

VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

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Since April, three issues have emerged which have a bearing on EAL and the work of members for the future.

So far there has been little indication of how the DfES intends to proceed in relation to the distribution of EMAG for 2003/4. Given the difficulties caused by the gradual erosion of the value of the grant through inflation and the consequent dwindling of the numbers of specialist EAL staff, it is to be hoped that any major changes in the means of distribution are at least cushioned by an increase in the total amount of the grant. Otherwise the position for EAL learners is likely to be adversely affected.

One recent DfES initiative, which may ultimately impact on the grant, has been an Excellence in Cities/EMAG scheme. This involves 10 pilot authorities receiving £40,000 a year EiC grant for 3 years to develop innovative projects to raise minority ethnic achievement or to encapsulate good practice. The pilot LEAs are mainly cities and London boroughs and a number of these have included EAL work in their projects. The work is mainly secondary and, like other EiC funding, is tied to targets and while, like EMAG, the money is ring fenced, the 3 year time limit means that posts are likely to be specific purpose contracts.

On the positive side, the money is over and above EMAG and will give the opportunity for some innovative work to be carried out or for aspects of good practice to be firmed up and disseminated. If it is deemed to be successful then it is possible that the scheme might be extended to other areas and be expanded to increase primary involvement. There is, however, the possibility that this could be seen as a means of distributing EMAG funding. In this case, some serious issues of equitability and accountability would arise, particularly as much EiC funding is based on bidding. Although EAL has space within the pilot projects, another worry would be the potential for further erosion of EAL as a specialism within an EiC type framework. As the projects are for three years this may be some way off and would be more likely to be an issue for the next 3 year spending review.

Support for appropriate EAL provision should be strengthened by the implementation of the Race Relations Amendment Act. The deadline has passed for schools to have in place a distinct race equality policy to comply with the Act. One of the worrying features of the exercise for many authorities was the number of schools that felt they were starting from scratch and had no policy at all - an indication of the

decline in the profile of anti racist work over the past ten years. Whether schools have completed work on their policies at this stage or not, the obligation to monitor progress and to look at the implications of school policies and activities on minority ethnic groups has been established. The CRE's Guide for Schools on the Statutory Code of Practice makes clear reference to language, curriculum and cultural needs (p11), while the use of the CRE's Learning for All or an equivalent monitoring device is endorsed. Although it does not cover EAL in great depth, it is a relatively straightforward matter to incorporate a more detailed section on EAL using the same or a similar format. This provides members with opportunities to ensure that language work is incorporated into school policy and related action plans and, more importantly, that the issue is regularly discussed in the context of equality and achievement.

The strong emphasis on inclusion, however, sits a little uncomfortably with new immigration legislation that is moving towards isolation and exclusion in relation to the children of asylum seekers.

It looks as if David Blunkett is going to press ahead with proposals to place some 3000 asylum seekers, including families, in accommodation centres pending decisions on their applications. It is proposed that children will be educated in the centres rather than in schools, only transferring to mainstream education if their applications are successful. Tony Cline in Naldic News 26 reminded us that 'segregated arrangements reinforce difference and restrict access to important educational opportunities' to which could be added that they emphasise power relationships and develop and reinforce negative perceptions of refugees by the host community. The implications of this for language development are quite considerable.

The question arises as to what kind of education will be put in place. The Act states that the provision will not be schools in the accepted sense but that Ofsted would monitor the quality of education. On what basis is not clear. Mainstream schools as institutions are more or less geared to meet the educational needs of their pupils and have in place appropriate pastoral and academic systems into which new pupils can be incorporated. The centres will be unlikely to be able to recreate this range of structures particularly when the underlying political imperative of containment and control is likely to determine the educational context. One wonders how far the centres can genuinely aim to prepare pupils for the mainstream education system or whether their educational functions will be largely mediated by the expectation that the bulk of pupils will be returned to their country of origin.

It is not clear what the age profile and appropriate curriculum needs might be nor what other needs might be included. There is therefore an issue of viability particularly for the delivery of the full curriculum range at secondary level. Children and adults will come with a range of educational and linguistic

experiences; some will speak some English, others very little. Although it is intended that English teaching is made available, in what form and to what extent remains to be seen. Furthermore, In allocating asylum seekers to the centres, it is suggested that some grouping by language takes place in order to minimise the number of interpreters required. This would have implications for effective language and learning provision with the temptation to adopt some of the features of the former German 'gastarbeiter' programmes where mother tongue was used for curriculum learning, not as part of a bilingual programme but with the underlying expectation of eventual return.

In language teaching terms, several factors are likely to move the approach into particular directions. Psychological issues will affect the language learning process while contact with established communities and support agencies is likely to be limited. Contact with the real world in terms of both social and academic language interactions and exposure to a variety of English models and language contexts is likely to be restricted.

The stated intention is that children will not stay in the accommodation centres for more than six months. Whether this is achievable is difficult to say. In any case, in the UK in the past, transferring from language centres to mainstream schools was not always easy and the consequences of restricted language learning and educational opportunities, institutionalisation, interrupted education and the possible failure to build on prior knowledge are likely to impact adversely on refugee pupils who are eventually admitted to mainstream schools.

It would be wrong to pretend that problems such as racism, the difficulty of obtaining school places or the quality of accommodation do not exist at present, but isolating children in this way can hardly be an educationally sound solution. Pupils will learn some English - educational classes take place in prisons - but the role of English in the process will be different. The tendency will be towards minimal functional English supported by teaching through mother tongue, not as a means of empowerment but as a means of control.

Whatever provision is eventually made it should be scrutinised carefully, in order that our worst fears as educators and language teachers are not realised.