Mother tongues, second languages and languages “in-between”:
On multicultural landscapes and curriculum

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Borderlands, Promislow 2003, Collage, mixed media, 14” x 11”

Artist's Statement

It was a hot day in July when we landed at Ben Gurion Airport. The sun was so bright I could not see without squinting and shading my eyes with one hand while clutching my teddy bear “Brownie” with the other. An Israeli friend of ours picked us up and I did not like the looks of his old pickup truck nor his constant smiles as though this were a joyous occasion. I knew there was nothing to be so happy about. He drove us up the winding road to Jerusalem and I was overwhelmed by the barrenness of the hills, the blinding sun,
and a longing to go home, to sit under a shady tree and drink a nice cold slurpy. When we finally arrived at the “absorption center” (temporary governmental accommodations for new immigrants), I sat on a curb outside the administration office while the rest went in to register. With sweat trickling down my forehead I thought, “Why did my parents take me here? Why couldn’t we just go to Disneyland or the beach? I want to go home!”

I was eight years old when my family emigrated from Canada to Israel. My life would never be the same again. There is a deep wound in me from being uprooted from all that was familiar, from what had been known to me as reality unquestioned, from the environment in which I knew how to communicate with others, in which I felt comfortable and at home. Reality never had the same absoluteness to it again. Language became associated with struggle, not a natural tool of communication, before becoming inseparable from who I am. From the moment I landed at Ben Gurion airport, I began the long and often painful process of becoming and being bilingual.

Immigration does not necessarily result in bilingualism, actually it more often does not. I was lucky, or so I see myself. English, my first language is a highly valued language throughout the world, and so, although I was a minority, I was not faced with the same devaluation and disregard of my first language in my new environment that many immigrants do. At school, when my class began to study English a few years after I arrived, I participated in classes for English speakers that continued throughout my formal education. However, English was considered a linguistic ability alone, segregated to English lessons. Even so, through my first language I was able to maintain a part of me that I had been before immigrating to Israel. There was continuity to my identity, to my family relations that sustained me throughout my struggles in my new environment, throughout the blows to my self-esteem, throughout the loneliness amongst my peers.
Pressures to assimilate were strong, and I was almost completely isolated at school until I learned to speak the language and behave according to what was acceptable:

* I was the only new immigrant in the class and although I was in a sense a prestigious immigrant, coming from Canada, ‘The land of plenty’, and an English speaker, the curiosity I aroused initially in my classmates was quickly deterred by my heavy accent and lack of understanding. In the two years I spent at that school I was a silent observer. I was generally ignored by my teacher and classmates, and was not expected to do more than my limited Hebrew allowed.*

If you live your entire life in the same linguistic environment, you may never realize the significance of your mother tongue to the very core of your existence. When your mother tongue is at risk of being lost because you are in an a different language environment for an extended period of time, you may become aware of the fact that it is not replaceable, that you cannot express your “self” or your feelings in another language in the same way.

The challenges that immigrants experience when they try to translate their worlds and express themselves in their second language are not only a matter of acquiring proficiency in that language, although it does take between five and ten years for immigrant children to become proficient in their second language and catch up academically (Cummins, 2001a). Adolescents and adults may never be able to bridge the gap between their mother tongue and second language.

Our mother tongue has particular significance to our being. It is the language through which the norms and values of our culture are acquired, and it is while learning our mother tongue that we come to know the world and ourselves. According to Skutnabb-Kangas (1981):

* Many bilinguals testify to the fact that their second language, which they learnt later in life, feels colder, more alien, less rich in words, less subtle and on the whole poorer (...) it does not awaken the same deep layers of personality. One is more oneself in one’s mother tongue. (49-50)*

When I tried to write creatively in Hebrew, my second language, as an adult many years after I had become proficient in the language, I found that I was unable to express myself as well as I did in English my mother tongue. I had written poetry in English for some years before sharing my poems with a poet friend who told me that I must write in Hebrew if I want to be published in Israel. I wrote the following in the reflexive narrative of my experience.
But Hebrew words were never enough for me to express the deepest meanings, to sound right. I felt them to be too simple and sparse. I had a strong feeling of not having words, of my need to express myself blocked by the barrier of language. I had to force myself to continue to write in Hebrew...I disciplined myself and read a lot in Hebrew. I even wrote in my journal in Hebrew. It became more natural over time, but it continued to feel inadequate. (in press)

In the process of becoming and being bilingual, over time, I have learned to bridge my worlds, to translate myself from one language to another. It is an ongoing process, even a struggle, in which I engage in both consciously and unconsciously. I am bilingual, I am proficient in two languages, I am a part of two worlds, and although I may identify at times more strongly with my mother tongue, this does not mean that I am unable to express myself well in my second language. “We find ways of describing phenomena which are important to us, even if our language does not provide the words for them” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981: 7).

Furthermore, my second language has become as important to me as my mother tongue. Over time it has become inseparable from who I am. “I am the sum of my languages—the language of my family and childhood, and education and friendship, and love, and the larger, changing world” (Hoffman, 1989: 273). Although one’s mother tongue is of extreme importance to one’s being, if one has the good fortune of becoming bilingual, one’s second language may take on as much significance as one’s mother tongue, integrating into one’s being, becoming a part of one’s self. The rift that many immigrant learners experience between home and school, their previous way of life and their present experiences, is embodied in their experiences of language and identity, in their inability to translate their “self” into a second language. However, human experience is fluid and subject to continual change.

An interplay between languages and selves brings about a transformation of identity, allowing bilingual people to bridge separate worlds, while being a part of both, creating a “borderlands” between languages and identities. I am bilingual no matter what language I speak. I have learned to express myself in both languages. I speak Hebrew in English, as I speak English in Hebrew. I speak Hebrish, a language “in-between” with those who know both Hebrew and English. Kanno (1996) a Japanese who spent many years as a student in England and Canada feels that “I [am] most comfortable when I am speaking to another Japanese-English bilingual and can code-switch freely between the two languages” (187, note 7).

For Anzaldua (1987), a Mexican who grew up on the border with the
United States, the hybrid language in which she speaks and writes in, Chicano Spanish that is neither Spanish nor English, is an assertion of her identity. Anzaldua calls it “The language of the Borderlands” (ii), “a forked tongue, a variation of two languages” (55). “So if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language” (59). Languages “in-between” such as Hebrish and Chicano English allow bilinguals to communicate freely “in-between,” on the borderlands of their languages, with other borderland inhabitants. This phenomenon of language use is an expression of the integration of worlds, experiences and identities that bilingual people experience.

The integration of worlds that occurs through becoming and being bilingual is a process. It is not an inherent process, but one that is dependent upon and strongly influenced by one’s socially embedded experiences. Igoa (1995) found that immigrant children whose cultures and languages were not included in their education were unable to integrate their worlds.

Children who were afraid to reveal their backgrounds...and who pushed their cultural past into the unconscious, or off onto their home life...feel uncomfortable, acting one way at school and another at home....When they grow up, if they become conscious of their separate worlds, they may look down upon, reject or deny their native cultures; or they may discover that native part of themselves left behind in childhood. When they try to regain this early self at the adult stage, integration of life will take time. (45)

In many multicultural societies such as our own, the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of many students are ignored and excluded from their education. Research shows that minority learners are continually discriminated against by the devaluation and disregard of their original languages in mainstream education (Corson, 1993; Cummins, 2001a ; Feuerverger, 1997; Nieto, 1994). For bilingual immigrants and/or linguistic minorities in societies where their first languages are not official languages, becoming and being bilingual is a struggle against, and a defiance of linguistic and social dominance, of monologic discourse. Kouritzin’s (2000) rendition of her attempts to bring her children up bilingual in Canada (in Japanese, her husband’s mother tongue, as well as English), and the opposition she is experiencing is a distressing example.

I also find myself facing the pressure that immigrant parents must feel when they decide to maintain minority languages at home. Strangers ask me when my children are going to start learning English because they will need it for school...I feel their disapproval, when unsolicited, they tell me what they think of
parents who speak minority languages at home and then let their children take ESL at public expense; I know they are giving me a warning. (320-321)

Visiting Toronto, Black and white photo, Courtesy of Promislow family album

Immigrant students experience tremendous pressures to assimilate, to forget their past and fit in as quickly as possible (Cummins, 2001a; Feuerverger, 1997; Nieto, 1994; Wong-Fillmore, 1991). Learners receive a strong message “that if they want to be accepted by the teacher and society, they have to renounce any allegiance to their home language and culture” (Cummins, 2001b). Children internalizing this message often refuse to speak their original languages at home and at school (Kouritzin, 1999; Wong-Fillmore, 1991). Under these conditions children can lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue(s) within 2-3 years of schooling (Cummins, 2001b). Although speaking one’s mother tongue at home is an important factor contributing to language maintenance (Feuerverger, 1989), it is not sufficient in counteracting the forces contributing to language loss (Cummins, 2001b). As students struggle to acquire greater proficiency in English, attend classes in English, do their homework in English, speak English with their friends and watch television in English, proficiency in their mother tongue diminishes over time.

The loss of one’s original language and culture can have detrimental effect on the individual, resulting in the disruption of family relationships (Fishman, 1989; Kouritzin, 1999; Wong-Fillmore, 1991); the loss of one’s sense of self (Kouritzin, 1999); low self-esteem (Corson, 1993; Cummins, 2001a); and academic failure (Corson, 1993; Cummins, 2001a; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981; Wong-Fillmore, 1991). And
as Richard (Kouritzin, 1999) asserts:

Losing the language is like losing half the man you are. Not to lose the language makes me twice the man, so the loss of the language is the loss of the soul, I think, for an Indian person. It’s the loss of the essence of the soul, not to know the language, because you never know how beautiful you are until you know your language...because you can only be described in a foreign tongue, right? (71-72)

Despite large bodies of research in support of immigrant and minority mother tongue maintenance and literacy development (e.g., Cummins, 2001a), and the detrimental effects of language loss, there continues to be great misinformation in this area. The gap between research and practice in the field of multicultural education has had negative impact on the ability of teachers to address the needs of many of their students. I am continually surprised to meet educators who are unaware of the negative effects of language loss, and who believe that immigrant students are better off speaking the majority language alone, believing that continued to use of their mother tongue will impede the acquisition of the majority language.

According to Cummins’ Linguistic Interdependence Principle (1981) maintaining and developing one’s mother tongue can actually promote the acquisition of a second language, since there is underlying language proficiency that allows the transfer of language skills from one language to another. Furthermore, research evidence shows that there are metalinguistic, academic, and intellectual benefits for bilingual children who develop both their languages (Corson, 1993; Cummins, 2001a; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981).

Why does the gap between research and practice persist? In a conversation with a participant in my current research on the life histories of childhood immigrants who maintained their mother tongue, he told me that educators simply do not know what true multiculturalism is. The gap is particularly apparent in the pre-service education where courses preparing for multicultural education are scarce and optional. In-service educators often do not receive instruction in this area at all, and find great difficulties in adapting their instruction to meet the needs of a growing diversity of students in their classrooms.

What is true multiculturalism? How can education become truly multicultural? How can we prepare educators “to engage in culturally [and linguistically] responsive/relevant pedagogy [...] that build upon the cultural [and linguistic] resources that students bring to school” (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1993: 115)?
We are all born into language; we know ourselves and others in language; we word our worlds; we weave our worlds as we weave our words. Therefore schooling must be centered on the discursive practices that constitute the people we are and are becoming. (Hasebe-Ludt, 1999: 39)

Aoki (1993) defines *multiculturalism* as “a polyphony of lines of movement that grow in the abundance of middles, the “betweens” and “Ands” that populate our landscape...a landscape of multiple possibilities in a shifting web of rhizomean lines of movement” (94). It is a landscape of between languages, between cultures, between identities that reflects the multiplicity of our reality and our being; its heteroglossic nature continually unfolding as different cultures and languages commingle in individual and collective experiences in our communities. A collage of cultures and languages, that have cross-pollinated and created borderlands of “betweens,” identities that had not existed before, new cultures and languages.

The “betweens” of our social fabric need to be created throughout our curricula, across subject matter, in all interactions between teachers and learners, by including the diversity of languages and cultures that learners bring with them to the classroom. “Borderlands” need to be created, monologic views need to be questioned, possibilities need to be opened, so that everyone has a chance to learn and grow, so that everyone can belong.

Avoiding fixed concepts and stereotypes of identity: “we need then to have in mind a range of individuals and groups confronting a field of possibilities in which varied ways of behaving and reacting may be realized” (Greene, 1988: 116). Allowing for multiple voices and possibilities to exist, multicultural education needs to be created in dialogue with students, building upon their experiences and knowledge, their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Multicultural education must be “centered on the discursive practices that constitute the people we are becoming” (Hasebe-Ludt, 1999: 39), empowering students to find their “voice.”

Voice is identity, a sense of self, a sense of relationship to others, and a sense of purpose. Voice is power—power to express ideas and convictions, power to direct and shape individual life towards productive and positive fulfillment of self, family, community, nation, and the world. (McElroy-Johnson, 1993: 86)

Although by Grade Twelve, I had long since mastered the language of my surroundings and assimilated its culture, my past could not be erased. There was an important part of me that my teachers failed to
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In grade 12, after misbehaving on a class trip, my homeroom teacher gave the class a lecture on how some people will never succeed in life. When she finished her speech, she called out my name. I was not surprised. I knew who she thought she was talking about. She then proceeded to tell me to leave the classroom, since I was suspended. I walked out of the room proudly thinking to myself, “She doesn’t know who I am,” and slammed the door. The door echoed through the hallways as I walked out into the bright morning smiling. I had put up a strong front and knew deep inside how wrong she was, and that I would eventually prove her wrong, but the damage was done and her harsh words seeped through and haunted me for many years. Whenever I do succeed it is always a surprise and never taken for granted. I am forever doubtful of my abilities.

Slamming the door, hearing the echo sound through the hallway. I am there. I feel its vibration on my body, the assertion of my being in spite of attempts to silence me. I would not give in. But the doubts, the horrible pain poisoning me, defining me nevertheless.

Five years ago, when dr. patrick allen suggested I explore my own experience in my research, I felt my experience validated, my “voice” recognized for the first time in my life by an educator. In my subsequent exploration and reflections, I have come to know my “voice.” shaky at first but gaining momentum over time. It is the voice of my unique experience of the world through languages and cultures “in-between.” Through the reflexive narrative of my experience (Promislow, 2000), I was able to understand the sources of my strength and the sources of my alienation from my adopted homeland.

Maintaining my first language and identity has been a source of strength for me, and has contributed to my ability to resist the devaluation of my identity at high school and later in life, and to my consequent success. My bilingualism, my dual identity, can be seen as a challenge to monologic views of reality, to stratified social structures that do not include the diversity of its members, that do not affirm difference.

“Minority students are ‘empowered’ or disabled as a direct result of their interactions with educators in schools” (Cummins, 2001a; Feuerverger, 1994: 127). Educators are in a unique position to
encourage learners to explore their experiences, to find their voice as I have my own, recognizing and validating their experiences throughout their education.

Visiting Jerusalem, Colour photo, Courtesy of Promislow family album.

According to Nieto (1994), in order to create truly multicultural education there needs to be a transformation of mind and heart among educators. It is not in pedagogical methods that true multicultural education can be created, but in the ability of educators to envision and create borderlands in their classrooms where all students belong. The experiences of those who have maintained their mother tongue while becoming and being proficient in their second language reflect the multiplicity of reality and our being as created in and through language, as well as our ability to transcend boundaries through dialogue with others and ourselves.

It is through the experiences of immigrants who have maintained their mother tongue of creating and inhabiting “borderlands” between languages and identities, that educators can learn how to create such spaces in their classrooms, creating education that is truly multicultural. Educational researchers such as Tara Goldstein (2003), Erica Hasebe-Ludt (2002), and Ming Phang He (2002) are a part of a growing body of scholarship that is in its very creation contributing to the development of a language with which we can continue the dialogue of Aoki’s “betweens,” and provide educators with insight into and vicarious experiences of what it means to live “in-between” worlds, languages, and cultures through biographical, autobiographical, and ethnographical renditions of experience.

My experience transcends language and place, although it is defined by them, embodied in the geographical distance, in the history contained in my languages, my life history, the history of my
identities. I am bilingual, I live in two worlds in tandem. I am here both in English and in Hebrew, I am both with my family in Israel as I am here in Canada. I carry with me memories from Canada as a child, before emigrating to Israel, before becoming bilingual, memories of Israel of becoming and being bilingual, memories of Canada since I returned. My present is shaped by these memories, their continuity fragmented by change. My experience is shaped by the fragments of my present, not here but here all the same...I am in Israel, but I am not there. I am here. (Research journal 17, April, 2002)

References


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About the Author

Sara Promislow is a doctoral candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). Her doctoral research explores the life histories of childhood immigrants who maintain their mother tongue, and the dialogic interaction among languages, cultures and identities in their experience. Her own experience of immigrating as a child, of becoming and being bilingual, is at the root of her research and motivation as researcher and educator. When she was an M.Ed. student at OISE/UT, she became aware of the gap between research and educational practice in multicultural societies, and has been dedicated to bridge this gap ever since, searching for and creating ways of making research on immigration, mother tongue and cultural maintenance accessible to educators. She has the great fortune of being an active member at the Centre for Arts Informed Research at OISE/UT, and is editor of arts-informed, the on-line publication of the Centre.

Website for Centre for Arts-informed Research: http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~aresearch