

# Families Learn Together: Reconceptualizing Linguistic Diversity as a Resource

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While a growing number of diverse children are entering U.S. schools, misconceptions remain regarding language acquisition. Analysis of weekly interactions in an urban children's playgroup in the South reveals how the concept of language diversity as a deficit is still widespread. Mothers of young children still believed that efforts to learn multiple languages diminish a child's ability to learn other things. Conversely, research points to multilingualism as a resource rather than a deficit. Findings indicate that interactions among mothers and children, mediated by the researcher, combined with observations of one child's bilingual development allowed mothers and young children to rethink their beliefs regarding linguistic diversity. They began recognizing that bilingualism/multilingualism adds to the lives of all children.

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Many believe that our brains are just like our stomachs: to have room for dessert, we can't overeat. Just like an expanding balloon, some believe our brains can only hold so much, and if we fit it too fully with the heritage language, there will be no room for English. This misconception leads many parents and teachers to advocate arresting development of the native language to leave ample room for the new language. (Tse, 2001, p. 45)

## LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

All throughout the United States, as we walk through neighborhoods that were historically monolingual, scan through radio stations while driving our cars, or enter schools and classrooms, we are likely to encounter languages other than English being spoken. More and more bilingual children are

entering schools. Today, one in five children in the United States lives in an immigrant family (The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools, 2005) where they are constantly exposed to languages other than English. While a common situation, many misconceptions still remain regarding the acquisition and development of languages other than English.

Over six months, I recorded weekly conversations of mothers and young children (families) in a playgroup in an urban setting in the South in which my son and I participated. "Two languages? That will confuse his little brain." In my experience as a multilingual mother raising a multilingual son, comments such as this voiced by monolingual mothers are quite commonly heard by a parent who is raising a bilingual or multilingual child. I came to realize that the misconception that efforts to learn two languages rather than just one diminishes a child's ability to learn other things which should be learned (Jespersen, 1922) is still widespread. I heard monolingual mothers give advice, and say "I would never do that to my child" when they heard me speak to my son in English and Portuguese. According to this misguided view, a child's intellectual capacity is limited, due to the

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conception that bilinguals think less efficiently because the brain stores two linguistic systems (Lambert, 1990).

Although it has been over “30 years since solid empirical evidence has been available on the positive relationship between bilinguality and... intellectual functioning for bilingual children, the stereotype of negative consequences still survives” (Hamers, 2000, p. 86). Parents and professionals in the area of education continue to propagate these discourses, as many continue regarding bilingualism as a deficit in their philosophical beliefs (Hamers, 2000) and sponsor this idea by incorporating it in their narratives and advice. According to Tse (2001), research in the areas of language acquisition and development, in reality, points to bilingualism and multilingualism as resources, rather than deficits. “Not only do we appear to have infinite capacity for language learning, but knowing one language may help a learner pick up a second better and faster because it means not having to start from scratch.” (Tse, 2001, p. 45).

#### YOUNG CHILDREN INTERACT AND LEARN ABOUT LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

As a growing number of children in the United States become multilingual, it is common that we hear them start voicing words and sentences in more than one language before age two, be it in the playground, be it in preschool. The incident below represents an interaction between a 29-month old monolingual child and an 18-month old developing bilingual:

This example depicts a genuine interaction between two boys whose pseudonyms are Diego and Ben. While in the beginning of the interaction there was a misunderstanding between what Diego was trying to say and what Ben understood, by explaining the two languages, Diego’s mother introduced Ben to another language and another way to say “dog.” As a result, Ben learned that there are many languages, many ways to say things. He thought *ca-ca* was for cat, but he learned that *ca-ca* stood for dog, in Portuguese.

Children come to learn language through socializing and engaging in genuine conversations (Bruner, 1983), such as the play interactions analyzed in this study. It is through social interactions that children start developing the understanding of multilingualism and are introduced to multicultural contexts. By mediating naturally occurring interactions that expose young children to the rich universe of linguistic diversity and regarding languages as equally worthy, parents, teachers and caregivers can introduce young children to the worldly norm of multilingualism, fostering respect and admiration for other languages and those who speak them. While in the United States linguistic diversity is still reticently associated with minority populations, worldwide, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception, as about half of the people in the world are at least bilingual (Matlin, 2003).

The narration below represents 34 interactions between monolingual and bilingual children between the ages of one and three in unstructured play situations over a time span of three months. After

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#### Ca-Ca is for Dog (in Portuguese!)

Ben and Diego were friends. They liked playing together. They were in the park when they saw a dog. Diego said “Ca-ca,” as he pointed to the dog. “No,” said Ben. “That is a dog, D-OOO-G!” Diego kept pointing and calling “Ca-ca.” Ben said a loud “NO!” Diego started crying.

Diego’s mother asked, “What happened?” Ben said, “This is a dog, not a cat!” Big tears rolled down Diego’s face as he said “ca-ca” again, pointing to the dog. Ben screamed a loud “NOOOOO!”

Diego’s mother gave him a big hug. Then, she knelt and said, “Ben, cachorro<sup>1</sup> is dog in Portuguese. Diego is trying to say cachorro when he says ca-ca. Can you say cachorro?”

“Portuguese? What is Portuguese?” asked Ben. Diego’s mother said, “Portuguese is what we speak in Brazil. It’s a language. I am from Brazil, so I speak Portuguese to Diego.” Ben asked, “Why?” Diego’s mother answered, “so that he can speak with his grandmother.” “Oh, okay,” said Ben. “And, it’s nice to learn many languages. If you can speak different ways, you can think different ways too,” said Diego’s mother.

Diego stopped crying. Ben asked, “So how do you say dog in Portuguese?” “Cachorro,” Diego’s mother answered. “Ca-ca” said Diego pointing to the dog. “Ca-ca is for Dog” said Ben. They all laughed.

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<sup>1</sup>Pronounced kă/shō/hō.

mediation provided by caregivers and mothers over 1 month, the monolingual children in Diego's playgroup started mediating themselves and explaining to other monolingual children on the playground that Diego was speaking another language, which was Portuguese. After six months, Diego's eight regular playmates each knew at least ten new words in Portuguese, all learned through playing with Diego each week. This suggests a need for mediation and explanation of the existence and value of languages other than English in changing children's attitudes towards other languages as well as towards multilingual peers. Diego's peers now ask Diego to translate many words from Portuguese to English. Rather than being the one who didn't know how to speak, Diego is now regarded as a language expert in his playgroup.

### **MOTHERS' (MIS)UNDERSTANDINGS OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY**

As the nine children regularly met to play together, mothers and caregivers interacted, shared experiences, and handed out advice. Simply put, over time, these monolingual mothers went from voicing statements such as "I would never do that to my child" to "I wish my child could do that." This change happened as Diego's linguistic repertoire developed and he could speak both languages with ease. Initially, these women corroborated the argument that temporary delays in the development of expressive English language in early bilingual development are examples of how bilingualism hinders cognitive development. They now realize that being able to speak two languages is a positive skill rather than something that limits learning and intellectual capacity. Current research shows that "bilinguals have an advantage because they have more than one way of thinking about a given concept, making them more 'divergent' thinkers and more effective problem solvers." (Tse, 2001, p. 48).

While it can be uncomfortable to wait for a child's language to develop, and heartbreaking to watch your own child fall behind, after Diego started speaking both languages fluently, many monolingual mothers voiced their desire to have their own children learn other languages, and started seeing linguistic diversity as a resource, rather than a deficit. This illustrates the importance of understanding that language development takes time, and when a child is acquiring more than one language, temporary expressive language delays may occur. Caregivers and

teachers can also benefit from this understanding of linguistic diversity and discourage the commonly employed approach of abandoning other languages so as not to hinder rapid English language development. As in building a house, the foundations take a long time to be built, and the more intricate and complex the house is, the more time the foundations will take to be built. While it is being built, however, a layperson may walk by and assert there has been no progress. The same happens with multilingual development—much is happening while the child is apparently lagging behind; it is important that we know this is only temporary.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS**

According to Crain-Thoreson, Dahlin, and Powell (2001), parents who used play situations as opportunities to encourage their 3- and 4-year-olds' use of language were able to stretch their language abilities by using more sophisticated vocabulary in one language. This can also happen with another language, such as in the case of Portuguese in this study. Encouraging two to four year olds to develop a repertoire in a second or foreign language has the potential to stretch their vocabularies and understandings of multilingualism and multiculturalism, as exemplified by this study.

As the mothers repeatedly voiced, it is important to expose children to multiple languages early on, as it allows them to consider other languages as worthy. Children develop a keen interest in learning about other cultures, and are more likely to take in multiple perspectives, expanding their repertoires. We need to understand that instead of repeating the common "No Spanish in the hallway!" or corroborating with English-only tacit rules, we need to serve as mediators, and introduce young children to other languages, so that they become interested rather than resistant. We need to be pro-active and challenge the tremendous restrictive pressure that exists throughout the United States to conform to the linguistic norm of speaking English only (Caldas & Caron-Caldas, 2002).

Applications for policy-makers include designing and implementing educational policies and assessment tools that take into account the importance and value of bilingualism and multilingualism (Santos, 2004), recognizing that while bilingual development may take longer, it allows students to engage in complex problem solving tasks, and to look at the world through multiple lenses. Bilingual education

should therefore be considered as a resource rather than being regarded as a threat to English and remain unfunded (Krashen, 1999) as it allows students to have a developmentally appropriate curriculum that takes into account the multitude of languages and cultures present in American schools (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2004). The benefits of early bilingual education are evident in Norway and the Netherlands (Krashen, 1999).

Applications for parents and families include exposing their children to multiple languages early on, and encouraging their children to develop more complex vocabularies or language systems at an early age. This can happen even when the parent does not have proficiency in the language being spoken yet shows a positive attitude towards multiple languages and cultures, and creates opportunities for authentic interactions in languages other than English to occur.

“Professionals need to deepen their understanding of the impact of culture and language” (Santos, 2004, p. 49) and consider that negative consequences of bilingualism only appear in the schooling of minority children in Western countries to date (Hamers, 2000). Applications of this study to caregivers point to the need to recognize the value of other languages early on, so as to expand the young child’s linguistic repertoire, allowing for authentic interactions in multiple languages to occur among children. Serving as mediators and explaining that other languages are valuable can serve to influence the child’s attitude towards a new language. By doing so, the caregiver is exposing young children to the world of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Instead of thinking of bilingualism and linguistic diversity as a malady that affects part of the population, against which parents, teachers, and caregivers need to fight, we must start promoting bilingualism as augmenting and sophisticating children’s thought processes, and serving as a resource for all children. It

is important that we recognize that bilingualism can add to, and not subtract from the development and lives of all children, and ought to be viewed as multiplying the possibilities (Baker, 2000), as broadening the horizons, and contributing to a better future, allowing us to implement a curriculum that is culturally and linguistically responsive (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2004). The earlier the better!

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