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# **Rethinking Reading at Home: Connecting families with multilingual digital texts**

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*Abstract: Reporting a Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) project spanning 2018-2020, this paper looks at what happened when early primary English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners were given eReaders with multilingual texts to take home to read together with their families. The shift in pedagogy to view our learners as multilingual and developing multicompetence rather than English language learners only, influenced our decision to make digital texts in community languages more readily available to our students. Although our increasingly digital world has led to improved access to information, texts in different languages and the opportunity for students to access learning in different ways, we realised that many students at BCE schools, particularly those from a refugee background, have limited access to these resources. Along with improved access for students, we also wanted parents to have access to reading materials in their home languages, so that they could read together with their young children. Our goal was not only to facilitate reading in both home languages and English but to create greater student engagement in reading, while strengthening home and English literacy. In the course of developing the BCE digital library, we realised that we needed to find out more about what helps our multilingual students with reading and gain a greater understanding of family literacy practices in our school communities. Our learnings about the sustainability of libraries, student progress in reading, and family literacy practices in Brisbane Catholic Education school communities has important implications for how we teach multilingual learners to read today.*

## **Introduction**

In 2017 and 2018, several schools in the Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) system enrolled large numbers of English as an

Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners with a refugee background from Syria and Iraq. Within that group were significant numbers of children in the early years of primary school, aged from five to eight years old. Teachers of these young EAL/D learners expressed concerns that they were not progressing in reading. Their evidence of lack of progress in reading came from system literacy monitoring tools, including the PM Reading Assessment Resource (2009) which assesses reading accuracy and comprehension.

Although these observations about reading development showed a lack of progress, it should be noted that the results could not be considered unusual. Using the English language learning scales, the NLLIA Bandscales (McKay, 2007), showed that the progress of these young refugee background learners in reading was consistent with being newly arrived in Australia. As Gibbons (1991) confirms, “These children have full capacity for learning, but in an English only class they are without the language that will allow them to do so” (p. 61).

Learning to read in another language requires readers to both bring their own background knowledge to a topic and also develop their understanding of the language system itself. A means of meeting the first requirement is through using home language for reading. This approach creates a social environment for learning that provides a link to the language of the home and family. As a result, this would reduce the trauma and alienation children may experience in a new environment, and helps develop confidence and self-esteem (Gibbons, 1991).

The idea central to this project of using multilingual texts is based on extensive research showing the benefits of learning using home languages (Harper & Brand, 2010; Heugh et al., 2019; Martinez, 2018). The project also took into account the importance of acknowledging, building and celebrating the different ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez et al., 2005) that diversity in language and culture can bring to a school community. We aimed to effect change by capitalising on the diversity of language and culture in BCE schools to build more effective partnerships with families and their communities (Cairney & Ruge, 1999). Specifically, we sought to utilise and understand the role of family literacy practices for young EAL/D learners, learning to read. Ultimately, this signals that, “We accept your language and - by implication - your family, your ethnicity and your culture” (Gibbons, 1991, p. 62).

In response to these considerations, we decided that by providing multilingual families in our schools with access to e-books and audiobooks (digital texts) through the BCE Digital library using loan devices, we could create greater engagement in reading while strengthening home and English literacy and language.

### **The BCE Digital Library and e-Readers**

The Brisbane Catholic Education Digital Library delivered through *OverDrive's* digital reading platform, was established in 2013. It was intended as a supplementary resource, designed to complement both the central office and school libraries with access to digital content available to all students and staff. Within this digital library, provision had been made for a Languages Collection. This particular collection was initially curated by Languages teachers within BCE to review and select books to use with their own classes in Japanese, French, Italian, Chinese, Spanish and Indonesian. Using their expertise, digital texts were chosen that were age appropriate and of interest to both teachers and students.

Some schools also had existing multilingual print collections. However, access to these books was only for students attending those particular schools. In addition, the changing demographics of schools meant that these existing collections were not necessarily in the home languages used by current students. Schools were also constrained by the number and quality of print books that they could make available to students for reading in home languages.

The arrival of students from Syria and Iraq in BCE schools coincided with the development of the Languages collection within the digital library. We realised that the Languages collection could be extended to include Arabic and other home languages, so that we could support students' reading choices using their home language.

Another consideration in this project was the students' access to devices to download and read the digital texts in their home language. While research and reports show that digital inclusion is slowly increasing, the "digital divide" is still a reality for many families in our school communities, particularly for those with refugee backgrounds (MYAN, 2020). As e-books are usually accessed via an internet connection and either a computer or other device, many refugee families lack the ability to access or

purchase these items (Twill, 2012). Information from teachers about the Syrian and Iraqi background students' access to digital technologies and resources, was consistent with this data. Most families only accessed the internet for communication with their home country via mobile phones and did not have access to a computer or tablet for educational purposes.

The Australian curriculum area of Digital Technologies along with the general capability of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) emphasise the importance of building skills in learning and equipping young Australians to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century. Underpinning this is our understanding that literacy expands beyond language proficiency to the digital world (Walker, 2013). Unless students have access to digital technology inclusive of devices, systems and resources, the gap between those who have access and those with limited or no access creates a "digital divide". "A school can implement technology and teach every student how to use it, but if a student doesn't have access to a device or internet at home, they won't show the same academic results" (American University, 2020). Through collaboration with the schools to improve access to either the internet, devices or digital resources was at the foreground of our project planning to bridge this "digital divide".

### **Project design**

With a project budget of \$1,000, ten low-cost android devices were purchased. They were used as loan devices along with five repurposed ipads. These devices were set up with access to BCE Wi-Fi and the *Sora by OverDrive Education* reading app to enable students to borrow and download digital texts from the BCE digital library. The purchase of digital texts did not need to be factored in as they were already budgeted for in a separate on-going central resource budget for the BCE digital library.

Twenty-eight families from three schools took part in the project across 2018 - 2020. The project ran consecutively in each of the three schools with no overlap, due to the limited number of e-devices available. Schools are discussed in order of their participation.

The first school in the project was located on the southside of Brisbane, Queensland. This school had a significant group of Arabic speaking families, newly arrived from Syria and Iraq. Supporting these students were Arabic speaking Bilingual School Officers (BSO) employed by the school. Their role is comparable

to a bilingual teacher aide or assistant, building and maintaining the home language of the EAL/D learner and aiding communication between the school and home. At the first two schools, the bilingual school officers played an essential role in the project. They supported the young learners in locating and choosing digital books, interpreting Arabic and English during parent meetings, translating communications to parents, and developing efficient procedures for the borrowing and returning of digital books and the devices. They also played a crucial role in the selection of appropriate texts to build the Arabic language digital library collection as we were unable to make informed decisions about the suitability of titles. This was necessary as there was no English translation of the book reviews available on the digital book purchasing platform.

In Schools One and Two, EAL/D teachers identified families that may be interested in participating in the project. At these schools, the families had either Arabic as a home language or Syriac, a language from the Northeast of Iraq. The Syriac speaking parents also spoke Arabic, the language they were educated in. A letter in Arabic was sent home to prospective parents asking if they would like to take part in the project.

School Three was a much smaller school than the first two and did not have any newly arrived learners from Syria or Iraq. The school expressed interest in participating because they had heard about the project from the other two schools. The participants differed from the previous schools as instead of one language group, several languages were in use. After the EAL/D teacher identified possible participants, the teacher-librarian approached families individually. The Spanish speaking teacher-librarian helped choose suitable texts with the learners and liaised with the families.

At all schools, families were required to attend an information session in person to find out about the project, how borrowing would occur and to discuss the practice of shared reading in relation to both the nominated home language and English. This was an opportunity to also share the benefits of shared reading between family members and the value of using home languages to read and discuss books.

These sessions also provided the opportunity to explain that reading together or shared reading was not the same as the common homework practice of a student reading aloud a levelled reader to a parent, sent home by teachers for students to practise

their reading. Reading together or shared reading is shaped by the idea that children become literate by participating in literacy events defined by their home culture and that home literacy practices vary among cultures (Heath, 1983). Shared reading is defined as an interactive activity during which a child and adult share reading a book. The adult models reading or take turns in reading the text with their child (Begin Learning Team, 2020). Frequent shared reading, parental interactions and responsiveness are known to be important in the development of language and literacy with the conversations that occur as a result being just as important as the reading itself (Curry, Reeves & McIntyre, 2016).

Each student was given a loan device and participated in an interest survey to support them in their reading selection. Families were also provided with a *How to Guide*, a *Reading Bingo* game to help get started with borrowing, and a *Reading Diary* (see Appendix 1).

The sequence of the events at each school followed the same format with four main parts: the parent information session including exchange of ideas about shared reading in home language; the process of selecting, borrowing; downloading the digital texts at school; the reading of the digital texts together at home and providing feedback and information. These events are summarized and sequenced below. The amount of time for participation at each school varied, influenced by external factors, including staff changes and the beginning of Covid with the first school participating for 6 months, the second for 12 months and the third for 6 months.

### **Summary of sequence of events**

1. Student participants identified
2. Collaboration with bilingual school officers and teachers supporting reading choices and use of devices
3. Parent information session and demonstration of use of the device
4. Interest survey completed by students
5. Ongoing cycle: texts selected, borrowed and downloaded with bilingual support; reading of digital texts together at home; returning of device to school
6. Parent survey and feedback
7. On-going data collection and analysis of data.

## Results

Project results were measured through feedback from parents, students and teachers, improvement in English reading levels and engagement in reading in both home language and English.

Feedback from parents was through a survey and oral commentary, translated and reported back by bilingual school officers. Improvement in reading during the life of the project and after was measured through progress in Speaking and Reading on the NLLIA Bandscales (2007) and PM Reading levels (2009).

Analysis of the data showed:

- engagement in using the digital texts and families reading together was high at all three schools
- students who consistently borrowed books improved dramatically in reading in English
- some students who previously lacked motivation to read prior to the project and had been stuck on early level PM readers, were able to progress to higher PM levels over the life of the project
- Parents reported that students:
  - enjoyed reading, not only with parents, but with older siblings and grandparents
  - proficiency in speaking and knowledge about reading in home language developed and improved.

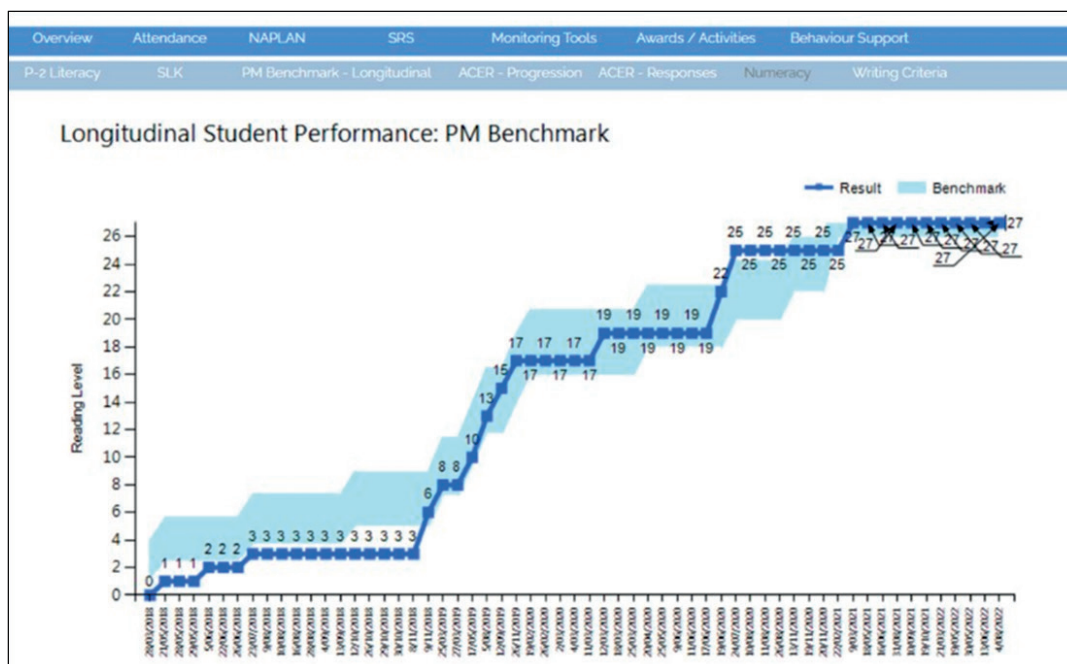
## Discussion

### *Student reading improvement and engagement*

Prior to the project, the majority of students' reading progress had plateaued at low levels (Level 1 or 2) on both the NLLIA Bandscales and PM Benchmarks over a period of several months. For a number of students, we saw an immediate increase in PM reading levels when they commenced borrowing digital texts in home languages and English.

Figure 1 with PM results for one student from School Two shows an example of this pattern. This particular student had plateaued at the lower levels of PM Benchmarks. The student's reading level immediately increased when they started borrowing Arabic and English digital texts. This rise was consistent in the months following until reaching the highest PM benchmark.

Figure 1: Individual student's longitudinal performance: PM Benchmark



Engagement in the reading of digital texts was high in all three schools. Students were very excited about having a digital device of their own to engage with digital reading materials. Most students were reliable in returning their devices to the school to download new texts. Over the course of the project, only one family opted out while another family transferred to another school.

### Home literacy practices

An important consideration underlying this project was the understanding that developing and maintaining literacy in home languages develops meta-linguistic understandings and improves use of both home languages and English (Harper & Brand, 2010; Heugh et al., 2019; Martinez, 2018).

This was observed at School Three when transference of reading skills between home language and English occurred. A student whose home language was Spanish was sharing a book with the Spanish-speaking teacher librarian and was recorded on video. This student began by listening to the teacher reading and answering questions about the book on the Solar System. By the fourth page, the EAL/D learner took over from the teacher, reading in Spanish. Her parents confirmed that previously the student had only ever read in English independently using levelled



readers sent home by the teacher.

When families share a book in their first language with their children, they are building the foundations for a positive attitude to reading and expanding on the child's language skills. It expands vocabulary in both languages and connects with culture (Lowe, 2017).

We knew that reading to and with children may not be a feature in many multilingual learners' home literacy repertoires. This was confirmed by one of the Arabic speaking bilingual school officers who explained that reading to children was not a home literacy practice for her family in Syria. This bilingual school officer shared with us that reading books did not feature until she was sixteen years old. Instead of reading texts herself or being read to, she accessed stories through video.

A few families from Iraq also participated in the projects. Although no books were available in their home language Syriac, they were very interested in being able to read the books within their language repertoire. When using bilingual Arabic/English books, they translated from Arabic to Syriac and practised reading in English for both themselves and their children. For one student whose family engaged in this practice, improvement in confidence, behaviour and engagement in school increased. There was also an immediate improvement in reading in English.

### **Parental engagement**

At the initial parent information sessions, interest in participating in the project was high. All parents were firm in their belief that using their home language would strengthen family connections and home language. Despite this, a small number of parents initially could not perceive the benefits of reading in home language, believing that that their child should only be reading in English. At the parent information sessions there was robust discussion on whether reading only in English was the most beneficial way to learn English and to learn to read. They believed that reading in home language would hinder the process of learning English.

By the conclusion of the project at each school, parents had developed a greater awareness of the benefits of reading together in both home language and English. Some parents suggested that the project be extended to include their older children who enjoyed reading their younger sibling's texts. One parent commented that it was good to compare language structures in

Arabic and English to help with meaning. Several parents commented that they liked to use the resources to learn English themselves and make comparisons between their home language and English.

At the first two schools where the students were of a refugee background, parents were reluctant to use their own internet resources because of the cost. As a result, borrowing and downloading of texts was only done at school, even though students could borrow from home using their school login. At all three schools parents were concerned that they would be responsible if the devices were lost or broken.

### **Student interests survey**

Prior to students borrowing digital texts, they participated in an interest survey (see Appendix 1). Students identified their interests using pictures and discussion with an adult. The survey was designed to guide the adults supporting the students' search for engaging multilingual and English reading materials that would meet their needs and interests. Equally important was that this survey informed the ongoing selection of texts for the digital library.

Conversations arising during the student survey revealed that often as adults we make assumptions about what we think young readers like to read. For example, an initial assumption was that the students would like to read stories about cats and dogs. However, during those conversations, students shared that they were interested in monkeys and dolphins, not cats and dogs.

Many students preferred non-fiction texts. One student said, "I don't like storybooks. I like reading about things that are real."

Another finding was that audio-only books were too hard to comprehend and that students preferred read-along e-books.

These findings strongly indicate that the selection of texts requires input from students, rather than relying on adult assumptions and biases. We found that building a multilingual digital collection required a concerted effort from all stakeholders and that it was highly important to recognize student voice and agency. This has implications for engaging students in reading and teacher selection of reading materials. In conversations with students, we found that they had strong preferences for what they wanted to read and discarded materials that did not meet their interests. When matching reading materials to student needs teachers must take into account individual interests.

### **Challenges and opportunities**

It was envisaged that students and parents would eventually borrow by themselves at school or at home. This was more prevalent at School Three, where many of the participants were from a migrant rather than refugee background and had lived in Australia for a longer period. They owned their own devices and used them to borrow and download books at home.

A search of library usage showed that some project participants continued to use the digital library beyond the life of the project. However, for many students, once the devices were returned, they could no longer access the digital library at home, as there was only one shared device for the family. For example, a student from the first school who took part in the project beginning in October 2018 continued to borrow books from the digital library into 2019, and stopped using the digital library when the loan devices were returned and redeployed to another school. Follow up with the student in 2022 revealed that there was no longer access to a device at home because there was only one shared iPad, prioritised to be used by other members of the family. However, a school library usage report for this student showed that while the digital library was no longer accessed, the student continued recreational reading through the school library. This report showed that the student read 167 print books from October 2019 to September 2022, across a range of genres, with more recent choices showing a preference for humorous books.

This student's school and most other BCE schools have devices that could be repurposed as loan devices and be loaned out like any regular library resource. While some schools have taken this approach on board others remain reluctant. Our data showed that engagement with digital texts is limited when there is no opportunity for students to take home a device and there is no support from an enabling adult. Feedback from schools showed that the fear of damage or loss was the main reason why digital devices could not be loaned to students. Over the two years of the project not one of the loan devices including cables or chargers was damaged or lost.

Feedback also uncovered that time constraints were an impediment to schools using loan devices for borrowing digital texts. Bilingual school officers or teachers supporting the selection and borrowing of books required at least one to two hours each week to do this. Whilst this was a challenge, it presented an opportunity to look for other ways that families and the school

community could engage with the digital library. One solution is that schools review their practices to create conditions for greater digital access and to build awareness and knowledge in the wider school community.

While the project focused on three schools with a small cohort of participants, on-going usage reports reveal the Languages/Multilingual collection is accessed to some extent by all schools and a growing number of students. Borrowing patterns show that there is a greater awareness of the digital library from both staff and students. There is more variation in reading material and more books for older readers. The recent addition of magazines and comics has meant that students who have low reading levels in English can access age-appropriate content.

While publishers are becoming more responsive to user needs and interests, such as the recent addition of books in Ukrainian, there is still a need for a greater range of quality texts within particular languages. Availability of multilingual digital texts is determined by the publisher and does not match the number of languages used in Australian communities.

The languages available in digital texts are Eurocentric and include a few major Asian languages, but no languages from the Pasifika region. If we want parents to engage in recreational reading in home languages and schools to promote digital texts for learning, the range and quality of multilingual digital texts must be expanded.

Although the project was small, the results have shown that the practice of shared reading in home languages and English is of great benefit to families, students and schools. We found out more about what helps our multilingual students with reading and gained a greater understanding of family literacy practices in our school communities. The project has shown that providing access to devices, the internet and quality multilingual texts through a centrally funded and managed digital library is strategic, sustainable and can bridge the “digital divide”.

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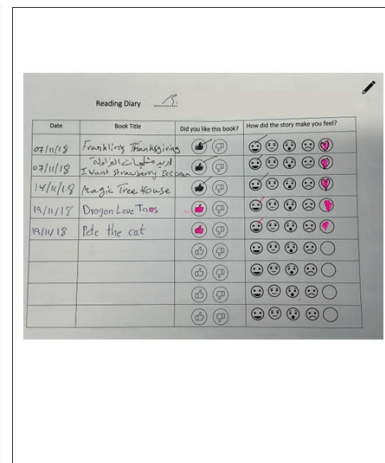
## Appendix 1: Family resources and interest survey



How to guide



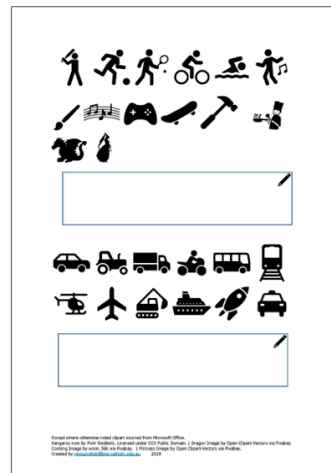
Reading bingo game



Reading diary



Reading interest survey



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