

Pulling it all together: The road to lasting bilingualism for children with developmental disabilities



Elizabeth Kay-Raining Bird^{a,*}, Natacha Trudeau^b, Ann Sutton^c

^a Dalhousie University, Canada

^b University of Montreal, Canada

^c University of Ottawa, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Children with DD must and do become bilingual, but the research reported in this special issue raises questions about equitable access to bilingual opportunities and provision of appropriate supports to ensure optimal bilingual growth in these children. The purpose of the present article was to apply the findings from our international collaboration to inform policy and practice on bilingualism in children with developmental disabilities (DD). To do this, we first overview the research presented in detail in other articles of this special issue: a narrative literature review, a review of site policies and practices related to special education and language education, a qualitative analysis of key informant interviews, and a quantitative analysis of surveys of practitioners. From these overviews emerge a complex set of contextual factors that impact bilingual development in children with DD. We then use the Bioecological Systems model of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) and conceptual maps (C-maps) to examine the particular circumstances of three hypothetical children with DD who are in very different bilingual contexts. In so doing, areas of both positive and negative influence on lasting bilingualism are identified for each child. We end with recommendations for increasing access to and support for bilingualism in children with DD.

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Children with developmental disabilities (DD)¹ can, do, and often must become bilingual. Their success with bilingualism depends upon a multitude of contextual factors. Other contributions to this special issue reported in detail on four studies conducted by an international team of researchers to investigate bilingualism in children with DD. In particular, the team was concerned with issues of equitable access to and participation in bilingual opportunities and the supports provided to bilingual children with DD. The research was conducted at six sites: Halifax, Montreal, and Vancouver in Canada; Albuquerque in the United States; Manchester in the United Kingdom; and Nijmegen in the Netherlands. A four-pronged research approach was used which included a *review of the literature* on bilingualism in children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI), Down syndrome (DS), or Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD); a *review of policies and practices* related to bilingualism and/or DD at each of the six sites; a *qualitative analysis of key informant interviews*; and a *quantitative analysis of surveys* conducted with administrators and practitioners. The policy review, key informant interviews and surveys used

* Corresponding author at: School of Human Communication Disorders, Dalhousie University, 1256 Barrington Street, Box 15000, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 1R2, Canada.

E-mail address: rainbird@dal.ca (E. Kay-Raining Bird).

¹ Consistent with the other articles in this special issue, we use the term DD to refer to individuals with language, communication and/or intellectual disabilities, including those with Specific Language Impairment, Down syndrome, or Autism Spectrum Disorders.

parallel methods across the six sites. The purpose of this last article in the special issue is to apply the findings from this international collaboration to inform policy and practice on bilingualism in children with developmental disabilities (DD).

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; previously the Ecological Systems Model, Bronfenbrenner, 1977) provides a framework for interpreting and applying the research findings reported in this special issue. To understand human development, Bronfenbrenner (1977) argued that researchers need to examine the influence of three nested systems on a person: microsystems which include the influences of the family, school, and peers; the exosystem which includes the local community, the school system and the medical system; and the macrosystem which includes laws or policies and social and cultural values of the larger society. These three systems have a dynamic interconnectivity, achieved through various avenues of communication and influence. In 2007, Bronfenbrenner and Morris elaborated on the original model by stressing the importance of child-internal characteristics on development, particularly what they called dispositions, resources (e.g., abilities, knowledge), and demands (i.e., invite or discourage reactions). Further, they emphasized the distinctive contribution of more proximal (microsystem) influences on the development of a child. Fig. 1 presents our interpretation of the Ecobiological Systems model, as it applies to bilingual development. The child is at the center of the representation; the other components represent layers of contextual factors that may influence the child's opportunity and ability to become bilingual.

In the following sections of this article we first describe the sociolinguistic characteristics of the six sites involved in our research (Section 1) followed by an overview of the findings of each component of that research: the literature review, policy review, key informant interviews, and surveys (Section 2). These four research components together reveal a complex array

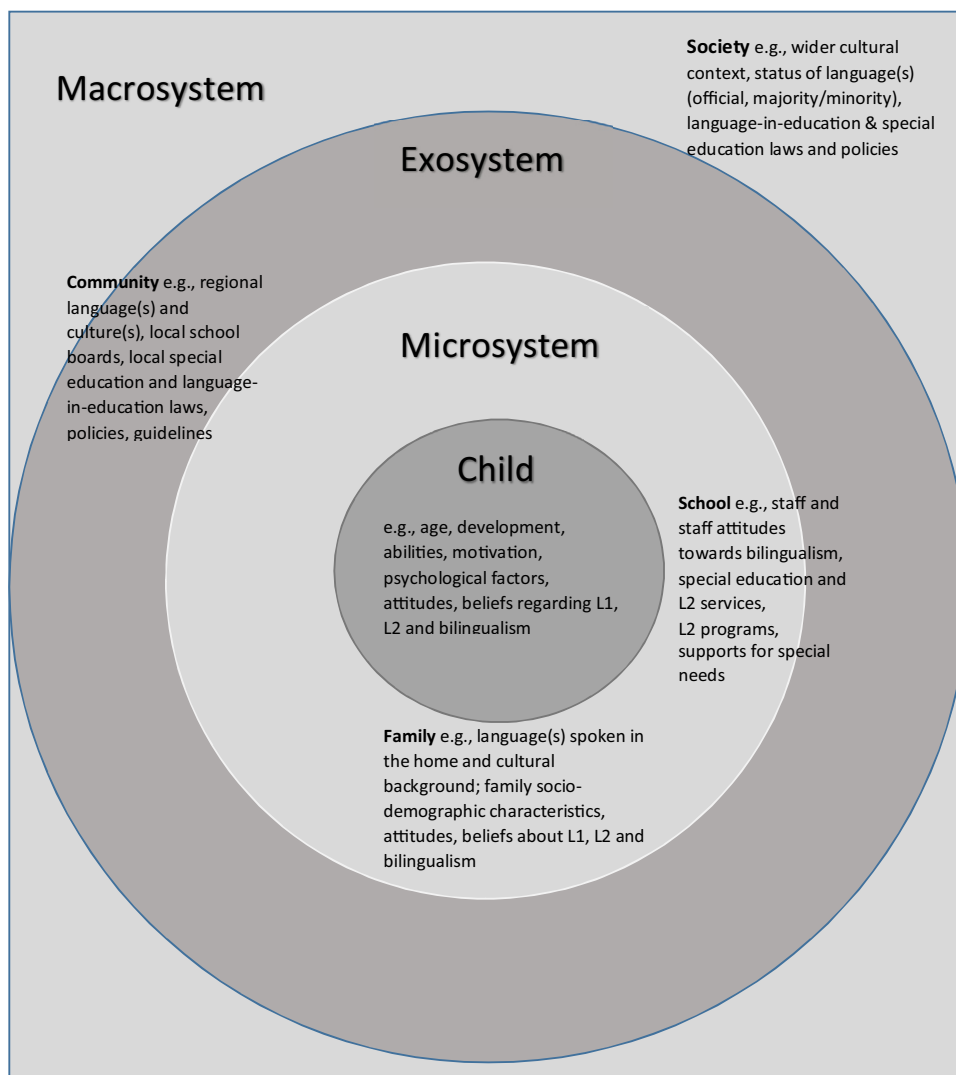


Fig. 1. A representation of context for bilingual access and participation and avenues for bilingualism of an individual within the family, school, community, and larger society.

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