

# VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

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## Ian Jones

In a belated but nonetheless welcome initiative, the government has begun to address the issue of the achievement of ethnic minority pupils. In its recently launched consultation document 'Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Minority Ethnic Pupils' the DfES sets out its thinking and outlines a proposed strategy. The document identifies the features of successful schools such as strong leadership, high expectations and effective teaching and learning but also recognises that certain groups of pupils have particular needs 'which schools have a responsibility to meet'.

The needs of bilingual learners, African Caribbean pupils and 'mobile' pupils are addressed in specific sections. It is the intention, 'to develop a comprehensive EAL strand' as part of the strategy. Finally, the document discusses funding and offers four options for the future use of the money currently delivered through EMAG.

For many years NALDIC has argued for a coherent national approach that would set EAL in the mainstream context without being marginalised but which would at the same time recognise the distinctive nature of the field. We have argued that this strategy should be adequately funded in a way that ensured that all EAL pupils received the type and quantity of support appropriate to their age and level of English language development. We have argued for the development of training programmes including a recognised specialist qualification to ensure the effective delivery of an appropriate curriculum for EAL pupils and for a national formative assessment system for EAL to ensure that their needs are accurately identified.

The consultation process now underway and the government's commitment to develop an EAL strand within a national strategy affords us an opportunity to assist in shaping the future of EAL in schools.

The DfES approach to the development of the strategy has been encouraging so far. An Ethnic Minority Achievement Team has been established, including practitioners seconded to provide specialist input. Working groups have been established on a more inclusive basis than in the past and there has been more open approach to consultation with a willingness to engage in discussion and debate in a positive way which it is to be hoped will be sustained in the future. In the past, it has too often the case that individuals or groups offering criticism or alternatives out of step with department proposals were dismissed or ignored. There is a sense that views are being widely

sought and listened to. Having said that, it is unfortunate that the recent consultation conferences seem to have taken a step backwards and missed the opportunity for some constructive consultation.

Despite the more open approach to the development of the strategy, there is of course the question of what the strategy looks like, its implications and whether it will achieve its objectives particularly, for NALDIC, in relation to bilingual pupils. Two important issues will impact on this. Firstly, the fact that ministers tend to take little notice of ideas that, in their perception, challenge or fall outside their broad policy parameters. Secondly, there appears to be no new money to fund the strategy. Much is made of the increased funding to schools, and while this is to be welcomed, we know the reality of work with EAL pupils on the ground.

The implementation of a new funding formula for the distribution of EMAG, while long overdue, will adversely affect some authorities. This could be compounded by the possibility of the grant being top sliced to fund training or other aspects of the strategy. In contrast, the existing national strategies were well funded; money was found for EiC initiatives. While these and other approaches will obviously impact on minority ethnic pupils, one would have thought there would be a case for at least a modest increase to support initiatives which involve nearly 20% of the school population including 9% who are bilingual. In their report 'Managing Support for the Attainment of Minority Ethnic Groups' published in 2001, Ofsted recognised that the demands on the funding were increasing. In the light of this finding, the introduction of something as important as an effective and comprehensive training programme covering ITT, EAL specialists and non-specialist staff ought to be subject to additional funding rather than be an extra demand on a limited EMA Grant.

One of the difficulties for EAL pupils is that their particular needs, while recognised, are being set in the context of an achievement driven strategy. Although, EAL has a strong links to achievement, it is also important to see pupils' EAL needs in their own right. In this context, the National Curriculum, the inclusion agenda and the operation of the Race Relations Amendment Act reinforce the conceptualisation of EAL as entitlement. As with Special Educational Needs, a balance between the use of mainstream and focused funding becomes easier to implement from this perspective. Recent interest in developing a Code of Practice for EAL pupils would be relevant. A Code of Practice could set out levels of support, including those for advanced learners, of particular importance in the light of the recently published (2003) Ofsted research, 'More Advanced Learners of English as an Additional Language in Schools and Colleges'. A code of practice would also impact on the development of a national approach to formative EAL assessment and perhaps

more significantly would be a positive incentive to meet bilingual pupils' needs rather than the negative incentives provided by Ofsted inspection and the Race relations Amendment Act.

Each LEA's context is different, so it is essential the element of local decision making in relation to the use of the funding is retained. This will be particularly important if the implementation of the strategy significantly affects staffing in schools. Much of EMAG is still used to employ staff; it is to be hoped that the impact of the strategy is not the opposite of its stated intentions and that the situation does not arise where there are less EAL specialists and less black staff in schools.

Whether the proposals and the funding options set out in the consultation document have the potential or the capacity to deliver a strategy for EAL learners which is more than tokenistic or which simply subsumes their needs within a whole school approach and a training strategy based entirely on the existing national models remains to be seen.

What is important is that NALDIC members contribute to the development of the National Strategy by responding to the consultation exercise in whatever way they can. The DfES is asking for our comments and for alternative suggestions. We may not get another such opportunity to express our views. NALDIC is working on a formal response from the association and the Committee would welcome opinions. Some initial thoughts are included in this edition of NALDIC News. Above all, we want the strategy to be based on what is best for bilingual learners not just on what is most convenient or because it's being done anyway or because it's cheap.