



# A multi-site review of policies affecting opportunities for children with developmental disabilities to become bilingual



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## ABSTRACT

This review of special education and language-in-education policies at six sites in four countries (Canada, United States, United Kingdom, and Netherlands) aimed to determine the opportunities for bilingualism provided at school for children with developmental disabilities (DD). While research has demonstrated that children with DD are capable of learning more than one language (see Kay Raining Bird, Genesee, & Verhoeven, this issue), it was not clear whether recent policies reflect these findings. The review, conducted using the same protocol across sites, showed that special education policies rarely addressed second language learning explicitly. However, at all sites, the policies favoured inclusion and educational planning based on individual needs, and thus implied that students with DD would have opportunities for second language learning. The language-in-education policies occasionally specified the support individuals with special needs would receive. At some sites, policies and educational options provided little support for minority languages, a factor that could contribute to subtractive bilingualism. At others, we found stronger support for minority languages and optional majority languages: conditions that could be more conducive to additive bilingualism.

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## 1. Introduction

In many regions of the world, knowledge of more than one language (i.e., bilingualism) is essential for children to function daily in their families and communities. In other contexts, bilingualism is not critical, but parents (amongst others) may still consider it a form of language enrichment and an asset (King & Fogle, 2006), in line with research showing that bilingualism

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is not harmful and can even be advantageous for children. For example, studies of typically developing children have shown that bilingualism does not slow early vocabulary development (e.g., [De Houwer, Bornstein, & Putnick, 2014](#)) and has positive effects on cognitive skills, such as executive function ([Barac & Bialystok, 2012](#); [Poulin-Dubois, Blaye, Coutya, & Bialystok, 2011](#)).

There is also evidence that dual language learning by children with developmental disabilities (DD; e.g., autism, intellectual impairment, or specific language impairment) does not exacerbate language impairments, particularly when exposure to each language is relatively balanced (see [Kay-Raining Bird, Genesee, & Verhoeven](#), this issue). Bilingualism might even benefit children with such disabilities by expanding their possibilities for social interactions and access to services. Yet, we know little about whether children with DD have opportunities to become bilingual, and the kind of bilingualism they are likely to experience: subtractive bilingualism in which a second language is acquired at the expense of the first (i.e., the first language is displaced, eroded, or lost) or additive bilingualism in which both languages continue to develop ([Baker, 2011](#)).

In the present paper, we examine the opportunities for bilingualism for children with DD indicated by educational policies at multiple sites: three in Canada, and one each located in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Educational policies were selected as a focus based on the influence of education on children's lives, as well as the potential of schooling to foster childhood bilingualism (see, for example, [Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2007](#) on dual language education). The six sites were chosen to represent economically-developed countries where formal education is compulsory from early childhood through adolescence, and consequently accessible to children with DD. However, we also chose sites we expected would vary in terms of their institutional support of bilingualism and of inclusive education, and would thus reflect the range of possibilities for children with DD, even beyond the sites studied here.

More specifically, the opportunities for children with DD to become bilingual were examined through a review of policies and educational options in two areas: *special education* and *language-in-education*, discussed in turn below. The term *policies* encompassed documents labelled as such, as well as written guidelines, regulations, and action plans. Laws informing the policies were identified but legislation was not exhaustively reviewed.

### 1.1. Special education/inclusive education policies

*Special education* is generally understood to be education designed to meet the individual needs of children with disabilities. In contemporary research articles, didactic texts (e.g., textbooks), and policy documents from various parts of the world, however, the term and indeed the notion of *special education* has been increasingly linked to *inclusive education*. Inclusive education has been defined in various ways. Sometimes it has been defined with explicit reference to special needs: for example, as specialized instruction and support for students with disabilities, provided in the general education classroom ([Florida State University Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy, 2002](#)). Increasingly, however, definitions refer to the needs of all children and to the school or teacher's role in fulfilling them; for example, inclusive education has been defined in terms of teachers having the required supports to foster all children's participation in learning and relationships with others ([Crawford, 2005](#)). In a related vein, documents on special and/or inclusive education often refer to *differentiated instruction* or *adaptive teaching*. These two terms, defined similarly in the literature, refer to adaptations to teaching and/or to the curriculum and environment in order to accommodate individual differences amongst learners (for differentiated instruction, see, e.g., [Iris Centre, n.d.](#); for elaboration of adaptive teaching, see [Corno, 2008](#)). As [Corno \(2008\)](#) claims, teachers engaged in adaptive teaching view individual differences as “opportunit[ies] for learning” rather than as “obstacles to be overcome” (p. 171).

Inclusion has also been asserted as a human right in treaties or policy documents with an international scope, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989; UNESCO's 1994 Salamanca Statement and Millennium Development goals; and the 2006 United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([Global Campaign for Education, 2014](#); [Towler, 2015](#)). In keeping with a rights-based approach, inclusive education has been described as a path to social justice ([European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014](#)). In this view, disability is a social construct that interacts with other factors (e.g., ethnicity, race, class, and gender) to produce inequalities in school experiences and achievement ([Liasidou, 2012](#)). Consequently, one of the tasks of an inclusive approach is to elucidate and challenge the interlocking constructs that privilege some children and marginalize others. According to [Dei and Kempf \(2013\)](#), an inclusive approach requires that the “problem” of school failure be reformulated; rather than focusing on why some groups of children fail at school, educators and policy-makers must examine why so many schools fail particular groups of children. Arguing for systemic change, [Dei and Kempf \(2013\)](#) maintain that “[i]nclusion is not simply about bringing people into that which already exists. Instead, it is about forging new educational spaces” (p. 37) that promote equality and are committed to all learners, including those with disabilities.

### 1.2. Language-in-education policies

*Language-in-education* policies are not necessarily labelled as such by policy-makers. The term, however, is widely used amongst researchers to capture the manifestations of language policies in educational contexts, as well as the socio-political factors that shape the languages that are used and valued in schools (e.g., [Ball & McIvor, 2013](#); [Lin & Martin, 2005](#)). We adopt the term here to encompass policies that set forth the languages in which children will be instructed or have

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