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## Q & A with Dr. Gail Prasad

### Recipient of the 2016 Pat Clifford Award for Early Career Research

Dr. Gail Prasad is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the department of Curriculum and Instruction. She completed her doctorate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto in the department of Languages and Literacies Education.

Leveraging her experience as a former classroom teacher and strong desire to connect with every learner, Dr. Prasad has boldly and successfully collaborated with multilingual elementary students as co-researchers by using a highly creative arts-based approach that incorporated photography, drawing, and multilingual bookmaking.

These exercises generated valuable data from children's self-expression and reflection, which not only allowed students to see their diverse identities reflected in their work, but also deepened their classmates' appreciation for cultural and linguistic diversity. Dr. Prasad's subsequent research from these experiences [highlighted in this article](#) provides a framework for teacher education and professional development by demonstrating the benefits of incorporating students' first languages into classroom activities. This work is especially pertinent in Canada's increasingly diverse school systems.



*The following is an edited interview transcript.*



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In describing your work, you refer to both “plurilingualism” and “multilingualism” – can you explain how these two terms differ?

The distinction between plurilingualism and multilingualism is a topic of current debate amongst researchers. I use each term for different purposes and it may be helpful to think of them as being two different paradigms: thinking about multilingualism in terms of spaces or contexts, and plurilingualism in terms of people or individuals. We have traditionally described multilingualism in terms of spaces: a society or an institution where multiple languages come into contact but often are kept separate. In Canadian schools, we have multilingual children who speak several languages at home but who have little opportunity to use these languages at school where the language of instruction is typically either one of our official languages: English and/or French. When we restrict children’s home language use at school, we are effectively asking them to deny a part of themselves. Plurilingualism, on the other hand, recognizes the repertoire of languages and cultural practices someone uses to communicate according to the context they are in. For example, if I were a child at school I may speak in French because I go to a French-immersion school, but at home I speak in Hindi because my parents speak Hindi, while out in my community I speak English so that I can be understood. All of these languages are part of my repertoire but I may not be equally proficient in all of them since what I know may be limited by how and why I use the language in different settings.

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Because the traditional view of multilingualism is associated with the use and mastery of multiple, separate languages, people often feel they have to be fully proficient in several languages in order to be counted as a multilingual person. Plurilingualism comes from a radically different perspective that views people not as starting out as monolingual and adding additional languages to their repertoire, but rather as being in the process of developing a repertoire or a network of practices over the course of their lives. I think that one of the reasons we may have not prepared teachers well to work with linguistic diversity in the classroom is due to the fact that people are naturally uncomfortable with not knowing languages fluently in order to be working with them. I’m not asking teachers to be able to teach in all of the languages of the students in their classrooms, but I do think that an important part of teacher education and professional development today is an ability to be flexible, welcoming and open to the rich linguistic experiences and resources of all of our students and their families.



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### **What influenced your decision to conduct research on linguistic diversity in the classroom?**

I'm from an Indian-Japanese Canadian background, which spurred my fascination with culture, language and identity. As a beginning teacher, I worked at a French International school as an elementary English language and literacy teacher. My experience working with multilingual international and Canadian students, particularly at the K-2 level, sparked many questions within me regarding multilingual literacy development and home language maintenance.

Prior to pursuing graduate studies, I was involved in teacher development in Kenya, working with an HIV/AIDS orphanage and rehabilitation centre for girls who had been rescued from the sex trade. Issues surrounding second or additional language literacy development were pertinent in these Kenyan contexts too because schooling at the elementary level in Kenya functions in English and Kiswahili and yet many of the children come from other linguistic backgrounds. Linguistic diversity has become defining of 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms.

### **What are the challenges faced by students in Canadian public schools whose first language is not English or French?**

As I look at the world today, I think that we need to be working from a very young age to help children understand how we live together and how we communicate across languages and cultures. Schools are immobile structures: they have been here for a very long time, and modern schooling was based on the idea of creating citizens under the belief of one nation and one language. However, if we look at the children in our schools today, they come in with multiple languages because of their diverse backgrounds.

I think of people like my dad who speaks a number of languages but only one of Canada's official languages: English. As such, in Canada, he "counts" as an "Anglophone" rather than as a multilingual or plurilingual person. I think that in a time when cultural and linguistic diversity pervades our country and our schools, we need a new vocabulary and a new paradigm for thinking about how we can help students live and learn in multilingual spaces in ways that do not deny the fullness of their communicative repertoires.



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**So are you suggesting that we proactively address this challenge while children are young, which can have lifelong repercussions about how young people think about their own culture and language, as well as that of others?**

My work is advocating for a complete paradigm shift from our traditional approach to language education in Canada. My work is saying that, in fact, we need to be helping children explore and experiment with different languages through their learning because a plurilingual approach to teaching has the potential to increase their curiosity about language learning and their appreciation for cultural and linguistic diversity. I do this by inviting all children to engage in creative plurilingual work with other children who speak different languages than they do. In multilingual groupings, they make connections not only about their own language skills and experiences but also with one another, each bringing something of value to their collaborative work. In the process of schooling, we see a significant amount of language loss, as the languages that have traditionally been valued in school are limited to the language or languages of instruction. Consequently, children often lose proficiency in their home languages in elementary school. In a knowledge-based economy where languages are important resources, it makes sense that children who come to school as multilinguals with different home languages should be able to share their linguistic resources with the people in their schools, so that all students develop with more diverse communicative repertoires rather than smaller ones.

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**What do multilingual students need to thrive in the public school system?**

Take a look at the work of Dr. Jim Cummins, who encourages teachers to engage culturally and linguistically diverse students in creating ‘Identity Texts’: music CDs, multilingual books, drama skits, web pages, anything across the arts or sciences – that students invest their identities and individuality into. When students create work using their home languages and the language of instruction in school, the products, like mirrors, are a reflection of the students’ identities. When students get positive feedback on this work, they also get positive affirmations that school is personally relevant to them - which motivate their desire to learn. My research takes Jim’s initial notion of ‘Identity Texts’ as ‘mirrors’, and transforms it into what I call a dynamic ‘prism’. The ‘prism’ brings together the ‘mirrors’ of each student – within a group, a class, a grade level, or even a school – so that all students not only see themselves reflected individually through their unique contributions, but also collectively as a culturally and linguistically diverse community.



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While a mirror reflects light, a prism refracts it into a rainbow of possibilities. Classrooms can be 'prisms' where children not only come to imagine their potentialities as multilingual citizens in a global society, but also tangibly experience how to work and live together in an inclusive community. I see this paradigm shift in language education in Canada to be one that not only supports official bilingualism, but also positions us to be able to leverage the diversity that we have in our nation.

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**The education system can tend to have a certain level of rigidity to change. What would be the first steps for classrooms to move towards being ‘prisms’?**

School systems need to work together to share lessons learned so that we don't repeat the same mistakes but rather grow and build on them. We need all teachers – regardless of the content or language in which they teach – to recognize their role in promoting students' development of a plurilingual mindset, as Canadians and as global citizens. I purposely worked with students and teachers across English-language, French-language and French immersion schools rather than within one single school system because we have tremendous resources and experience within each of our public school systems, and yet there is no other research in Canada that examines cross-cutting issues like linguistic diversity across systems.

**Why did you decide to have school-aged children participate in your research work?**

My experience as a Kindergarten teacher and mother has taught me that kids have a lot to say about their experiences, and I believe that they are the only ones who are experts on their own lives. As adults, we can talk to kids but we cannot necessarily see things from their perspective, unfiltered by our own adult ways of seeing and knowing. I don't approach language, education or research from a traditional perspective, but rather I try to look at ways to engage children in areas where they are the most reliable and truthful sources. This got me looking at other types of data other than verbal data, which is what the field of applied linguistics usually looks at. I engaged children in drawing, portraiture, collage making, photography and bookmaking so that they could explain their thinking, which later became the basis of interviews that allowed me to hear things from children's perspectives. This also allows children to take on the role of creative experts as they generate research artefacts, and it further creates opportunities for sharing this research in more accessible ways.



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**Can you tell me about a memorable moment you had while conducting activities with students?**

One of the most powerful moments for me occurred while working on multilingual bookmaking with a group of students in a French immersion school. In one of the groups, there was a boy who spoke English and was learning French, as well as a girl learning English and French but who spoke Arabic as her first language. At the end of the project, the boy said, "I'm so proud that my book has Arabic in it, and I'm so glad that this girl is part of our class". That moment demonstrated a real shift in how this girl was seen by her peers: no longer as a language learner who was struggling, but rather as someone who had expertise that could enrich their classroom community. If children experience productively in school how to work with and value people who have different cultural and language resources than they have, eventually as they get out into the workplace and into society, we can have hope that they will bring more intercultural understanding and plurilingual awareness to their work and communities. The need for this kind of understanding and inclusion is clearly becoming all the more necessary in today's world.

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**How are you preparing teacher candidates to engage students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?**

I have a tremendous amount of respect for teachers, especially since I began my career as one. As a teacher, you cannot get away from the desire to reach each of your learners. My experience in working with teachers through classroom-based research and in teacher preparation programs has been that once teachers experience the engagement that happens when students work collaboratively on creative plurilingual projects, they are motivated to try it out and design projects of their own. This is my goal. I think that when one teacher experiences success in a classroom, the other teachers who they work with look and say, "I want to do that too! I want a piece of that success in my classroom for my learners". My hope is that teachers come to see themselves as creative agents of transformation, even though change can sometimes be a slow process.



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Through my experience in conducting classroom-based research projects, collaborating with teachers and infusing collaborative language inquiry into my own teacher education class, I have been able to narrow the process down to help teachers design plurilingual activities and projects more effectively. Plurilingual teaching and learning benefits all children: even if you are a monolingual Anglophone, you are going to benefit from being exposed to the different languages in your classroom just as much as the multilingual child who speaks three languages but may still be in the process of learning the language of instruction. This is a more culturally sustaining and linguistically expansive approach to schooling. I think the traditional way teacher education has been offered leads teachers to be inadequately prepared to respond to and leverage the linguistic diversity of their students.

### **From a research perspective, what is next for you and what will you be exploring?**

Beyond my ongoing work with elementary teachers in designing plurilingual project-based learning activities, I am also beginning to examine the diverse communicative repertoires and literacies of middle and secondary school students. Together with a large team of graduate students and teacher candidates, I am using a series of tools that can help teachers and students map their communicative repertoires and literacies using iPods. Students are taking photos and videos to capture their everyday experiences of using multiple languages in and out of school. Overall, I'm exploring how we can move beyond a traditional multilingual understanding of students' language abilities – as measured by proficiency levels and assessments – towards a more complex understanding that considers the range of language practices and literacies in students' lives that we can leverage in classrooms for deeper learning. As I expand my research focus from Kindergarten to Grade 12, my hope is that this work will support plurilingual teaching and learning across whole school systems rather than remaining in individual classrooms.