



Edmonton Chinese Bilingual Education Association

愛城中英雙語教育協會

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EXTRA

“Will Our Children be Able to Talk to The World?” Conference.

St. John College, U of BC

Vancouver, B.C.

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Guest Speaker : Loretta Kong Speech

My name is Loretta Kong, I am a graduate of Edmonton's Chinese-English Bilingual program, class of 1998. My passion and profession is architecture. Currently, I am an intern architect, living in Vancouver, working for a local architecture firm in town. I moved here from Ottawa just over a year ago, after completing my Bachelor and Master of Architecture degrees then working for a couple years in that city. I was born in Edmonton and that's where I spent my first eighteen years, raised by my Cantonese speaking Chinese-Canadian parents.

In 1986 my parents enrolled me into Kindergarten at Meyonohk Elementary school, in the third year since the Chinese-English Bilingual program officially opened its doors in 1983. I was one in a full class of students, but by the sixth grade there were about eleven of us left. After elementary school we merged with our counterparts from the north, the students from Kildare Elementary School, at Ottewell Junior High School, the only one at the time, where Mandarin became a language option class in a standard Junior High Curriculum. Most of us continued into McNally Composite High School to graduate from the program in 1998.

In my opinion, the key to the Bilingual program's success lies in those first six years. Much more than a simple language instruction course, the curriculum is one that weaves content and relational learning within a cultural context. Instead of focusing solely on grammar and memorization, language learning with the Edmonton system is built into Elementary School content; into the mandatory subjects. When I went through the program, we studied Social Studies,

Art, and Physical Education in Mandarin; Science, Math and Music in English, although we spent a lot of time singing old Mandarin folk songs as well. Language Arts was studied in both languages. Language becomes far more interesting when students can benefit from the content that is being communicated. It is also far more exciting for a child to sing a song in a language than to recite characters. Equally as important, the Bilingual curriculum encourages learning relationally, through day to day communication with peers. Inevitably, spending an entire half day in Mandarin allows students to use language conversationally, to play in that language. To add further incentive, some of our teachers had rules in which we were not allowed to speak even a word of English during the Mandarin half of the day. We had some Bristol board up on the wall with our names on it, and at the end of that half of the day we got a gold star if we spent it entirely in Mandarin. At the end of each week we would receive a surprise treat for a clean record that week. We took great pride in this, even spending recess time playing in Mandarin. For myself, it was especially beneficial to learn the language of Mandarin within the context of Chinese culture. It seems essential that knowing about the people that use the language, the history of the country, the geography and the customs are all very important to set the stage for understanding a language. Chinese culture and the Mandarin language are intimately linked.

Essentially, I believe the Edmonton model of bilingual language learning is much closer to the way we use language on an everyday basis. The program incorporates all levels of language use - from the communication of concepts and ideas to the mundane everyday phrases that we all use to relate to one another - towards acquiring a secondary language. In this way it is a method of teaching language from the inside. I think this is a very important advantage to the Edmonton model of an early start bilingual program. A six year old learns without self-awareness; without feeling like an

“Understanding Through Education”



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outsider. A child does not feel like the person who is struggling to learn a second language. As a children learn language, adults speak as though they already understand, and eventually they learn. I myself spoke exclusively Cantonese the first five years of my life. I may have picked up a little bit of English from Pre-school or from Television, but when I entered Kindergarten I was essentially learning two new languages. This was probably true of half the class. Yet I don't remember struggling or receiving special attention. To me it seems natural to fold language learning in with concept learning for children who are learning as many new concepts as new words. After all without words we would have no concepts.

On a more personal note, the aspects of Chinese-English Bilingual school that I most enjoyed were really the myths and stories from China. We read old folktales that my mother and father had also read growing up, we learned the mythologies behind the festivals, the holidays, and the customs at Chinese New Year. We learned Chinese folk dances, and dressed up in fancy costumes. I think we felt that we had twice as much fun as the kids in the regular programs. Instead of feeling as though we were different, outsiders to mainstream population, I think we felt we were special. We were Canadians with a little something extra. For an immigrant family such as my own, an understanding of cultural origins builds bonds between children and parents who, in a way, exist in very different cultures. It is difficult enough for teenagers to see eye to eye with their parents through generational differences, this becomes an increasingly complex relationship if language barrier and cultural disjunction are added to the mix. It is hard to respect cultural differences where there is no mutual understanding.

Canada is not a homogenous place. This may be true of countries all over the world, but because we are a relatively new country, established during a time when the movement of people between geographic and political boundaries had already become so widespread, we have a very unique condition where our nationality is not culturally exclusive. I can have

Chinese bloodlines and be Canadian. I do not believe that any amount of language education courses, Mandarin or otherwise, would make me feel any less Canadian. Often times I feel that knowing another language, being empathetic to another culture, allows you to reflect upon your own with much more clarity. We come to understand ourselves much better when we can see ourselves from another perspective. And arguably, this condition of an empathetic existence is what defines us as Canadians.

The opportunity to speak at this conference has allowed me to reflect upon my twelve years with the Edmonton Public School board's Chinese-English bilingual program. I may never be able to define the true extent of how the program has influenced me, but I know for certain that Edmonton has something really special in their Bilingual Education Programs, and I truly hope that other school districts around Canada will begin to see the potential of such programs in their own cities.