

Why support bilingualism?

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Teachers will vary in their understandings of and support for, developing young children's bilingualism. In this article, we examine why many educators place such importance on the role of first languages within early years settings.

Benefits of bilingualism

An expanding number of research studies have identified positive advantages of bilingualism (see for example Cummins, 2000, for a full discussion). Irrespective of languages or geographical locations, children who acquire two or more languages from birth, or learn a second language after the acquisition of the first language, demonstrate strengths. In summarising one study (by researchers from University College London who studied the brains of 105 people, 80 of whom were bilingual) a BBC report (BBC, 2006) described the benefits of being bilingual by likening brains to muscles, and by noting that learning languages is an intellectual exercise. The more children do it, the more this process strengthens their intellectual capabilities just like any exercise builds muscles.

Baker (1996) discusses cognitive, social and affective benefits of bilingualism. Others, from around the world, have explored the benefits of bilingualism and identified increased metacognitive and metalinguistic knowledge and heightened communicative sensitivity (Ben-Zeev, 1977; Bialystok, 1991). A positive link between children's bilingualism and concept formation, classification, creativity, analogical reasoning and visual-spatial skills (eg. Diaz and Klingler, 1991) has also been discovered. Similarly, research has revealed a link between bilingualism and heightened language awareness and greater cognitive flexibility (Hamers and Blanc, 1988; Gombert, 1992). Many of these studies have focused on older children, but Kenner's (2000; 2004) work is a notable exception in that she has revealed similar benefits with younger children in London schools. Also working in the English context, Robertson (2002) shows how in early years settings the benefits of bilingualism are generally overlooked. For example many 5-year old children routinely learn to read in more than two languages in English settings and schools but the strengths accrued on the way remain hidden from teachers. Having a knowledge of different languages also provides access to different sets of cultural meaning.

The early years forms a critical stage in children's development. If children are to become and remain bilingual, settings and schools have a role to play in providing opportunities for *additive* rather than *subtractive* bilingualism. This means that English needs to be *added* to children's overall language repertoire rather than replacing or displacing their first languages. Thus the setting needs to make sure that by introducing English, children's first languages are not subtracted from the process. One way that this can happen is to ensure that children have continued opportunities to hear and use their first languages.

The rationale for incorporating various home languages in an early years curriculum is based on sound theoretical principles which are presented here within four different but overlapping areas: children's rights; building on children's previous learning; supporting the learning of English; and promoting identity.

Children's rights

There is a growing acceptance that young children are not simply citizens of the future, or 'becomings', but 'beings' (James and Prout, 1997) - as in human beings - and competent experts in their own lives (Clark and Moss, 2001; Rinaldi, 2005). A young bilingual child may not yet speak English very well - she is in the process of becoming bilingual - but that does not make her any less of a 'being'. She will need to learn English in order to do well in her later life, but the main focus of the early years setting must be the real 4-year old. She has a right to have her learning needs considered in terms of who she is now, and not what she might become later. By the age of three, children have learnt the bulk of their mother tongue (in terms of pronunciation and grammar) and are able to express their own thoughts, ideas and feelings. They have a right to have their voices heard and a right to use their own language as, indeed, the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states in Article 30:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language. (see www.unicef.org/crc/)

The new Early Years Foundation Stage (DfES, 2007), to be implemented from 2008 onwards, is built on the premise of children's rights:

'All children are citizens and have rights and entitlements. Children should be treated fairly regardless of race, religion or abilities. This applies no matter:

- what they think or say;*
- what type of family they come from;*
- what language(s) they speak;*
- what their parents do;*
- whether they are girls or boys;*
- whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor.*

All children have an equal right to be listened to and valued in the setting.'

(DfES, 2007)

'Listening to' young children means listening to their bilingual voices. Practitioners will need to demonstrate positive values and respect routinely in their everyday teaching, and respect for, and use of, home languages is a straightforward way to do this. Demonstrating positive values explicitly, for example displaying 'welcome' in 15 different languages in settings' and schools' entrance halls, is a useful starting point. But it is only a starting point.

Building on children's previous learning

The need to build on young children's previous learning experiences is enshrined in early years pedagogy in many parts of the world, and in particular within the British tradition of Early Childhood Education. Within this tradition, partnerships with carers and families are often cited as the cornerstone of good practice. Many settings strive to develop continuities between home and school learning and find innovative ways of working with parents who may not yet speak English. Others struggle when faced with different languages or home cultures, and lower their expectations of minority ethnic children, and accept discontinuities as an unfortunate but unavoidable aspect of schooling today.

Moreover, still within the British tradition, in the every day life of the setting practitioners' observations of what a child knows and can do already are understood as being the best starting point for considering what to do next and how to ensure that all children are learning.

Therefore, early emergent bilingual children need continued and meaningful opportunities to talk about their learning in their home languages; otherwise there is a real danger that for many children this approach of building on prior learning will become a tokenistic gesture which for them denies equality of opportunity.

Supporting the learning of English

A number of research studies have demonstrated how the continued use of home languages in school speeds the process of learning the school language. This is a powerful, winning argument. The more practitioners provide opportunities for bilingual children to use their home languages in the early years setting, the easier it is for them to learn English. If we are, therefore, committed to supporting young children to learn in the most effective ways and to achieve the highest possible results in English, we should provide varied and continued opportunities for using home languages across the early years phase and into primary and secondary schools. Being able to discuss new concepts in mother tongue, and relating previously learnt concepts to new English words and terms, helps all children to learn, and it is this conceptual learning in its broadest sense that has a positive (knock on) effect on learning English, too.

Identity

The use of home languages also supports the development and maintenance of a strong sense of identity. The new Early Years Foundation Stage presents 4 themes, of which 'Unique Child' is the first, and it acknowledges that each child 'is a competent learner from birth, who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured'(DfES, 2007). Practitioners have a responsibility in ensuring that young children do not lose their resilience and confidence.

More than 30 years ago the Bullock Report recognised that in schools some children were positioned differently from others:

'Para: 20.5: Immigrant children's attainment in tests and school in general is related not only to language but to several other issues, particularly those of cultural identity and cultural knowledge. No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he [sic] crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart. The curriculum should reflect many elements of that part of life which a child lives outside the school (DES 1975, p. 286).

In many ways it seems that these warnings have not been heeded, and in the intervening 30 years many children have accepted the need to cast off the language and culture of home as they enter school. Conteh et al (2007) argue that standardised testing, league tables, performance related pay, the National Literacy Strategy with its whole class teaching and its prescribed programme of learning objectives and Ofsted inspection regimes have all had an impact on the marginalisation of bilingual children's needs

At the same time, some of the more recent key government documents have explicitly recommended that there are consistent opportunities for developing a strong learner identity and for including home languages in early years curriculum. For example, the earlier 'Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage' (DfEE, 2000) stated that learning opportunities should be planned to help children develop their English by:

- providing bilingual support, in particular to extend vocabulary and support children's developing understanding;
- providing a variety of writing in the children's home languages as well as in English

- providing opportunities for children to hear their home languages as well as English, for example through the use of audio and video materials. (DfEE, 2000, p.19)

It can be argued that the current government approach focusses on the use of home languages for transitional purposes, that is that home languages are seen as helpful only as far as they support the *transition* to English. Whilst this is not the same as the continued and varied use of first languages within early years settings and beyond, however it may be seen as a step in the right direction.

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