

# **FIRST LANGUAGE BRIDGE ACROSS SOCIAL DISPARITY: A Bilingual Programme for Language Minority Children in a Rural Indian Kindergarten**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Experts assert that mother tongue education in the early years is beneficial to young children. However, with growing diversity of the population worldwide, multilingual, multicultural classrooms are often the norm. In India, linguistic and cultural diversity is immense. Even within the native population, there are 350 recognised languages and more than 1500 dialects. The deeply rooted caste system, urban, rural and tribal populations and socio-economic disparity are the other major reasons for creating several sub-cultures in almost all communities across the country. In metropolitan areas, a steady influx of migrant labourers, often from neighbouring states, adds to the linguistic diversity. Because of all these factors monolingual classrooms in the children's mother tongue is a rarity. Learning through an unfamiliar language presents many challenges for young children. In order to help a group of language minority children in a small town preschool in India, a bilingual programme was implemented. This article examines the programme and its outcomes.

Key words: early literacy, bilingual immersion, peer learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

In spite of the Constitutional mandate of free and compulsory education for all children below the age of 14, and the recent passing of the Right to Education Act in April 2009 (RTE 2009), early childhood education remains neglected in India. The government's focus is on universalising primary education for children 6-14 years (Department of School education and Literacy, Government of India, n.d.).

One of the authors of this article (Gokhale, 2008) gathered the following information during her Doctoral research. The importance of pre-primary years has been recognised by parents, policy makers and educators. However, the understanding and expectations are widely varied. In the government provided programmes, the main goal of pre-primary education is the development of children's social-emotional skills, as a preparation for their learning in the formal setting of the primary school. Additionally, the programme provides care for small children so that their older siblings – generally girls -- so they can attend school themselves. The focus of the government's Anganwadi (Integrated Child Development Services—ICDS)) programmes is, therefore, providing nutrition and custodial care for children below the age of 5. The educational component is minimal.

In the majority of urban and privately run programmes, on the other hand, the pre-primary period is treated as school readiness period. There is great emphasis on learning the skills deemed necessary for conventional reading and writing. In the absence of any regulation or governmental mandate, there are no organised literacy development programmes. Similarly, the opportunities for pre-service teacher education in early childhood are very limited.

The *balwadi* (preschool) which is the focus of this report is part of an innovative educational institution that actively encourages research and development in teachers' pedagogical practices.

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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social nature of literacy is now well recognised. Various environments that children have access to and the interactions they engage in shape their literacy related knowledge, skills and behaviours (Gee, 1990; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Family, home, culture and community, therefore, have a significant influence on children's literacy development (Storch, & Whitehurst, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 1995). When there is great disparity between children's experiences in their learning environment and other social environments, their learning, as well as the development of social and cultural identity is impacted (Bialystok, 2001; Rogoff, 1990; Au, 1993; Heath, 1983).

According to the sociocultural perspective of development (Vygotsky, 1978) language is an inseparable part of culture. Children enter preschool with substantial knowledge and mastery of literacy related skills in their first language. If the language and culture of their preschool are not in congruence with their life experiences, their chances of learning and achieving success in preschool and later years are affected greatly (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, Cairney, 2005).

Experts assert that mother tongue education in the early years is beneficial to young children (Kosonen, 2005; Perez, 2004a; Hovens, 2002). However, with growing diversity of the population worldwide, providing monolingual classrooms in the mother tongue is not feasible in many contexts. Historically, countries such as the United States, and several European countries have tried various bilingual programmes to help children from minority population groups to acquire proficiency in the majority language in the context of their schools. These have resulted in varying degrees of success. Brisk (1998) points out that traditionally, these programmes were compensatory in nature, designed to help the minority language speakers to learn the mainstream language. With the sociocultural perspective and the related understanding of the relationship between culture, language and development, different models and approaches to bilingual education have emerged. One such model is the 'two-way bilingual immersion' (Perez, 2004b). Perez explains that the two-way bilingual immersion education promotes "*bilingualism, biliteracy, and biculturalism for language minority and language majority students participating with and learning from each other in the same classroom*" (p12). This bilingual immersion model is the one which closely approximates the programme described here.

## BALWADI (Preschool)

The *balwadi* was established more than 30 years ago for children from marginalised communities. It is proactive in promoting secular and inclusive education. There are 90 students and 8 teachers. The emphasis here is on children's physical, social-emotional, language, literacy and cognitive development. Understanding children's home background is given importance. Teachers visit children's homes to establish communication between home and school and strive to continue the communication throughout the child's time at the *balwadi* and beyond.

The two main social groups that make up the student population here are Scheduled Castes (SCs) and a subgroup of the Muslim community, which belongs to category defined by the government as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). While some of the Scheduled Caste community still identify themselves as Hindus, the majority have now embraced Buddhism. They belong to various subgroups but mostly speak Marathi, which is also the primary language of the community.

The members of the Muslim community are butchers by trade and are isolated from the rest of the Muslim community. The Muslim children's mother tongue is Hindi. Their home literacy experiences are complex, as their spoken language is mainly Hindi, but they are exposed to written Urdu or Arabic. Visually, Hindi and Marathi are very similar as they share the Devanagari script, while Urdu is written in the Perso-Arabic script, which is very different, including the directionality of the text.

The two communities have traditionally lived in the same part of the town. In spite of the proximity, there is very little social contact between them. This division is evident in the social interactions between children and their parents at the *balwadi* as well.

A social worker, Najma, who worked with the women from this Muslim community, encouraged them to send their children to the *balwadi*. She also worked as a part time teacher at the *balwadi* to provide support to the children and their families. Over the years, a small number of children from the Muslim community continued to enrol at the *balwadi*. However, they often remained separated from the rest of the children in the classroom. They interacted with Najma, as she spoke Hindi, and they were familiar with her from outside of school. They particularly sought her attention when they were unsure or in distress. One Hindi speaking teacher thus played an important role by providing emotional security particularly, at the beginning of the new academic year.

#### TEACHER, SHRADDHA

Shraddha, the kindergarten teacher at the *balwadi*, began to observe and document information about this group of children, which she was to teach in the following academic year. Their social interactions and language use were her primary focus. She observed that the Hindi speaking children

- usually played within their language group
- often looked for help to the only Hindi speaking teacher in their classroom and responded well to her instructions and requests
- followed instructions given in Marathi, but often by observing others indicating lack of confidence and/ or comprehension
- seldom made an attempt to use Marathi words independently
- rarely talked about home,

The effect of the complete separation of home and school life was evident in how these children socialised, participated in and gained from their preschool experiences. Shraddha identified the needs and difficulties of the non-Marathi speaking children. She saw that it was important to bring in their culture and language into the classroom to enhance their learning and social integration.

Shraddha herself is a Marathi speaker. She speaks and understands Hindi but does not use it in her everyday life. She, therefore, began by using the language more with her Hindi speaking colleagues. She particularly wanted to learn to talk to children about their out of school experiences and be able to give simple instructions about routines and activities in the classroom. At this time she had an opportunity to reflect on her established pedagogical practices, as a long term early literacy initiative had begun at the *balwadi*. The two significant changes implemented were small group, multiple choice activities including imaginative play and incorporation of written language in all aspects of classroom learning. Children were just becoming familiar with the change. However, Shraddha

recognised the value of the new environment as it offered children opportunities to communicate freely and to use language meaningfully and for various purposes.

There was a teacher's aide in the classroom who too was Marathi speaking with some knowledge of Hindi. She worked closely with Shraddha throughout the year.

## THE PROGRAMME

As noted earlier, the main goal of the programme was to help the two linguistically and culturally distinct groups to come together and learn from each other to try and reduce the isolation that the minority language group experienced.

The broad strategy was to provide parallel inputs in both languages; to encourage children to talk to each other in their own language; and to encourage parents to participate more actively in their children's preschool life.

The new academic year began with 25, five to six year old children in class. Out of which, 19 were Marathi speaking and 6 Hindi speaking children. They were divided into four groups and care was taken to ensure that each group had at least one Hindi speaking child. This was to encourage the small Hindi speaking group to widen their social circle and foster greater awareness of the two languages amongst children.

The teacher began by welcoming children individually in their own language rather than giving a common greeting in Marathi at circle time. A few instructions were given in both languages every day to increase children's familiarity with the two languages and to heighten their awareness of different needs amongst their peer group. Discussions took place in both languages encouraging children to use whichever language they felt comfortable with. Several children's familiarity with each other's language was revealed as some of the children knew a few words in both languages. Two weeks later, the following conversation confirmed that the children had noticed the change in the classroom practices:

*A Marathi speaking girl to the teacher:* "Why do you repeat everything in Hindi?"

*Teacher:* "So that the children who do not speak Marathi can understand me better."

*The girl:* "You can talk to us only in Hindi. We all understand it."

*Teacher:* "Will it be alright if I speak in Hindi one day and Marathi the next?"

*Children:* "Yes".

The teacher alternated instructions in two languages, but used the relevant language for individual children as needed. Two weeks later, the teacher suggested a 'Hindi only day', when everyone speaks only in Hindi for the whole day. For the first three weeks, there were very few contributions from the Marathi speaking children during circle time and any other group activities. Gradually, they began to converse primarily in Marathi with a few Hindi words. The Hindi speaking children enjoyed and supported their friends' attempts.

A special bilingual display corner was created. Children were encouraged to find any five objects to display. Each object was labelled in both languages. When the children were ready for a change, the exhibits were changed. This helped greatly with vocabulary building as well as language

development, as children talk about the exhibits to their friends or sometimes even to the whole class. They made effort to remember the names in both languages.

Numerous traditional stories, rhymes and poems are easily available in both languages. These were read to the children on alternate days, and were made available to them either through classroom display or in the form of collated booklets in the reading/ writing area. Children were encouraged to read these and share them with each other. Children were encouraged to write independently. (This writing was done in personal scripts spontaneously invented by each child). The influences of home literacies were evident here. Several Urdu letter like forms appeared in the Hindi speaking children's writing. As noted earlier, Hindi and Marathi scripts are very similar, but the Urdu script is distinctly different.

As children began enjoying and feeling comfortable with attempts at speaking each others' language, the teacher decided to draw their attention to the letter sounds. She has them create word banks and charts of words beginning with the same letter sound in both languages. Children often engaged in word play and punning jokes, e.g. – the word for radish in Hindi is 'mooli', which in Marathi means 'girls'; or 'pao' in Marathi means a 'bun' but in Hindi it means a 'foot' or 'feet'. Children enjoyed sharing their knowledge of vocabulary, particularly the ones they thought others might find interesting or funny.

There are numerous festivals throughout the year celebrated by various cultural subgroups. The *balwadi* teachers always take children to visit the special places on such occasions, talk about them in the classroom, and invite parents or others from the community to talk to the children about how and why these days are celebrated. However, there were very few interactions between the *balwadi* and the Muslim community.

Ramzan Id is one of the most important Muslim festivals celebrated in India. It is preceded by a month of strict fasting and prayer. This year, at the beginning of Ramzan, the teacher brought in a picture of people praying at a mosque. The Muslim children enjoyed talking about their special day. One girl in particular, gave relevant and detailed information about Id celebration with great pride and enthusiasm. The teacher then decided to take the children to visit the Tabut, a special place created outside the mosque for people of all religions to offer their prayers during Ramzan. She asked one of the parents for help. The mother was very pleased that their culture was shared with her child's friends. She talked to the children about Id. Children identified various similarities between how different festivals are celebrated in their homes – such as burning candles, incense and lamps; cooking special foods; visiting families, mosques or temples. This newly gained information began to emerge in children's conversations and writing and other expressive media such as construction corner and clay.

The year long effort of the 'two-way bilingual immersion' culminated in presenting a play at the end of the year gathering. A very popular traditional children's story was modified in to a play with dialogues in both languages. However, children exchanged languages. Hindi speaking children took the Marathi dialogues and vice versa. The systematic, relevant, high quality inputs that showed respect for children's home literacies had given children the necessary confidence for such a challenging task, which they fulfilled with great success.

## OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

This was a qualitative study with most of the data gathered in the form of detailed, systematic writing of descriptive notes and anecdotes. It was supported by children's attempts at speaking, reading and writing in both languages, as well as expressions of ideas through various media. Some of the important observations documented by the teacher are:

- There was a significant increase in the attendance of the Muslim children. These children previously often remained absent from school, but this year all of them were in school for more than 80 percent of the time.
- Children showed keen awareness of different languages spoken by different people in their classroom and used code-switching, the cognitive linguistic ability, to shift appropriately from one language to another (Cenoz & Genesee 2001). For example, a Marathi speaking girl was reading word pairs in two languages, and wanted to know the Hindi word for a tortoise. Instead of asking her teacher, who was sitting nearby, she asked a Hindi speaking boy for help. Another Marathi speaking boy reading a Hindi story retold it to the teacher in Marathi. Children also used a mix of words, sentence structures while talking to their peers to ensure clarity of communication.
- Hindi speaking children shared their home experiences more with their peers as well as teachers.
- Parents of both Hindi and Marathi speaking children appreciated the changes they saw in their children as they had started communicating and socialising more freely with both Hindi and Marathi speaking children at the *balwadi* and with some of them even at home. The parents of Hindi speaking children were also pleased that their children were gaining confidence in speaking Marathi, which is the primary language of the community.

Although very limited because of the small sample size and only descriptive and anecdotal data, this study has had several positive outcomes. Children have shown increased awareness of different linguistic needs and abilities amongst their peers, and of social cultural practices. They have gained greater confidence in speaking both Marathi and Hindi to communicate with each other. This increased confidence in communicative abilities was also reflected in their engagement and sustained interest in literacy related tasks and collaborative play.

The appreciably increased communication and social interactions amongst not only the children but their parents (the mothers in particular), is, of course, the most gratifying outcome. Parents' contributions and appreciation of the changes will strengthen the programme in the long term. Thus, by choosing the much wider perspective of literacy as linguistic, social and cultural phenomenon rather than narrowly understood reading and writing skills, this teacher has managed to set the 25 children and their families on a positive, long term learning path.

Authors:

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Shraddha Sangle, holds a science degree (BSc). She has worked as a kindergarten teacher for more than 10 years. At present, she is the Supervisor at the preschool, where she had implemented this programme.

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