

## **BOISE IKASTOLA: BOISE BASQUE LANGUAGE IMMERSION PRESCHOOL**

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### **Defining the Boise Basques**

It is said that the first Basques to reach the Western Hemisphere were early cod fishermen. Following them was the fleet of Christopher Columbus, whose ships had been built in Northern Spain by Basques, and there were Basque sailors in his fleet. Some remained in South America and their descendants still flourish there, mostly in Argentina and Uruguay. At the time of the California Gold Rush, many of the Basques who ran cattle and sheep in the Pampas region of South America migrated to the United States. They were not made to feel welcome in the gold rush camps, because they were looked on as sojourners rather than American citizens. In order to survive, they slowly took over what had traditionally been the work of the Native Americans: namely, the sheep herding industry.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many Basques, young men and women, migrated to the United States from the Basque Country in northern Spain and the Basque region in Southern France. Economic need forced vast Southern European migration at that time because of little hope for the future. By the turn of the century, large sheep companies had been created in the American West, located mostly in the states of California, Nevada, Wyoming, Oregon, and Idaho. The companies were often owned or tended by reliable and competitive Basque shepherders. Invitations were extended to brothers, uncles, nephews, and friends to join and work with the herders in the American West. A network of one hundred twenty-one Basque hotels sprung up throughout the West, and young women were invited to come from the old country to work in the hotels. Those gathering places were sometimes called “marriage mills,” because many of the young Basques met their life-partners there.

Boise was one of the early settling places for the Basque people. There were hotels where the language was spoken, familiar foods were served, and familiar music, games, and dances were practiced. The language is a major marker in the Basque tradition. It cannot be definitively traced to any other language. There is an old joke told again and again to explain why the Basques are so good. It seems the devil decided to corrupt the pure people of the Basque region. Try as he might, he could not learn the difficult language. He learned “yes - bi” and “no - es,” but that was all. Consequently, because he couldn’t tempt the Basques in their own language, he left and they remained very, very good people – even to this day. Right here on Grove Street, there is an old Basque hotel that has been lovingly restored and donated to the Basque community of Boise.

### **Maintaining Cultural Identity**

There are many people in the United States of Basque heritage, and the Basques are recorded as a group separate from the Spanish or French in the United States

census. Because of the unique language, cultural mores, and rich traditions of the old country, the American Basques work hard to blend and syncretize their Basque heritage and their American national identity, and that often begins with the young children. The National American Basque Association, called NABO, has chapters in many states throughout the country, including New York and Florida, and NABO provides club interaction, language training, and other activities for adults. For children, the Basque Museum and Cultural Center sponsors summer *Euskara* Immersion camps, and NABO supports other opportunities for Basque language training, dance and music lessons, arts and crafts, and a variety of other Basque cultural experiences from festivals to study abroad programs (through the University of Nevada at Reno and Boise State University) to trips and tours of the old country.

### **History, Purpose, and Goals of the Basque Ikastola**

Founded in 1998, Boiseko Ikastola is a preschool for children to learn to understand and speak Basque. Housed at St. Paul's Catholic Church on the Boise State University Campus, it introduces young children to Basque and not only aids in their comprehension of the Basque language, but also helps with developing other language skills. Twenty-five years ago the Basque government was one of the first to recognize the need to establish a curriculum especially designed for preschool aged children. The program, called the *Urtxintxa* Project, has been replicated by other European countries. The Ikastola uses this same curriculum and has proven very successful for children continuing on at both private and public kindergartens. There are two full-time instructors with Early Childhood Development degrees.

### **Language and Literacy**

Children learn the Basque language through thematic units and interaction with teachers, peers, music and print. Other opportunities for conversation include dramatic play, story time, circle time and puppet shows. The Ikastola's print-rich literacy environment includes some of the following: books in Basque and English, books made by individual children, magazines and newspapers appropriate for young children, calendars, bulletin boards, alphabet charts, labels on materials, supplies, equipment, lists of all kinds, children's names displayed, child dictation or writing and drawings displayed. When the children want to write, copy or draw, the "tools" are always available.

### **Science**

Open-ended questions by the teacher help the children learn how to question, how to be thinkers. Hands-on activities include using simple machines, sensory table play, plant and animal life, and cooking activities.

**Math**

The children learn to print and work with numbers. They compare, sort, classify, and organize objects. The concepts of time and seasons are introduced, and the children learn the days of the week and months of the year. Clocks and calendars are used to teach time.

**Social Studies**

Learning about the “world around us” is the focus of this curriculum area. Field trips and studies of occupations are included.

**Art**

Exploratory, sensory art activities help the child experience a variety of media. Paints, chalk, pencils, crayons, markers, glue and play dough (made by the children) are available in a “free choice” area for the children to use as they wish.

**Large and Small Motor Skills**

Movement activities including dance, running, balancing, and sports are just part of the large motor program. From using scissors to completing small puzzles, children are continually offered opportunities to develop their smaller muscles.

**Field Trips**

Students enjoy a variety of field trips that add to the rich learning experience. Common trips are to The Basque Museum and Cultural Center, Fronton, Edwards Greenhouses, The Pumpkin Patch, Zoo, and the Boise Public Library.

**Dramatic Play**

Dramatic play is one of the most valuable forms of play for children. The preschool gives children many opportunities to play and the toys and tools with which to learn. Play provides opportunities for exploration, manipulation, and experimentation that are vital for a child to construct knowledge. Through immediate feedback of peers, children refine their learning and restructure concepts.

**Guidelines**

Because it is a non-profit center, a portion of the annual budget is generated through fund raising activities and events. Boiseko Ikastola requires a parent participation activity from each student’s family. This parent participation activity program is designed to keep students safer, and to keep parents involved in their

children's learning environment. Under the auspices of the *Urtzintza* Project, the following guidelines (condensed here for time purposes) are to be followed:

- The project cultivates children's natural knowledge aptitudes, self-confidence, physical abilities, social and communicative skills.
- Instructive games are inclusive and work towards each child's autonomy and shared social development.
- One of the program's first aims is to enforce respect for diversity.
- The program teaches practices of cooperation and compromise to reinforce human values and self-respect.
- This is a project structured for all students, within or without the Basque Country. Thus, the contents of the lessons are directed to develop among the children knowledge of the Basque language, culture, customs, and sentiment all over the eight territories of the country in and out of Europe. The project includes the study of traditional songs, poetry, art, literature, theatre, mythology, and rural sports as a way to widen their love and respect for the Basque language and culture.
- The project is focused on teaching and learning in Basque language. The program heightens the respect, use and knowledge of the Basque language.
- The project aims to develop the love of the Basque culture as a way for developing within the students the respect, admiration, and care for the rest of the nations, cultures, languages, and peoples all over the world.

### **Purpose and Linguistic Performance**

For many adult Basque Americans or American Basques, learning the language of the old country is a frustrating dream. The unique language itself is non-Indo-European, and it is difficult to learn because the vocabulary is not rooted in Latin or Greek, the common origin languages of the Western world. Because the Basque language is dialectical and can vary significantly from village to village, Basque scholars created a consensus language called *Batua*, which is now taught both in the old country and in the United States. There are Basque language classes in various American cities including Boise, Reno, Fresno, San Francisco, and New York.

In the Basque Country, much of the dominant language is Spanish. The primary reason for the rise in early second-language acquisition in the Basque Country is a result of studies conducted there concerning monolingual and bilingual presence

in families in various regions of the country. Basque language scholar Maria José Ezeizabarrena reported that “research into early language acquisition has lead many researchers to conclude that bilinguals with ‘sufficient “ input behave like monolinguals” (2007, 1). In other words, in homes where Basque is the dominant language, children are monolingual before the age of three or four. Older children become more and more bilingual as they pass through the educational system. Production data of Basque vocabulary, verb morphology, case morphology, and Spanish-Basque mixed utterances have shown that monolingual and balanced bilingual children follow a very similar developmental pattern in linguistic production.

The value of second language acquisition in early childhood is particularly significant because it can enhance cross-cultural understanding, and it fosters an active interest in learning one’s own cultural knowledge and maintenance. In the United States, as children progress through the elementary grades, studies suggest that they retain the ability to form certain sounds of the language learned in early childhood even though they may not remember all of the vocabulary. This ability to enunciate the sounds correctly will serve as an aid in their mastering the language in their later years should they return to the study.

Through shared lore, songs, expressions, games, and belief practices, children in these early second language acquisition programs learn to understand and adapt to new situations. The Ikastola enculturates children into their own ancient heritage as well as the language and culture of the United States, their homeland. W. K. McNeil, in his introduction to Simon Bronner’s 1988 edition of *American Children’s Folklore*, referred to the research of William Wells Newell as saying: “By this means he also demonstrated that games, songs, and rhymes moved across linguistic and geographic barriers just as easily as folktales and legends” (1988, 11). Though Newell feared that traditional lore was waning, time has proven differently, and many scholars have demonstrated that children’s lore continues over time and space.

Referring to the playful sound sequences in *Dr. Seuss’s Sleep Book* (1962), such as “Up at Herk-Heimer Falls, where the great river rushes And Crashes down crags and in great gargling gushes,” a scholar of children’s language and learning, Judith Wells Lindfors, stated, “I believe that it is the unexpected in the language of these books that is most engaging to the child” (1987, 73). The books I observed at the Boise Ikastola, written in Basque, carry the same kind of language play presented in stories familiar to American children. *The Three Pigs*, for instance, called *Hiru Txerrikumeak*, cleverly tells the old tale and is profusely illustrated with the expected visual images: first a house of straw, then a house of sticks, followed by a house of bricks, and then what appears to be a foiled (but still living) picture of a wolf with a scalded foot. Another book tells the story of the peculiar duckling, rather than the ugly duckling. As these changes are pointed out, the different tellings of the tales introduce the children not only to subtle differences in story, but also subtle and sometimes not subtle differences in the expressed culture of varied people.

## Second Language Acquisition

In a Stanford doctoral dissertation, L. W. Fillmore posed a question and offered a succinct answer: “What is it that second-language learners must learn? After intensively observing during an entire school year five Spanish monolingual children (ages five to seven) acquiring English as their second language, one researcher summed up the second-language learner’s task this way. The learner must figure out how the sound system of the new language is organized, how units of meaning are organized into words, by what principles these words are put together to form sentences, how these sentences can be used appropriately in given settings, and in what ways meanings can be conveyed in the new language and culture (1976, 634).

Using the new language as it is learned, “it is fascinating to watch children of all ages in dramatic play as they assume high-status roles and role play interactions in various status relationships. They play with various language styles, deliberately changing style when they are queen or subject, teacher or pupil, boss or employee, parent or child. Such play is an important support for the children’s growing ability to express and to interpret language expressions of role relationships, one of the many reasons that sociodrama should be an ever-present opportunity in *every* elementary and preschool classroom” (Lindfors 1987, 377).

Children possess an innate curiosity and actively pursue their urge to find out about the world, and school is a good place to do it. In an interesting study about questions asked by pre-school children with the categories being curiosity, procedural, and social-interactional, researchers found that “of the 159 preschool-kindergarten questions analyzed, approximately 45 percent (almost half) were social in nature, approximately 33 percent (one-third) were curiosity questions, and approximately 23 percent (less than one-fourth) were procedural” (Lindfors 1987, 288). Lindfors continued her discussion with examples of typical pre-school/kindergarten questions demonstrating the various categories of the questions under consideration. A curiosity question addressed to an adult observer in the classroom was: “Is God in cookies?” A procedural question asked of the teacher during an art lesson was, “Do I have to write my name up here?” And a social-interactional question, spoken after an argument between children at an art table was, “I forgive you, Jenny. Do you forgive me?” (Lindfors 1987, 288-89). Questions help children build a rich theory of the world, and in a focused school like the Boise Ikastola, curiosity, play, and learning are constantly fed.

## Conclusion

October 2008 marked ten years since the Boiseko Ikastola opened its doors in Boise, Idaho. On May 15, 2008, Ikastola families (past and present), teachers and supporters gathered to commemorate this milestone. More than 130 people came to the Basque Block to enjoy lively music, good food, entertaining games, and precious memories. As in the Japanese Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) programs in the United States, Islamic primary schools for teaching Arabic in order for the children to study the Q’uran, Jewish early Hebrew training, and

even the folkloric and play activities taught to the Yupik Eskimo children, like carving stories in mud with a knife, Basque people are sensitive to the realities of lost cultures and languages.

Professor Dan Dewey, an early childhood linguistic scholar at Brigham Young University, stated that early second language acquisition has many benefits. He listed increased brain development and capacity, even without mastery; greater use of the left and particularly the right brain; a more sensitive cultural awareness; increased ability to pronounce sounds in language; increased vocabulary; and an early knowledge of the subtleties of language (Dewey 2008).

In the article "Narrative Practices and the Social Construction of Self in Childhood," the authors state: "Although we believe that personal storytelling plays an important role in the social construction of self throughout the life span, we are especially interested in the beginnings of this process. There is evidence that conversational stories of personal experience are available early in life to children from a variety of cultural backgrounds. ... The process of self-construction may be especially visible in early childhood, when it first gets under way. Bruner (1986) has suggested that stories are one of the first cultural constraints on the nature of selfhood" (Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, Mintz 1990, 263). Wouldn't it be fascinating to sit in on a conversation among these budding bilingual children and see for ourselves how they are or are not constructing themselves with a strong American Basque identity?

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