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## **Colonized through Language: the case of early childhood education**

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**ABSTRACT** In this article, the privilege accorded to language as the ‘natural’ way of human expression and communication is problematized. Drawing upon multiple post-colonial sources, the author suggests that this is yet another of the ways in which dominant Western ways of viewing the world are imposed upon diverse groups of people, including young children. Questions are asked about whose interests are best served when language is privileged over other modes of communication. Acquiring language is often perceived as a crucial tool in the growth of young children; however, the question is rarely asked, what is lost when language is gained. The article also provides examples from an ethnographic study done in India that suggests that children can engage in complex forms of communication that do not involve language. Finally, the article addresses the common assumption that using language mostly means using one language. Dominant Western discourses about language are almost overwhelmingly unilingual; however, most of the world’s children use and live in multilingual environments.

The excessive importance given to language as the ‘natural’ way of human expression represents the continued colonization of the field of early childhood education by dominant perspectives (Cannella, 1997). Said (1991) has used Foucault’s work on the alliance between power and knowledge to explore life in colonized societies, and suggests that knowledge transforms power into a ‘web-like force which is confirmed and articulated through the everyday exchanges ... which animate social life’ (Gandhi, 1998, p. 74). I extend this argument to the lives of young children (who in many ways fit the definition of a colonized group) and demonstrate how, in the case of language, one form of representation (that of the privileged) has gained power and how that marginalizes and casts into shadow other ways of viewing and interacting with the world (Viruru & Cannella, 1998). As Dahlberg et al (1999) ask, why does so much of the early childhood world speak the same language? What other

languages might one choose to speak? (p. 2). And to take this even further, must we always choose language to interact with one another? As Gee (1993) puts it, viewed in the light of postmodernism's rejection of claims to exclusivity and privilege on the part of any social practice, how can one defend the choice of language as the one way in which human thoughts and feelings are expressed? Thus, the intent of this article is not to suggest that if children were not exposed to adult domination, there is an 'innate' child language that would naturally emerge. Rather, it is to suggest that constructions of language (and silence) are used in complex ways to create opportunities and justifications for the exercise of power. Thus, by choosing language as one's only way of communication, by learning to express oneself only in accepted ways, is one then really learning to speak, at times, against oneself (Seth, 1981)? In early childhood education, when we choose language, is that the same choice that all or even some children would make? As McLaren & Lankshear (1993) point out, learning to read and write a language may expose children 'to forms of domination and control by which their interests are subverted' (p. 379). Ultimately, the question has to be asked, does choosing language create more opportunities for children? (Cannella, 1997).

*Britton (1999) points out 'the question of language is central to the colonial and postcolonial experience' (p. 1), since language becomes inextricably intertwined with issues of control and command. Britton's analysis of the work of the postcolonial writer Edouard Glissant suggests that in places such as the Caribbean islands, with their complex history of transportation and slavery, there is no language that really belongs to the people. I suggest that young children face similar situations. Dominant discourses of early childhood envelop children within dominant language, denying them the possibilities of creating their own language(s) and ways of expression. The assumption within dominant discourse seems to be that the earlier children become 'vocal', the sooner they can express themselves. However this concept of becoming vocal itself represents speaking within traditions and hegemony (Spivak, 1996). I address two issues that relate to the dominance of language-based perspectives in early childhood education: (1) that language is the form of representation that we use to express the things most important to us and (2) that the normal definition of using language is to use one language. Both these assumptions, I believe, support the argument that I have made elsewhere, that early childhood education, as it is positioned today, is a site for postcolonial struggle. (Viruru, in press)*

### **Language as a Privileged Form of Representation**

#### *Early Childhood Stories from India*

Growing up in India, one of the ideas that shaped my way of viewing the world was the (unspoken) rule that language was for the unimportant things in life. If something really mattered, it was unlikely that it would ever be spoken aloud. These messages would be conveyed in ambiguous and layered

ways, using symbols that had nothing to do with the written or the spoken word. Language seemed to play only a limited role in the relationships one had with other human beings.

In an ethnographic study that I conducted in a nursery school in India, I found that language played a similarly limited role. However, this way of doing things seemed to be coming increasingly under attack, from global capitalism and other colonizing forces (Viruru, in press). One of the most fascinating aspects of my 5-month tenure at the school was the fact that at no point was I ever introduced to anyone at the school as ‘someone who is doing research here’, or in any other terms. I was just simply there. This was in spite of the fact that I sat in on parent meetings, helped out at school events and spent time in practically every classroom. The children were never told who I was or what I was doing. Neither the adults nor the children that I came into contact with seemed to want to know exactly what my role was. The question that I was asked the most by the children, especially when taking field notes, was ‘what are you writing in your book?’, to which I would usually answer something like, ‘I am writing about what you are doing’. However, some of the children seemed to understand that I was someone who needed or wanted to be initiated into the life of their classroom and filled me in on their routines and ways of doing things. If anything, being undefined by language seemed to help us communicate better with one another. Margaret Trawick (1990), in her book, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*, which is also set in India, has suggested that silence in relationships in India does not mean absence but is more of a tool that invites dialogue, probing and further understanding. The children I interacted with also seemed to take the silence about my presence there not as representing something forbidden but as an opportunity to share ideas and construct understandings for themselves.

On a day-to-day level at the school, sometimes I did not even notice how many things were not spoken until someone said something, which made me aware, once again, of all the other ways in which people seemed to communicate with one another. One day, one of the teachers exclaimed rather exasperatedly, ‘some of these children have such a poor grasp of phonetic ideas’. This came as quite a shock to me, for this was the first time that the word phonetic had ever been mentioned as having anything to do with language. In the 2-3 year-old class, alphabets were taught as ‘a for apple’ and ‘s for spoon’ and so on. However, the connection between letters and sounds was never mentioned openly. Yet the children seemed to learn them and even to understand that this was expected of them. On another occasion, I watched the teacher of the 4 and 5 year-olds explain how to use the articles ‘a’ and ‘an’. Although she gave them many examples of how each one might be used, she never told them what the rule for using them was. It was inferred and illustrated by the examples but not spoken aloud.

In the community, the school I studied had a reputation for being a place where children were taken care of well. Many parents that I talked to were very satisfied not only with the academic standards of the school, but also with

the ways in which the children were looked after. The teachers and administrators (when I asked them direct questions) talked about how important it was not just to teach children but also to take care of them. However, caring or affection were almost never expressed openly, nor were they talked about at school. One of the things that initially struck me the most about the interactions between the parents and the teachers had to do with what seemed a lack of emotion. Parents did not ask questions about how their child would be cared for; they rarely asked any questions at all that did not have to do with routine details. Entirely absent were any kind of questions about the well-being of the child or how the school would handle separation or 'nurture' the children. Teachers too did not try to reassure the parents; phrases like 'don't worry' or 'she will get used to it' or 'I know this is hard on you' were never spoken.

One of the children who started attending school while I was there was called Vaishnavi. When she first started school, she spent almost 3 weeks crying the entire time she was at school – she would cry from the time her mother left her until it was time to go home. During this time, Vaishnavi had developed an attachment to her lunch basket and refused to be parted from it: she carried it wherever she went, from her classroom to the playground to the portico, where she was often to be found sobbing loudly. The principal told me that she thought Vaishnavi would probably turn out to be very clever since in her experience children who cried a lot were 'more intelligent'. Her mother continued to bring her to school, knowing that her child would spend the next 2 or 3 hours sobbing. Eventually Vaishnavi stopped crying, settled down very happily in school, and was one of the stars of the School Day function, held a few months later. When I had an opportunity to talk to Vaishnavi's mother, I commented to her about how well she had settled down. All Vaishnavi's mother said was, 'It took her 3 weeks, she is really exceptional', but her face said a lot more. It is difficult to describe how a look can communicate so much but in her face, one could read all the emotion, and many other unnamed feelings, that had seemed absent. As was often the case, I felt like I had committed some kind of obscene act by imposing speech in a situation where it did not belong. At that moment, it felt like an act of almost unspeakable brutality and violence to force language into situations where it was entirely inadequate. The satisfaction of having understood what was really going on seemed an act of irresponsibility when compared to the sense of violating the codes by which people function.

One of the most interesting experiences that I had in the school involved the use of silence by a group of children to very firmly keep me out of their activities. The classroom that I spent the most time in was the Lower Kindergarten or 3-4 year-old room. There was one particular group of children who always seemed to play together and create their own games and rules. Often this would involve writing things, which is probably why it caught my attention, since very few of the children used writing in unofficial contexts. Most of the children were very open in talking to me about what they were

doing, but this particular group seemed to want to keep their activities to themselves. They were always polite and friendly but elusive. If I asked what they were doing, they would smile or say 'nothing' but would never tell me anything more. After five or six attempts, the message became clear: this was not something that they were going to talk about. As a researcher, I found this quite frustrating, since I really wanted my work to reflect the perspectives of children. On the other hand, they seemed, through their silence, to be asking for something that one would not even think twice about with older human beings: to have control over what belonged to them.

The longer I spent at the school, the more aware I became of the multiple ways in which the people there (both adults and children) seemed to create positive relationships with one another, in ways that had very little to do with language or with physical expressions of feelings. The youngest children, especially during the first few weeks of school, were often carried around on the hips of various adults. During that time, the teachers would go about their duties, rarely talking to the child they were holding. At lunchtime, each teacher had her own particular group of children, who wanted her to feed them their lunch. They would refuse to sit or be fed by others. It was through such actions that relationships seemed to be created, not through language.

There were times, however, when language seemed to intrude and make its way into relationships. One of the teachers had a few cards in her room, given to her by the children, for 'Teachers' Day', which is September 5th. This fairly recent tradition involves setting aside this one day each year to recognize the efforts of teachers. Although Teachers' Day is usually not a holiday, most schools do something to celebrate it. Recently, however, some multinational companies who make greeting cards have introduced special cards for teachers, and in the stationery stores the banners read something like 'show your teacher how much you care with a Teachers' day card'. In a classroom where words like love and affection were never spoken aloud, the cards, with their messages of love, seemed entirely out of place. They seemed to be bringing a much deeper message with them: that since language could be exploited for capitalist purposes, other ways of doing things would not be left alone for very long.

#### *Problematizing Language*

My work in India made me deeply and perhaps more consciously aware of the multiple ways in which human beings negotiate and create social relationships: with and without language. Yet, upon returning to the USA, it seemed that one was surrounded by language: there seemed to be no place where language could not go: ultimately, language seemed inextricably linked to power. As McLaren & Giroux (1997) put it:

*As the cultural mask of hegemony, language is being mobilized to police the borders of an ideologically discursive divide that separates the dominant from*

*subordinate groups, whites from Blacks and schools from the imperatives of democratic public life. (p. 16)*

Consequently, McLaren & Giroux suggest that not only should the role that language plays in representing and constructing reality be examined critically but that pedagogies of critical literacy be developed. These pedagogies, they suggest, are situated in the places where language, culture, power and history intersect and make learners aware of 'how relations of power, institutional structures and models of representation' keep people powerless (p. 36). Pedagogies of critical literacy, according to McLaren & Giroux, demand that the very 'ideological process of language itself be interrogated' (p. 37) and that new counter-discourses be developed, which aid in the project of social transformation. Recognizing the validity as well as the complexity of other forms of human communication seemed to be a step towards one such counter-discourse. In early childhood education, such a discourse could create increased possibilities for younger human beings. While working in India, it often appeared to me that the limited role of language seemed linked to a less stratified world, where adults and children were not so rigidly distinguished from one another. To return to situations where it often seemed as though young children were classified as 'other' or 'limited' or 'still developing' merely because the language they chose to use (or not use) did not conform to adult standards seemed to be imperialistic and disempowering (Cannella, 1997). This made it appear all the more imperative that the relationship between language and the colonization of younger human beings be further examined.

#### *Post-colonial Perspectives*

Post-colonial theorists have pointed out that language is deeply implicated in the continuing colonization of the world by Euro-Western ways of being and thinking (Gandhi, 1998, Loomba, 1998). Seed (1991) has noted that language has been used as a tool to distinguish between 'civilization and barbarism' (p. 8): those civilizations that use written languages are considered superior to those who do not. Incidentally, young children too are often referred to as beings who need to be civilized and one of the most predominant parts of this civilizing process is the acquisition of (proper) language. As Gandhi (1998) suggests, language or text, more than any other social or political product, is one of the most 'significant instigators and purveyors of colonial power' (p. 141). Tiffin & Lawson (1994) state that although colonial power was established through such means as 'guns, guile and disease' (p. 3), it has been and continues to be maintained largely through the means of language. As Viswanathan (1989) has suggested, one of the ways in which the British consolidated their power in India was through the deliberate introduction of English literature in Indian schools. The 'planned dissemination' of English literature created an image of the colonizers as more human and

approachable, all the while masking the intellectual and economic exploitation in which the colonizers were engaged.

Language too seems to wear similar masks when used as a tool to 'socialize' young children. Constrained to learn language and given to believe that without language there can be no valid ways of living, younger human beings are made to live within boundaries that they had no voice in creating. Often they are explicitly given the message that using language is desirable and 'good' whereas other forms of communication are not. Even the kind of language that they are permitted to use (or not) is determined by adults; this is often masked as something done in their best interests. Often children seem to be denied the right to silence: to refuse to answer a question is not a right that children are allowed. Silence is created as dangerous and forbidden. As Lakoff (1995) points out, 'the powerless cannot choose to be silent, any more than they can choose to speak, or choose the meaning of their speech' (p. 25).

Britton (1999) has suggested that an important part of the post-colonial theory of Edouard Glissant is the concept of 'Relation', which is a way in which different cultures and people might interact with one another. Relation is essentially an anti-imperialist project, and is defined by Britton as a 'relation of equality and respect for the Other as different from oneself' (p. 11). Glissant (in Britton, 1999) has argued that the 'universalizing force of Western humanism leads to a conception of the Other as mere fodder for its drive to reduce everything to "the same"' (p. 12). In contrast, the concept of the 'Relation' sees the Other as equal, and as a presence that is necessary because it is different. Thus, 'Relation operates within a totality based on *diversity rather than unity*' and is seen as 'infinitely open ended and uncontainable' (p. 12). Another important aspect of the concept of Relation is that it is opposed to the idea of 'essence', which Glissant (in Britton, 1999) sees as 'complicit with the coercive universalism of the West' (p. 15). To exist in Relation, is to be part of an ever-changing and diversifying process, whereas to be reduced to an essence is to be fixed with permanent attributes.

When we think about the concept of Relation as it applies to our interactions with young children, language seems to play an implicit role in the process of reducing younger human beings to an essence. Perhaps more so than with any other group of human beings, language is used to describe, observe, categorize and label young children. As Glissant points out, the dominant languages of the West are languages of essence rather than of the Related and thus continue the complex processes of colonization. In our attempts to 'understand' young children, we seem to be trying to reduce them to proportions that are more understandable, rather than trying to enter into Glissant's concept of Relation with them, which would respect their existence as human beings who can never completely be understood.

Intimately related to the concept of Relation is the idea of opacity: for Relation is seen as accepting of the 'opacity' of the Other's difference, which cannot be assimilated or objectified (especially through language). Glissant (in

Britton, 1999) sees opacity as something that enriches and deepens relationships, since:

*the more the Other resists in his thickness or fluidity (without restricting himself to that) the more expressive his reality becomes and the more fruitful the relationship becomes. (p. 18)*

Glissant thus claims that all human beings have a right to be opaque and to resist 'transparency'. Opacity is also seen as a defense against 'understanding', in the hierarchical, objectifying way that those in the West use it. As Glissant (in Britton, 1999) puts it:

*If we look at the process of understanding beings and ideas as it operates in Western society, we find that it is founded on an insistence on this kind of transparency. In order to 'understand' and therefore accept you, I must reduce your density to this scale of conceptual measurement which gives me a basis for comparisons and perhaps for judgements. (p. 19)*

Britton further states that understanding thus appears as an 'act of aggression' (p. 19) because it constructs the Other as an object of knowledge. Glissant (in Britton, 1999) points out the French word for understanding, *comprendre*, has at its root the word *prendre*, which means to take. Thus, understanding becomes a process of taking and of appropriation and is complicit in the process of colonizing other human beings.

Glissant's (in Britton, 1999) deconstruction of the word 'understanding' seems of great importance to the field of early childhood education, as 'understanding' is perhaps one of the most commonly used terms in characterizing relationships with young children. Many of our conversations about how to become better caregivers and teachers seem to revolve around this concept of understanding. Yet, as Glissant and others (Cannella, 1997) have noted, the concept of understanding colonizes children since it assumes that they are transparent enough to be understood. By using an excess of language to label, categorize and dissect their every move and behavior, we deny them the right to be 'opaque', and insist that they become transparent, so that we might on the surface 'understand' them better, but essentially, control them more and more.

Glissant (in Britton, 1999) has also discussed how language and colonization interact in other complex ways: in some colonies, where the colonized already had languages of their own, they were able to use their language as a form of protection against the colonizers. But in situations where there was no indigenous language, and the only language available belonged equally to master as well as slave, it was far more difficult for the colonized to create spaces where the colonizers could not go. As Britton (1999) puts it, for those who are colonized, 'there is no given available language in which they can fully articulate their sense of themselves and their specific social and material reality' (p. 35). This argument can be extended to young children, who, as has been argued elsewhere, can be seen as a colonized group (Viruru & Cannella, 1998, 1999). For young children, all language may appear as the

colonizer's language. Thus, if we wish to reconceptualize early childhood education as a field that creates increased opportunities for younger human beings, it would appear essential that we create spaces for children to explore and employ multiple forms of communication.

*Deconstructing the Superiority of Language*

Analyzing the troubled place of English as a second language programs in Canadian schools, Rockhill & Tomic (1995) state that the dominance of the English language over all others defines 'identities, identifications and communities' (p. 210). Knowledge that cannot be communicated within the dominant language becomes subjugated; further, even when acquired by diverse people, the 'referent' of the language continues to be that of the dominant culture. Thus, linguistic dominance serves as 'an essential axis along which othering practices get to play themselves out' (p. 210). Although functioning as a tool of colonization, the discourse that surrounds the acquisition of the English language in Canada is of empowerment and of liberation, advancing the belief that once one has acquired the correct language, one's possibilities are endless.

It would seem that many of the points that Rockhill & Tomic make apply not only to the acquisition of English as a second language but to the acquisition of any language. For, as the stories from India seemed to indicate, language is one form of human expression, but not the only one. In early childhood education, much attention is paid to how children acquire language and how they learn to read and write. However, this focus diverts attention from the reality that even before young children learn to use language they are complex and complete individuals. Their knowledge is subjugated since it is not expressed through the dominant (and superior) form of language. As Lakoff (1995) puts it, 'it is easier to perceive what is there as meaningful, as opposed to discerning meaning in the absence of a phenomenon' (p. 25). A lack of language is thus perceived as just that, a lack, rather than as indicating the presence of other knowledges. Other forms of expression are ignored, as adults continue to focus on socializing children into dominant ways of functioning. For example, children's play that does not involve the use of language (such as the 'onlooker' and 'solitary' stages of play) is considered as less 'developed' (Parton, 1932). Here, too, the discourse of language acquisition is that of increased possibilities, with no recognition of the knowledges that are lost through this colonizing practice. Children are encouraged and rewarded for using language (for example, being told to use 'their words') and even more so for using appropriate language. Often, studies of child language tend to focus on how children's speech develops (in other words becomes more like adult language), rather than recognizing the complexities and integrity of the language and other forms of communication that children do use.

Gibbon (1999) has suggested that the discourses that privilege language as a superior form of representation ignore the fact that not all parts of the world are 'named'. As she suggests, the parts of the world that are named are the ones that we talk about and notice. Linguists such as deSaussure have argued further that the relationship between words and the concepts they represent is not as simple as it seems: for words achieve their meaning not just from the things they refer to but from associations created in the mind (quoted in Loomba, 1998, p. 35). As McLaren & Giroux (1997) put it, language is not just a transparent window to the world but rather, 'the primary medium through which social identities are constructed' (p. 21). Thus, language directs attention to some parts of the world and legitimizes some ways of thinking and not others; the way it is constituted influences how we view and conceive of reality (p. 19). Thus, when we 'socialize' young children into using language, we limit human possibility, denying them the opportunities to create their own understandings. In many circumstances, it would appear that the use of language is inevitable; at the very least, then, one should be aware of its limitations.

Many of the people in my study in India seemed to communicate through what was not said rather than what was. However, silence has generally been perceived as 'less than' language. As Gal (1995) has said, silence in public is generally deplored in the West, as a symbol of 'passivity and powerlessness' (p. 171). Those who are silent, it is assumed, cannot influence their own lives or the ways in which they are constructed by history. The construction of silence as the dichotomous Other of speech reflects the 'discourse of dichotomies fostered in both the enlightenment and modern periods' (Cannella, 1997, p. 34). Thus, perceiving silence as a lack of something reflects Western ways of thinking and viewing the world.

Many works about India have, in contrast, suggested that silence is a way of knowing (Trawick, 1990; Visweswaran, 1994). As Gal (1995) has said, in some cultures, verbal skills are seen as essential for power, but in others it is quite the other way round. Thus, the link between language and power is not as simple and 'natural' as dichotomous ways of thinking have led us to believe. One of the many ways in which younger human beings have been colonized has been through their construction as a 'silent' and consequently a 'needy' and 'underdeveloped' group (Woodhead, 1990; Cannella, 1997). When one starts to perceive silence as a presence rather than absence (Visweswaran, 1994), it has radical implications for the lives of younger human beings.

Gal (1995) has shown how silence can be used as a 'strategic defence against the powerful', as when used by the Western Apache men to 'baffle, disconcert and exclude white outsiders' (p. 171). Silence thus became the opposite of passivity, and a form of political protest. The children in my study, who refused to let me in on what they were doing, seemed through their silence to be engaging in a similar protest. To return to Glissant's theory, they seemed, through their silence, to be demanding the right to be opaque, and to be resisting the transparency that was being demanded of them.

### Multilingualism

Related to the idea that language is the form in which human beings fully and completely express themselves is the often unspoken assumption that one naturally chooses only one language in which to do so. Dominant Western discourses about language are almost overwhelmingly unilingual, such as in Bredekamp & Copple's (1997) highly influential *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*. Bredekamp & Copple do mention that 'the early childhood years are an optimal time to acquire fluency in second language' (p. 104). Multilingualism, however, is not mentioned. Further, most of the ensuing discussion in their work about language development assumes a monolingual perspective. Thus, the life experiences of many of the world's children are ignored.

### *Indian Stories*

One of my favorite moments in the school came when I asked one of the children, Dushyant, what a 'bud' was, since they had just learned to write this word. In general, these children were not subjected to many questions to which adults already knew the answer. On this occasion, Dushyant looked at me for a while (perhaps wondering why I didn't know the answer) before answering and then said, 'mogh'. 'Mogha' is the word for bud in Tamil, which was that child's home language, but he made it sound like an English word, cutting off the last 'a' sound. I found it intriguing that he chose to Anglicize a Tamil word rather than explain what it was (which he was certainly capable of doing). Through the months that I spent in the school, the children had come to realize that English was the language that I spoke the most often. Thus, through suitably Anglicizing his answer, Dushyant seemed to demonstrate not only his multilingual capabilities but also his ability to tailor his words to the perceived nature of the person to whom he was speaking (someone who spoke mostly English). Furthermore, through his answer he seemed to subtly convey his opinion of my question: that such a foolish question demanded a suitably simplified answer.

Multilingualism seemed to be one of the least mentioned yet most striking features of the school. All children in the school were exposed to at least three languages: English, Hindi and Telugu. Some of them spoke other languages at home and used those as well, usually with the teachers. The principal, for example, spoke six languages, though she was not sure that so much multilingualism was a very good thing. She said that they tried to use translated versions of popular songs with the children. With English songs, she said, the children enjoyed the rhythm and sound but little else. With songs in languages they understood, the principal said, one could see 'a sparkle of understanding' in the children's eyes.

Hindi, the most widely spoken language in India, and Telugu, the language most commonly spoken in the state, were the languages one heard

the most often in the school, although the school was officially designated an 'English medium' school. Hindi seemed to be used more often than Telugu: children who were native speakers of other languages tended to learn more Hindi than Telugu, though when I asked the principal why this was, she did not consider it very important. In general, languages were mixed and used so often and so interchangeably that distinguishing between them or even noticing that so many of them were being used seemed irrelevant. When they were mentioned, it seemed rather surprising. For example, on one particular day at lunchtime, one of the Upper Kindergarten children, Madhura, came up to her teacher and asked her, in Hindi, if she could speak Bengali. The teacher said she could not. She then looked at me and said, 'I thought she was asking me if I could speak Hindi', and then she added, with a laugh 'and she would be right for I cannot'. That teacher considered her knowledge of Hindi rudimentary, though she used it a lot with her children. Madhura then asked the teacher if she spoke Marathi, her own native language, and the teacher again replied that she did not. Madhura remarked casually that her mother spoke Kannada, but at home they spoke Marathi (her father's language). Incidentally, she was asking all these questions in Hindi. The teacher then asked the other children what they spoke at home, and there was a range of answers. One of the children, Raghav, insisted that he spoke Telugu at home, though his mother tongue was Tamil. Again, this was one of the very few conversations at the school that explicitly focused on multilingualism.

On another occasion in the nursery classroom, the principal casually turned to me and asked me if I spoke Kannada. I was startled and said 'No'. The unspoken question in my mind was 'why would I'. Reflecting upon this, I thought that in India, one did not seem to learn languages for any particular reason: one was just in contact with them so much that they automatically became something that one knew.

The 4-5 year-old children seemed to be the ones who openly tried to use English in their interactions with one another. A great deal of school time was devoted to instruction in the English language, since this is considered a highly desirable skill in an increasingly global world. Two of the children, Raghav and Tony, often tried to converse in English with one another. One day, when they were drawing something together on the classroom blackboard, Raghav said, 'stand now very boiling water you will dead', referring to the picture they were drawing of a person standing in hot water. Raghav then added, to draw 'moon, moon and stars ... it will be out only ... in the house only it will be ... it will be very happy'. This seemed to mean that moonlight would be everywhere and would make everyone happy. I found it very interesting that they would try to use English in these contexts since they both used Hindi and Telugu quite fluently, even though Raghav's native language was Tamil and Tony's was Malayalam. They would try out their English by using phrases such as 'book no' (they did not have their books) or 'I don't got it' or 'I am big pencil' (they wanted a big pencil). Whenever the teacher said anything in the classroom in English, some of the children seemed to make it a point to repeat

it after her word for word, often to themselves at other times. Even as I observed and made notes on all of these things, I was aware that to the people in the school, all of these behaviors were rather commonplace, for probably every single person in that school was at least trilingual.

### *Ignoring Multilingual Realities*

Dominant Western discourses about young children speak of the acquisition and development of language as extremely important (Kostelnik et al, 1999). Although not often stated, the unspoken assumption is that they acquire one language at a time, and that regardless of the language that is being learned, there are predetermined stages in language development (Kostelnik et al, 1999). Discussions of how children learn language and literacy thus seem to assume monolingualism as the norm (Wishon et al, 1998; Kostelnik et al, 1999). However, the experiences of most of the world's children contradict this assumption (World Bank, 1995). As Tucker (1998) puts it, 'bilingualism or multilingualism and innovative approaches to education which involve the use of two or more languages constitute the normal everyday experience' for many children in the world (p. 4). Tucker cites the example of Papua New Guinea, which has a population of approximately 3 million people, but about 870 languages. Thus, in that society, 'it is common for a child to grow up speaking one local indigenous language at home, another in the market place, adding Tok Pisin to her repertoire as a lingua franca and English if she continues her schooling' (p. 4).

Many other societies in the world not only use multiple languages in multiple different contexts but also actively integrate themselves into their educational systems. For example, in both the Philippines and in Brunei Darussalam, children in the same school receive instruction in different languages, based upon content area. In the Philippines, English is used as the medium of instruction for English, mathematics and science, and Filipino is used for Filipino language arts and all other content areas. In the regions of the country where Filipino is not spoken, a third language is added (Gonzalez, 1998; Tucker, 1998). In Luxembourg, the entire school-aged population follows a trilingual education system (Hoffmann, 1998).

As Cenoz & Genesee (1998) state, 'multilingualism and multilingual acquisition are widespread, not only in bilingual and multilingual communities but all over the world' (p. 16). Yet, dominant discourse about language acquisition and language use focuses on unilingual or at best bilingual perspectives (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998). Even when one speaks of using language for multilingual speakers, this has very diverse connotations. As Cenoz & Genesee point out, multilingual speakers may distribute their languages according to the necessities of the situations they encounter, and as such should not be assessed using the same standards as monolingual speakers who use the same language in all contexts.

In books such as *Beyond Bilingualism: multilingualism and multilingual education*, edited by Jasone Cenoz & Fred Geneese (1998), and in many other works, one finds innumerable examples that suggest that multilingualism may indeed be the most common mode of expression for many children in the world. Such experiences cast problematic reflections upon such commonly accepted aspects of dominant discourse such as 'native speaker' (Singh, 1998).

As Kandiah (1998) explains, the capitalist-industrial system of the last few centuries engendered:

*unprecedented structures, arrangements, practices and modes of action, behavior and thought and so on in every conceivable sphere of life. Alongside these structures there emerged the modern empirical scientific thought which most essentially helped forge what might be considered to be the current knowledge paradigm. (p. 84)*

Further, the same history that created the new global order also decreed that English should be the (single) primary language through which it expressed itself. When formal colonization ended, in many situations, the colonizers 'left their language behind' (Kandiah, 1998, p. 85). As Kandiah suggests, the danger with this is that the forms and practices of the dominant language 'constitute reality and the meanings associated with it' (p. 85) in ways that favor the 'interests and preoccupations of those who determine them' (p. 85). Thus, adopting the idea that any one language (preferably English) should be the way in which one expresses oneself, is to assert a:

*favoured view of reality, by which all behavior is structured, regulated and judged to be normal, legitimate and acceptable, even to the extent of determining what questions it is possible to ask and what issues it may be valid to discuss. (Kandiah, 1998, p. 86)*

Kandiah asserts that mainstream language study, by assuming monolingualism as a desirable as well as a normal state, limits not only the questions that are asked about language use but also the manner in which those questions can be asked. Kandiah also charges that positivist perspectives on language are driven by a 'simplistic essentialism' (p. 88) that prevents it from being able to theorize such complex phenomena as children who can speak multiple languages. According to Kandiah, such discourses would rather call into question the validity of those experiences that tend to contradict its own positions, thus re-establishing the superiority of its norms.

Whether it is through discourses that privilege the use of language over other forms of representation or through those that assume that the normal use of language is to use one language, the power of unexamined truths continues to colonize and subjugate the perspectives of those who are different, many of whom are young children. Although these problems are too immense to be solved by any one answer, there are some possibilities that seem to be promising. As was mentioned in an earlier section of this article, to limit and reverse this domination, and to assist in the creation of a more equitable world order, McLaren & Giroux (1997) suggest that critical

educators focus their efforts on the development of pedagogies of critical literacy. Possibilities for this world order include what Gomez-Pena (quoted in McLaren, 1997) has called the 'New World Border':

*A great trans- and intercontinental border zone, a place where no centers remain. It's all margins, meaning that there are no 'others', or better said, the only true others are those who resist fusion, mestizaje and cross cultural dialogue. (p. 11)*

In the New World Border, it would appear that there would be place not just for multiple languages and multiple silences, but also for the multiple ways of human expression.

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