

## Expectations of pupils

The evidence that many teachers continue to have low expectations of pupils from some ethnic and linguistic minorities can be found in the impact of largely hidden, day-to-day decisions about such issues as placement in streamed classes. HMI have observed that, where schools emphasise tight setting, some groups learning EAL (notably pupils from the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities) are likely to be placed disproportionately in low sets, especially in English (Ofsted, 1999). A review of the research literature has indicated that reports of this phenomenon have been appearing regularly for nearly twenty years (Hallam and Tattounji, 1996, p. 16). For example, Troyna and Siraj-Blatchford (1993) traced the progress through secondary school of a group of South Asian pupils who were assessed on entry as needing ESL support. They showed that, even if these pupils were seen as of “average” ability in the last year of junior school, they were very likely to remain in lower ability sets for English and Maths between Years 7 and 10. They were then likely to be allocated to a low status Alternative Modular Curriculum exam option in Year 11.

The introduction of tiered GCSE examinations has added new risks of discriminatory decision making at that stage. Gilborn and Youdell (2000) have shown that black children are markedly less likely to be entered for higher tier examinations, depriving them of the opportunity to win higher grades. It would be worth repeating this analysis with children learning EAL. If there is a political and professional will to address such evidence of inequity, the means is easily to hand. An overall strategy might include regular self-auditing within schools and the analysis of ethnic group allocations to sets and tiered examinations during inspections.

However, the discrimination that leads to such outcomes arises from unwitting processes that operate in very subtle ways. Teachers of EAL will be aware of it particularly in the ideas that other professionals have about bilingual children’s language proficiency. Competence in a community language is often simply ignored when evaluating a child’s abilities. A particularly striking illustration of this is found when children learning EAL are assessed for special educational needs. For example, a content analysis of the case papers of 35 children with moderate learning difficulties and EAL in Glasgow indicated that many of the professionals who had assessed the children had simply overlooked the EAL dimension. In the school’s form in the official Records of Need (the equivalent of an English Statement of SEN) language was mentioned in describing the child’s difficulties in only about half the cases and bilingualism was referred to in the language assessment in less than a fifth of the cases. In the psychologist’s assessment of language reference was made to the child’s bilingualism or ESL status in only two thirds of the cases, and the child’s first language was assessed in only half of the cases (Curnyn et al, 1991). Studies of SEN assessment papers in other cities have yielded similar findings (Cline and Shamsi, 2000, p. 28).

Perhaps underestimating the significance of bilingual language proficiency is a particular expression of institutional racism in traditionally monolingual societies. Those of us in education who are monolingual face increasing challenges as our communities of pupils become more bilingual and multilingual. In a recent project involving bilingual and monolingual teachers in primary schools Guida de Abreu, Bina Radia-Bond and I were struck by a difference in how some teachers in each group described the impact of their pupils’ language competence on their learning of mathematics. It seemed to us that the teachers articulated their accounts of the mediating role of language around two possible functions that language might have in learning. It might be a cognitive and communicative tool (e.g. supporting or expressing understanding of key concepts and operations), or it might mediate a sense of identity (e.g. as the focus of feelings about being comfortable or embarrassed about using different languages in different contexts).

“Sasha”, a bilingual support teacher from the Pakistani community, had an awareness of language as an identity mediator that seemed to derive from her own experiences when she was a child in an English school. To survive school she had had to exclude and silence her Pakistani home culture. She recounted this experience in the following way:

I think the thing is that sometimes when you are from a bilingual background I mean I can only relate this back to myself because myself is the only person I know well enough but I can always remember when I went to school it wasn't like it is now where these children have there's so much emphasis placed on their mother tongue, I mean I'm here you know supporting them in their mother tongue. I can remember when I was in school and I wouldn't dream of ever saying any word in my own language at school. Just the embarrassment of it would kill me you know. But yeah, I am much more stronger because I think I have, I have that other language.

While she acknowledged that school attitudes towards the use of home languages had shifted towards more inclusive approaches, she thought that the children in her school still felt shy about their mother tongue: “...they won't express themselves because they think it's something just for home.” Her aim was to have them using whichever language helped them best to explain what they wanted to say. Towards the middle of the year she felt that they were becoming much more comfortable and they were actually using the home language in the way she asked. For her it

was important as a teacher to overcome the prejudiced perspective that they had projected as their view of what school would require of them.

We also examined the account of children's use of language by one of her monolingual colleagues, "Annette", a highly effective teacher who incorporated language stimuli into her teaching of mathematics in a challenging and supportive way. Annette also believed children should be given the opportunity to develop their language, but her conception of developing language to support the learning of a particular subject such as mathematics was predominantly cognitive. Thus, for instance, she described how home environments may constrain a child's language development so that this is then translated into a limited range of vocabulary that impairs understanding. That is why it needs to be developed. So these two teachers both expressed the view that it was a part of their role to give the children access to language that would offer them the opportunity to participate actively in classroom mathematics. Both were seen as skilled practitioners, but they drew on quite distinct representations to inform their practices (Abreu et al, 2001, p.15).

The narrow focus of the monolingual teacher, which limited her sensitivity to important aspects of her pupils' development as users of language for school learning, may be seen to have had its roots in a long tradition of monolingual views of language development (Grosjean, 1985). As Sasha recognised, much has changed since she went to school, but the underlying cultural resistance to bilingualism can be seen as a continuing feature not only of the overt national curriculum but of the covert attitudes that monolingual speakers bring to their work as educators. The downgrading of knowledge and skills in other languages appears to derive from a basically racist set of assumptions that are fed by the international status of English as a language.

**Author**

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