RESEARCH INTO BILINGUALISM

Much research has been conducted over the years into bilingualism, bilingual education programs, and especially immersion programs. The research indicates that bilingualism has a positive effect upon the cognitive development of children. Recent results indicate that the bilingual child is more advanced than his or her monolingual counterpart, more sensitive to the semantic relationship of words, has a greater cognitive flexibility as well as a greater social sensitivity.

Lambert (1990:210) stated:

“Enough data is available to conclude [that] being bilingual can have tremendous advantages not only in terms of language competencies, but also in terms of cognitive and social development. ...studies ... indicate that bilingual young people, relative to monolingual controls, show definite cognitive flexibility, creativity, divergent thought, or problem solving.”

Furthermore he added that:

“The limiting condition is that the two (or more) languages involved in the bilingualism have enough social value and worth that both can be permitted to flourish as languages of thought and expression.”

Cognitive development

In simple terms, cognitive development relates to how mental processes such as thinking, logic, problem solving ability, knowledge, reasoning, conceptualisation, etc. develop within an individual.

Early bilingual children realise quite early the conceptual arbitrariness of assigning a word (sound) to an object or concept. This develops a greater flexibility in word attack skills for literacy development and the potential early development of a wider vocabulary in both languages.

Studies in Canada have indicated that bilinguals performed better on a Piagetian concept formation task than did a monolingual matched control group. It was also reported by Peal and Lambert (1962) that ten year old French-English bilingual children scored better on verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests than did a matched control group of monolingual children.

Ben Zeev’s study of Hebrew-English bilingual children in New York and Israel prompted her conclusions that bilinguals have greater cognitive flexibility in respect to skill at auditory reorganisation of verbal material, a much more flexible manipulation of the linguistic code and more sophistication in concrete operational thinking. (Lambert 1990:211)

Divergent thinking was an area researched by Cummins and Gulutsan (1974) where significant differences were found between bilingual and monolingual children on a verbal originality exercise. Similar results were found in Singapore by Torrance et al. (1970) on tests of creative thinking. Carringer (1974) found similar supporting evidence in a study carried out in Mexico.