

Maintaining first languages

Maintaining the language of the home is very important for many families, from Panjabi-speaking Sikhs who have been settled in the UK for three generations to more recent arrivals. In the early days, the emphasis is often on acquiring English but it is important for children to maintain their first languages both in order to communicate with the wider family and also to be able to reintegrate into the school system in the home country if their stay in the UK is only temporary. Research has consistently shown that 'additive bilingualism' where both languages are maintained and developed brings cognitive advantages (Cummins, 2001). [Why support bilingualism](#) offers trainees an opportunity to examine why many educators regard continued first language development as essential to pupils' overall development and well-being.

In smaller more dispersed communities, parents often take sole responsibility for this task. Many students from the Republic of China pursuing higher education in the UK, for instance, will spend an hour or more each day on activities related both to reading and writing in Chinese and to maths, in the hope that their children will not be disadvantaged when they return to the highly competitive Chinese education system. Larger communities organize complementary classes, which allow children to continue studying their family's language and culture, often on a Saturday or Sunday morning; a community of Libyan students in Manchester, for example, offers a whole day programme on Saturdays.

The pressure on children to keep up is often intense. Kazue Aizawa, a teacher in a supplementary school, describes how her students talk about 'black Fridays' when they prepare for the next day's Japanese lessons:

I expect my students to spend at least three or four hours preparing for a lesson. Quite a few students stay up until two or three o'clock in the morning, preparing for the next day. Some students manage; a few manage magnificently but, inevitably, others do not and I think we have to face the reality that some students simply cannot juggle two sets of school work at a time.'

This situation is, of course, played out in various guises in many other settings up and down the country. Student teachers need to understand that students may be exposed to different curricula and pedagogies in complementary schools. This is the first step in offering children appropriate support. The next is, where possible, to establish links with the other school to see if there are useful connections that can be made that would help reduce the pressure on the children and enrich both partners. [Community languages](#) offers trainees an extended discussion of these issues.

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References

Cummins, J. (2001) *An Introductory Reader to the Writings of Jim Cummins*. Clevedon : Multilingual Matters

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