

Why I Kept My Kids Out of Preschool

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Introduction: Porque?

Quality preschool, as we know, is key to lifelong success, as the research clearly shows. After all, if the human brain is most responsive (acquiring some 85% of its intellectual mass) before the age of five, then these early years are critical. Why then did I, an academic, choose to keep my children home? The reason is simple; I could not find in my vicinity a preschool that employed two or more languages with their children. To me, my children's multilingual skills, that is, their ability to understand and utter interaction-facilitating words and phrases like "abhi, abhi, nahi, nahi, bus bus!" (now, no, enough!) in Hindi and Spanish with me and with each other was muy importante—far more important than being able to "read" books in English and to merely maintain in their repertoires fashionable relics of another language they once knew, such as greetings and expressions of love and/or other sentiments, like "Kese ho?" (How are you?)

That's because I firmly believe that no amount of reading and writing instruction yields success until a child has developed phonemic awareness (i.e., can identify the individual and blended sounds of the languages she hears and connect them to their written representations) and a sizeable vocabulary, which speech and interaction foster. So first comes speech (primary literacy) and only then or alongside this, once a child's interaction skills have been excited and finetuned through experiences that require them to collaborate and simultaneously build their critical thinking skills, their reading and writing (secondary literacy). I was convinced back then, as I still am, that quality preschooling would replicate to the extent possible, the sociolinguistic milieu of a child's home and primary community, and attempt to steadily amplify this experience by adding in another language or two, and ardently use more than just English to stimulate my children's senses, so that they could be fully engaged—cognitively and otherwise. The *Ten Pillars of a Good Childhood*, a handy checklist developed by the Association for Childhood International (www.decaforchildhood.org) was designed to do precisely this, to remind us of our obligation to all children. These guidelines summarize and highlight the primary tenets of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and remind us that children need "loving caregivers" and "strong families." Since language undergirds interaction, creative play (Pillar 2), "creative expression" and comprehensive or all-around engagement (Pillars 6 & 7), and practically every other index, including a child's sense of safety and security (Pillar 1) and "supportive, nurturing communities" (Pillar 8), home language maintenance should be a priority. Indeed, successful early and lifelong education is contingent upon use of one's primary language.

Después

I was afraid that the moment my children heard just one language in their school day, they would stop using other languages, so I tried to stall what I feared was inevitable. And sure, just as I had predicted, both my children, one after the other, started using just English with each other and even with me. They might have been rated higher had their other language skills been considered in the assessment. I believe the reason they were “on grade level” in the first few years (K-2) was because their English skills were acceptable. Clearly, like most bilinguals, we hadn’t excluded English in our home, unlike what many teachers assume is common practice in homes where languages other than English are spoken. We had simply included Hindi (mostly) and some Spanish in our daily exchanges—yielding a multilanguage environment, but their teachers in those early years appeared to care just about English. Not surprisingly, they were monolingual, which might explain why they expressed minimal to no interest in other languages—even when I sometimes managed to force my children to code-mix in couplets and other assignments, and when I did my best to mention their Hindi and Spanish language skills at PA meetings. I noticed that my children began to question me when I reminded them to use the other languages we had been using at home. My “Hindi bolo” (“Speak Hindi”) plea fell on deaf ears, probably because I wasn’t enforcing and reinforcing the language of the school. Nothing hurt more than when they announced and threatened, as they increasing did, “No more Hindi!” “Who cares about Hindi?” and “I’m not going to speak any more Hindi or Spanish!” I was mortified by the extent of my children’s home language resistance and utter rejection. And then a miracle happened-- a teacher at the school came to the rescue! It was around the time my youngest was about to complete first grade, and this transformative experience is referenced in the following letter that I sent to my 3rd grader’s teacher earlier this week (see Fig. 2):

Dear Carrie:

Thank you so much for inviting the children in your class to display their cultural pride today by wearing clothes that mirror their rich cultures and traditions. The only other time I've seen Sahara this excited was when she heard Mr. Kilbert say "Ek, dho, theen" (1, 2, 3 in Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarathi, & Urdu).

"Mama! Guess what?" she exclaimed as she ran toward me yesterday after school (note that this child usually saunters after school), as she did the day Mr. Kilbert magically transformed her attitude towards languages other than English, "We get to wear what we want and to share our cultures, so can I wear my lehenga and churris (Indian clothing and bangles)?" "Ha, beta" (Yes, my child), I responded. "And guess what? Mrs. Lawson knows what ladoos are and she said she's going to make 25!" "Really? Wow! That's so nice of her!" "We should make some coconut ones and send them to school, but we don't have all the ingredients today." "And can you make my Bollywood choti and can I wear a bindi?" she continued. "Quoo nahi?" (Why not)? "I'm so excited!" she reminded me periodically. And that's all she talked about to "Didi" (her big sister) all evening and again this morning.

Just so you know, you do have magical powers, including the power to build and affirm in each child confidence and pride in their home languages and in their personal and multicultural identities, and we greatly appreciate your desire and ability to help children embrace that which few teachers frequently talk or talk about . . . Sahara and her classmates are truly fortunate to have you. No wonder Arushi, like many others, still says "I love Mrs. Lawson! She's my favorite teacher!"

Dhanyevaad!
Anita

Fig. 2: A Parent's Letter to a Teacher

Since that day, when my youngest heard a school authority, Mr. Kilbert, use three words from Hindi inside her school, both my children have returned home-- figuratively. What I mean is that their negative attitude towards other languages has been replaced with a deep respect for differences. They have resumed their use of code-mixed language at home and have made every effort to seek out multilingual media and to employ other languages in their classroom assignments and in arts and crafts and other self-creations not initiated by their instructors. In my experience, children, like most adults, love to share their stories and that's how they learn quite a bit. This is hardly surprising, as they feel validated. When we invite them to share what they know much about, such as their language, culture, and interests, we ignite in them a love for learning (essentially continued discovery and analysis), and more importantly, we empower them. The confidence they display as a result mirrors their successful socialization in the academic world.

Since language (verbal and nonverbal) undergirds instruction, learning and assessment, and most accurately mirrors a child's understanding, abilities and overall school readiness, a preschool that prizes bi/multilingualism, as most of us would agree, is the most qualitative one can provide—and not just for those children in whose homes languages other than English are employed. Indeed, when we don't mention other languages or use with alacrity words and other inviting samples from them, we send the message that other languages—and associated cultures—are unimportant. As I remind fellow educators in *Language Building Blocks* (2012), what we don't say speaks volumes (p. 105). Yet, it's a shame that we view mainstream children from English-dominant homes that are enrolled in bilingual schools as privileged, yet tend to consider "ELLs" in bilingual programs (most of them short-term or transitional) as "at-risk."

Even the labels we use convey these sentiments. Take the label "ELL," *English language learner*, so widely used to describe many students and non-students resident in the U.S. It says that a person is learning English. Unlike the term *dual language learner*, it makes no mention of the other language skills the individual in question possesses. While "ELL" is more positive than LEP (limited English proficient), it is still biased in favor of English. How can we expect to fully engage all children when we deny so many their heritage—their home language(s)? Kharkhurin (2012) aptly sums up this contradiction when he observes: "Ironically, the social and professional success in the country of immigrants turns out to be

contingent on an individual's ability to minimize the link between one's ethnic, cultural and linguistic origins and to assimilate into mainstream English speaking society" (p. 139).

We tend to consider students' abilities and scores in English as the primary gauge of success and often forget that actually growing their home language skills is the fastest and most effective way to attain this objective. If in the process, students learn two or more languages and cultures, and two or more ways of constructing and analyzing their world, what's wrong with that? Isn't their love for more than one language likely to make them more creative and globally competitive? If bilingualism is a plus for the bourgeoisie, then it's a plus for all. Why else would the European Commission mention "the learning of languages and development of innovation and creativity" under "key competencies" (Commission 2008, p. 137) in its report to European parliaments. And does institutional use of more than one language really cost that much more? Not really, as the Indian government's "Three Language Formula" and the successful Utah Dual Language Immersion program report (Utah State Office of Education, 2013).

If inundating students with just English is the fastest way to attain this objective, then why is it that despite its mandate of four hours of English a day (which one student described as "equal to zero"), the performance of AZ's ELLs' on the nation's 2013 report card—and not just in reading, but in math, as well--has declined ever since its English-only amendment in 2005? Achievement gaps persist when monolingual and monocultural instructional practices are employed. "The achievement gap between white and black students actually widened by five points between 1992 and 2013, to a 30-point gap. The score for English language learners (ELL) has also *fallen significantly since 2005* (they weren't separated as a group in 1992)" [emphasis added] reports *The Christian Science Monitor* (<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2014/0507/US-report-card-stagnation-in-12th-grade-math-reading-scores>). Yet, "the percentage of students who are Hispanic has risen from 7 to 20 percent in that time, and the percentage of students with a disability has doubled, from 5 to 11 percent, while the portion of students who are white has dropped from 74 percent to 58 percent," the report continues. John Easton, director of the Institute of Education Sciences and acting commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics is quoted as saying: "We don't explain away test scores based on demographics." "But it is also useful to keep in mind that we are seeing increases in some subgroups that have traditionally performed lower than some other subgroups. It increases the challenge on us to reach out to these student groups." Arguably, lack of language and cultural consonance or *cultural comfort* as I prefer to term this instructional trend of emphasizing and prioritizing just English is largely responsible for the underperformance of many minority language speakers. Research shows that identity (i.e., feeling a sense of affinity towards one's teacher and the school culture) is central to learning, particularly in the formative years. What this means is that when we overlook the value of languages other than English, and of multicultural and multimodal modes of contact, students are minimally engaged (Pandey, 2014a, b, c, 2012, 2010; Kharkhurin, 2012; Paiva, 2011; Block, 2007; Houk, 2005; Chee, 2003).

Students in need of special education, and dual language learners/DLLs, as well as speakers of non-Standard dialects of English are consistently portrayed as “at-risk” and high-need, despite evidence that they have unique *funds of knowledge* (Pandey, 2010). Despite the growing linguistic diversity in our schools and communities, and the increased focus on accountability, individualized instruction that taps *students’ primary cultures and languages*, and *collaboration* with their families and communities is still lacking, yet these approaches help all students realize their full potential. Most policy makers get caught up in *the numbers game* (i.e., counting the numbers of “at-risk” students, and the number of Standard English words they know, as well as the number of years they take to master English, and tracking their test scores, among other frequently employed success indicators) and forget that *quantity is not quality*.

According to the Nov. 7, 2013 issue of *Education Week*, “Larger shares of students reached the “proficient” level in 2013 than did so in 2011, and achievement was far higher than when the tests were first given in the early 1990s. But the numbers still painted a less-than-rosy picture of American academic strength: In grade 4, only 42 percent of students are proficient in math, and 35 percent are proficient in reading.” Interestingly, most ELLs’ performance remained unchanged since 2011 (see summary scores in Fig. 1 below).

- 13% in 4th grade math deemed “proficient” (increase since initial); 4% in 8th grade math (no increase since initial)
- 6% in 4th grade reading; 3% in 8th grade reading (no increase since initial or previous assessment)

Fig. 1: “ELLs” Scores in 2013

Despite a slight nationwide increase in non-ELL 4th graders’ performance on both math and reading, the scores of ELLs in both areas actually fell (by 3 to 4 points) in English-only States, with the exception of TN (where the exclusion rate for ELLs and students with disabilities—two groups which unfortunately, are often conflated—has been traditionally high¹). This is noteworthy and warrants further attention. This drop in ELLs’ scores in these states strongly suggests that the *language and culture of instruction* are having a negative impact on students’ performance. Given that nationwide, the number of so-called ELLs is on the rise,² remedying language-instructional approaches teachers employ is urgent. To date, no study shows that bilingual approaches do not work. On the contrary, more and more studies show the all-around pluses of integrating other languages in classrooms across America and the world, even in schools not designated as “bilingual.” Why then is it taking us so long to understand this simple point (i.e., that language that is easily understood = success)? As Kharkhurin (2012) reminds us, “[T]he increasing demands for creative enterprise emphasize the importance of creative education as never before (p. 136).

El Fin y Recommendations

High quality professional development (PD) and teaching at all levels—especially preschool, when children are most impressionable and vulnerable--must prioritize multilingualism and multiculturalism. For this to happen, institutional backing is essential. The visible absence of a sufficient number of state and federal offices which overtly celebrate the bilingualism and multilingualism that is America (in their names for instance), is a testament to the inert workings of an English-only pedagogy in many locations—one that is largely responsible for our achievement gap. For starters, employees and administrators at the U.S. Department of Education's OELA office should work to promptly change the name to something more inclusive, like Office of Language Acquisition, echoing the far more welcoming Romance language greeting (H)OLA. As of December 12, 2014, the opening lines on the Website still read "Thank you for visiting the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students homepage," reminding us of the challenges we face.³ When the nomenclature our policy makers and funding agencies employ is assimilationist, then we must start by changing this, so that we can work to eliminate the sociolinguistic biases that are so ingrained and pervasive in our society.

At the district and local level, in addition to professional development aimed at enhancing administrators,' instructors,' and families' multicultural competence, and best practices for (second) language acquisition and culturally inclusive vocabulary building, offering *survival language sessions* before or after school and/or on weekends is highly advisable. These could be facilitated in whole or part by students and parents, simultaneously bridging the school house and the home--enhancing the relationship between parents and teachers in the process (Pandey, 2010). Only then will success in core competencies rise for the vast majority instead of a select few. We must ensure that educators get to know each student and publicly acknowledge and embrace the language and literacy practices they bring with them. California's award of the Seal of Biliteracy is commendable in this regard and should be emulated in every state. It's time to move beyond pseudo bilingualism and lip service, and to stop regulating English as the language of instruction in a country that does not constitutionally mandate English. Indeed, it's time to start focusing on what students really need to succeed—the language of genuine interest and care and other supports (not overhauls) that build on the rich sociolinguistic capital our children bring to the school table. To put it simply, schooling should be complementary, not contradictory to one's home life (philosophy), and working closely with caregivers and community leaders can make this reality of success come to life for more than just a few.

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Endnotes

1. “Georgia, Kentucky, North Dakota and Tennessee all had 8th grade reading exclusion rates over 25 percent for students with disabilities” states the report. “North Dakota and California had among the highest exclusion rates for 4th grade students with disabilities, with 17 percent and 16 percent, respectively. Kentucky excluded 17 percent of its 8th

grade students with disabilities,” it continues. In contrast, bilingual-friendly states like NM had lower exclusion rates for ELLs and students with “disabilities.” New Mexico, for instance, only excluded 7 percent of its English-learners from the 8th grade reading NAEP in 2013 as opposed to 44% in 1998.

2. In 2013, Hispanic students made up approximately 24% of the fourth-grade student population up approximately 18 percentage points since 1990 and 1 percent since 2011. Hispanic students made up approximately 23% of 8th graders, up 15% points from 1990 and about the same as 2011. The percentage of ELLs in 4th grade increased from about 4% (math 1996) or 5% (1998 reading) to about 10% in 2013. The percentage of ELLs in 8th grade increased from about 2% (1996 and 1998) to 5% in 2013. These numbers have grown since last year.
3. [English Learners: an Asset for Global, Multilingual Future](#) reads the first “What’s New” tab . While it is indeed the case that DLLs are an asset, there is no reason that all American students can’t be assets for our global multilingual world, and one that is not merely predicated on the distant “future.”