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English books and Irish aspirations: Language and material artifacts in two Irish medium schools

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This paper presents findings from a study that investigated language use and material artifacts in *Gaelscoileanna*, or all Irish schools located in the English-speaking areas of the Republic of Ireland. The study consisted of two case study schools in which the material artefacts were explored as part of a sociolinguistic investigation of the language environments of the schools. Findings from the study revealed that nationally and locally produced material artifacts existed in both Irish and English in distinct ways. In the schools locally-generated materials attempted to elevate the status of Irish over English. Despite that effort, material artefacts of the schools were largely in English. Contradictions between the educational efforts of *Gaelscoileanna* and national support afforded the schools are discussed, and implications for the development of biliteracy of students.

Background

Within the past decade there has been renewed interest in *Gaelscoileanna*, or Irish medium schools, located in the Republic of Ireland. Teacher unions and news reports alike have expressed concern regarding the national language policy and funding for the teaching and learning of Irish in schools (e.g., Flynn, 1993; Sugrue, 1997; Doyle, 2000; Flynn 2000). This attention has been sparked, at least in part, by the notable growth in *Gaelscoileanna*, with three new primary schools opened in September 2003 and a secondary school scheduled to open in September 2004 (*Gaelscoileanna*, 2004). *Gaelscoileanna* are one form of bilingual education program is known as immersion. In an immersion education program, students who come from homes in which the majority language is used are educated through the medium of a minority language (Baker, 1996). The intent of the programs is to

foster high degrees of bilingualism and biliteracy (Baker, 1996; Johnson & Genesee, 1997). Immersion education programs typically have language goals, such as to revitalize an endangered language or to foster bilingualism or biliteracy in a minority, national language (Johnson and Genesee, 1997).

One essential part of an immersion program is use of the minority or endangered language in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as how the majority language is used in those modalities. Schools develop local (school) language policies regarding minority and majority language use. A school language policy might include things such as reproaches and rewards for minority language use; those policies directly impact the language environment of the schools (Heller, 1999). The policies in turn send messages to students about the value and status of the two languages, and this in turn can influence bilingualism and biliteracy development of the students. Thus, understanding the ways in which languages are used in bilingual schools, including the language of material artefacts found in the schools, can impact language and literacy development.

Language policy: A brief overview

The current context and growth of Gaelscoileanna has been impacted by national language policy. At the time of independence, the language policy goal was to revive the Irish language, with the educational system playing a major role in transmitting the language to children (Ó Riagáin, 1997). This was to be achieved by gradually replacing English with Irish as the medium of instruction in the national schools, beginning first with the younger classes (grades). Incentives and rewards were offered to schools that taught through the medium of Irish, and teachers were provided some financial incentive to use the language.

However, teachers were skeptical of this policy, in part because many lacked the ability to teach through the medium of Irish. A study conducted by the Irish National Teachers' Organization (INTO) in 1941 explored that issue among teachers. The report revealed dissatisfaction among teachers regarding the pedagogy of teaching English-speaking children through the medium of Irish. Teachers believed that the effect of schooling through Irish were limited because Irish never made its way into the homes of these students. Ó Laoire (2000) suggests that

schools' efforts were undermined due to a dearth of existing meaningful speech communities outside of the native Irish-speaking or *Gaeltacht* areas in which Irish could be used.

Despite this finding, students and teachers were affected by the national language policy throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Students were required to have adequate knowledge of Irish, and, as schools expanded to include secondary level education, students were required to score well in Irish in order to pass the secondary level leaving certificate examination. Reprisals towards teachers were also used. Teacher competence was based upon how well they could teach Irish (Cummins, 1977; Macnamara, 1966), as opposed to their teaching ability and competence in other subject areas.

About the time of the INTO study, the number of all Irish schools (AIS) throughout the Republic had reached its peak (Table 1). Although language policy was believed to be effective as more than half of the state's primary schools were offering instruction in Irish for English-speaking students in varying amounts, public opinion polls indicated that parents were increasingly displeased with the policy of compulsory Irish for their children (see Ó Riagáin, 1997). Scholars and language policy experts have suggested that the decrease in demand for Irish medium education occurred for a variety of reasons, including a dissatisfaction over using rote, grammar-based methods used to teach Irish (Ó Laoire, 1995; Ó Riagáin, 1997) and concerns regarding the academic achievement of students being taught through Irish (Macnamara, 1966). Other reasons included a shift in Irish national identity that was not tied to the Irish language (Baker, 1997). Due to these and other factors, the number of primary level Irish medium schools for English-speaking students reached its low by about 1970 (Ó Riagáin, 1997).

A grassroots immersion movement

By the early 1970s changes were made to the national language policy. Language policy emphases shifted from promoting the use of Irish as a medium of instruction in the national schools to teaching the language as a school subject. At approximately the same time, a number of 'new' Irish medium schools or Gaelscoileanna were being established, distinct from the All Irish Schools that proliferated through the 1950s

Table 1: Number of all Irish primary schools (adapted from Ó Riagáin, 1997)

School year	Number of all Irish medium primary schools in English-speaking areas	Irish medium primary schools in English-speaking areas as % of total primary schools in Ireland
1940/41	255	4.9
1950/51	200	4.2
1960/61	183	3.9
1970/71	24	.6

The schools were part of a grassroots movement and were established by parents, who sought the benefits of bilingualism and a connection to Irish. Some of those parents were civil employees. A study conducted in 1979 revealed that 51% of the fathers of children enrolled in Irish medium schools were government or semi-state employees whose jobs required Irish (Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin, 1979).

The *Gaelscoileanna* were qualitatively distinct from the AIS that existed from the 1920s to early 1970s. Ó Riagáin (1997) explains that the schools were founded as a result of grassroots, parental efforts as distinct from top-down, government policy-imposed schools. He states that the schools are

by and large, additions to the school system rather than reconversions of the existing schools to bilingual teaching. Thus, any suggestion that they represent a reversal of trends needs considerable qualification. They are more accurately seen as the start of a substantially new trend. (p. 24)

Like Ó Riagáin, Cummins (1978) described these schools as qualitatively different from their predecessors. He noted that the new wave of schools consisted of a large degree of parental

participation and support, as well as participation in national Irish cultural events.

Throughout the 1970s and 80s the number of *Gaelscoileanna* increased. The growth was initially modest, though has gained momentum in the past decade (Table 2). Ó Laoire (1995) has attributed the growth in Irish medium schools to parents observing the advantages of an education through a second or minority language. Ó Riagáin (1997) also suggested that parents choose those schools for both language (identity) and education (smaller class size) related reasons. Other reasons, such as the co-educational nature of the schools, also appear to be impacting current growth (Coady, 2001). A study conducted in 1997 by the Linguistics Institute of Ireland (ITÉ) found that, if given the opportunity, 24% of parents would send their child to an Irish medium school (Commission on School Accommodation, 1998). These data suggest that the growth in *Gaelscoileanna* may continue its upward trend.

Table 2: Number of primary level Irish medium schools in the English-speaking areas of Ireland (Republic only) 1975-2000 (sources: *Gaelscoileanna*, 2001; Irish Department of Education and Science, 2001)

School Year	Number of <i>Gaelscoileanna</i>	Total number of national primary (ordinary) schools	<i>Gaelscoileanna</i> as percentage of total schools
1975/76	14	3497	.4
1980/81	20	3295	.6
1985/86	46	3270	1.4
1990/91	64	3235	2.0
1995/96	91	3201	2.8
1999/00	114	3172	3.6

Gaelscoileanna and Irish/English language use

Although Gaelscoileanna have been part of the educational system for about 30 years, research conducted on the schools and the bilingual and biliteracy attainment of the students is limited. One study conducted in 1974 by Cummins consisted of a survey of teachers of the existing Irish medium schools. A self-administered questionnaire was used to elicit data regarding demographics of students, teachers' perceptions of students' language use and ability, and teachers' language attitudes and pedagogical beliefs (Cummins, 1974). Open-ended questions in the questionnaire specifically explored teachers' beliefs regarding the development biliteracy among students. One open-ended question asked teachers to explain why the number of Irish medium schools outside of the *Gaeltacht* had fallen by the early 1970s. In the present study, I adapted Cummins' survey conducted to further investigate teachers' beliefs in the schools, shifts in attitude and beliefs, and pedagogy.

Material culture and language use: a theoretical lens

I investigated the language environments of two Gaelscoileanna using a lens of material culture and language use in bilingual education programs. The framework was based on Johnson's (1980) investigation of the material culture of Deerfield Elementary, a rural elementary school in the midwestern United States. Johnson referred to material culture as the material artifacts, classroom decorations and displays that act as mechanisms for socialization and enculturation. His rationale was based on the premise that education, either familial or within the classroom, is a process of transmission of sociocultural norms. In small homogenous societies the transmission of sociocultural norms typically entails teaching and learning traditions of the local community. On the other hand, in large heterogeneous societies, enculturation takes on the teaching and learning of the national society, which often belies the local environment. For heterogeneous societies, then, there exists an inherent structural tension between the learning and teaching of local and national, extra-local traditions.

In Johnson's study a wide variety of material culture in each classroom at Deerfield Elementary was noted. These items included academic products, artwork, calendars, clocks, textbooks and maps. His list also included items such as the presence of a

national flag. Using non-participant observation across grade levels, Johnson examined the extent to which material artifacts along with school and classroom decorations socialized students into either a local or national sociocultural orientation. Johnson found that the classroom environment overwhelmingly favored a national orientation in its use of material culture, including the presence of an American flag in every classroom. Johnson's study concluded that "public schooling disavows local sociocultural orientations and traditions" in favor of a national sociocultural orientation (Johnson, 1980, p. 181).

The second dimension of the lens in the present study is based on Escamilla's sociolinguistic investigation into the material artifacts found at Valley Vista School, an urban elementary located in the southwest United States (Escamilla, 1994). That school was a transitional bilingual education program, in which students were taught through the minority language for several years before being transitioned into English language instruction.

Unlike Johnson's study that did not note language of the material culture the school, Escamilla's study specifically identified sociolinguistic functions of language, specifically the uses of Spanish and English throughout the school. Escamilla noted a variety of contradictions between the school's language policy and language use in practice. Despite claims that both languages were used equally in the school, English was overwhelmingly used over Spanish. For example, in the school's 284-page bilingual handbook, Escamilla found that English was used exclusively in 261 pages, while Spanish was used in 23.

Escamilla also found that while Valley Vista claimed to operate bilingually, English was used to fulfill high status functions, while Spanish was relegated to filling lower status functions. For example, teachers in the school used Spanish and English for instructional purposes in accord with the school's model of bilingual education; however, English was the preferred language among adults. The material artifacts and language use in the school confirmed that an asymmetric relationship existed between English and Spanish. In short Spanish was perceived to be an unnecessary or extraneous language of the school; English was the favored language of choice.

Research methods: case study schools and survey methods

In this investigation I acted as a non-participant observer in two Gaelscoileanna. The two schools comprised a collective case study (Stake, 1995) and lasted for a period of approximately six weeks. I used a reputational sampling procedure (Schensul et al., 1999) to identify two case study schools. In that procedure, schools were nominated by experts, educators, and school. Additionally, on a larger scale I administered a revised survey (Cummins, 1974) to teachers of Gaelscoileanna and to administrators who were knowledgeable of and worked in schools.

The first case study school, Scoil Cathal, was a rural 6-year-old Irish medium school located on the outskirts of a small town. The school consisted of 163 students and 6 teachers. During its six-year existence, the school was housed in a variety of locations before moving to temporary structures on its own site. Scoil Nóra, the second case school, was a 30-year-old urban Irish medium school containing 251 students with 12 teachers. The setting of Scoil Nóra consisted of a sizeable gray building located within commuting distance of a large urban center. Unlike Scoil Cathal, Scoil Nóra was well established in the surrounding community (Table 3).

At each of the schools 50% of the teachers were native Irish (L1) speakers during the 1999/2000 school year. While neither school had a written language policy that specifically set guidelines for language use, both schools investigated followed a language policy of "all things through Irish". The principals of the schools stated that this was the school's default language policy, which was also promoted and by the national *Gaelscoileanna* organization.

Table 3: Profile of Two Irish Medium Schools

	Scoil Cathal	Scoil Nóra
Setting	Rural	Urban
No. years established	6	30
No. of full time teachers	6	12

No. (percentage) of teachers with L1 of Irish	3 (50%)	6 (50%)
No. of students (excluding adjacent preschool)	163	251
Religious orientation	Multi-denominational	Catholic
Patron of the school	<i>Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Ián-Ghaeilge</i>	Archbishop of Dublin
General socio-economic class of students attending	Wide range, but mainly middle	Middle to upper
Type of school structure	Temporary; trailers	Permanent

In each school I investigated the material artifacts of the school environment and the language in which the material artifacts were produced. These consisted of school and classroom artifacts, decorations and other student- and school-produced materials. Johnson's list of material culture was adapted and served as a general guideline for investigating and identifying the material artifacts found in the each school. The language of material artifacts and classroom decorations was also investigated; this was noted on an observation protocol as Irish, English, or other language.

The two school sites were observed over a period of approximately two to three weeks each. At the schools, the hallways, common areas, gathering spaces, principal's office, teachers' room and playgrounds were investigated for language and material artifacts. At Scoil Nóra I noted the material artifacts and language in the computer room, but there was no computer room in Scoil Cathal. In addition those spaces, I observed in several classrooms at each school site. In Scoil Cathal, the artifacts and decorations of the Junior Infants (kindergarten) classroom, third class (2nd grade US equivalent) and fifth/sixth (4th/5th grade US equivalent) (combined) class were observed. In Scoil Nóra, the material culture of the Junior Infants, third, and sixth classes were likewise investigated.

An adapted version of Cummins' 1974 survey was administered to teachers of Irish medium schools. The survey, as with the original, was written and administered in Irish. A cluster sampling procedure was used to select teachers, based on a list of Irish medium schools supplied by the *Gaelscoileanna* organization in Dublin. In total 15 schools representing 134 educators in nine different counties were sampled. A total of 48 (36%) surveys were returned. The response rate may be partly attributed to the late timing in the school year (May to June), during which time testing occurred as well as several religious ceremonies and holidays.

Material artifacts

Findings from this study showed that many locally produced items were written in Irish, while many nationally produced materials were heavily created in English. Some material artifacts in schools such as flags, maps, and other visual aids, were often not written in either language. In this section I describe the findings of those artifacts, decorations, and objects. I discuss the implications of those materials in the following section of the paper.

Irish material culture

Most of the locally produced items found in both schools were in Irish. Examples of these printed items included official school papers intended for students such as academic achievement awards and certificates for Irish language use. Certificates and awards were handed out in morning assembly at Scoil Nóra to students who had exemplary use of Irish. Behavior charts that reinforced language use were in Irish. Locally produced materials in Irish consisted of papers and materials generated by teachers; examples of these were items such as teaching aids and materials. At the upper primary class levels these locally produced Irish materials included laminated charts and posters displaying mathematical concepts and grammatical constructions of Irish. Those visual aids consisted of large pieces of paper that were hung on the classroom walls.

At the lower primary levels, the teaching aids and materials in Irish included worksheets used and generated by teachers. Teachers also produced the charts and posters in Irish.

When they did not exist, teachers modified existing English language charts and posters by covering up the English words with Irish words. Examples of these, found at both case study schools, included charts of the seasons, weather, and colors. These locally modified teaching materials and printed artifacts reflected the dearth of teaching materials in Irish. They also illustrated the determination and effort of the teachers to foster literacy in Irish and to maintain the "all things through Irish" language policy of the schools.

English material culture

In contrast to locally produced items that were generated by teachers in Irish, nationally-produced documents and materials were also found in the language environments of the schools in English. English heavily dominated visual aids and educational materials such as books and maps with titles and printed country names. Assessments being administered during the study were standardized tests of English ability. Some of the workbooks that students used in their course subjects were in Irish; however, many of the teaching materials used by teachers for content area subjects (history, geography, mathematics) were in English. Because of the lack of teaching materials and academic textbooks in Irish, teachers in this study combined the English language lesson with content material.

Outside of the classroom, official national documents, such as the national curriculum, Department of Education circulars and announcements, educational surveys, and correspondence were in English, though teachers stated that Irish versions of those documents occasionally followed at some later date.

A striking area in which English dominated the printed material artifacts was free reading materials. Free reading materials were often brought to school by students and came from home or the local library. Neither school had its own school library but some teachers had free reading materials available in the classroom for students to use. I located free reading materials on students' desks, inside boxes aligning the rooms, and on bookshelves located around the classrooms. In the Junior Infants classroom at Scoil Cathal, for example, a small bookshelf aligning the wall contained 73 books. Of those books, 70 were found in

English, two were in French and one was in Irish. Similar percentages of books were found in the fifth/sixth class at Scoil Cathal. In the sixth class at Scoil Nóra, about 15% of the books were in Irish and the remainder of books were in English. When asked about the number of free reading materials, textbooks and teaching aids in Irish, the sixth class teachers at both Gaelscoileanna suggested that the lack of appropriate Irish reading materials was their biggest concern for students in the upper primary level. In fact, the sixth class teacher at Scoil Nóra found and used only one engaging novel in Irish during the 1999/2000 school year that was age- and ability-appropriate for students in her class. Overall, students' access to engaging reading materials in Irish was limited, especially at the upper primary levels.

Language in bilingual material artifacts

In contrast to materials used with children inside the classroom, material artifacts intended for parents were generally produced at the local level in both English and in Irish. This reflected the knowledge that parents of students attending the schools were primarily English speakers. For example, the parent handbook at Scoil Cathal, dated September 1997, was written in both languages; three pages were written in Irish and three pages were written in English. An additional page was titled *Labhairt na Gaeilge* (Speaking Irish) and was a page dedicated to school-related Irish words and phrases translated into English. Other examples of items produced in both languages toward parents included school notices and announcements. In the case of these school-generated documents, Irish was written above the English section, graphically elevating the position of Irish over English (for example, see Figure 1). English was typically written in a smaller font size than that used in Irish. This represented a form of positive discrimination toward Irish language by visually elevating the status of Irish over English.



GAELSCOIL

Ar an Satharn beidh Múire Mhic Giolla Íosa at teacht go Cloch na gCoillte. Tá cuireadh faighte ag na páistí bheith ann. Mar sin an féidir leat do pháiste a thabhairt ar scoil ag 2:00i.n. agus é/í a bhailiú ag 3:30i.n. idir Halla an Bhaile agus Cearnóg Emmett.

On Saturday President Mary McAleese will visit and our páistí have been asked to line the route from the U.D.C. offices to Emmett Square along with the school-children from all the other National Schools. I would be grateful if you would bring your child in full uniform to school at 2:00 pm on Saturday and collect him/her at the Emmett Square at 3:30pm

Survey data and growth in Gaelscoileanna

Teachers responding to the 2000-year survey were asked why they believed that there had been an increase in number of Irish medium schools in recent years. Of the teachers responding to the open-ended question (n=45), 20 (or 44%) stated that the growth of Irish medium schools could be attributed to a renewed interest in the language, including heritage, pride and culture. Some common responses to this question included "interest in the native language of Ireland" and "respect for the language". One teacher noted

With the wealth that's in the country now people will direct their thoughts towards Gaelic culture and language. We have new confidence in ourselves and we are proud of our heritage and roots.

In an additional question on the 2000-year survey, teachers were asked to comment on obstacles that might impede growth of the schools. Sixty-four percent of teachers responding to the survey stated that there were in fact obstacles inhibiting the

growth of Irish medium schools. Of those, 22% felt that the largest obstacle largest facing the Irish medium education movement was overall lack of support on the part of the government and/or the Department of Education and Science. An additional 19% of teachers stated that the lack of textbooks, software (technology) and other teaching aids were obstacles or potential obstacles, and a similar percentage (19) stated that lack of buildings or equipment inhibited growth. Textbooks and teaching aids, equipment and buildings, and lack of governmental support account for 60% of the teachers' responses regarding obstacles that currently inhibit growth of the schools. Overall, teachers stated that the growth was largely attributable to an increase in goodwill toward the language in the broader society.

Bilingualism and biliteracy development: language policy goals?

The findings from this study are based on two Gaelscoileanna located in different parts of the country. The two schools differ along certain dimensions. Despite those differences, data obtained from the study reveal some common features regarding the use of Irish and English in the language environments and material culture of the schools. Data from this study revealed that many of the common material artifacts used by teachers were created to support the school's all Irish policy and curriculum. These materials were visible throughout the schools, but they lacked the "high gloss" appeal of nationally produced materials. In contrast, the nationally produced materials, especially novels, dramas, and other books, were found mainly in English. The lack of Irish materials, teaching aids, textbooks, and free reading materials made the all Irish policy impossible to uphold. Teachers and school administrators further attempted to elevate the status of Irish by literally placing it above English print in materials that were produced bilingually for parents. This was evident in official school documents, notices, and rewards for students.

The effort and determination of teachers and administrators in the schools demonstrated a commitment to follow the all-Irish language policy in spite of limited material support. They recognized the need to develop students' bilingual, oral ability, as well as their literacy in Irish. They expressed an urgent need for teaching materials in Irish so that they could do

their job most effectively. Arguably one of the most important items needed in Irish were engaging and age- and ability-appropriate free reading materials for students. Lack of reading materials in Irish made Irish literacy (or the development of biliteracy) more difficult for teachers and less attractive to students. This was confounded by the finding that 66% of the students currently attending Gaelscoileanna come from homes in which English is the spoken language (Coady, 2001).

Further compounding that problem was the added challenge that the language in the broader, "outside the school gate" environment is overwhelmingly English. In this study it was evident that English materials and artifacts easily made their way into the schools and classrooms by ways of labels, book covers, books, wrappers, computer and technology items, etc. This was completely unavoidable but a very visible part of the language environment of the schools. For teachers, principal, and staff of Irish medium schools, this underscored their concerns of the presence of English material artifacts and English language use in school.

There was also a concern that nationally-produced Irish language artifacts were relatively absent in the schools. Educational notices and documents generated nationally by the Department of Education and Science were in English. Further, in the case of textbooks and teaching aids, teachers participating in this study pointed out that, though they might exist, most of these materials were outdated and were neither engaging nor ability-appropriate for the students in their classes. Educating students who come from homes in which English is spoken through the medium of Irish is pedagogically different than educating Irish speaking students in Irish medium schools (as in the Gaeltacht). This also differs markedly from teaching students Irish as a subject in regular, English medium schools. Thus, having access to teaching aids, textbooks, and free reading materials that reflect the students' developmental and academic level is crucial. This study revealed that teachers in *Gaelscoileanna* are generally left on their own to provide engaging, age and ability appropriate Irish language materials to support the language inside the classroom and school environments.

As the demand for Irish medium education reveals, the Gaelscoileanna have made contributed to elevating the status of

Irish and to positive societal views of the language. But countering the presence of English in the schools is an ongoing challenge. Educators need to create meaningful contexts for authentic language use inside the school gate. Educators of Irish medium schools must create ongoing, authentic contexts for language use inside the school gate, especially among students. This will support teacher's efforts to develop students' oral language ability in Irish and their bilingual attainment.

To the extent that biliteracy or Irish language literacy is a goal of the schools, teachers must also consider creative ways to produce and solicit engaging reading materials for students in Irish. Access to engaging texts in Irish is crucial. One way to do that might be to designate an area of the school as the school's library. In the library there could be books written and produced by upper primary students and illustrated by lower primary students. Books could be read between and across grade level. They could be used as a springboard for discussion in a broad school effort to promote authentic language use among students in Gaelscoileanna. These efforts could, at least temporarily, fill a gap left by the dearth of literacy materials that are engaging and appropriate for students in an all-Irish educational context.

The potential for Irish medium schools to foster bilingualism and biliteracy in the English speaking areas is encouraging. However, this potential appears to be barely tapped. As Ó Riagáin (2001) has noted, "[p]aradoxically, in a period when Irish language policy in the schools generally is experiencing considerable difficulties, the number of Irish immersion primary schools in English speaking areas continues to grow" (p. 204). The influence of Gaelscoileanna in terms of providing Irish language support in the English speaking areas cannot be underestimated. The efforts of schools as a grassroots bilingual education movement have contributed to societal views that the Irish language can be used as a living means of communication and effective medium of instruction in schools. In fact, as Cummins (1988) pointed out some time ago, Gaelscoileanna are likely one of the most efficient and cost effective options to support the national language policy objectives of language revival in the English speaking areas of the country. Ultimately, if the language policy objectives of fostering bilingualism and biliteracy are to be seriously taken, future educational policies will

support and encourage the ongoing efforts of educators, students and parents of the Gaelscoileanna movement by providing teaching materials, supplies, and, most urgently, books that engage students and effectively foster the highest degrees of bilingualism and biliteracy attainable.

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