

VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

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I want to focus on the question of expertise in EAL teaching. We have a situation in which not only established multilingual schools, but a wide range of schools are enrolling considerable numbers of youngsters with little or no experience of using English. We are also aware that learning to use the more formal, academic and literary registers of English is a major factor in the success or otherwise at school of children from established bilingual communities.

This is why expertise is a major issue in our educational response to the presence of children using EAL. The plain fact is that the number of sufficiently trained, qualified and experienced EAL teachers is very limited.

Many class and subject teachers are struggling to offer the kind of language conscious pedagogy necessary to enable EAL learners to engage with the language and content of the curriculum. This is not the fault of the teachers, the majority of whom are concerned to do their best for all pupils. Initial teacher training has tended to provide little preparation for the multilingual classroom and continuing professional development has often been patchy and inconsistent. Even with better preparation and training we cannot expect all teachers to become experts in EAL teaching, but if they have access to well-informed school and classroom support then we can expect them to develop a linguistically conscious approach to their teaching.

What then does an EAL expert bring to the classroom situation? The best of EAL work in the last twenty-five years has:

- integrated content and language learning across the curriculum.
- involved the linguistic analysis of subject matter and thinking skills.
- provided an integrated balance between speaking and listening and reading and writing
- built in a lot of teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interaction.

- structured the language and learning demands of lesson content.
- provided appropriate cognitive challenge with controlled language demands.

This last point emphasises that EAL in the mainstream classroom is not about ‘dumbing down’ or lowering expectations. Good EAL work has often led class and subject teachers to respond by saying “Actually these activities are good for all the pupils in the class.” The reason for this, perhaps lies in the way in which EAL teachers have always had to think carefully about vocabulary, sentence structure and text structure in order to develop bilingual pupils’ reading and writing skills. This kind of consideration may indeed be important for many monolingual pupils too.

There are some promising developments in this respect coming from the Primary and Secondary National Strategies. However, I worry that these promising developments will prove less effective than they could be without the EAL expertise ‘on the ground’ to put the theory into practice.

The NFER evaluation of the EAL Pilot / Programme reported that schools were of the opinion that effective use of EAL consultancy time included:

Partnership teaching.

Working with class teachers to help them in the planning of EAL strategies into existing units of work

discussing any issues or confusions individually with teachers.

observing and monitoring practice within the classroom

In other words, schools value expert ‘hands on’ support.

Why am I so worried about the question of EAL expertise? In the field of EAL we are an ageing professional community and younger colleagues are not choosing to specialise in this field because they regard it as an area with

- unstable employment,
- limited career opportunities

- and constant year on year uncertainty about continued grant funding.

As it stands, a considerable number of staff employed through EMAG are not qualified but are enthusiastic, willing and yet lacking professional knowledge and skills. Partly this is due to the fact that opportunities to gain specialist qualifications are now much more limited than they were twenty years ago. In response to this situation many schools are now employing teaching assistants (who are of course cheaper) and opting for quantity of support rather than searching in vain for quality.

As experienced and qualified colleagues retire or are made redundant, we will be reducing the capacity of the education system to respond positively and equably to increased EU and global mobility. We are capable of adapting to greater linguistic diversity and moving towards first class educational provision for all, but not without building a coherent long term and adequately resourced strategy for recruiting, training and employing EAL teaching specialists.