

Language and Identity

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Those who miss the opportunity to speak their cultural languages feel a sense of loss, because their cultural languages tie them to their ethnic backgrounds. Some children who are raised in different countries take their parent's languages and cultures for granted, because they do not know that without them they would feel out-of- place in their own families. In "Saying 'Adios' to Spanglish," Leticia Salais chose to stop speaking Spanish because she related her Mexican culture and language to poverty and prejudice. Similarly, Richard Rodriguez explains in "Achievement of Desire" how he gave up his relationship with his family and his home culture to be successful in his career as a scholar. Like these authors, some people who choose to sacrifice their home languages and cultures for professional gain feel a deep sense of regret when they realize that their native cultures and languages connect them to their ethnic background.

Salais made a change from avoiding her home language to appreciating her bilingualism. As a child, Salais was ashamed of her culture because her Mexican heritage was the reason her family faced prejudices. Salais became more involved in the English-speaking world by being in her school's English literacy club and only by speaking Spanish to her mother, who did not speak any English. When Salais had her first son, she chose to only teach him English. As Salais matured, she regretted not teaching her first child Spanish because it prevented him from connecting with his grandparents and with his Mexican heritage. After Salais discovered the benefits of speaking two languages, she learned that bilingual people can find better jobs, because there are many of organizations that need bilingual peoples' expertise. When she had her second child, she decided to teach him Spanish as his first language, which gave him the chance

to have a bond with his grandparents, something that his older brother did not have. Salais's native culture and language reinforced her sense of identity by helping her feel connected to her roots. She also realized that her identity as both Latina and American gave her an advantage that she never thought she would have because she speaks two languages.

Salais's transformation is very important because knowing her culture and language not only provides her with better opportunities, but also it gives her a sense of identity and belonging. Being a member of a group or culture gives a person an identity. After Salais decided to learn more about her language and culture she gained a sense of identity. Yet, when she decided to learn more Spanish she had the opportunity to share more with her family especially her mother and the people in her job who only spoke Spanish.

Like Salais, Rodriguez claims that he had to separate himself from his family to pursue his education. He did not want to live the same life his parents had: living from paycheck to paycheck, not speaking English, and relying on other people to translate for them. These are reasons why he focused more on education than on family bonds and his culture. For instance, one time he asked his father for help with his homework, but his father could not help him because he did not understand English. Rodriguez was not satisfied with his dad's attempt, so he immediately snatched his notebook away and said that he would do it alone. Similarly, when family members would come by, Rodriguez would avoid them. He says, "But withheld from my mother and father was any mention of what most mattered to me: the extraordinary experience of first-learning" (178). He never talked to his parents when they asked him about his day, because Rodriguez thought that his illiterate parents would never understand his passion for education. He managed to separate the two most important things in his life, which were his family and education.

Rodriguez felt the need to become a professional so badly. He did not want to live the life like his parents, which involved working many hours and not knowing English. This can be very frustrating for some children who come from immigrant families. They want to escape poverty so badly that they miss out the positive aspects of their cultures and languages. Rodriguez focused more on his profession than his family and native culture. He completely put them to the side while he accomplished his career. In the end, he realized this mistake because he took the time to write about his experience and all the things he missed out on.

Because they associated their customs and foreign languages with the poor quality of life they lived while being raised by their parents, both Leticia Salais and Richard Rodriguez felt ashamed. Poverty gave them the sense of insecurity, and lack of opportunities. Both wanted to have a better life. In pursuit of that life, Rodriguez separated himself from his family while Salais stopped speaking her home language. Unfortunately, this success drove Rodriguez apart from his native culture and language, which gave him a sense of sorrow for losing something so valuable. Salais learned the beauty and benefits of speaking Spanish. It gave her new opportunities and reinforced her sense of identity.

Those who learn to value their native language will have new opportunities ahead of them. Those who do not learn the value of their language will regret losing a precious gift passed down by their ancestors. Language and culture give us a sense of identity and belonging. In the end, Rodriguez learned that having a career is not the only important thing in life; family and culture are as well. Salais learned from her mistake of avoiding her language and family values. She learned to appreciate the value of speaking two languages and decided to pass down this gift to her own children. Both Rodriguez's and Salais' experiences teach us not to take for granted the gift of languages.

Works Cited

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