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Apni boli, apna virsa: Our language, our culture

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Language is of utmost importance to preserve and maintain people's cultures and identities. When people move from their home lands to other, especially western, countries they struggle to preserve their minority languages within English speaking societies. This article briefly explores the connection between language and culture and the need to preserve and maintain languages. It then considers how children from diverse backgrounds use home language experiences to extend their learning within English speaking early childhood environments, and the benefits of being bilingual. Finally, it addresses how teachers and parents can draw on children's rich literacy skills in their home language and build new knowledge.

Introduction

"Boli jiondi rahi tan Punjabi jionde rahenge" comes from a Punjabi song and translates as: "If our language is alive, our culture is alive." This deep and strong connection between language and culture was not impressed upon me until I migrated from Punjab (India) to New Zealand. I felt the impact of this thought – to keep a Punjabi identity through language – in earnest as soon as my children started socialising with children in the neighbourhood and started kindergarten and school. I watched them compromising and negotiating their identities everyday just to fit in with the new environment.

In India, children learn their home language, national language (Hindi) and English as soon as they start kindergarten (about one and a half years) or school, while the home language is the main language of communication within society. In New Zealand, English is the meaning-making language within the mainstream educational setting, and the lack of support for other languages was the main cause of my concern. Not only was the context different, the shared communicative content was completely changed (Makin, Campbell, Diaz, 1995). Going through cultural shock, the scariest thought was of my children losing their language, culture and identity. I imagine similar concerns occur to all minority groups who move from their homeland to other countries.

The lived experience of identity formation in a new land forms the backdrop to this paper. Comparisons between the Indian and New Zealand contexts in combination with my early childhood background raised important questions for me about why children cannot use and learn their home languages in the mainstream education system, and whether they learn English at the expense of their precious home language. This encouraged me to look at the benefits of acquiring English *in addition* to the home language. When children start early



childhood education with rich experiences in their home language, they are often judged for their lack of spoken English, and therefore misjudged. From observations at kindergarten, I found that teachers who did not speak a child's home language regularly misinterpreted children's silence as lack of knowledge or literacy skills.

My purpose in this article is twofold: firstly, to investigate what the literature says about the role of children's home language in their learning; and, secondly, to consider how teachers and parents can make children's learning journeys interesting while helping them retain their identities and preparing them to live in a new world.

The role of bilingualism in children's learning

For children, language is a part of the cultural knowledge that they acquire and develop within their home and community environments: languages serve the needs of the community in which children grow up (Korat, 2001). A typically developing child has the capacity to develop first language proficiency within the context of a family structure and this process continues throughout the early childhood years (Tabors, 2008). Children acquire functional proficiency in a language by about three years (Makin et al., 1995), while culturally appropriate ways of using a language are acquired throughout the early childhood years.

When the first language acquisition process is interrupted, as children switch abruptly or transition too soon to English in early childhood years, their home language acquisition may be affected; it may even cease (See Diaz & Harvey, 2002). According to May et al. (2004), an environment where English replaces a home language is a *subtractive* environment, in which children are at risk of losing their home language and identities. Children start shifting from their home language when they attend English-only educational environments in which there is not much support for the home language; this process of language shift is slow, but definite (Diaz & Harvey, 2002). Even when growing up in a bilingual family, children may not gain functional proficiency in their home language. However, when English is added to the children's home language, several cognitive and social benefits result. Such an environment, called an *additive* environment (See May et. al., 2004), enables children to use knowledge and literacy skills learnt in their home language to extend their learning in English.

Tabors (2008) has identified two types of second language acquisition: simultaneous and sequential. Simultaneous language acquisition occurs when children are exposed to a second language from birth or a very early age and learn two languages side by side. Sequential language acquisition occurs when children start learning a second language after the first language is partly established (Tabors, 2008). There is no "correct" age for learning a second language; however, Foster-Cohen's (2003) findings show that by learning a second language simultaneously children can attain native levels of proficiency in both languages. Children can become conversationally fluent in the second language in about two to five years, although it takes about five to eight years to master more complex academic language (McComish, May & Franken, 2007).

There have been several studies on the benefits of bilingualism (see Baker, 2006; McComish et al., 2007) that suggest that learning is *opened up* when children have access to two or more worlds through having two or more



languages. Benefits include increased cognitive development and metalinguistic awareness.

Cognitive benefits

The essential cognitive processes, such as thinking and problem solving, which form a basis for most of our intellectual life, may develop differently and more advantageously in bilingual children (Bialystok, 2001a). Besides having access to another language, bilingual children have access to another world of people, ideas, ways of thinking and literature. According to Gibbons (1991), bilingual children have the capacity for a high level of lateral thinking and problem solving. Having two or more words for a single object or idea seems to increase flexibility, fluency, originality and elaboration in thinking (Baker, 2006). Bilingual children can think and say things in two ways, as is illustrated in the experience from practice recorded below:

Kaushal (4 years old) played with 'clever sticks' and made a circle that she joined to three more sticks horizontally. Holding these three sticks together she said to me: "This is an umbrella and we use it when it rains." She then straightened these three sticks and put them on the table and said: "This is a dining table where we eat our food." Next she put this same structure on her head upside down and said: "This is a crown which kings wear and make announcements". She explained to me all this in Hindi and wanted me to write it in Hindi for her mum and dad to read as they will be happy.

Kaushal is growing up in an environment where great importance is given to the home language and culture, enabling her to actively and confidently establish links between home and kindergarten. She also displays the knowledge she has gained in Hindi, some from an Indian TV serial (the king's crown) and some from her grandparents' stories (the umbrella). Within a supportive socio-cultural context, knowledge which might otherwise be *othered* (Dyson, 2000) has become a communication resource.

Metalinguistic awareness

Metalinguistic awareness involves being aware of how languages work (McComish et al., 2007). It is an ability to analyse language, particularly forms of language (sound awareness, word awareness and grammatical awareness), how they work and how they are integrated within the wider language system. Experience has led me to believe that bilingual children have greater awareness of how languages work, and how languages can be similar and different, and that they are able to use this knowledge to construct meaning in different situations. The example below provides an illustration from practice:

We used to sing the Maori-English greeting song 'Tena koe, hello to one...' every afternoon. One day Aqeel (a Fijian Indian boy, aged 3 years, 8 months) asked me: "Why can't we sing that song in Hindi?" I said to him that I didn't know how to sing it in Hindi. He replied very confidently, "Change all the words to Hindi and that's it". Together we changed it to a Hindi-English song 'Ek ko Namaste, hello to one...' All the children loved this new song.



Aqeel is aware of how languages work, and how we can swap them around to construct the same meanings. This ability may provide children with enhanced skills for extending their understanding of the wider world from an early age (Bialystok, 2001b). As Dyson (2000) explains, “children do not only build *on* what they know; they build *with* it, reconfiguring, rearranging, rearticulating, and collaboratively constructing new context for action” (p.354).

Bilingual children have higher abilities at telling stories and expressing concepts in those stories (Baker, 2006). The total vocabulary of bilingual children is also larger than monolingual children. The vocabulary may be less in each of the languages initially, but Bialystok (2001a) found that bilingual children are as strong in their expression as monolingual children. I have observed children readily using words from both languages to express meaning, for example a Punjabi child who stated: “I don’t want to get *bhij*” (*bhij* in Punjabi means to get ‘wet’).

Fluency and literacy in a home language appears to lay a strong foundation for learning additional languages (Ball, 2010; Gibbons, 1991; Tabors, 2008). Second language learning seems to be easier because children do not have to learn the basics of language structure, as they already have it from their first language: “A language template is available for second language learning that enables selective attention to new and different information” (Baker, 2006, p.156). Further, McComish et al’s (2007) findings show that the level of competence achieved in a second language is largely dependent on the level achieved in the home language. Bilingual children understand symbolic representation of words in print earlier than monolingual children because they see words printed in two separate ways (Bialystok, 1987; 2001a). Bialystok discusses such metalinguistic awareness as a key factor in the development of reading in young children, which may result in a slightly earlier capacity to read in bilingual children.

Social and economic benefits

Bilingualism may have profound benefits for living in a multilingual and multicultural society. Bilingual children have the opportunity to develop increased sensitivity to the social nature and communicative functions of language, or what is termed *communicative sensitivity* (McComish et al., 2007). They are likely to be more aware of which language to use in which situation. For example, in the first excerpt quoted above, Kaushal is demonstrating her communicative sensitivity.

City of Manukau Education Trust (COMET, 2007) sees bilingualism as an enrichment of oneself and one’s community, adding value to the education process: “maintaining a bilingual culture and heritage supports their community well being, and builds a sense of both personal and national identity and belonging” (COMET, 2007, p. 1). Children who are bilingual know that different people do things differently. They are able to translate ideas and serve as bridges when new relationships are being formed. Being bilingual and exposed to two cultures fosters greater tolerance of other cultures (McComish et. al., 2007). Moreover, bilingualism is a huge benefit in the employment market of a globalised world.



The New Zealand early childhood context

New Zealand is among the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries in the world, and Auckland is its most diverse city. The 2006 census recorded that the highest proportion of the population who spoke two or more languages (27.1 percent or 331,914 people) resided in the Auckland region (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). Over one-third or 35 percent of children born overseas were able to speak two or more languages as compared to 11.5 percent of New Zealand born children.

Mainstream early childhood education in New Zealand has English as the medium of instruction (Vine, 2003) and children have little choice but to switch to English usage in these education environments. Additionally, children's literacy skills can be misjudged when skills gained in their home language are not recognised or valued, particularly when they do not speak English. Amituanai-Toloa (2010) suggests that children need to be assessed for literacy skills in their home language first, in order for accurate judgements to be made.

Bilingual programmes in New Zealand are still a rarity (Vine, 2003). The programmes that do exist are likely to benefit second language acquisition and content learning, but are often not long enough to support children in maintaining and developing their home language. The initiatives which have successfully developed home language at early childhood level for Māori and Pacific children are Kohanga Reo and Pacific bilingual programmes (May et. al., 2004) but as yet the same focus has not been given to other home languages commonly used in New Zealand. Recent endeavours from the Ministry of Education's have considered the benefits of bilingualism within the New Zealand context and explored how bilingualism could be made into a norm within educational settings (See Cullen et. al., 2009; McComish et.al., 2007; Meade, PuhīPuhī & Foster-Cohen, 2003; May et. al., 2004), however, these initiatives mainly focus on providing guidelines for Māori and Pasifika languages and cultures.

'*Te Whāriki*,' the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, aspires for children to "grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). Frequently, however, a major emphasis in mainstream education is on making children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds comfortable in early childhood centres and supporting them with acquiring English, without adequate recognition of the rich literacy skills they have gained in their home language (Tuafuti, 2010). It is now known that skills learned in a home language are transferable to learning a second language (McComish et al., 2007) but there is a lack of New Zealand research on what the transfer process involves and how it might occur (Amituanai-Toloa, 2010).

The role of collaboration in maintaining bilingualism

It is possible for teachers to provide opportunities and resources for developing home language and English simultaneously within the mainstream early childhood education system (McComish et al., 2007). If both languages are used



throughout the day and curriculum, children may succeed academically while maintaining their home language, culture and identity (Tuafuti, 2010). Increased awareness of the importance of protecting and preserving minority languages will generate the need for a variety of models, tools and resources that can do the job. In developing children's home language and second language, the role of parents/families as children's first teachers and the role of early childhood teachers is pivotal (Ball, 2010). Positive outcomes can best be achieved through working collaboratively with parents and families. According to Ashton, Woodrow, Johnston, Wangman, Singh & James (2008), parent involvement to ensure ongoing support for children to develop competencies in their home language and the availability of qualified teachers who are fluent in more than one language, are vitally important.

In order to understand how children use their home language teachers need to be acquainted with the cultural practices of families. I have always advocated that teachers play a crucial role in extending bilingual children's thinking and learning when they acknowledge their home-language, cultural experiences and parental partnerships in day to day programmes (Ball, 2010). By extending children's literacy skills in their home language, early childhood teachers can build on their competencies and abilities in a second language (Diaz & Harvey, 2002). To achieve this I would like to make the following recommendations:

- First of all, bring an open mind towards learning and use every opportunity and resource that children, parents, community and bilingual staff members have to offer.
- All cultures have specific ways of learning and teaching children. Develop good relationships with parents/families and get to know the values, beliefs and attitudes of their cultures, and find out what language/literacy experiences their children are involved in at home.
- Find out about parents' expectations when they enrol their children and inform them about a range of opportunities for partnership between parents/families and the centre or kindergarten.
- Become acquainted with the alphabets and numbers in different languages and display these on charts. Children may use their home language alphabets when writing their names on paintings and in other writing. Support children to write their full names in each language by making a list of children's names and enlisting parents' support.
- Use songs and stories in different languages and ask parents to help with correct pronunciation. It isn't necessary to rely on CD's all the time; make your own songs and improvise popular early childhood songs by translating them into different languages and singing them on regular basis.
- Make resources such as magnetic stories and books. For example, children's profiles with family members' photos, their names, status in the family and occupations, cooking days, festivals celebrated in the centre, famous people, animals, or any other topics that emerge from children's interests. Keep these books open ended so you can keep adding to them.



- Encourage children to take mat times where they teach alphabets and numbers in their home language. One option is to have set days for different languages. Magnetic cards for greetings, days, months and the weather will help children to recognise different languages.

Providing an early childhood environment that is accepting of children's home language, family and culture will develop their confidence and self-esteem. Establishing a rapport with parents as well as children is crucial to success when fostering an environment that enables bilingual children to make links and contacts across communities and cultures. Nagel (2009) supports the idea that teachers should acquire sufficient knowledge of each culture before providing culturally appropriate curriculum. "[A] variety of social and cultural practices, enable teachers to implement collaborative, innovative and equitable pedagogies that go beyond traditional and narrow teaching practices" (Streelasky, 2008, p. 27).

How can parent/family partnerships be promoted?

Creating strong links between families and early childhood settings extends children's learning, fosters a sense of community and acknowledges the expertise of families. Respecting and encouraging children and parents' roles in decision making in early childhood may lead to many positive outcomes for both children and parents (Streelasky, 2008). Parents need to be informed that their children's retention of their home language while acquiring a second language depends on several factors. Ball (2010) identifies these as:

- (1) continued interaction with their family and community in their first language on increasingly complex topics that go beyond household matters;
- (2) ongoing formal instruction in their first language to develop reading and writing skills;
- and (3) exposure to positive parental attitudes to maintaining the mother tongue (p. 3)

Children living in communities with strong motivation towards academic achievement and education may develop higher levels of competence in languages and positive attitudes towards school (Bialystok, 2001a).

Sometimes teachers find it problematic to involve parents in their programmes, and there may be many reasons for families' unwillingness to participate, including shyness, lack of confidence, cultural beliefs about the teachers' and school's role in children's education, limited English language skills, time constraints and commitment to paid employment (Terreni, 2003). Partnerships can be promoted by communicating more effectively, for example, by translating notes and newsletters into home languages; finding volunteers from the community with common languages to help with parent-teacher interviews; or inviting parents, grandparents and other members of the community to the centre or kindergarten to tell stories in their languages (Ashton et al, 2008). According to Moore & Pérez-Méndez (2008), families develop the ability to interact with teachers and advocate for their children only when they trust in the responsiveness of the system of supports and services, are knowledgeable about how this system works, and have enough information to select the appropriate choices for their child and family.



A personal conclusion

As a kindergarten teacher, I observed Indian children putting their name initials in Hindi and Punjabi on their paintings, Samoan children counting and singing in Samoan and a Vietnamese child reciting shapes in Vietnamese. I started talking to their parents, asking them to write songs, numbers and children's names in their home languages. The response was very positive, so as a team we decided to buy books in different languages. I could read books in Hindi and Punjabi and the head teacher could read in Samoan, but we had no staff to read in other languages, so I invited parents to read to children through parent rosters. Displaying photos of parents who read books to children encouraged other parents to come on board for the sake of their children's learning.

A dialogue started between teachers and parents about the benefits of using home languages and different ways to include home languages in various areas of the kindergarten. Conversations around including all cultures in the programme were initiated as part of this process. Parents offered help in almost all areas of the programme: some cooked food with children, some read books in their home languages, some taught songs, some taught words for everyday use, some brought clothes for the dress-up area, some translated newsletters and notices into different languages and helped celebrate festivals. Parents even took mat time. How amazing! Children and families became a much larger part of the programme, supported by initiatives from teachers.

One of the Punjabi parents acknowledged these efforts about four years after his daughter left kindergarten:

"From her early years, my daughter was a very shy girl. When she started the kindergarten, language (as she only knew Punjabi) was one barrier as well as her shyness . . . With the teacher acknowledging the language . . . she kept Isha involved in a variety of activities in Punjabi while maintaining her in the mainstream along with other children at the kindergarten . . . and made Isha proud of what she was good at consistently while slowly introducing English to her at the same time. As a result Isha flourished at a very good pace and started coming out of the shell . . ." (Isha's father).

Languages are precious and in a multicultural society it becomes our responsibility as early childhood teachers, in collaboration with parents/families, to preserve and maintain children's home languages, cultures and identities. My experience is that children use their home language to extend their learning in English, and this view is supported by the literature. By providing *additive* language environments in early childhood years, even within the mainstream education system, teachers can extend children's learning in two languages simultaneously.

Gibbons' (1991) states: "A second language and culture is not learned by destroying the first. By ignoring the mother tongue, we run the risk of slowing down children's learning and encouraging often unintentionally the beginning of a one-way journey away from their families" (p.69). For early childhood teachers in New Zealand, encounters with several cultures provide opportunities to draw on rich resources of cultural and linguistic knowledge to make children's learning a lifelong success story. Bilingual teachers can use their home



language and English equally with children and families who share that language, while all teachers can demonstrate positive, supportive attitudes towards different cultures and languages. Together we can preserve and maintain the many languages, cultures and identities of young New Zealanders.

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