

LA PRENSA

DE MINNESOTA

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Latinos and literacy: the power of the word



Rodrigo Sánchez Chavarría poeta y escritor latino / Photo: Sai Vang

EN HONOR DEL DÍA INTERNACIONAL DEL LIBRO INFANTIL (2 DE ABRIL), EL DÍA MUNDIAL DEL LIBRO (23 DE ABRIL) Y EL MES NACIONAL DE LA POESÍA, LA PRENSA DE MINNESOTA ECHA UN VISTAZO A LOS LATINOS Y LA ALFABETIZACIÓN, LOS RETOS Y ESTEREOTIPOS QUE ENCARAMOS Y LAS CONTRIBUCIONES QUE HACEMOS.

IN HONOR OF INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S BOOK DAY (APRIL 2), WORLD BOOK DAY (APRIL 23) AND NATIONAL POETRY MONTH, LA PRENSA DE MINNESOTA LOOKS AT LATINOS AND LITERACY, THE CHALLENGES AND STEREOTYPES WE FACE AND THE CONTRIBUTIONS WE MAKE.

LATINOS AND LITERACY

The power of the word



Franklin Curbelo at his bookstore "Acentos" / Photo: Andrés Cid

lit•er•ate: *educated, cultured, able to read and write, versed in literature or creative writing.*

That's the dictionary's definition. In real life, literacy defines not just your reading habits, but determines your access to information, to education and ultimately, to power and influence.

By Lorena Duarte

In honor of International Children's Book Day (April 2), World Book Day (April 23) and National Poetry Month, La Prensa de Minnesota

looks at Latinos and literacy, the challenges and stereotypes we face and the contributions we make.

The numbers

When it comes to Latinos and literacy, the cold hard numbers are a little hard to come by, especially locally. Nationally, however, the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) does provide some interesting figures.

NAAL examined English language literacy among adults ages 16 and older living in the United States. The assessment focused on everyday tasks American adults regularly encounter. NAAL defines literacy as "the abil-

ity to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." It assessed three literacy areas: prose, document, and quantitative in a nationally representative sample of more than 19,000 adults.

NAAL determined that 11 million adults in the U.S. are non-literate in English and that the overall literacy rates for Latinos have declined since 1992. The average score of Whites was largely unchanged from 1992 to 2003 with Blacks and Asian/Pacific Islanders making gains.

Specifically, in looking at different literacy indicators, NAAL found that Whites went up

nine points in quantitative literacy, Blacks went up six, eight and 16 points respectively in prose, document and quantitative literacy, Asian/Pacific Islander went up 16 points in prose and Latino adults were down 18 points in prose and 14 points in document literacy. And of the 11 million adults in the non-literate in English category, approximately 4 million were Latino.

Behind those numbers are a myriad of different challenges particular to the Latino community, and specifically particular to recently arrived immigrants.

The new readers

For the recently arrived, language acquisition

INFO

Hennepin County Libraries will be hosting an event on April 29th in Richfield focusing on early literacy, where they are expecting over a thousand people. Parents will be reading in Spanish, all participants will get a free book. For more information, call Tammy Pineda at 612-280-0192 or visit www.hclib.org.

The MLC Offers an Adult Literacy Hotline at 800-222-1990. Phones are answered in Spanish and English. The MLC also offers: basic math and reading classes, English language programs, GED preparation, area learning centers, family literacy programs and citizenship classes. For more information visit www.theMLC.org

Libreria Acentos is located on 400 E. Lake St. and can be reached at 612-824-6109.

Palabristas can be visited at www.palabristas.com

may not even be the first problem. Some Latino immigrants come to the U.S. with low literacy skills in their native languages, making the task of learning English even more difficult.

However, regardless of their literacy level in their native language, nearly all Latino immigrants face the enormous challenge of learning a language full of idiosyncrasies, puns, exceptions to the exceptions, etc. A few hilarious examples are the following sentences: "The bandage was wound around the wound," "The farm was used to produce produce," "The soldier decided to desert his dessert in the desert," "Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present," "I did not object to the object."

With such complexities, it is perhaps not so difficult to understand the bewildering task that immigrants face.

Franklin Curbelo, originally from Uruguay, is the owner of a Minneapolis based translating agency; he has also recently started his own Spanish language bookstore, Acentos, buying and selling new and used books. He says the biggest challenges facing Latino immigrants in their quest for literacy are, "limited school education in their native tongues, having to struggle to learn English as a second language, and not having enough time to further their education due to the demands of job schedules."

However, he says, the idea that Latinos are just not interested in learning English is false. That assertion certainly seems to hold up when looking at the number of Latinos en-

rolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) statewide.

Todd Wagner, a coordinator of Adult Basic Education at the Minnesota Department of Education says that of the 47,173 participants they had in the program year 2004-2005, 26.2% self identified as Hispanic/Latino. He says that the number of people served have steadily increased in the past few years, although the numbers for Latinos grew just a little bit faster than the population as a whole.

Astrid Liden, Adult Direct Services Manager of the Minnesota Literacy Council (MLC) concurs. She says that of their four adult literacy programs, 54% of the participants are Spanish speaking.

She says that in areas of high Latino concentration, such as South Minneapolis, there are waiting lists for their programs, but stresses that students can go to other areas, such as North or Northeast Minneapolis where there are no waiting lists.

She notes that adult learners face many challenges, particularly due to stability. She says, "it takes a long time to learn English, and sometimes our participants can't make it through the whole process. But that's why classes are designed so that students can take something useful away from every class."

If adults face such challenges, what about their children?

Reading to the kids

While adults face the chaos of learning a new language and surviving in a new system, their children must do the same, all the while learning all the other things they must to become successful adults: math, science, etc.

Tammy Pineda, Latino Outreach Liaison for Hennepin County Libraries says that there are three major challenges facing literacy in younger children.

She explains, "First, many parents are not confident in English and don't understand the system, they are not receiving information in their own language. And they rely too much on teachers and librarians to read to their kids. Second, there are conflicting reports and information regarding bilingual education between schools and libraries – what is the best way to teach English? Now we have the research that says that children who have a deep understanding of their native language learn English much better than those who don't. And third, there is a lack of understanding about Latino culture by educators and libraries who don't understand the legal and social issues that the Latino community faces in Minnesota."

Regarding the lack of understanding about Latino culture, Pineda points to a local program that was modeled after one used in New York. She says that although the program was well intentioned, the Latino population here is much different than the one in New York, "You can't apply the same pro-

gram here as you would for second and third generation Puerto Ricans."

She says that that level of sensitivity is necessary to reach students and parents and worries that local school systems and libraries are not prepared to meet the needs of these children. She points, for examples, to the Richfield Public School system, where she says 90% of incoming kindergartners are non-English speaking. She says that of those 90%, 75% of them are Spanish speaking; however, she says that there are no Spanish speaking kindergarten teachers, only aids. She asks, "How are these kids going to succeed?"

One of the biggest messages that Pineda emphasizes to parents to ensure their children's success in school, is that they must read to their children in their own language. She says that some parents, who perhaps do not know English very well, think it is better to read to their children in English, and therefore do not read to them in Spanish.

But she stresses that it is absolutely necessary to do so. If parents lack literacy skills in their own language, then there are local programs specifically geared towards them, she says.

Pineda explains that it is all about building basic concepts, instilling the culture of reading and literacy in the home, and points to research which indicates that those children who have a firm understanding of their native language and are well grounded in that in the K-3 years will eventually learn English better than those who do not have that grounding and will be at the same reading level in English as native English speakers by the 5th grade.

Cathy Grady, Early Literacy and Families (ELF) Program Director at the MLC, agrees. In their program, bilingual staff make home visits to parents of 3-5 year olds to build the family's literacy skills. They provide books, and make sure kids are ready for kindergarten. They also teach parents different activities with books and model ways for parents to provide a strong foundation in language, which includes reading to them in Spanish. She says, "It's not just English, English, English. They need a strong foundation in their native language."

She adds that the ELF program is there to build parents' confidence, and emphasizes that, "they are their kid's first teachers. We are there to give them help and support so that their kids succeed."

Their program serves about 100 families a year, and Grady estimates that about half of them are Latinos. She says that there are waiting lists for the program, but encourages those interested to call. She also says that next year, the MLC is looking to incorporate the ELF program a little more with some of their other, adult learning programs in order to reach more people. Adults already receiving classes would be offered classes in how to help their children learn.

Ultimately, both Pineda and Grady agree that

it is about giving children a strong foundation in reading, in any language, that is most important. Otherwise, Pineda says, "They are starting off with a shaky understanding in their own language, then they have to learn English and then they are always behind."

Dishwashers do read

One of the perceptions of Latinos in Minnesota (and in the U.S. generally) is that all we are are butchers, bakers and candlestick makers. That our contributions are limited only to the economic sector (and plenty of people want to foolishly deny that as well). That we are dishwashers and roofers with no time or interest in reading.

Rodrigo Sanchez Chavarria, a member of a local Latino poetry group called Palabristas, passionately disagrees.

"That's just another stereotype that's been placed on us," he says, "Just because we are hardworking people, they say that we don't make time to read. My dad came to this country to study, but he had to wash dishes, but he still read. He's the most literate man I know. He read Don Quixote and understood it the first time through. And he passed down that love to me, I didn't know that that's what he was doing, but he did. I absorbed it. And I do think that Latinos read newspapers and know what's going on. Otherwise, we would not have had 40,000 people at the immigrant march."

Sanchez also defies the perception that Latinos don't contribute to the cultural landscape, "look at all the murals in St. Paul and Minneapolis, that's public art. And what we do as poets, we contribute a lot. In the arts, in music, in the local hip-hop scene, we contribute a lot, sometimes I think even more than we should, because we have to prove ourselves. There are some people who just don't want to see it."

Curbelo agrees. He says that even though Latinos as a whole tend to have less education than their American counterparts, "they bring with them their rich traditions, culture, customs, language, and indomitable spirit that helps them to overcome hardships and challenges in this society. Latino parents strive to provide their children with educational opportunities they themselves didn't have in their countries of origin. Given the chance, Latinos will enhance their education, because they perceive it is the key to success."

Pineda says that it is important to overcome those negative perceptions, because it can ultimately affect funding for programs. In the Hennepin County Libraries, she says for example, there are now good collections of books in Spanish, because their administration has understood the importance of providing high quality materials to the Latino community.

"Latinos used to come to the libraries and find five books in Spanish about lice removal and think, 'there's nothing here for me.' But

that has changed. It's much better and it's getting better. Library administrators are putting more value into investing in other languages, the budget is bigger and that is all helping a lot," she says.

Grady too says that in her program, Latino families are "eager to learn, quick to sign up. They are so invested in their kids, and in their kids' education."

All of them call for a change in perception and more resources and funding to aid Latinos in achieving literacy.

Wagner says for example, "the whole ABE field is facing the challenge of what is still a growing population and there is still a lot of unmet need here because there are still people coming into the State."

Ultimately, higher literacy rates will mean lower drop out rates, higher education levels and more political and economic influence.

Achieving those goals will certainly take effort, funding and passion from numerous sectors.

Says Pineda, "Parents need to understand what their role is – we have to educate parents in Spanish so they can understand what they need to do. But the responsibility is not just on parents," she stresses, "Schools and libraries need to become more engaged in their communities. They need to be culturally competent. They must not repeat what has not worked. They need to get a clue about who the community is, what their part is. They need to hire staff that is bilingual and bicultural. And they need to build bridges."

To view the NAAL report, visit: <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/>. For more information on the programs mentioned in this report, see sidebar.



Rodrigo Sanchez Chavarria defies stereotypes through the written and spoken word / Photo: Sai Vang

WORDS

Why English Is Hard To Learn (anonymous)

We'll begin with box; the plural is boxes,
But the plural of ox is oxen, not oxes.
One fowl is a goose, and two are called geese,
Yet the plural of moose is never called meese.

You may find a lone mouse or a house full of mice;
But the plural of house is houses, not hice.
The plural of man is always men,
But the plural of pan is never pen.

If I speak of a foot, and you show me two feet,
And I give you a book, would a pair be a beek?
If one is a tooth and a whole set are teeth,
Why shouldn't two booths be called beeth?

If the singular's this and the plural is these,
Should the plural of kiss be ever called keese?
We speak of a brother and also of brethren,
But though we say mother, we never say methren.
Then the masculine pronouns are he, his, and him;
But imagine the feminine... she, shis, and shim!