Bilingualism is good for your mental health

Bilingual kids are more resilient

October is Mental Health month here in New South Wales. The campaign runs under the slogan “Celebrate, connect, grow” and includes some fantastic tips how to look after your mental health. The key point is to build strong relationships and to engage in activities that give us purpose and meaning. One thing that’s often overlooked in the mental health literature is the fact that these things are done through language: the languages you speak (or don’t speak) determine who you can build strong relationships with and which activities you can engage in.

That’s where bilingualism comes in: a bilingual person can build strong relationships within more than one community. That migrants to Australia need to learn English to build those relationships and to engage in a broad range of activities is a no-brainer. If you are stuck in an abusive marriage and don’t know where to turn for help because you don’t speak English that’s obviously not a good place to be in.

However, as a nation we are so focussed on English language learning that we easily forget that other languages are important, too. If a child can’t communicate with their grandparents because they’ve never learnt the family’s heritage language, then that also poses a mental health risk. Or if you can never have an adult conversation with your parents because you haven’t learnt their language and their English isn’t good enough for a difficult conversation, that’s going to make both children and parents feel isolated and disconnected.

In a multicultural society bilingualism is an essential ingredient of mental health. A recent study tracking the development of anxiety disorders and behavioural problems among Asian-American kids from kindergarten to Grade 5 (Han and Huang 2010) confirms that. Problem behaviours increased for all children during that period but they increased least in those who were balanced bilinguals and in those who were dominant in the language other than English. Those who were monolingual in English or English-dominant experienced a faster growth rate in mental health problems and those who were monolingual in a language other than English experienced the highest growth rate.

The fact that not speaking English in the USA (or here in Australia) is not good for personal well-being is obvious and requires little explanation. However, the fact that bilinguals fare better than monolingual English speakers flies in the face of current educational practice, which is to mainstream migrant children into English as quickly as possible. At the same time, we shouldn’t be surprised: bilingual children get the best of both worlds and in addition to building relationships through school, they also have access to additional social and cultural resources in their community.

The evidence is clear: Monolingualism is a risk factor for poor behavioural and emotional outcomes in the early school years. Clearly, schools need to nurture bilingualism, not just English, for all to be able to lead healthy and productive lives and to strengthen the social and economic fabric of our society.

Wen-Jui Han, & Chien-Chung Huang (2010). The Forgotten Treasure: Bilingualism and Asian Children’s Emotional and Behavioral Health American Journal of Public Health, 100 (5), 831-839 DOI:

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