

Back to the mother tongue

Eithne Gallagher argues that by attending to them we can make schools more truly international

One of the main goals of international education is to promote Additive Bilingualism and Biculturalism (Additive Bilingualism occurs when the child's home language is not replaced but added to. Biculturalism is a near native knowledge of two languages including the ability to respond effectively to the demands of two cultures). In order to accomplish this, we need to implement a curriculum that has a truly international perspective and a pedagogical approach that develops an open attitude to other cultures.

What steps do we need to take to achieve this? I think administrators and teachers have to ask themselves four basic questions:

- What does it mean to us that our school is international?
- How does that make us different from other schools?
- In what ways does our school need to change in order to reflect the cultural diversity of our student population?
- How do we view language? Do we see it as a problem or as a resource?

In answering these questions it should become very clear that multiculturalism needs to exist throughout the curriculum and the curriculum needs to address racism at every grade level. A key factor is the acceptance and respect for other languages and cultures. We have to find ways of promoting language and culture throughout the day, everyday. Multicultural units in isolation that are not an integral part of the curriculum could do more harm than good. At best they are colourful but superficial and at worst they simply accentuate differences.

Research tells us that children who have developed the rules that govern their first language have an easier time learning successive languages. It has also been observed that children who have not fully developed a first language can experience language-based cognitive difficulties later on. It is now recognized that effective enrichment programs take a minimum of five to six years to close the achievement gap in second language acquisition.

Collier and Thomas carried out one of the largest investigations of educational effectiveness, *School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students*. They analysed two million students' records from 1982-1999. More than 150 home languages were represented in their sample. Collier and Thomas report that the amount of formal schooling in L1 (mother-tongue language) that students have received is the strongest prediction of how rapidly students will catch up academically in L2. This factor is a stronger predictor than socio-economic status or the extent to which the parents may or may not speak English.

What does this mean for us in international education? A few international schools have bilingual programmes for their younger children and a mother-tongue programme in primary and secondary. This is usually an after-school programme where the school lends its facilities to mother-tongue teachers. These schools send out a very clear mes-

sage to their communities: we value your language and your culture.

What can we do in the absence of such a programme or to reinforce such provision? First, we must make it clear to our community that we believe being bilingual is a resource for the student, the school and the society. We can manifest this in many ways:

- Incorporate students' home language and cultural experiences into curricular instruction. Ensure that signs and posters and instructions use the various languages of the community.
- Educate staff and parents that their attitudes need to be positive to all languages and cultures.
- Demonstrate through curricular content that rationality is not the monopoly of any one culture.
- Be aware that students will need their mother tongues when they return to their native country and if they take MYP or IB Diplomas.
- Ensure that teachers have a good understanding of language acquisition and are aware of current research on language development. Provide in-service training on linguistic and cultural awareness.
- Encourage the ongoing development of the mother tongue whilst also acknowledging ESL as a priority.
- Create opportunities for home language development; invite parents to tell stories to a class in languages other than English, encourage the keeping of a mother tongue/English rubric, the writing of projects and stories in a home language and exhibit this work, the chance to use a home language during class presentations and assemblies.
- Establish contacts with teachers and students in other international schools to share information about their cultures.
- Employ teachers of foreign nationalities and incorporate the mother tongue teachers into the school community.

I firmly believe that administrators, usually the decision-makers in our schools, need to actively involve all teachers in making our schools truly international. Planning time should be set aside when the whole curriculum can be reviewed from an international perspective. Decisions about implementing a mother tongue programme and ensuring that there is adequate ESL provision may be administrative, but they are vital to an awareness by staff students and parents that 'international' values are taken seriously. Each child brings to a school a unique set of backgrounds, competencies, skills sensitivities and needs and this should be acknowledged.

Eithne Gallagher is an Elementary ESL teacher at Marymount International School, Rome, Italy.

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