

Victor

Contributed by Jan Hoggan

The school

Victor's school is a mixed junior school attended by 306 pupils aged 7-11 years. Although the majority of pupils are White British, the intake is becoming increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse, with pupils of Indian background being the largest minority ethnic group. There are seven refugee children, mostly from Eastern Europe. Thirty-five pupils have support from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (an allocation of 0.5 fte). Languages spoken other than English are Punjabi, Turkish and Yoruba and Shona. The number of pupils entitled to a free school meal is well above the national average. Overall attainment on entry to the school is below average. There is a high turnover of both pupils and staff each year. There are currently 55 children on the SEN register, five of whom are bilingual learners and two of these are currently being put forward for statementing. Victor is Czech and will be in Year 6 in September.

Victor's background

Victor is a Catholic, Czech Romany who has refugee status. His first language is Czech. He has a much older sister and a baby sister. He came to the school in Year 3 and he is now in Year 5. He had moved house due to racism, and had been in three different schools since Nursery. His EAL teacher in reception remembers that he had been very tearful, did not want to leave his Mum and was regularly absent from school. I was the third EAL teacher to support him. No concerns about his progress were mentioned to me. I was told he was a lovely, hardworking, polite lad and a pleasure to teach. His EAL teacher had withdrawn him from class once a week. His report stated that he was becoming more confident of writing in English, wrote in simple sentences using some common everyday verbs and adjectives and used phonic knowledge to blend sounds and capital letters and full stops, although it said he found writing 'difficult'. There was no background information in the report. He was assessed as being at English language Stage 2. I was surprised to be told he was being put forward for statementing.

Some aspects of provision made for Victor

I raised concerns with the class teacher about Victor's needs, as I had been giving in-class support three times per week. The teacher knew little about him. He sat with SEN pupils for Literacy (they had an LSA), with little support in terms of vocabulary lists, wordbook, dictionary, personal whiteboard. It appeared that he was not being stimulated and was working at a low ability level. We ensured he had the above items and we put him in a higher ability group for Literacy. He also had problems completing homework. Victor explained to me that it was too difficult, so at a parents meeting, where an interpreter was invited, we established that there was no-one at home who had sufficient English to help him and that his homework would need differentiating. His attendance was also an issue and he was missing classwork. Notes were not going home and communication with the home was breaking down. I was able to explain to the class teacher that his family was most important to him and that if he was needed to stay at home to help with his sibling then, from the family point of view, that might take priority over school. Miles (1981) argues that the 'centrality of the family' in most minority cultures must be grasped by professionals and that their own cultural assumptions should not be imposed. Victor felt useful and valued at home but not in school. We ensured that he knew we valued him being in school and that he could ask if he felt he had not had information about something rather than just muddle along.

Since his class teacher did not hear readers regularly, Victor had no one to read to, so I heard him frequently and the LSA included him in her daily readers. Finally, he rarely looked happy in school and we found that some children were calling him names in the playground and after school so we made sure he knew he could come and talk to us about it.

A meeting was arranged with Victor's mother and an interpreter, to explain that Victor had been assessed by the Educational Psychologist as "working at a low level". If the statement went through, the SENCO said an adult would give him support in school and a Specialist teacher would give him some 'catching up' work. The statement would set out learning objectives for him and how support would be carried out. Victor's mother was very concerned about him being labelled SEN and I explained to the SENCO that in the Czech Republic, Romany children had a history of being put into special schools just for being Romany and that there was a great stigma attached to this with loss of face in the community. Mum was encouraged to agree to the statement by the promise of additional adult help in class. I did not get the impression that she had been involved from the first signs that Victor was causing concern, or fully understood what the school were doing.

Key factors

There was a lack of continuity in Victor's education. He had moved house and school several times and had several EAL teachers. More than one Educational Psychologist had been involved in assessing him.

He had suffered racism all his life - he had to flee his home country and then move for safety reasons in England.

He suffered real trauma at being separated from his mother. There had been little home/school contact or use of translators by the school, resulting in poor communication. The use of first language in school was not encouraged. No one had asked Victor or his parents what they thought his difficulties were

Victor was not being exposed to positive reading experiences. He was not heard reading regularly there was poor access to reading books, library books were dispersed around the school and a mobile library only visited every two weeks.

The adults working with Victor did not operate as a team but rather as diverse professionals, each with their own agenda.

Perceptions of Victor

The SENCO requested statutory assessment as it was felt that he had "significant needs which must be recognised in a more secure manner". Also it was stated that he had been supported in Literacy and Numeracy by a classroom assistant but was making minimal progress and that he had weaknesses across the curriculum and he was working at a significantly lower level than his peers. What it didn't say was that he had sat on a table with Special Needs pupils, some with violent behaviour problems and that the LSA had her hands full maintaining these pupils interest/behaviour, so support for Victor was probably minimal.

The most worrying issue about Victor being perceived as having SEN was that there had been no differentiation made for him in class. He was quiet and well behaved and therefore not a problem to his teacher in the way that more aggressive and disruptive pupils were. He was being labelled as a poor attender, which was affecting him in other aspects of school life. For example, he was not being selected to take part in assemblies, in case he was absent. Apart from EAL teacher support, writing activities were not being scaffolded.

A change

Since the meeting with Victor's mother, everyone is aware that Victor has difficulties with written English. He has a new class teacher who has excellent class control. She is differentiating classwork/homework for him. The school Learning Mentor is addressing name-calling and is more aware of Victor's pastoral needs. His attendance has improved and his reading age has increased steadily - from 4.9 in September 2003 to 5.11 in April 2004 (Salford Reading Test). Victor asks if he has not understood something or believes he has missed a letter going home or if anything is worrying him. He is becoming much more

assertive. He is smiling! In QCA tests, he has achieved 2C in Reading, 2B in Writing and 2A in Mathematics.

As well as supporting his reading and differentiating his homework, he receives some LSA support in Literacy and Numeracy lessons and has Additional Literacy Support. He has been given a High Frequency and Key Word card continues to receive EAL support three times per week. In the past such support has been inconsistent. His new Australian class teacher who specialises in SEN is initiating consistent differentiated support. She recognises that he displays intra and interpersonal intelligence enabling him to empathise and understand his peers and teachers. She knows he needs encouragement prior to attempting an activity. She sees that as he continues to experience small levels of success he will approach his work more positively. She understands that he is open to constructive feedback and actively follows suggestions to improve his work. She encourages him to seek assistance from adults in the class, when he is unsure of how to fulfil the specified learning criteria and that he needs to be encouraged to be more assertive and express his very valid opinions and ideas. This is a teacher who knows her pupil. She knows he finds learning difficult but she is aware that there are many factors affecting this and concentrates on his strengths and builds on them.

Some conclusions

It is important to make sure that the school/system is not creating a problem which may otherwise not exist. A bilingual pupil should not be assumed to have SEN solely on the basis that he does not catch up with his peers quickly. All aspects of the learning environment must be examined for possible sources of difficulty before the school makes a referral to the authority. Otherwise major decisions about a pupil's educational future may be based on flawed information.

Victor is very capable of recording personal experiences such as visiting a Nature Study Centre or the local river, given scaffolding support. His cognitive development evolves from interpersonal negotiation with others such as his family, peers and teachers, which he does very well, given the opportunity. Unfortunately, the Literacy Strategy often reduces reading and writing to an intrapersonal process, that is, an ability to perceive and interpret graphic symbols - something Victor finds difficult.

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) talks about 'verbal recipes' or speech genres that are learnt culturally. Our elders teach these to us at a very young age and we share them implicitly with members of the same culture. It is our role as teachers to make sure these recipes become explicit for bilingual pupils by promoting opportunities for talk.

Finally and most importantly, the school needs to talk to and listen to its EAL pupils, because if someone had taken the time to ask Victor what he needed, he has the maturity and emotional intelligence to state very clearly what his needs are - primarily much more individual support from an adult in all lessons. As Victor prepares to go into Year 6, we must make sure that he receives the additional support he deserves.

References

Heath, S.B. (1983) *Ways with Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miles C (1999) *Policy, Provision and Working Collaboratively with Bilingual Learners with SEN*. Introduction to Bilingualism and Special Needs, Unit 5. University of Birmingham