

Talking Turkey. The Language, Culture and Identity of Turkish Speaking Children in Britain.
Tözün Issa (2004)
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The 'blurb' proclaims that "This is the book that teachers and others working with Turkish speaking children and young people have long needed", and so it was with some expectation that I approached my reading of this book. I found, however, a strangely dichotomous work that sadly perplexed and informed me in equal measure.

Part 1 of the book is devoted to the history of the Turkish diaspora, its cultural identity and its economic standing. This section is well informed and is written with authority and sensitivity. I found the exploration of Turkish, Cypriot and Kurdish identity to be of particular relevance to my work as a classroom practitioner. Issa reminds us of the cultural distinctions that exist between these three groups that are often 'lumped together' for numerical ease at LEA level. He traces some of the language distinctions between mainland and Cypriot Turkish, as well as describing some of the various cultural groups that exist in Great Britain. This all made interesting and enlightening reading.

Much less successful is Part 2 of the book. Issa devoted some forty pages to his research on, in turn, primary-age children's understanding of cost, money, buying and work. For each of these chapters, he concluded that cultural understanding and early childhood experiences were significant factors in determining children's success in the tasks that he had set. These tasks involved the setting up and maintenance of 'shops' in Cyprus and England, running a trucking company and establishing a bilingual paper. From this research, Issa draws a number of implications for classroom practice, in Chapter 8. These recommendations add, however, nothing new to the current debate on classroom methodologies.

Chapter 8 could have drawn upon Issa's privileged insight into the Turkish community in Britain and told us so much that was new. Instead, it recommends that we 'get to know' our pupils and provide 'valuable opportunities' for speaking and listening. The latter suggestion uses the NALDIC literacy papers as a model of including speaking and listening. Yet all good EAL teachers will do this as a matter of course. Specific strategies that are highlighted include bringing in a recipe from your country of origin and holding general class discussions about 'people around us'. There is, sadly, nothing new here. One suggestion, under the heading of 'collaborative group activities', is that children role play an Accident and Emergency Department in a London hospital. There are no

guidelines given for the ages of the children. I am concerned, here, that this approach has no link to the National Curriculum at a time when the national shift has been towards examining how to embed linguistic and cultural heritage in the *existing* curriculum framework.

Chapter 9 focuses upon examples of 'successful bilingual classroom practice', although again this is not entirely successful. While the focus of the book is Turkish children, two of the three examples given are with Panjabi children. Although it could be argued that good practice in bilingual education is good practice in any language, this is never made explicit. One example concerns a whole class of year 7 pupils learning how to read numbers 1-20 in Panjabi. The lesson is seen as good practice because of the use of support materials and the use of two languages simultaneously. What the research does not show is how the work benefited the pupils directly. If children are bilingual, then learning numbers 1-20 in their mother tongue will not stretch them. If the intention was to teach the monolingual children in the class Panjabi, then what was the context? There are better and more meaningful ways of acknowledging and utilising the first language in the classroom. Another example concerned a Year 10 science class. Where the lesson differed from monolingual science lessons was that the teacher was bilingual in English/ Turkish and a list of key words in Turkish was supplied in the lesson plan. EAL teaching has moved on from providing translations of key words. Issa did argue that the teacher was able to access his pupils' cultural knowledge by talking about light reflecting on the water while the children were boating in Turkey. It is the job of *every* good teacher to access the interests and experiences of their children and use them where possible in a lesson.

In his concluding chapter, Issa revealed his research finding that the children's understanding of economic concepts was markedly different, despite shared cultural experiences. Their levels of understanding, he concluded, develop at different rates. He did argue, however, that the opportunity to use the first language for discussion and debate impacted directly on some children's conceptual awareness. Members of NALDIC will long have been familiar with this idea.

Issa misses a great opportunity to elaborate upon practical strategies that will have a direct benefit upon Turkish and Kurdish speaking children in our schools today. He is keen that cultural celebrations are marked in the classroom and that children benefit from resources that 'reflect children's experiences', yet nowhere do we find the detail. I would expect a book about Turkish children to contain a certain amount of culturally-rich information that could be transferred into a classroom setting. Instead, Issa suggests that mini projects be set up with local shops so that children can become 'workers' for an hour, drawing upon their early childhood experiences of shops and trade. I felt that the practical constraints of engaging in such a task

with primary-age children had either been ignored or not envisaged. Many of the other suggestions are also lacking in practicality: classteachers should visit supplementary schools 'a few' times over a term to set up joint medium-term planning. Again, it is possible to perceive more than one obstacle to this laudable aspiration. Where Issa does provide details of classroom activities, these are disjointed and removed from good classroom practice. As practitioners in the field of EAL, we need to ensure that children in our

care are enabled to access the national curriculum to the best of their abilities. This book does not assist in this task.

Vicki Rabicano