

Learning to read in three languages at the age of 5: A very common practice in Britain today

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A large number of British children learn to read in more than one language at the same time as they learn to read in English, according to a Watford-based Ph.D. study, and for the children this results in social, emotional and cognitive advantages.

The six-year study, based on two Watford primary schools, focused on children from linguistic minorities, mainly on Pahari and Urdu speaking children of Pakistani background. The study, which followed children's progress from the age of 5 years to the age of 7, found that all the Pakistani children in the study routinely learnt to read in English, in Urdu (the national language of Pakistan) and in classical Arabic (the language of the Qur'an). The literacy learning of Urdu and Arabic was organised by the Pakistani community itself in a range of community language schools.

For the children, learning to read simultaneously in three different languages resulted in advantages. They were very aware of their own learning process and what they had to do as a learner in each school, which potentially provided them with innovative new ways of entering the world of English literacy. They were also able to discuss their literacy learning in highly analytical and complex terms. At the age of 5 they examined, translated and reflected on words in different languages, and how they are written in different scripts, and contrasted sound systems in different languages, for example how English has only one 'd' sound but Urdu has two.

Leena Robertson expands on her Ph.D. study: "The study corresponds with other similar studies that have explored the benefits of bilingualism, and those that have shown how many linguistic minorities in Britain have established community language schools. In these schools children learn the cultural traditions and often the literacy of the place of their origin. This is as true for many European languages (Portuguese, Finnish) as it is for other language groups, but whereas French or German are often viewed as 'advantageous' to young children's learning, there are far fewer studies that reveal the benefits of all literacy learning. For me this study has really emphasised the role of the community in children's learning, and literacy is a good example of this. As language is often viewed as the heart of a community, then in the case of linguistic minorities, the community language schools really are the arteries. They provide food, energy and power that keep these groups alive and well. The children benefit from this sense of well-being. At the age of 5 the children also know how all these different literacies are important to them in their very different ways. Learning Urdu cannot take the place of learning English; learning English cannot do for becoming a Muslim. And at the age of 5 they are keen to learn them all. English teachers will be interested in tapping into these schools as a resource and using them to achieve high results for all children. Similarly the study provides real-life examples of inclusive practices which will be very useful for all policy makers."