

# BETWEEN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES:

## THE TRIAD OF SYMBOLS IN THE WORLD

### OF AN IMMIGRANT CHILD

By Krystyna Nowak-Fabrykowski & Myroslav Shkandrij

The child's symbolic world can be analyzed by observing perceptions as expressed in drawing and painting, the creation of a specific vocabulary, or the use of metaphorical expressions and specific reactions in symbolic play (Nowak-Fabrykowski 1991, p. 25). The interactive relationship between an experience and symbolic world is a part of the child's development into a complex adult capable of functioning in a wide range of situations.

As Charon (1989) has stressed: "The symbol, and especially language, transforms the human being from a weak, helpless, unintelligent, simple organism to one whose complexity, flexibility, and intelligence brings about a unique nature" (p.57). There are many definitions of symbols, but in this study a symbol is an object, a word, or a behavior that has special meaning for a child and is conditioned by the child's experience.

When an immigrant child starts life in the new country, his/her symbolic world is transformed. Many new elements, such as unexpected structures, are incorporated into the new language, confusing values and norms of behavior. Even new holidays and feasts are introduced. They must be comprehended and integrated with the already familiar.

For example, we can analyze how Slavic immigrant children in Canada learn to overcome fear of death. We can examine how in Polish and Canadian culture two holidays are celebrated.

November 1st is "All Saint Day" for Poles, a day when the whole family visits the cemetery to decorate graves with flowers and evergreen branches. People light candles and pray for those that have passed away. Children are told that when they die they will meet their relatives, who love them and will take care of them after their death.

In Canada, Halloween is celebrated on October 31st. It can be considered a different way of coming to terms with death. Children dress as skeletons, witches, zombies, etc, and they visit neighbors and shout "treat or trick." In school they read frightening poems, sing songs, paint pictures of black cats, etc.

Children who celebrate both traditions gain different perspectives of being "inside" the two holidays. Their symbolic worlds must of necessity become more complex.

During these celebrations, a Polish child must make his/her own judgments and evaluations of experiences and must find a way of existing that enables him/her to function in the wider society. Usually adaptation to the new has to be manifested in celebration of Halloween simultaneously as "All Saints Day," even if this holiday is not celebrated by his/her parents.

The confusion by new symbolic activities brought on by the new external symbolic world requires some changes and the building of new structures that can be maintain or rejected in the course of life.

Many factors comprise the symbolization of an immigrant child: a sense of identity, the memory of celebrated events, the understanding of emotions, values, and norms of behavior, and the evaluation of experiences.

## TWO WORLDS

In our earlier work we emphasized that the world of the bilingual child is build out of *two worlds*—an *internal* and an *external* one. It should be noted in passing that the consideration of immigrants here can also be synonymous with any ethnic minority. Much of what we have to say concerning an immigrant child is applicable to a child raised in a minority culture where a "second" language is spoken at home.

In order to reach a high level of harmonious development a child must have the

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right to hold to one original symbolic world (based on the mother tongue and culture) and the simultaneous right to integrate into a new linguistic dealing with cultural content.

The interdependence and the relations of the child's two symbolic worlds are significant elements of his/her personal growth and functioning. The interchange between the two worlds is natural.

As Blackledge (1993) has stressed, "Bilingual children switch between languages confidently and appropriately when encouraged; if we deny them this natural facility we will inhibit their learning" (p.140).

The Internal Symbolic World

The internal symbolic world is built out of personal symbols created from myths, role models, and important people existing in the child's environment. These elements belong to the non-dominant and therefore "antihegemonic" culture of a linguistic minority.

For example, the internal symbolic world is built when Polish or Ukrainian children go to church on Easter Saturday to bless food. Their behavior on this day is very different from the majority of their

student colleagues. The ceremonies with their symbols (pysanky, food basket, candles, processions, etc) are meaningful only to their specific community).

The External Symbolic World

The external symbolic world consists of symbols formed by the society in which the child is living, and is drawn from its mythologies and rituals, heroes, models of behavior, success stories, etc. Usually this society reflects strongly the dominant culture of a linguistic majority.

This external symbolic world must be created when, for example, Polish or Ukrainian children celebrate "Halloween," the holiday that does not exist in their parent's culture but that is reinforced by the school and the peers.

**CREATING NEW MEANINGS & REALITY**

Acculturation, understood as the process of learning a culture different from the one in which a person was originally raised (Berelson and Steiner, 1967 p. 16), includes an introduction of a range of new symbolic elements into the already familiar and in many ways similar symbolic world.

In our assumption, each of these worlds consists of cognate elements (Figure 2), although the content may vary, depending on the languages and cultures to which the child is exposed.

The elements that construct both symbolic worlds are as follow:

1. *A sense of identity.* This includes personal norms and values, the feeling of being part of a group. It is built out of family and friends, past and present experiences. Initially the children's sense of identity is built by the home language.
2. *The memory of celebrated events* and cultural rituals held in a certain language and atmosphere.
3. *Emotions* related to the sense of identity, associated with the celebration of events, music, and forms of behavior.
4. *Values* incorporated into the language, the forms and styles of conversation, and behavior.
5. *Norms of behavior* established while acting and interacting with people.
6. *Evaluation* of experiences while speaking different languages, visiting countries, etc.

These elements interact in order to produce a complex structure that is related to the multiple characteristics of immigrant children. There are, of course, many variables that should be considered, such as whether a child was born in the new country or came to the new country with their parents. Furthermore, it is important at what age the child came, as well as his/her knowledge of the language spoken in the new country.

Children born in a country that is new (for their parents) usually do not go through a sudden "cultural shock," since from the earliest years they have access to TV, radio, and the outside world of the new country. The hard transition from one culture and language to another is the situation of newcomers.

The many struggles and fears that the latter must overcome in childhood in order to integrate into the new culture and new language sets them a difficult task.

As Berelson and Steiner (1967) have stressed, culture is learned behavior. For the most part, it is learned early in life and invested with a good deal of emotion. Deviations from the mainstream culture

FIGURE 1: THE TWO SYMBOLIC WORLDS THAT INFLUENCE AN IMMIGRANT CHILD.

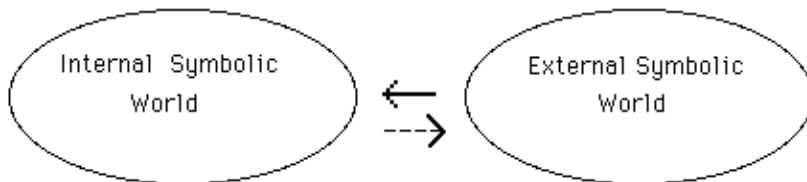
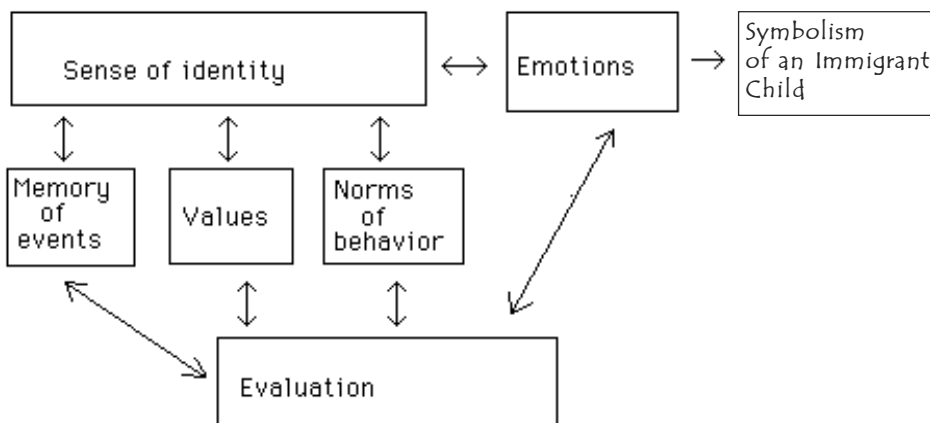


FIGURE 2: SYMBOLISM OF AN IMMIGRANT CHILD



usually cost something in comfort, status, peace of mind, or safety (p. 14).

As Berelson and Steiner (1967) and Bruner and Olson (1979) have indicated, humans learn by symbol rather than by experience.

But in the case of the language of an immigrant child, experience plays a decisive role. Experience is a vital part of the child's learning process.

For example, a child's view of foreigners often influences his/her perception and willingness to learn a new language. Positive experiences and emotions stimulate the child while a negative memory often discourages.

Students learning Polish during a presentation on Polish culture have been heard to remark "I did not know that Poland was so beautiful, with castles and new cities and the houses painted in color. I have two aunts living here, they came from Poland after the war and they told me that everything in Poland is grey and is ruined. Now, that I know it is different, I will go to visit Poland, and study Polish." A negative experience blocks the learning process, a positive one enhances it.

According to Berelson and Steiner (1967), the process of so-called assimilation is complete when an outsider has been accepted as a genuine member of a new social group (p. 16). The newcomer can make meaningful decisions if he/she is accepted as genuine members of this social group. A young country like Canada, where the whole population except the aboriginal is composed of immigrants, poses another problem.

Who are the immigrant children? In Canada two thirds of the country (the English and French) consider themselves "founding nations." The Indian communities consider themselves the "first nations." The rest of the country belongs to the category of immigrant or minority language cultures in a country that has declared its multicultural character. The Ukrainian/Canadian community has five generations behind it.

In many parts of the country, therefore, the majority/minority, dominant/subordinate, hegemonic/anti-hegemonic dialectic is being played out in analogous but different ways.

### AN IMMIGRANT CHILD AS AN OBJECT OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Our next question is related to the "social intelligence" seen by Charon (1989) as

"the ability to take the role of the other" (p. 111). In the case of an immigrant child, the major issue is to be able to communicate with the environment and find one's own place and be appreciated by members of the new culture. This process is always based on interaction and learning. For Charon (1989) an interaction is "a negotiation of reality, (including attributing cause) is to act" (p. 144) Taking this approach, the new culture and language stimulate one to act and to modify or reject new attributes. The negotiation takes place in the child's mind, and the child's symbolic world.

As Denzin (1992), a symbolic interactionist, has stressed, "Language has been taken as the window into the inner life of the person." (p. 2) What happens when a child must change the language? What happens in a child's mind?

We can assume that, at first, the communication with an environment is broken until the child is able to speak in the new language. The new symbolic world must be built, and all old structures must be translated.

Observation of children learning French showed that the new structures are difficult to assimilate. To restrict ourselves only to language, one could cite two sentences having the same meaning but using different verbs in English and French such as: "I am seven years old," and "J'ai sept ans." After learning those sentences, children often confuse the verbs. Another example is the use of different verbs for describing the same body condition as in the examples:

"J'ai tombé malade" in French.

"I got sick" in English.

or "zakhvoriv" in Ukrainian.

These expressions are based on different verbs and idioms but have the same meaning.

As Denzin (1992) has emphasized, interactionists don't believe in asking "why"

questions. They ask, "How" questions. *How, for example, is a given strip of experience structured, lived, and given meaning?*

In our analysis we are asking:

*How do they live an experience of being an immigrant child?*

*How is their experience structured by language?*

*What are the interactions of an immigrant child?"*

In our Figure 1, the broken line indicates that there are possibilities for the child to influence his/her external world.

Those attempts to change an environment are based on implementing one's own style of behavior, one's own values and norms.

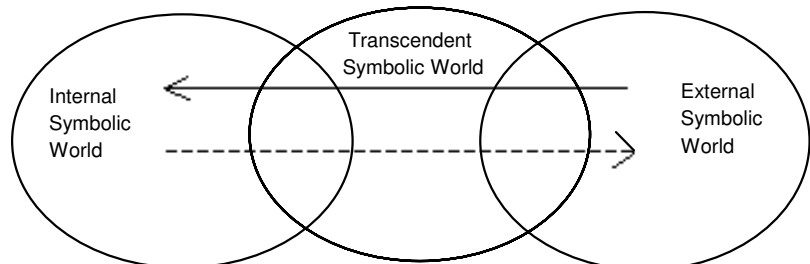
Such norms, learned at home (from the family), have the chance to be strong if the group that the child is representing is itself quite compact and coherent. In such communities, most holidays and customs, for example, are understood and accepted without question. Moreover, if one is part of a "strong" group, one has more opportunity to influence the society. *Are immigrant children able to produce cultural meanings?*

If we assume that their world is created by two or more cultures, the meanings in which they live are a compilation of symbols and competing patterns from the different cultures. An immigrant child's identity can be regarded as a conglomeration. In Figure 3, we show a model that suggests a "Transcendent Symbolic World"

### THE TRANSCENDENT SYMBOLIC WORLD

The transcendent symbolic world can be considered a site of contestation between dominant "hegemonic" and minority "antihegemonic" cultures. It is frequently the result of a triumph over some negative self-abnegating feeling, sometimes a stage of being above some at-

FIGURE 3: THE TRANSCENDENT SYMBOLIC WORLD





tributes and powers of the dominant world. It is the product of an ability to overcome and to go beyond the limits of one culture using the best in others. It is a world where the individual sense of identity continually is reshaped and recreated.

An example of a symbol existing in this transcendent-symbolic world can be found in the archetypal symbol of the skeleton as a symbol of death (which exists in many cultures) or celebrating Mother's Day. These "archetypal" symbols are common to both internal and external worlds and can be appropriated by the transcendent world because they have universal meaning. They can be seen as linking the two worlds and helping newcomers understand the new world more easily.

The arrows going through the three circles in our Figure 3 show the influence of one world to another. An individual may shift his/her transcendent symbolic world (shown as the middle circle) to one side (an internal symbolic world) or another (external symbolic world). An example of such a complex situation requiring shifting is in our study of celebrations. An individual might have to celebrate "All Saints Day" as a part of an internal symbolic world, Halloween as a part of an external symbolic world, and "Mother's Day" as a "universal" feast that could be considered being a part of the transcendent world.

A person may balance his or her whole life between the internal and external worlds, and this process can be envisaged as moving all the time. Perhaps in some cases, after a certain time, the circles, which represent the internal and external world, may even "overlap."

According to Halliday (1994), "Cultures are by no means mutually exclusive. They overlap, contain, and are contained by other cultures" (p. 28). While we go through life's changes we can travel between those circles. Sometime this process is conscious or even unconscious.

The space between the two worlds suggests that there is an area where an easy acceptance (the ability to relax and look at both cultures with some degree of distance and irony) exists, a centered, perhaps ambivalent space. People are able to take from both cultures what they think is best and most valuable to them. Some individuals might reach or feel comfortable with this sense of balance, and may be pulled from one direction to another.

Others find a place somewhere to the left or right that harmonizes with their personal symbolic universe.

## THE TRIAD OF SYMBOLS

The creation of a "symbolic triad" marks the beginning of life in a new culture. This triad emerges from children's experiences of acting and interacting in the new world and his/her struggle to survive.

According to Erikson (1963), a child develops by overcoming crises of trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and ego integrity versus despair. For an immigrant child, such crises are faced almost every day.

Building the "symbolic triad" is a mechanism of defense and survival. Each day, an immigrant child makes choices as to which situations are acceptable and can be assimilated into the internal symbolic worlds and which ones hurt, which the child prefers to avoid and leave in the external symbolic world.

Coping with new situations is a part of a child's development, even in "homogenous" cultures, but in the multicultural society children must learn to "participate in the other people's conceptual schemes by bringing their own references" (Lampert in Gadamer, 1997).

In this regard, when a child is struggling to establish his/her own validity in the new world, he/she must (applying Lampert's 1997 term) perform cross-cultural interpretation permitting conversation in the foreign language. For example children will illustrate "Dovbush" in Ukrainian culture as being like Robin Hood.

Sometimes this cross-cultural interpretation is impossible when a hegemonic culture is not "open" or "ready" to accept new values and new ways of behavior.

In this situation the conflict between the internal and external symbolic worlds is more painful for a child searching for harmony.

## THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

The "symbolic triad" helps living and interacting in the new world of symbols. The teacher as a cross-cultural interpreter may help children learn to converse and "participate in other children's conceptual schemes" (see Lampert 1997, p. 355)

Considering different approaches to teach an immigrant child, we should attempt first to reach his/her "internal symbolic world," slowly shifting it toward the external one. Blackledge (1993), working as a teacher of bilingual children, found

that the work of bilingual children would sometimes improve dramatically when they used their home language. Especially helpful were stories told in their mother tongue.

According to Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamazaki (1994), opportunities to negotiate meaning through interaction facilitate comprehension and second language acquisition. In their model of an interactive hypothesis they stressed the importance of two-way exchanges, the opportunity for the less competent speaker to provide feedback on his/her lack of comprehension, a negotiated modification of the conversation, and comprehensible input. Just that kind of conversation gives opportunities for the learner to modify and learn language.

The researchers used the number of requests for confirmation or comprehension checks made by a student or the teacher as interactional modifications. They concluded that interactions help learners to work toward comprehension because it gives them control over the input they receive and enables them to systematically identify and solve comprehension problems.

Other researchers, Adair-Hauck and Donato (1994), were trying to implement Vygotski's theory of a Zone of Proximal development in the teaching of foreign languages. They stressed that a teacher, as a reflective problem solver and mediator using the reciprocal circle, permits discourse and interaction. In this model, students are actively participating in the search for meanings, rules, and patterns. Also, Garcia (1991), in describing characteristics of effective second-language instructors, emphasizes promoting the involvement of students, providing immediate feedback, and using both the students' language and the English language.

## IN SUMMARY

Since the symbolization of an immigrant child is created and recreated in a process involving many stages and modifications of behavior, it is important for a teacher to observe and stimulate children. Reaching a satisfying balance may never be completely possible and the child may as an adult struggle all his/her life, but guidance toward such harmonious development and providing understanding and support is the only way to deal with the problem.

In our assumption, an immigrant child is living in his/her created "symbolic triad" world. This world is the result of struggles and overcoming crises. If it is appropriately

stimulated, it can be a very positive situation giving the advantage of deeper understanding and constant development of the child's personality.

If we take into consider Maslow's (1970) theory of psychological needs and the fact that beside (physiological needs), security, love and belongingness, and self-esteem are the most important needs to satisfy, we may say that in the new culture, immigrant children struggle the most. We suggest that the mechanism that helps them fulfill those needs produces the "triad of symbols."

This "transcendent world" gives some security and stability even in the paradoxical situation of being "constantly in motion."

This process takes place everyday, for example, when in the morning a child switches between his/her home culture and language and the language and culture at school. Just entering the school playground is like entering a different world. The familiar is absent, and the new language and rules now apply.

This situation will persist all through schooling. The enriching experiences that

children are getting at home and the everyday conflicts that children must resolve in accepting that external symbolic world are constant. If we apply Erikson's (1963) theory, we may assume that this situation is simulative for the child's development.

An immigrant child's universe is crystallized during this process, as each encounter and each new crisis creates new meanings and new contents for his/her symbolic triad.

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IN THE SPRING 2002 ISSUE (VOLUME 9, NUMBER 3)

## OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION.

