

Olamide

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In this article I present a short case study of a bilingual pupil with special educational needs. I made notes of interviews with several people who were able to offer a perspective on the pupil's school experience. The intention is to show a progression which I take to be not unusual as a school attempts to provide appropriate answers to the learning difficulties faced by a bilingual pupil.

Overview

Olamide is from northern Ghana and her home language is Hausa. She lives with her Cousin and her two children - a boy three years younger than her and a girl one year older. Her father lives in Ghana with her older brother and her mother is dead. She was raised by her Grandma and attended school for one year in Ghana. The records show that Olamide used Hausa at home with her Grandma and was taught in School in Ghana in English. She was sent to the UK to live with her cousin when she was 6 years old and she moved to her English primary school in the summer term of Year 3 when she was 8 years old. She used Hausa at home with her family and English at school. No assessment was made of her home language before she moved school, nor at her new Primary School. It was felt that she needed time to settle and she would pick up the language.

Concern was not raised until Year 4 by which time there were serious problems with her behaviour. Her progress across the curriculum was extremely slow (Level 1 National Curriculum) and she was placed on the register for SEN. The advice of the EAL teacher was sought and she received one hour a week in-class support for two terms. Individual education plans were written with short-term targets about her reading and writing and about strategies for keeping on task. The advice of the Educational Psychologist was sought in Year 5 and a statutory assessment made. A statement of Special Educational Needs was written with 15 hours learning support assistance per week. A placement at a Secondary School for Moderate Learning Difficulty and Emotional and Behavioural Needs was found for her at the end of Year 6.

Perspectives

A SENCO

Wright (1991) suggests that professionals face two potential errors when assessing bilingual pupils who may have a special educational needs: one is the false positive error of diagnosing a difficulty where none is present; the other is the false negative error of failing to diagnose a learning difficulty and not giving the child appropriate help at an early stage. Olamide's former primary teacher, who is also the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) reflected this dilemma when interviewed.

SENCO: How is she doing? Is she doing well? We were so worried you know ...she was so nearly there ...a bit more... maybe another few months and maybe she could have gone ...you know...maybe she didn't need to go to a Special school.

EAL T: Do you think her home language played a part in how she learnt?

SENCO: Yes. It was hard to understand her at first – she was sullen and withdrawn – disjointed speech – prickly and defensive.

EAL T: Was this the problem with her lack of progress?

SENCO: No. The family spoke English at home as well as Hausa and the cousins made fast progress. It was her behaviour – the tantrums - the way she was easily distracted - disrupted

everything. I felt frustrated too! We tried everything, assistant support, setting targets for her, you know, small steps, for work as well as behaviour, but the main thing was getting her to stay in the classroom, how could she learn if she kept being sent out for disrupting the class?

EAL T: What is the policy for inclusion?

SENCO: Not just policy. It's what we do. Including all children, not just SEN or EAL, but all sorts – the less confident... for instance. Getting professional help. All the staff being aware of the child's needs and helping. It's important that children have strong characters but it can be problematic - in your face. It's getting the right balance so that they are all included – never to be quite equal - but to have the best chance.

EAL T: How do you assess the children's needs? Make decisions about who goes on the Special Needs Register for instance? Monitoring? Tests?

SENCO: Of course we have those but it's not what does it for us - it's about what the teachers say and parents. They know the children. We have a strong ethos of achievement. We expect our kids to do well – if they don't we want to know why. What we can do, what we can try. We don't give up easy. I always thought there was more to Olamide than we were seeing.

Supporting the home language is a very important part of language acquisition. Was the lack of support in the home language in the early stages of learning English a factor in Olamide's lack of English language acquisition? What was her home language development like in the early stages? Does the comparison with her cousins point to a learning difficulty or is there a danger that this would lead to a false assumption? Is Olamide's lack of progress related to environmental factors? What we see is behaviour that is the result of how the child feels. It does not help us to understand the cause of her difficulty.

Cline and Frederickson (1996) argue that it is not helpful to try to sort out problems of communication from learning difficulties. The two kinds of obstacles to learning interact and both language difficulties and learning problems may contribute to the perceived problem. The acquisition of a second language will proceed slowly because of learning difficulties and problems of access caused by language difference will continue to impede progress with the curriculum.

Olamide

Olamide in the special school (the other children in the class are reading to themselves or to an adult)

Olamide: I am no good...God made me not to read. my cousin said..it's not my language...I lost it .I can understand it and answer to it but I can't speak it that good ...not like my cousins ...they can read perfectly well. I go to the Mosque every Saturday. I learn Arabic. You learn writing like and stuff like this..(writing Arabic letters). I don't know what it says..I can't remember..you move up –class -.but I don't 'cos I'm no good. What are you writing? Oooh! You've spelled that wrong!

EAL T: It's notes - a short way of writing so that I can remember you speaking.

Olamide: I liked Miss - in the other school 'cos she listened to me. A woman came... she asked me things. I didn't know..understand what she wanted me to say..so I just said things. It got me into trouble...

EAL T: But you like it here now. You've got friends.

Olamide: Yeah but you have to think where they live... not my friends out of school. Mary's my friend..I still see her..if I went to school with her ..well she knows some things - like reading but there are some things I know that she don't..I don't see..why ..we can't be

together..my cousin says I could handle it now but I'm not sure .I didn't stay in class.. it was so embarrassing- – the teachers said I was rude. It's my behaviour that makes me not to learn ..people see me what I'm like - look like and what I say ..and they judge me - they don't know me....

Labelling a child as having a special need can be a very positive thing where it leads to intervention and change in a child's progress. On the other hand labelling difference can lead to the child being excluded and distanced from the main group. It puts the focus on the learner as being 'a problem'. Olamide sees herself as being the sole cause of the 'problem'. This is a view that is shared by some of her teachers and her family.

Olamide's cousin

An end of term review meeting with the class teacher at Special School.

C: Olamide is behind with her learning. Her younger cousin has overtaken her. This is shameful for her. She goes to the Mosque with her cousins to learn. Special needs is a private thing in our community. Education is important – there are doctors in our family - but she has problems with reading and writing and she knows. She can't spell. Why isn't she learning her spellings? –She needs to work harder. I want her to go to sixth form college ...they are strict there.

T: Spelling can be difficult. She is trying. She has made progress. Were you unhappy with the Primary school?

A: No. It is a very good school. My children have done very well there.

In order to work together, parents and teachers need to see and understand each other's point of view and the cultural perceptions involved. Sandow (1994) has analysed perceptions of special needs by identifying seven broad constructs. Two of these are the 'Magical' model where the 'disability' is taken to come from God, and the 'Moral' model where the child's failure to progress in learning is assumed to be due to idleness or a wilful refusal to learn. The learner can be blamed for not trying hard enough and programmes for motivating the child involve punishment. There are elements of both these approaches in the reflections of Olamide and her cousin. The difference in the perception of the Head of the Primary school has substantial implications for them working together.

Primary School Headteacher

EAL T: When Olamide was at this school did you have any difficulty understanding Her Cousin?

HT: Yes, I found it very difficult to understand her. It was not the vocabulary, it was concepts. She did not want her daughter to have anything to do with Olamide in school even though they were only a year apart in age. We wanted to introduce games and play as a way of developing Olamide's language but she would not allow that; she said she did not want the child to play with dolls. We respected her wishes but I felt this limited what we could do.

Deputy Headteacher

EAL T: When Olamide was at this school did you feel there were any cultural issues involved?

DH: Yes...I think so. ..there were mixed messages...for the child. Her Cousin was very good - she came to parents' evenings – of course the other two were doing so well – but- you see Olamide was so unhappy..I knew why - she was frustrated 'cos she found things difficult ...but she had to work hard to catch up.

EAL T: What strategies worked?

DH: She could work one to one with an assistant but then she resented sharing adult support with others. I think working with a partner worked. She wrote a piece once where the words were hers but her partner wrote them down. That worked.

Raising the self esteem of children who see themselves as failures is problematic. On the one hand peer support is crucial but on the other hand how can it be fostered in an atmosphere of competition where rewards focus on high levels of achievement? Sahota (1999:36) argues:

From the perspective of the child with learning difficulties, affective factors, which include attitude, self esteem, anxiety and locus of control, may both precipitate and be a consequence of learning difficulties.

Meadows (1993) concludes that cognitive activities may come to have emotional biases like fear of maths or tests which influence outcomes. She argues that it is necessary to consider the interaction of emotional well-being, cognition and social relationships in order to understand a child's development.

Conclusion

Olamide arrived in the summer term and the complexity of her situation did not unravel until the following year. On the one hand this is a long time. On the other hand children take time to settle into a new school and to make relationships and it could be argued that this is a more relaxed time to settle in school than at the beginning of the academic year. Could more have been done initially to offer support to the family? It has to be born in mind that the two cousins settled well and have been very successful in the same school.

Would an early assessment of the child's home language by the receiving primary school have been useful? It would have signalled the child's academic needs. However, a bilingual speech and language assessment of the home language is problematic and we cannot surmise what the Cousin's reaction to it would have been. The home culture places great importance on the acquisition of English and the child's failure is seen as shameful. In addition by this time she had been learning in English for several years. Cummins (1984) argues that when the first language is less secure and when a child is immersed in a second language every day at school with a corresponding lack of incentive to develop the home language, the learning of and in the second language may be impaired.

Secondly, this would focus on the child's inadequacies rather than the circumstances of the learning environment. Thirdly, an ongoing assessment of the child's learning experiences was recorded, it was a failure on the part of the receiving school not to recognise them. With hindsight it can be surmised that her first language was not very well developed when she began to learn English but it does not tell us whether this was due to a learning difficulty or the circumstances of her learning. What we do know is that her emotional needs, how she saw herself and how she was seen by others, played a huge part in how she was able to learn.

There were also factors associated with the form of intervention employed to help her 'catch up', focusing on her impairment, such as grouping her with less able children, which made it more difficult for her to see herself as one of a successful group of learners. As her wilful behaviour escalated so did the impatience of the teachers. This culminated in her being excluded from the classroom which sits uneasily with the school's policy of inclusion.

There are multiple factors and perspectives to take into account when attempting to understand how best to respond to the learning needs of individual bilingual children. Olamide's story is not unique.

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