Bridging the Gap between Home and School: The Samoan Bilingual Cultural Maintenance Program

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This paper describes an action research project that was designed to investigate the effects of a cultural maintenance project that involved bilingual teaching for a group of Samoan students in their first year at school. The two basic assumptions underpinning this project were that affirmation of cultural identity fosters positive self-esteem, and that development of literacy in a first language provides a basis for development of literacy in a second language. As the project developed, parents were invited to take an active role in their children's bilingual literacy development. Their involvement was intended to bring the cultures of the home and the school closer together. Data collection was ongoing throughout the project and took the form of interviews with parents, teacher reflections, classroom observations, and collection of work samples produced by the children. Some findings were anticipated, for example, the increased levels of confidence in the Samoan children. However, much was learned that was not anticipated. In particular, the central role of the bilingual Samoan teacher, not just in the capacity of teacher, but as an essential bridge between the Samoan home and the school and the university research team.

Introduction

As the range of cultural heritages extant in contemporary Australian society has broadened, the socio-cultural context of education has diversified. This is particularly so in the suburb of Woodridge where this research was conducted. Census figures for 2001, indicate that languages other than English were spoken in 25.54% of homes, compared to 7.1% for Queensland, generally. In addition, the number of non-English speaking background (NESB) speakers had increased significantly in the five years prior to the 2001 Census (Department of Local Government and Planning, Queensland Government, 2001), with the Samoan language currently spoken by almost 72% of the NESB population in Woodridge. In multicultural suburbs such as Woodridge, children bring to school a richness of beliefs, languages, practices and ways of knowing that are often shared within the school community when multicultural events are celebrated. While this practice raises the cultural awareness of the school community, teachers need to sustain this awareness in their own classrooms, helping students to make connections between academic concepts and their own lives. Teachers need to be able to work with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to achieve a "meeting of minds", a process that McNaughton (2002) described as "making connections by building on the familiar and by unlocking the unfamiliar" (pp. 27–28).
This project aimed to achieve a meeting of minds by bringing together two cultures: the culture of the school and the culture of the home. This was to be achieved through the involvement of a bilingual Samoan teacher working with the regular classroom teacher and the participation of the Samoan children's parents. Consequently, it was intended that, as well as fostering the children's positive self-esteem and developing their literacy in both Samoan and English, a range of subsidiary outcomes would ensue. First, it was anticipated that the regular teacher's intercultural communication and cultural awareness would be enhanced and that her pedagogy would become more culturally inclusive. For the parents, it was anticipated that they would feel a sense of cultural pride and develop an awareness of the types of literacy practices that were encouraged at school. Thus, a "meeting of minds" was anticipated.

Literature review
The issue of student diversity has become a key concern for educators in recent times, and has been flagged as a priority in various reports published by the State of Queensland, Department of Education (1999, 2000) and Commonwealth authorities (National Multicultural Advisory Committee, 1999). Many researchers (e.g., Kostogriz 2002; Giroux 1996) have raised questions about the adequacy of current pedagogic models in literacy learning and teaching. Kostogriz (ibid p.2) suggests that "we need to resume the dialectic of multicultural spaces in which we live and learn in order to reveal contradictions between the global and the local, between centres and peripheries, between the individual and the social, between the politics of universal knowledge and situated knowing in everyday practices. In a word, we need a theory (a knowledge) of the production of cultural-semiotic and intellectual spheres in multicultural conditions".

The impact of intercultural communication on pedagogy and student diversity has provided new focuses for research. For example, working on the assumption that pedagogic practice is the variable most likely to influence students' academic and social outcomes, research projects have investigated teacher beliefs and practices. The outcome of one major study, the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS), was the generation of a set of Productive Pedagogies (The State of Queensland, Department of Education, 2002) that teachers can use as a framework to provide instruction that is responsive to academic and social outcomes for all students. Issues of social justice, equity and inclusion are central to these pedagogies. In fact, it is fair to say that currently there is a strong emphasis on the provision of pedagogies which are aligned with curriculum that engages productively with cultural and linguistic difference.

Literacy is viewed as social practice (Gee, 1990). As such, literacy is manifest in multiple forms and dependent on the particular set of social purposes and practices that defines a particular social group, be it the family or the classroom. When the distance between family literacies and classroom literacies is increased, students' likelihood of experiencing difficulties in school literacy achievement is increased (Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn, 1995). Cairney (2003), however, stressed that these difficulties are not about deficits in experience or skills but about students' ability to deal with literacy practices that are unfamiliar. According to McCaffery and Tuafuti (2003, p. 83):
… traditionally, children in Samoan society are to be seen but not heard: to listen and to obey without question is the norm, and discussion between children and adults is very rare. In addition, literacy activities for Samoan children are often first introduced in a religious setting (Sunday School, Bible studies) where any form of questioning of the text or the issues that it raises is considered completely unacceptable.

Their view would suggest some distance between Samoan literacy practices in homes and school literacies that are underpinned by productive pedagogies that promote high levels of intellectual quality through substantive conversation and the problematisation of knowledge. This is not to suggest that lower-level skills should be emphasized with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Au (2002) has emphasised that higher level thinking is essential and must be supported by instruction that builds on strengths in students’ home languages and promotes biliteracy.

Cummins (1980, 1981a) has also argued for bilingual instruction. He explained that persons possess a Common Underlying Proficiency, which has a common central processing system, an integrated source of thought that can utilize, when needed, either of the two languages. In addition, Cummins (1984) has postulated that children develop two different proficiencies: basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). CALP is generally developed in schools and it allows for coping with the cognitive and academic demands of the classroom. Cummins further suggests that students who have gained only BICS in their first language will find it difficult to progress beyond BICS in the second language. In other words, this implies that academic progress is facilitated by the enhancement of CALP in the first language as a platform for the development of CALP in the second language. A study of Vietnamese high school students in Brisbane by Birch (1997) provided research evidence that the secondary students in his study performed better in a range of subjects when they gained new content knowledge in their home language first, thus negotiating the transition from BICS to CALP in their first language, a much less demanding process than in the second language. Once the pathway had been established in the first language, students were able to undertake the transition with more confidence and resultant success in the second language. This current project attempts to apply Cummins’s ideas in a primary education context.

Unless the link between home and school is maintained, Cummins (2002) concludes that alienation between parents, the child and the school may occur. Birch (1997) reported that parents found that one of the benefits they derived from a bilingual education approach was that they were able to assist their children with study conducted in the language of the home, thus arresting the alienation that often occurs through monolingual education. Baker (1993) and Genesee (1987) both strongly recommend the maintenance of the child’s first language as a way to overcome the development of a potential cultural and linguistic gap between parents and children in NESB families.

**Methodology**

The project, implemented over a five-month period, adopted an action research design which Zuber-Skerritt (1995) described as a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. One cycle of the ongoing process is described.
Planning

At the planning stage, five Samoan Grade one students were selected and their profiles were established. Table 1 provides a basic picture about the participating students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Student profiles (Code: M=male, F=female)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TAVITA (M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of birth</td>
<td>Samoa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended family at home</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of Ethnic Community</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of church group</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Samoans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourite show</td>
<td>Spiderman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourite leisure time activity</td>
<td>Rugby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What else do you like?</td>
<td>To play with my cousins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These profiles emphasise the individual situations of each child. While their interests are typical of age peers in any culture, they do have varying experiences of Samoan culture as a result of their different family situations, and their family’s unique association with ethnic and religious communities.

In order to gain a holistic picture about the individual students’ home situation, we complemented the profiling data with data gained from parents about literacy practices in the home and their attitude towards these. Tavita’s and Taina’s parents had been reading to their children in Samoan. While they valued their children’s bilingualism, it was difficult to develop Samoan literacy as resources were not available apart from the Bible. In contrast, the other children’s parents read English stories to their children as English resources were available and they believed that literacy activities involving English would develop their children’s English language ability. Anita’s parent regarded English as more prestigious than Samoan:

Why wouldn’t I speak English to her at home? Samoan is a small language, not that important at all. It is important only to us… I mean only to my family and friends. It is good that Anita speaks it, and all our friends speak it, but English is more important. Just look at how many people speak English!

While all parents agreed that they valued their children’s education, there were quite different views about teaching procedures and the role of the teacher. These are outlined in Table 2.
Table 2
Parental view on the role of the teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TAVITA’S PARENT</th>
<th>TAINA’S PARENT</th>
<th>ANITAS PARENT</th>
<th>IEROME’S PARENT</th>
<th>ASETA’S PARENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you think the teacher helps your child to read and write?</td>
<td>Getting books for children</td>
<td>Just to teach her</td>
<td>That she can recognize and read words.</td>
<td>Good Memorizing letters, reciting words, practising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the teacher’s role in your child’s education</td>
<td>To teach him</td>
<td>Teach her appropriate to her age</td>
<td>To maintain partnership with parents. To help understand things and identify weaknesses</td>
<td>Teach the child how to learn</td>
<td>Teacher and parents should work collaboratively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum, the data gained in the planning stage of the project provided a basic picture about the students’ social practices and interests and about the cultural and linguistic practices in their homes.

**Acting**

Findings from the parent interviews informed the design of programs that were implemented with children and parents. It was decided that the bilingual teacher would work with the Samoan students each week during the 2-hour literacy block. A whole-part-whole grouping was anticipated in that the bilingual teacher or classroom teacher would start the session with a whole-group activity. When this activity was lead by the bilingual teacher, the activity would involve the sharing of a Samoan story or song with the whole class (in English). The purpose of this type of activity was to promote cultural awareness. The classroom teacher and the bilingual teacher would then work in parallel. The Samoan teacher would teach the same topics to the Samoan students as the English speaking teacher to the English speaking group of the class. Students’ opportunities to apply their understanding were often contextualised as games where concrete materials were used and a range of learning styles were accommodated. As Samoan texts were not available, the bilingual teacher adopted a language experience approach (Stauffer, 1970) where shared cultural experiences and understandings provided opportunities for modelled writing by the teacher. The Samoan texts produced in this way were used for shared reading activities and allowed take-home reading materials that could be read independently by the children. At the end of each literacy block, students from parallel groups shared their learning experiences (in English) with the whole class. This generated talk, with much at a metacognitive level.

The parent program was designed to involve parents in a partnership with the school where children’s literacy would be developed in two languages: Samoan and English. It aimed to engage parents in dialogue about their views on literacy practices such as reading and storytelling. This dialogue was intended to identify the types of literacy...
practices that occurred in the home and to consider ways to build on these in the classroom. In addition, it was intended to inform parents about the types of practices students engaged in at school using either language: Samoan or English. Parents would be encouraged to talk with their children about these experiences at home, and to encourage their children to share these experiences with other family members. It was hoped that parents would gain understanding about literacy practices at school, and that the school would gain understanding of literacy practices in the home. At all stages of the program, teachers emphasised the positive role of a child's first language in their personal and educational development.

**Observing**

Data relied heavily on observations. These observations were triangulated with those of participant observations made by the classroom teacher, the bilingual teacher and the teacher working with parents. Whenever possible, focused analysis of children's work samples was used to confirm observations. A set of general observations emerged in relation to each program:

The Samoan students enjoyed their parallel language classes and appeared to have pride in sharing stories and songs relating to their culture. The classroom teacher noted a change in the Samoan students' confidence and willingness to participate:

The growth in their self-worth and pride was evident. They were more willing to participate in general literacy activities. They'd have a go because they had a higher level of self-worth. I remember when the Samoan students were lined up in front of the class and asked to sing a Christmas song in Samoan. The whole class joined in and many continued singing the song in the yard in the break.

… they have more confidence, and are more inclined to talk to the teachers.

The bilingual teacher shared this view:

The children did well. The books became a treasured part of the program because they were personalized because the children contributed to the making of them. … Since the start of the program I had seen a boost in the children's confidence, improvement in their peer work and especially in appreciating the classroom work.

The classroom experiences with the bilingual teacher had affected all children in the class:

In our classroom we have children from various cultures. All students enjoyed these multicultural activities. I have noticed that they understand, and are more tolerant of differences. … They don't comment negatively about anybody.

The parent program was less successful than the classroom program. Not all parents attended regularly and those that did were often late. However, this allowed the classroom teacher to understand the children's classroom behaviour:

I learned how Samoans tend to pace their activities. Time isn't so important. Before I thought the children were hard to keep on task because they'd do a little bit, then turn away and then do something else and maybe a few minutes later return to the activity. So I'm able to see now how I need to help the children become more familiar with the way activities at school will be paced.
Reflecting
Ethnic communities are characterized by particularism as well as universalism. It is important for researchers and educators to examine and understand the particular features of an ethnic group that are markedly manifested through behaviours, feelings, understandings, style of conceptualisation and diversity in knowledge acquisition (Gundara, 1999). We are still wedded to the proposition that children's education will be enhanced if the gap between the home culture and the school culture is reduced. However, prior to this project, we have not had the opportunity to gain a thorough insight in the characteristics of the Samoan group that was subject to investigation. Therefore we lacked the ability to predict parental responses to our initiatives. We planned a substantial parental participation in the project without knowing that the parents' initial enthusiasm was rather an act of politeness than real enthusiasm. We lacked sufficient knowledge of Samoan culture to interpret this enthusiasm in the light of the subsequent lack of parental participation. It was tempting to see this as evidence that Samoans think that their duties end at the doorstep of the school and that in the school the teacher is responsible for the children's education and development. However, this plausible interpretation may need to be revised in the light of recent developments where parents have begun to participate in the classroom activities due to initiatives from the Samoan teacher, who has approached them independently of our research team. This suggests another possible hypothesis that where the gap between the home and the school cultures is wide, great care needs to be taken to ensure that the home culture is not alienated from the planning of the intervention process. Our program was a university-driven initiative and was presented to the parents as such, so that not only were they required to overcome their feelings of cultural difference from the school but also their lack of familiarity with the concept of university-based research.

Conclusion
In the spirit of true action research, this project has not yielded a definitive product in terms of a conclusion; it has, however, raised a number of questions which form part of an on-going action research cycle.

The first of these addresses the very heart of the issue that motivated the project, viz., the importance of language and culture maintenance. To what extent are parents committed to the maintenance of Samoan, or would they rather see their children skilled in the use of English? If the latter, should we expend our energies in promoting the notion that literacy in English cannot be achieved without literacy in Samoan?

It has become increasingly obvious that the bilingual Samoan teacher is crucial to effectiveness of the project. Not only can she speak to the parents in Samoan, but she has an intuitive understanding of how the parents think about the program's important issues. It is also clear that she gives credibility to the program. As it proceeds she will play an increasingly important bridging role between the home, the school and the university research team.

Two areas have emerged as positive outcomes of the program. On the one hand, the qualitative data from all involved in the project have all pointed to gains in the children's self confidence and cultural pride. On the other hand, the regular teacher has
commented on the development of her own cross-cultural understanding and sensitivity. In both of these areas, it has been the involvement of the Samoan teacher that has been the crucial factor. She embodies the positive effects of bilingualism and biculturalism and validates the belief that underpins the project.

References


