

Combating disadvantage in the classroom and curriculum

Many authors and researchers have stressed the importance of relationships between educators and bilingual children and young people. It is argued that the development of a state of emotional security and well being contributes to a positive learning environment. If a bilingual learner feels valued, has a positive sense of identity and is engaged cognitively in activities that are challenging, interactive and instructive, then learning takes place.

Many researchers have however uncovered evidence that bilingual learners face isolation and educational disadvantage. For example, Cline et al (2002) found that many children in mainly monolingual schools 'play white'; that many teachers in these schools minimise the significance and the value of cultural and ethnic diversity; and that provision for bilingual learners is variable with few schools having strategies in place for supporting children with EAL beyond the initial stages of English language acquisition. [Chen](#) found that young Chinese children who enter urban primary schools feel isolated, are bullied and suffer academically due to lack of support in learning English.

Student teachers will need to understand that combating the disadvantage facing bilingual learners is not a simple matter of establishing good classroom relationships between teachers and learners. It is also concerned with the content of the curriculum and the complex relationship between language and power.

Cummins has argued that school success is created in educator-student interactions that simultaneously affirm student identities and provide a balance of explicit instruction focused on language, content, and strategies together with extensive opportunities for students to engage with literacy and collaborative critical inquiry. (Cummins, 2000: 268). Teachers can thus promote equality for their bilingual students through affirmation of their identities and through opportunities for critical exploration of language and curriculum in relation to their experiences, histories and concerns.

Many authors have argued that the marginalisation of EAL curriculum and assessment concerns may contribute to the 'invisibility' of bilingual learners and educational discrimination against them. For example, a recent OFSTED survey of good practice in relation to bilingual pupils' writing development (OFSTED, 2005, p 1) noted that 'Bilingual learners may be unwittingly disadvantaged when their oral fluency masks a continuing need for literacy support'. (p 1). In the same document, an example is provided of how the lack of a rigorous monitoring of the language acquisition of bilingual learners had negative consequences on their progress and achievement.

69. A lack of rigorous analysis in some schools visited meant that issues affecting the specific needs or progress of advanced bilingual learners (or other underachieving groups) were not identified and tackled. In one school, of the 28 pupils who had attained level 2 in writing at the end of Key Stage 1, almost half (13) did not reach level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2 in 2004. The school had not realised that all these underachieving pupils were pupils with EAL. One school noted:

The proportion of EAL pupils who did not meet their target in 2004 and failed to achieve level 4 is significantly higher than EIL pupils.

However, it had not identified a clear strategy for tackling this.
(OFSTED, 2005, p 23)

Had the schools in question been maintaining comprehensive nationally agreed EAL assessment information relating to the long term language development of pupils learning EAL, their relative lack of progress in National Curriculum English writing levels would have been contextualised by their EAL progress measures over the previous two years. Not only may this monitoring have exposed the issue in time for the school to take effective action but would also have provided them with a clear framework for action which could have translated into classroom strategies. For example, such information would have enabled teachers to discriminate between those pupils who were making progress in acquiring English as an additional language but were possibly experiencing more general literacy difficulties and those for whom acquisition of EAL in general was proving problematic and how to address these distinct and different needs. A failure to recognise and meet the distinctive needs of EAL learners within the education system can thus contribute to educational disadvantage.

Student teachers will also need to be alert to the possibility of encountering the [marginalisation of EAL specialist staff](#) and their expertise within their placement schools.

References

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