

# **Bilinguality and Giftedness in a Canadian Public School: Toward a New Approach to Accommodating Bilinguals Within a Monolingual Classroom**

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*This exploratory study investigates the intersection of bilinguality and giftedness in the public school system in Ontario and the connection between the bilinguality of gifted immigrant minority language (IML) speakers and their giftedness. Following a series of semistructured interviews with gifted pupils and teachers in the gifted program in an Ontario elementary school, it was concluded that the bilinguality of gifted IML students who are literate in their home language is not utilized for either curricular or community-building purposes. Drawing on recent research in psycholinguistics of bilinguality, this paper argues that the bilinguality of gifted IML students constitutes a cognitive asset that should be used for curricular purposes in the gifted program, suggesting potential ways to accommodate the continued bilingual development of the students within the largely monolingual framework of the Ontario curriculum. These potential ways are situated within the current research on biliteracy and critical literacy.*

Bilingualism is often considered a cognitive asset in mainstream educational research (Cummins, 2000; Fishman, 1989; May, 2008). Additive bilingualism—the type of bilingualism where proficiency in one language constitutes a cognitive advantage for the mastery of another—has been equated with educational achievement; it has been suggested that balanced bilingual children academically do as well as or better than their monolingual counterparts (Cummins, 2000). Pragmatically and programmatically speaking, however, linguistic accommodation of bilingual immigrant children, whether for the purposes of faster integration into the mainstream educational process or in order to maintain their first language, is a rather contentious issue, where

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the cognitive benefits of additive bilingualism have to be weighed against potential linguistic and cultural segregation. In Canada, bilingualism and multiculturalism have been the official ideology for nearly four decades. However, as Duff (2007) suggested, the discourses on bilingualism, whether the official English/French bilingualism or the community-based bilingualism in English and an immigrant language, “are often more myth than reality as far as educational practice is concerned and when describing the linguistic competence of many who were born in Canada” (p. 150). My experiences as a father of a gifted student who is a balanced bilingual in English and Russian corroborate Duff’s contention: the bilingualism of gifted students is not utilized in any way for the purposes of learning. For example, my son has a wealth of resources in Russian (e.g., books, encyclopedias, visual aids) that could be used for curricular purposes to enhance my son’s understanding of the subject matter, offer new perspectives on it that are only possible through the medium of the Russian language, and foster his further bilingual development.

This paper is an exploratory study that investigates the intersection of *bilinguality* (individual bilingualism; Hamers & Blanc, 2000) and *giftedness* in the public school system in Ontario, Canada. Until quite recently, the definition and educational implications of giftedness had not encompassed bilinguality as a separate cognitive or social construct, even though cognitive advantages of child bilinguality have been thoroughly researched over the past 40 years. It is the goal of this article then to investigate the possible conceptual intersections of giftedness and individual bilinguality. The conceptual framework presented is juxtaposed with the results of a pilot qualitative study. Following a series of semistructured interviews with gifted pupils and teachers in the gifted program in an multicultural elementary school in a large urban center in Canada (henceforth Thistlefield<sup>1</sup>), with more than 50% of students speaking a language other than English as their mother tongue, it is concluded that the bilinguality of gifted immigrant minority language-speaking (IML) students who are literate in their home language, as predicted, is not

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the school has been changed.

taken advantage of for either curricular or community-building purposes. This paper argues that the bilinguality of gifted IML students constitutes a cognitive asset that *could* and *should* be used for curricular purposes in the gifted program. Furthermore, it suggests potential ways of accommodating the continued bilingual development of the students within the largely monolingual framework of the Ontario curriculum, ways that ensure the integrity of a community of gifted students and the inclusion of both monolingual and bilingual gifted students, and foster critical engagement with the two or more languages in the repertoire of bilingual gifted students.

## Background

### Bilingualism and Giftedness

According to Joseph Renzulli (1986), Director of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut, “[g]ifted and talented children are those possessing or capable of developing [a] composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance” (p. 73). The composite set of traits Renzulli referred to is the core of his three-ring conception of giftedness: above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity (Renzulli, 1978). Valdés (2003) presented one of the few studies available to date that attempt to bridge the conceptual gap between child bilingualism and giftedness. In her study of the intercultural interpretation practices of school-age bilinguals in immigrant communities, Valdés claimed that “these youngsters display abilities that are in many ways more sophisticated than those measured by verbal analogies, cloze procedures and items found on standardized tests of intelligence” (p. 163). They “exhibit a range of abilities that can be considered within a framework of exceptionally cognitively competent individuals” (Valdés, 2003, p. 173): Along with conveying the factual information, they were able to decode and convey the pragmatic intent of the messages. Besides, they were

able to make decisions about the communicative value of certain messages and the power relation between the two heterolingual interlocutors, and thus the inclusion/exclusion of those messages in the translation. This view of bilingual capacities includes the notion of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997). In other words, the young immigrant interpreters met the demands of the communicative situation and exhibited abilities above and beyond those of an average bilingual. The characteristics of above-average ability in Renzulli's (1986) classification include, among others, verbal reasoning, word fluency, adaptation to novel situations, automatization of information processing, and rapid, accurate, and selective retrieval of information (p. 73). It is evident in Valdés's study that the demands of the communicative situation of consecutive interpretation required those skills. In another study on bilingualism and giftedness, Kogan (2001) also spoke to the need to reconsider the current procedures and tests that assess for giftedness in order to create a more realistic and inclusive approach, one that would accommodate the bilingualism of students.

Whereas Valdés (2003) and Kogan (2001) were interested in immigrant children who are not normally identified as gifted but exhibit many of the characteristics of giftedness in their day-to-day intercultural interpretation practice and other activities, the focus of this paper is immigrant children who *have* been identified as gifted by the standardized Canadian Cognitive Abilities Test (CCAT). Even though it is obvious that English is their dominant language, the two bilingual gifted children in this study are highly proficient and literate in their home language (HL). The interdependent nature of their linguistic proficiency in the two languages is corroborated by Cummins's Threshold Level hypothesis, which claims that a certain level of proficiency in a first language (L1) is a must for successful second language (L2) acquisition and functioning in it (Cummins, 1978), and Developmental Interdependence hypothesis, "the level of L2 competence which a bilingual child attains is a function of the level of the child's L1 competence at the time when intensive exposure to

L2 begins” (Cummins, 1978, p. 405)<sup>2</sup>. These hypotheses have been largely used to conceptualize how academic language proficiency in an L1 affects developing academic language proficiency in a L2, not the other way around. However, they posit the existence of a “common bilingual reservoir that serves both L1 and L2 literacy” (Riches & Genesee, 2006, p. 82), so there is no reason that the same model cannot accommodate the inverse relationship.

Furthermore, Cummins (1980, 1983) made a distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP) in describing L2 acquisition by ESL students in an academic context. CALP refers to academic vocabulary, complex sentence structure, and discourse markers, among other elements, used for academic communication. Cummins (1980, 1983) noted that it usually takes secondary school students 1–2 years to achieve BICS and 5–7 years to achieve CALP in their second language. By the same token, while gifted bilingual students may have retained BICS in their L1, their CALP in the L1 is affected by language attrition. Lexicon has been attested in the language attrition literature as the part of language the most susceptible to attrition (Weltens & Grendel, 1993). The most prominent feature of the attrition of the lexicon is the reduction in the number of lexical items in an attriter’s L1, especially in the low-frequency, unmarked lexical items (Olshtain & Barzilay, 1991). Academic vocabulary generally consists of such unmarked lexical items.

## Language and Thought in a Bilingual Brain

The following are some conceptions of lateralization of language and thought in a bilingual’s brain. Paradis (2004) proposed, among his many other models, the Three-Store Hypothesis. He suggested that “[b]oth languages are differentially connected to the same conceptual-experiential information store” (Paradis, 2004, p. 197). In this model, a bilingual has access to

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<sup>2</sup> Although it is hard to determine which of the two languages spoken by the gifted children in this study is their L1 (many of them are simultaneous bilinguals), their high proficiency in both seems interdependent. Rather than using the L1/L2 dichotomy, I will use the term *home language* (HL).

the conceptual store through two different media that can be visualized as two vessels not connected to each other, but each connected to the brain and to the same conceptual store. This representation, however, is only valid if we assume the same conceptual-experiential information store for two different languages. The Sapir-Whorfean school of thought—a language spoken by a particular group influences its perception of reality (Whorf, 1940/1956)—would postulate two different conceptual-experiential stores, each reflecting its own sociocultural world. For example, Kövecses (2006) and Sharifian (2007) suggested that linguistic mental representations (scripts, patterns of social interaction characteristic of social groups; schemas, cognitive structures representing specific aspects of the world; and frames, semantic networks that constitute the way meaning is constructed in lexicon) are culture-specific and not easily translatable. Thus, in this alternative model of language and concept lateralization, for example, the English and Russian words *bottle* and *butylka* may not be connected to a unitary concept with the same semantic and physical features, but to two versions of a bottle divergent physically and semantically. In addition, there may be concepts that are only part of the conceptual-experiential store connected with one language but not the other, or concepts that are semantically broader in one language. Thus, the bilingual gifted students who are the subjects of this study should have access (however imperfect it may be) to two different conceptual stores and, due to their giftedness, an above-average ability to switch between two conceptual and linguistic repertoires. Hamers and Blanc (2000) pointed out that bilinguals have a “greater sensitivity to semantic relations between words . . . [and] higher scores on Piagetian concept-formation tasks” (p. 89).

Furthermore, Aitchison (1987) and Pavlenko (2000) differentiated between the *semantic* and *conceptual* levels of representation in the bilingual brain, whereby the bilinguals have access in each language not only to a more superficial store of words (the semantic level) but also to a deeper layer of representation (the conceptual level). This level is accessible through experiential and cultural learning that goes hand in hand with first language acquisition, and is evident in nonlinguistic mental representations.

Some concepts are culturally more salient and have more precise mental representations including schemas, imagery, scripts, and auditory, tactile, and somatosensory representations. For example, the language-specific lexicalized concept of *privacy* and grammaticalized concept of *definiteness/indefiniteness* are part of the English but not the Russian conceptual representation of an English/Russian bilingual (Pavlenko, 2000). Pavlenko (2006), based on first-hand accounts of bilingual individuals, argued that many concepts representing emotional states are language-specific. This level of representation that eludes words is the basis of the sociocultural worlds with which our gifted bilingual students associate the HLs and English.

It can be hypothesized that their bilingualism has contributed to the giftedness of the immigrant students, at least as it is recognized by the Canadian Cognitive Abilities Test. Bialystok (1991) pointed out that early exposure to two languages results in heightened awareness of grammatical, phonological, and semantic aspects of language such as metalinguistic awareness. More recent research (Eviatar & Ibrahim, 2000) also spoke to the heightened metalinguistic abilities of bilingual students. The verbal section of the CCAT includes questions based on semantic and grammatical paradigms, which are purported to be a measure of giftedness. Thus, in order to be identified as gifted, students need to demonstrate advanced metalinguistic functioning. Continued utilization of their HL at the same level of complexity as English is seen as advantageous for their further cognitive and academic development (Bialystok, 2001). Having established that, let us now turn to the curricular practices predominant in the gifted program in question as elicited from interviews with the teachers and students.

## Method

In order to investigate the connection between the discursive construction of bilingualism in the gifted program as part of a larger school structure and the curricular practices in the gifted program, I conducted semistructured interviews with two teachers

(Grade 3/4 and Grade 5/6 in the gifted program; see Appendix A for the interview questions) and two bilingual gifted students from the Grade 5/6 class (see Appendix B for the interview questions). All interviews were held at the school premises after school hours, and were of the following duration:

- Steven<sup>3</sup> (teacher): 40 minutes
- Victoria (teacher): 45 minutes
- Sergei (student): 20 minutes
- Henry (student): 18 minutes

The semistructured format allowed me to probe some of the questions deeper as curricular practices seem to be elusive constructs and often required multiple questions for the researcher to get a better grasp of them.

Research stresses the need for plurality of methods and flexibility of approaches, especially when interviewing children and adolescents (Barker & Weller, 2003). In this regard, Cohen and colleagues (2007) suggested using a mix of formal and informal procedures when interviewing. On the one hand, following a formal interview protocol legitimates the interview process for the interviewees (Cohen et al., 2007). On the other hand, a researcher should be prepared to digress to elicit a richer qualitative data, something Geertz (1973) referred to as “thick description.” Bushin (2007) utilized a semistructured conversational approach with many diversions from the script when necessary to keep the child focused.

### **Teacher Participants**

Steven has been a Grade 5/6 gifted teacher for the past 7 years. In his class of 24, 14 students speak a language other than English at home. Most of them were born in Canada to immigrant parents or brought to Canada at a very young age, but have maintained their HL at a functional level and are literate in it. Among those languages are Mandarin, Hindi, Hungarian, and Dutch. Although he mentioned that it is hard to evaluate the

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<sup>3</sup> The names of teachers and students have been changed.



extent and the complexity of their use of the HL in class, Steven reports having observed his students use their HL occasionally in class, to complete their homework from a Saturday school or to write in their diaries. All of his bilingual students seem to have positive in-group identification, speaking with pride about their home cultures during presentations and proposing to have an “all-Chinese squad” during physical education practice. During a social studies discussion, the Chinese and East Indian students identified themselves as representatives of ancient civilizations.

Victoria has been the Grade 3/4 gifted teacher for 2 years. She taught the two student participants last year. This year, 12 out of her 22 third and fourth graders are proficient in a language other than English and speak it at home. HLs are used quite frequently in class: Students bring in books to read during independent reading time; they also use HL words if they cannot express themselves fully in English during writing activities. Like in Steven’s class, the immigrant students in Victoria’s class seem to exhibit positive in-group identification, asserting their uniqueness by bringing cultural artifacts to their presentations.

### **The Teachers on Bilingual Practices and the Curriculum**

In the 2004–2005 academic year, the whole school was involved in a project entitled “Thistlefield Writes.” In view of the fact that Thistlefield is an ethnically diverse school, the purpose of the project was to instill in its students a sense of pride in their cultural heritage. All of the students and staff wrote stories narrating their past experiences, folktales, or observations in English. The stories were then translated into the languages the students chose either by themselves or by a member of the community. Selected stories were then published in a book. It is interesting to note that approximately half of the stories were translated by the students themselves or with their parents’ help. Even though the initial purpose of the project did not involve promoting HL literacy, it certainly created a tidal wave of interest among students in their home languages. Abdallah-Pretceille (1992) and Helot and Young (2002) indicated that the interest in a HL and positive in-group identification in general are associated

with the legitimation of HLs at the school level. Seeing their stories translated into their HL and printed in a book was certainly an uplifting experience for immigrant students, as Steven pointed out.

“Thistlefield Writes” also provides an important lesson for any bilingual project within a monolingual educational environment. As not all of the students involved spoke a HL (quite a few were English monolinguals), it was up to a student to choose a language out of the list provided that she would be interested in seeing her story translated into. Thus, many of the students chose an Aboriginal language. Including Aboriginal languages in the pool of potential languages is an important mechanism of inclusion of monolinguals into a bilingual project and deserves special attention.

Both Steven and Victoria were enthusiastic about “Thistlefield Writes” or any project that may involve the use of their students’ HL. They both felt that bilingual projects foster a deeper understanding among pupils and empathy for one another. Victoria noted: “The class becomes a whole community of independent and unique members who work, learn and grow together.” When asked whether a bilingual project involving students’ HLs would disadvantage or exclude the students who did not speak a language other than English at home, both respondents stated that it would not. Victoria believed: “From a curricular and organizational perspective, I don’t see any disadvantages for students . . . every student has some sort of history/background and should be able to participate.” Steven mentioned that a lot of English Canadian students felt a certain affinity for an Aboriginal language when asked to pick a language for “Thistlefield Writes.” Considering the fact that many of the nongifted students who do speak a HL couldn’t write or translate a story into it and had to resort to a translator’s help, the English Canadian students did not feel excluded, according to both respondents.

When asked whether bilingual students should be encouraged to draw on the concepts or knowledge available to them in their L1 or HL, Steven and Victoria diverged in their answers. Steven felt that accessing concepts through reference to HL words would be a difficult idea for Grade 5/6 students to grasp, so the priority

Table 1

*Summary of Bilingual Curricular Practices at Thistlefield and Student and Teacher Attitudes Toward Them*

<b>Student-initiated use of HL in class</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal entries</li> <li>• Independent reading</li> <li>• Homework from Saturday school</li> <li>• Use of single HL words in writing activities if a student is unable to express him- or herself in English</li> </ul>
<b>Bilingual projects (schoolwide)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Thistlefield Writes”:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ stories/experiences written by students and staff in English</li> <li>◦ translated into a language of choice by students or members of community</li> <li>◦ stories published as a book in two languages</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Bilingual projects (gifted program)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul>
<b>Teachers’ attitudes toward bilingual projects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enthusiastic in theory, but difficult to implement</li> <li>• Exclusion of monolinguals</li> <li>• Maintenance of bilingualism is not high on the list of priorities</li> </ul>
<b>Students’ attitudes toward bilingual projects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time consuming → need to translate</li> <li>• “Is this some kind of a prank?”</li> </ul>

of a skill of switching between two independent conceptual stores connected to a third nonlinguistic cognitive store in the brain (the Three-Store Hypothesis; Paradis, 2004) would be quite low on his list of important skills to be taught. He also believed that an activity that has the bilingual students make use of the knowledge available through a HL would exclude students who are less proficient in their HL or monolingual students. Victoria, on the other hand, pointed out that monolingual students would not be excluded, provided the teacher found a way to involve them as well. She did not go into detail about the logistics of involving monolingual students into a bilingual activity, but she felt that the success of such an activity would depend solely on the teacher’s motivation and resourcefulness. Victoria also pointed out the cognitive and learning benefit of drawing on HL concepts, because

“[t]his is useful for some students because that is the language they ‘think’ in and thus they can successfully show what they know.” Table 1 contains a summary of bilingual curricular practices and the teachers’ attitudes.

### **Student Participants**

Sergei is a 10-year-old fifth grader who speaks Russian at home. He was born in Canada to Russian immigrant parents and grew up as a consecutive bilingual, speaking only Russian until the kindergarten age, at which time his exposure to English began. He is both fluent and literate in Russian. His reading skills in Russian are slightly weaker than those in English; he can read in it at perhaps one grade level lower than in English. He reads Russian fiction and nonfiction books regularly, although less willingly than in English. At home, he can express himself in Russian on a wide range of topics, although very often finds himself short for words when talking about school life. He considers himself bilingual.

Henry is a 10-year-old fifth grader born in China. His parents immigrated to Canada when he was 5 years old. He admits that even though his parents invest both effort and money in teaching him Mandarin, he is not as fluent in it as he used to be before he started going to Grade 1. He is still quite fluent in Mandarin, according to his parents, but has difficulty reading and writing it at the comparable grade level. Henry’s parents try to enforce a Mandarin-only policy at home, but Henry finds it impossible to express himself fully in it on topics related to school activities, which is often a source of frustration for both his parents and himself. Regardless, he considers himself bilingual.

### **The Students on Bilingualism and Curricular Practices**

The gifted program uses the Ontario curriculum in the same way it is used in the regular stream, but because the students tend to grasp the material quickly, the instruction is project-based. When prompted to comment on the usefulness of seeking out materials for their projects in the HL, both Henry and Sergei

mentioned that it would definitely take longer, because they would have to resort to a dictionary more often than if they were working in English. Sergei questioned the usefulness of the whole endeavor on the grounds of the need to translate into English the material he would find in Russian.

Sergei and Henry converged on the idea that if their teacher were to ask them to do part of the research for their projects in their HL, they would find it extremely strange. Sergei was very surprised indeed with the notion of doing some part of schoolwork in his HL, and mentioned that he would definitely take this suggestion as some kind of a prank on the part of his teacher. Table 1 contains a summary of bilingual curricular practices and the students' attitudes.

### Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

From the interviews with both Thistlefield teachers and students it emerges that individual *biculturalism* is fostered at the school and program level. The gifted students are encouraged to explore their family and ethnic heritage and share it with the class. They are also encouraged to identify positively with their ethnocultural background. However, *bilinguality* does not seem to be one of the principles of community building in the gifted program at Thistlefield, as gleaned from the curricular practices. Two of the major contentions of bilingual education in general are potential exclusion of monolinguals and segregation of bilinguals. In the following, it will be argued why bilingual activities would be a benefit for both individual cognitive development and community building, for gifted bilinguals and monolinguals alike. It will be demonstrated that both bilingual (English/HL) and monolingual (English) gifted students would be able to actually conduct learning activities in two languages and engage with critical metalinguistic discourse in English.

According to Clark (2002), giftedness can be fostered only if students are involved in activities that not only challenge them but also build on their particular strengths, exceptional abilities, and interests. It would seem natural then to try to challenge

bilingual students in their HL skills. Renzulli (1986) noted that gifted students are capable of creativity based on using different modalities of obtaining information. As was pointed out earlier, if bilinguals are able to make use of their two conceptual and semantic stores and to switch between them relatively effortlessly, bilingual gifted children should be able to obtain information from sources in different languages—different modalities of obtaining information—with an even greater facility. I believe that engaging the creativity of gifted bilinguals by having them seek out and utilize resources available in a HL for curricular purposes would foster Renzulli's three rings of giftedness: above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity. Furthermore, whatever the state of his or her academic skills in a HL for a particular student may be, using resources in a HL would prevent/reverse HL attrition or promote HL acquisition. Both lexicon and conceptual representations are subject to nonpathological attrition (Olshtain & Barzilay, 1991), whereby lexical attrition leads to attrition of concepts. Wittgenstein (1953/2001) referred to languages, or rather, to what allows a language to function, as *forms of life*. Gradual conceptual attrition impoverishes a language, thus taking away from the richness of a "form of life." Using HL sources for school projects may thus expose bilingual students to linguistic input in their nondominant language and strengthen both conceptual and lexical representations in their HL. By using sources of information available in a HL, bilingual gifted students would be exposed to lexical items in that language, which would give them access to concepts that may not be available through the medium of English. Exposure to concepts in a HL would thus solidify its lexicon and help prevent HL attrition.

However, two questions remain with regards to the pragmatics of HL education. The first is about accountability: How would a teacher evaluate her gifted students' work in their HL if she does not speak any of those languages? As Victoria has pointed out, a teacher's motivation and resourcefulness alone can bridge this linguistic deficiency. Students could keep a log of their bilingual activities, where they would enter the amount of time they spent on research in each of the languages, word pairs, and their reflections on the usefulness of the sources in a HL they

consulted. Granted, the teacher would still not be able to evaluate the linguistic accuracy, but she would be able to appreciate the scope of bilingual involvement of her students. The proposed approach would also rely on parental involvement, which seems to bridge the gap between parents expressing interest in bilingual programs and in L1 maintenance in general (Guardado, 2002; Kim, 2006; Kouritzin, 1999; Lamarre, 2003; Li, 2006), and their inability to really become involved in serious efforts to prevent L1 attrition of their children because of the lack of institutional support. Within the framework of this approach, parents would be able to guide their children in their choice of material, help them with translation, and monitor their progress. Parents may also be asked to participate in students' self-evaluation as the teacher would not necessarily be proficient in all the languages spoken by bilingual students. Parental involvement is one of the principles of *invitational learning*, a vision of the educational process by Purkey (Purkey & Stanley, 1991), where school becomes a beacon in the community by inviting children and parents to take an active part in the educational process. School becomes an inviting place by recognizing the diverse cultural capital that students and their parents possess; parental involvement in their children's independent work in their L1 is a sign of true recognition of that cultural capital, recognition that goes beyond a once-a-year multicultural potluck party.

In any case, creating a framework for the utilization of a HL for curricular purposes would facilitate students' efforts in contributing to their projects through the medium of a HL. In the final analysis, what very often legitimizes a pedagogical approach to students is the value a teacher attributes to it, and her consistency and persistence. It seems that one of the reasons the student informants were taken aback by the question about the use of their HL for school projects was the sheer fact that they had not thought that a HL *can* be used for those purposes.

A second question is about community building and inclusion/exclusion. How would a teacher involve gifted students who do not have a HL other than English? Would the students who do not speak a HL other than English feel excluded and disenfranchised? The project "Thistlefield Writes" presents some important lessons

in this regard. The school administration and teachers had found a way to involve both bilingual and monolingual students by adding First Nations languages that none of the students spoke but had certain affinity for. Another approach would be to involve French. It would seem to help the matter that the monolingual gifted students have a relatively high proficiency in French, perhaps even higher in its cognitive-academic dimension than in the basic interpersonal communication dimension, and have Core French for one period per day. The teacher could engage the students in a simplified form of independent content-based language learning in French, on a project-to-project basis. This would give the students some extra practice in French, while at the same time raising the pragmatic value of the language—the drawbacks of the Core French program have been attributed to the lack of connections between French classes and the rest of the monolingual curriculum (Lapkin, 1998). In this way, the monolingual gifted students, just as their HL-speaking counterparts, would be part of the same community of learners.

Thus, building a community of gifted students that includes the notion of bilingualism within a monolingual curriculum is not only beneficial for the bilingual immigrant gifted children but also for their monolingual counterparts. Such a community could be generated on the Vygotskian principles of the classroom as a *community of inquiry* (Wells, 1999). This approach to classroom practices envisions open-ended inquiry as not just one of the methods of instruction, but as the fundamental philosophy on which the curriculum and instruction are built. Incidentally, this approach dovetails with the general project-based, open-ended approach to instruction practiced in many gifted classrooms (Clark, 2002). The communities of inquiry approach also recognizes the importance of alternative methods of inquiry applied to independent projects. Students are taught various modes of inquiry and are free to take advantage of as many of them as they want. By the same token, they should be able to explore any media of knowledge available to them, including their home and/or other languages. It is on the principles of building a strong community of independent learners able to critically evaluate and differentiate between various modes of inquiry that



HLs could be incorporated into the instructional practices of the gifted program.

A promising pedagogical tool to accommodate the bilinguality of gifted students within a monolingual curricular framework is found in Hornberger's *continua of biliteracy* model (2003, 2004), which is used to

demonstrate the multiple and complex interrelationship between bilingualism and literacy and the importance of the contexts, media, and content through which biliteracy develops. . . . The purpose of using the continuum as the basic building block of the model is to break down the binary oppositions so characteristic in the field of bilingualism and instead draw attention to the continuity of experiences, skills, practices and knowledge stretching from one of any particular continuum to the other. (Hornberger, 2004, p. 64)

Hornberger (2003, 2004) suggested that the bilingual proficiency and literacy of a bilingual student lies at the intersection of four continua (contexts, development, content, and media of biliteracy), with three subcontinua within each continuum. This model in part owes to the *interlanguage* model in that it implies that a bilingual's proficiency in her two languages is always at a point in the continuum. Selinker's (1972) interlanguage is the emergent grammatical system a second language learner has. This system, at any given point in the development of a second language, can be placed on a continuum with regard to the amount of influence of a first language on the emerging second language grammar. However, unlike the interlanguage model, which assumes a linear movement towards native-like grammatical competency in the L2, Hornberger's (2004) model posits a multidimensional continuum that bilingual (not just the L2) literacy occupies, and points out that "the more their learning contexts and contexts of use allow learners and users to draw from across the whole of each and every continuum, the greater are the chances for their full biliterate development and expression" (p. 66). Hornberger's notion of continua of biliteracy seems to be promising in that it allows educators to draw on all aspects of students' bilingual proficiency. Within this framework, educators can let their

bilingual students see the connections between their proficiency in the L1 and the L2, and actively follow them to investigate the knowledge that is afforded through different linguistic media. Thus, daily communication between tautolingual students in their common language may be situated by the teacher within the content of biliteracy continua, namely between the vernacular and literary, minority and majority, and contextualized and decontextualized (Hornberger, 2004, p. 66). Moreover, same-language students may be put with one another to discuss an assignment in their HL and write a report in the language of instruction. The teacher could encourage the students to use both HL and English sources and comment on the different kinds of knowledge that were accessible through different languages, thus developing their critical thinking skills. This way, gifted students would not only access information through different media, but also critically evaluate the process of accessing knowledge, which is part of critical literacy practices.

The continuum of biliteracy pedagogical approach lends itself well to the way Morgan and Ramanathan (2005) conceptualized critical literacy. To them, the pedagogy of critical literacy refers to “cultivating a citizenry that is able to negotiate and critically engage with the numerous texts, modalities, and technologies coming at learners” (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005, p. 152). Bilingual students can critically engage any point of intersection of the continuum; as was mentioned above, they can be involved in a comparative analysis of the information obtained through two languages, to discuss why certain knowledge may be accessible through one language and not through another. A critical engagement with a HL text can be seen as one of the practices described by Cronin (2003) as a critical approach to translation: Students can investigate what cultural forces, power structures, and linguistic inequalities are behind their inability to translate certain words from their HL to English or vice versa. Thus, *critical literacy* becomes *critical biliteracy*. Clark and Ivanič (1997) saw critical literacy as part of a more general pedagogy of critical language awareness, whose aim is to “empower learners by providing them with a critical analytical framework to help them reflect on their own language experiences and practices

and on the language practices of others” (p. 217, as cited in Pennycook, 2008). In this regard, educators can help students conduct critical discourse analysis and deconstruct bilingual speech samples found in texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, TV, classroom communication) for the purpose of demonstrating the stereotypes associated with bilingual speech. It is not uncommon for bilinguals to use code-switching, code-mixing, and linguistic borrowing in their daily communication in both languages, and to have to cope with unfavorable attitudes to this by monolingual speakers of the two languages. Examples of bilingual texts such as those mentioned in Pennycook (2007; e.g., bilingual hip-hop lyrics) can help students put in critical perspective the notion of discreteness of their two languages—by analyzing the hybridity of their speech, they may be able to see the interconnectedness of the two or more languages that they speak, the identities they are investing in when speaking with their bilingual interlocutors, and the societal attitudes to their mixed code. As has been previously mentioned, both bilingual and monolingual gifted students can be involved in discussions of this sort.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Schedule 1 (Teachers)**

1. How many students in your class speak a language other than English at home?
2. Have you noticed any evidence of your students' work in a language other than English in class (books, communication with tautolingual peers, anecdotes)?
3. Can you think of any examples where your students have referred to their bicultural identity or difference from the mainstream?
4. In your opinion, is there any connection between the bilingualism of some of your students and their giftedness? If yes, how is it manifested? Have you noticed any difference in the manifestation of giftedness between your monolingual and bilingual students?

5. There have been activities and projects done on a schoolwide basis that involved the use of students' first language (bilingual stories/folktales). The purpose of these activities has been integration and second language acquisition of newly arriving immigrant children. Do you think there would be individual and/or class benefits of such activities in the gifted program? From a curricular and organizational perspective, would activities like that disadvantage some students?
6. Would you say that encouraging the bilingual students to draw on the first language concepts or worldview exclude the English-speaking monolinguals from active participation in classroom activities?
7. To conclude, what role (if any) do your students' home languages play (should play) in your classroom practices?

### **Appendix B** **Interview Schedule 2 (Students)**

1. How old are you?
2. What language(s) do you speak at home with your parents?
3. Were you born in Canada? If not, where were you born? How old were you when you came to Canada?
4. Can you read and write in your home language? How would you describe your reading and writing ability in your home language?
5. Do you like to read in your home language? If yes, what kind of books do you like to read?
6. Can you use your home language to speak about anything?
7. Do you consider yourself bilingual?
8. Would it be useful for you to use any materials in your home language for class projects? Why or why not?
9. Would it be difficult for you to look up some information related to your class project in an encyclopedia or a website in your home language? Why or why not?
10. What would you say if your teacher asked you to use materials available in your home language for your project?