Community as Curriculum

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Educators work together to develop activities that explicitly build on the resources and abilities that children bring to school.

Although it is spring, snow blankets the schoolyard. Eight-year-old Ashish and his parents, dressed in layers and shivering from the cold, are not used to this climate, having arrived in Canada three weeks earlier from India. Bypassing the schoolyard, they enter Thornwood Public School and report directly to the main office where Lynda Sliz, one of Thornwood’s English as a Second Language teachers, is expecting them. Indeed, she has arranged for an Urdu interpreter to assist with the reception process.

Ms. Sliz greets the family warmly. She escorts them to the librarian’s office where they are able to talk quietly. There she initiates a discussion on school policies, routines, and expectations—traversing a range of subjects including the grade-level curriculum, Thornwood’s safe arrival program, home-school book protocols, and appropriate clothing for gym.

Through the interpreter, Ashish’s parents are encouraged to ask questions regarding the new school system so that they can better support their child at Thornwood. They are also encouraged to raise any concerns they may have. Ashish is free to listen and join in the discussion, to read a dual-language book in Urdu, or to draw. Throughout the
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We describe these activities by integrating two perspectives: (a) the perspective of a grade one teacher, Patricia Chow, who, together with her colleagues, initiated and implemented a variety of projects aimed at enriching students’ literacy experiences and forging stronger home-school connections, and (b) the perspective of two university-based researchers, Jim Cummins and Sandra Schecter, who both supported and critically reflected on these activities in light of their broader implications for understanding children’s literacy development and for developing school-based language policies.

We begin by situating our approach to school-based language policy within a language-as-resource orientation to language planning. We continue by reviewing the relevant research evidence on bilingualism. Then we highlight some innovative approaches developed by practitioners in one local, particularized school setting, elaborating on the immigrant, urban context that informed these innovations. Finally, we outline a framework for predicting the adequacy of educational provision for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

**ORIENTATIONS TO LANGUAGE PLANNING**

Richard Ruiz (1988) has introduced a useful distinction between three orientations to language planning: (a) language-as-problem, (b) language-as-right, and (c) language-as-resource. The language-as-problem orientation focuses on the resolution of societal problems associated with language learning or linguistic diversity. Provision of ESL programs for students who need support in English-language learning is one example of this orientation.

The language-as-right orientation is illustrated in the minority language rights guaranteed to Canada’s official language minorities by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However, these legal rights are enshrined only for specific groups in a particular context. In cases where no legal rights are enshrined with respect to language, we are left with the difficult question about the ethical rights that children have to maintain and develop their home languages. In the past, many educators actively discouraged children and parents from using their home language for communication in the home (most brutally in the case of First Nations students). To reverse this pattern involves challenging assimilationist attitudes and practices that have long been tacitly supported by the societal power structure. The reality that, until recently, issues related to individual and societal bilingualism and language maintenance rarely crossed the threshold of teacher education programs is an illustration of this tacit support.

Ruiz suggested that while problem and rights orientations are valid and important, they are insufficient as a basis for language planning in linguistically diverse societies because hostility and divisiveness

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are often inherent in them. He recommended giving greater emphasis to a **language-as-resource** orientation in which linguistic diversity is seen as a societal resource that should be nurtured for the benefit of all groups. The language-as-resource orientation appeals to us because it is more inclusive than either of the other two orientations, and it incorporates the other two in various respects. It is inclusive insofar as it highlights the interests of the entire society rather than those of particular minority groups and, in so doing, transcends the “us versus them” mentality that characterizes much of the debate in this area. It incorporates many aspects of the other orientations since solving language problems and eliminating discrimination on the basis of language can be viewed as strategies that will result in better use of society’s human resources.

The distinctions highlighted by Ruiz are relevant to the work of the school- and university-based educators who collaborated in the context of our action research project to explore what a language-as-resource orientation might look like in practice in linguistically and culturally diverse schools. Although in this article we focus on the implications of this orientation for class curriculum, over time collaborators’ perspectives evolved well beyond this dimension to encompass a **community-as-resource** orientation to educational practice.

### THE RESEARCH BASIS FOR A COMMUNITY-AS-RESOURCE POLICY ORIENTATION

Over the past 20 years, evidence has accumulated that linguistic, cognitive, and affective advantages accrue to students who develop literacy skills in two or more languages and continue biliterate development at least through elementary school (Corson, 1993; Cummins & Danesi, 1990). In short, development of literacy in two or more languages (additive bilingualism) constitutes a positive force in children’s educational and personal development. An obvious implication is that teachers should seek opportunities to encourage students to develop literacy in their home languages and to assist parents in this process. At the level of policy and practice, however, attitudes toward heritage language development range from indifference to ambivalence, suggesting that many schools still have a long way to go before children’s mother tongues are viewed as a resource to be cultivated rather than as a problem to be overcome.

![Schools still have a long way to go before children’s mother tongues are viewed as a resource to be cultivated rather than as a problem to be overcome.](image)

Overwhelmingly, the research shows that encouragement of mother tongue development will in no way impede the development of English academic skills (Schecter & Bayley, 2002). Thus, teachers are in a position to communicate these research findings to linguistic-minority parents and children and support home language development within the classroom as a learning resource for individual children and for the classroom community as a whole.

### CREATING AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING CLIMATE AT THORNWOOD PUBLIC SCHOOL

Thornwood Public School, located in the densely urban area of Mississauga, Ontario, serves an ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse student population, many of whom are first-generation immigrants to Canada. Thornwood is a K–5 school, with the student population ranging in age from 4 to 10 years. There are 725 students in the school, with the majority of the students in the early grades.

Most recent school statistics indicate 143 arrivals from every part of the world within the past 2 years. The
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In recent immigration statistics report provided by the Peel District School Board, more than 40 different languages were identified as spoken by members of the Thornwood school community. Urdu, Tamil, Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Mandarin, and Korean are the most common languages spoken by students in the school. The high mobility of the student population and the diversity of the school community have a major impact on decisions made by school personnel on how best to organize the teaching team to ensure effective programming and provision for the many new students that arrive throughout the school year. The staff has experimented with a variety of service delivery models to better address the needs of ESL students. The currently adopted model provides ESL students time with the ESL teacher for 40 to 80 minutes each morning in small instructional groups on a withdrawal basis. In the afternoon, the ESL teacher is integrated into the regular classroom for two or three 40-minute periods in a 10-day cycle. (Every attempt is made to have the ESL teachers see the children at the same time every day.) Although at the time of implementation, it was acknowledged that this model limited the amount of time for the integration of the ESL teacher into the classroom, it was believed that it provided the ESL teacher with sufficient opportunity to be in the students’ classroom learning environment. In this manner, the ESL teacher could assist students with the application of their English skills in content subjects such as social studies and science, and could serve as an important resource in classroom teachers’ efforts to accommodate the needs of ESL students in the regular program.

**Valuing Community Resources through Multilingual and Multicultural Approaches to Learning**

Several action research initiatives were pursued by a group of Thornwood teachers in partnership with university-based colleagues. Early on we identified some core beliefs and goals:

- **We are committed to forging a stronger home-school connection.**
- **We believe that reading in any language develops reading ability.**
- **We want to engage parents in reading with their children at home and to encourage discussion and sharing of experiences between parents and children.**

In order to pursue these directions, we decided to create book bags so that the children could bring dual-language books between school and home.

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- **Non-English-speaking parents could enjoy reading the stories to their children in their own language and expand on the ideas, values, skills, and concepts they encountered in the books.**
- **Through the use of audiocassettes, ESL students and parents would be exposed to basic English vocabulary, common grammatical structures, and conventions of English text.**
- **The dual-language books would permit students to access prior knowledge through their L1, thereby providing a framework for transfer of this knowledge to English.**
- **By means of the project, the school would be communicating to parents and students that we value their language, their prior experiences, their knowledge, and their culture as important resources for the curriculum and the community.**
- **By acknowledging to students that their L1 represents a significant accomplishment, we would encourage them to express themselves more fully through their L1 in both oral and written communication.**

In short, we set out to enhance the status of multilingual children by creating a context within the school where they would have ample opportunities to demonstrate their skills and to share with their peers and teachers aspects of their culture, countries of origin, and personal experiences. We also wanted to support parents’ efforts to develop their children’s skills in their L1 and to maintain lines of communication across generations. We anticipated opening up possibilities for greater social participation by parents as they became involved in activities such as translating and recording books, using multilingual word processors, helping out in school, and becoming more active in the community. In addition, we expected...
to expand our own awareness and appreciation of other languages and cultures represented both by the community and by our own unique experiences and backgrounds.

As we discussed the dual-language initiative further, however, we realized that we knew very little about the home literacy practices and beliefs of parents in our community. Therefore, we developed a questionnaire to explore the literacy practices of the parents and to assess the extent to which they would support the kinds of home–school literacy initiatives we were discussing. We also asked parents if they would be willing to tell some of their favorite stories to small groups of children within the school setting, either in English or their home language.

The Multilingual Reading Survey

The survey was designed to elicit information about children’s reading experiences and habits, the sources of children’s literature that parents had access to, parents’ willingness to share their cultural experiences and multilingual expertise, and their access to audio technology. The survey was also an attempt to communicate with parents about our attitudes as educators toward the languages and cultures that their children brought to school. We received 291 completed questionnaires. The responses were encouraging.

Parents expressed an interest in a program that would support their children both in acquiring English and in maintaining their first language and culture.

From the survey, we discovered that the majority of the school children whose families responded had stories read to them at least three times a week. Almost half the respondents reported reading books in English to their children and almost as many read both English and L1 books. Only a relatively small percentage of parents (13%) were reading only L1 books. We were encouraged to see that a large majority of parents stated that they talked about the books/stories with their children. A large majority of parents reported telling stories to their children, with about equal numbers using English and the L1. Many expressed a willingness to tell stories to small groups of children in the school context.

Many parents expressed delight that their children’s teachers were interested in learning more about their students’ backgrounds and the experiences that shaped their lives.

We had initially thought that there were about 15 different languages spoken in the children’s homes. From the questionnaire, we came to realize that more than 40 languages were represented. After English, spoken by 93 respondents, the most common languages were Arabic (33 respondents), Urdu (30), Tamil (28), and Hindi (21). We also learned that the majority of families would welcome the opportunity to read and listen to dual-language books, and we got information on how feasible it might be for families to listen to audio recordings that would accompany the printed texts. We became aware of a small number of bookstores and heritage language schools that might be useful sources. We also discovered from the survey that many families had L1 books that they would consider sharing with small groups of students.

However, more valuable than specific information about family reading and writing practices was the message that this initiative conveyed to the community concerning the framework in which practitioners at Thornwood were thinking about their teaching of literacy. In fact, many parents expressed delight that their children’s teachers were interested in learning more about their students’ backgrounds and the experiences that shaped their lives. Family members saw the reading survey as an indication of Thornwood teachers’ convictions that acquiring knowledge of the interests, cultural identities, and linguistic resources of their students would help them to teach effectively. The survey also reinforced for parents the sincerity of teachers’ interest in integrating community resources into the class curriculum.

The Dual-Language Books and Stories Project

After we had identified some book suppliers that focused on multicultural/multilingual books, we were faced with the challenge of what to order. Many factors went into the selection of our dual-language books. Although we could not assess the quality of translation before purchasing the books, we did take into consideration the cultural sensitivity of various subject matters. For example, Charlotte’s Web (White, 1952), where the central character is a pig, was clearly not a good choice for our school because of our Muslim population.

We were mindful of Viv Edwards’s (1998) comment that repetition, rhythm, and rhyme will help children to internalize the
vocabulary and structures of English as well as to predict what comes next. This consideration was influential in leading us to choose The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle (1969) and It’s Mine! by Rod Campbell (1988). The repetitive language of these books, the appealing visual support, and the embedded mathematical and scientific concepts made them perfect choices.

We believed that it was important to provide our students with positive role models from a variety of cultures. Babu’s Day by Mira Kapur (1997), about the life of a Tamil boy in Bombay, is excellent for initiating discussions about life in another country. A Baby Just Like Me by Susan Winter (1994) features a young girl of African descent who is coming to terms with the addition of a new baby into her family. This book is especially worthwhile because it deals with an issue that is potentially relevant to many students. We felt that students could relate to Anna Goes to School by Kati Teague (1991), a story about a young girl who learns to adjust to a new school environment and overcomes her reluctance to attend school.

As we waited impatiently for the dual-language books that we ordered to arrive, we decided to make our own original dual-language stories. Patricia Chow went to the Mississauga Central Library to check out dual-language books for her class to serve as models for our own books. Her students were fascinated with them and enthusiastically took up the challenge to make their own. The stories were written in English by Patricia’s grade one students and translated by their parents or by older bilingual students in the school (see Figure 1a and b). By creating these books with the help of teachers, friends, and family, the students had the opportunity to explore their language and English in a developmentally appropriate way. Care was taken to ensure that the layout of the books allowed the two languages to enjoy equal prominence. On each double-page spread, the illustration is set above two columns of text—the English on the left, and the first language on the right. Duplicates were made so that the children could have a keepsake, and the school could keep a copy for its dual-language book bag collection.

One parent, Mrs. Ismail, acted as the Arabic word processor expert for some of the students in Patricia’s class. Other parents solicited extended family members to translate, handwrite the words, or audio-record the story. This was truly a collaborative effort—a pooling of expertise!

To celebrate the students’ accomplishments, all books published by the class during the month of May—both dual-language and English-only—were displayed in the school’s showcase outside the main office. They served as visible evidence of the value that Thornwood placed on the diversity of the school’s student population. We hoped that they were a welcome sight for new registrants to the school during June and September.

Another exciting development took place in June. A newly immigrated Korean student joined Patricia’s class. Chang Woo was sociable and immediately well liked. Day after day, he listened politely during story time and independently did work supplied by his ESL teacher, Brenda Wong. After a week, it occurred to Patricia that he might enjoy listening to a story in Korean. She was aware that Zube Patel, a colleague who taught grade five, had encouraged a Korean student to do...
some creative writing in his native language. Another Korean student with a basic mastery of English had acted as his translator.

In preparing her students for the surprise, Patricia highlighted how attentive Chang Woo had been on the carpet even though he did not understand English. Now it was their turn to experience listening to a story in a language that they might not understand. Patricia encouraged them to observe Chang Woo’s reaction to the language of the story. On cue, the boys came in and the author started to read. It took a few seconds for Chang Woo to register that he was hearing a story in his own native language and the smile that crept across his face thrilled his classmates. Then the translator read the story in English. Out of curiosity, Patricia asked Chang Woo if he could read the Korean story. He took it and, to the class’ amazement, began to read confidently and fluently. His classmates gasped in admiration. Later, he readily wrote a story in Korean. We arranged for this story to be translated into English by another Korean bilingual student in grade five. We learned that Chang Woo was highly literate in his first language.

In order to extend the audience for our student-authored dual-language stories, Patricia and her colleague James Wilson created a Web site (http://thornwood.peelschools.org) on which the stories could reside for a prolonged period of time. In this manner, teachers could access the stories to teach and inspire their ESL students or to showcase student-made multilingual stories.

The commercially produced dual-language books finally did arrive—to an enthusiastic welcome by parents and students. By then, however, participants in our project had developed a sense of text as dynamic entities that could be enhanced, morphed, and appropriated according to the needs and dispositions of readers. Immediately, participating teachers began working with parents in the community to audio-record the books. Community members found creative ways to enliven the recordings. For example, Mrs. Ding, a Mandarin-speaking parent, played a recording of the Moonlight Sonata in the background to set the mood for her reading of Peace at Last by Jill Murphy (1995).

### Dual-Language Storytelling

At the end of the school year, we planned a half-day storytelling session to celebrate multicultural books and the diversity of languages in the school. One teacher, Brenda Wong, volunteered to do storytelling in Cantonese and English, and we invited Mrs. Ismail to tell a story in Arabic and English. We discussed with Mrs. Ismail the choice of dual-language book to use as the basis of the storytelling, and together decided on It’s Mine! by Rod Campbell (1988), a book with elaborate illustrations and appealing story content for young readers. Mrs. Ismail offered to make large cardboard animals to represent the characters in the story. We arranged for a trial run in a kindergarten class. The young children were enthralled by her visual displays and by her narrative in Arabic. Many of the kindergartners spoke Arabic as their home language and therefore understood her account of the story.

On the day of the storytelling, we set up four storytelling stations in the school. Primary and junior classes were pooled together to make up four groups that rotated through the stations in the course of the morning. We videotaped the sessions to gain feedback for future planning. The sessions were received enthusiastically by a large majority of the students. Brenda Wong reported that her Cantonese-speaking students told her afterwards that they were surprised and thrilled to hear a story told in Cantonese in an “English” school. They were proud that their home language could be heard by their teachers and peers. In some of the sessions, children showed curiosity toward other languages by asking for equivalents of familiar English vocabulary.

![Figure 1b. Excerpt from Maria’s bilingual Russian–English story](image)
terms such as “good morning,” “family,” “school,” and “friends.” We learned from this project that parents and teachers can work together in a partnership to organize storytelling sessions. On the basis of our experience, we suggest grouping the students according to grade level so that the stories can better match students’ age and interest level. Also, when producing audiotapes of dual-language books or telling stories based on these books, it may be advisable to read each page first in one language and then in the other so that bilingual and monolingual children can listen together without losing interest.

**A N A C T I O N F R A M E W O R K FOR A C A D E M I C LANGUAGE LEARNING**

We now turn to the conceptual framework that has evolved from our action research initiative. At the time the initiative was getting underway, this framework had not yet been elaborated in its present form, but the school- and university-based participants brought some shared assumptions to the table that would become core ideas embedded in the framework. We all saw students’ home languages and cultures as potential resources for learning. We also believed strongly in the importance of parental involvement in children’s education. We all shared a commitment to connecting with individual children on a personal level as well as at an instructional level. Finally, we all shared a view of literacy that went beyond merely the acquisition of skills in English.

Despite these shared assumptions, we had to work very hard to bridge the substantial distances between professional cohorts entrenched in different discourse communities and with divergent understandings of their missions as educators. As the collaboration progressed, and as we entered a work-intensive, hands-on stage, it became evident through a variety of reflection formats—project organizing meetings, focus group sessions, participants’ journal reflections, interview conversations—that teachers, researchers, and administrators did not share the same understandings of their and other stakeholders’ respective roles in and obligations toward children’s learning. Collaborating teachers were struggling to accommodate pervasive Ministry of Education policies regarding curricular expectations and standards. Administrators representing the collaborating institutions situated their commitments to students and proficiency in languages other than English is seen as a significant accomplishment, clearly a very different message regarding identity is communicated to students. These issues are explored further in the framework depicted in Figure 2.

The central sphere in Figure 2 represents the interpersonal space created in the interactions between teachers and students. Within this interpersonal space, or what Vygotsky (1978) termed the *zone of proximal development*, knowledge is generated (learning occurs) and identities are negotiated. In contexts of cultural, linguistic, or economic diversity where social inequality inevitably exists, these interactions are never neutral. They either challenge the operation of coercive relations of power in the wider society or they reinforce these power relations.
At the other end of the sphere, we can visualize the discourse of societal power relations that is broadcast into the classroom and directly affects how identities are negotiated between teachers and students. For example, the discourse that asserts that bilingual children need to assimilate and give up their L1 if they are to succeed in the society is not a neutral scientific statement of fact; on the contrary, it contradicts the scientific data on this issue (Cummins, 2000) and derives directly from patterns of coercive power relations in the wider society.

This construction of children’s bilingualism as a problem to be resolved (as opposed to an asset to be nurtured) frequently results in patterns of teacher–student interaction that communicate to students that they should leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door.

Our framework argues that within the interpersonal space of teacher–student interactions, students’ cognitive engagement must be maximized if they are to progress academically. Similarly, teacher–student interactions must affirm students’ cultural, linguistic, and personal identities in order to create classroom conditions for maximum identity investment in the learning process.

Thus, there is a reciprocal relationship between cognitive engagement and identity investment. The more students learn, the more their academic self-concept grows, and the more academically engaged they become. For students to invest their sense of self, their identity, in acquiring their new language and participating actively...
in their new culture, they must experience positive and affirming interactions with members of that culture, including their teachers. This perspective entails two implications for how teachers define their role. First, teachers must see their role as creating instructional contexts in which second-language learners can become active partners in the learning process; and second, teachers must view themselves as learners. That is, to teach effectively they must learn from their students about students’ cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. Maximum cognitive engagement and maximum identity investment are realized in instruction that provides opportunities for students to focus on meaning, on language itself, and on use of both oral and written language. In this regard, the importance of extensive reading and writing in the development of both academic self-confidence and academic language proficiency cannot be overemphasized. Reading texts (ideally in both L1 and L2) that students can relate to their personal histories or their understanding of the world generates the motivation to keep on reading. Writing narratives and analyses (in L1 and L2) that express their growing sense of self allows students to map out where they have come from and where they are going. However, students will also benefit from an explicit focus on developing an awareness of language and its pervasive role in all aspects of our society. This focus on language itself and its intersection with various kinds of power relations in society encourages students to harvest the language (Goodman, 2003). In this way, they absorb maximum academic language from what they read and are enabled to use this language powerfully and effectively in their own speaking and writing.

**Reflections on Past and Future Directions**

Collaborators in the “Situating learning in home, school, and community” project at Thornwood recognize that our efforts at providing...
ing native language support are only in their infancy. In an ongoing effort to ensure that bilingual students feel a greater sense of belonging and emotional support and develop high self-esteem, our group continues to focus on providing native language support. The initiative has allowed us to discover and access knowledge, expertise, and energy in our students and community that we were largely unaware of in previous years (Schecter & Cummins, 2003). We are encouraged by the fact that new ideas emerge in a relatively spontaneous way now that our collective mindsets are oriented in this direction. For example, teacher Lynda Sliz gave her newcomers the challenging project of creating an illustrated bilingual dictionary. She supplied a commercial illustrated dictionary as a template and as a reference. The students demonstrated a strong sense of independence and pride in compiling and illustrating their bilingual dictionaries.

We are very much aware that we are unlikely to find many of the directions described and advocated in this article explicitly recommended in most state or provincial curriculum guidelines. Our project and ongoing language planning endeavors have attempted to go to the deep structure of our pedagogical mandate by affirming the identities of the students we teach, involving parents and other family members as powerful contributors to their children’s learning, and ensuring that all students become cognitively engaged in the learning process.

In addition, we believe that the Thornwood experience illustrates how collegial dialogue and brainstorming of ideas at the school level can generate practices that, through a spiraling process, engage with existing theory and community practices to generate deeper understandings of what can be achieved pedagogically in multilingual school contexts. We hope, too, that in time the cultural and linguistic capital that bilingual students bring to schools will be valued at its full worth.

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