

Supporting bilingualism in families, day care centers and schools

Great work by a German association

by Mareen Pascall, February 16, 2021

Bilingualism is one of four major themes that *the Association of Binational Families and Partnerships* deals with. In this inspiring interview, Maria Ringler speaks from the Association's headquarters about supporting multilingual families, an exciting reading project for day care centers, and about her experiences with political lobbying for bilingual education.

Ms Ringler, you are the contact person for intercultural education, especially multilingual education, at the Association of Binational Families and Partnerships. What concerns do people have when they seek your advice?

I am primarily responsible for the coordination and conception of our educational work, for example, for planning further training for early childhood care and education staff about bilingualism. In addition many parents contact us with the question of how they best manage and balance the use of German as the school language and one or more family languages. There is, however, no general model. I always ask the family what emotional significance the languages involved have to them, how much time there is available for each language, and what expectations parents have with regard to their children's bilingualism. For example, is verbal communication within the family sufficient or is literacy desired as well? I find it important to make clear that it is always best for children if parents communicate with them in a language through which they can build a good and deep emotional relationship.

The Association's free brochures "At home in many languages" offers basic information on a bilingual upbringing in ten bilingual editions, for instance, in German and Arabic. What kind of feedback have you received about these brochures?

We deliberately designed the brochures to be low-threshold, as we saw that many parents feel quite insecure about raising children bilingually; unfortunately, they still hear from day care centers, schools and doctors that they should speak "more German" with their children. Yet we know that good skills in one language do not take away anything from another: on the contrary, children can learn German better if they get support in both languages.

The fatal advice to "speak more German" is often given to recently immigrated parents who only speak the family language at home and are in the process of learning German as a second language themselves. As I said, they then feel very insecure, and that was the main reason for why we developed the brochures. They are frequently downloaded from our website and requested in print, especially by day care centers. We would have liked to also see family centers, pediatric surgeries etc. make more use of the brochures, but unfortunately so far that hasn't worked so well.

We have received a lot of appreciative feedback, especially from families who find confirmation in the brochures of what they already felt was the right thing to do - speak their own language with children. Some also tell us that they now have something to use as a basis on which to defend their choice towards professionals who question parents' decision to speak their own language at home. Furthermore some parents used to feel rather isolated and now see there are organizations that deal with family bilingualism professionally and that can be asked for advice.

One of your specific recommendations is to read books to children in different languages. Parents can find a list of suitable children's books on your website. Through your project "Our grandmas and grandpas tell stories in many languages" you also carried out a multi-year reading project in day care centers. What has been your experience with this project?

That was a lovely project. We trained parents and grandparents to be reader volunteers in day care centers and supported them all along while they were in the program. Once a week reader volunteers went to day care centers and did activities with children in their home language. This included singing, saying rhymes, counting, and, of course, book reading! The children who participated in these activities usually knew the language from home, but other interested children were very welcome to participate as well.

The project was very well received, but also involved a lot of effort on our part, because we had to train and continuously support the reader volunteers. You cannot do this for long without public funding. So unfortunately we had to stop the project. After the funding stopped, we did, however, make a brochure and a detailed manual with recommendations in order to share and pass on what we had learned through the project.

This manual entitled "Setting up bilingual reading sessions" is a concrete "roadmap" for educators who want to set up multilingual reading offers. What advice, though, would you give day care centers and family centers that want to involve parents and grandparents in reading projects, but do not have resources for qualifying and accompanying interested volunteers?

It is of course important that volunteer readers are properly trained and know what materials are appropriate for young children and how to present them. They also need a person who they can contact whenever they need advice and support. Also readers need access to suitable material - not every book is suitable just because it is bilingual. Books must be free of clichés and prejudice, represent diversity, and offer positive identification opportunities for children who are not part of the white German majority.

Our manual explains all this, and we also try to help day care centers with a list of recommended children's books and other handouts. Our manual gives a detailed description of which competencies a training course should convey and which types of content are particularly important. Our manual is in high demand, although at the moment [because of the pandemic], everything is a bit different, of course. Groups cannot be mixed so easily. Currently we advise parents to get more tips for multilingual reading from the internet and we provide a list of links on our website.

You used to offer online workshops on reading with children. Do you still offer them?

We continue to offer online workshops. Groups or institutions can book a seminar and we then prepare specific content in function of what the client needs. Several times, for instance, we had requests from institutions that want to work with volunteer readers. Every three months we also offer workshops on specific topics and for specific audiences via our website. Those are always booked out immediately. For example, we offered a three-part workshop for immigrant fathers on how to raise bilingual children.

Overall, we cannot keep up with the demand. Unfortunately, the reason is that we do not really have a budget for the workshops. We keep trying to obtain funding for projects, but that is very difficult, especially when it comes to bilingualism. State agencies often ask: "Why aren't you doing something to promote German?" The fact that any language support strengthens children and lays the foundation for further language development, including in German, is usually not understood. Based on our experience, I think I can put it bluntly as follows: the need for funding to promote bilingualism is not recognized by those in charge of developing integration and migration policies. That is true even when results of bilingualism research are explained to them.

Perhaps the apparent fear of decision-makers who grew up monolingually still is that promoting family languages could take something away from German. Or that, if we take the reading projects as an example, monolingual German-speaking children cannot benefit from the "foreign language" offer. Have you been able to gain insight into the extent to which monolingual German-speaking children participate in activities in other languages?

In day care centers with enough children with the same family language background, usually only these children participated in the reading activities in that language. But there have also been centers where very few children speaking the language we had on offer were present. In these cases, we explained to children that we wanted to read with everyone, and we involved them differently right from the start, and asked them: Do you want to take part in this, do you want to help us with the words?

Sometimes we would take a multilingual book whose story the children already knew, but which they then experienced in another language. In this case, the focus was less on the content than on the comparison of languages: how do the languages sound, what is the name of this character, which words are similar, which are completely different? All children were able to say something about this. Sometimes, however, unfamiliar stories were read to children, including longer texts. There were children who said afterwards: "I don't know what they said, but it was nice". We received several comments like this and concluded that the children got emotionally involved in the experiment, and found it interesting and pleasant. But day care centers often did not allow us to read to such linguistically diverse groups.

Why?

Mostly, there were concerns are that "everything will get mixed up" and that the children would "not understand anything and not pay attention". Of course, it is true that there are children who show this reaction and we cannot force anything onto children. If there was a child who did not want to take part in the reading activity she or he was allowed to go somewhere else or to play on their own. But that happened very rarely. Most children came back the next time, even if they didn't understand the language.

In my view, an explanation for the concerns of the day care centers is that if you grew up in a monolingual environment yourself, you may feel uncomfortable with the bilingual situation, because you are not used to it. For instance, it can happen that people speak and laugh and you don't understand anything - however, this doesn't mean that you are being marginalized and laughed at, but merely that a different language is being used. It doesn't mean you should be afraid of losing control of the communicative situation.

Language is also part of culture and cannot simply be "replaced". We do not see language as being independent from culture. For children, the connection seems to be even stronger and more direct. When they link a language with something they have seen before or that they are familiar with, for example, through neighbors, friends or holiday trips, they are often enthusiastic, enjoy the discovery, and the re-discovery. I find this very touching.

In this light, let us hope that your multilingual reading experiment will be able to continue in day care centers and schools, at least after corona-related restrictions have ended. What else do you wish for in the future?

I wished that we as a society would realize and accept more fundamentally that we indeed live in a multilingual society, and that we were taking this into account in our educational institutions. It is further of paramount importance that we stop dividing languages into “good” and “bad” ones. This hierarchization of languages depending on their image or the image of the cultures behind them and, ultimately, the people – this hurts their speakers and is discriminatory. When as a child I experience that the language through which I received the affection and love of my parents is ridiculed or rejected, it does something to me. It may not be a problem if it happens once or twice. A pin sting or two do not hurt for long. But if I get a few hundred pin stings, it starts to hurt very much and can have lasting effects. I would like us to become aware of the discrimination and pain that we cause with such linguistic categorizations and evaluations.

Ms. Ringler, thank you very much for this impressive interview.

This interview was recorded on January 20, 2021. HaBiNet is very grateful to Ms Ringler for her generous cooperation.

As an intercultural family charity, the Association for Binational Families and Partnerships is active in 24 cities in almost all regions of Germany. The Association offers workshops, consultations and hands-on projects for couples and families with and without a migration background. Both its offers as well as its lobbying work relate to family, education, and migration policy. A large part of the Associations's work is done by volunteers: individuals, parents, multipliers, and specialists.



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