

## **Bilingual Education in Practice, A Multifunctional Model of Minority Language Programs in Western Canada**

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### **Abstract**

*Research studies indicate that bilingual education can either empower or disable minority students, depending on the goals, structures and human relations emphasized in the model.<sup>1</sup> This article reviews models of bilingual education and presents data collected during semi-structured individual interviews with 14 grade 6 children in one bilingual program in Western Canada, the Chinese Bilingual Program. The seven themes which emerged from the data are: perceived second language ability, negative and positive experiences of speaking Chinese, understanding of Multiculturalism, feelings of belonging, feelings of ethnic identity, the role of bilingual education in forming their thinking and reasons for being enrolled in the program.*

Minority language rights and equal opportunities in education for minorities have long been social issues in many parts of the world. In the last few decades, dramatic demographic changes and the rise of civil rights movements in many western countries have brought such issues to the forefront of public policy. In the United States, bilingual education for minority children has been in hot debate among politicians, educators and large numbers of concerned citizens. In Europe, the debate around linguistic diversity has made some governments allow inclusion of regional indigenous languages in the education system. In New Zealand, Maori activists withdrew their children from the Anglo education system and worked toward establishing a separate Maori school system<sup>2</sup>. In order to address minority concerns, Canada's federal policy of Multiculturalism was introduced in the 1970s. Esses and Gardner note that one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Abdeljalil Akkari. "Bilingual Education: Beyond Linguistic Instrumentalization". Bilingual Research Journal, vol. 22, no. 2, 3, & 4. (Spring, Summer and Fall, 1998): 103-125, 117

<sup>2</sup> Akkari. 106.

objectives of the Act was to “preserve and enhance the use of languages other than English or French”<sup>3</sup>. As a result, several bilingual programs, Ukrainian, German, Hebrew, Chinese, Arabic, and Spanish bilingual programs appeared in Western Canadian schools. In these programs children receive instruction in an ethnic minority language for about half of their total school instruction time from kindergarten to grade 6.

Though some of these programs have been in existence for more than two decades, with most maintaining or increasing their annual intake of students, very little research has been done on their effectiveness. Most programs also remain unknown to the rest of the country and the world. Known collectively in the 1980s and 90s as “Canadian Heritage Language Programs”, there are a variety of differences among these programs in terms of the type of students they attract and their instructional arrangements (because they serve varying needs of different language communities). Studies are needed to investigate how different language programs function in different social contexts and their effectiveness.

This paper focuses on the perceptions of grade 6 children in one of Edmonton’s bilingual programs - the Chinese Bilingual Program. It first situates the Chinese Bilingual Program among models of bilingual education for minority languages and then discusses the students’ comments about multiculturalism, minority language learning and its use in- and outside of the school and its impact on their own identity.

### **Theoretical Background**

Though English and French are Canada’s official languages, a large number of people speak other minority languages, and their numbers are increasing. In 1961, 43.8% of the Canadians were of British origin, 30.4% were French, and 25.8% were of other ethnic origins. In 1991, the British population dropped to 36.3% of the Canadian population and the French to 26.6%. The people of other ethnic origins became the largest group at 37.2%.<sup>4</sup> The 1996 Statistic Canada’s census indicates that 16% of Canadians spoke

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<sup>3</sup> Antonio J. Tavares. “From Heritage to International Languages: Globalism and western Canadian Trends in Heritage Language Education”. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1. (2000): 156-171.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Castronguay. “The Fading Canadian Duality”, in *Language in Canada*, comp. and ed. John Edwards (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 37.

languages other than English or French as their mother tongues. In some areas such as the Lower Mainland in British Columbia, more than 50% of students in the Vancouver school board spoke a language other than English as their first language.<sup>5</sup> Though Canada has adopted Multiculturalism as a national policy, until now, most immigrant children and the children of immigrants are expected to merge into mainstream schools with little or no support for the development or maintenance of their first or home language. In other words, a child's mother tongue is not seen as either a part of the Canadian heritage or an asset for a child's learning. In fact, due to attitudes of schools and unilingual administrators, children from different cultural backgrounds and languages have often been encouraged to abandon their heritage language and learn an official language instead.

Research studies consistently demonstrate that minority children's cognitive/academic development and socio-psychological development are enhanced by maintaining and further developing their first language. In fact, Cummins's "Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis" holds that the development and maintenance of minority students' home language contribute significantly to the learning of a second language and academic success.

A child's second language competence is partly dependent on the level of competence already achieved in the first language. The more developed the first language, the earlier it will be to develop the second language. When the first language is at a low stage of evolution, the more difficulty the achievement of bilingualism will be.<sup>6</sup>

The Threshold Theory, first postulated by Cummins<sup>7</sup> and Toukoma and Skutnabb-Kangas<sup>8</sup> also addresses the relationship between children's first language development and their cognition. It holds that when a child's first language is not well developed, learning a second language will have a detrimental effect on the child's cognition. Furthermore, they postulate that children with age-appropriate abilities in two languages

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<sup>5</sup> L. McGivern and C. Eddy. *Language Policy: Vancouver's Multicultural Mosaic*. *TESOL Journal*, vol. 8, no. 3, (1999). 29-34

<sup>6</sup> Colleen Baker. *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Sydney: Multilingual Matters. 1996) 151.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Cummins. "The Influence of Bilingualism on Cognitive Growth: A Synthesis of Research Findings and Explanatory Hypotheses." *Working Papers on Bilingualism* 9, (1976) 1-43

may have cognitive advantages over monolinguals. However, due to policies and practices of assimilation in Canadian schools little or no credit or acknowledgement is offered to minority children for knowledge of their first language. Under such a system, “Students prior experiences are seen as an impediment to academic growth rather than as the foundation upon which academic development can be built”.<sup>9</sup>

Studies in social psychology indicate that the pressure to assimilate into mainstream society puts the mental health and self-esteem of minority students under constant threat. The outcomes of such pressure can cause heightened anxiety, lower self-esteem, feelings of marginality, and identity confusion, especially in children.<sup>10</sup> Liebkind points out that the relationship between the majority and the minority is inseparably intertwined with value differentials, with the minority often on the ‘losing side’.<sup>11</sup> Her summary of many empirical studies on negative minority self-esteem reveals an unjustified assumption about minority dependence on, and conformity to, the norms of the ongoing majority. As a result, subordinated groups often develop negative concepts of themselves and positive attitudes towards dominant groups, attributing their disadvantaged position to some fault in themselves. In other words, as Cummins also observes “..subordinated group members often partially internalize the ways they are defined or positioned by the dominant group and come to see themselves as inferiors”.<sup>12</sup> Self-identity by the minorities is closely related to their language environment. Bonny Northon elaborates, “every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and recognizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are, in other

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<sup>8</sup> P. Toukoma and T. Skutinabb-Kangas. The Intensive teaching of the Mother Tongue to Migrant Children at Pre-school Age. (Research Report No. 26) Department of Sociology and Social Psychology, University of Tampere. (1977).

<sup>9</sup> Jim Cummins. Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society. (Ontario, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education, 1996). 12

<sup>10</sup> S. Klimidis, G. Stuart, and L.H. Minas, “Immigrant Status and Gender Effects on Psychopathology and Self-concept in Adolescents: A Test of the Migration-morbidity Hypothesis”, Comprehensive Psychiatry, vol. 35 (1994) 393-404.; M. Rutter, W. Yule, M. Berger, B. Yule, J. Morton, and C. Bagley. “Children of West Indian Immigrants: I. Rates of Behavioral Deviance and of Psychiatric Disorders”, Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, vol. 15, (1974) 241-262

<sup>11</sup> Karmela Liebkind, “The identity of a Minority”, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development vol. 10, no.1, (1989) 47-57. 53.

<sup>12</sup> J. Cummins, (1996), 12.

words, engaged in identity construction and negotiation”.<sup>13</sup> Liebkind points out “Identity relates to desire - the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety.”<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu explores the nature of such identity construction and negotiation. In his view, when a person speaks, the speaker wants not only to be understood, but also to be ‘believed, obeyed, respected,’ and “distinguished’. However, a speaker’s ability to ‘command the listener’ is unequally structured for different speakers because of the symbolic power relations between them.<sup>15</sup>

Cummins states that “human relationships are at the heart of schooling”<sup>16</sup> and points out that students from “dominated” societal groups are either “empowered” or disabled” as a direct result of their interactions with educators in schools<sup>17</sup>. According to him, there are four characteristics that reflect the nature of such interactions. They are whether:

- (1) The minority students’ language and culture are incorporated into school programs;
- (2) Minority community participation is encouraged as an integral component of the educational program;
- (3) The pedagogy promotes intrinsic motivation on the part of students to use language actively in order to generate their own knowledge; and
- (4) Professionals involved in assessment become advocates for minority students locate the ‘problems’ in the students themselves.<sup>18</sup>

### **Models of Bilingual Education**

Bilingual education is generally perceived as a means to empower minority students by acknowledging their home language and culture and using it to help them construct their learning. However, since bilingual education takes many different forms, with each emphasizing different goals and priorities, it is useful to review them. Four

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<sup>13</sup> Bonny Norton. “Language, Identity, and the Ownership of English”. TESOL Quarterly. Vol. 31, no.3, (1997) 409-429.

<sup>14</sup> K. Liebkind,

<sup>15</sup> P. Bourdieu, In other words: Essays towards a reflexive sociology. (Stanford, CA: Standord University Press, 1990)

<sup>16</sup> J. Cummins, (1996), 1.

<sup>17</sup> J. Cummins, “Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention”. In Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race and Gender in the United States Schools, comp. and ed. L. Weis and M. Fine (New York: SUNY Press, 1993), 101-139

<sup>18</sup> Abdeljalil Akkari, “Bilingual Education: Beyond Linguistic Instrumentalization,” Bilingual Research Journal, vol. 22, no. 2, 3,& 4, (Spring, Summer and Fall, 1998), 117.

models of bilingual education will be presented here, namely, transitional bilingual education, enrichment bilingual education, two-way bilingual education and language maintenance bilingual education.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Transitional bilingual education*

Transitional bilingual education is the most common type of bilingual education in the United States. Its primary goal is to mainstream minority language students by weaning them from instruction in their mother tongue to instruction in the dominant language. Under this approach, students are taught for a transitional period using their native language to ensure that they can keep up in their school subjects, before switching to the dominant language.

Transitional programs vary in length. Early exit bilingual programs allow children a maximum of two years of instruction in their mother tongue, whereas late exit programs allow up to 40% of instruction to take place in the mother tongue until grade 6.<sup>20</sup> Akkari criticizes this model as an example of a “transmission-banking” model, with the goal of domestication and perpetuation of the social status-quo (Freire, 1970, 1973) and concludes that “most bilingual education programs tended to focus more on disabling than empowering students”.<sup>21</sup> Lessow-Hurley, however, cited Krashen and Biber’s study of eight programs across California and concludes that it is “a lot better than nothing”.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Integrated-enrichment bilingual education*

The integrated-enrichment bilingual education approach has been applied to second language immersion programs for majority language students, such as Canada’s French immersion program for majority anglophone children and native or aboriginal language immersion programs for teaching endangered minority languages to aboriginal students. The primary goal of the latter programs is to preserve a minority language and culture. However, due to a lack of economic incentives, many such programs have received low

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<sup>19</sup> Baker, 172-197; Akkari, 108-114

<sup>20</sup> Baker, 178

<sup>21</sup> Akkari, 117.

<sup>22</sup> J. Lessow-Hurley, The Foundations of Dual Language Instruction, (New York, Longman 2000) 13.

levels of parental support and high attrition rates.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the former foreign language immersion programs are additive in nature and allow students from the dominant or majority group to learn more languages. Since this model is seen as a way to elevate individual social status and increase career potential without dealing with controversies of ethnicity, it is more likely to receive government funding and support from society than the minority language programs. In other words, and as ironic as it may seem, the learning of a foreign language by majority students is highly regarded, while the speaking of some of these same languages by minority students in mainstream schools is often prohibited and denigrated.

#### *Two-way bilingual education*

Two-way bilingual education, also known as dual-language education or two-way immersion, brings together students from two language groups to learn a second language while achieving high academic standards. In San Diego, where this model has been applied, monolingual English-speaking children have been placed in a classroom alongside native Spanish speaking children (with limited English proficiency). In kindergarten, Spanish is used 90% of the time and English 10% of the time. By grade 5, English and Spanish are each used for 50% of instructional time. Putting two language group students together creates a learning environment in which both groups are exposed to native speakers of the other language, and allows students to learn from peer interactions. Through this program, the monolinguals are immersed in Spanish and learn it, the cultural identity of the Spanish speaking ethnic minority is confirmed and both groups learn to appreciate and respect one another's culture. The challenge to such programs is to keep the numbers of students from each language group in balance, since it can be the case that the monolingual mainstream school is more attractive to prospective parents.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Language maintenance bilingual education*

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<sup>23</sup> A. Akkari,

<sup>24</sup> Baker, 188

The language maintenance bilingual education model aims at further developing the home language of minority students while gradually phasing in instruction in the dominant language. Its purpose is to develop both languages and to preserve the culture of the minority group. Baker has summarized some of the key features of these programs. They:

- (1) Have most, but not necessarily all of the children come from language minority homes.
- (2) Give parents the choice of sending their children to mainstream schools or to heritage language education programs.
- (3) Use the home language of the language minority students in half or more of the curriculum time.
- (4) Are usually heritage language programs in elementary schools.<sup>25</sup>

Baker considers Navajo and Spanish programs in the US, Catalan in Spain, Ukrainian and some other languages in Canada, Gaelic in Scotland, Finnish in Sweden and Welsh in Wales in this category.<sup>26</sup> The Arabic-Hebrew Bilingual program reported in Israel,<sup>27</sup> and the Khmer-English bilingual program in Western Australia would also fit this category.<sup>28</sup> Maintenance bilingual programs vary in their structure and contents. Most of these programs have not been well studied and many are almost unknown to the public and among researchers and academics.

Much of the research into bilingual education has focused on Spanish-speaking students in the United States. Considering the wide range of variations among bilingual programs and their social settings, it is difficult to generalize research findings. The Chinese Bilingual Program to be examined in this paper has several features of each of the models of bilingual education described above. It also distinguishes itself from other bilingual programs offered in the same Canadian City and school jurisdiction. For example, the Ukrainian and German bilingual programs mostly enroll students who are at least third or fourth generation immigrants to Canada; children in the Chinese

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<sup>25</sup> Baker, 186

<sup>26</sup> Idib. 184

<sup>27</sup> G. Feuerwerker, "Peacemaking Through Emancipatory Discourse: Language Awareness in a Jewish-Arab School in Israel" Curriculum and Teaching, vol. 11, no. 12 (1996) 53-61

<sup>28</sup> Caroline Barratt-Pugh, and Mary Rohl, "Learning in Two languages: A Bilingual Program in Western Australia", Reading Teachers, vol. 54, no. 7, (April 2001) 644-677.

Bilingual program are mostly immigrants themselves, or the children of immigrants. A comparative study by Bilash and Wu in 1997, which surveyed students from the Chinese and Ukrainian bilingual programs in the city, revealed that while both groups responded positively to questions about their language learning and cultural and self identities, overall responses from children in the Ukrainian bilingual program were more positive than those of their Chinese bilingual program counterparts.<sup>29</sup> Curious about why this might be so, the authors undertook this study to probe into these issues. Could the less positive responses of children in the Chinese Bilingual Program be attributed to the fact that they are not native speakers of the majority language? Or that they are visible minorities? Or the length of time that their families have been in Canada? After a brief overview of the Chinese Bilingual Program, the answers to these questions will be presented.

### **The Chinese Bilingual Program**

Canada's minority language bilingual programs, once known as Heritage Language Programs, have recently been renamed International Language Programs and share a unified curriculum framework. The first of such programs, the Ukrainian Bilingual Program, was introduced in 1973, first as a three year pilot project in the province of Alberta and later, once approved, in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Arabic, German, Hebrew, Mandarin, Polish and Spanish bilingual programs have since followed suit; however, unlike the Ukrainian Bilingual Program, they have not spread to other parts of the province or country! The establishment of such programs was directly related to Canadian federal government's Multiculturalism policy adopted in 1971 and the pressure from various cultural groups, especially Ukrainian Canadians.<sup>30</sup>

The Chinese Bilingual Program, established in 1982, has become one of the biggest bilingual programs in the city, with five elementary schools collectively enrolling about one thousand students from kindergarten to grade 6. Similar to the Ukrainian and other

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<sup>29</sup> Olenka Bilash and Joe Wu, "The Influence of Bilingual Education on Student Self-identity and Inter-cultural Sensitivity: Perspectives from Grade 6 Children in Chinese and Ukrainian Bilingual Programs". *Journal of Interdisciplinary Education* , vol. 2, (1998) 68-87.

<sup>30</sup> Antonio J. Tavares,

bilingual programs, the Chinese bilingual program offers children the same basic academic curriculum content as that of any publicly funded school in Alberta. Fifty percent of instruction time takes place in English and fifty percent in Mandarin Chinese. Subjects such as social studies, art, health and physical education are taught in Chinese while mathematics, science and sometimes music are taught in English. Language arts is taught in both Chinese and English.

Bilingual students completing grade 6 usually continue the learning of the minority language in junior and senior high schools, which offers them about 3 hours of minority language instruction each week. Whereas children in most of the other bilingual programs in Edmonton are taught by one teacher per day, children in the Chinese Bilingual Program have two teachers per day. Those teaching Chinese subjects are usually well educated new Chinese immigrants with a good knowledge of the Chinese language and culture and proficiency in English. The English part of the school day is instructed by certified native English speaking teachers with no knowledge of Chinese. They offer the children exposure to and instruction about Canadian culture.

The Chinese Bilingual Program attracts mostly children of first generation immigrants. Most of these children do not speak any English before they come to school. In fact, more than half of them do not even speak Mandarin, the target language, but instead use one or a variety of different Chinese dialects, such as Cantonese, Phokenese, Toishanese and Shanghainese as their home language. The program also attracts a small number of native English speakers, including some students from other cultural backgrounds, with no knowledge of any Chinese dialects, and these numbers have increased in the last few years.

When children in this program start kindergarten, some begin to learn English or Mandarin as a new language, while others are learning two new languages. Newcomers from Asia often join in the program at different points from kindergarten to grade 6. Having begun their formal schooling in Chinese, they usually have more advanced Chinese literacy skills than the local children; however, their English abilities are far behind. Due to this variety of students' home languages, the Chinese Bilingual Program functions in three different ways. It is, firstly, a maintenance program for Chinese minorities to keep their language and cultural heritage. Secondly, it functions as a two

way bilingual program with both native Chinese and English speakers in the same class. Finally, it also serves as a transitional program for new immigrant children to learn English as a second language and to adapt to the Canadian school system. For many, it is an immersion program for learning two new languages at the same time. In general, it is a versatile language program whose multiple functions meet the needs of different students.

No formal evaluations of the students' Chinese language development have been done in the past. Some Chinese language assessment tools are being adapted and tested such as the "Highest Level Achievement Tests" used in mainstream mother tongue majority language programs in Western Canada. However, such measurement tools are still in their early stages of development. From the students' performance in the Alberta government 's Provincial Achievement Tests in four subject areas in grades 3 and 6 it is clear that children are mastering the content of the mandated curriculum. In fact, the average test scores of students in this program are consistently higher than the provincial and school district average. The Achievement Tests, including those in Language Arts, are all implemented in English, the language that the students, who come from mostly non-native English speaking families, only spend half of their school time learning. Yet even in Social Studies, which though taught in Chinese, is tested in English, students' test scores are also higher than the provincial average. In fact, a Fraser Institute report ranking Alberta's elementary schools placed one of the city's elementary schools, in which 80 percent of the students are in the Chinese Bilingual Program, No. 41 among 201 in the municipal area. Paula Simons, a local newspaper columnist, commented on the school's ranking as a "hidden surprise" since the school is located in a lower middle class neighborhood and a typical parent at this school has completed just 13 years of formal education.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, most of the students attending the Chinese Bilingual Programs are bussed to the designated schools from several nearby neighborhoods. When the school sites were chosen for setting up new bilingual programs, those located in older neighborhoods facing closure due to a lack of new prospective students were often selected. This is an

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<sup>31</sup> Paula. Simons, Edmonton Journal, June 11, 2002

example of how bilingual programs, which do not necessarily require extra public funding, could even salvage dwindling schools.

The socioeconomic status of families that send their children to the Chinese Bilingual Program varies. Since most are first generation immigrants, they belong to the lower-middle class and are not yet well established in society. While some parents have completed university degrees in Canada or in their home countries, others have had little formal education. Parents, including the poorly educated group, usually pay a great deal of attention to their children's schooling. Most of them are willing to spend time working with their children at home and helping them with their schoolwork. In fact, teachers are often asked to increase the amount of homework they give and seldom received complaints about giving too much homework. A strong dedicated parent association plays a very important role in the program, planning daily operations and fundraising to support school cultural events, obtain teaching materials and equipment, and sponsor professional development activities for teachers.

### **Perceptions of Grade 6 students in the Chinese Bilingual Program**

One of the most important goals of bilingual education is to empower minority students through recognizing their language and culture while improving their self-esteem. This study is designed to achieve further understanding of the influence of the Chinese bilingual program on the development of students' self esteem and cultural identity. Using transcribed data collected during semi-structured individual interviews with 14 grade 6 children in the Chinese Bilingual Program, seven themes emerged: perceived second language ability, negative and positive experiences of speaking Chinese, understanding of Multiculturalism, feelings of belonging, feelings of ethnic identity, the role of bilingual education in forming their thinking and reasons for being enrolled in the program.

#### *Perceived second language ability*

Among the 14 bilingual students interviewed, 12 were Canadian born and two were born in China. One student was not of Chinese origin, and the rest were all ethnic Chinese whose parents came from Hong Kong, Taiwan, southern provinces of China, or

southeast Asian countries. The 14 children used a variety of different languages at home. The non-Chinese student and one Chinese student reported speaking English all the time. For others, home languages include Cantonese, Mandarin, Phokenese, Toishanese and Shanghainese. Some families used two or three dialects and therefore their children could speak several of them. A few children reported that their parents spoke Mandarin at home and that they could speak it though they seldom used it at home. Most of them did not have native English speaking proficiency when they started schooling.

In Grade 6 at the age of 11 or 12, these students mostly perceived English to be their stronger language in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Most of them expressed the opinion that Chinese was a more difficult language to learn than English. Some of them described their ability to speak Mandarin as strong, but their ability to write in Chinese as weak, since it is quite difficult for them to memorize how to write Chinese characters. A few students indicated that they could understand, speak, read and write both Chinese and English proficiently. The non-Chinese student felt that her Mandarin skills lagged considerably behind her English skills, and that she was most proficient in reading Mandarin and least able in writing it. Most of the students felt that writing Chinese was the most difficult part of learning the language. With its very different writing system, they needed to learn ways to memorize each character and learn how to read and write all characters. For students who spoke a dialect at home that was close to Mandarin, understanding spoken Chinese was not very difficult.

Outside of the classroom students reported that they used Mandarin with relatives and on trips to China and hoped to return to China in the future. The few who had been to China recognized the value of the language and were motivated to continue with their Chinese language studies in Canada. Some expressed that they enjoyed learning about Chinese culture and history as they learned the Chinese language and some just felt that knowing more languages could help them speak to more people.

Most of the students spoke Cantonese or other dialects with their parents, grandparents and sometimes with their relatives. Speaking with their siblings varied from person to person and time to time. Many of them reported that they spoke English with their siblings. At school, during recess and lunch on the playground, they usually spoke

English. Some noted that they used to speak Cantonese with other Chinese children in the past, but now found that English was easier. Mandarin was used at school with the teacher and sometimes with their friends. The non-Chinese student spoke Mandarin only in the school setting within the class, but she related that she sometimes spoke Mandarin to herself while at home. Most of them expressed that they did not feel very comfortable speaking Chinese dialects or Mandarin with their parents or other people in public places.

### *Negative and positive experiences of speaking Chinese*

When asked about why they did not feel comfortable speaking Chinese in public places in Canadian society, many students described both positive and negative experiences in doing so. Examples of negative experiences include being teased for speaking “gibberish Chinese”, being insulted by a neighbor who said "Chinese sucks", or a fellow student who said, "Hey Chinese kid!". One child described the disappointment he felt when people treated him like that. Another student concluded that some other students mustn't like Chinese people because they made fun of their language and their looks. A boy remembered an incident on the bus when his father was teased for speaking Cantonese. Another boy claimed that other students often insulted him because of his Chinese background when he was in another school. A girl reported that she had occasionally felt put down by other students at the school and made to feel that Chinese people were bad. It made her feel uncomfortable.

While pointing out these negative incidents, many children also acknowledged experiences of being respected by many people because they could speak a different language. One student remembered that in Scouts, many of his friends were impressed by his ability to speak other languages and asked him questions about the languages. One girl, who reported being occasionally teased and called dumb by non-Chinese students at her school, noted that despite this some other people thought she was “cool” because she could speak another language and were jealous of her. She knew a girl who spoke Spanish and they shared words.

Some students talked about the effects these negative and positive incidents had on them. One girl, who had a number of negative experiences, recognized that most of the

children were still kind to her and her tutor made her feel very good about knowing different languages. She imagined she would try to make other newcomers feel comfortable by being kind to them. One boy admitted that he had both insulted the cultures of other Canadians and treated people of other cultures positively as well. A girl felt that she treated people better if they spoke another language and a friendship she made with a Ukrainian girl once. She explained, “you can treat people of other cultures better because you can talk and share each other's traditions.” She regarded her friend as lucky because she could travel and understand different languages. Most of the children interviewed said that they would treat other people equally and well, no matter what language they spoke.

#### *Understanding of Multiculturalism and Multicultural society*

All of the bilingual students interviewed agreed that Canada is a multicultural country. They explained their understandings of what a multicultural country was, and what it meant to them in different ways. One student thought that in a multicultural society “one can see different things and shop in different types of stores”. Many pointed out that a multicultural country was one where immigrants of all countries, with all sorts of different cultures could come to. A boy believed that a multicultural country was one where people have freedom – where “ people can be free to do whatever their culture does”. Other students also mentioned that all people were equal and were treated “evenly”. One student observed that “a multicultural country is where lots of people come and have peace”. A multicultural country was also understood as a country where different people could live together and didn't have to feel too different. Some emphasized that multiculturalism was sharing their cultures with others.

#### *Feeling of Belonging*

On whether they believed that they could fit into Canadian society, all fourteen students answered “yes”. Some indicated that they fit pretty well into Canadian multicultural society because they felt very comfortable here. One student acknowledged that she fit into the country because she “speaks English”, “eats Canadian food”, “celebrates the same holidays” and “dresses the same” as Canadian children. The students constantly

repeated that they could get along with other people, including those from different backgrounds. One said that she felt like she belonged because she had friends, and she was just “one of the kids”. One boy expressed his sense of belonging by stating that he “had Canadian friends but still did Chinese things”. A girl felt that she fit in because there were lots of other Chinese people here. Another girl explained that she fits in because many of her relatives decided to move here and live here. Some also answered that they fit in because they know different languages and cultures. One student felt good being in a multicultural country because he didn't feel bad about being Chinese here and because there were lots of other kids like him who were from a different culture. As a result, he would be recognized as a good, maybe even special, person. The non-Chinese student referred to herself as a Canadian of South American descent because her mother was Canadian and her father was South American. She felt that “multiculturalism referred to all the different sorts of people who populate Canada: Chinese, Jewish, African and many different groups”. She felt that she fit in, although she was not a full Canadian. The Chinese Bilingual Program had helped her “to understand Canada as a multicultural country because we have the opportunity to learn many different languages”. Clearly the students’ definitions of multiculturalism corresponded to their feelings of belonging to a multicultural Canada.

### *Feelings of Ethnic identity*

All the students treated their ethnic identity positively. They felt positive about being Chinese, while at the same time recognizing their Canadian side. Factors used by the bilingual children to determine their identities were their language, culture, birthplace and their parents’ ethnic origin. For example, one girl refers to herself as a Cantonese Canadian because most of the time she spoke Cantonese. She came from Hong Kong, and now she was in Canada and spoke English. Another girl thought she was a “Canadian-Chinese”, because she lived in Canada and spoke mostly English. A boy described himself as Chinese Canadian because he was born in Canada but his culture and first language were Chinese. Another girl referred to herself as a Chinese-Canadian because she was born in China, came to Canada later on and became a Canadian citizen. In a more complicated case, a girl referred to herself as a Chinese American and then a

Canadian because her relatives and family were mostly Chinese, she still had an American passport and had lived there for a while, but at the same time she lived in Canada and liked it a lot. One described himself as Canadian Chinese because Canada is right here and his parents are Chinese. One elaborated "My blood is Chinese but I am Canadian." Another said: "Chinese is the true part that's in me because I am a Chinese person, but I live in Canada so I am a part of both." In general, these statements did not give clear indication on whether they place more importance on their Chinese or Canadian side. It seems none of them over emphasized either side. Again, the descriptions of these children's ethnic identity correspond to their view of Canada as accepting people from many cultures.

#### *The role of bilingual education in forming their thinking*

As to the role of the Chinese Bilingual Program in their understanding of Chinese culture, many explained that if they did not attend the program, they might forget how to speak their native language, or would not have been able to learn the Chinese language. One girl, who moved from a mainstream school to the bilingual program, felt that the program had helped her learn and value her own culture because before the school transfer she "only thought about the English culture". One student valued the fact that the Chinese Bilingual Program helped him to learn the history of China and how it had changed. For him, these opportunities to learn Chinese history were an essential part of understanding his Chinese roots. Others acknowledged that the program had helped them understand Chinese culture by celebrating their own holidays. Students also discussed the role of the Chinese Bilingual Program in teaching them to think in multicultural ways. One student explained that the program had helped him understand multiculturalism because it had taught him about Chinese culture, and to understand that different languages could fit into Canada. Another boy noted that the program had helped him to become aware of both his own culture and of how other immigrants felt about their cultures. "The CBP has allowed me to learn about other cultures, to respect them and to interact with other cultures. In Science, for instance, we have cross class groupings with the English speaking kids." The non-Chinese Canadian student explained that she liked to be exposed to other cultures and languages. The

Chinese Bilingual Program had helped her to learn about her own culture and Chinese culture, as well as teaching her about the reasons why people from other cultures came to Canada.

#### *Reasons for being enrolled in the program*

The children in this study gave a variety of reasons as to why their parents sent them to the Chinese Bilingual Program. These include increasing future employment possibilities, carrying on family traditions, and being able to communicate with family members, relatives and other Mandarin speaking people. Many children also emphasized that they liked the program and chose to remain in it on their own. Some had already experienced the advantages of knowing Mandarin when they acted as translators for their parents and relatives on certain occasions in Canada, or when they were able to communicate with people when they traveled to China. Having friends in the program was another major reason children reported for staying in the program. One boy said that he “felt better” being around people who could speak Chinese. Many also shared the view of their parents, that their language ability would be helpful for future employment. Some believed that even if they did not go back to China, it might still be helpful to know Mandarin for business or other career purposes. Some children even said that they joined the program purely for the enjoyment of learning Chinese! One student, for example, claimed that he wanted to study Chinese because it allowed him to continue working around other Chinese people, so he “wouldn't forget his roots”. The only African American in the program, explained that she joined up because she really liked the Chinese people and their culture. She started the program in Grade I after hearing about it in daycare and telling her mom she wanted to attend. She was originally only going to attend for one year but was glad that she has stayed in it. She hoped to travel to China in the future and hoped that her knowledge of the language would be helpful.

#### **Discussion**

Students' comments on the negative experiences of using their mother tongue indicate that they have encountered racism and racial discrimination. Incidents of being teased,

insulted, and put down because of their background, genetic features and their language occurred on the bus, in their neighborhood or in their former schools as well as in their own bilingual schools where large number of students learn Chinese and are ethnic Chinese. Such incidents created bad feelings ranging from being uncomfortable to thinking that “Chinese people were bad”. Negative experiences inevitably affected the students’ sense of who they are and how they relate to the world. It is also evident that the students not only felt strongly about their own personal experiences, but were also sympathetic to the experiences of others. Some made friendships with students who spoke other languages - Spanish and Ukrainian. Some expressed a desire to help other newcomers feel comfortable by being kind to them.

In spite of their negative experiences, students commented that they were proud of being able to speak their language and felt quite confident about their ethnic identity. In their minds their second language ability was a valuable asset which should be respected and even envied. Some even expressed that they felt special being a Chinese person. In their ways of defining who they were, they included such factors as their mother tongues, their birth places, and their ethnic origins. There were no indications of feeling ashamed of or denying their ethnicity. Such confidence can also be seen in how they saw Canada as a multicultural society and how they felt about themselves as being part of it. They listed diversity, equality, freedom to be different, and sharing among cultures as the characteristics of a multicultural society. As eleven year olds, they had already had enough life experience to understand complex abstract concepts such as identity and multiculturalism and strongly believed that they fit into such a multicultural society.

From the students’ comments, we can find the connections between their positive attitudes towards their own language, culture and ethnic identity and their experiences in the bilingual program. They indicated that through many learning activities in the program they learned to value their own language and culture. Such understandings of their own culture projected to their understandings and sympathy of other cultures and their appreciation of multiculturalism.

This is in sharp contrast to what one usually finds in the research literature on immigrant children's experience of the pressure of assimilation. Often minority students' mental health and self-esteem are under constant threat, causing heightened anxiety, lower self-esteem, feelings of marginality, and identity confusion. The students in the Chinese Bilingual Program seemed not to have gone through these pressures of assimilation and there were no clear indications that they came to see themselves as "inferiors". In fact, the way they saw their own language, culture, and their place in the multicultural society suggests that they experienced positive self-esteem in the Chinese Bilingual Program and a sense of fitting in with children from the dominant culture.

The students' comments on their difficulties in learning the Chinese language, particularly the written language, show that it is difficult to learn a minority language. The Chinese language is probably more difficult to learn in a North American context, where English is dominant and the differences between the two languages are great. On the other hand, considering many of these children's mother tongues were neither Mandarin nor English, it is a great achievement for them to have learned two new languages at the same time. Most of the students in the Chinese Bilingual Program know one or more Chinese dialects in addition to the Mandarin they are learning in class. These dialects, though mostly incomprehensible to Mandarin speakers, are still variations of the Chinese language and they share many similarities in their vocabulary and sentence structures. Students with knowledge of other Chinese dialects learned Mandarin much more easily than those without such knowledge. In some sense, maybe learning Mandarin can still be regarded as further developing their native Chinese language. However, further studies are needed to investigate if and to what degree the "Language Interdependence Hypothesis" and the "Threshold Theory" apply to children in this program.

Despite the fact that there are various ways of practicing "Chinese Culture" among different ethnic Chinese groups there seems to be a large set of core beliefs and generally accepted traditions that hold the groups as one unique culture, particularly in terms of their pride in the long history of Chinese civilization including its education and literature. This cultural component is essential to the Chinese bilingual program. The program is a confirmation of the students' home culture and as such empowers

Chinese minority students in a society where the minority is mostly silenced through cultural dominance. As bilingual education programs in Western Canada move from being seen as “Heritage Language Programs” to “International Language Programs”, a change that reflects the efforts of Canadian schools to prepare the young generation for participation in the global community and economy, the important function of cultural confirmation should not be lost, altered or diluted. Empowering students, creating positive self identity, and supporting minorities to become full participants of a multicultural society are the essence of the program. They need to be continuously nourished.

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