Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue:
Why is it important for education?

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The term *globalization* is never far from the front pages of newspapers these days. It evokes strong positive or negative feelings depending upon whether it is being praised by the business community for opening up world markets to more extensive trade or condemned by those who associate the term with the dramatically widening gap between rich and poor nations and people.

One aspect of globalization that has important implications for educators is the increasing movement of people from one country to another. Population mobility is caused by many factors: desire for better economic conditions, the need for labour in many countries that are experiencing low birthrates, a constant flow of refugees resulting from conflicts between groups, oppression of one group by another, or ecological disasters. Economic integration within the EU also encourages the free movement of workers and their families among EU member countries. The fact that travel between countries is now fast and efficient (most of the time) obviously facilitates population mobility.

A consequence of population mobility is linguistic, cultural, 'racial', and religious diversity within schools. To illustrate, in the city of Toronto in Canada, 58% of kindergarten students come from homes where standard English is not the usual language of communication. Schools in Europe and North America have experienced this diversity for many years but it remains controversial, and educational policies and practices vary widely between countries and even within countries. Neo-fascist groups in a number of countries

promote overtly racist policies in relation to immigrant and culturally diverse communities. Other political parties and groups adopt a somewhat more enlightened orientation and search for ways to 'solve the problem' of diverse communities and their integration in schools and society. However, they still define the presence of diverse communities as a 'problem' and see few positive consequences for the host society. They worry that linguistic, cultural, 'racial' and religious diversity threaten the identity of the host society. Consequently, they promote educational policies that will make the 'problem' disappear.

Whereas neo-fascist groups advocate expulsion of immigrants or at least exclusion from the mainstream of society (e.g. in largely segregated schools and housing areas), more liberal groups advocate assimilation into the mainstream of society. However, 'assimilation' is similar in many ways to 'exclusion' insofar as both orientations are designed to make the 'problem' disappear. Under both policies, culturally diverse groups will no longer be visible or audible. Assimilationist policies in education discourage students from maintaining their mother tongues. If students retain their culture and language, then they are viewed as less capable of identifying with the mainstream culture and learning the mainstream language of the society.

While students may not be physically punished for speaking their mother tongue in the school (as they previously were in many countries), a strong message is communicated to them that if they want to be accepted by the teacher and the society, they have to renounce any allegiance to their home language and culture.

This 'solve the problem' orientation to diversity in education is still dominant in most European and North American countries. Unfortunately, it can have disastrous consequences for children and their families. It violates children's right to an appropriate education and undermines communication between children and their parents. Any credible educator will agree that schools should build on the experience and knowledge that children bring to the classroom, and instruction should also promote children's abilities and talents. Whether we do it intentionally or inadvertently, when we destroy children's language and rupture their relationship with parents and grandparents, we are contradicting the very essence of education.

The destruction of language and culture in schools is also highly counterproductive for the host society itself. In an era of globalization, a society that has access to multilingual and multicultural resources is advantaged in its ability to play an important social and economic role on the world stage. At a time when cross-cultural contact is at an all time high in human history, the identities of *all* societies are evolving. The identities of societies and ethnic groups have never been static and it is a naive illusion to believe that they can become static - fixed as monochrome and monocultural museum exhibits for

posterity - when the pace of global change is as rapid as it is today.

The challenge for educators and policy-makers is to shape the evolution of national identity in such a way that the rights of all citizens (including school children) are respected, and the cultural, linguistic, and economic resources of the nation are maximized. To squander the linguistic resources of the nation by discouraging children from developing their mother tongues is quite simply unintelligent from the point of view of national self-interest and also represents a violation of the rights of the child (see Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, for a comprehensive review of international policies and practices relating to linguistic human rights).

How can schools provide an appropriate education for culturally and linguistically diverse children? A first step is to learn what the research says about the role of language, and specifically children's mother tongues, in their educational development.

What We Know About Mother Tongue Development

The research is very clear about the importance of bilingual children's mother tongue for their overall personal and educational development. More detail on the research findings summarized below can be found in Baker (2000), Cummins (2000), and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000).

Bilingualism has positive effects on children's linguistic and educational development.

When children continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years, they gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both, and they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize reality. More than 150 research studies conducted during the past 35 years strongly support what Goethe once said: "The person who knows only one language does not truly know that language". The research suggests that bilingual children may also develop more flexibility in their thinking as a result of processing information through two different languages.

The level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development.

Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language. When parents and other caregivers (e.g. grandparents) are able to spend time with their children and tell stories or discuss issues with them in a way that develops their mother tongue vocabulary and concepts, children come to school well-prepared to learn the school language and succeed educationally. Children's knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue they have learned in the home to the school language. From the point

of view of children's development of concepts and thinking skills, the two languages are *interdependent*. Transfer across languages can be two-way: when the mother tongue is promoted in school (e.g. in a bilingual education program), the concepts, language, and literacy skills that children are learning in the majority language can transfer to the home language. In short, both languages nurture each other when the educational environment permits children access to both languages.

Mother tongue promotion in the school helps develop not only the mother tongue but also children's abilities in the majority school language.

This finding is not surprising in view of the previous findings that (a) bilingualism confers linguistic advantages on children and (b) abilities in the two languages are significantly related or interdependent. Bilingual children perform better in school when the school effectively teaches the mother tongue and, where appropriate, develops literacy in that language. By contrast, when children's mother tongue is encouraged to atrophy and its development stagnates, children's personal and conceptual foundation for learning is undermined.

Spending instructional time through a minority language in the school does not hurt children's academic development in the majority school language.

Some educators and parents are suspicious of bilingual education or mother tongue teaching programs because they worry that these programs take time away from the majority school language. For example, in a bilingual program where 50% of the time is spent teaching through children's home language and 50% through the majority school language, surely children's learning of the majority school language must suffer? One of the most strongly established findings of educational research, conducted in many countries around the world, is that well-implemented bilingual programs can promote literacy and subject matter knowledge in a minority language without any negative effects on children's development in the majority language. Within Europe, the Foyer program in Belgium which develops children's speaking and literacy abilities in three languages (their mother tongue, Dutch and French) in the primary school most clearly illustrates the benefits of bilingual and trilingual education (see Cummins, 2000, pp. 218-219).

We can understand how this happens from the research findings summarized above. When children are learning through a minority language (e.g. their home language), they are not only learning this language in a narrow sense. They are learning concepts and intellectual skills that are equally relevant to their ability to function in the majority language. Pupils who know how to tell the time in their mother tongue understand the *concept* of telling time. In order to tell time in the second language (e.g. the majority language), they do not need to re-learn the concept of telling time; they simply need to acquire new labels or 'surface structures' for an intellectual skill they have already learned. Similarly, at

more advanced stages, there is transfer across languages in academic and literacy skills such as knowing how to distinguish the main idea from the supporting details of a written passage or story, identifying cause and effect, distinguishing fact from opinion, and mapping out the sequence of events in a story or historical account.

Children's mother tongues are fragile and easily lost in the early years of school.

Many people marvel at how quickly bilingual children seem to 'pick up' conversational skills in the majority language in the early years at school (although it takes much longer for them to catch up to native speakers in academic language skills). However, educators are often much less aware about how quickly children can lose their ability to use their mother tongues, even in the home context. The extent and rapidity of language loss will vary according to the concentration of families from a particular linguistic group in the school and neighborhood. Where the mother tongue is used extensively in the community outside the school, then language loss among young children will be less. However, where language communities are not concentrated or 'ghettoized' in particular neighborhoods, children can lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue within 2-3 years of starting school. They may retain receptive (understanding) skills in the language but they will use the majority language in speaking with their peers and siblings and in responding to their parents. By the time children become adolescents, the linguistic gap between parents and children has become an emotional chasm. Pupils frequently become alienated from the cultures of both home and school with predictable results.

To reduce the extent of language loss, parents should establish a strong home language policy and provide ample opportunities for children to expand the functions for which they use the mother tongue (e.g. reading and writing) and the contexts in which they can use it (e.g. community mother tongue day care or play groups, visits to the country of origin, etc.).

Teachers can also help children retain and develop their mother tongues by communicating to them strong affirmative messages about the value of knowing additional languages and the fact that bilingualism is an important linguistic and intellectual accomplishment. For example, they can initiate classroom projects focused on developing children's language awareness (e.g. surveying and celebrating the multilingualism of students in the class) and the sharing of languages in the class (e.g. every day a child brings one significant word from the home language into class and the entire class, including the teacher, learns and discusses this word.

To reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child.

When the message, implicit or explicit, communicated to children in the school is "Leave your language and culture at the schoolhouse door", children also leave a central part of who they are - their identities - at the school-

house door. When they feel this rejection, they are much less likely to participate actively and confidently in classroom instruction. It is not enough for teachers to be passively accepting of children's linguistic and cultural diversity in the school. They must be *proactive* and take the initiative to affirm children's linguistic identity by having posters in the various languages of the community around the school, encouraging children to write in their mother tongues in addition to the majority school language (e.g. write and publish pupil-authored bilingual books), and generally create an instructional climate where the linguistic and cultural experience of the whole child is actively accepted and validated.

Shaping a Dynamic Identity for the Future

When educators within a school develop language policies and organize their curriculum and instruction in such a way that the linguistic and cultural capital of children and communities is strongly affirmed in all the interactions of the school, then the school is rejecting the negative attitudes and ignorance about diversity that exist in the wider society. In challenging coercive relations of power, the school is holding a mirror up to bilingual children of who they are and who they can become within this society. Multilingual children have an enormous contribution to make to their societies, and to the international global community, if only we as educators put into practice what we believe is true for all children:

- children's cultural and linguistic experience in the home is the foundation of their future learning and we must build on that foundation rather than undermine it;
- every child has the right to have their talents recognized and promoted within the school.

In short, the cultural, linguistic and intellectual capital of our societies will increase dramatically when we stop seeing culturally and linguistically diverse children as 'a problem to be solved' and instead open our eyes to the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources they bring from their homes to our schools and societies.

References

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