Introduction of a Wapishana-English bilingual education programme: an evaluation of the early stages

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Summary

This thesis provides an evaluation of the introduction of the Wapishana-English Bilingual Education Programme, which is a pilot project currently run in three Wapishana communities in Guyana. The Wapishana live in the North Arawakan or Northern Arawakan area, inclusive of Rio Branco in Brazil and Rupununi in Guyana. The data studied for this thesis concern the planning stages of the programme and the first seven months of its implementation, which represent a part of the overall two-year programme.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to Wapishana school children's educational underachievement and its causes: dissimilarities in language and culture as the children move from their home to the school setting. The community members' own identification of this problem and its causes motivated them to seek an educational intervention. This further sparked other sources of inspiration and justification that eventually led to the pilot programme under study. The main research question concerns the determination about what practices promote biliterate, bilingual, intercultural, and academically oriented education for bilingual children, with an eye to improving existing practices of the above-mentioned programme.

Chapter 2 provides the context of the study: the location, population, brief history, and impact of colonization on the Wapishana communities, including the three villages—Maruranau, Karaudarnau, and Sawariwau—where the pilot schools are located. A sketch is made of those aspects of the culture that have disappeared, are disappearing, and have been maintained. It also includes the social issues that affect the development of the Wapishana people. This chapter presents the Wapishana core values upon which a linguistically and culturally diverse curriculum could be built. Using this information, the curriculum can offer the children a formal space for further learning about their cultural heritage for a holistic education.

Chapter 3 presents the wider context, including an overview of the pre-tertiary education system in the country. Attention is paid to children's academic performance in English and mathematics as well as their attendance, repetition, and dropout rates at the primary and secondary levels over recent years. The government has been continually seeking educational interventions to provide effective education to different levels of the school population such as the nursery, primary, and secondary levels. Despite some interventions, there is still concern about the underachievement of children in Indigenous-dominant communities. Given the right to receive an education in one's first language, this type of education should be a priority

for children who come to school speaking their mother tongue and learning English as a second language. This would give children who speak an Indigenous language more equal opportunities to English-speaking children, and it would improve their educational achievement. As such, there is a need for specialized training for teachers who teach in Indigenous-dominant communities. The focus of the chapter is then narrowed to attempted interventions, zooming in on earlier trials at Wapishana literacy in some nursery and primary schools located among the Wapishana. The lessons learnt from these experiences are invaluable information for the planning of the new programme. The advocacy meetings are a great step in raising the people's consciousness on the rewards and benefits of a mother tongue-based programme. The reactions from the stakeholders and parents are generally supportive. Finally, an overview of the Wapishana orthography is presented. This is of relevance to the mother tongue-based education programme, since the teachers need to be familiar with the orthographic conventions of the Wapishana language. In this way, they would be more confident in creating and presenting materials to their pupils.

Chapter 4 provides the literature review on bilingual education programmes with a focus on culturally diverse contexts. There are success stories in bilingual education, both by researchers and practitioners. However, there is still controversy with respect to the effectiveness of bilingual education. A route to bilingual education, either simultaneous or sequential, can be chosen to suit the specific linguistic and cultural context. Simultaneous bilingual education is when both languages are used from the beginning, whereas sequential bilingual education is when one first uses the students' L1 (first language) and then gradually introduces the L2 (second language). Ideally for children in culturally diverse contexts, it is the sequential model that should be introduced because it is in line with the pedagogical principle to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar. The sequential approach is less commonly tried and, therefore, requires more effort to develop a programme that suits the context. More research and training are needed in order for the sequential approach to be easily applicable to any culturally and linguistically diverse situation.

Chapter 5 describes the qualitative research approach that was used to obtain the findings. It also provides a description of the types of sources that were used for this study. Part of the information about the history and cultural aspects of the Wapishana is gained through stories told by some elders. Information about the programme is obtained by the perusal of documents such as teacher's handbooks, the memorandum of understanding between the communities and the Ministry of Education, big books for children, and some assessment booklets. Further information is obtained through interviews with prominent members of the communities, as well as with the teachers and parents of the pilot schools. This information from the

interviews is supplemented by classroom observations. Since this study also involves the researcher as a participant seeking to improve the educational situation of the communities, it is also participatory study. When also part of the community, the researcher brings knowledge of the cultural aspects of the Wapishana, mindful that the sacredness of this knowledge must be respected. For the themes inferred from the findings, a conceptual framework by way of a spider web model is constructed. This illustrates how the Indigenous worldview is interconnected as in the web of life. In this way, an Indigenous paradigm is added to complement this qualitative research.

The research data is presented and evaluated in chapter 6. The preparation and execution phases of the Wapishana programme coincide with the essential phases of other bilingual programmes. These phases are the following: (1) conducting preliminary research, (2) mobilizing resources and developing linkages, (3) recruiting and training, (4) developing an orthography, (5) developing a curriculum and instructional materials, (6) developing literature, (7) recording the programme's progress, and (8) evaluating the programme. Another major finding is that there is consensus among interviewed teachers and parents that aspects of Wapishana culture are incorporated well into the new curriculum. As a result, the programme has progressed satisfactorily, as seen in the increased use of the language and culturally relevant materials by the children. However, the programme seems to follow the simultaneous rather than the sequential approach. This is line with the early transitional programme; that is, children are instructed in the L1 and L2 in close succession. This signals that emphasis is being placed on the L2 so that the L1 is eventually replaced by the L2. The following points of improvement emerged from this study: (1) enhancing the teachers' proficiency in the language(s) of instruction; (2) providing solid training in the theories and practice of the teaching methods/strategies; (3) the adoption of the appropriate route to bilingual education determined by the specific context; (4) the introduction of rhythmic and repetitive language patterns as part of early literacy instruction; (5) addressing the mismatches in sound–letter combinations in Wapishana and English; (6) providing the right level of cognitive challenge to move the learners in both language and content; (7) creating a safe and inviting setting for fuller and more robust participation by school staff, parents, and community; (8) inclusion of members of staff and other stakeholders from the outset; and (9) addressing the need for bilingual education to be intercultural education, because the teaching of language needs to have cultural content.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions of this study. First, some limitations of the study are noted. For instance, vital information on the practices and activities ongoing after the period during which the data gathering took place is not considered. Therefore, a follow-up study on the whole two-year programme is an obvious point of general interest. Some

insights about the potential contributions towards the wider study of bilingual education and its success are discussed and recommendations are made for an improved programme. The main recommendations include the following: (1) a more frequent and systematic participation needs to be pursued by parents; (2) continued teaching of cultural aspects of the Wapishana would foster the realization in the children that their cultural heritage is valued and affirmed by the school; (3) the goal to be considered for the programme should be the promotion of additive bilingualism and biliteracy skills among learners; (4) the programme should follow the sequential approach, which includes an oral component of the L2 before literacy in the L2, while still maintaining instruction in the L1; (5) the big books should first present stories that have repetitive language patterns; (6) teachers should take care to sequence the teaching of letter–sound links that are equivalent in Wapishana and English first, followed separately by those letter–sound links that are distinct; (7) for teachers to be more effective in reading and presenting materials in Wapishana, they should have special training in Wapishana orthographic conventions prior to any training workshop; (8) more emphasis should be made on role play and the retelling of stories, as well as on step-by-step guidance of tasks to be carried out by pupils; and (9) all teachers, including head teachers, of the schools where a mother tongue-based bilingual education programme is implemented should be involved in the process from the beginning. When these recommendations are followed, the needs of the children, parents, and community can be better addressed.