

Editorial

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EDITORIAL

For children to go to school and being taught in a different language from the one they speak at home seems to have become a big issue in New Zealand. The problem has existed for a long time with Maori and other Polynesian children starting off in Primary School without knowing a word of English.

Lately, the focus has been on Asian children who arrive here with their parents and who have no knowledge of English either when entering the New Zealand schooling system.

The problem does not lie with the

children themselves, but mainly with the general attitude of the average New Zealander and of the education system in particular. For them English is the only language they will ever know and therefore, in their view, the only language they will ever accept and consider as worthwhile and necessary to get through life. By deduction, anyone who does not know English must therefore be inferior, suspect and kept at a certain distance. No doubt, many of you Swiss people who have emigrated to New Zealand either as children, or as adults for that matter, have gone through this experience at one stage or the other of your lives.

For the Swiss, to see children being brought up bi- or even tri-lingual is nothing exceptional because it has happened so often over so many generations that the matter hardly ever makes headline news anymore. In this respect, like in so many other areas, New Zealand has still a lot of growing up to do. The New Zealand schooling system is still based on the idea that everyone only speaks English at the onset. Foreign languages are what they are: foreign, and therefore they should only be taught at a later stage (when it is much harder to absorb them) and only to those students who really want to learn them. Children are such fast learners that the original handicap of not knowing English when entering school will not last for very long. Instead of considering children who are being brought up bi-lingually by their parents as a bit weird, inferior and non-conformist, the New Zealand educational system should look at them as the fortunate ones, because they start life not with a handicap, but with an asset which they will appreciate and cherish more and more as they grow up.

It is a well known fact that people who can speak and think in several languages have in general a much better appreciation of the world around them and of other people's way of life and are therefore much more tolerant towards their fellow humans.

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