SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BILITERACY AND EMERGENCE OF A BICULTURAL IDENTITY

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1. Aim and rationale

A recent report from a multilingualism seminar concluded that even for children language acquisition is hard work and needs effort, patience and persistence. Recent research has shown that supportive sibling relationships help the younger bilingual sibling to successfully blend together different cultural reading strategies. However, this recognition of older siblings as mediators of language and culture is more complex where cultural and linguistic issues are not "in sync" between parents, the siblings, or between the parents and the children.

The aim of this paper is to reveal the role of siblings in the transmission of literacy, within bilingual family practices in Portugal. The study focuses on Portuguese-English bilingual siblings acquiring biliteracy within diverse family structures, reflecting the changing nature of the bilingual family. Research methods included ethnographic observation, interviews and audio taping of naturally occurring talk.

The rationale for the research was based on the premise that the acquisition of literacy outside the formal school setting depends heavily on family literacy practices and the sociolinguistic context in which literacy is experienced and learnt. The research presented here also explores the possible reasons, located within the families themselves, for the different rates of literacy acquisition in each language.

The children studied were all of school age (8-12), so the acquisition of literacy in the non-school language had surfaced as an issue. In the cultural context of Portugal, low levels of literacy are still widespread, Portuguese children have low access to books and home literacy practices are closely associated with text books and academic literacy. An "International IEA Reading Literacy Study" was carried out in 32 countries in 18 languages from 1990 to 1991. It was the first time there had been national data available on students' reading performance in Portuguese. In the Portuguese report,

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'*Como Lêem As Nossas Crianças?*' (How do our Children Read?), Portugal was one of the three countries at the bottom of the list regarding access to books:

> Portugal situa-se entre os três últimos países com uma percentagem de apenas 40% de alunos dispondo de mais de 100 livros em casa.
>
> (Sim-Sim & Ramalho, 1993: 14)
>
> (Portugal is situated between the three last countries with a percentage of only 40% of the pupils who possess more than 100 books at home)

Portugal was referred to as one of five countries, with the fewest books in libraries in their primary schools:

> Com um número de livros inferior a 700 volumes por biblioteca nas escolas com 4º ano de escolaridade. (p. 14)
>
> (With a number of books lower than 700 volumes in the school library for the 4th year)

Portuguese researchers argue that Portuguese society is a predominantly oral culture, where verbal interaction and communication between strangers is common and members of the community are able to negotiate their daily lives through talk, without ever having to become literate:

> As nossas características culturais levam muitas vezes a valorizar a "cultura analfabeta" pelo engenho que as pessoas que não sabem ler e escrever desenvolvem na sua vida diária, ultrapassando os obstáculos do material escrito.
>
> (Delgado-Martins, Ramalho & Costa, 2000: 14)
>
> (Our cultural characteristics make us, many times value an «illiterate culture» by the ingenuity people, who do not know how to read or write develop in their daily life, in order to overcome the obstacles of written texts)

In contrast, the Portuguese researchers argue that British society is a predominantly literate culture, where it is difficult to function without literacy.

At the core of my research study was the issue of contrasting cultures and how variations between British and Portuguese cultures affect literacy practices in the bilingual families. Street (1995) argues that in literacy practices, the variations between cultures are generally variations in the combination of "oral/ literate channels". The contrast between the predominantly oral Portuguese culture in which the bilingual children in the research reside and the literate British culture to which they also belong is one which has been considered in this paper.

The families in the research study are in contact with these contrasting literacies and have to negotiate new communicative practices in the bilingual home. In this paper, the concept of 'in and out of sync with bilingual family practices' describes the strategies that family members employ in the production and reception of both

languages in the home and the convergence of both cultures. The idea of 'in and out of sync' is associated with discovering ways that oral/literate traditions merge from both cultures to motivate bilingual children to acquire home literacy in different languages. The research presented here explores the diverse literacies in the bilingual children's lives and how the family members' relationship to contrasting languages and cultures affects the children's access and acquisition of biliteracy.

2. Context of the investigation and data analysis

My research was an in-depth longitudinal study into biliteracy and biculturalism and I carried out the fieldwork over a period of seven months. During the seven-month period in the field, the bilingual families accepted my presence in the home and I was able to explore emerging hypotheses and gain new insights into bilingual siblings' family literacy practices.

In this paper I present data from four out of the six bilingual families in the original research study (Obied, 2002). All the siblings in the research attended local Portuguese schools and the ages of the family members were registered at the outset of the fieldwork in January 2000. I discussed the question of naming with the parents and chose pseudonyms for the subject and siblings with similar cultural connotations.

2.1. The context of the investigation (January 2000)

Figure 2.1. Alexandre's Family. Alexandre has two Portuguese half-sisters in their twenties from his father's first marriage.

	Age	*Nationality*	Country of Origin	Parents' Nationality	Profession
Father	**47**	**Portuguese**	**Portugal**	**Portuguese**	**Restaurant Proprietor**
Mother	**40**	**English**	**England**	**English/ Australian**	**English Language Teacher**
Alexandre	**9**		**Portugal**	**Portuguese/ English**	**4th year student**
Marco	**13**		**Portugal**	**Portuguese/ English**	**7th year student**

Figure 2.2. Claudia's Family.

	Age	Nationality	Country of Origin	Parents' Nationality	Profession
Father	**40**	**Portuguese**	**Portugal**	**Portuguese**	**Physician**
Mother	**37**	**English**	**England**	**English**	**English Language Teacher/ Translator**
Claudia	**8**		**England**	**Portuguese/ English**	**3rd year student**
Jorge	**6**		**Portugal**	**Portuguese/ English**	**1st year student**

Figure 2.3. Patrick's Family. Patrick spends weekday evenings with a Portuguese babysitter.

	Age	Nationality	Country of Origin	Parents' Nationality	Profession
Father	**42**	**Irish**	**Northern Ireland**	**Irish**	**English Language Teacher**
Mother	**37**	**Portuguese**	**Portugal**	**Portuguese**	**Secretary**
Patrick	**11**		**Portugal**	**Irish/ Portuguese**	**6th year student**
Alison	**6**		**Portugal**	**Irish/ Portuguese**	**1st year student**

Figure 2.4. Martin's Family: Single-Parent Family.

	Age	*Nationality*	Country of Origin	Parents' Nationality	Profession
Father		**Croatian/ American**	**Croatia**	**Croatian/ Serbian**	
Mother	**47**	**Scottish**	**Scotland**	**Scottish/ English**	**English Language Teacher**
Mother's Partner	**55**	**Dutch**	**Holland**	**Dutch**	**Campsite Proprietor**
Martin	**11**		**Portugal**	**Scottish/ Croatian**	**6th year student**
Janet	**16**		**Portugal**	**Scottish/ Croatian**	**10th year student**
Justin	**17**		**Portugal**	**Scottish/ Croatian**	**11th year student**

Results from the research reveal conflicting patterns in the role of siblings in supporting the emergence of biliteracy in the home. I analysed language use and cultural identities in the four bilingual families in Portugal and developed interrelated models of language use and cultural identity in the homes. The language models showed dominant language usage in the home environment and the reception and production of spoken interaction in bilingual family practices. The model of cultural identity was based on the family members' perceptions of their own cultural allegiance. The models of language use and cultural identity revealed patterns between the families relating to language dominance and cultural identity in the home. These trends gave insight into sibling relationships and may be replicated in other bilingual families.

3. Final analysis and conclusions

The interrelationship between the emergence of biliteracy and the development of a bicultural identity is at the heart of my research. I focused on the links uncovered during the research between language variation and cultural identity, including the role of siblings, and the transmission of literacy practices in the home. The research findings relate to the cultural context of the country where the children are being raised. In a recent survey, Portugal had the highest correlation of any European country for the national language being used as the mother tongue:

> Dans chacun des pays de l'Union européenne, la langue désignée le plus fréquemment comme langue maternelle est la (ou l'une des) langue(s) nationale(s). Les taux les plus forts s'observent au Portugal (100%).
>
> (Eurobarometre 54 Special, 2001 : 1)
>
> (In each country in the European Union, the language designated most often as the respondents' mother tongue is the (or one of the) national language(s). The highest figures are observed in Portugal, where 100% of the respondents said that their mother tongue was Portuguese)

Therefore, parents deciding to bring their children up bilingually in Portugal need to provide clear role models of the 'other' language and links with the 'other' culture.

In creating patterns between the families, the parents do not always display complementary roles in literacy transmission. In Alexandre and Claudia's families where conflicts arise from contrasting cultural and linguistic practices, it is difficult for the children to bridge these linguistic gaps and develop a bicultural identity with respect to literacy practices. The siblings tend to challenge, or change, literacy patterns in these

families. The parent whose history is rooted in Portuguese cultural and linguistic practices dominates the children's concept of literacy in the home, making it difficult for the 'other' parent to transmit cultural and linguistic practices from their own cultural past. The "other" parent's literacy practices are rejected by the siblings, if they are presented in the "other" language.

In Alexandre's family, the mother and older sibling attempt to scaffold Alexandre's English in the home, but Alexandre is often aggressive in his language use and the older sibling is de-motivated to support him. The spoken interaction between the siblings is volatile in nature and Alexandre does not look to the older sibling for help in literacy activities in the home: "No, never!". In this family, the 'older-brother; younger-brother' sibling combination has not been conducive to fostering the emergence of biliteracy.

In Claudia's family, the "older-sister; younger-brother" combination creates barriers to shared literacy practices in the home, as the siblings are very close in age and extremely competitive in spoken interaction. Claudia's volatile interaction with the younger sibling is not conducive to scaffolding his literacy practices in the home, in the absence of parental guidance to frame the literacy event. In this family, the father thinks that Claudia sometimes confuses the younger sibling in her discourse around formal literacy and numeracy practices in the home and so does not encourage shared sibling literacy practices.

In these two families in the research, where one culture and one language dominate bilingual family practices, it is difficult for the siblings to blend together literacies from both parents. Portuguese cultural perspectives and formal school literacy practices dominate home literacy. The siblings negate informal literacy experiences with the 'other' parent in the 'other' language, and due to these cultural and linguistic barriers find it hard to develop an interdependency between literacy practices in both languages.

In the following example of an audio recording, Alexandre was recalling written information from a Portuguese newspaper, but was unable to switch into English to interpret information from a Portuguese text:

Audio-recording: April 2000

Alexandre: Um miúdo estava no quarto e o cão…

(A child was in his room and a dog…)
Mother: Talk in English.
Alexandre: Havia lá dois cães.
(There were two dogs there.)
Mother: Talk in English!
Alexandre: I can't say it! Chegaram ao pé do miúdo e começaram a morder-lhe no pescoço. Olha, os outros não conseguiram tirar os cães, mataram-no, antes que a polícia chegasse lá para matar os cães.
(They came near to the child and began to bite him on the neck. Look, the others couldn't get the dogs off him, they killed him before the police could get there to kill the dogs.)
Mother: That was in Germany, this week.

The following is a typical example from Claudia's family of the linguistic conflicts, which arise in the transmission of literacy. The siblings create a barrier to the bedtime ritual of story reading and instead of responding to the shared intimacy of reading together in their mother's first language, try to impose their own linguistic preferences on the literacy practice:

Audio-recording: March 18th 2000

Mother: I'm not reading a story in Portuguese.
Jorge: *Pôssas*!
(Bother!)
Mother: Oh Jorge please, in English.
Jorge: *Pôssas*!
(Bother!)
Mother: Come and listen to the story, Claudia.
Claudia: *Complaining in Portuguese in the background*.
Mother: Yes, but Jorge I don't read stories in Portuguese. I don't pronounce them properly.
Siblings: *Both of the siblings still complaining in Portuguese.*

In these families, the siblings do not develop a shared sense of identity or supportive role, in relation to both parents' literacies. Family literacy practices are "out of sync" with one parent, so the siblings' emerging biliteracy and bicultural identity can only happen at the "very margins of awareness".

In Patrick's family where both parents' languages and cultures are valued, the family members have combined literacy practices from both cultural traditions in home literacy. The siblings retain a person-specific model of language use when talking about print in either language and show a clear interdependency between both languages in their interaction with print in the home. Sibling relationships are supportive and the

older sibling is encouraged to scaffold the younger sibling. Family literacy practices are "in sync with" both parents, so the siblings are motivated to develop biliteracy and a bicultural identity.

In Patrick's family, the "older-brother; younger-sister" sibling pair interact harmoniously and the older brother helps shape the literacy development of the younger sister in the home.

In this family, the ritual of oral storytelling is a powerful support for language learning and creates a shared sense of pleasure in developing the siblings' home literacy practices. In a typical example of oral storytelling with all family members present, both languages are used naturally to add to the story:

Audio-recording: February 2000

Father: Did you see that coffin being taken out in the middle of the night? This woman dressed in black and this coffin and a horse and carriage. I heard this screaming in the middle of the night. Did you not hear the screaming?

Mother*: Não!*

(No!)

Alison*: Monstros!*

(Monsters)

Father: I went to the window and there was this lady with a big long dress, long hair and long fingernails. Then this coffin came out on the shoulders of the men and there were all these dogs howling round it.

Patrick: Howling.

Alison: *Cruella de Vim*.

Father: I shouted out the window, "Who's the coffin for?" " It's for Alison. We've come to get her!"

Mother: Eeeh!

Father: She doesn't live there. She lives here. Get her tonight …..tonight!

Alison: *Não me apanharam*!

(They didn't catch me!)

Father: Tonight …….. tonight!

Alison: *Cruella de Vim*.

Father: Not '*de Vim', 'de Ville', Cruella de Ville*.

Alison: *O que é 'Ville'*?

(What is 'Ville'?)

Father: It means 'Cruel Devil'.

Mother: *Não*!

In creating generalised patterns from the models of language use and cultural identity in the one-parent family researched, the findings indicate that the single parent

in Martin's family is able to engineer and create a supportive environment for both languages to develop, and motivate the children to become biliterate. In Martin's family, which is a single-parent family inclusive of the role of siblings, the younger siblings model their language use closely on the oldest sibling. The shared language and cultural identity of the siblings provides a model for both languages and cultures in the one-parent family.

In this family, in the absence of interparental conflicts, the siblings have a well-established flexible model of language use in the home. Oral storytelling forms part of this family's home literacy practices and helps to reinforce and develop certain language patterns in the siblings' linguistic repertoire. The single parent uses writing to organise daily activities and communicate with the siblings. The "older-brother; middle-sister; younger-brother" combination in this family is supportive of developing home literacy practices in an informal family context.

In the following example of family storytelling, the middle sibling is relating a Portuguese anecdote in English and the event becomes a shared literacy activity, as other family members linguistically support the sibling's storytelling and enrich the anecdote:

Audio-recording: July 2000

Janet: Two Englishmen went to Africa on an expedition and they got caught by a group of ….um ..

Justin: a tribe of cannibals.

Janet: They were starting to … um …

Justin: Cook them.

Janet: No, not cook them, but just spread garlic and curry and salt and pepper all over their bodies.

Justin: *Temperar.*

Janet: How do you say '*temperar*'?

Mother: *'Temperar'* … um

Justin: Dressing.

Mother: Yes, I think so. Marinating.

Janet: Something like that, whatever. Anyway, they were…

Family literacy practices are "in sync with" the parent, but also combine a unique blend of community literacies and sibling literacies, which are incorporated into home literacies, due to the children's daily cross-cultural experiences. The children in the one-parent family in this particular research develop biliteracy due to their cross-cultural literacy experiences in the family and the community.

My research reveals conflicting patterns in the role of siblings in supporting the emergence of biliteracy in the home. Contrary to current thinking (Gregory & Williams, 2000), which focuses on supportive sibling relationships, my research shows that younger siblings may negate the language experience, or cultural model of the older sibling. The parents in the research have no memories of shared literacy practices with siblings in their own childhood.

I put forward the premise that shared sibling support in literacy practices has probably emerged from bilingual or multilingual families where the older siblings are able to act as mediators or language brokers for the younger siblings, where neither parent is fully literate in the host language:

> Home reading usually means children reading their school texts not with mum or dad nor even with grandma or grandpa, but with those members of the family who are already fully proficient in English –that is, the older sisters and brothers.
>
> (Gregory & Williams, 2000)

Parents from monolingual backgrounds do not share these experiences and shared sibling support for literacy practices needs to be learnt, nurtured and supported in home literacy practices, rather than parents expecting such support to appear naturally between siblings. This ties in with current research on literacy transmission from monolingual families, where siblings 'read together spasmodically' (Taylor, 1994: 66).

Bilingual siblings require encouragement and a reason to study the minority language together. Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson (1999) concluded that for their own Swedish-English bilingual children growing up in a bicultural European family, this type of literacy learning at home had spasmodic success:

> It can be difficult to make this kind of extra study at home work without some external motivation or target. (Cunningham-Andersson & Andersson, 1999: 117)

My research findings show that the interdependency between a bilingual's developing languages is crucial to the support of both literacies in the home and where strategies from both parents' literacy practices are integrated in the home, biliteracy will emerge in natural settings outside the classroom. Naturalistic acquisition of biliteracy is based on purposeful, meaningful literacy practices in the home and the siblings continual exposure to two home literacies. The siblings willingness to promote home biliteracy practices is a salient factor in natural acquisition and the development of biliteracy for pleasure and for daily organisation of a bilingual's life.

The research presented in this paper reveals that sibling relationships may not always foster the development of home literacy. The younger sibling may reject the linguistic and cultural practices of the older sibling and minority language parent. These conflicts are particularly relevant in the home, as once barriers develop in language usage it becomes difficult for the older sibling to transmit literacy practices in the minority language from the minority culture. However, this paper also shows that supportive sibling' relationships, particularly in one-parent families, play a vital role in the emergence of biliteracy and a cross-cultural identity. Educators now need to identify the most effective strategies that can be developed to encourage shared sibling support in home literacy practices.

The siblings in this research study are beginning to access new literacy resources from electronic media in the home, which are not firmly embedded in the parents' literacy histories or cultural practices. This home access to electronic literacy may encourage shared sibling literacy practices and open up new opportunities for bilingual siblings, "to engage in dialogue with others in a multilingual world" (Kenner, 2000: 87).

I conclude this paper with Martin's comment made during the research project about using both languages with his older siblings in the home: "Because they're my brothers I like more Portuguese. Because they're my family I like more English".

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