

Using community languages in the mainstream classroom

A number of authors have suggested how to make community languages more prominent in children's lives beyond the home. Student teachers may find the following checklists for action useful

Bhatt, A. Bhojani, N., Creese, A. and Martin, P (2004). Complementary and mainstream schooling: a case for reciprocity? NALDIC Occasional paper 18

- Find out what complementary schools are in your local area and make contact with them. Your LEA may keep a list; the library may advertise; bilingual/EAL teachers, parents and children will know of some.
- Invite complementary school teachers and administrators to any open days at the school.
- Offer to attend complementary schools' prize giving events where the schools share students. Show commitment to their bilingual and multicultural projects.
- Use mainstream school buildings to house complementary school classes.
- If a complementary school uses the mainstream school site, provide permanent space for materials storage, equipment, section of the library, a notice board.
- Use the mainstream classroom to reflect the home and community languages of the children studying there. Make the mainstream classroom a multilingual space.
- Put up a community/language/culture/ notice board giving information about bilingual, community and multicultural events.
- Find out if your teachers work in other complementary school settings – ask them to do INSET/ professional development workshop for other teachers in school
- Engage bilingual parents in multilingual homework activities – not just for early bilingual learners until they learn English
- Find out phrases in different languages which highlight respect and good citizenship and positive attitudes to learning: display these on notice boards around the school.
- Ask a head teacher of complementary school to give an assembly.
- Encourage other bilingual teachers, parents and assistants to actively promote bilingual interactions in classrooms for learning beyond a transition to English.
- Encourage small-scale research and/or practical projects which would harness the potential links between complementary and mainstream schooling
- Incorporate teaching and learning experiences of complementary schooling into individual pupil profiles
- Work with complementary schools to facilitate registration for examinations in community languages

Blackledge, A. (1998) Unit 4: Literacy and Bilingual Learners; Introduction to Bilingualism in Education. University of Birmingham, Educational Materials.

- **Make languages visible.** Many schools have taken a first step towards incorporating pupils' home and community languages into the learning environment by providing signs and notices in the languages of the community. Welcome signs in several languages give a clear and immediate signal to all visitors; labels on displays in the main languages and scripts of the pupils give status to the languages. These labels and notices should be checked: make sure that a notice in an Asian language is not hung upside-down!
- **Provide dual-language texts** When choosing books for the classroom, look for texts written in English and the community languages of the pupils. These should not only be stories which originate in the pupils' culture but also texts which reflect the pupils' lives in England. Although many young children will not yet be biliterate, they can take home dual-text books and read with their parents, who may be literate in their community language, but not in English. The presence of the community language in the children's reading book affirms their cultural and linguistic identity.

- **Provide opportunities for pupils to write in their home/community language.** Pupils will respond to the task of writing in their home/community language when they feel that they have the respect and trust of the teacher. Appropriate tasks for development of biliteracy include writing and publishing dual-language texts for young children, writing articles for the school newspaper, writing letters to the home country, writing dual-language assemblies for performance, and writing home-culture stories.
- **Language as curriculum content.** Languages can be valued and affirmed when teachers place them at the heart of pupils' learning. This may be by talking and writing about languages in the primary school (e.g. "I speak to my sister in English, I speak to my mother in Sylheti..."), or, more formally, by studying community languages (e.g. Urdu) for examinations in the secondary school.
- **Involve minority parents in their children's learning.** One of the most important areas for developing parental input in young children's learning is in the teaching of reading. It is the responsibility of the school to ensure that all parents feel confident about supporting their children's reading, even when they do not read, write or speak English. Teachers need to speak to parents about their role in talking about text in home languages, asking appropriate questions, and building on existing literacy practices.

Kenner, C. (2000) Home Pages: literacy links for bilingual children. Trentham Books.

Kenner suggests the following ideas for encouraging young bilingual learners as writers by strengthening the home school dialogue:

- As part of whole-class discussions invite bilingual children to talk about anything they have been reading or writing at home in any language. You can make it clear that you are interested in all sorts of activities: for example, have they watched cable or satellite TV in a home language? have they got any tapes or videos? have they seen parents or grandparents reading a newspaper?
- Children may be shy about mentioning their home language literacy activities until a multilingual literacy environment begins to be established in the classroom. Once they see their teacher working with texts in a number of languages, they will have evidence that bilingualism is part of school learning and they will feel comfortable about telling you what they know.
- Monolingual children will probably want to have something 'special' to talk about too. They are likely to add their own language and literacy experiences to the discussion (for example, when we worked with the 'Lion King' audio-book in Spanish in the nursery, another child brought in her 'Lion King' in English and we used both). This is a valuable way of finding out more about the home knowledge of all the children in the class.
- You could ask children whether anyone in their family writes in any language besides English. An open-ended question such as 'Can you show me how your grandmother writes?' or 'Would you like to do some writing in Chinese/Turkish...?' Can stimulate children to engage in emergent writing. The presence in class of materials in their home language is a great support, particularly if the children themselves have brought in their favourite items (such as a photo album).
- The 'reading folder' which children take to and from school can be used for a two-way exchange of literacy items. As well as taking storybooks home from the classroom, children can be encouraged to bring in anything they have been reading at home. This will help teachers to find out about the immense variety of literacy activities the children enjoy. In our experience in the nursery, items which might appear in the folder can range from leaflets and cereal packets to Chinese storybooks, Indian film magazines and a birthday card from Thailand. The reading folder gives status to the materials carried in it and shows that home literacy is considered important in the classroom.
- A similar two-way exchange can be established with writing done at home and at school. If the teacher shows examples of children's emergent writing done in the classroom, parents will realise that emergent writing done at home is of interest to the school and be encouraged to bring in examples, either in a carrier bag or in the reading folder or similar 'writing folder'. Children will soon choose items they want to bring into school.
- Time spent on family literacy workshops will reap ample rewards. The workshops forge closer relationships between teachers and parents and provide informal opportunities to discuss children's learning. They are an excellent way of enabling parents and children to write together in school.

References

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