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Young bilingual children's access to participation: minority languages in early childhood settings in London

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Background

For the youngest children questions of 'democracy' are likely to be considered in the curriculum areas of personal and social development. Children's emerging self-identity and the developing sense of others is well explored in much of the literature on early childhood. In this paper I will consider a particular aspect of identity and community membership for young children. Within many early childhood settings in London there are bilingual children who speak as their first language a minority language. In nurseries and schools near to the University of North London these languages would for example include Bengali, Urdu, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, Somali, Tigrinya and Farsi.

This paper links to wider research I am undertaking into training for work with young bilingual children. I am interested in asking what kinds of experience help educators working with young children develop their understanding of the skills and needs of young bilingual children, in order that they can develop practice which allows all the children in a group to have a 'voice'. The situations I am exploring are those in which there may be several different languages represented in one group, or there may be one or only a few bilingual children among a large group of children speaking only English. For some children there are peers who share a first language, for others there are none. There is often no access to adults who are able to communicate in the home language(s) of these young children.

My questions (and concerns) have arisen from my own experience of working in London with young children and their families, and my teaching of students who are, or who are going to become, professionals working with young children in education and care. Students I am working with share these concerns, and bring a depth of personal knowledge and experience to the issues. Many are themselves speakers of minority community languages, whose understanding might support children particularly effectively (Nieto, 1999).

While we think about the ways in which children learn about each other in their close, personal and then increasingly wider communities, in London there is both a need and an opportunity to explore with children the diversity within their nursery or school communities. (Ross 2001) The 'belonging and connecting' which young children need to experience and the possibility to contribute may be difficult for many children to negotiate. This may impact significantly on young children's learning (Cummins 1996, Siraj Blatchford and Clarke 2000). For young bilingual children who are not yet fluent in the majority language of the nursery or classroom, those opportunities may be very distant unless adults and other children understand the need for all of us to have a voice, and to be heard. For many children in London who are members of the wider European community some of the first explorations of similarity and difference, and lessons of equality/inequality, will take place in nurseries and classrooms where children are from a very wide range of different cultural and linguistic community backgrounds.

I am interested in looking at whether students on early childhood courses at the University of North London

- consider the published curriculum for early childhood in England provides a model for the inclusion of the voices of those children who come from minority language communities in London and who may, when entering early childhood settings, be in the early stages of learning English
- consider the curriculum they actually experience, as it is developed in early childhood settings, allows the voices of bilingual children to be heard
- feel they are able to influence this curriculum

The curriculum for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000) for children from three to six years old has met broadly with agreement that there is some cause for hope: this is a curriculum document which does to some extent acknowledge the diversity of experiences and home backgrounds which children bring. However there is also reason for concern, as this Foundation Stage curriculum does not develop the theme of inclusion as fully as many would wish, and the curriculum which children meet after the age of six is less concerned with personal and social development, emotional well-being or issues of diversity. The National Literacy Strategy. (DfEE 1998) which determines work in literacy and language for the vast majority of children also raises for many of us questions about representation of linguistic diversity and children's rights.

The research

This was carried out with two groups of students whom I have been teaching.

The students

1. Students studying on the Early Childhood Studies degree programme. These students are all studying part time; most of them are working as practitioners with young children, a few are not currently in work but each week spend some hours in an early childhood setting.
2. Students who are studying on a one-year full time, postgraduate course (Post Graduate Certificate in Education). These students are training to teach young children from three to eight years and are taught at the university for one year, during that time undertaking periods of supervised practice in schools.

The courses

The courses on which the students are studying each involve significant elements which address issues of equality of access, and specifically issues of bilingualism. This is not true of all such courses in England and is in fact a distinctive feature of work at this university.

The curriculum for those students studying for the Early Childhood Studies degree is not determined by professional bodies or the requirements of the regulations for courses for teaching: it is a general and broad early childhood studies curriculum with strong emphasis on equality and diversity. The curriculum for those studying to qualify as a teacher is closely determined by central requirements. This puts particular pressure on the course and the university struggles to maintain space for those aspects which it considers

to be essential for all teachers and especially for the majority of its students who are going to work in inner London.

The approach

I drew on background information from discussions with students both individually and in class groups. I have then used

- questionnaires to students from both courses
- a review of the problems identified for action research projects undertaken as part of an early childhood studies module, which specifically address work with young bilingual children
- interviews.

The questionnaires

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire about the curriculum as both a published document and as they saw it practised in their workplace/practice placement. The students on the Early Childhood Studies programme completed the questionnaire at the end of a ten-week module which specifically considered young bilingual children. The student teachers completed the questionnaire two-thirds of the way through their course. At this stage most of their study in the university had been completed and they had just begun a final two-month period of teaching practice.

All students were asked

- how far they considered the national curriculum document for the age group to be an inclusive curriculum for bilingual children
- how far they considered the actual practice in their setting to be inclusive
- to comment on any perceived areas of strength or weakness
- how far they considered the practice in the setting to be inclusive for young bilingual children in the early stages of learning English.

Students on the Early Childhood Studies degree were also asked to comment on whether the small-scale action research into work with bilingual children, undertaken as part of the module, had changed their practice and whether it had changed the practice of colleagues.

Students on the teaching course were asked to assess both their first practice placement and to indicate what they expected in their second placement. They were asked to say whether they felt that they had been able/would be able to influence practice.

26 students from the PGCE course responded to the 35 questionnaires sent out.

10 students from the ECSS course have responded to date; these questionnaires continue to be returned (20 questionnaires were sent out).

What the responses show

1. The document as published (all students)
 - only two students felt that this curriculum was *very inclusive*,
 - one student felt that it was *not at all inclusive*.
 - other responses were evenly balanced about the degree of inclusion – a little/quite inclusive.
2. Of the practice experienced (all students)
 - 8 students felt that it was *not at all inclusive* in relation to bilingual children.
 - 6 students felt that the practice was *very inclusive*. None of these six students considered the published curriculum to be very inclusive.
3. The action research undertaken (Early Childhood Studies degree)
 - All ten responses from the students who had undertaken action research stated that it had supported the development of their practice.
 - All students said that they felt that it had influenced the practice of colleagues, at least to some degree or in some aspects, although one student clearly identified this as being only “or the short term”.
4. Teaching practice experiences (Post Graduate Certificate in Education)
 - 18 of the teaching students felt they influenced practice in their first placement.
 - Three did not, and all of these also felt that the curriculum they observed did not reflect the needs of bilingual children at all.

Thinking ahead to their second, forthcoming practice all the students felt they would be able to influence practice. However, ten felt that it might be difficult and seven of these ten students felt that the practice they had already observed did not support bilingual children well.

Interviews

At this stage of the research I have interviewed only a small sample of five students taken from both courses. Some of the key points which are emerging are:

- that students on the Early Childhood Studies scheme feel that there are severe limitations for staff who are not in roles of influence in the workplace, and who work with and ‘under’ other staff who do not share their concerns about the needs of bilingual children.
- that within this same group of students there are concerns about how the skills of bilingual practitioners are perceived, and that sometimes they are seen as simply facilitating interpreting and translation for practical issues. These are considered to be important, but it is felt that the support for cognitive development, which could be given, is not recognised. (There may be a very significant issue here if it is a common situation that bilingual staff who speak a minority language are more often in the less managerial roles.)

- that the small action research project, which is an assessed part of the course for the first time this year, may offer not only an important learning experience for the practitioner or student, but also give them a way to influence practice for children, even if they are not in a leading role.
- that a particular aspect of learning on the courses comes from the opportunity to learn directly from others' experiences of being bilingual.
- that the students do not on the whole feel that they are working with colleagues who have had education for working with bilingual children, and that for all children, but especially those in the early stages of learning English, this means that children's voices are not heard.

Review of the areas addressed in action research projects by students

The problems identified are in three main categories

1. limited initial information about children coming into the nursery or class
2. insufficient information to parents/carers who are not fluent in English about the setting and their involvement in the setting
3. further support is needed for bilingual children to access the curriculum – particular focus on story and song
4. concerns about lack of acknowledgement in many settings of the issues (across the whole curriculum) and the need to improve the ethos.

Initial review of the work undertaken (from course presentations and feedback) suggests that even where students felt relatively positive about the practice in their workplace there were clearly identified areas of concern. Addressing some of these concerns and evaluating work done has led to some changes in practice and a feeling that bilingual children have a greater voice in the setting. In some cases the difference is seen as very significant.

Where next?

As the final questionnaires are returned and students' assessed work on their action research is completed, my next steps are to revisit the material collected and carry out further interviews in greater depth. My intuition is that there are definite effects from 'action' taken as part of a course, not only in terms of students' own learning but also in terms of some influence on the wider team. This seems to be more specific than when observation without action research is required on the course. I also feel from the material collected from interviews to date that bilingual students may bring some specific understanding to their practice whether or not they share the home/first language of the children with whom they are working. This appears to be so in both the observations of children and in the analysis of this observation.

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