

Listening to bilingual children

How children are acknowledged by practitioners, including student practitioners, in the setting relates to the way children communicate. Their ‘voice’ is established through the ways they communicate, including through spoken exchanges at any given moment and over time. If this is not established because they are, as yet, unable to engage in spoken exchanges in English with adults and their peers, they may be viewed as not having a ‘voice’, as ‘silent’. Since ‘voice’ registers presence, sometimes they may even become ‘invisible’. However, if practice can be extended so that the voices of the bilingual children can be heard, providing insights into the strengths they bring to their learning, a more constructive perspective can be established.

The Mosaic Approach

Rather than viewing bilingual children’s linguistic diversity as presenting potential difficulties, developing a range of ‘multilingual’ methodologies can construct wider windows on their learning and deepen our understanding of it. Clark and Moss (2001), in their Mosaic Approach to listening to young children, have developed a helpful framework for listening. They point out that listening consists of the following dimensions:

- multi-method:** recognises the different ‘voices’ or languages of children;
 - participatory:** treats children as experts and agents in their own lives;
 - reflexive:** includes children, practitioners and parents in reflecting on meanings; addresses the question of interpretation;
 - adaptable:** can be applied in a variety of early childhood institutions;
 - focused on children’s lived experiences:** can be used for a variety of purposes including looking at lives lived rather than knowledge gained or care received;
 - embedded into practice:** a framework for listening which has the potential to be both used as an evaluative tool and to become embedded into early years practice.
- (Clark and Moss, 2001, p.5)

Student practitioners should recognise that the process of capturing and understanding young bilingual children’s voices and interaction is complex and multifaceted. They should also recognise that bilingual children may have considerable linguistic strengths which may be obscured if they are viewed solely as learners new to the dominant educational language. Below we adopt the Mosaic Approach framework and develop it further by analysing how bilingual children’s voices can be listened to, captured and represented. This presents a summary of how multilingual learning episodes, such as [Samia’s ‘school game’](#), and the range of languages spoken in schools today have the potential to create optimal conditions for listening as advocated by Clark and Moss (2001). It also represents what practitioners can gain from the process.

The benefits for practitioners of listening to bilingual children
Multi-Method Approach
Because the most obvious language (the spoken word) cannot always be relied upon, it becomes necessary to interpret the other ‘hundred languages’ of children (Rinaldi, 2005) and to trust the various idiosyncratic and contextualised ways in which young children convey meaning (such as through non-verbal communication, gestures, mark making, singing, play and so on). Working with bilingual children helps practitioners to routinely adopt a multi-method approach, and to acknowledge and validate the many creative ways in which all young children convey meaning. A multi-method approach is good practice for all children.
Participatory Process
Accepting and recognising bilingual children as experts and agents in their own lives - including recognising these children as linguistic experts - facilitates a closer listening process. Listening to bilingual children and their parents speaking in an unfamiliar language forces the practitioner to leave some of his/her presumptions behind, and to work closely with those who share the children’s languages, such as bilingual teaching assistants, and who can translate. This has the potential to challenge established power relationships and to empower parents and others from linguistic minorities.
Reflexive
When working with bilingual children and their parents, the role of the translator or interpreter has the potential to evolve, and the term ‘mediator’ captures the multifaceted role of the translator/interpreter more effectively. Mediators act as cultural brokers and they translate, not only the language, but also the cultural

traditions. They also act as general advisors and 'insider informants'. This routinely gives rise to discussions and debates about words and their meanings, about literal translations, about individual interpretations of meaning, and about different points of view. This can help practitioners to reflect and evaluate their own beliefs and practices.

Adaptable

The process of working out different kinds of bilingual voices, yields a deeper understanding of young children, their families and communities. Adapting to hear these voices by using different strategies, methods, and approaches is a necessary process which, in itself, supports practitioners to develop mutually trusting relationship with children, their families and communities.

Focused on Children's Lived Experiences

Working with bilingual children in early childhood settings including voluntary community-based organisations (such as community language schools) and focusing on lived experiences, reveals the cultural nature of learning. Teaching and learning in settings take place through active participation, through living the life of a community member. The processes of constructing knowledge takes place within social systems, and these are based on specific beliefs, traditions and value systems. These cannot be located within a single model of learning.

Embedded into Practice

Listening to all children, families and practitioners, including bi- and multilingual children and adults has the potential to develop into an inclusive evaluative tool, and subsequently to become embedded into early years practice.

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References

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Rinaldi, C. (2005) *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia*. London: Routledge

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