

## Handout 6

### Research on Bilingual Education

Although bilingual and bicultural children have the potential to enrich the classroom environment with diverse ways of seeing and understanding, their discourse and literacy styles are often seen as a liability. Utilizing the expertise of teachers, parents, and other community members of diverse cultural and linguistic groups can do much to counter the deeply held and often unconscious biases that guide our behavior and that may cause us to value only one way of talking, understanding, and behaving. Children and teachers of the dominant culture can learn from children from diverse cultures, enhancing their own lives and their ability to “become citizens of the global community” (Delpit, 1995, p. 69).

There is widespread agreement among researchers that bilingual education is the most effective and pedagogically sound way of providing early childhood education for the many language-minority students in the nation’s schools (Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988; Wolfe, 1992; Wong-Fillmore, 1991). According to Wolfe (1992), “effective bilingual programs instruct children in all of the academic subjects in their primary languages while they are developing proficiency in English” (p. 139). Researchers based their position on the following premises:

- During the first five years, children are learning their primary language at a rapid pace. Because language and thought are interdependent, a firm command of the native language is vital for conceptual development (Cummins, 1989; Wolfe, 1992; Wong-Fillmore, 1991).
- Children under the age of five have not reached a stable enough command of their native language not to be affected by the immersion in English-only classrooms that they typically encounter (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). Thus, acquisition of English as a second language by young children may result not in bilingualism, but in the erosion or loss of their primary language, dubbed “subtractive bilingualism” by Lambert (cited in Wong-Fillmore, 1991).
- Conversely, when children are able to learn their primary language with all its richness and complexity, they are able to transfer these skills to a new language (Wolfe, 1992).
- Contrary to popular belief, young children develop proficiency—which is not the same as fluency—in a second language slowly, over a five-to-seven-year period (Wolfe, 1992). Young children who are forced to give up their primary language and adjust to an English-only environment may not only lose their first language, but may not learn the second language well (Wong-Fillmore, 1991).
- When children have only a partial command of two languages, they may mix both languages in what Selenker (1972) called “fossilized versions of inter-languages,” rather than using fully formed versions of the target languages (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). This inability to speak any language with proficiency puts children at high risk for school failure.
- The loss of the heritage language can seriously jeopardize children’s relationships with their families, who may not be fluent in English. The inability to communicate

with family members has serious consequences for the emotional, social, and cognitive development of linguistically diverse children (Cummins, 1989; Wolfe, 1992; Wong-Fillmore, 1991).

Creating a classroom environment that values and accepts children's home culture and language is the first step in helping children feel proud, not ashamed, of their "mother tongues, their origins, their group, and their culture" (Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988). Bilingual education, in which children are encouraged to use their first languages while supporting their acquisition of English, is optimal; however, due to lack of qualified minority-language speakers and the challenges of meeting the needs of children in a multilingual classroom, this approach is often impractical.

### **Strategies That Work**

- *Collaboration with parents and linguistically diverse members of the community* is an effective way to provide opportunities for children to maintain their own language and to validate its importance. Parents can be encouraged to converse with and tell and read stories to their children in their native language, at home and at school. Developing strong family/school partnerships is essential to providing cultural continuity for children (Wolfe, 1992).
- *By understanding the way children learn a first language, teachers can apply these principles to help children learn English.* While until recently English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) methods of teaching had a strong behavioristic skills orientation, current practices emphasize a whole-language approach. ESL literature identifies attainment of communicative competence as the goal of instruction (Abramson, Seda, & Johnson, 1990). With the recognition that language is best learned through actual use in a nonthreatening social context, language use is encouraged by focusing on meaning rather than correctness of form, regarding errors as part of the learning process (Abramson, et al., 1990)..
- *Contextual cues, such as gestures, actions, pictures, manipulatives, and other hands-on, real objects can help children connect words with meaning.* As Okagaki and Sternberg (1994) point out, for children with limited English skills, following teachers' directions and even "figuring out what to do to stay minimally out of trouble is an enormous task" (p. 18). While Anglo teachers typically value the decontextualized "text" over the context, Delpit (1995) observes that other groups, such as Alaska Natives, Native Americans, and African Americans, place a far greater value on context. In a classroom setting, while an Anglo teacher frequently directs children to do something while he or she is engaged in a different task, other cultural groups typically match words with actions.

For example, if a Native American teacher says, "Copy the words," she is at the blackboard pointing. Delpit (1995) points out, "The Anglo teacher asks the children to attend to what he *says*, not what he does; the Native American teacher, on the other hand, supports her words in a related physical context. What gets *done* is at least as important as what gets said" (p. 98). To help linguistically diverse children feel secure and competent in the classroom setting, as well as

to promote English proficiency, teachers should learn to provide as many cues as possible to aid understanding.

- *Providing ample time for children to answer questions can increase the number and quality of responses for all children.* Increasing the “wait time” from the usual one second or less to three or more seconds can provide needed time for children not only to reflect on their answers but to hear their words in a second language.
- Finally, *providing bilingual signs around the classroom, learning as many words as possible in children’s primary languages, and encouraging children to teach the class a few words in their language* can convey the message that diverse languages are valued.

## Styles of Discourse and Literacy

### Dialect

Teachers often insist on remediating the dialect of African American, Native American, and Alaska Native students. Many researchers and educators, however, contend that constant correction can have a damaging effect on children’s self-esteem, attitude toward school, and ability and motivation to learn to read and speak standard English (Delpit, 1995; Cummins, 1988). When teachers model respect and acceptance of children for who they are, children are much more likely to identify with teachers as role models and want to emulate their styles of speech and behavior.

Delpit (1995) provides this example from a Mississippi preschool, where a teacher had been “drilling her three- and four-year-old students on responding to the greeting, ‘Good morning. How are you?’ with ‘I’m fine, thank you.’ Posting herself near the door one morning, she greeted a four-year-old Black boy in an interchange that went something like this” (p. 51):

Teacher: Good morning, Tony, how are you?

Tony: I be’s fine.

Teacher: Tony, I said, how are you?

Tony: (with raised voice) I be’s *fine*.

Teacher: No, Tony, I said *how are you?*

Tony: (angrily) I done told you, *I be’s fine* and I ain’t telling you no more!

Delpit points out that it is unlikely that Tony will want to identify with this teacher, who is as unpleasant as she is inscrutable. Yet children like Tony may experience many such invalidating and confusing attempts to make them conform to standard English, both in literacy instruction and everyday conversation.

### Strategies That Work

Helping children to become aware of the speech patterns of various cultural groups, and comparing and contrasting styles, is an effective way to expose children to alternative forms and to provide opportunities to practice them in a nonthreatening environment. In addition, all children are helped to realize the value and fun of knowing different ways to talk (Boutte & McCormick, 1992). Following are some strategies that have been identified by two well-known African American educators, Lisa Delpit and Gloria Ladson-Billings:

- In the sixth-grade classroom of Ann Lewis, students were permitted to express themselves in the language (in speaking and writing) with which they are knowledgeable and comfortable. “They were then required to ‘translate’ to the standard form. By the end of the year, the students were not only facile at this ‘code-switching,’ but could better use both languages” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161).
- For younger children, discussions about the differences in the ways television characters from different cultural groups speak can provide a starting point. A collection of the many children’s books written in the dialects of various cultural groups and audiotaped stories narrated by individuals from different cultures provide authentic ways to learn about linguistic diversity (Delpit, 1995, p. 54).
- Mrs. Pat, a teacher chronicled by Shirley Brice Heath, had her students become language “detectives,” interviewing a variety of individuals and listening to the radio and television to discover the differences and similarities in the ways people talked (Delpit, 1995, p. 54).
- Native Alaskan teacher Martha Demientieff helps her students understand “book language” by contrasting the “wordy,” academic way of speaking and writing with the metaphoric style of their heritage language, where they say a great deal with a few words. Students work individually, in pairs, or in groups to write papers with enough words “to sound like a book.” They then take these papers and try to reduce the meaning to a few sentences. Finally, students further reduce the meaning to a “saying” brief enough to go on the front of a T-shirt, and the sayings are put on little paper T-shirts that the students cut out and hang throughout the room (Delpit, 1995, p. 62).
- Demientieff also analyzes her students’ writings for what has been referred to as “Village English” and fills half a bulletin board with these words, labeling it “Our Heritage Language.” On the other half of the bulletin board, she puts an equivalent statement under the label “Formal English.” She and the students spend a long time on the “Heritage English,” savoring the nuances and discussing how good it feels.

Then, she turns to the other side of the board and explains that there are people who will judge them by the way they talk or write, and that in order to get jobs, they will need to talk like “those people who only know and can only really listen to one way.” She affirms that although they will have to learn two ways of talking, they will always know their Heritage English is best. She compares Formal English to a formal dinner and Heritage English to a picnic. The students then prepare a formal dinner in the class; they dress up, use fancy tablecloths, china, and silverware, and speak only

formal English. Then they prepare a picnic where only informal English is allowed (Delpit, p. 41).

- Teachers who do not share the culture and languages of their students can ask students to “teach” the teacher and other students aspects of their language. They can “translate” songs, poems, and stories into their own dialect or into “book language” and compare the differences across the cultural groups represented in the classroom (Delpit, 1995, p. 54).

All of these strategies affirm children’s culture and language, while at the same time children are helped to learn the skills to operate in the dominant society.