

Some comments on the English- Spanish bilingual- bicultural education program in Zelaya Sur

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January 5-10, 1987 in Bluefields, Nicaragua, Linguists for Nicaragua, working through CIDCA (Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica) and MED (Ministerio de Educación), conducted a workshop for 70 educators from the English-Spanish bilingual-bicultural education program in Zelaya Sur. There 25,000 Nicaraguans speak a variety of English as their first language, an English-based Creole. I came to this experience from Australia where I have done work on bilingual education with Australian Aboriginal people.

At the workshop I worked with teachers preparing the first texts in Nicaraguan English to be used in the schools. We made a major innovation by writing Nicaraguan English in standard English spelling. This practice should be discussed with people in the community. If the idea gains approval it can have important consequences for the education program.

GOALS

The program aims to teach the children International English. International English can bring great benefits. In an interview reported in Wani and speaking of standard International English, Ray Hooker has said (Wani Numero 2-3 dic-mayo 1985, p. 56):

In the area of the world where we live, knowledge of English is an advantage for us in many situations. The country needs lots of speakers of English, lots of writers of English. For example, with translations most translators are people from abroad; there's definite lack of people who handle the language. Our diplomats need to know English, the people who conduct our foreign trade must know English well. Also, the most modern technical books are first published in English before being published in any other language. So to know English is definitely an advantage.

But International English differs in significant ways from Nicaraguan English. Together with Spanish, this means the children are expected to learn two language varieties which are not native to them. The Spanish-English program involves three distinct language varieties, International English, Nicaraguan English and Spanish. This must be understood for coherent planning.

What the children are being asked to do is harder than in many other bilingual programs where there are just two language varieties, one of them the one the children come to school speaking and only one unfamiliar. In this respect the English-Spanish program may be more difficult than the programs for Miskito or Sumu children.

The teachers in this program are themselves speakers of Nicaraguan English. They can approximate International English to varying degrees in careful speech and writing. Although they can help them learn some of its features, most of them cannot provide models for the children in this variety. Until they have the opportunity to improve their speaking ability, the main source of International English for the children will be from written materials. Most oral work is in Nicaraguan English, most written work in International English. This imbalance is a problem. There should be effective work on oral and literacy skills in both varieties of English.

The program faces a second problem different from any faced by the Miskito and Sumu programs, the relative status of the two varieties of English, Nicaraguan English and International English. This is a sensitive issue because the language and culture of English-speaking Nicaraguans is a principal source of identity and pride, but something which has not always had the most respected social status, even among these people themselves. In the same interview, Ray Hooker expressed the attitude

speakers of Nicaraguan English should have in learning International English. Referring to Nicaraguan English as Creole, he said:

For me the important thing is going to be that you're going to train people not to be ashamed but to be proud that they are speakers of Creole, that they are Creole. Creole is definitely not going to disappear, people are going to have both Creole and standard English and they'll know that they must learn standard English as a means to future achievement in the wider world in which they must become involved.

So great benefits will come from International English, but young people must learn it in a way which will not jeopardize their pride or their sense of identity. Primary education should enable them to realize their best capacities. They should go on to higher education, do work needed in their communities and contribute to the development of Zelaya Sur. The autonomy program makes it important for Costeño communities to have capable leaders; education should encourage young people towards this role and provide them with skills to fulfill it. They need a purposeful context for learning, and for this it is essential that their language and culture be put in a favorable light, making them proud of their heritage and confident of the abilities they bring with them from their homes.

If the teachers convey enthusiasm to the children for learning International English, all the better. But they should be just as positive towards their own variety of English. From a linguistic viewpoint, the two varieties are different; here is no relevant sense in which one is better than the other. They differ in how useful they are in various circumstances. International English gives people access to a wide range of information and contacts, and greater job possibilities; however, Nicaraguan English is very useful along the Atlantic Coast. In fact, to do good work there, people coming from the outside must gain familiarity with Nicaragua English. Both varieties are good and will be used for different purposes.

When children express themselves in their native English, they should not be made to feel they have done something wrong. Whenever they express themselves well they should be praised. If they are practicing International English, teachers can help them with corrections, but the spirit should be "This is the way to speak (or write)

when you use International English," never "This is the only way to speak (or write)."

VERNACULAR LITERACY

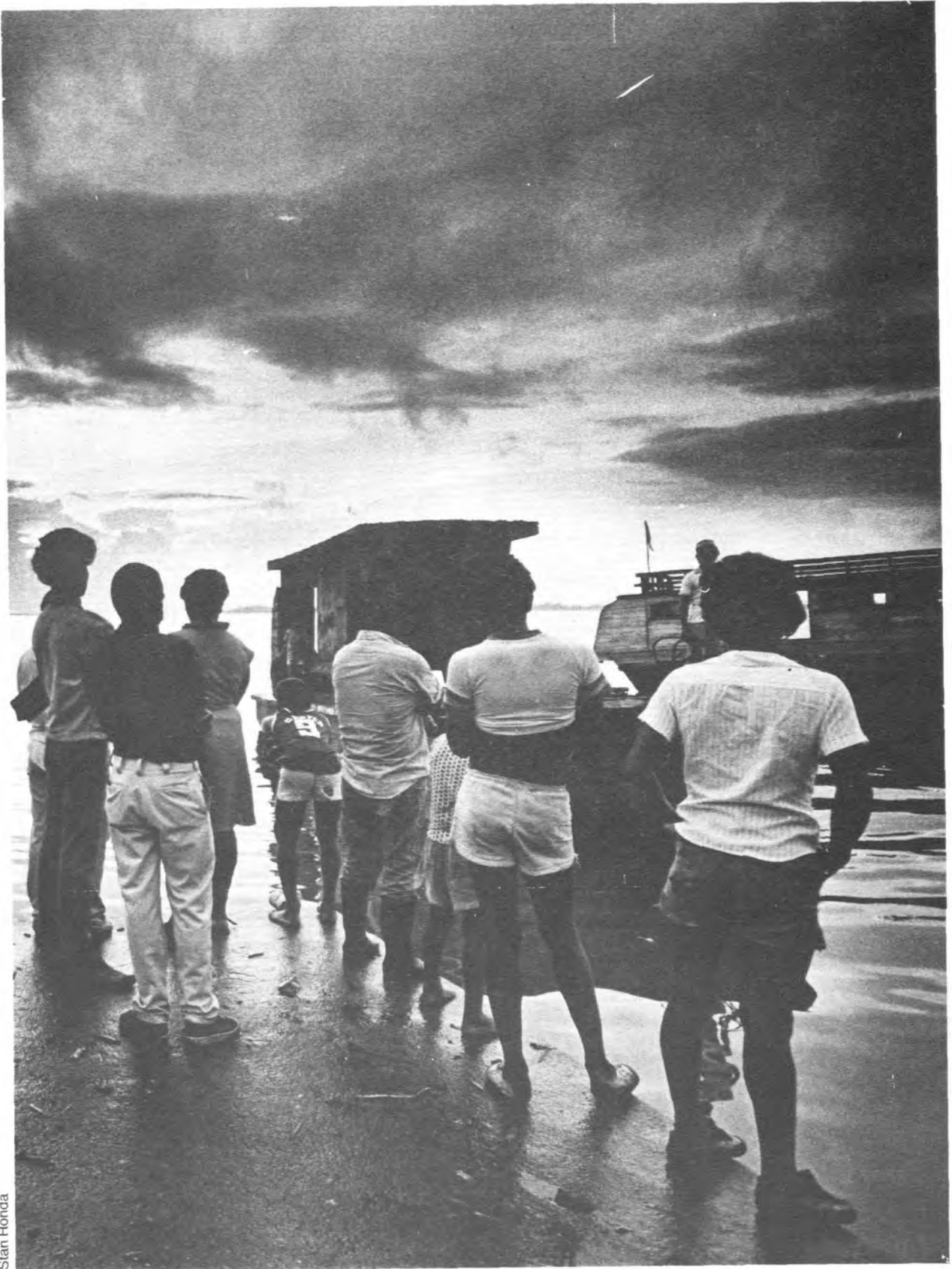
Although it expresses the culture of many Costeños, little has been written in Nicaraguan English. There is much worth writing down, and it can help community development. Literacy has value within cultural groups as well as between them: a key concept here is what Ferguson calls *vernacular literacy*, the ability to perform reading and writing behaviors in one's native language to exchange messages within a social group. If vernacular literacy can grow in Costeño communities, it will be a powerful resource for economic, political and cultural development as it has been elsewhere in Nicaragua. The national literacy campaign has contributed to one of the important themes of the Nicaraguan revolution, self-reliance.

Cook-Gumperz has said that while functional literacy is the ability not only to read, write, and calculate, it essentially concerns the ability to use these skills to generate new literate materials and new understanding (*The Social Construction of Literacy*, CUP 1986). Heath discusses the importance of people being able not just to read and comprehend, but being able to 'take from books', making the content of what they have read their own so that they can use it in new and original ways (*Ways with Words*, CUP 1983). Literacy is a part of action. People use it to shape the world around them and determine the course of their lives. It is not just a passive activity to absorb information supplied by someone else. Literacy in International English will give Nicaraguans access to a wide world of thought, but they must make it their own and go on to express new thoughts. When the audience is other Costeños, they should write in Nicaraguan English.

SPELLING

There should be more writing and publication in Nicaraguan English. How it is written is a critical question. Writing is a conventional activity for which people can make choices. Costeños can choose which spelling system they will use for writing Nicaraguan English.

Until now a practice has existed of writing Nicaraguan English in a manner that makes it appear particularly exotic. For example (Wani No. 4, julio-sept. 1986 38):



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*...me fraid we no unnastan dem ting...
we have a program foar peeple like you...*

But the same words can be written in standard English spelling:

*...me afraid we no understand them thing...
we have a program for people like you...*

There are two internationally recognized standards for spelling English, the British and the American. With a few exceptions such as **honour/honor**, and **centre/center**, they are the same. Millions of people use what is essentially the same spelling system for English even though they pronounce the words in many different ways. It facilitates communication and leaves people around the world in no doubt about how to write words. Although the spelling is sometimes inconsistent (e.g. **ph/f** and **o/oa** in **phone/foam**), it is an established system. A reform is needed, but until there is a universal revision, it is advantageous to conform to this standard.

Standard English spelling allows for variation in pronunciation, variation between speakers and variation within words. It represents elements of meaning by the same spelling, even when they pronounced differently. For example, the verb **create** and two nouns formed from it:

create creature creation

If these words were written 'phonetically', they would be harder for English speakers to read:

create creechure creashion

In all languages speakers vary their pronunciation of words in different contexts. English is no exception, yet in standard spelling words are usually spelled the same everywhere. In Nicaraguan English, however, people have written the same word in different ways in an attempt to make the representation 'phonetic'. Consider the two spellings that follow for the word **he** (Wani No. 4, julio-sept. 1986: 38):

*...h^e will attend you. Wilson ass dis an 'e ass dat
den 'e tel me Sunday 'e going visit we paan
de faam...*

The habit of pronouncing the word **he** without the **h** is common among all English speakers. Most English speakers will pronounce **he** with the **h** in "He went", but without it in "Did he go?", yet they always write it as **he**. Why do otherwise in Nicaraguan English?

Many more comments are possible. In the above passage, the word 'farm' is spelled **faam**, presumably because the speaker did not pronounce an **r**. Most English speakers in Great Britain, and fully a third of those in North America would say **faam**, yet they all write **farm**. There is no need to treat the Nicaraguan rendition of this word any differently.

We can use standard spelling for Nicaraguan English without changing its structure. The above passage would be written as follows:

*...he will attend you. Wilson ask this and he
ask that, then he tell me he going to visit we upon
the farm...*

Sometimes words have distinctive structure and in such cases speakers of Nicaraguan English should decide on the spelling. An example appears in the story **The Golden Fish**, which we transcribed in our workshop:

...every day he goes out fishing...

Here the verb form is derived by adding **-ing** to the noun **fishing**. We considered **fishinging**, but decided to spell the word as you see it above, **fishing**. Sometimes there are words unknown in International English. Another story we transcribed, **Brother Anancy and the Monkey-them**, had such a word, one we agreed to spell as **unu**:

Fellow is unu eating my plantain.

This word has a meaning similar to that of **all**. Such words are important to the distinctive character of Nicaraguan English.

There is a pedagogical motivation for this approach: reading and writing in Nicaraguan English will give people practice in the same spelling system they will use for International English. It might be easier for an illiterate person to learn to write Nicaraguan English in a spelling devised for just that language variety, but when the ultimate goal is International English, standard spelling is an investment worth the effort.

From our conversations with the teachers at the Bluefields workshop, we understand that English-speaking Costeños would greatly prefer to see their language variety in standard spelling. There is good reason why this should be so, and that will be the subject of the next part of this essay.

NICARAGUAN ENGLISH VS. MISKITU COAST CREOLE: THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE IDENTITY

Throughout this essay I have been using the term *Nicaraguan English*, not the term which

is sometimes used, *Miskito Coast Creole*. English speaking Nicaraguans can call their language variety "Creole", or they can call it "English". Both names are good. When they call it "Creole", they emphasize its distinctive character, and when they call it "English", they identify themselves as speakers of a major world language. With either name, they have a strong sense of identity with other English speakers.

Around the world, language identity is decided on social and political grounds. Consider Trudgill's discussion of a Western European example and his notions of *autonomy* and *heteronomy* (*Sociolinguistics*, Penguin 1983, pp. 15-16):

...Dutch and German are known to be two distinct languages. However, at some places along the Dutch-German frontier the dialects spoken on either side of the border are extremely similar. If we choose to say that people on one side of the border speak German and those on the other Dutch, our choice is again based on social and political rather than linguistic factors. This point is further emphasized by the fact that the ability of speakers from either side of the border to understand each other will often be greater than that of German speakers from this area to understand speakers of other German dialects from distant parts of Austria or Switzerland. Now, in attempting to decide which language someone is speaking, we could say that if two speakers cannot understand one another, then they are speaking different languages. Similarly, if they can understand each other, we could say that they are speaking dialects of the same language. Clearly, however, this would lead to some rather strange results in the case of Dutch and German, and indeed in many other cases.

The criterion of 'mutual intelligibility', and other purely linguistic criteria are, therefore, of less importance in the use of the terms language and dialect than are political and cultural factors of which the two most important are autonomy and heteronomy. We can say that Dutch and German are autonomous, since both are independent, standardized varieties of language with, as it were, a life of their own. On the other hand, the non-standard dialects of Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland are all heteronomous with respect to standard German, in spite of the fact that they may be very unlike each other and that some of them may be very like Dutch dialects. This is because speakers of these German dialects

look to German as their standard language, read and write German, and listen to German on radio and television. Speakers of dialects on the Dutch side of the border, in the same way, will read newspapers and write letters in Dutch, and any standardizing changes that occur in their dialects will take place in the direction of standard Dutch, not standard German.

On both linguistic and social grounds, Nicaraguan English can be considered a dialect of English. (Here I am using the term 'dialect' as linguists use it, meaning a variety of a language with distinct grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Everyone speaks a dialect in this sense, including the queen of England.) Adult English speakers in Bluefields can communicate quite well with people from other English-speaking countries. That satisfies the linguistic criterion, but the criterion of overriding importance is social. Nicaraguan English is *heteronomous* with respect to standard International English. Costeños regard this variety as their standard. They want their children to learn it in school. They listen to it on the radio and in movies. They shift towards it when they write and when they speak in formal registers. They make standardizing changes in that direction. It is perfectly consistent then that they would prefer the standard spelling system. It makes their language variety *look* like English.

Speakers of Nicaraguan English want to emphasize cultural autonomy from the Spanish-speaking majority around them, and their link to International English gives them some legitimacy in this regard. By contrast, there are two English-based creoles in Australia, each with 25,000 speakers. These people also want to emphasize their cultural autonomy from the majority, but in this case the majority language is English, and so this leads them to call their language varieties only by separate names, not English. As one might expect, they have adopted different spelling systems.

COMPLEMENTARY USES OF NICARAGUAN ENGLISH AND INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH IN THE SCHOOL

One should distinguish between self-expression and practice in a new language variety. From teachers I understand that in school children speak Nicaraguan English but are expected to write in only International English. In fact, for both speaking and writing it would be good to distin-

guish between different kinds of tasks and use both varieties. Self-expression is an important part of education. The children should be able to use a language variety in which they *can* express themselves. When they begin school, the children's capacity for self-expression in International English will be zero. Self-expression in Nicaraguan English should be recognized in the curriculum and encouraged in speech and in writing by the teachers at all stages. At the same time the children should learn to express themselves in International English.

One should also distinguish between writing and copying. Writing is self-expression with the alphabet. In successful writing one can convey an original message to someone else. To become literate, children must learn to write as well as copy. When they begin school, children can only copy in International English. To write they should be encouraged to use Nicaraguan English at first, then both English varieties later on. It will be a triumph when a first grader writes something other children understand. They will have communicated with the English writing system and this will encourage them for further hard work.

Reading and writing in Nicaraguan English—with standard spelling—will be complementary to the goal of reading and writing in International English. There are at least three reasons for this:

- (1) The work will be in a language variety with which the children are familiar, so that they will have just one initial task, learning how to understand the written symbols. By contrast, with International English the children have to do two things at once, learn to understand the written symbols, and learn to understand International English.
- (2) Much of the skill the children gain at literacy in their native language variety can be transferred to International English, especially if the same spelling system is used.
- (3) Nicaraguan English has things of great literary value—stories, proverbs, riddles and songs—that deserve a place in education, important cultural heritage for children who need a secure sense of identity with which to approach the acquisition of new language varieties and knowledge of a wider world.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

A strength of the English-Spanish program is that all the teachers are speakers of Nicaraguan

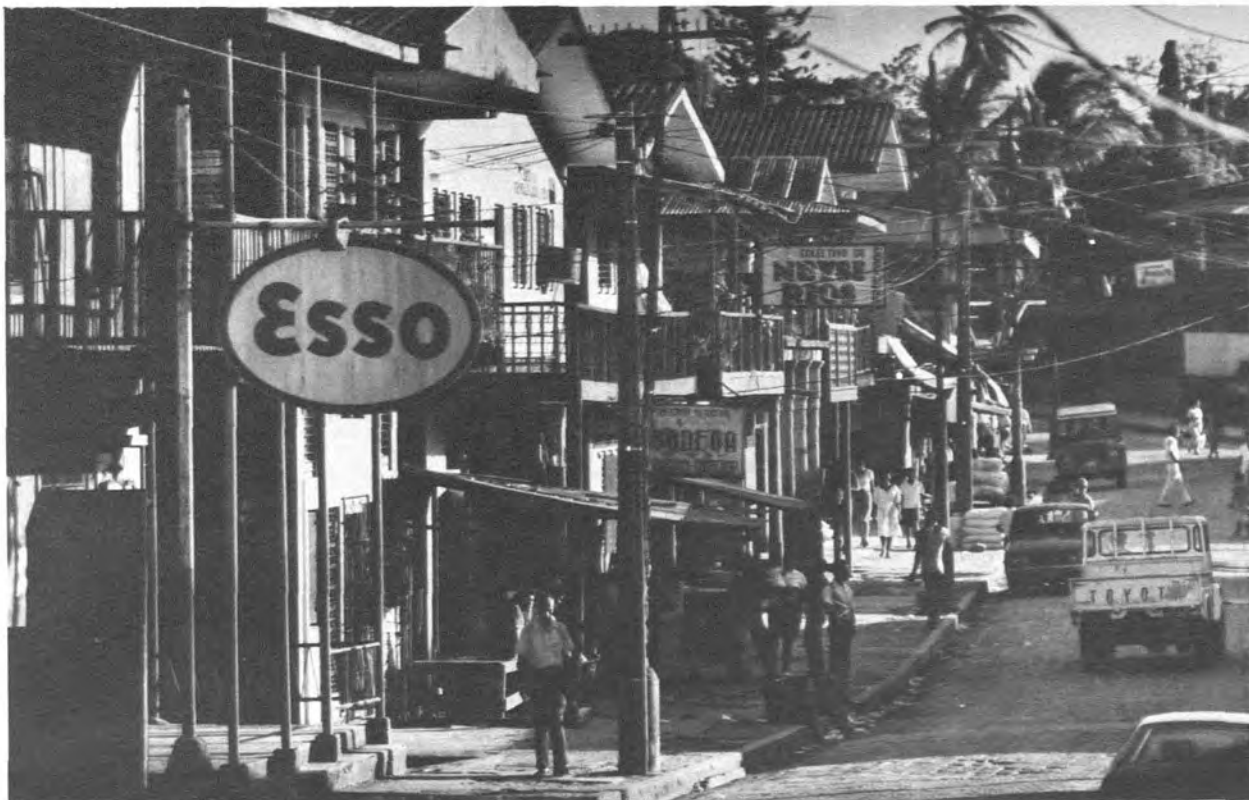
English and come from the same communities as the children. The teachers can provide good cultural input. Nevertheless, great benefits can come from inviting parents and others in the community to participate in the school. In every community, there are good story tellers, people, who can talk about the work they do or about the history of the Atlantic Coast, people who can give the children instruction in traditional skills. Learning this way will enhance the children's education and give them respect for their culture. Some of this material can be written down and shared with people in other places.

The participation will vary depending on the people who are available and their free time. It might involve special scheduling, but it can also be part of already scheduled work. People can join in *lap reading*, reading books with children sitting nearby or in their laps who can follow the words as they hear them read, and later who can do some of the reading themselves. This can be done by adults and also by older children and teenagers who are good readers. Alone, teachers cannot give such individual attention. The children gain from the personal contact: they see others besides their teachers who can read and can feel something of the pleasure it gives them.

The school schedule should be flexible enough to allow several hours a week to be with people in the community, including excursions or activities in the classroom. These events can lead to follow-up activities where the children discuss, write or draw about their experiences.

The exchange of ideas and performances can go both ways. Community members will be pleased by presentations of schoolwork by the children, or artistic events such as plays or musical performances. All this will build support for the schools in the community. When the community is invited into the school, then the school will be invited into the community. This will encourage a situation where community members take responsibility. This will encourage a situation where community members take responsibility and initiative for the children's education and not just teachers and the government.

Discussion with teachers in Bluefields in January 1987 gave us the impression that there has been relatively little participation from the community in the English-Spanish bilingual program. It may be that people are used to the situation that existed in the long period when children were educated in Spanish only and adults speaking



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minority languages couldn't be part of school activities. But now the children's community and culture can be a part of their schoolwork. What better upbringing can they have than when teachers and community members work together for their education?

CONCLUSION

If the suggestions made here have value, then the Ministry of Education should initiate discussions about them with community members. If the major points gain approval, there is important work to be done. There will be two main ingredients for success: teacher training, and an active, cooperative relationship in a community-based school program, one where there is a close relationship with adult education programs.

The Ministry should initiate workshops for teachers with a two-pronged attack. First the teachers should continue to improve their oral and literacy skills in International English; second, they should work to develop the resources they already have at their command in their own language and culture. Their social, cultural and educative roles should be a matter of community concern. Community leaders should be involved in these workshops. Activity should include:

- (1) Discussion with community members of ways to make the program truly community-based, with an examination of the teachers' role from the perspective of the community,
- (2) Practice at writing Nicaraguan English with standard spelling,
- (3) Sharing of materials in Nicaraguan English already collected,
- (4) Planning a curriculum that includes work on literacy skills in Nicaraguan English in a way that facilitates the acquisition of literacy skills in International English. The overall plan should be for *English literacy* with phase 1 focusing on self-expression in Nicaraguan English and phase 2 self-expression in both Nicaraguan English and International English.

In both phases the children should be learning the rules of the English spelling system.

The prospects for English-Spanish bilingual education on the Atlantic Coast are excellent. Already this program has gained marked improvement in school attendance, where many children are doing schoolwork for the first time in a language that they can understand. The autonomy program emphasizes self-reliance and the value of cultural diversity; these themes are in full harmony with national goals. Ethnic minorities in Nicaragua are in a fortunate situation. They have the support of their government in their quest for cultural integrity. In many other parts of the world speakers of minority languages either have no bilingual education or if they have it, do not get good support or encouragement from the majority. Advances in education have been made on the Atlantic Coast under the most difficult circumstances. The United States Government is trying to crush the revolution because of the example the Nicaraguan people are setting for the rest of the world. But many people around the world already know about what has been accomplished in Nicaragua and have gained inspiration from it. Nicaragua, we give you our support, we look forward to new successes in the future.

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