

Bosnian parents in Britain try to maintain children's bilingualism but receive no support from mainstream education

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Bosnian parents living in Britain regard it as essential for their children to maintain the Bosnian language as well as learning English. Bosnian is necessary to keep up links with family members outside Britain and to develop children's cultural identity. Parents therefore use Bosnian consistently at home and make sure that children attend voluntary-run Bosnian schools on Saturdays.

Bilingualism is recognised by researchers as an educational advantage, and the Government is now expanding language learning to primary schools. However, the Bosnian parents interviewed did not see mainstream schools as promoting children's bilingualism in any way. The children in the study never used Bosnian in lessons, teachers were not aware that children attended a supplementary school, and there was no link or communication between the two types of school.

Parents therefore received no positive messages about bilingualism from mainstream education. In interviews, not one parent indicated the awareness that maintenance of Bosnian could have positive effects on English acquisition and on overall cognitive development and academic achievement. In contrast, English was highly valued by the parents. They regarded it as the global language and obviously essential for prospering in this country. Fifty per cent of parents rated English as more important than their mother tongue.

Dina Mehmedbegovic comments 'By their actions, parents demonstrated that they were providing a supportive environment for the maintenance of Bosnian. But unfortunately, due to the lack of support and recognition for their efforts in mainstream education, they had internalised the devalued status of their own language. Schools need to take steps to support children's bilingualism, which is an economic asset to Britain as well as an asset to ethnic minority communities'.

10 families were interviewed, all with around 10 years' residence in Britain