

A thesis submitted
for the
degree of Doctorate of Philosophy
for the University of Canberra

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The home-school connection: Immigrant family
literacy practices and use of technology
in home/first language learning

December 2007

Form B

Abstract

The study addressed immigrant families' and mainstream school systems' support for young children's home language learning in Basel, Switzerland. In Switzerland, as in many European countries and in Australia, early childhood educators work with growing numbers of children from immigrant, refugee and asylum seeking families. The culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse groups of children that now characterise childcare centres, kindergartens and primary schools result from these patterns of immigration and present challenges for teachers and other educators who cater for the needs of increasingly diverse student populations.

The literature on home languages acknowledges the importance of the relationship between a child's first language and development in the second language and the essential role of language proficiency in academic success. Despite knowledge from extensive studies on the interdependency of first and second language development (Cummins, 1979, 1981b, 1991, 2001) and evidence that continued development in a child's first language is crucial for overall cognitive development and transfer to second language learning (Collier, 1995), there is little focus on helping children maintain their home language in the early years of education.

Arguably too, information and communication technologies (ICTs) lead to increased availability and opportunities for global communication, affecting the nature of communication, and creating possibilities for new forms of learning in the home and school. Children must therefore have the opportunity to become proficient users of these new and evolving forms of technology in order to acquire the skills, including language skills that they will need for future employment.

In the light of this conceptual background, the present research focused on:

(1) Immigrant parent beliefs and attitudes to home language use and how languages were used at home.

(2) The strategies families used to promote home language learning in oral and written forms.

(3) The extent to which ICTs were used as a tool to support home languages in the family and school environment.

(4) The kinds of support offered in school and communities and what government policies and initiatives were afforded to home languages.

(5) The nature of school and community policies and practices on the promotion and maintenance on home languages.

These issues were addressed through a qualitative interpretive research approach drawing on the traditions of phenomenography (Marton 1986) and Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The research was based on three main data sources: (1) analysis of policy and curriculum documents from school systems, (2) interviews with key education personnel and (3) interviews with “immigrant” parents (n=58) from diverse socio-economic backgrounds living in Basel. Families were drawn from 16 countries including the former Yugoslavia, (Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia), Spain, South and Central America, and Turkey. All children, whose parents participated in the study, attended state run kindergartens and primary schools.

A major focus in the data collection and analysis was on (a) parents’ perspectives and experiences as they negotiated home language learning in the home, school and community and the extent to which they used ICTs to enrich home language development, and (b) mainstream teachers’ perspectives on the role home languages played in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, as well as the role ICTs and media played in teaching children from immigrant families.

The results of the study showed that:

- (a) immigrant children’s home languages and culture as well as bilingualism and multilingualism are prominent features in Basel integration policy and curriculum documents but this focus is rarely translated to early childhood classroom practice,
- (b) classroom teachers focus predominantly on children learning their second language (German),
- (c) immigrant children’s home language and culture is valued and respected but formal opportunities for children to learn to read and write in their home languages begin only when they have reached second grade,
- (d) there were a range of perspectives, reasons and strategies for maintaining and promoting home languages within families,
- (e) ICT was not an integral part of children’s classroom experiences in kindergarten and scarcely integrated in primary classrooms, but was used in a variety of ways within homes to promote home language and communication,
- (f) there were wide variations in parents’ and teachers’ perspectives on what constitutes parent involvement in children’s learning and education, and

(g) links between home and school were mostly ‘one way’ and formal and some parents desired more frequent, more informal and spontaneous contact with teachers.

These findings have considerable implications for Basel school and classroom practice and for early and middle year policy makers. They show that embedded assumptions of both teachers and parents may have a negative impact on children’s positive identification with both majority and minority language learning. Limited financial support for home language classes is likely to have a negative effect on immigrant children’s home language literacy learning. Dialogue needs to be sought on the potential for ICT use in home language learning. Policy makers’ efforts towards developing multilingualism in all children are problematic. Some parents drew attention to the challenge of learning a third language through a second language, L1 + L2a +L2b + L3+L4. (L1 = home language, L2a= German Swiss dialect, L2b = Standard German, L3= French, L4 = English).

To help better explain and increase awareness of the interrelationship between home languages, ICT use and the home-school connection, a model was developed that reflects the range of immigrant family perspectives on home language learning and the influences that appear to promote home language development within children’s environments. This ‘multilingual social cohesive communications model’ should assist in understanding the important links between home languages, ICTs and home-school communication.

The model emphasises the importance of developing bottom up local level strategies and recognises the vital role of positive interactions between parents and teachers. It builds on a sociocultural view of language learning, tapping on the potential of new learning tools (ICTs) in real and virtual communities. It recognises the importance of intercultural identity formation and at the same time the inhibiting effects of discrimination both overt and covert. The model incorporates the strategies schools need to improve communication with families and to strengthen links between home and school with the view to improving educational outcomes and prospects for immigrant children.

Dedication

Dedicated to my children David and Julie, for demonstrating to me the true meaning of multilingualism. To Phyllis, for her guidance, support and motivation along the way. To Kathleen, Helen, Bill and Christine for their love and encouragement. To David, Julie and Werner, whose support and patience enabled me to complete this thesis.

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Bruno Gadola, Silvia Bollhalder and Judith Strub for their suggestions and support throughout the initial stage of the project. I am especially indebted to Myriam Wyprachtiger for her assistance as transcriber and Tarek Moussalli for his graphic design of the final model. I am grateful to Marcus Jäggi for his technical assistance. I deeply appreciate the insightful discussions with Cemile Mutlu, Marianne Frei, Werner Marti and Armin Lenzin and the continued support, constructive criticism and encouragement from Alison Elliott.