

THE WORLD WE HAVE TO GAIN WITH BILINGUALISM AND BICULTURALISM

In the United States, something has gone terribly awry: The political forces that lead to the domination of one language and culture over others directly contradict what we know to be the skills needed for success in the 21st century and the ingredients for strong family and community connections. From the voices we gathered for *And Still We Speak*. . . and from our own experiences, here is what we now know more than ever: fluency in more than one language and the ability to bridge cultural realities is of tremendous benefit - to individuals, to families, to communities, to the nation and to the international community. If children and youth were supported to become fluent in at least two languages, to know and be rooted in their family language and heritage, and to develop cross-cultural skills, these six things would be true:

1. *Families would be stronger and more cohesive.*

Maintaining or reclaiming the home language, family heritage and history strengthens families. It strengthens the sense of belonging and fulfillment that is so central to identity, and at the most basic level, survival. Children, from entry into the world throughout their development, learn the world in large part through language. Language is the expression of a people - encapsulating the history, the culture, the rhythms and ways of being. Within families, language is both a means of functional communication and a way of communicating an understanding of the world. Family connection and communication depends, however, on having a shared language. It is particularly essential in a family that has immigrated and is adjusting to a new land to integrate their new culture with the old and seeking to create continuity with a culture and homeland that is far away geographically, but deeply embedded in the heart and dynamics of the home. With advances in technology, young people in immigrant families today are the first generation to more frequently travel and communicate internationally to maintain family ties in other countries. This means that maintaining the family language is crucial for young people to be able to connect and participate in their multiple national communities.

2. *Our society would have stronger intergroup relationships, more humane international collaboration and understanding.*

When two people, or two nations, do not share a language and have little true understanding of each others' cultures, it is almost certain there will be misunderstandings. Sometimes those misunderstandings result in hurt feelings or confusion, other times they feed stereotypes and distrust, and sometimes they result in violence or dangerous incidents. International relations are delicate in a nuclear age. Race relations are tense in societies

plagued by racism, discrimination and misperceptions of people from different ethnic and class backgrounds. Immigrants and newcomers to communities in the United States easily misunderstand and are misunderstood by those whose neighborhoods they have come to join.

Understanding, respect and appreciation for other cultures and languages comes through learning and speaking the languages of our ancestors, and from learning other peoples languages. Through this exchange young people are able to do more than function in the two or more languages they may speak; they deepen their understanding of themselves and raise their consciousness of how to bridge relationships with people from different backgrounds. As Americans, we have the opportunity, the responsibility and the joyful possibility of knowing multiple languages and developing a respectful consciousness with which to view our neighbors, community, nation and world. Within a global community, English is a common language that facilitates international communication, but we also need to learn from the wisdom of cultures and societies outside the United States. Cultural and linguistic diversity is and will continue to be a great asset to our country in knitting stronger and more respectful relationships to the world.

3. Children would do better in school and the intellectual life of the nation would be strengthened.

Children who know or learn two languages do better in school. Numerous linguists, sociologists and program evaluators have come to the same conclusion - that bilingual proficiency is associated with higher academic achievement. Bilingual children and youth - even matched with monolingual youth of similar age, socioeconomic level and family background - on almost any measure of cognitive flexibility, will do better. So academically, intellectually and mentally, there is real benefit for the child who develops two languages. Our communities and nation benefit from the intellectual strengths brought by people who think from multiple perspectives and who can draw directly upon the knowledge from various regions of the world.

4. New generations would have more choice and opportunity as to what kind of work they do and where.

Fluency in more than one language is viewed as a highly desirable professional asset in many companies and organizations. Bilingual and multilingual employees increase a firm's access to clients and strengthen a non-profit or public service organization's access to its community. Familiarity and ability to function in more than one culture is also a valuable asset that employers seek. Such skills are especially vital for organizations and businesses serving diverse communities and trying to provide respectful and culturally appropriate services. Grassroots and community organizations seek bilingual and bicultural activists and organizers who can

communicate and connect with their constituencies. And in an increasingly global economy, multinational corporations look for people with language and cultural skills to conduct business abroad.

However, it is not just that business and international trade can be done more efficiently with bilingual and bicultural employees. For a nation such as America, where many corporations have a history of exploitative relations to workers in other countries, the humanizing of those workers becomes crucial to facilitating more responsive and responsible economic exchanges. With a workforce truly skilled in speaking multiple languages and respecting the different cultures of the world, the doing of business can become more humane. Business can be done more respectfully and relationships that stem from business interactions can work to knit a closer human community around the globe.

5. The quality of our community life would be enriched, political participation strengthened, cultural life more vibrant, and the social fabric stronger:

Bilingual and bicultural competencies are tremendous assets in the life of a community. When people can use their strongest language as a way to communicate ideas, they are able to more fully participate and contribute, and the community therefore is able to draw upon the resources of the greatest number of its members. Where government reaches out to its citizens and residents through the channels of the different languages spoken, and where neighbors can reach out to each other by speaking the languages of newcomers and immigrants, a far stronger social fabric can be knit. On a deep and profound level, human beings seek connection to each other and to the variation of human experience that comes from contact with other peoples, cultures and ways of life. This is one reason why many people love to travel and why travel has often been a component of elite education experienced by children of mostly wealthier families. It is understood to be a broadening experience - to see, to hear, to feel different ways of life and thereby to gain understanding of the world in new ways.

Contact with people from diverse cultures adds depth to our understanding of ourselves and the world. The cities and communities of the United States are rich with the perspectives, sounds and tastes of diverse cultures, languages and traditions. Many cities are proud of their ethnic neighborhoods, restaurants of many palates, bookstores with literature from around the world, music clubs and dancehalls ranging from salsa to country, Taiko drumming to African High-Life, German polka bands and hard rock. Many people choose to live in diverse communities rather than more homogeneous ones to be able to feel a part of the rainbow of human cultures. Musicians and artists thrive on the vibrant interchange across

cultures, bringing us ever evolving creative expression. This vibrancy feeds the spirit and greatly enhances the quality of community life.

6. People would develop a dual-consciousness - a "third eye."

There is a depth of soul, spirituality and basic personal benefit that comes from knowing one's family language and cultural heritage, while having the skills to be part of other cultures and languages as well. Fluency in more than one language and immersion in more than one culture opens the door to a dual consciousness - an additional lens with which to view the world. This dual consciousness is more than seeing things from two perspectives, it is a superceding consciousness - an ability to see across, embrace and synthesize all of the variances and contradictions between the two ways of seeing. This conscious process of reconciling multiple cultures provides the freedom to define ones identity and creativity to imagine new answers for living in a complex society.

Reprinted by the Early Childhood Equity Alliance with permission from California Tomorrow