The language of success

New research shows that children who speak at least two languages do better at school than those who speak only one. Why is it, then, that so many teachers still see multilingualism as a problem rather than an asset? Caroline Haydon reports

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In a quiet corner of a Hackney school a group of six-year-olds are telling me proudly about their language skills. And they are quite astonishing. They speak Gujarati (and a little Urdu) to grandparents, because this is considered only polite. They speak English and Gujarati to their (second generation) parents, and a great deal more English to their siblings. And from age five they spend two hours a night studying religious texts in Urdu and the Koran in Arabic in the local mosque.

Despite the talk about how difficult children can find it to learn foreign languages, the fact is that at six they can recognise different scripts and understand how they work. They enjoy learning to read in three languages from the age of five. And they positively benefit from having their existing language skills recognised, and developed, by their schools. Most important of all, the consequent boost to self esteem helps them to work harder and to do better in their school work.

But until recently no one has paid much attention to the huge benefit to these children of learning two or three languages, because they are not learning French or German or the languages of a cosmopolitan elite. They are learning Gujarati or Urdu, or in other cases, Chinese, Bosnian or Pahari - the languages of immigrants. And until now, most teachers have had low expectations of the capabilities of children from non-English speaking backgrounds, according to a study from the Institute of Education at the University of London.

Things are changing. The report - which brings together a number of studies on bilingual and trilingual children - says that boosting the learning of "community" languages is beneficial. It is good for the people speaking them and also (not least for economic reasons) for everyone else too; schools should be doing more to foster them.

There are some schools where this already happens. Handing out bilingual books at Millfields Community School in Hackney, where the children are showing off their impressive skills is Dr Raymonde Sneddon, from the School of Education and Community Studies at the University of East London, who has studied local children. Success, she says, takes time - children can learn to communicate in a language in two years, but it takes seven years to achieve full command. But by 11, she has shown, trilingual children are doing better at school than their monolingual peers. Taking 36 children, aged three and a half, seven, and 11, she has demonstrated that, far from being confused by the different languages surrounding them, the children were accomplished speakers of English and performed on a test of reading comprehension at a level higher than children who spoke only English. Even more interestingly, though boys normally lag behind at this age, in this group they were certainly keeping up with the girls.

It is not difficult to see why. Mohammed Hafesji, now 10, who was part of Sneddon's cohort at seven, is very definitely proud of his language ability. A studious-looking boy, he grins when reporting that it is useful to know Arabic, because you might need to speak it to someone, not just read it in the Koran. Jane Betsworth, deputy head of Millfield, says the conclusions of the report are borne out by her experiences in the classroom. "These children tend to be in the higher ability groups", she says. "The skills they need for their language acquisition transfers to other subjects."

What the study also showed was that even where schools had positive attitudes and the right dual-language books, there could still be considerable underestimation of the children's skills, a lack of knowledge of the nature of the religious education they received after school, and of the complex negotiating of meaning across three languages that it involved.

Sneddon's report concluded that if the children's multilingual experiences (which are, after all, the norm in many countries) were acknowledged, they could be put to greater use. Later, in the local community centre which the study identified as providing vital support for the children's skills, Mohammed's mother Sakina tells me it's family policy to speak as much Gujarati at home as possible "because we don't want him to lose the language". Rohana Wadiwala, a community nurse, says she might very well have lost her ability, or even the will, to keep up Gujarati. "I was told by teachers that at an English school we speak English", she says.

Another mother, who is keen for her children to keep up the language for home visits to India, says that she remembers speaking
to her sister at school in Gujarati and being asked to stop. Everyone talks about the fate of the Gujarati Indians who went to South Africa and, over time, completely lost the ability to talk in their own language. And, someone adds, because India is likely to become a more important trading partner in the future, we risk losing vital business opportunities if we don't foster the relevant languages.

"In a number of schools there is a positive appreciation of the benefits of children keeping up with these languages, but there are still a lot of teachers who think bilingualism is a problem rather than an asset", says Sneddon. "And then there is a problem - if their language isn't valued in school then children may not value themselves either."

That crippling effect was seen in a similar study of Bosnian families who had recently come to Britain. The children never used Bosnian in lessons, the teachers were not aware that they attended supplementary schools out of hours, and the two cultures never crossed. So parents began to value English and devalue Bosnian, unaware that learning their own language could have positive effects on their children's progress in English and overall cognitive and academic achievement.

Dina Mehmedbegovic, who carried out that study, says "Bilingualism is recognised by researchers as an educational advantage, and the government is now expanding language learning to primary schools. But many schools are still not giving out positive messages about it. The result is that children and parents internalise the devalued status of their own language. Schools need to take steps to support children's bilingualism, which is an economic asset to Britain as well as an asset to the communities".

It remains true that, even in schools where there is an appreciation of children's existing skills (and it does seem strange that we will pay to teach our children French or Spanish but not recognise languages children already speak), there is still virtually no teaching in "community" languages. Even Millfield can only run to classroom support in Gujarati, because it's not on the curriculum. Yet the children would love to be taught in the subject. Those I met spoke, but could not read or write it. Indeed most adults locally speak a dialect of Gujarati and, because they were not actually taught it, they can experience difficulty with the "pure Gujarati" of written texts.

But it will be a long time before anyone finds Gujarati on the primary school timetable. It's not often on the secondary timetable, either, and in places where it is, it will probably be taught, even at GCSE level, by untrained teachers, because postgraduate teacher training doesn't usually offer it as an option. The same goes for other "community" languages such as Arabic and Turkish. The situation is beginning to improve, with a few teacher-training courses in some of these languages being pioneered in a handful of institutions across the country. But exam boards have complained that because the number of entries at GCSE or A-level is small, exams in these subjects are uneconomic to run and, so their place in the system is hardly guaranteed.

Some of the studies point out the downside of failing to appreciate all this potential. Recently arrived Chinese pupils faced isolation and bullying in the classroom, said one. Feeling frustrated, they withdrew more and more from classroom activities, with the obvious harmful effects on their studies later.

And in schools which failed to make links with a local Portuguese community, the pre-GCSE drop-out rate for Portuguese students was high. At the Institute of Education Dr Charmian Kenner, who did her own research on six-year-olds growing up in London and learning to write Chinese, Arabic or Spanish as well as English, recognised the various studies were all basically making the same point. She says that in the first instance the government and local authorities should make sure that community-language classes are given resources and support. "The price of ignoring children's bilingualism is educational failure and social exclusion", she says.

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