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**Bilingual Superpowers: Children can learn two spelling systems at once**

Much of the recent discussion about the changes to te reo Māori in primary school readers is based on the assumption that it is confusing for children to learn two spelling systems at the same time. On the surface this may seem to be obvious, especially when it comes to the complicated English spelling system.

But this goes against what we know about how languages actually work in the brain. As described by Canadian linguist Jim Cummins in the 1970s, it was previously thought that each language was separate like two separate icebergs floating in the sea of our mind. Anyone who has learnt more than one language knows that they are not separate, but more like two tips of the same ‘language iceberg’ - when I search my brain for how to say ‘a little bit’ in te reo Māori, up pops *ein bisschen,* still lurking in my brainfrom my high school German classes!

So, what about literacy in two languages? An increasing body of international research evidence is showing that as well as language-specific skills, the ‘common underlying proficiency’ of the language iceberg also works with reading and writing. This is because of the basic principle of all literacy; that the sounds of a language are represented by symbols such as letters of the alphabet in English or te reo Māori, or other writing systems such as in Chinese or Arabic languages. The awareness of this fundamental principle is not specific to one language and is transferable to the writing system of other languages.

My own research has confirmed this ability. Multilingual children in Papua New Guinea who had only English reading books at school were able to transfer their English ability to literacy in one of their other languages. This was incidental biliteracy learning, but a more clearly supported approach to supporting early biliteracy is being used in early childhood in the US, developed for teaching Spanish and English bilingual children.

In this approach children are explicitly taught to compare and contrast the sound and writing systems of both languages, building on their ‘bilingual superpowers’. I am currently exploring this approach in early literacy for the revival of one of Australia’s Indigenous languages, and soon with migrant children in Aotearoa NZ.

There is no doubt some children need a very clearly organised approach, which is why the International Dyslexia Society developed (and trademarked) the Structured Literacy approach to teaching reading and writing. However, if we require all children to go through the same tight lock-step process we run the risk of turning children off the joy of reading. An extreme example would be returning to the Victorian era readers written entirely with two letter words: “I am on an ox. Lo! It is my ox.”

We should not underestimate the capacity of our children’s brains, but should be celebrating and supporting the cognitive, social, academic and economic benefits of their potential ‘bilingual superpowers.’

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