



early CHILDHOOD development  
INTERCULTURAL PARTNERSHIPS



# Promoting children's rights to use their mother tongue in early education

Jessica Ball, M.P.H., Ph.D.

University of Victoria

Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships ([www.ecdip.org](http://www.ecdip.org))



# Proposition

One way to achieve equity of educational opportunities and achieve Education for All, as well as to counter linguistic and cultural loss, is to deliver early childhood education and primary school in children's mother tongue(s).

- Explore rationale and research supporting this proposition
- Explore implications for policy & practice

# Overview

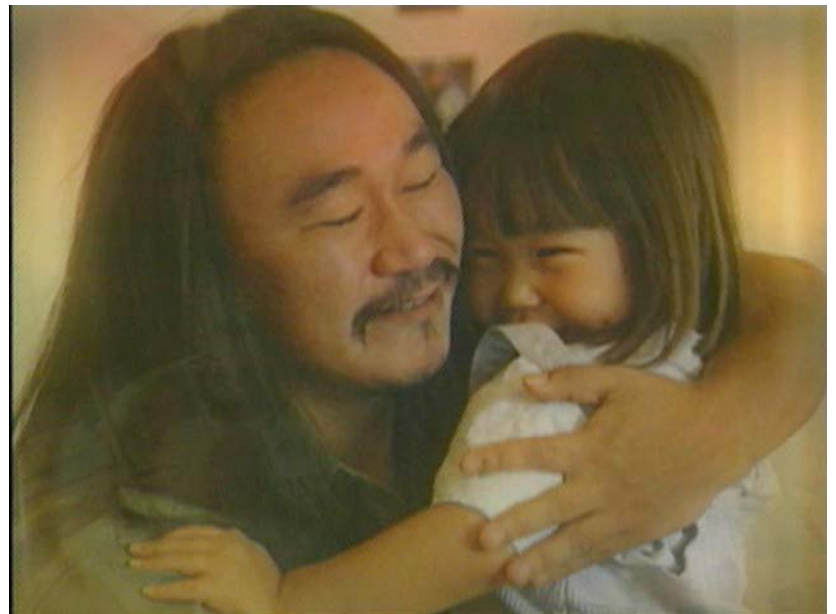
- *What* are we talking about?
- *Who* are we talking about?
- *Why* are we talking about it?
- *How* are we talking about it?
- What's known?
- What's new?
- What's next?
  - Discussion



# What are we talking about?

Mother tongue:

The language which a person has acquired in early years & which normally has become his/her natural instrument of thoughts and communication (UNESCO)



# Who are we talking about?

Everyone, but some children's mother tongue is privileged while other children's mother tongue is over-ruled, dismissed, denied, or given only token support by dominant society, cultural institutions, schools, and policies.

Language-in-education policies routinely contribute to the minoritization of children whose mother tongue is not the privileged language(s).

These are the children we're talking about it.

# Why are we talking about it?

Policies & associated practices pertaining to language affect child development outcomes including:

- Social inclusion/exclusion
- Social & cultural belonging
- Educational attainment
- Labour force attachment
- Civic participation

# *How are we talking about it?*

Several frameworks provide for questions for research and rationale for advocacy:

- Rights
- Psychological development
- Cultural & linguistic endangerment/loss
- Educational equity
- Economics: Labour force participation
- Civil society, community empowerment

# Child rights

UNCRC (1989) Article 30: stipulates right of Indigenous Peoples to use their own language in schooling.

UNCRC General Comment 7:

- Young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention.
- Early childhood (from birth to 8 yrs) is a critical period for realization of these rights.
- Programs & policies are required to realize rights in early childhood
- Recognize & incorporate diversities in culture, language, and child rearing.



# Parental rights

## UNCRC Article 29

Education of the child shall be directed to development of respect for the child's parents, and the child's own cultural identity, language and values, as well as for the national values of the country in which the child is living....

(Also Article 5)

# Community rights

UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) affirms the right to education without discrimination.

- Article 2 establishes the basic principle against discrimination on the grounds of language.

UN Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education specifically recognizes “the right of the members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities, including...the use or the teaching of their own language.”

# Community rights

## UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992, Article 4)

- Affirms the rights of minorities, including Indigenous Peoples, to learn and/or have instruction in their mother tongue or heritage language.



# Psychological development

Cultural identity associated with speaking the language of one's culture of origin

Cultural knowledge embodied in language

Belonging within a cultural community that shares a language or dialect

Inter-generational communication

Self-concept: who am I? Commonalities with ancestors/ Distinctiveness from others

Self-esteem: proud of who one is & special competencies associated with family of origin

# Development of civil society

- Engender a sense of place in civil society
- Develop a civil society rich in diverse linguistic and cultural competencies
- Community empowerment

# Cultural and linguistic endangerment / loss

About 6000 languages spoken globally now.  
10-50% will be spoken by end of 2099.

“Linguistic genocide” (Skutnabb-Kangas)

Language loss endangers identity, heritage,  
belonging, cultural knowledges

The world’s repository of language and  
culture is steadily depleted by language-in-  
education policies that impose dominant  
languages on children’s learning journeys.

# Educational equity

UNESCO (1953) encourages mother tongue based early learning & primary school

Schools, kindergarten, preschool and even parenting education programs often become the first context of vulnerability for minority children by virtue of language in education policies that denigrate their home languages and associated cultures, and demand that children enter unfamiliar learning environments in an unfamiliar language.

A significant contributor to persistent high rates of early school non-attendance, non-engagement, and failure among minority & Indigenous children.

# What's known?

The dominant language in a society is presented to children and families as

- ✓ normative
- ✓ desired
- ✓ privileged
- ✓ high status       .... and, very often...
- ✓ the *required* language of early learning & later education programs.

For minority language children, this is a SUBMERSION approach (also known as 'Sink or Swim').

*Subtractive bilingualism* ... when second language becomes more proficient than first language.



# Scholars agree...

- Children can acquire 2+ languages in their early years.
- Languages don't compete for 'mental space' and bilingualism doesn't 'confuse' children.
- Given adequate inputs & opportunities for interaction, children can acquire multi-lingual proficiency.
- Cognitive advantages of developing proficiency in 2+ languages.
- Early learning is no guarantee of continued development or lifelong retention: languages can be maintained, attenuated, or forgotten.

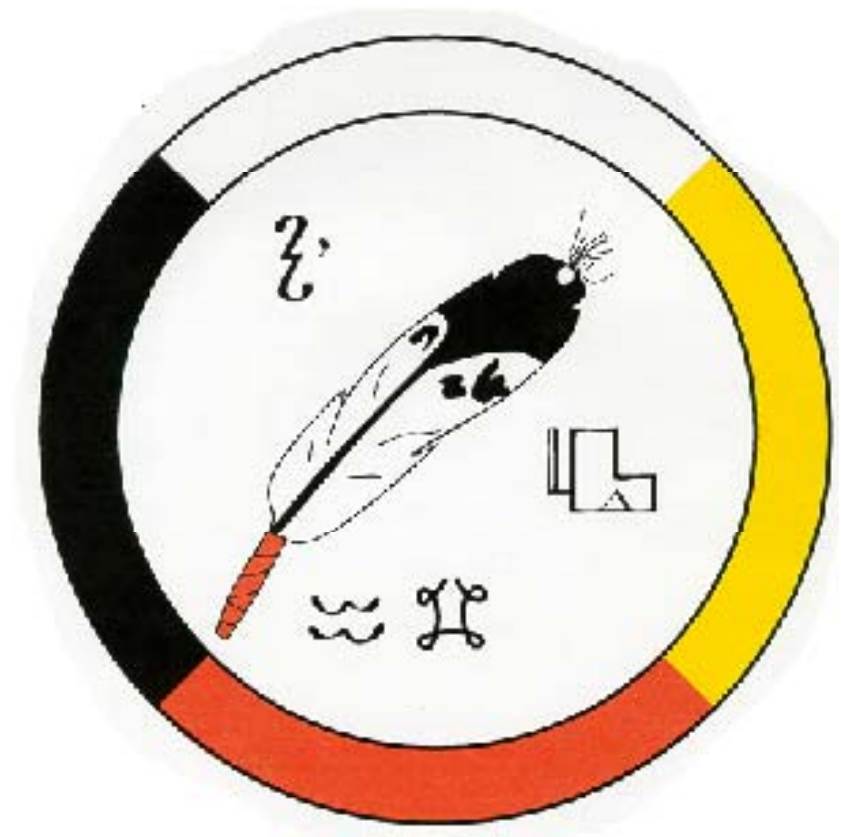
- While children can learn more than one language, whether they develop academic proficiency (reading to learn) in a language depends on increasingly advanced learning opportunities in that language.
- ✓ Late transition (primary 6) is better than short cut.
- ✓ Development of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) takes about 6 years of formal education.

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# Eskasoni Immersion Program, Canada

*'A place to be Mi'kmaw'*

Promoting cultural identity,  
Bilingual fluency, and  
academic achievement.



# Building confidence in identity

## Cultural spaces: Talking circles



# Teacher as Mi'kmaw model



## 2 languages/multiple identities

*“Speaking the Mi’kmaw language helps to make the classroom a more comfortable place because it’s a part of our culture. The way you explain things is a part of your culture. The children are more relaxed in the classroom. They’re used to hearing both languages all the time so they feel free to ask and answer questions about any subject in either language.”*

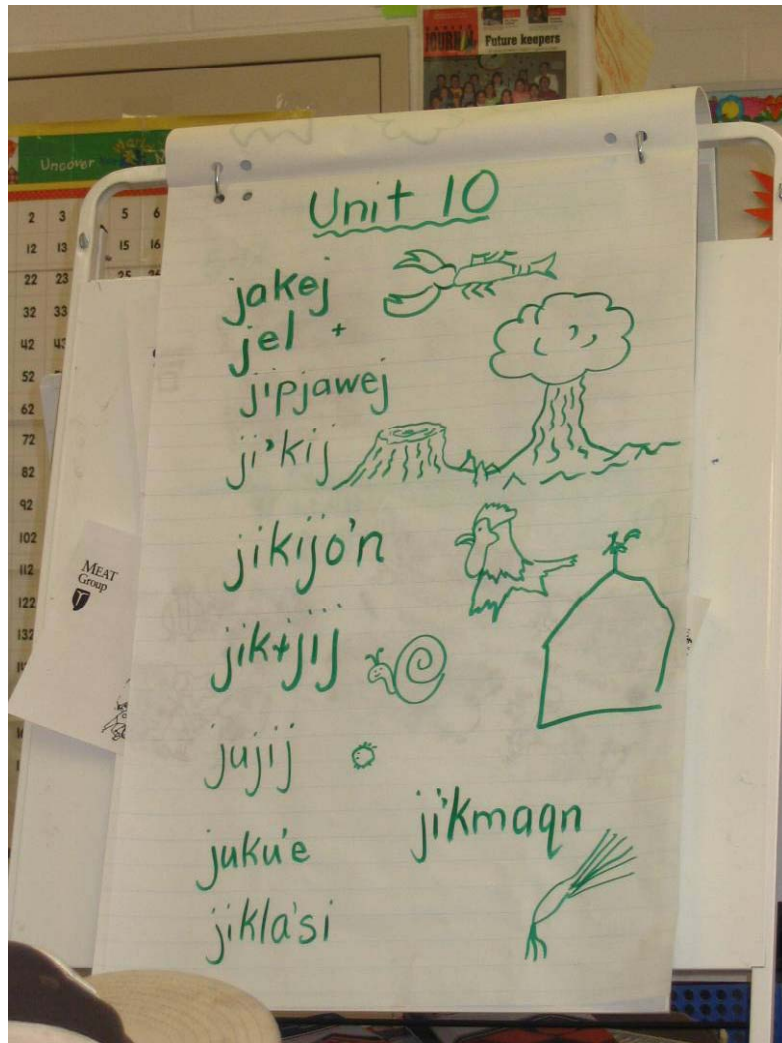
(Transcript of Ida Denny interview)

# Reading and writing



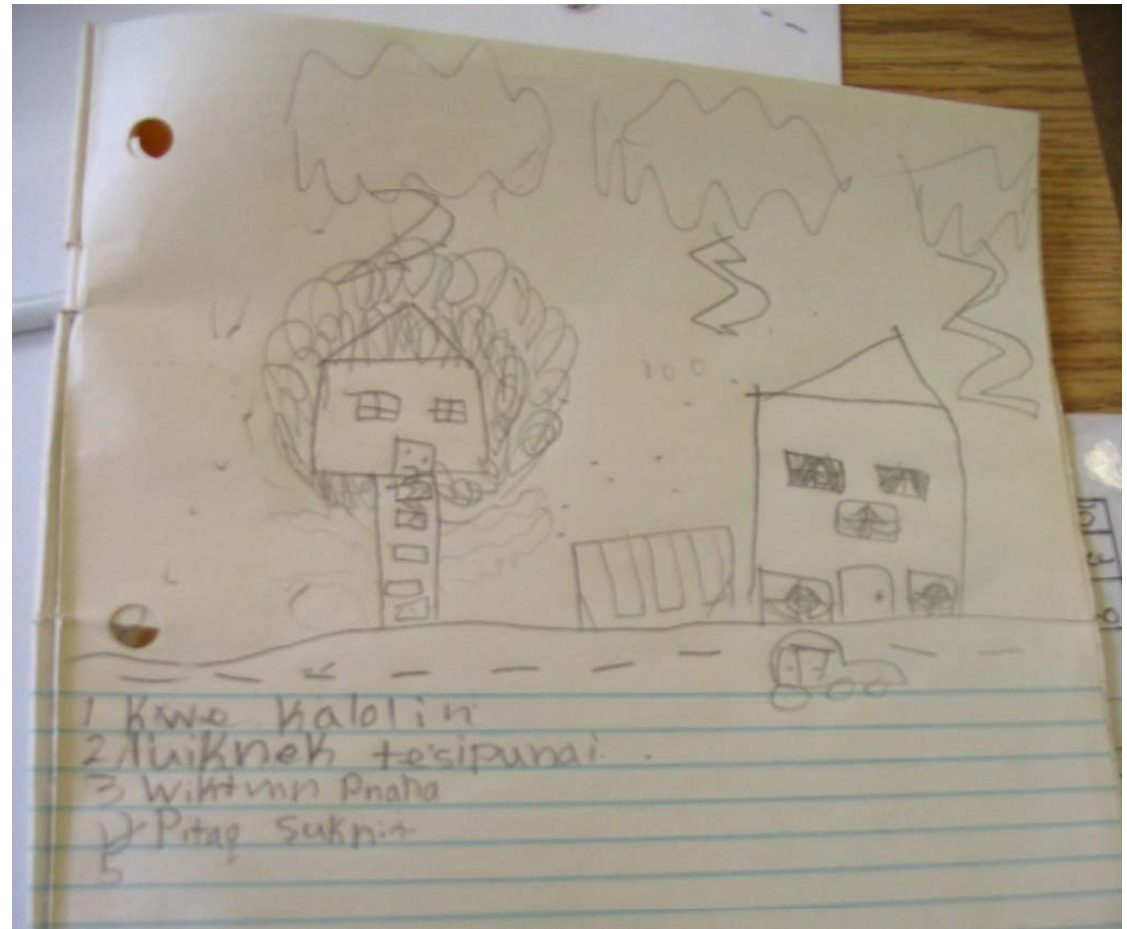
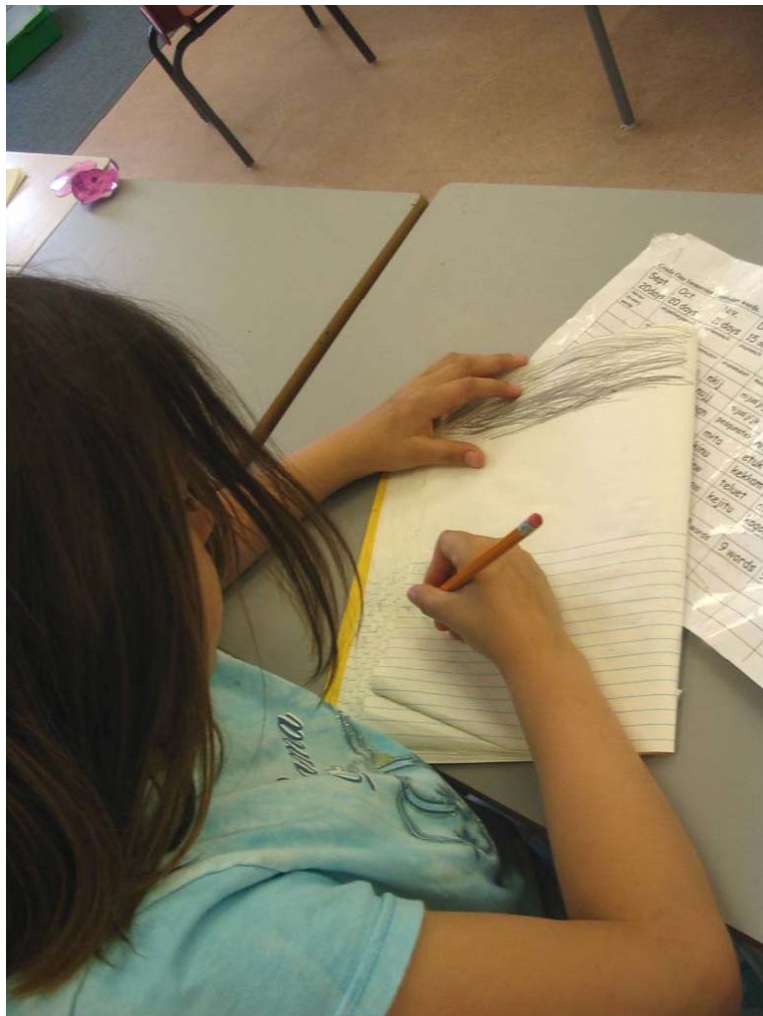


# Reading and Writing: Spelling





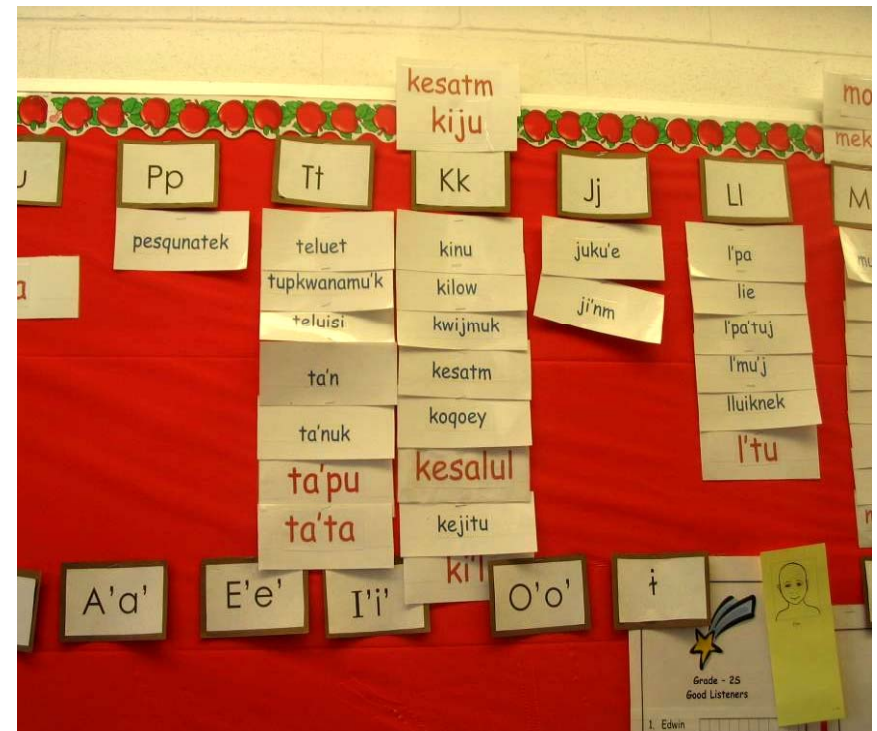
# Reading and writing: Journal writing



# Reading and writing: Read Alouds



# Reading and writing: Word wall





# Confidence in other academic areas

“Centers are another way Starr builds confidence in her students in other academic areas, by ensuring multiple opportunities to use Mi'kmaw while working independently on tasks in a variety of subject areas.

In this picture we see students using real money to solve problems in Mi'kmaw.”

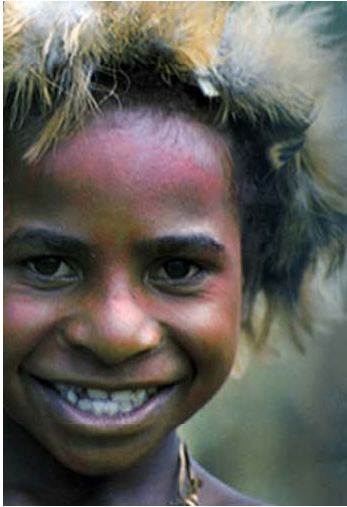


# Confidence in English language arts

“Their writing too...the year before I had kids from the English only program...They would write “I like red....I like blue...I like green” and the next day “I like red....I like blue...I like to go to town”. Every single day was the same thing. I saw a big difference with the kids who started school in their home language. These kids had stories to tell and long, nice stories. And I really enjoyed reading their writing. They wrote spontaneous, creative stories and their grammar was really good too.”

(Mary Prosper interview)

# Kaugel First Language First program Papua New Guinea



Total family commitment

Parents generated curriculum resources

Availability of highly proficient speakers of the  
heritage mother tongue

... who have some training and lots of energy  
to work with very young children!

# Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin

Welsh-medium programs

Nursery, infant-toddler playgroups, preschool

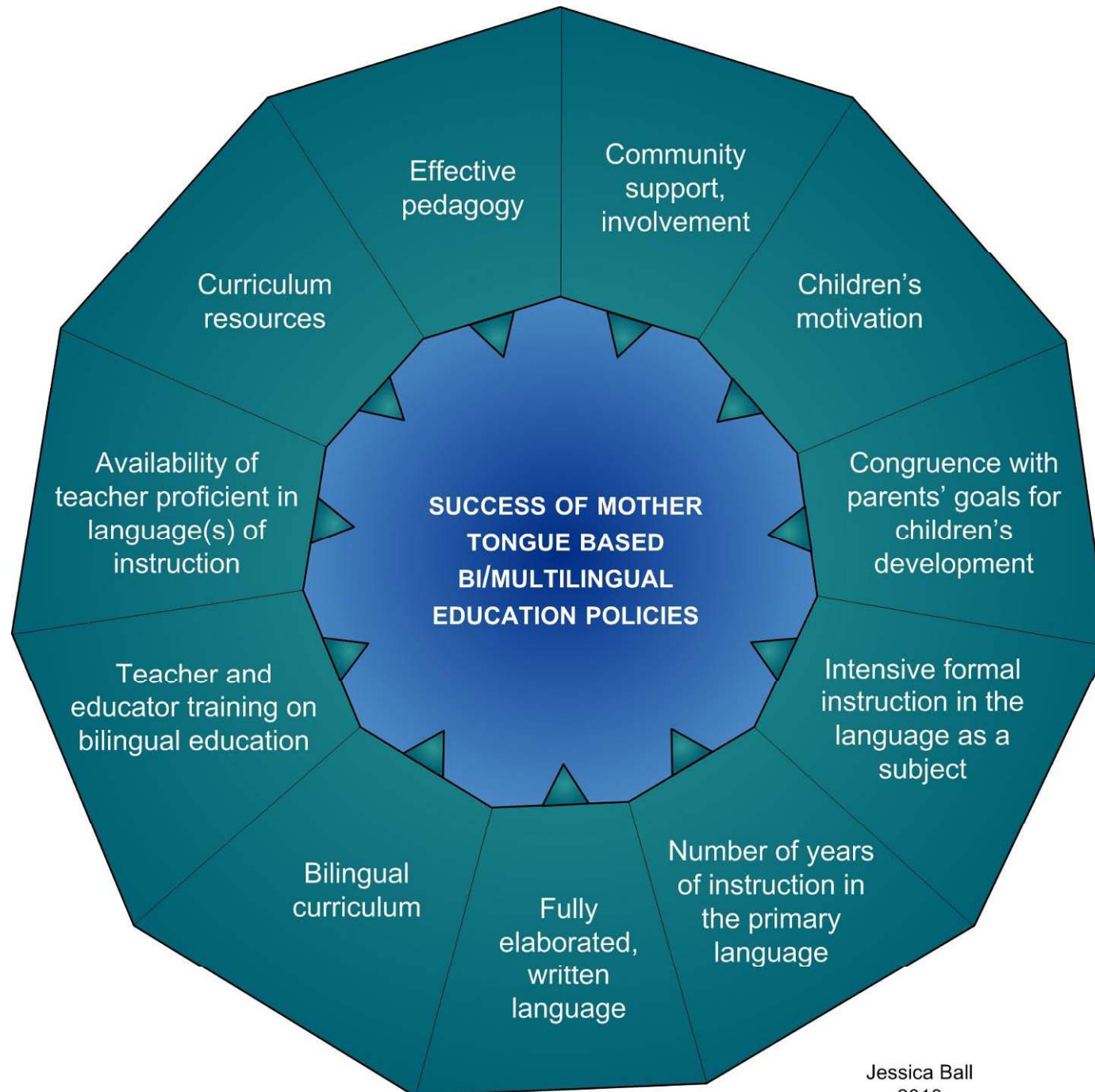
Welsh-medium, English-medium, and bilingual  
schooling options

Second language taught as subject of study

Community commitment

Government language-in-education policy support

Political will – funding for children's and parents'  
rights to education in language of choice





# What's next?

1. Need research documenting learning, health, employment and social outcomes of mother tongue based Early Years programs
2. Raise awareness of parents as children's first language teachers & helping parents make informed decisions (e.g., Toronto School District: DVD "Value Your Language")
3. Empowerment of parents & linguistic communities
4. Community- and computer- generated curriculum resources
5. What else is next?

Find out more:  
[www.ecdip.org/reports](http://www.ecdip.org/reports)



# UNESCO online library

- Ball, J. (2008b). *Mother tongue instruction in early childhood education: A selected bibliography*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Ball, J. (2010). *Educational equity for children from diverse backgrounds: Mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years: Literature Review*.  
<http://www.unesco.org/en/languages-in-education/publications/>

