Multilingual Families

What Teachers Should Know About Multilingualism

Pedagogic Background Manual

Version 2.0

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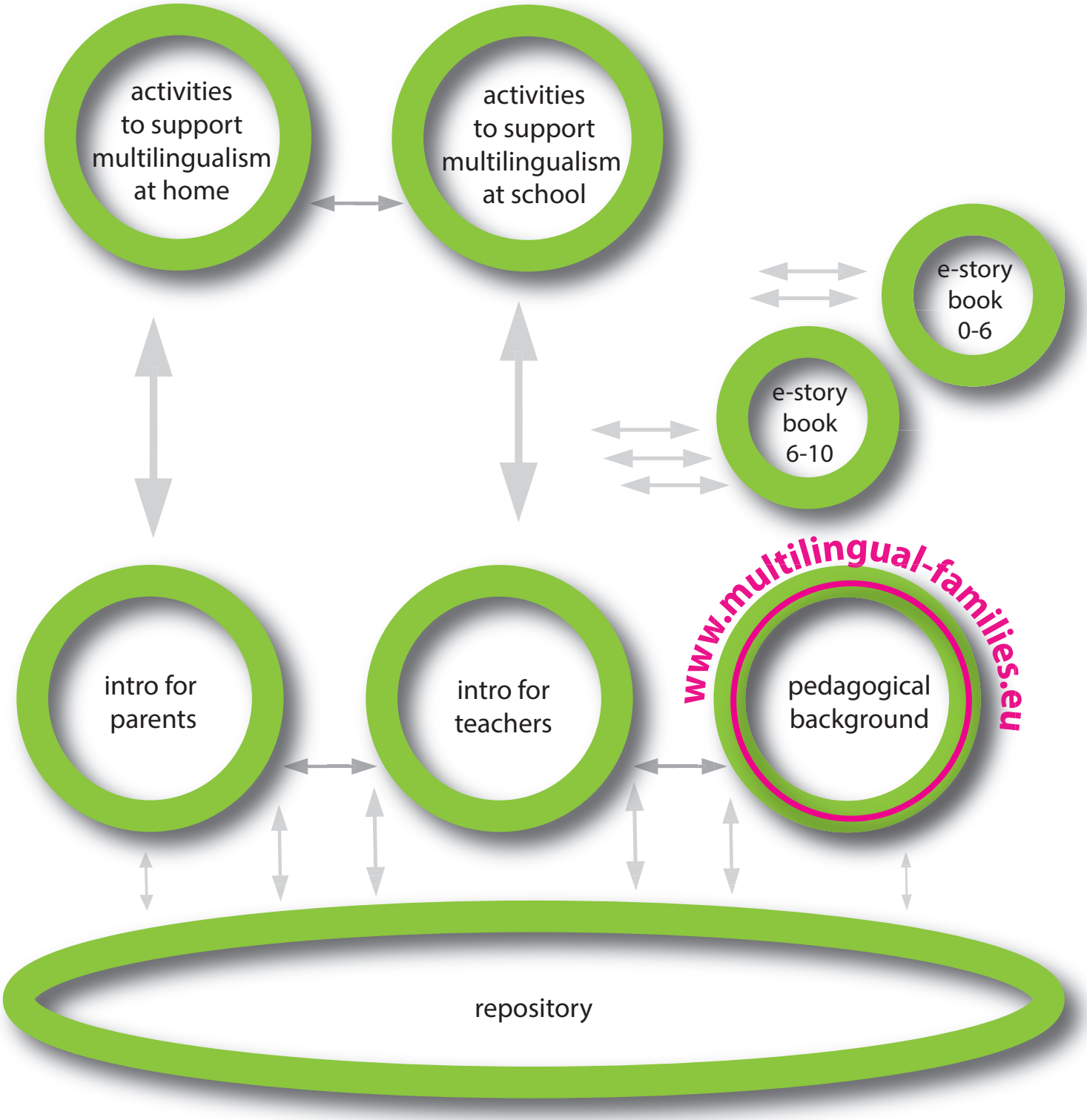
Lifelong Learning Programme

Multilingual Families

Multilingual Families Map



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PREFACE

Approximately two thirds of the world's children grow up in multilingual environments (Bhatia, Ritchie, 2004). This includes children of migrant families, children living in border regions, children of binational marriages and children of mobile parents. For Europe, this represents a linguistic treasure that must be preserved to enhance the linguistic and multi-cultural diversity of Europe. The children's linguistic competence and skills should be supported and developed throughout their entire education – from nursery school through to university or vocational training.

In Europe, national educational systems and organisations for language training place only little emphasis on early multilingualism. In the standard educational systems, children' multilingualism is rarely taken into account. Instead, the objective is the teaching of the national language. In addition, children with a migration background experience problems with inclusion or rather social exclusion and economic discrimination; some children suffer with a refugee background suffer from traumatic experiences. Surveys conducted by the project partners and results of national studies show that there are not enough incentives for children to learn or develop their family languages (UNESCO 2003). The *Multilingual Families* project attempts to support a long-term solution by providing learning materials to teachers, immigrant groups and in fact all stakeholders that work with immigrants and multilingual parents, so that they can disseminate the project resources to immigrant and multilingual parents and support them by answering questions and obtaining materials.

Children who are multilingual can be role models to their peers to encourage them to become multilingual as well. A primary aim of the project is to encourage and show parents that are multilingual how to raise their children multilingually in an informal setting and give them reasons why this can be an advantage for their children. *Multilingual Families* supports parents by answering:

1. **Why** – should they support children's learning and continuing use of the family language?
2. **What** – can they do to support them?
3. **How** – do they implement real language support so that children learn the family language and retain it?

Multilingual Families helps children with multilingual backgrounds experience their multilingualism as something positive and normal. Knowledge of a second or third language should not be perceived as an obstacle to learning and expanding a first or national language, but as enrichment and a sign of linguistic competence.

TEACHER MATERIALS OFFERED BY MULTILINGUAL FAMILIES

The materials for teachers developed in *Multilingual Families* have four sections:

1. **Part I, Introduction** — introduces the basic ideas of the project and intends to provide motivation for teachers and parents to support multilingualism in educational institutions and at home by giving reasons why multilingualism can be beneficial for the individual child and society as a whole.
2. **Part II, Answers to questions teachers might be asked by parents** — this section answers questions relating to raising children in a multilingual environment.
3. **Part III, Teachers' guide to the project** — this is a practical guide designed to give teachers and educators ideas and clear orientation on how to use the materials developed in the project with students. It consists of a collection of activities *Activities to support multilingualism at home — parents' guide on how to motivate children to use the family languages* which can be used in class to support the idea of multilingualism. The activities are described in detail with clear indications of the students' and teachers' roles.
4. **Part IV, Pedagogic background manual** — is the theoretical background to the project and its field of interest. It describes the current state of available and relevant resources and literature. It includes references to some of the vast amount of literature for those interested in to a deeper insight into the issues.

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document should serve as a source into the linguistic and pedagogical background to multilingualism for teachers and educational institutions who are interested in helping and supporting families who live in multilingual contexts and want to raise their children multilingually.

The manual:

- provides information on the ideas of multilingualism,
- gives concrete answers to frequently asked questions by parents and teachers,
- provides insight into the patterns of language acquisition in children,
- shows some principles and ways to complete multilingual education.

The manual reflects on issues connected with language acquisition, multilingualism and multilingual education and helps educators understand the processes of language development. It helps them become more aware of the benefits of children' having the ability to speak more than one language.

THE ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE BY CHILDREN — WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON CHILDREN GROWING UP MULTILINGUALLY

Our mode of communication i.e. our use of languages represents an essential aspect of human societies. Looking at the phenomenon of languages some central questions arise: How do children acquire these languages and communication skills? At what speed do they do it? Can everyone acquire more than one language? These questions have interested linguists for some time and at present the answers to them are clearer than ever. In this chapter you will find information on the development of language in children.

SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATIONS OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Language acquisition mainly describes the processes of developing a system of grammatical use of language; there are, of course other elements of language use such as narration (see activity no. 10) which in this context means that a child, within only few years, adopts a system consisting of symbols (words) and rules (grammar) (Pinker, 1999) that enable it to communicate with others. The question whether the phenolmenon of language acquisition is based on biological or environmental factors has led to the so-called nature/nurture controversy also labelled the nativism vs. behaviourism controversy. These are philosophical terms describing the differences between inherent internal and acquired external development factors. The fundamental question is: What is more important – the environment or genetic predisposition?

Nativism, with Chomsky (1965, 1966, 2002) as its main representative, assumes a species-specific ability of humans to acquire and use language. Nativists see humans more as acting than a reacting organism. Within the concept of nativism language acquisition is explained by the presence of ain inherent language acquisition device, also termed Universal Grammar in later developments of the theory (1975; Chomsky, 1986). It constitutes a species-specific ability of humans, which applies exclusively to the acquisition of languages and is activated by linguistic input. Grammar rules are not explicitly learned but implicitly acquired. Since every child is able to learn a language, Chomsky assumes that

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the inherent structures of language must be shared by all languages, which in turn makes language acquisition a universally comparable process. Whether children acquire English, Czech, Pashto, Urdu or Mandarin, they all do that within comparable periods of time using comparable steps in their grammars, but how can they do that: Pinker provides a plausible answer in his book, the Language Instinct: "The child does not learn dozens or hundreds of rules — it just throws a couple of switches inside its head" (Pinker, 1996:129). Which switches are set is determined by the input.

This leads to the conclusion that linguistics input and interaction with the environment are necessary. However, the mere exposition to linguistic input as, for example, in the passive consumption of TV, does not suffice for language acquisition. In the best case, it can activate the knowledge the child already has a priori at its disposal, "the activation of knowledge already available" (Meisel, 1998). We can conclude that some degree of actively processing the linguistic input seems to be vital (see activity no. 11).

In short, nativism assumes that humans possess an inherent and modular language ability that is based on universal principles and language-specific parameters. Within the framework of a universal grammar, the universal principles determine what constitutes human language. Each language is determined by parameters, which in turn are determined by their respective linguistic environment.

The opposite school of thought, **behaviorism** (Skinner, 1957), denies such a biogenetically inherent language ability in humans. They see humans less as an acting, but rather as a reacting organism. Human abilities and behaviours are only learned, and learning is defined as a systematic reaction of the organism to environmental stimuli (see activity no. 22). According to the behaviourist interpretation, only little inherent linguistic behaviour is present at birth.

A third school of thought, we would like to introduce at this time is **constructivism** with its main proponents L.S. Vygostkij (2002) and Tomasello (2003). This approach does not deny the existence of innate structures in the child's mind but claims that they are of a general nature such as the abilities to perceive process and connect information, linguistic as well as general ones. The main assets of the child are its ability to "read intentions" and to find and develop patterns. The first is vital in the child carer communication and the development of the lexicon, i.e. the internal inventory of words and their meanings, the second for the development of grammatical structures.

To sum up our assumption is that language acquisition is driven by an innate mechanism, at least as far as the acquisition of grammar is concerned, the development of the lexicon can best be explained by constructivist models and skills such as narration are also a factor that is strongly based on interaction. We also assume that these processes can happen in more than one language either in parallel or in sequence.

Stages of language acquisition and development of general cognitive skills

First some thoughts on the difference in development of (visible) linguistic and general cognitive skills. We can observe two different speeds of development. Already at age three, children have acquired the most important rules of syntax and morphology of their first languages and only rarely produce forms different from the patterns of the target language (cf. Weissenborn, 2000:142). This advanced developmental stage is not present in other cognitive areas: The three-year old does not know what time it is, it cannot describe the way to its day care centre, it cannot distinguish between physical sizes and many other things.

One conclusion we can draw from this is that language acquisition is quite independent from learning in other domains, or as Pinker formulates it: "Language is not a cultural artefact that we learn the way we learn to tell the time or how the federal government works. Instead, it is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains. Language is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently." (Pinker, 1996:18)

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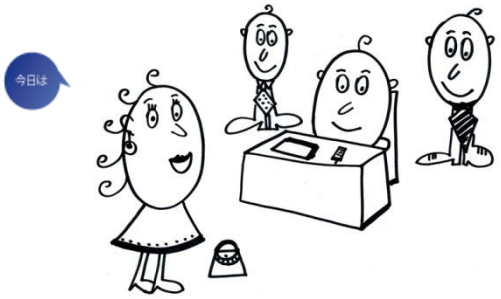
But what exactly constitutes multilingualism? Edwards (2004:7) provides a quite sweeping answer by claiming, "everyone is bilingual". Historically theorists assumed that only people with near native competence in more than one language could be labelled multilingual. This very restricted view does not hold at present as researchers now assume that individuals are multilingual even if they can only understand and speak language ONE, can read language TWO, can read and write language THREE, understand some words and phrases in language FOUR and can understand spoken versions of language FIVE (see ibid: 8).

Multilingualism is not seen as a collection of languages spoken perfectly. Research suggests that all these languages are not stored in distinct compartments on our minds but interact with one another. They influence each other and thus multilingual languages users are different from so-called monolinguals. Multilingualism is seen as a dynamic process (Jessner, Herdina, 2002) and language competence is multilingual, or as some researches call it we can speak of multi-competence (Cook, 1992, 2002). From this we see that the theoretical concerns with multilingualism are also quite dynamic and the state of the art, at present, is very different from the situation twenty years ago.

One of the main questions parents in multilingual families ask themselves is whether a child can learn more than one language at the same time. There is still some doubt stemming from social misconceptions and, in some situations, the fact that multilingual children may sometimes take longer to start talking.



MULTILINGUALISM AS A NORMAL PROCESS OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In this section we intend to present some of the concepts and the terminology in use in connection with multilingualism to show the historic and current debates and to clear some misunderstandings.

We speak of individual and societal multilingualism, i.e. individuals who speak more than one language and societies in which more than one language is present. In the context of this project we also speak of multilingual families, that is families in which more than one language is spoken, not necessarily by all member of the family. For example there could be a grandmother who speaks Azeri, a grandfather who speaks a Kurdish language, mother who speaks Azeri and Turkish, Father who speaks Kurdish, Turkish and French and children who speak none of the grandparents' languages but Turkish, French and English; and all of these languages to varying degrees.

Another example could be a family in which the mother speaks Czech, German and some English, the father German and English, the children Czech and German, and father, mother and son also some Chinese. Today all these families would be labelled multilingual and all languages would be taken into account.

For a long time the term multilingualism – or bilingualism was restricted to a certain degree of language competence achieved at the end of the acquisition process, in most cases this was called native speaker competence. So only speakers who had achieved this very high degree of linguistic competency in more than one language were labelled multilingual (see Edwards, 2004:10)

This is contrasted with MacNamara's (1967) much broader definition, "I shall consider as multilingual a person who, for example, is an educated native speaker of English and who can also read a little French".

Competence is also at the centre of the distinction between balanced bilingualism and dominant bilingualism, to choose just two out of many possible descriptions.

1. Balanced multilingualism occurs when the speaker possesses skills and knowledge in two or more languages, enabling him or her to communication in any situation in any of the languages with equal ease.

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2. Dominant multilingualism occurs when the competence in one language is higher than in the others (Grosjean, 1982). Competence is often seen as dependent on the time of acquisition. Multilingual or double first language acquisition (or simultaneous acquisition of two or more languages) occurs according to De Houver (1990) when a child is exposed to the input of two or more languages on a regular basis (daily) from birth, based on the principle of "one person, one language" (Ronjat, 1913).

Today, the debate about models of multilingualism has generally taken the assumption that almost everybody is multilingual (see Edwards above) and that there is a multitude of patterns of individual and family, as well as institutional language use, sometimes also called language regimes (Busch, 2013). These depend on the surrounding society, the family traditions and personal attitudes which languages are spoken where and on what occasions (see activity no. 2 and 16).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE FOR THE ACQUISITION OF THE SECOND LANGUAGE AND VICE VERSA

The languages a person speaks interact with each other. We observe phenomena such as code switching, the use of more than one language in one conversation or even within one sentence (see activity no. 12); this is assumed to be a sign of high competence in all languages (Jessner, Herdina, 2002). We see that both at a grammatical as well as a conceptual level languages "help each other out" and that multilingual speakers do not have separate language competence in different languages but in one language system, that includes all the languages available to the speaker (Cook 2002, 2003).

In summary we can state that multilingualism is not an exception but rather a norm for (almost) everybody.

MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

A large number of people are multilingual and using more than two languages in their everyday life. The languages they use have different statuses as majority/minority languages both in their community and internationally and some of the languages are used primarily in the private domain while others are used primarily in public domains, such as work or school. Multilingualism is not an exception but is more frequent than might be commonly thought.

There are several components of multilingual families that are mostly represented by "strong foundations" and "strong bridges". Research shows that children whose early education is in the language of their own tend to do better in the later years of their education. An essential difference between multilingual and monolingual education is the inclusion of a guided transition from learning through the mother tongue to learning through another tongue (Thomas, Collier, 1997).

A widespread understanding of multilingual, language education, programs (UNESCO, 2003, 2005) suggests that instruction take place in stages:

Stage I – learning takes place entirely in the child´s home language.
Stage II – building fluency in the mother tongue, introduction of oral L2.
Stage III – building oral fluency in L2, introduction of literacy in L2.
Stage IV – using both L1 and L2 for lifelong learning.

Multilingual language education proponents stress that the second language acquisition component is seen as a "two-way" bridge, in that learners gain the ability to move back and forth between their mother tongue and the other tongue(s), rather than simply a transitional literacy program where reading through the mother tongue is abandoned at some stage in the education.

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According to Cenoz (1998), multilingualism and multilingual acquisition are widespread, not only in officially recognized multilingual communities but all over the world. Despite this, the process of acquiring several non-native languages (i.e. multilingual acquisition) and the final result of this process (multilingualism) have received relatively little attention in scientific research in comparison to second language acquisition and bilingualism.

It has become customary to distinguish between additive and subtractive multilingualism, following Lambert´s usage.

1. Additive multilingualism occurs when the learning of another language does not interfere with the learning of a first language. Consequently, both languages are well developed.
2. Subtractive multilingualism occurs when the learning of another language interferes with the learning of a first language. As a result, another language replaces the first language.

As we note in this chapter, a similar distinction may be useful with regards to multilingualism and multilingual education so that educators and policy makers seek those conditions that are optimal for multilingual development. Multilingual education must be additive if it is to lead to the positive outcomes that educators aim for and that have been documented systematically in the case of multilingualism and some forms of multilingual education (see activity no. 24). An important goal of future research on multilingualism should be to discover those conditions that promote additive multilingual education. At present, we have some indications of what these conditions are, but there is much that remains to be discovered.

Whether or not multilingual education is deemed successful may depend to a large extent on the definition or goals of multilingualism that underlie it. Following Grosjean, Cook, and other, it is recommended that multilingual competences are not viewed as simply the sum total of several monolingual competencies; that is to say, the aim of multilingual education is not to approximate the ideal monolingual speaker-listener of traditional linguistic theory. Rather, a more realistic definition would refer to the unique set of communication skills needed by specific groups of multilingual learners as reflected in their day-to-day lives, To expect and aim for the same levels and kinds of proficiency as for monolinguals could engender a false feeling of underachievement since, as was pointed out earlier, multi-linguals may not need the same levels of proficiency in all of their languages in all of the same discourse domains as monolinguals (Cenoz, 1998)

THREE PRINCIPLES TO START

So what can we, as teachers do to make use of multilingualism in classrooms? Here are some examples (see *Activities to support multilingualism at home — parents' guide on how to motivate children to use the family languages* for more concrete ideas).

Contrasting

It is fun and interesting to compare how different languages describe certain concepts. For example, the names for family members, colours, objects, numbers etc. (see activity no. 6 and 8)

Comparing

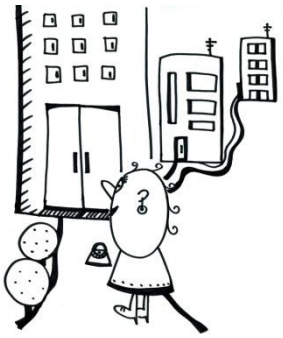
How does language X describe certain concepts, such as time? Where are verbs positioned within a sentence? (see activity no. 15)

Collecting

Finding words in “My languages” that are similar to others can be fun but also be very productive (for example the word for tea in many languages is “chai”; find out why and where it comes from) (see activity no. 9).

Generally it seems advisable to let children play with languages and to make all languages that exist within a group visible. Note that children very often do not differentiate between dominant languages and less dominant ones – as adults tend to do – and using the language of all the children in a class makes them important.

Teachers do not have to know all the languages, but can rely on the expert knowledge of the children – they are the experts.



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