

Ahmed

Contributed by Noelle Hunt

Ahmed is eleven years old and in Year 6. His school in Hertfordshire has around 170 pupils on roll (and a part-time Nursery). Most pupils come from below average socio-economic backgrounds and around 15% are from minority ethnic backgrounds, predominantly Pakistani. The community is quite a settled one and several families have seen all their children progress through the school. Most Pakistani families locally originate from the same region in the north of Pakistan. Their first language is Punjabi and many mothers, in particular, speak little English. Generally there are low levels of literacy at home in either English or Urdu (as Punjabi is not written in Pakistan).

Ahmed is the fourth of five children and the youngest of three boys. His mother [] has not been to school herself and has no literacy skills other than her ability to read the Qu'ran, but she is quietly very supportive of her children's education and appreciative of support given to them. Her two youngest children are the most regular attendees of an after school literacy booster class run by the family literacy project and of a lunchtime Urdu class. She is determined that Ahmed make the most of his educational opportunities particularly as his two older brothers had unsettled school careers and eventually returned to live in the village in Pakistan.

Mr Khan came to this country as a boy, possibly in his teens. He has some literacy skills but is very busy with two jobs. He is working hard to pay for the house he is having built in the village in Pakistan. It is now nearly finished and Ahmed is excited that his brothers have recently sent a video showing the work in progress. He says it is very beautiful and only the floors and windows remain to be finished.

The third significant member of the family who has an impact on Ahmed's achievement in school is his older sister, Nagina. She is now in Year 10, was identified as having special educational needs (SEN) at primary school and struggles with the reading and writing demands of the secondary curriculum. Nonetheless she is a lively and delightful girl who finds time on a daily basis to hear her two younger siblings read, and rarely misses commenting in and signing their reading record books.

Both Ahmed and his younger sister attend the Mosque after school each day where they are learning to read the Qu'ran. Life otherwise centres around the home, trips shopping locally or in Luton and visits to cousins. Ahmed has had one extended holiday to Pakistan since starting school but the family plans to go again when the village house is finished.

Ahmed had one term at Nursery in another local school and then transferred to his current school as soon as their new Nursery opened. His best friend is another Pakistani boy who came to the school only a short time after. Their backgrounds are very similar and they are both younger children in quite large families. The boys are small for their age but lively and mischievous. Ahmed is the quieter and shyer of the two. He is also usually more focused in class but not so forthcoming in discussion. They are members of a very small year 6 class with a large proportion of its pupils with SEN, in particular with emotional and behavioural problems. Both Ahmed and his friend are significantly under-achieving within the National Curriculum. A third Pakistani pupil, a Punjabi-speaking girl, is very focused and hard working, and is expected to achieve level 4 in KS2 SATs.

Ahmed's recent assessed writing has elements of 3c but a best fit of 2a. His writing is mostly simple and undeveloped, and poorly punctuated. He enjoys reading, has made good progress in the last year and now chooses from the higher levels of the school's banded readers. However, although he is gaining in confidence and fluency, he is not an expressive reader and often doesn't note punctuation. As he now reads more demanding texts, he meets a lot of new vocabulary. Interestingly, he has a good understanding of most figurative language as he reads it in stories. Numeracy is taught by ability and Ahmed works near the top of the lower ability year 5/6 group. When he understands a task he works well, but the language

demands of the subject (including those associated with more complex or abstract problems) are limiting factors to his progress. However he shines in times tables tests and is always one of the few left standing in 'table-chaser' games!

Ahmed has had support from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service since before he started in Nursery. An outreach worker, a member of a project that encouraged mothers to play with their pre-school children, visited the family. As a beginner speaker of English when he arrived in Nursery, Ahmed was given bilingual support, which continued throughout KS1. He has also had language support from Year 1 onwards. During his whole school career to date, he and his family have benefited from home/school liaison and family learning support. He developed from beginner to early developing bilingual within a year but, although he has gained social fluency in English (in the context of a playground language which is generally restricted and dialectal), he has not acquired academic language sufficient to deal with the increasing demands of the curriculum. Ahmed has progressed steadily from a low baseline assessment but the gap in achievement between him and his higher-performing peers has widened consistently. Now in Year 6, he is about one whole level below national expectations in literacy.

One of the issues is the amount of support available. He is representative of several other Pakistani pupils in the school whose needs are similar but who are spread throughout most classes. Individual pupil needs are high but because there aren't many EAL pupils overall, the school can only afford to buy back small amounts of support (under the current funding formula). This then has to be deployed to best effect. Even by blocking the time, rather than spreading it thinly, Ahmed has not had the benefit of consistent long-term language support. He has also had to adapt to recent frequent staff changes within the school although, set against this, he has worked with the same EMA staff throughout.

Ahmed has seemed to derive most benefit when language support is given either individually or as part of a small group, and in particular when activities have a strong focus on developing oracy skills. A first language assessment in KS1 and subsequent informal observations by the bilingual members of the EMA team in school, suggest that his range of Punjabi vocabulary and grammar is limited. Although he now switches with ease between English and Punjabi according to context, his use and understanding is restricted in both. It therefore comes as no surprise that his written English is undeveloped.

Ahmed needs activities, which encourage talk and where appropriate language is both modelled and extended. He needs language-rich experiences, which he can process, transform and reproduce in his writing and which may also support his understanding in subjects across the curriculum. For example, how can a child who has never seen the sea truly relate to the abundant imagery and figurative language about it in Literacy Hour texts?

As with reading, Ahmed benefits from individual or small group writing conferencing sessions. They provide the best opportunity to praise his strengths and give direct support in the areas he needs to develop. He can work at his own pace and develop language skills modelled in response to his particular needs.

It is equally important for Ahmed to develop his Punjabi. This is the language he uses most of the time at home, especially with his mother. Organised by the Family Learning Co-ordinator, his mother attended story-telling workshops with Ahmed when he was in KS1. She also attended a series of computer sessions for minority ethnic mothers in school, which used Urdu software. Ahmed regularly attends lunchtime Urdu classes and according to his teacher is making steady progress. As he progresses on to secondary school, it is important that Ahmed is able to share and talk at home about all the new things he learns.

Ahmed joined in a very small group discussion about bilingualism recently. He found it quite hard to think about as he just takes for granted that when speaking, he could switch fluently between two languages. When asked about the benefits, his first idea was that it was helpful because it allowed you to say things you didn't want someone else to understand! On more reflection, he thought being bilingual might help him get a wider range of jobs. He remembered quite clearly what it was like when he started Nursery and didn't understand

any English. He says he used to get a headache and sometimes felt scared because when adults spoke to him he wasn't always sure whether they were cross or pleased. When asked about the best kind of help teachers can give, his response was quick. He likes it when he reads with them and they can explain the difficult vocabulary. As for the future, he feels a bit daunted by secondary school and not too sure about learning French or German or whatever other languages are offered. He said he thinks he already speaks enough languages and coping with another would be too hard!

