

The organisation of EAL teaching

When it was first necessary to make provision for EAL teaching on a significant scale the approach that was adopted to organising it built on what was then well-established practice in organising provision for handicapped children. The rationale was that, if children have particular difficulties in school, they are most easily helped if they are put together with other children whose needs are similar. This will allow special facilities and specially trained staff to be made available to children who need them in a more straightforward and efficient way. It will also ensure that they do not make excessive demands on staff who are not prepared for them and that the additional attention they require does not divert the teachers' time from other pupils.

It was soon recognised (or at least recognised within a generation) that the effect of such segregated arrangements is to reinforce an awareness of difference among both the pupils who are put away and those who remain in the mainstream and to restrict access to important educational opportunities. When the Commission for Racial Equality enquiry condemned the segregated arrangements that Calderdale Borough Council made for children who failed an English language screening test in the 80's, key findings of their investigation were that "...children in both language centres have no access to a normal school environment" (CRE, 1986, p. 9) and that even in school-based language units 'the range of subjects... was narrower than that covered by the mainstream classes... (they) had no practical classes, no music, no foreign languages and no specific periods for religious education' (CRE, 1986, p. 12). Such concerns have been important in fuelling a movement away from segregated facilities in both EAL and SEN provision (Frederickson and Cline, 2002, chapter 3).

Of course, virtually all teaching of EAL is based in mainstream settings now and free of the taint of stigmatisation and exclusion - or is it? In an earlier phase of a series of case studies of mathematics teaching we noted significant differences between the primary schools on two sites. With one exception all the teachers who were interviewed from the linked infants and junior schools on site B mentioned language as a factor in the way mathematics teaching was organised. In those two schools English language support teachers regularly joined the mathematics teaching planning meetings and supported the teaching of both low and high achievers. In the linked schools on site A teachers rarely mentioned language as a factor in their teaching of mathematics, although a high proportion of their pupils were learning EAL. We noted that in these schools language support for pupils with EAL was available only in the lower maths sets (Abreu, Cline and Radia-Bond, 2001, p. 5).

In a case study of the organisation of teaching groups in one secondary GM school Gillborn and Youdell (2000) showed how a shortage of EAL teaching resources had led to a "rational" planning decision that had had unintended discriminatory consequences. "The school reports that it has a particularly high number of EAL learners and provides a substantial amount of learning support within classrooms. This support is concentrated in the lower school, mostly in years 7 and 8. From 1993 the school has concentrated EAL pupils into two of the eight tutor groups. Senior management present this change as driven by the demands of the learning support service, as an attempt to achieve maximum access to classroom-based learning support for the maximum number of EAL learners." (p. 74) Seen from the perspective of the EAL team leader the decision may have seemed clear-cut. When resources were very limited, it made sense to use the numbers of pupils in a teaching group as a means of deciding which groups would and would not be supported. Otherwise such teaching time as there was would be spread very thin indeed. However, the effect in this school was, firstly, to create groups with high and low concentrations of South Asian pupils and, secondly, to place an effective bar on those who needed language support from participating in the school's fast track groups in that year.

One of the ways in which specialist EAL staff can help schools to work towards race equality is by monitoring the impact of decisions about the allocation of their own time and expertise. That is a formidable challenge when the EAL team is itself an interested party in such collusive arrangements. But working towards race equality was never going to be a comfortable process for anyone in the public services

(Adapted slightly from an article by Tony Cline which first appeared in *Naldic News*, 2002.)

References

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