B 1.1 The language socialisation of bilingual children upon transition from nursery to primary school

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A study conducted in Hamburg from 2001 to 2004 explored language development opportunities in nurseries in the context of migration-related bilingualism and multilingualism (Reich 2009). The study documented language development in German and in the languages spoken at home for just under 60 children. These data provide information on average language development for children who are not receiving special support and who tend to be socially and economically disadvantaged.

The study shows that attending nursery does not guarantee that bilingual children will find it easy to cope with the transition to a school with a monolingual focus. Four findings are central to the question of how we can support children who are multilingual as a result of their migration background upon transition from nursery to school:

1. The children's achievements were remarkable: after around two years of nursery, they are able to operate in German in the same way and at the same level as in the language they have been acquiring since their birth.
2. However: from the school's point of view, these achievements are not satisfactory, as the average German skills acquired do not meet the monolingual standards of the German-language school. They represent merely the minimum language requirements for school readiness. The children therefore tend to be faced with very challenging conditions for starting school.
3. The study also found that the progress of many five-year-old and six-year-old children in the languages spoken at home slowed. Some ceased to progress at all and in certain cases there was even a regression. The language spoken at home, which had previously made up for the second language, German, was no longer necessarily able to fulfil that function.
4. In situations of bilingualism, the parallel between age and language acquisition level is no longer a given.

Reich (2009) writes that

*Die Aneignung der Zweisprache braucht Zeit! So steht sie dem schon erreichten sozialen und kognitiven Entwicklungsstand des Kindes unter Umständen für längere Zeit nicht als vollgültiges Ausdrucksmittel zur Verfügung.*

*Das ist nicht tragisch, solange die für eine altersgerechte Weiterentwicklung des Kindes nötigen Impulse im Medium der anderen, der Erstsprache vermittelt werden. Es kann aber zum Problem werden, wenn diese Impulse nur im Medium der Zweitsprache verfügbar sind, wie dies typischerweise bei den Bildungsangeboten der Kindergärten [und Schulen erg. VP] der Fall ist. Es kann dann leicht zu Situationen der sprachlichen Überforderung und der kognitiven Unterforderung kommen.  
[Acquiring a second language takes time. A child may for a while therefore not have full access to that language as a means of expression that is equal to their level of social and cognitive development.  
This is not a serious issue provided the child receives the stimulus they need for age-appropriate development through the medium of their other, first, language. It can, however, become a problem if that stimulus is only available through the medium of the second language, as is typically the case in education at nursery [and school, note by VP]. In such cases, the child may easily face too great a linguistic challenge and too low a cognitive challenge. (14)*

In other words, it is important that the languages bilingual children speak at home are integrated into the education process, as this is the only way to enable bilingual children to harness their linguistic repertoire and receive stimuli in the language of the home as well. Children need both for their linguistic and cognitive development. Making this possible is particularly important upon transition from nursery to school.

# Bibliography

Reich, Hans H. (2009), *Zweisprachige Kinder. Sprachenaneignung und sprachliche Fortschritte im Kindergartenalter.* Münster.