

# Multilingualism in Classroom Instruction: “I think it’s helping my brain grow”

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**Abstract:** School systems in many countries typically view the home languages of multilingual students either as largely irrelevant or as an impediment to students’ educational progress. It is frequently assumed that because the teacher does not speak the multiple languages that may be represented in his or her classroom, there are no instructional options other than use of the national language (e.g., English) as the exclusive language of instruction. This normalized assumption is challenged in the present paper. Drawing on research carried out collaboratively with teachers across Canada over a 15-year period, I document ways in which students’ home languages can be incorporated into classroom instruction. This instructional approach, which I label ‘teaching through a multilingual lens’, is supported by an extensive range of research related to the effects of bi/multilingualism on students’ cognitive and metalinguistic development and the positive cross-lingual relationships between students’ first and second languages. The approach is also consistent with a philosophical and theoretical orientation that instruction should focus on teaching the whole child.

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**Keywords:** Bilingualism; Identity; Instruction; Metalinguistic development; Multilingualism; The whole child

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## Introduction

The quotation in the title of this article comes from Manaana, a grade 6 student (aged 11) in Floradale Public School in the Greater Toronto Area, as he reflected on the experience of reading, retelling, and creating books in his two languages, English and Hindi. This bilingual experience came about as a result of the multilingual approach to literacy development initiated by the teacher librarian in the school, Padma Sastri. Three core elements of Padma’s teaching were the focus of a collaborative research study carried out between the school and researchers at the University of Toronto (Cohen & Sastri, 2006):

1. Padma’s creation of an extensive commercial dual language book collection in the library,
2. short dual language ‘books’ written by students, often with the help of their parents, and
3. reading and dramatization of stories in the school library where students read stories in English to their class and then they, and/or other students, would summarize these stories in their home languages.

At the time of this research, Floradale had a student population of more than 700 students from Junior Kindergarten (age 4) through grade 6 (age 11). These students spoke 44 different languages and their families came from 88 different countries of

origin. In typical elementary schools across Canada (and elsewhere) prior to the 2000s, this rich linguistic and cultural diversity would have been treated with 'benign neglect'. Teachers might be positively oriented to students' languages in a general way but most of them saw no possibility of teaching or promoting these languages. As a result, most schools in English Canada (outside of Quebec) were 'English-only zones', not because there were any explicit rules against the use of other languages but because teachers, students, and parents assumed that the curriculum should be delivered through English and a major goal of school for immigrant-background students was to ensure they learned English as rapidly as possible.

In Canada, these assumptions began to change in the early 2000s as a result of a series of collaborative projects undertaken by schools and university researchers (Cummins & Early, 2011). Educators began to question through their practice the assumption that schools had no option but to be English-only zones. In this article, I describe a number of these projects that have taken place over the past 15 years and then try to articulate the broader empirical research and theoretical principles that underlie the success of these projects.

But first, let us return to Manaan. In an interview with researcher Sarah Cohen, he expressed his delight at the opportunity to tell or retell a story in Hindi, his first language (L1): "It feels great, I feel perfect; I feel like I'm back in India." He feels good about the feedback he gets from his teacher (Padma Sastri): "When I say a story in Hindi my teacher says, 'You were very good and your pace was good.' That makes me feel good." As he listens to stories in English but prepares to retell them in Hindi he also speculates on how the interchange between his two languages is affecting his brain and his cognitive functioning:

*I think it's helping my brain grow because first I'm hearing it in English when Mrs. Sastri is reading the story and I divide my brain in two parts: this part is English and when she is reading my memory's going in here, going toward there, and coming in Hindi so I feel like my brain is growing at the same time.*

*(Cohen & Sastri, 2006).*

Some researchers call this process of language interchange *translanguaging* (e.g., Celic & Seltzer, 2011; García, 2009; Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012). In the sections that follow, the instructional possibilities of translanguaging, or what I have called teaching through a multilingual lens (Cummins, 2014), are explored. The heading of each section expresses the major point being made.

## **Instructional possibilities of translanguaging**

### **1.0. Young children very quickly internalize the status differential between their home languages and the school language and this contributes to rapid language loss**

The rapidity with which elementary school students internalize the monolingual language norms of the school environment can be illustrated in the experience of a grade 1 student (age 6) who felt embarrassed to use Cantonese (her L1) in calling her grandmother from the school office. The student reflected on this experience when she

was in grade 5 after her teacher (Perminder Sandhu) had opened up a discussion of multilingualism within her class, sharing with her students the numerous languages she had learned growing up in India and asking students to reflect on and write about the languages they knew. The school was highly multilingual, but up to that point, very little explicit attention had been paid to students' languages.

*I am not always comfortable speaking Cantonese when I have to go to the office for some reason. I don't like it because a lot of teachers are at the office and I don't like speaking it in front of them. I know that they are listening to me. I get nervous and afraid. For example, once I didn't feel very well in grade 1. So my teacher sent me to the office to call my grandma. My grandma doesn't speak English and she also can't hear very well, so I had to speak in Cantonese very loudly for her to hear. So when I spoke to my grandma, I felt very nervous.*

In this example, the student clearly would not have been reprimanded for speaking Cantonese in calling home. However, by the age of 6, she had already internalized the conviction that English was the only legitimate language within the school. The fact that she still remembers this experience four years later highlights just how much it affected her emotionally at the time.

Wong Fillmore (1991) was one of the first researchers to document the loss of language skills in early childhood in an interview study involving more than 1,000 California families (most of them Spanish-speaking). More than 60% of the families judged monolingual English day-care or preschool provision to have exerted a negative impact on family communication as a result of loss of L1 skills on the part of children. By contrast, preschool programs that utilized children's L1 exclusively were associated with significantly less language loss.

In summary, the mother tongues of immigrant-background children born in the host country or who arrive at an early age are fragile and susceptible to rapid replacement by the dominant language. Under these circumstances, these children will not experience the cognitive, linguistic, and personal benefits of bilingualism that Mana'an described so insightfully.

Is it possible for the school or preschool to communicate very different messages to young children that might change the typical trajectory of L1 language loss? The projects reviewed in the following section suggest that students (such as Mana'an) will take pride in their L1 abilities when educators communicate to them that knowledge of two or more languages is an intellectual accomplishment that is valued by the school or preschool.

## **2.0. In linguistically diverse contexts, educators must teach through a multilingual lens in order to teach the whole child**

Most teachers in western countries would agree that we should try to teach 'the whole child'. They understand this term as implying that we should try to develop positive and supportive relationships with students, teach in a way that engages their interests and abilities to the extent possible, and motivates them to engage actively with learning.

However, in practical terms, what does the idea of teaching the whole child mean in a context of linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity?

Listen to Sidra, a grade 7 (age 13) student who had arrived in Canada two years previously, express her feelings and experiences as a newcomer to Canada:

*I was new, and I didn't know English. I could only say little sentences. I wore cultural clothes, and people usually judge a new person by their looks. If they see the clothes that I am wearing are not like their clothes, they will just think that I'm not one of them. If we had any partner activities, no one will pick me as their partner and I felt really, really, left out and kids also made fun of me because I looked different and I couldn't speak English properly.*

Sidra talks about the struggle to express herself, not just linguistically, but also culturally. Her 'cultural clothes' are an expression of an identity that her peers have rejected, causing her to feel 'really, really left out.' But Sidra also had caring teachers who welcomed her into school. As she explained,

*Teachers in school were really helpful. They tried their best to make me feel comfortable in class. I was the only person in grade 5 who wore cultural clothes. The teachers liked what I wore. They tried to talk to me and ask me questions. I liked telling teachers about my culture and religion. It made me feel more comfortable and welcome.*

She concludes by saying "It is nice when teachers respect me". These excerpts from Sidra's 6-page account of her transition from Pakistan to Canada provide a glimpse into the inner world of a newcomer student. Her experiences show that human relationships are of central importance in children's adjustment to schooling. Engagement in learning, particularly for newcomer students, is fuelled as much by feelings and emotions as by cognition. Despite her still-limited access to academic English, she writes extensively because she has a lot to share, and she knows that her teacher, Lisa Leoni, is genuinely interested in her experiences and insights. Sidra's account also illustrates the opportunity that teachers have to create environments that affirm the identities of newly-arrived learners, thereby increasing the confidence with which these students engage in language and literacy activities.

One of the most powerful and obvious ways of affirming newcomer students' identities and teaching the whole child is to affirm the value and legitimacy of their home languages. It is hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when school policy dictates, either implicitly or explicitly, that students should leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door. At the preschool level, an outstanding example of teaching the whole child is the ***Linguistically Appropriate Practice (LAP)*** framework, supported by more than 50 concrete instructional activities, developed by Toronto-based researcher, Roma Chumak-Horbatsch (2012). She describes LAP as follows:

*LAP brings linguistic diversity to life. It opens the door to all languages and gives them a place in the program. It links children's two language worlds, promotes bilingualism, engages families and communities and helps all children understand and experience linguistic diversity. (<http://www.ryerson.ca/mylanguage/lap/>).*

A variety of other instructional ideas, based on the same empirical and theoretical perspectives, are presented below.

### **2.1. Teaching through a multilingual lens: Instructional examples**

The idea of teaching through a multilingual lens brings together both the ways in which educators construct their identities and the instruction they actually implement in their classrooms. As noted previously, most educators (and students) have assumed that only the dominant language is appropriate for use in schools serving culturally and linguistically diverse students. In opposition to this assumption, an increasing number of educators have begun to explore ways in which students' home languages can contribute to their learning and ease their adjustment to schooling in a new country. Their instruction has consciously positioned students from linguistically diverse, low-socioeconomic status, and marginalized communities as powerful learners, capable of generating knowledge and insights, rather than as passive recipients of instruction.

Four categories of teaching through a multilingual lens can be distinguished (Cummins, 2014). These range from the very simple to the more elaborate and can be implemented in both primary and secondary schools across the grade levels:

- Simple everyday practices to make students' languages visible and audible within the school;
- Encouraging students to use their home languages for reading, research, note-taking etc.;
- Using technology in creative ways to build awareness of language, geography, and intercultural realities;
- Dual language project work.

#### **2.1.1. Simple everyday practices to make students' languages visible and audible within the school**

Although the activities listed below are very simple to implement, their symbolic value for students should not be underestimated. They illustrate how teachers can build powerful relationships with their students by implementing policies and practices that explicitly acknowledge students' languages and cultures within the school.

1. Each day, one or two students bring a word or phrase from their languages into the classroom and explain why they chose that word/phrase and what it means. All students and the teacher learn the word or phrase and its English equivalent. The multilingual words and English translations that the class has learned can be displayed in a 'multilingual corner' in the classroom. The words can also be included into a computer file that can be printed out or displayed on a smartboard on a regular basis for review by students and teachers.

2. All students including the teacher learn simple greetings (hello, thank you, etc.) in the languages of the classroom. Students who speak these languages are the 'teachers'. The 'teachers' can also show their peers and teacher how to write a few simple expressions in different scripts (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Greek, etc.).
3. During the morning announcements or school assemblies, students give greetings and say a few words in different languages (with follow-up translation in the school language).
4. At school assemblies, teachers who speak additional languages say a few words in a language other than English and a student also gives greetings in a language other than English.
5. Examples of students' work in English and L1 are prominently displayed in school corridors and at the entrance to the school in order to reinforce the message to parents and students that students' linguistic talents are seen as educational and personal assets within the school.
6. School signs (e.g., for the main office) are displayed not only in English but also in languages of the community. Students could also be invited to construct and display multilingual versions of other signs in the school (e.g. Exit signs).

These simple activities have the potential to sensitize students to the sounds and writing systems of different languages and counteract the ambivalence and even shame that many students develop in relation to their languages. The acceptance of students' languages within the classroom can also be linked to other curricular content. For example, if a Syrian student has brought an Arabic word to share with the teacher and her classmates, this could be extended to demonstrating where Syria is on a map of the world and explaining some salient aspects of its culture and history. Some examples are presented below.



Figure 1: Multilingual sign for the school office in Crescent Town Public School, Toronto District School Board



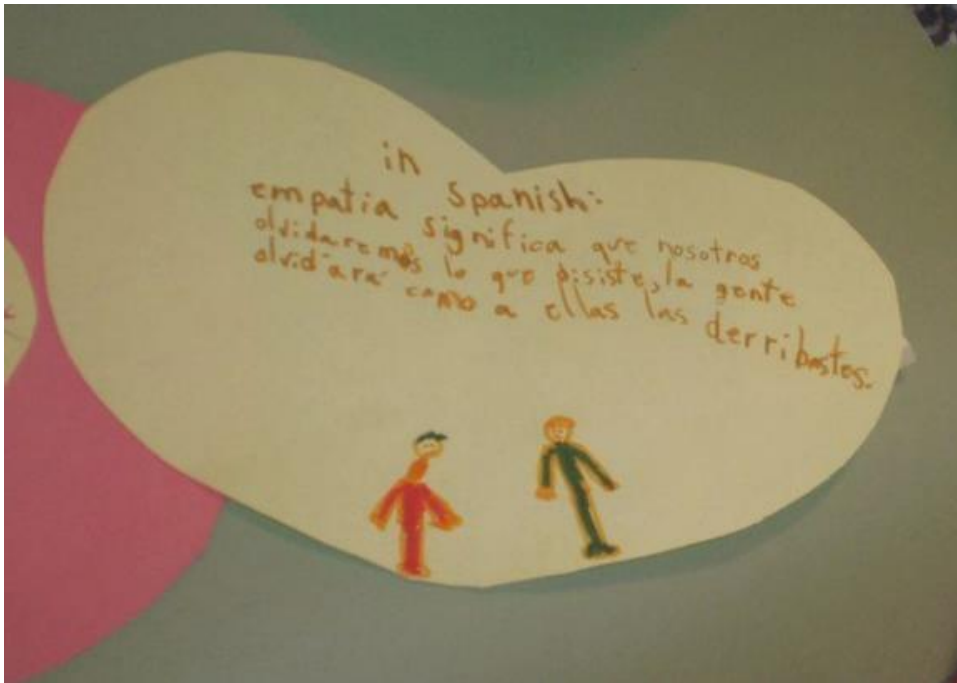


Figure 2: Example of student work in Spanish displayed on corridor wall in Crescent Town Public School, Toronto District School Board

### 2.1.2. Students use their L1s for reading, research, note-taking, and other academic work

7. Encourage newcomer and bilingual students to use the Internet to access L1 resources relevant to their school work in English. This might involve activating and expanding their background knowledge of content (e.g. researching the concept of photosynthesis in L1). Building up this L1 knowledge will make L2 content and texts more comprehensible and promote two-way transfer across languages.
8. Encourage newcomer and bilingual students to use L1 (or both L1 and English) for group planning of projects which will be presented to the wider class in English. In these cases, students' limited English skills do not prevent them from using their full cognitive capacities in carrying out the project.
9. Encourage newcomer students to read and/or tell stories in L1 in the home both as a means of expanding L1 knowledge into literate spheres and also expanding their knowledge of the world.
10. Ensure that the school library has a good collection of L1 and dual language books for students to check out and read. Dual language books written by students in the school can also be included in the school or classroom library (see Chow & Cummins, 2003). The school could also work with parents to set up a home language book exchange in the school library where parents could donate L1 books that their children have finished reading or have grown out of. Parents could then borrow these books to read at home with their children. The advantage of this kind of initiative goes beyond just providing children with reading materials in their L1; it also promotes genuine collaboration between

- parents and the school, communicates to parents the importance of both reading with children and actively developing their children's L1 abilities.
11. Invite community members to come to class to read and/or share their stories (e.g. about coming to the UK) in English or community languages. If the visitor uses a community language, translation can be provided by bilingual community members (e.g. home language teacher or tutor). Naqvi and colleagues (2012) have reported that this kind of classroom exposure to multiple languages results in stronger linguistic growth in the dominant language of schooling.
  12. In social studies at intermediate or high school levels, encourage students to research issues and current affairs using Internet sources in their L1s. Parents may be able to assist in this process. Students then bring this information back to class and differences in perspectives across different languages, cultures, and ideologies can be discussed.
  13. In Science, encourage multilingual students to use their L1 in project work. For example, if students were working in groups to create posters of the various bodily systems (e.g. respiratory system, digestive system, etc.), students could label the various organs and parts of the body in their home languages as well as in English.



Figure 3: Library books in multiple languages, Crescent Town Public School, Toronto District School Board

### **2.1.3. Use technology in creative ways to build awareness of language, geography, and intercultural realities**

14. Encourage students to use Google Translate ([www.translate.google.com](http://www.translate.google.com)) for a wide variety of purposes. For example, to aid in the 'language teaching' outlined above (cf. Section 2.1.1) or to assist newcomer students in creating dual language books or projects. For example, students write in L1 and then use



- Google translate to generate a rough version in English. This rough version is usually sufficient to enable the teacher and other students to understand what the student is trying to express. The teacher and/or other students can then help the newcomer student edit this rough version into coherent English prose.
15. Google Earth can be used to 'zoom into' the towns and regions of students' countries of origin. Students can adopt a comparative approach to compare aspects of their countries of origin to UK realities. For example, in the study of history, students from particular language groups could work together to create a timeline showing what was happening in their countries of origin at particular stages of history. In science, students could investigate what the effects of climate change are likely to be in their countries of origin in comparison to the UK.
  16. Students' languages can be integrated in creative ways into a variety of content instruction (e.g., language surveys in a data management unit in mathematics, probability of students in a class speaking particular languages etc.).

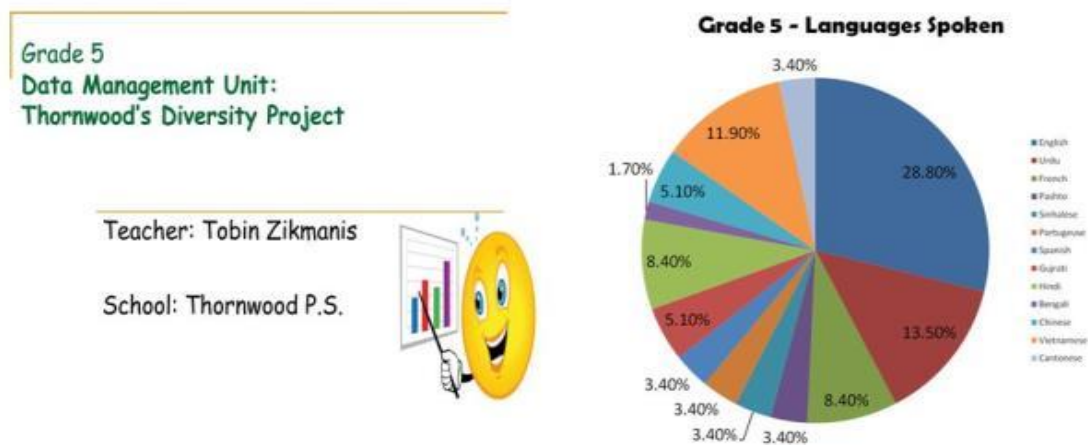


Figure 4: Slides from PowerPoint presentation by grade 5 teacher Tobin Zikmanis documenting language survey project in Thornwood Public School, Peel district Board of Education.

#### 2.1.4. Dual language project work

17. Students can write and web-publish dual language books or publish curriculum-related project work using programs such as PowerPoint. Students can also create videos using iPads or similar technologies. Sidra's dual language book (Figure 5) was created as a class assignment to write a story for an audience of younger children. Some of the short dual language books created by students in teacher-librarian Padma Sastri's class can be viewed at <http://multiliteracies.ca/index.php/folio/viewProject/5> (see also Gallagher, 2008).
18. Students can express their ideas and insights through poetry in L1 and English. Poetry allows the author to express profound meanings in relatively few words. Students could write first in English or in their home language, depending on their comfort level in each language. Then they could translate from one

language to another, possibly working with other students from the same language background. Examples of multiple themes for stimulating student (and parent and teacher) writing can be found at <http://authorsintheclassroom.com/examples-of-books-index/>. These themes include: I am books, Where I'm from books, I can books, as well as themes focusing on A person in my life, My name, Understanding the past, creating the future (Ada & Campoy, 2003).

19. Students can collaborate with partner classes in distant locations (across the world or across the city) to carry out a variety of projects involving dual or multiple languages. These projects could focus on social justice issues (e.g., environmental policies, income disparities, etc. in different countries), language awareness, or other substantive curriculum-relevant content.

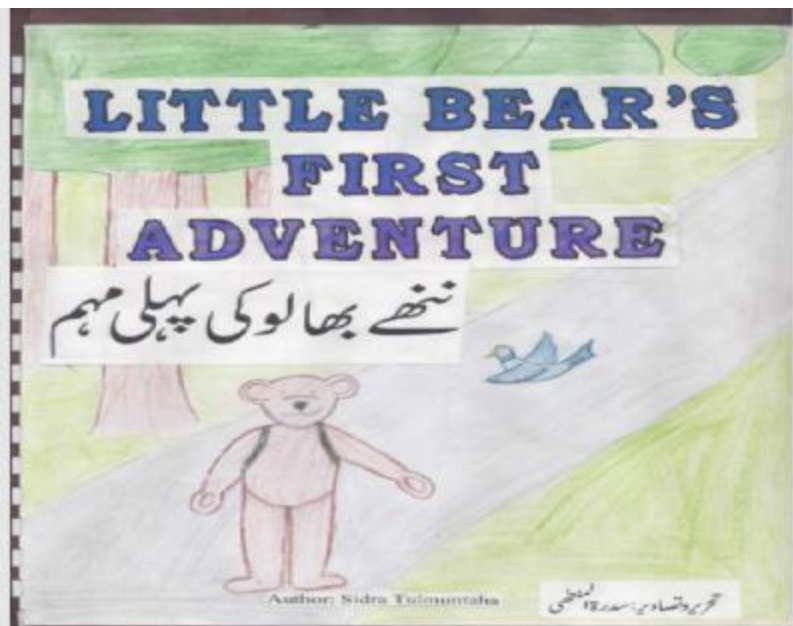


Figure 5: Sidra's English/Urdu dual language book written in grade 7, 2.5 years after her arrival in Canada from Pakistan.

### **3.0 Instructional practices based on teaching through a multilingual lens are strongly supported by empirical research and theoretical understandings of bilingual academic development**

The research basis for teaching through a multilingual lens is summarized in the sections that follow.

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

More than 200 research studies carried out during the past 50 years demonstrate that students who continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years 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. Barac and Bialystok (2011: 54) summarized their review of the research as follows: “the experience of speaking two languages yields cognitive benefits in the areas of attentional control, working memory, abstract and symbolic representation skills, and metalinguistic awareness”. The most consistent findings are that bilinguals show more developed awareness of the structure and functions of language itself (metalinguistic abilities) and that they have advantages in learning additional languages (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider (2010). In short, Madaan’s insight that active use of two languages ‘helps his brain grow’ is supported by an extensive body of research evidence.

### **3.2. There is a strong positive relationship between the development of bilingual students’ L1 and their success in learning academic skills in the school language.**

Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their L1 develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language. When parents and other caregivers (e.g. grandparents) spend time with their children and tell stories or discuss issues with them in a way that develops their L1 vocabulary and concepts, children come to school well prepared to learn the school language and succeed educationally.

The positive effects of L1 development on L2 academic development has recently been demonstrated in a large-scale longitudinal study involving 202,931 students carried out in the Los Angeles school district in California. These students entered Kindergarten (age 5) as English language learners between 2001 and 2010. Thompson (2015) examined the length of time these students required to develop sufficient English academic proficiency to be reclassified as no longer needing English language support services. Students who entered kindergarten with high levels of L1 academic language proficiency were 12% more likely to be reclassified as English proficient after 9 years than students who entered with low levels of L1 academic language proficiency. Those who entered kindergarten with high levels of English academic proficiency were 13% more likely to be reclassified than those with low levels of initial English proficiency. Students who entered kindergarten with high levels of proficiency in both their languages (English and L1) were 24% more likely to be reclassified than students who entered with low levels of academic L1 proficiency and low levels of academic English proficiency.

These findings suggest the importance of preschool programs that promote not only students’ knowledge of the dominant school language but also, to the extent possible, students’ knowledge of their home language. They also suggest that preschool and primary school educators should communicate explicitly to parents the importance of developing their children’s home language abilities as well as encouraging development of L2 skills (e.g., through preschool participation).

### **3.3. Spending instructional time through a minority language in the school has no negative consequences for children’s academic development in the majority school language.**

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 (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006). These findings demonstrate that L1 and L2 academic language skills are interdependent or manifestations of a common underlying proficiency.

When students are learning through a minority language (e.g., their L1), they are acquiring more than just language skills in a narrow sense. They are also learning concepts and intellectual skills that are equally relevant to their ability to function in the majority language. Students who know how to tell the time in their L1 understand the concept of telling time. They know that there are 24 hours in a day, 60 minutes in an hour, and 60 seconds in a minute. In order to tell time in their L2, they do not need to re-learn the concept of telling time; they simply need to acquire new labels 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. The transfer of skills, strategies, and knowledge explains why spending instructional time through a minority language entails no adverse consequences for the development of academic skills in the majority language.

#### **3.4. Identity matters: To reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child.**

When the message, implicit or explicit, communicated to students in the school is: 'Leave your language and culture at the schoolhouse door', students also leave a central part of who they are—their identities—at the schoolhouse door. This implicit rejection of a major part of the student's identity may undermine their confidence and the likelihood that they will participate actively in classroom instruction. By contrast, when teachers are proactive and take the initiative to affirm students' linguistic and cultural identity, students' confidence in their own abilities and academic potential will be reinforced. Recall what Sidra said about how much she appreciated her teachers respecting her by showing interest in 'her cultural clothes' and talking to her and asking questions about her culture and religion: "It made me feel more comfortable and welcome".

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

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 students 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 these discriminatory power relations, the school is holding up to multilingual and immigrant-background students a positive and affirming mirror 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 when schools focus on teaching the whole child rather than seeing the child only as a 'second language learner'. Instruction of immigrant-background students is much more likely to be successful when the school bases its policies and practices on two core pedagogical principles:

- Students' 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 student has the right to have their talents and abilities 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.

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