Bilingual, Bicultural Children in a Waldorf Early Childhood Classroom

~ Karen Imhof

The number of bilingual children in our programs is growing. In his indications about language, Rudolf Steiner did not concern himself with bilingual children directly. Many anthroposophical writers and Waldorf educators have written about speech and language learning, but with the focus on monolingual children. Bilingualism was not a particularly well researched theme for mainstream educators and linguists either; for a long time, bilingualism has been considered a disorder rather than a desired state and an important part of a child's identity. Research has moved on to a more inclusive and less discriminating view of bilingualism, but this biased perception has informed how educational programs have been designed for decades. This view has shaped how bilingual children are viewed and treated in schools even today, where they are by no means a minority any more.

Bilinguals are demographically well represented today. This is mirrored in my New York City classroom, where the majority of the children are at least bilingual, if not trilingual, and usually exhibit very different levels of language proficiency when they start school. My role as a Waldorf teacher working with very young children is to support them as they incarnate into their bodies, gain trust in the world and their abilities, and also freely develop to their fullest potential. Relating to the outside world through language is a significant factor in this process. Language affects how we can be with other people and deeply influences how we build our identity. In this sense a curriculum for bilingual children has to go beyond the mere topic of language learning.

How do bilingual children hear and learn two or more languages? If they grow up hearing and learning two languages at the same time or one after the other, how does their experience differ between these two modes?

The linguist Lily Wong Fillmore developed a model of second language learning in a social context that is useful for looking at the language learning of bilingual children in a Waldorf early childhood classroom. Rudolf Steiner's views on general language learning are added to broaden this social model and show how a more comprehensive view can enrich our understanding of bilingual language learning.

What is often not fully acknowledged in the linguistic research on bilingual children is the importance of cultural factors for second language learning. Most bilingual children, independent of their language proficiency, are also bicultural, meaning that they have roots in more than one language and culture. This has an effect on the way bilingual children approach the process of secondary language learning in significant ways. The theme of cultural inclusivity is large on its own. This paper concentrates on those aspects of cultural inclusivity that directly concern learning language and finding identity in bilingual children aged two-and-a-half to six years old in a Waldorf early childhood setting.

Considering past research on bilingualism is complicated. Early research often held a biased (and often racially biased) view of bilingualism as an educational complication. The general attitude was held that bilingualism was a disorder that could be corrected through relentless instruction in a standard majority language, pushing out all traces of the invading language. The remedy was imposed despite the fact that the unwanted language was often the language spoken in the child's home, also carrying the child's family heritage and tradition.

Eventually another group of researchers started to look at the role that social factors played in second language learning and how they are instrumental to learning the second language. Researcher John Schumann developed a new model for language acquisition by arguing that second language learning is based on social factors as well, such as the integration into a community and personal feelings of assimilation. If this complex of experiences is positive, the future looks bright. Negative experiences of language learning and attitudes toward this process hinder possibilities for future healthy intellectual, social, and emotional development.

While he did not address bilingualism itself, Rudolf Steiner gave considerable attention to general language acquisition and language development. He

emphasized several aspects in Waldorf education that the mainstream view also acknowledges. First is the aspect of imitation. Waldorf education sees imitation as the driving force for all learning in the young child and definitely with language learning. Children learn to speak by imitating movement, the gestures that accompany speech sounds, and then the sounds themselves. Steiner writes, "While the human being is growing into the physical, earthly world, his inner nature is developing in such a way that this development proceeds in the first place out of gesture, out of differentiation of movement. In the inner nature of the organism speech develops out of movement in all its aspects, and thought develops out of speech. This deeply significant law underlies all human development. Everything which makes its appearance in sound, in speech, is the result of gesture, mediated through the inner nature of the human organism" (Steiner 1924, Lecture III).

What is bilingualism? One definition describes it as the use of two or more languages in everyday life. A person is bilingual when she can function in each language according to given needs.

Before babies communicate through spoken language, they communicate through body movements when spoken to. When the mother speaks, the baby moves. If she is still, the baby's body is also still. Motor movement, speech, and cognitive development are closely intertwined and support each other. As a consequence, thinking develops out of the structuring activity that speech has on the brain. Understanding the world through the senses, through thought, is developed out of speech. Movement precedes speech; speech precedes thought. First out of movement he learns to speak, to articulate. Only then does thinking come forth from speech. We must, therefore, look upon this sequence as being something of importance: gesture, speech, thought, or the process of thinking (Steiner 1924, Lecture III).

A consequence of this intense imitation process is that young children organize their bodies according to what comes to them through the senses and in ways that allow them to participate in the world. This particularly holds true when looking at the effect of language on children. Young children are so open and susceptible to outside impressions that they take in the verbal and non-verbal expressions of adults wholly through their senses and are not consciously able to withdraw from them. This way speech and auditory experiences have a forming effect on the children's physical and soul organization. "And language coming from the child's environment, works upon the child's soul. Through language we take in from our surroundings what we make our own in the realm of the soul. The entire soul atmosphere of our surroundings permeates us through the medium of language. And we know that the child is one great sense organ; we know that inner processes are inaugurated through these soul impressions" (Steiner 1988: 44).

This knowledge is not confined to Waldorf education. Ample evidence in scientific research has confirmed the effects of verbal and nonverbal communication on the organs, particularly on the brains of babies even before they can speak themselves. The implications of these findings for the language development of children are that children need interactive communication (verbal and non-verbal) where they can both observe and imitate movements, gestures and expressions of others in order to develop non-verbal and verbal language themselves. They need an active speaker who speaks to them regardless of their intellectual understanding of the words or their own ability to speak. "Children need our sympathetic voice and word-sounds no less than the 'songs without words' from their surrounding. Just as an infant would languish without our soothing words and lullabies, and as a baby would suffer inwardly without our nursery rhymes and little games, a toddler would not thrive without our words and word-sounds that harmonize his tender experiences" (de Haes 2014:52). How language is presented and language development supported is of monumental importance. All language learning comes not only through sound but also through movement and gesture.

What is bilingualism? One definition describes it as the use of two or more languages in everyday life. A person is bilingual when she can function in each

language according to given needs. How do emerging bilingual children perceive speech?

Steiner observes that speech starts when children gain uprightness and start walking. Hearing, on the other hand, happens much earlier. Infants even develop impressive auditory discriminatory capacities for languages in utero. Fetuses who were regularly read prose passages by their mothers prior to birth demonstrated a preference for these passages after birth in comparison to new passages. Dual language learners can benefit from these innate discriminatory capacities even before they are born. Newborn bilingual infants can differentiate between their native language and another language shortly after birth if these languages belong to a different rhythmical group (e.g. French and Russian) and by about four and a half months if they belong to the same rhythmical group (e.g. Spanish and Catalan). This ability to differentiate between languages early in life is an important foundation for building separate linguistic systems later.

While infants can differentiate sounds early in their life, the first sound production begins at about six months with babbling. At this point, babies are able to reproduce the sounds of all languages. But at about ten months, infants tune into the properties of their surrounding languages, reducing their spoken language sounds to those that are used in the relevant languages. This, in turn, changes their cognitive ability to perceive different sounds.

There are two categories of bilingual acquisition—simultaneous and successive.

Simultaneous bilingual children develop their two languages in parallel and achieve early language milestones on a similar schedule to monolingual children. This also holds true for children who learn a spoken language and sign language. Successive learners, who learn one language before the second language is introduced, already possess linguistic knowledge, know what language is, what it is used for, and in which setting it is used. This is of help to them when they start to learn a second language, particularly with skill transfer to academic reading and writing in the second language. However, when it comes to oral language use, the influence of one language on the other depends more on individual attributes such as personality, interaction style, environmental or cognitive factors. This is true when both languages are established properly.

It is a different picture when both languages are not established properly. When competence is lacking in both languages, the effect on the academic achievements of the child can be negative. Without adequately developed language, it is difficult for structured thinking to emerge. Children need language with which to think. Rudolf Steiner emphasized the importance of this sequence: gesture, speech, and then thought, or the process of thinking. This can be a guiding principle in supporting language learners in our classes.

One may see differences in how bilingual children structure their speech because of cross-linguistic influences. Substitution of a word-order rule from one language to another is common. This is a typical phenomenon of bilingual development that does not point to language confusion or difficulties in coping with different language input. But all in all, cross-linguistic influences are usually not rampant in bilingual children

Another difference is "code switching," when the speaker shifts to another language for a word or a sentence and then reverts back to the original language. Bilinguals switch languages for reasons other than simple confusion, one of them being that certain phrases, notions or concepts are better expressed in one language than the other.

There is another important aspect to understand when code switching is used as a communicative or social strategy. This can be the case when code switching is used to mark the identity of a group (such as the extensive use of code switching in English and Spanish, as found in the Puerto Rican communities in New York). This should be seen as an identity issue and not as a lack of proficiency.

Code switching is often criticized and has led to the misconception that bilinguals code switch out of laziness or carelessness about their language skills. The conception that code switching will lead to some form of language mix that is neither one language nor the other has led teachers to discourage code switching. Current research does not validate this concern. Bilingual researchers have found that code switching happens deliberately depending on the listener, the social environment, or the theme of conversation. Thus, code mixing can be viewed as a reflection of the child's growing linguistic competence: in order to code mix, the child has to have access to the grammar in both languages in order to integrate

them in one sentence or conversation. Linguist Shana Poplack, who conducted pioneering work in the area of code switching, wrote, "Code switching is a verbal skill requiring a large degree of linguistic competence in more than one language rather than a defect arising from insufficient knowledge of one or the other. Rather than representing deviant behavior, it is actually a suggestive indicator of degree of bilingual competence" (Poplack cited in Grosjean 2010: 57). In addition, as stated above, as it can be a part of a child's cultural identity and, therefore, a fundamental part of who they are. To refuse a child the possibility of using her languages for self-expression is to diminish the child as an individual.

Whatever strategy the family adopts—who speaks which language and when—what is important is to ensure that the child receives enough input from both languages and that she has a real need and opportunity to use both. Language learning should come from active human interaction, not passive input from TV, computer programs, or voice recordings. Both Waldorf and mainstream research affirm this need.

When bilingual children enter school with little knowledge of the language spoken there, they are often expected to acquire the majority language as best as they can without paying any attention to their first language. This approach presents numerous problems on many levels. If children do not understand or speak the dominant language, learning of skills and content is often slow and they fall behind. In addition, they often feel lonely and insecure, especially if they alone do not know the language spoken by most of their peers. This struggle is even harder when the teacher has no knowledge of the child's language or culture, and there is nobody around to help them out. Research reveals the frustration of children who do not have sufficient second-language skills. They are not able to express their intelligence, their feelings and their ideas to their peers and teachers. They cannot do so in the language of the school, and they are often not allowed to do so in their home language.

Lily Wong Fillmore describes three social strategies that language learners adopt to enter into a second language setting. First they join a group and act as if they know what is going on, even if they don't. Second, they give the impression—with a few chosen words—that they can speak the language, even if they don't. Third, they count on the help of their friends to actually learn words, sentences and expressions in the new language (Wong Fillmore 1991, p. 52). Children will often attach to a teacher or an older capable child and imitate unconsciously what they hear until they gain an understanding of the language.

Steiner speaks repeatedly about the openness of a young child's senses and the influence of attachment figures in the imitation process of the young child. This holds true particularly for initial language acquisition. Rainer Patzlaff writes, "In order to develop in a healthy way, children need the 'spark' and impulse of being spoken to on a regular basis. It is not the number of words that matter, but certain qualities that ask a lot of today's adults. We must not chatter to children while thinking of something entirely different, but make the effort to keep everything from our minds when we speak. All our powers of feeling and empathy must be involved when we surround the children with conscious awareness. Then, and only then, will our words be true, authentic expressions of our I." (Patzlaff 2011, p. 30) Children need a truthful expression of our own I in order to build their I. Bilingual language learners who do not know the meaning of words yet are even more in need of our true interest and empathy.

It can be said that the language learner needs a language companion, a buddy, who speaks with the special needs of the learner in mind. The helpful language spoken tends to be "structurally simpler, more redundant and repetitive, and is characterized by greater structural regularity than what is found in ordinary usage" (Wong Fillmore 1991, p. 54).

How can we adapt our classroom language in order to fulfill this prerequisite for successful second language learning? In a Waldorf classroom we already have wonderful tools to practice rhythmical, repetitive language use with children. The Waldorf educator and researcher, Rainer Patzlaff, refers to Piaget's observation about language learning: language learning in children is not a product of intellectual learning but a by-product of sensorimotor intelligence, the immediate synchronizing of sense perceptions and motor activity without the use of mental images or

rational insights. From utilizing sensory and motor skills, children move on to unconsciously absorb language structure, leading to conscious thinking and using language as a tool. In other words, children learn language through movement, gesture, sensing the environment, rhythm and repetition, and richly spoken language in stories, circles, and puppet plays.

According to Steiner children learn the grammar of a language by experiencing the rhythmical movement of the language. He speaks in detail about the effect that the rhythmical movement of arms and legs has on primary language formation. "When you see how in the process of sentence formation the legs are working upwards into speech, and how the content, the meaning of words enters into the process of sound production—that is, into the inner experience of the structure of the sentence—you have an impression of how the beat-like, rhythmical elements the moving legs works upon the more musical- thematic and inward element of the moving arms and hands…Through the movement of the legs, the child learns to form correct sentences. Speech has to be developed on the basis of the right kind of walking and of the free movement of the arms" (Steiner 1988, p. 32ff.). Rhythmic movement, singing games, dance, and eurythmy all support this integration of movement and speech.

Bilinguals have both two languages and two cultures.

Bilinguals have both two languages and two cultures. Recognition and affirmation of each is also critically important for identity development and experience of belonging. Family, community, and place provide "anchors," according to Ruth van Reken, to make the child feel safe and simultaneously "mirror" back a message of how she is seen by those around her (Van Reken et al. 2017, p. 108). In traditional monolingual and monocultural childhoods these anchors and mirrors are more or less steady. A consistent language, known community, and recognized cultural values give guidance in how to interact with one another. If this process of anchoring goes well and the feedback coming to the children from their mirrors is kind and accepting, then children can develop their unique identity and find their belonging in a particular culture (Van Reken et al. 2017, p. 117).

When children move to a different place and culture, the anchors and mirrors become unstable. Even if the family remains a stable entity, the community and place have changed. In this case what is mirrored back to the children depends on how the new community supports them. If the community helps the child to understand how life works in the new place with language and culture, the child's identity can grow in exciting new ways. However, if the community mirrors back to the child that she is not understood and not helped in understanding this different cultural context, then identity building is much more difficult. The new place feels unsafe.

Living with two or more languages and cultures is increasingly common for children in our time. Yet it is poorly understood in our schools. We know that successful school programs for bilingual children not only promote bilingual language learning but also have a real understanding of the children and cultures involved. The practice of cultural inclusivity and anti-bias education in classrooms is, therefore, not a choice but a necessity if we want to successfully support bilingual and bicultural children in our schools. Parents and teachers must be aware of what children are going through when they are learning to live with two or more languages and cultures, and must ease their passage as they establish their identity as bicultural-bilingual individuals. Ultimately, the journey into bilingualism and biculturalism should be a joyful one. This is only possible if the children feel accepted and supported as individuals who are rooted in more than one culture and language. Language learning and cultural inclusivity go hand in hand.

In addition to creating a culturally inclusive classroom and a true environment of belonging for bilingual-bicultural children, the importance of supportive social relationships from teachers comes up in all studies. Lily Wong Fillmore's model of language learning and the extensive studies of Jim

Cummins have shown that the experience of bilingual children depends critically on the relationships they can form with educators and other people in their environment. Cummins writes, "The starting point for understanding why (bilingual) students choose to engage academically or, alternatively, withdraw from academic efforts is to acknowledge that the human relationship is at the heart of schooling. All of us know this from our own experiences. If we felt that a teacher believed in us and cared for us, then we put forth much more effort than if we felt that he or she did not like us or considered us not very capable" (Cummins 2000, p. 40).

Rudolf Steiner sees the role of adults and the influence of environmental factors as decisive not only for the language development of a child but for the overall organization of their bodies. Contrary to the more restricted linguistic models of language learning, he defines language learning as imitative activity that is connected to the child's sensory and motor experiences. Speech and environmental configurations enter the child through the openness of their senses and influence the constitutional development of body and soul. Therefore, speaking to the child is a great responsibility. It requires a conscious speaker as a truthful model for imitation.

How can we develop into such conscious and truthful speakers? Rudolf Steiner speaks repeatedly about the need to create an inner relationship with the child as the basis for a genuine teacher-child connection (Steiner 1924, Lecture V). He demands that we study the children deeply, not only in a general anthroposophical approach, but in a very real way as they present themselves before and within us. Regarding bilingual-bicultural children, this means that we have to educate ourselves about the specific linguistic ways they use to articulate themselves, the influence of their two languages on each other, and the importance of retaining their bilingualism and biculturalism in the classroom and their home lives. ◆

Resources:

1. Cummins, Jim (2000): *Language, Power and Pedagogy. Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Tonawanda, New York: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
2. De Haes, Daniel (2014): *The Creative Word. The Young Child's Experience of Language and Stories.* Spring Valley, New York: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America.
3. Patzlaff, Rainer (2011): *The Child from Birth to Three in Waldorf Education and Child Care.* Spring Valley, New York: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America.
4. Steiner, Rudolf (1924): *Human Values in Education*, Lectures III, V, GA# 310. Rudolf Steiner Archive. https://wn.rsarchive.org/GA/GA0310/19240721a01.html.
5. Steiner, Rudolf (1988): *The Child's Changing Consciousness and Waldorf Education.* Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press.
6. Van Reken, Ruth, David C. Pollock, and Michael V. Pollock. (2017): *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*. Third Edition. Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
7. Wong Fillmore, Lily (1991): *Second Language Learning in Children: a Model of Language Learning in Social Context*. *In Language Processing in Bilingual Children* by Ellen Bialystok. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Karen Imhof *is currently working as a kindergarten teacher at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York. She received her degree in Waldorf Early Childhood Education from Sunbridge Institute. Prior to becoming a Waldorf teacher, Karen studied history, philosophy, and economics at the University of Vienna in Austria and worked as a researcher at the University of Vienna and the Austrian Academy of Sciences.*