand, and student academic achievement, family cohesion, self esteem, and educational aspirations on the other. It further presents the author’s own findings from interviews with second-generation immigrant law students who underscore the importance of language as a critical factor in shaping their identity and as a means of building an intergenerational alliance within immigrant families. At the same time, the paper suggests that allowing immigrant children to develop the language skills they need to participate meaningfully in their communities, in turn, produces citizens who are not only more well-adjusted, but better able to cross over linguistic borders and bridge cultural gaps in a world that is becoming increasingly transnational.