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Bilingual pupils do better in exams, report finds

By Richard Garner, Education Editor

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Bilingual children are far more likely to get top-grade passes in exams in all subjects, a report has found.

A study of Portuguese children at secondary schools in London showed that those who were encouraged to continue studying their native language were five times as likely to achieve five top grade A* to C grade passes at GCSE.

The study also found that 11-year-olds in Hackney who speak more than one language at home were outperforming pupils who only speak English, even in reading, in their national curriculum tests.

The report, *Positively Plurilingual*, is published today by Cilt, the national centre for languages, to coincide with a drive to encourage the take-up of community languages.

In an introduction to the report, Sir Trevor McDonald - who led a major inquiry into the teaching of languages in schools and is now Cilt's patron - says too many schools miss out on the opportunity to ensure bilingual pupils develop their skills in languages other than English. "Rather than thinking in terms of an 'English-only' culture, we should be promoting 'English-plus'," he says. "We know that children are capable of acquiring more than one language and that doing so brings a range of educational benefits, including cognitive advantages, enhanced communication skills and an openness to different cultural perspectives."

The report also cites research by Ellen Bailystock of York University in Canada, which showed that bilingual people were better at multi-tasking than those who only speak one language. This is because they regularly exercise the part of the brain known as the pre-frontal cortex which reinforces attention span.

The report says that more than one in eight primary school pupils in the UK - about 850,000 children - speak a language other than English at home.

"People who already speak more than one language find it easier to learn new languages than monolinguals," it adds.

It gives several examples of schools that take advantage of the ethnic diversity of their children - including Newbury Park primary school in Redbridge, east London, which adopts a different "language of the month" so its pupils get a grounding in all of the 44 languages spoken at the school.

Peterborough now offers classes in Italian, Urdu and Punjabi in its primary schools. "The linguistic map of the UK is changing," concludes the report. "The number of languages in use is growing and diversity is spreading to parts of the country where previously few languages other than English were spoken."

Dorset County Council, for instance, has teamed up with Tower Hamlets in east London - where 60 per cent of pupils are of Bangladeshi origin - to provide distance learning for Bengali speakers. Cumbria offers Saturday classes in Chinese and Bengali.

More than 200 representatives of schools and local education authorities will gather at the Polish embassy this morning to promote the teaching of Polish, in a meeting timed to coincide with the launch of the report. Children of Polish origin are one of the fastest growing ethnic minority groups in UK state schools.

Today's drive comes in the wake of the decision by Alan Johnson, the Education Secretary, to set up an inquiry into the teaching of languages in schools - following the disastrous slump in take-up of the subject at GCSE and A-level when compulsory language lessons after the age of 14 were scrapped. It is to be headed by Lord Dearing, the former chairman of the Post Office, and is expected to make its interim report in December.

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