The Education of Spanish Speaking Children in Australia — a Case to Answer

Miguel R. Valiente

Lic. F.L., Dip Ed. (ZARAGOZA, SPAIN) is a Language Consultant with the Victorian Education Department.

Australians are being bombarded day after day with a series of words and expressions which fortunately — or perhaps unfortunately — are becoming more and more familiar to the ear of Mr Average: 'ethnic', 'multicultural', 'multilingual', 'social integration', 'cultural shock', 'cultural identity', 'social interaction', just to mention a few of them. Fortunately, because it indicates that it is being accepted in an increasingly natural way the fact that the migrant phenomenon is a dignified social reality which has and will continue to have a leading role in the shaping of the present and future structure of Australia politically, economically and culturally. The general, although still slow, acceptance of this basic truth represents a healthy sign and an indication that our society appears to be moving in the right direction. Unfortunately, because, as happens in many other similar linguistic instances, these words and expressions might well prove to be one of the following things:

a) meaningless utterances;

b) the means of dulcifying, only linguistically, an otherwise bitter reality, thus 'migrant' becoming 'ethnic' which, by the way, is something that I have not yet been able to understand, semantically speaking, for one wonders what third generation Australians are if they are denied the basic right to have access to some type of ethnicity;

c) the manifestation of a purely tokenistic attitude with a certain degree of political opportunism, orchestrated from the top in order to appease the growing dissatisfaction expressed amongst migrant communities as well as amongst certain groups of dedicated, concerned and open-minded Australians. This tokenism becomes more apparent when certain gestures are made by a certain political party in power whose attitude to immigrants has always been that of considering them useful or useless figures to use as a source of manpower in the unscrupulous world of industrial development.

However it is only fair to admit that a lot of things have improved in Australian attitudes towards the new settlers since the early days when the post-war immigration programme began. Tensions have eased considerably, the availability of advisory services for migrants has increased dramatically and a few people of migrant origin are starting to have access to certain working positions that in the past used to be reserved to the pure Australian breed, but there is something that we can say without any fear or doubt: there is a lot of room for improvement.

As an example of what I am saying, we have the recent and sudden explosion of the so called 'multicultural education' programmes that some progressive schools are implementing or trying to implement. Apart from a few, very few, exceptions, most schools involved in the incorporation of multicultural concepts in their curricula are failing in their attempts. Sometimes this is due to lack of support, both human and financial, at other times because of sheer ignorance of the concept of 'multiculturalism', at times for the simple reason that the implementation of certain school activities bearing the mark of multiculturalism — Italian cooking lessons, Greek dancing, etc. — has been an easy way of giving satisfaction to increasing demands from migrants and community groups.

In any case, the whole affair could appear a little incongruous to the eyes of a foreign but objective observer, for he would probably have the impression that the educational system is desperately trying to convince the world — and maybe itself — that Australia is a

multicultural society and that what is being done at present is both proof and recognition of it.

One should in fairness ask what multicultural education is, but one would probably find it extremely difficult to give a good answer. Education, like quite a few other nouns, eg. justice, liberty, democracy, equality, etc., needs no adjectives for it is an integrated concept that can take no qualification. At the most one could accept a few adjectives that indicate a certain technical differentiation, like Primary, Secondary, Tertiary, etc. Even the very commonly used expression 'poor education' merely means 'the lack of it'.

It is the right of every individual to have access to education and it is consequently the duty of every community — and ultimately of its leaders — to provide it. But what type of education, one may ask. The answer is clear: the one that will equip each individual to be a happy, well-balanced and useful member of that community. The acceptance of this definition would bring about some obvious implications:

a) each community — e.g. country, region, area, etc. — would have to take a different approach to education depending on its own peculiarities: geographical position, natural resources, historical and cultural heritage, ethnic composition of the population, diversity of languages spoken, etc. If we apply this rationale to the Australian scene, it would not be too risky to come to the conclusion that a purely Anglo-Saxon approach to education might prove to be absolutely wrong and incapable of providing the educational answers that the very peculiar nature and composition of our society demands.

b) every member of the community — this also applies to minority groups — should have the right to be given access to a type of education which would respond to his needs, according to his personality, ability and vocational interests, respecting at the same time his individuality, beliefs and ideology. In the case of Australia it is quite clear that this is far from being a reality or even becoming one, at least in the forseeable future. Here are just a few of countless examples that we can find in our educational system: a young Aboriginal child may find himself alienated within a white man's oriented school system; our education is based upon Christian moral values without any consideration of the fact that a very high percentage of our school children belong to a great variety of non-christian religions such as Buddhism or Islam; hundreds of migrant children of non-English speaking cultures find it very difficult to be accepted and respected at school unless they fully assimilate into the Australian 'way of life', thus they are obliged to choose between the only two options left to them, either to disassociate themselves from their culture and hence from their parents and relatives with the subsequent emotional and psychological traumas, or to withdraw completely from the learning situation thus becoming social rejects condemned to a future as factory hands or mere faceless statistical data among the thousands of unemployed.

c) finally, it would be absolutely essential that the community as a whole take an active role in the management of the educational system. After all, if the community is the final recipient of whatever is offered in our educational institutions, it should be up to the community to decide what it needs and wants in order for its members to achieve their personal, professional and social goals. In other words, there is an urgent need for a drastic democratisation of the educational system at all levels. This may sound extremely utopian but it is not theoretically impossible. Any obstacles to attain this ideal situation would be the result of the unwillingness to share the decision-making responsibilities on the part of the establishment for fear of losing their present self-interested control. Let us not forget that to hold control of the educational system is to hold the key that operates the social, political and economic dynamics of the country. Needless to say, in this respect and in the particular case of our country, migrants are at an enormous disadvantage compared with Australians for obvious reasons: lack of knowledge of the system, communication difficulties, fear of being rejected, lack of self-confidence and blatant rejection.

If we accept all this in principle our next task is to delineate the Australian society and its peculiarities in order to decide what type of education is needed and what kind of curricula should be envisaged and implemented in schools so that we can give an answer to the particular needs and aspirations of the members of the community. It is then that we realise that what Australia needs is not multicultural education, but rather an integrated and rational system of education which gives a fair and just response to the multicultural nature of our society. What we have to assert very emphatically is that Australia IS a multicultural society and that this important fact IS NOT recognised in the curriculum design of our schools. Multicultural education can be — and it is in fact — a totally misleading or at least a totally misunderstood concept which, even in the case of our most progressive institutions, does not go beyond an undesirable manifestation of tokenism, folklorism or paternalism used to apply a thin coat of paint to hide what very often lies underneath: aggressive assimilationism.

All this was meant to be a short

preamble to the main subject of this article: the difficulties encountered by Spanish-speaking children in Australia in general and in Australian schools in particular.

When one is confronted with the task of analysing the learning and socialisation difficulties experienced by children from a migrant background, one tends to look for the answers within the children themselves. We equate difficulties with the inadequacies and differences that migrant children have to overcome if they want to succeed. Would it not be better to try to locate and identify these inadequacies within the educational system itself? Surely it would, and this is why my introduction has become almost the dominant component of my argument.

When non-English speaking migrant children enter our school system, they are confronted with a totally new world that they must come to terms with if they want to survive. And they usually survive, but survival does not necessarily mean that a well-balanced social and emotional adjustment has taken place. And yet, we tend to measure their apparent success in terms of their ability to survive, particularly in respect of the English language.

All our Migrant Education Programmes, — an official name which means nothing but says a lot about our own social inadequacies —, are based not solely but almost exclusively on T.E.S.L. (Teaching English as a Second Language) which, by the way, enjoys — or should I say suffers from — a staffing policy dictated by politicians which is appalling in terms of the quantity and all too frequently the quality of the teachers. It is my opinion that this excessive emphasis on T.E.S.L. is a big error and its results and shortcomings are clearly visible if we visit a few of our schools with a high density migrant population.

The student's ability to learn English tends to be considered as a clear measure of his adjustment by educators who fail to realise that children, particularly those of Primary school age, have a natural facility to learn a second language very quickly, especially if they are exposed to it all the time. However, the acquisition of a satisfactory command of the English language in a relatively short period of time does not mean that the educational needs of the child have been met. If, in the process of acquiring English, the child's ability to relate to his parents and to his culture is eroded and his command of his mother tongue deteriorates to the point of the latter becoming a kind of pidgin, the sad result will be the irretrievable loss of the child's cultural identity. Even worse, such a child may find himself split between two cultures.

If we accept the idea that one of the most basic necessities of the individual is to have a cultural identity, then we must come to the conclusion that too often our school system denies our migrant children the right to enjoy one of the most important benefits that education should be offering them: that of cultural identity, thus depriving our society of a very important source of human wealth, that is, well adjusted bi-lingual Australian citizens with a rich cultural background, ready and equipped to participate in the construction of a society whose multicultural nature should be regarded not just as the normal and unavoidable result of a large scale immigration programme, but as a beautiful and desirable reality of which we should be proud.

Surely it is time that society recognised the needs of the migrant child with his problems and difficulties, fighting to survive in a foreign world, at times assimilating into it and becoming alienated from his own cultural background, struggling in order to be accepted, very often becoming more and more incapable of understanding his parents and finally renouncing their values which are threatening simply because they reveal his ethnicity, pretending that he is more Australian than his Australian peers thus treating aggressively the more recent new-comers who, unwittingly, come to remind him where he belongs, leaving school too early because he has been told that with his knowledge of English he does not have any realistic hope of successfully proceeding to tertiary education, fearing that if he returns to his own home country, as his parents very often say they will do eventually, he is going to be unable to re-adjust and will be a foreigner again in his own culture, because he is illiterate in his mother tongue.

I would like to make a brief pause here in order to answer a question that might occur to some readers: Am I not generalising too much? The answer is yes, I am generalising; and no, I am not generalising **too much.** In the present case it is absolutely necessary to generalise because we are talking about the problems and difficulties suffered and the renunciations made by **the majority** of our migrant children. The real danger exists when we adopt the opposite attitude, when we take the examples of those few who are able to succeed professionally or academically, and we try to convince ourselves that we live in the best of worlds.

Let us now come to the central issue that gave rise to this article: the problems that Spanish and Latin-American children have to face when they come into contact with our educational system.

Unlike the Spanish migration to Australia that had its peak during the '50s and '60s, Latin-Americans started to migrate to Australia in large numbers in the late '60s and early '70s. At the present moment, there are some 35,000 Latin-Americans in Australia, the

majority of whom come from Argentina, Uruguay and Chile and, in smaller numbers, from Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and from other countries of the 19 that form the Spanish speaking part of Latin-America. The two main reasons behind the present exodus — and one must remember that there are now hundreds of thousands of people from Latin-America in many other countries of Europe, especially in Spain for obvious linguistic and cultural reasons —, are political turmoil and economic strife. It is important to be aware of these facts in order to understand what I consider to be the particular circumstances under which Latin-American children have to face the difficulties of adjustment.

Mixed-up concepts about Spain and Latin-America.

In a country like Australia, where there are people of dozens of different nationalities, it is not difficult to imagine that mixed-up concepts and stereotypes will be very common. In the case of Spanish and Latin-American migrants stereotyping reaches extreme limits. This is probably helped by the fact that Spanish speaking migrants tend to be clustered in a single group: they are represented at State level by a Spanish & Latin-American Welfare Committee, they share a common programme on 3EA (Ethnic Radio), and get their information from two Spanish language weekly newspapers that offer news of common interest. Behind all this there is a more profound reason that has a name: 'Hispanidad'.

'Hispanidad' is a concept probably difficult to understand in the Anglo-Saxon sociological context. It represents the sharing of the most basic cultural values: language, religion, customs, musical influences and tastes, educational system, social attitudes, family structure and sometimes even superstitions. One may say that Cervantes, Neruda and Garcia Marquez are Spanish, Chilean and Colombian respectively, but they all belong to the same cultural world, 'Hispanidad'. Independence gave Latin-America the possibility of acquiring a political and national identity, or rather identities. Nevertheless all Latin-Americans share a common cultural identity. In some Latin-American countries this cultural identity is enriched by the contribution of the Indian cultural heritage and in Spain by the diverse non-Castillian cultures: the catalan, the galician and the basque.

This concept of 'Hispanidad' which is so obvious to Spanish speaking people may, and in fact it does create a lot of confusion in the minds of people from other cultures, in this case of Australians. In this way, the most frequently encountered stereotype of Spanish speaking people would be one formed from the following ingredients: bullfighting, flamenco dancing, Mexican 'sombreros', military 'coups', tequila, paella, ponchos, etc.

This lack of understanding affects migrant children when they realise that their **national identity** is completely unknown and that the **cultural identity** of which they are so proud is reduced to a cheap folkloristic image.

High academic aspirations.

If one makes the effort of speaking with Spanish speaking parents about the Australian system of education, one comes to the realisation that most of them are very critical of it and in general quite disillusioned when they realise that the chances of their children attaining a high academic level and even completing a University degree are very slim.

Parents complain about the teaching facilities of State schools in areas of high migrant density such as Housing Commission estates, because of the lack of specialised teachers, the absence of any Spanish language teaching in school curricula, the lack of discipline, and the lower academic level of syllabi compared with those of schools in their countries.

If we consider the fact that many of these people came to Australia precisely because they expected that in this country they would be able to offer their children the possibility of fulfilling the educational aspirations that bad economic circumstances had denied them in their countries, it is not surprising to see that:

a) a lot of people opt out of the State system and take their children to private schools even if this means serious economic stress for the family;

b) other people are considering the possibility of returning to their home country because they feel deceived and frustrated when they realise that the aspirations they had regarding their children's future do not have much hope of becoming a reality.

Let us not forget that a great proportion of Latin-American migrants are not from the working class, but belong to the skilled professional middle class. Amongst them we can find teachers, librarians, journalists, psychologists, accountants, engineers, etc. It is not surprising then that they have high academic aspirations for their children. However, this attitude is not limited to professional people, but is shared by the majority of Spanish speaking people.

In other words, the Australian educational system is not geared to meet the needs of all members of the community.

To all this we could add yet another factor that aggravates the feeling of frustration amongst Spanish speaking people, and of migrant families in general: the totally negative attitude of schools

— and the administration — in respect of the teaching of community languages.

Linguistically speaking, Australia suffers from the 'island syndrome'. Culturally and geographically isolated from the rest of the world, islanders have never been keen learners of foreign languages; their language seems to them to be quite sufficient, and if their language is English, then there is even more reason for others to learn the language of their island which, in this case, also happens to be the international language of commerce, industry and of one of the big powers, the U.S.A.

Spanish speaking families do not understand, if English is commonly studied in their countries' schools, why Spanish in turn is not taught in Australian schools. After all, Spanish speaking migrants do not come here with a sense of cultural inferiority. On the contrary, they feel **at least** culturally equal. The lack of any teaching of their language in schools forces them to establish their own community schools in their social clubs, where children are offered tuition in the evening or on Saturday mornings. This is an unnecessary physical and mental strain on the children who must renounce part of their leisure time.

We should not forget either the plight of late adolescents whose educational situation is even more uncertain than that of younger children. I am referring to those young people who arrive in Australia when they are sixteen years old and over. They have no right whatsoever to gain admission into a secondary school, for it is the privilege of principals to refuse them enrolment. Even if they are admitted to school, with present facilities and the lack of support staff, their chances of successfully reaching H.S.C. or T.O.Y. level are pretty slim. If they decide to attend Adult Migrant Education classes in order to acquire enough English to proceed to an apprenticeship course, they find that it is too late for them to apply by the time they are linguistically competent. The result is frequently the same: young people with an educational level equivalent to that of Form IV or Form V have no other alternative but to seek employment in factories as unskilled workers.

Finally, I would like to point out another problem that started to emerge about the beginning of 1978 and that has created a lot of resentment amongst the Latin-American community.

Since the Government stepped up its policy of acceptance of refugees from South-East Asia, the population of Migrant Hostels has been formed mainly from Latin-Americans and Indo-Chinese.

For obvious but unacceptable political reasons, the Government has adopted a policy regarding the provision of funds and concession of special allowances to refugees that has never been enjoyed by ordinary migrants: the granting of special benefits to older adolescents, the establishment of a Refugee Contingency Fund that provides refugee children with a lot of educational niceties such as Language Centres, summer courses, excursions, a generous provision of teachers, teacher-aides and materials, etc., that understandably arouse the jealousy and resentment of ordinary migrants who do not have access to all these special privileges.

In no way am I trying to imply that South-East Asian refugees do not have a just case and very special needs that require immediate attention. What I want to assert very clearly is that most Latin-American people come to Australia with very similar economic problems, and at times even worse ones, for many of them have had to borrow the money for the trip and they have to work very hard to be able to maintain their families while repaying their loans at the same time.

Furthermore, I would like to pose the question why it is that the Australian Government only recognises the refugee status of South-East Asians, while wilfully ignoring the fact that so many Latin-Americans have had to flee their country for fear of political persecution or even death. Is it perhaps because Latin-American political refugees are escaping right-wing dictatorships and therefore can be seen as having left-wing political convictions?

If we accept the three basic premises that I pointed out at the beginning of this article:

a) education must meet the needs of individuals;

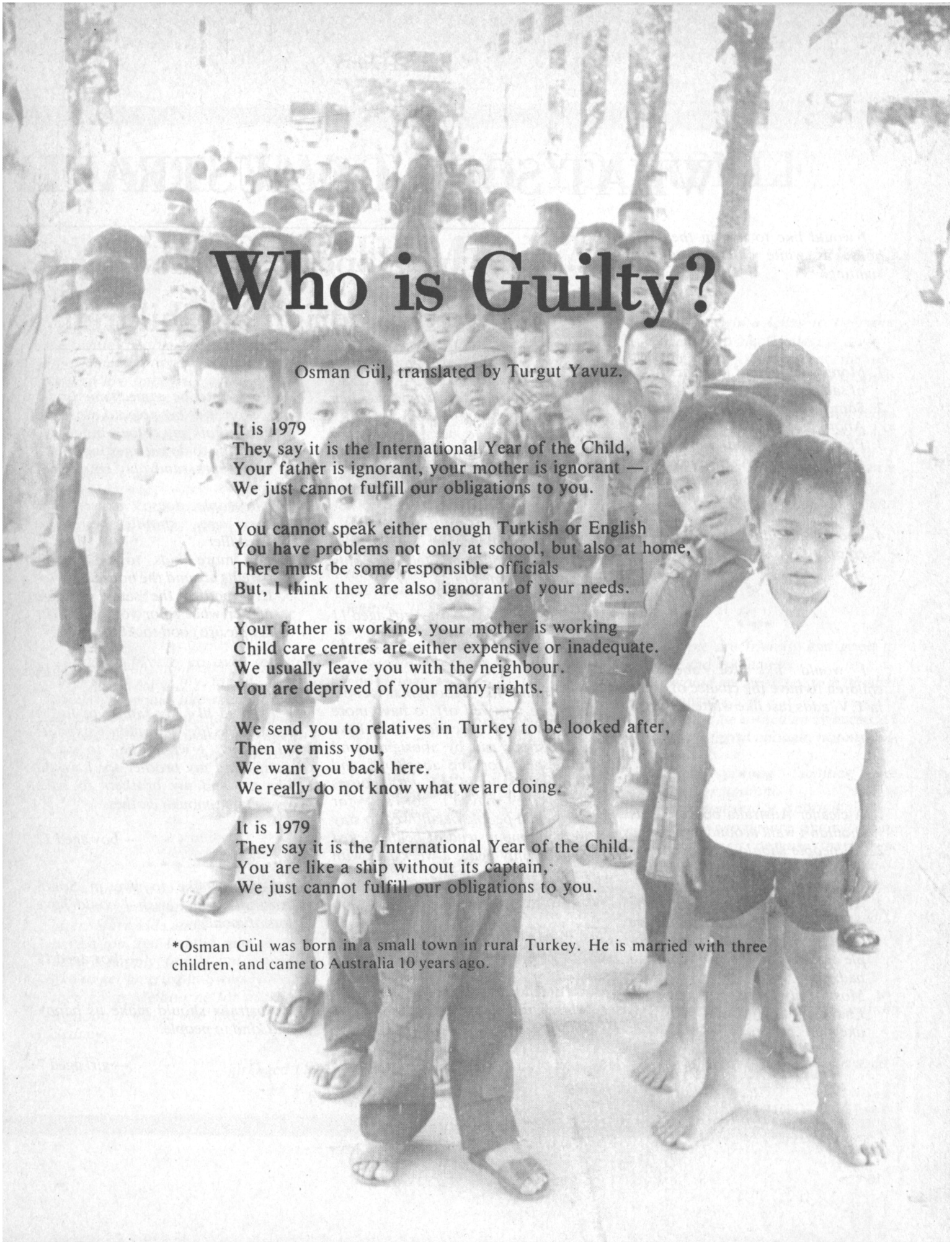
b) education must respond to the peculiarities of the community;

c) the educational system has to be democratised,

we must conclude that Australia is on the wrong path and that everybody concerned with the educational process of this country must very sincerely re-examine his stand in respect of what needs to be done in a multicultural society like Australia, in order for all members of the community to feel that they are an integral part of it, without any fear of becoming mere pawns of the political and economic power game.

The suggestions for possible alternatives have time and again been expressed and delineated; the human and financial resources are waiting to be used; our migrant children are demanding that their future be made a happy and bright one.

We have two options open to us: to change or to suffer the consequences of indifference and negligence.



Who is Guilty?

Osman Gül, translated by Turgut Yavuz.

It is 1979
They say it is the International Year of the Child,
Your father is ignorant, your mother is ignorant —
We just cannot fulfill our obligations to you.

You cannot speak either enough Turkish or English
You have problems not only at school, but also at home,
There must be some responsible officials
But, I think they are also ignorant of your needs.

Your father is working, your mother is working
Child care centres are either expensive or inadequate.
We usually leave you with the neighbour.
You are deprived of your many rights.

We send you to relatives in Turkey to be looked after,
Then we miss you,
We want you back here.
We really do not know what we are doing.

It is 1979
They say it is the International Year of the Child.
You are like a ship without its captain,
We just cannot fulfill our obligations to you.

*Osman Gül was born in a small town in rural Turkey. He is married with three children, and came to Australia 10 years ago.