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A PARADIGM FOR BILINGUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION  
IN THE USA: LESSONS FROM KENYA

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**Abstract**

This article reviews conditions in the East African country of Kenya that put students at an advantage for learning second languages. The author focuses on a group of students with mental retardation, a group historically regarded by some as being poor second language learners. Examples are cited of students attending a special education school for the developmentally disabled in Nairobi who demonstrate fluency in three or more languages. Students' proficiency in these languages is similar to that of their monolingual US counterparts with similar handicapping conditions. Factors contributing to multilingualism among these Kenyan students, as well as among their non-disabled counterparts, include strong and pervasive national bilingual education policies, societal expectations that multilingualism should flourish in present and future generations, and constant demand for the use of several languages in the students' environment. These policies, expectations, and practices in turn stem from the need for intra-national and international trade, as well as from a national resolve to sustain and safeguard the integrity of communication within the family unit and among the various tribal, ethnic, and national cultures. This article concludes by presenting a comparative analysis of policies and practices in the US.

## Introduction

As a teacher educator and student teacher supervisor in the San Francisco Bay area, I have visited several programs that serve students who require both special education and instruction in English as a second language. Over the years, as I've listened to the views of teachers and service providers - and eavesdropped on grocery line conversations - I've heard an all too familiar chorus of comments emerge regarding the subject of bilingual education, especially for those with special education needs. "Why is this country devoting precious resources to bilingual education for students who eventually need to learn English anyway?" "It's a disservice to encourage students and families to use their (non-English primary) language at home, especially if they have special education needs to begin with. Why, their language development is hindered enough as it is!" The refrain usually ends with something like, "I'm with you, Bob. After all, we're living in an English-speaking country. If those kids don't drop that first language, they'll never learn to function here!"

I recognize there are a host of factors that foster such perspectives. A short list includes an absence of training or theory in one or both of these fields of education, draconian budget cuts within the school systems, vague education codes allowing for liberal interpretations of any required services, and current attitudes against bilingualism bolstered by policy makers and special interest groups. Whatever the underlying factors, however, the results are invariably the same - a jagged distribution of services across the state and nation in both quantity and quality of instruction of students with special needs and limited English proficiency (LEP).

The underlying rationale of such views expressed by educators, policy makers, and the general public must be addressed in order to precipitate a better understanding of the importance of bilingual education and to improve the overall quality of educational services. One way to begin is to examine the *basis for participants' assumptions* when they individually and collectively decide on what to teach, what to learn, what to support, and what to fund. In this regard, an important point to consider is that few persons in the United States are likely to be familiar with systems that *do* effectively address the needs of both

special education and ESL groups. In the experience of many, the reality of the balanced bilingual child - where students acquire full communicative and academic competence in several languages - probably does not exist, even for non-disabled populations. Is it not unreasonable then for us to expect them to visualize, let alone embrace or reproduce, a phenomenon that they, after all, have never really seen?

This article provides an example of one such reality by illustrating how another country serves its multiethnic, multinational population of limited English proficient students. Specifically, I explore how the East African country of Kenya responds to the learning needs of students who have limited English proficiency and who also have special education needs, in particular those who have been identified as having mental retardation. What might a parent in Kenya expect to receive in the way of bilingual educational services for their child with Down Syndrome? And, in what ways does the Kenyan learning environment support or discourage the primary language and culture of the home? In describing some of the policies, practices, and attitudes that shape the nature of bilingual special education in Kenya, I will present a concrete example of how balanced bilingualism and multilingualism result when social policy and education work together.

### **Multilingualism in Practice: The Case of Jacaranda School**

In 1964, after accepting formal recognition from Prince Philip of Britain that Kenya was now an independent nation, the esteemed leader Jomo Kenyatta paused, turned to his countrymen, and in making his first speech as president of the new republic, stopped speaking in English and began to speak in Kiswahili. The Kenyans cheered jubilantly.

Thus, by his example (and later legislation) Mzee Kenyatta set the wheels in motion for the establishment of a multilingual nation. English was to be the *official language*, with laws written in English rather than Kiswahili, but Kiswahili was to be the *national language* and the use of all tribal languages would be continued. But how would this national resolve actually be played out in classrooms in the decades to follow? To answer this question, let me first describe my experience as a Peace

Corps volunteer teaching in Nairobi from 1979 to 1981 and then bring the reader up to date with current practice.

It had been just 15 years since independence, and therefore, it had been only 15 years since Jacaranda School (a government school) had opened its doors to non-white children who needed special education. In this short period of time, class compositions at Jacaranda School had changed dramatically, and was now a more realistic reflection of Kenyan society at large. For example, there was now only one white student in the entire student population.

Pre-independence law required that black Kenyans obtain permits to travel or move anywhere. The permits were just as difficult to apply for as to receive. After independence, having greater freedom to travel, there was an influx of people from the villages who had come to the cities to take advantage of opportunities that they felt the urban centers could provide. One of these advantages included special education classes for children. As a result, not only were most of my students from different tribes speaking different primary languages, but many were also relatively recent arrivals in Nairobi; children of parents emigrating to the city to find work, or children living with relatives in Nairobi in order to attend this school. Most of my students who were born in Nairobi were members of the Kikuyu tribe, the major tribe in Nairobi. In these families Kikuyu was spoken. Other Nairobi-born students included children of Indian ancestry who spoke Gujarati or Punjabi. The large majority of Nairobi-born and non-Nairobi-born students began to acquire proficiency in their second language - Kiswahili - as preschoolers, when they or their parents would communicate with those outside their respective tribes or language groups.

Upon graduating from the Peace Corps training program, where I received intensive language training in Kiswahili, I stepped into my new classroom with my Kiswahili English dictionary at the ready, assuming that Kiswahili would be my primary language of teaching. That was not to be the case. During my two year tenure, the only time I would speak in Kiswahili at Jacaranda would be with new students, with certain parents and staff members, and on field trips. It was clear after speaking with the headmistress and viewing the materials and records left by my predecessor that the school expected English to be the primary language of instruction.

But in what language would my students expect me to teach? After all, the twelve students represented a minimum of five ethnic groups and languages. Moreover, they had been identified as having mental retardation from such conditions as Down Syndrome, encephalitis, and cerebral palsy. How well would they learn in a language that was not their primary one?

To my relief and delight, most of the children did very well. It was evident from their first "*Good morning, Teacher,*" that they associated their teacher, academic instruction, or both, with the sole use of English. The students' ages were from nine to eleven years old. I soon found that students who had been in school for four years or longer demonstrated equivalent expressive, receptive, and written language ability in English with that of their monolingual US counterparts with similar developmental delays. This was most noticeable in observing those children with Down Syndrome. The difference, however, between my Kenyan students and California students with similar disorders was that the Kenyans demonstrated similar rates of fluency in at least two, and often three or more languages.

Students' proficiency in several languages was apparent to anyone who might accompany them throughout their day. The following presents a typical example of one student's day. Mulji, a first generation Kenyan, lived with his parents, uncle, and grandmother, who had come from India ("Mulji" is a pseudonym, as are all other student names below.). At home, Mulji spoke Gujarati with his family and members of the close-knit Gujarati-speaking community of Nairobi, but spoke Kiswahili to the family housekeeper who would often care for him and who did not speak Gujarati. While at school, Mulji spoke English during academic instruction, but spoke Kiswahili with playmates, with certain teachers, and staff. Coming home from school, he would again be required to communicate in Kiswahili. should he go into a store or ride on a public conveyance. In the evening and on weekends, he would listen to and speak Gujarati with friends and family. Every fourth month the school was in recess for holidays; at this time the rate of Mulji's use of his primary language was presumably higher. Mulji's parents spoke Gujarati, a little Kiswahili, and a little English. At parent conferences they would indicate much pleasure that Mulji's English and Kiswahili had improved since coming to school. As with other parents, there

appeared to be strong expectations that the language of instruction would be in English or Kiswahili.

Several years have passed since my time at Jacaranda School. To obtain current information on students' language use, I worked closely with Jacaranda's present headmistress, Mrs. Alice Mitine, to ascertain present levels of multilingualism among the students. Surveys designed to ascertain language use were distributed to parents of students who attended Jacaranda School during the 1995-1996 school year. Again, all of the students involved had developmental disabilities associated with mental retardation. The results of these surveys confirmed that the use of several languages by this group had remained consistent over the last few decades. Accounts of the school staff and parents indicated that students were speaking an average of three languages at similar fluency rates. This was evidenced by their school work, but most important by students' communications with staff and parents who spoke the languages fluently themselves and were able to gauge relative fluency of pupils' first and second languages. Thus students spoke English as a second or third language as well as they might speak Kiswahili, Gujarati, or Kikuyu. As an instructor in both countries, I found that the Kenyan students, with Down Syndrome for example, demonstrated receptive and expressive language proficiency in their third language (English) equivalent to that of the US monolingual English students with Down Syndrome. Based on students' school work and my observations of their communication inside and outside the classroom, both groups were similarly adept at expressing needs, desires, and emotions as well as reading and writing in English for functional purposes. Below are some more examples of language use among students currently attending Jacaranda School.

Vatiri, 19 at the time of the updated study, spoke Kinyarwanda with his family at two years of age, and French at six years of age with neighbors and classmates. Like many from the central African country of Rwanda, Vatiri learned Kinyarwanda and French as primary and secondary languages respectively. When Vatiri was seven years old he began to learn and to speak English and Kiswahili at Jacaranda school and in his Nairobi neighborhood.

Ngugi, 13 at the time of the updated study, spoke Kimeru (a Kenyan tribal language) as a first language with his family and

housekeeper, and Kiswahili as a second language at home and at school. He began to learn English as a third language at 11 years old. His parents reported that he had not yet reached his full potential in speaking this third language only because he needed more opportunities to hear the language "repeatedly" to become fluent. Again, a four year period appeared to be typical of the time required to achieve proficiency in a second language.

Kingori, 17 at the time of the study, was typical of students, with or without special needs, growing up in and around Nairobi. Kingori spoke Kikuyu as a first language with parents and housekeepers and grandparents. He spoke Kiswahili as a second language with neighbors and classmates, and English as a third language with family members and teachers.

Sadnya was 27 at the time of the study, and was probably the most prolific language speaker of the students who participated in the survey. Sadnya's first language was Gujarati, an Indian language which she used to communicate with her family, relatives, and certain neighbors. Her second language was English, which she also used with family members and at school with teachers. Her third language was Kiswahili, which she spoke with the maid, the school children from different tribes, and in market place situations such as in restaurants. However, she also easily conversed with people from the Kikuyu, Mkamba, Luo, and Baluhya tribes. Her mother reported that Sadnya adeptly identified individuals from different tribes by discerning various facial features associated with that tribe. She would then converse with the person in that tribal language. In those rare instances where she could not identify the tribe - and thus the primary language of the person - she would first inquire in the intertribal Kenyan language of Kiswahili as to what tribe they belonged, before switching over to the listener's tribal language. As Sadnya associated certain facial features with a particular language, so did she similarly associate the use of Gujarati with women in Indian attire and English with persons she would come into contact with on family visits to Britain.

A review of the histories of these students yielded some interesting patterns. First, degree of proficiency in second languages tended to be similar to that of the primary language when each was needed and used

on a regular basis. Table 1 lists some of the situations that students face daily requiring the use of different languages to get basic needs met.

Table 1  
*Samples of Children's Uses of Three Languages in Nairobi*

| L1<br>Tribal Language  | L2<br>National Language:<br>Kiswahili   | L3<br>Official Language:<br>English   |
|--|---|---|
| Tribal hymns and slogans   | National hymns and slogans, folk songs and dances   | Academic instruction<br>From upper elementary on                                    |
| Tribal folk songs and dances   | Public notices, warning signs e.g. "Hatari" (danger) or "Mbwa Kali" (mean dog/beware of dog)                    | Communication among people of different ethnic and racial background in urban areas |
| Primary communication with parents, siblings, grandparents and with elders of the community                          | Music on radio, Kiswahili station on television   | Videos (some local but mostly foreign)  |
| General communication among people of the same tribe   | Play with children from other tribes (primary language used on the playground)                                  | Television (English speaking station)   |
| Family Bible, sermons prayers etc. in churches in rural areas  | Labels on commodities   | Most cartoons   |
| Trading in local market places   | Transportation in Kenya (buses and taxis)   | Labels on commodities   |
| Music, greetings, and other programs in vernacular radio stations  | Used in lower primary classes where Kiswahili is lingua franca  | Reading material (educational books, leisure reading and newspapers)                |
| Political campaign rallies rural areas and of local administrative chiefs  | Currency  | Church services in urban areas (together with Kiswahili)                            |
| Taught and used for the development of literacy skills and for communication in lower primary classes in rural areas | Used for trading in marketplaces, shops<br>Language of custodians, bus drivers, assistants, and cooks at school | Written communication (official and casual)   |
| Operating the family farm  | Reading material  |   |



Second, it was not necessary for the families of these students to speak *solely* in the primary language to the student. For example, in situations where another language was spoken, the parents or siblings might temporarily switch to that language. However, in instances where students were able to *maintain* the use of the primary language, family members kept its use alive and necessary for communication. (As a case in point, Ngugi's parents noted that his proficiency in Kimeru had dropped off when the family began to use English and Kiswahili exclusively in the home.) Third, all of the parents strongly felt that the child's use of several languages was important to their well being and participation in Kenyan society. The views of Ngugi's mother mirrored those of other parents as she explained why multilingualism was necessary for her child.

...(Multilingualism is important) for effective communication. If other people are speaking different languages my son should do the same, because he is not living in isolation with the rest of the family members or (from) the... Kenyan population as a whole. He should know what others know.  
(Ngugi's mother, Survey response, 9/11/95)

### **Multilingualism as Education Policy**

Present policy regarding the use of language in lower and upper primary grades was established in 1976 (Kenya Ministry of Education, 1976). Examples of some of the mandates handed down by the Chief Inspector of Schools include the following:

#### **Lower Primary Level**

1. The mother tongue is to be the most suitable language for use in lessons other than English in the vast majority of lower primary classes (Education Code 1.3.1.).
2. In some schools, the lack of a common mother tongue in the classroom will mean that the language of Kiswahili or the language of English must be used if it is the common lingua franca (1.3.3., 1.3.4., 1.3.5.).

3. It is strongly recommended that the mathematical technical vocabulary in English be taught and used in the English form. Otherwise the mother tongue may be used, but only if it produces a deeper understanding of math concepts (1.5.).

4. Literacy will be created first in the language referred to in numbers 1 and 2 above. English, and later Kiswahili, will build upon the literacy created originally in the language of instruction (1.6.).

5. During literacy training in Standard I permanently exhibited visual aids will be lettered in the language in which literacy is being created. In other words only ONE language will be permanently on exhibition. Flash cards used in English teaching will be removed after the English lesson. Once literacy exists, then both languages may be exhibited and later on Kiswahili also (1.7.).

#### Upper Primary Level

1. English is the language of instruction. It is also a subject (2.1.).

2. Kiswahili becomes a subject. In Kiswahili only Kiswahili will be used (2.2.).

3. Finally, the Chief Inspector of Schools states that teachers who have been in the habit of teaching upper primary students in a mixture of English and the mother tongue "will cease to do so immediately," as this "bad practice has produced distressing results" on nation-wide achievement tests in some areas of the Republic (2.3.).

Inherent in the Kenyan Language policy pervasively used in the educational system since 1976 are the following assumptions. First, there is the assumption that the primary language (L1) will continue to be spoken at home by the student - and by subsequent generations of the student's family -without endangering academic progress or proficiency in other languages (L2 or L3). Second, there is an emphasis on primary language instruction in the early grades. This suggests support for Cummins' (1989) "common underlying proficiency" in which transfer

of skills from L1 to L2 is facilitated. At the same time, throughout their education, these students with special learning needs receive an "additive orientation" to their primary culture and language as Cummins recommends. Third, Kenyan educational policy avoids the pedagogical practice of concurrent translation. Finally, the universal nature of this policy, which is now entering its third decade of use, suggests that all of its nation's educational staffs are knowledgeable about its contents and accountable for its follow-through.

Along with this national policy, it is important to remember that the majority of Kenyan parents, educators, and policy-makers are themselves multilingual. It is perhaps for this reason that second language learning is not seen as a "problem" and "challenge" that is "faced" by students. Rather, it is seen as a matter of applying appropriate pedagogy. That is, policy is directed toward clarity of instructional practice (when to introduce a second language, how to introduce it, etc.). Barring poor instruction or little opportunity for use, the acquired proficiency in several languages is assumed and expected.

### **The Role of Multilingualism in Kenyan Society**

What is it then about Jacaranda School, or the Kenyan educational system in general, that promotes multilingualism among students with mental retardation, who as mentally disabled are historically considered to be inadequate language learners (Omark & Erickson, 1983)?

The strong educational policy, in addition to the individualized planning and instruction, transitional bilingual education from one language to the next, and plenty of one-on-one language opportunities certainly helps. Indeed, in terms of Wong Fillmore's (1982, 1991) ideal setting for second language learning, students are provided with favorable conditions for learning such as sufficient frequency of second language use and duration of contact with second language speakers. I also observed that Kenyan classrooms were teacher-directed and that instructors tended to focus on form. However, there is something going on outside of the classroom at work, as well. This includes the Kenyan need and use of multilingualism in their society, and the social expectation that multilingualism will continue to take place nationally.

The Kenyan need for multilingualism can be traced in part to its long history of cross-cultural commerce and colonialism. During the 8th century -nearly two thousand years after farming and domestic herds flourished in the Kenyan highlands - Arabs came to settle on the Kenyan coast. The Portuguese arrived in 1498 and like the Arabs brought their culture, religion, and language to Kenya. When Britain claimed Kenya as a colony from 1886 to 1963, Europeans were the dominant force in government and business. At that time, black Kenyans lived in apartheid-like conditions which severely restricted their opportunities in education and employment. People of Indian origin too, though active in commerce, lived in segregated areas of town and were excluded from full participation in Kenyan society. After Kenyans won their independence from Britain in 1963, the country went through a challenging period of readjustment. This included a temporary exodus of both expatriates and foreign businesses, disputes among various tribes within Kenya, and sporadic fighting with neighboring countries over boundary issues (Levy & Greenhall, 1983).

By looking at this very abbreviated history, one can quickly identify several reasons why Kenyan society would benefit from a multilingual policy and practice. First, there was the need for retaining the use of the English language for international trade and foreign investment (such as in their exportation of coffee, tea, and pyrethrum, and in sustaining a profitable tourism industry). Next, there was the need for maintaining the use of a distinctly African language - Kiswahili - to unite citizens from different ethnic groups, and to conduct intertribal communication in a non-European based language. Last but not least, there was the need for maintaining the tribal language (or L1) as a symbol of allegiance to, and power of, one's tribe within Kenya - as a necessity for local trade - for community interaction, and for living and communicating in an extended family unit. The result of this national, tribal, and familial set of needs is reflected in the use of multilingualism throughout Kenya, as is illustrated in Table I.

### **A Comparative Analysis of Policies and Practices in the United States**

#### *National, State, and Local Policy Affecting Bilingual Special Education in the San Francisco Bay Area*

Although an exact number is not available, it has been estimated that more than one half of one percent of all children in the US are non-English speakers who have special education needs (Smith & Luckasson, 1992). Baca and Cervantes (in press) estimate that, based on 1990 census data, there are over one million children between the ages of 5 and 17 who are both linguistically diverse and have a disability. Bilingual education has been shown to be a beneficial and important component in the special education of students who are limited English proficient (LEP) or non-English proficient (NEP) (Arreaga-Mayer, Carter, & Tapia, 1994; Baca & Payan, 1989; Cummins, 1989), and legislation such as the *Bilingual Education Act of 1968* (PL 90-247) and the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975* have provided federal mandates for these services. Nevertheless, a 1986 study on nationwide availability of services for bilingual handicapped students revealed the following: 1) only five states had established a definition for bilingual special education; 2) only Maryland and Washington, D.C. had designated specific funding for this area, and 3) no state had developed a specific curriculum for those designated as Bilingual Handicapped (Salend & Fradd, 1986). These findings indicate that the nation is falling short in serving the needs of this population of students. Lowering the current status of bilingual special education on the national priority list even further are the *English Only* initiatives and the faulty theories about second language learning that their advocates promulgate (Ramos, 1991).

In the United States, students in California have played a pivotal role in shaping our nation's policy on special education and bilingual education. It was largely due to the efforts of students and parents in the San Francisco Bay Area that important rulings affecting educational services for the disabled and for the limited English proficient (LEP) were established. In *Larry P. V. Wilson Riles, 343 F. Supp. 1306 (1971)* for example, the federal district court directly addressed the discriminatory use of IQ tests to place minority children in classes for

the mentally retarded, and ordered that school districts drop the use of intelligence tests as the sole criterion for special education placement. The regulations that derived from the Supreme Court case *Lau V. Nichols*, 414 US 563 (1974) stipulated that districts implement a systematic procedure for identifying LEP students, assess language dominance, provide special programs for all LEP students (including those with disabilities), and offer appropriate instructional programs which could ensure equal educational opportunities. California established state policy and programs for both limited English proficient students and special education students (California Special Education Programs - Composite of Laws, 1995 includes Education Code Part 30). However, there is little policy that focuses directly on *bilingual* special education. In *California's Education Code (CEC)*, Section 56320-56321 of the statute refers to students being tested in their primary language.

California law also recognizes the need for specially trained professionals to assess and serve pupils of limited English proficiency but does not mandate certification of competence for employment (Section 56362.7). The laws offer some flexibility at the local level for school districts to develop their own educational policy and programs, working under the constraints of budgetary problems, diverse student populations, and certified personnel shortages. Unfortunately, these same laws also allow for an uneven distribution of services in our state. Even when examining programs serving *non-disabled* students, one finds only minimal adherence to these laws, the result being that many of our students, disabled and non-disabled LEP students alike, go underserved or unserved altogether. Indeed, this was made evident to me in visiting educational programs described below.

#### *Local Programming*

By observing classrooms and speaking with teachers, administrators, and representatives from public agencies in the San Francisco Bay area, I found a wide variation in quality of services available to students requiring special education and bilingual education. In the city of San Francisco, for example, I did not observe any students identified as having a severe handicap (SH) due to mental retardation who were receiving bilingual education. No one I spoke with in the district knew of a student who received such services. Moreover, no one

knew of a teacher who held both of these teaching credentials. As a result such students invariably were taught and treated as English monolinguals. I did however observe such programs in San Francisco and in other cities in the Bay Area that were available for those designated as having learning handicaps (LH). These classes were primarily conducted in Spanish and Cantonese, and at the elementary level. Only *very rarely* were any such opportunities provided for students with severe handicaps (SH). One such example was found at the Ohlone Elementary School in Watsonville, California, where classes were offered in Spanish and English.

In most Bay Area public schools, individuals with mental retardation are usually identified and served by the school district and by the local Regional Center, one of 21 state-funded Regional Centers in California that serves individuals with disabilities. Public schools in San Francisco, for example, conduct assessments of this type through what are called the Central Assessment Units of the Special Education Department. These units do provide for testing in the child's primary language. In other districts, bilingual special education testing is sometimes arranged through the Special Education Local Planning Agency (SELPA) which serves as a resource as well as a type of internal monitor that its policy is being carried out. For example, the Placer- Nevada County SELPA covers two counties and numerous local school districts within that area. The individual school districts are responsible for carrying out SELPA policy regarding special and bilingual education. This particular kind of self monitoring would not happen in San Francisco or Oakland as they are their own SELPAs. The Regional Centers also provide testing in the child's primary language. These centers are often the first public agencies to do complete medical, developmental, and family history work-ups of students. Afterward, when students enter the school system, the school has access to these records.

However, what effect these assessment results have on a student's educational placement varies dramatically depending upon the individual school and the student's family. For example, for many families who are limited English speaking, having a disabled family member is just one other burden on top of many others, including financial and legal worries. In these situations parents may not press the

school for the attention and services that their children are entitled to under the Education code. Also, because of high teacher turn-over, large class sizes, and large case load sizes (of such designated instructional services as speech therapy and physical therapy), parents are currently seeing bilingual education and English as Second Language (ESL) instruction as luxuries they must forego if they are to secure other important services such as therapy or placement with a competent special education teacher. Moreover, teachers vary widely in their understanding of second language theory and pedagogy. Mostly monolingual, they often lack the experience, the understanding, and the incentive that is necessary to serve these students and their parents knowledgeably.

The purpose of this work is to focus attention on language use among Kenyan students with special needs. Whereas this article contains information on educational policy and practice in both countries, the reader may note that the types of language use described for US students is not in parallel detail with that of the Kenyan students. This may be seen as a limitation to this study. Indeed, information in the literature regarding the nature of bilingualism among US students with special needs in general, and with mental retardation in particular, is sorely lacking.

In California, I have had first-hand knowledge of students with mental retardation who spoke English in the classroom and another language in the home. However, special education programming and placement for those with limited English proficiency is for the most part "English only" (Harry, 1992). This practice is especially true for students with mental retardation, as was illustrated in comments made by California regional center social worker Gloria Linus, who saw a "mixed group policy emphasis...(where) anyone with developmental disabilities, including mental retardation, will probably end up in the same class regardless of what their primary language is" (1992, personal communication). Since that interview, I have noticed in my capacity as a student teacher supervisor in the Bay Area that little has changed in this regard. Moreover, my reviews of student records and interviews with school staff reveal that school professionals know little to nothing about their LEP students' language use patterns in the home communities. Even when reviewing student records of LEP students with learning



disabilities, I found that there was scant information - if anything - regarding students' language use outside of the classroom (Candelaria-Greene, 1996). More information on language use patterns of bilingual students with exceptional needs, especially those with mental retardation, is needed to provide a more accurate picture of their linguistic abilities.

### **Summary and Implications**

The overwhelming advantage that my Kenyan students had in learning a second language and in maintaining their first was social acceptance of multilingualism and multiculturalism. A concise policy on language instruction informing local districts and participants of what was to be expected was instrumental, but this really only served to reinforce the national attitude that learning a second language should not mean giving up the first.

Looking back on the attitudes held by my students' families and teaching colleagues in Kenya, I found clear expectations that students would be taught both the official and national languages of Kenya, but also that the primary language would continue to be spoken at home (and in the community of that particular language). These assumptions were made by the family, but they were also made by Kenyan educators, policy makers, and taxpayers. This national resolve was effectuated in the development of their educational policy and is seen today in their teaching practices.

In Kenya, second language learning is seen as an additive, not subtractive, experience. I found it revealing, for example, that not once in two years did I hear anyone blame academic failure or inappropriate behavior on the fact that a student's family spoke a second language at home or that the student came from another tribe. Kenyan society in general accepts multiculturalism and multilingualism as a given. If as Cummins (1986) maintains, students are empowered in the school context to the extent that students' home communities are accepted in it, then I submit that a monolingual Hmong speaker would probably fare pretty well at learning English in a Kenyan school.

This article focuses attention on second language acquisition among those with mental retardation in schools in Kenya and in Northern

California. Not explored were the many advantages that California, and the United States in general, offers in types of care, treatment, and services for all special education populations. These services, such as speech therapy and accommodations for those with learning and physical disabilities, currently are not as available in Kenya. Above all, in the United States special education is a right and families have due process under the law to see that their disabled youngster is served. In contrast, provisions in Kenya for this group (including those with learning disabilities, communication handicaps, physical disabilities, and multihandicaps) are limited. Still struggling to find the resources to educate all of its non-disabled population through to the secondary level, Kenya has a long way to go before they mandate a *PL 94-142* that provides a free and appropriate education to all.

Nevertheless, the lesson one learns from the Kenyans is that proficiency in several languages is only partially influenced by cognitive ability, and very much influenced by the expectations and opportunities for using a second, third, or fourth language in the student's life. Kenya shows us that - even among students who have cognitive disabilities - primary language development and the critical communication among family members that it supports need not be sacrificed at the expense of learning a second language. Where multilingualism and the various cultures they represent are valued by the society, and where there is a continued expectation and need for multilingualism to continue, students can and do manage second languages as well as they handle their first language, regardless of handicapping condition. US educators and legislators would do well to consider this when they act to design or omit bilingual education programs in this country. Biased by the limitedness of their own cultural experiences and expectations, they may overlook the true linguistic capabilities of students, and in turn, deny them programs that will best serve them.

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