

Teacher partnerships between mainstream and complementary schools: from parallel worlds to connected curricula

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Many bilingual children attend not just one school but two, because they also go to community-run language classes after school or at weekends. These classes complement children's mainstream education in significant ways, by developing linguistic skills and providing additional input on literacy, numeracy and other curriculum subjects. Yet this 'parallel world' often goes unrecognised, and the opportunity to connect up children's learning experiences is missed. Our research project, funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Tower Hamlets Children's Services, set out to link primary schools and complementary schools in East London through teacher partnerships working on topic-based bilingual learning.

The first step in the project was for complementary and mainstream teachers to visit each other's settings. It is extremely rare for such an interchange to take place, but we found that it has remarkable effects. Without visiting complementary schools, mainstream educators tend to be concerned about teaching methods there, wondering whether these will be 'old-fashioned' and less conducive to learning. However, once they actually witness their community colleagues helping children to learn in cramped community flats or draughty church halls, they recognise the dedication and professionalism involved. Complementary school teachers have to find strategies that work for multi-level, multi-age classes and engage the attention of children who have already had a full day's schooling. Many find creative answers to this challenge, producing their own resources since almost none exist or can be afforded. Furthermore, their relationship with their students is built on a deep knowledge of their shared cultural background, excellent links with parents and a strong desire for children to succeed so that the community as a whole can progress. There is much here for mainstream teachers to learn.

The return visits from community teachers to mainstream schools were equally rewarding. The unusual sight of a teacher from the mosque, in religious dress, appearing in the primary school playground led to a throng of excited children greeting their 'muallem' with affection and respect. Moved by this experience, one community teacher declared 'This is my school – all my children are here'. Children who had previously had to keep their educational worlds separate, since society gave them no other option, were relieved and happy to see their teachers united under one roof.

Teacher partnerships then began their work together, jointly planning a programme of topic-based lessons using bilingual strategies adapted to each teacher's setting. The project was based on findings from our previous research in Tower Hamlets which demonstrated the value of bilingual learning in both complementary and mainstream contexts (Kenner et al, 2008a, 2008b). In that study, community teachers were already using bilingual strategies to mediate learning, since their students were often stronger

in English than mother tongue. Meanwhile, action research in primary schools showed how children of second and third generation British Bangladeshi heritage could enrich their learning if given the opportunity to work bilingually in Bengali as well as English in their mainstream class. Children who were strong in both languages were found to be doing well in both settings, and the study provided examples of children transferring concepts between mother tongue and English.

The new project was once again based in collaborative action research. Each community/mainstream pair of teachers chose a topic that would provide a springboard to learning for their students. Topics included poems and stories in different languages and in English; jobs, climate, animals or food in different countries; and parents' memories of school. Linking with parents and grandparents was built into each topic, through homework tasks that could be conducted bilingually, or by inviting family members to be interviewed in class or to lead an activity. This family involvement, together with the participation of bilingual teaching assistants, provided a multilingual resource for mainstream teachers who did not speak their students' languages. Whilst the primary school teacher continued to use English to deliver the lesson, they could encourage children to draw on their multilingual knowledge as well as English when speaking or writing.

If children were unsure about writing in home language script, they could use transliteration (home language written in the English alphabet), which our previous research had identified as a successful bridge to learning (Al-Azami et al, forthcoming). Texts were often presented to the class in three versions: English, home language script, and transliteration, giving the maximum opportunity for understanding. In primary school, this approach made the text accessible to mainstream teachers and students who did not know the other languages involved. In complementary school, the benefits were also noted; students could switch from one version to another when interpreting the text or doing their own writing, and one teacher talked of the learning that took place 'in between' the three versions, commenting that 'once they do all those, it will stay in their mind'.

An example of teacher partnership work will show the kinds of learning that took place for the children and teachers involved.

Teachers exchanging strategies: the Somali song

James, the music and drama teacher at one of the participating primary schools, found himself in another world on his first visit to Zainab's Somali class, held in a community hall. The sum total of Zainab's resources for a class of twenty (ranging in age from four to eleven) were one Somali textbook, a whiteboard and a pen, and the children's workbooks, which were stored in a small cupboard. Zainab's approach at first seemed very traditional – she began every lesson by writing ten key words in Somali on the board and reciting them with the children repeating after her. However, the next step showed her creative response to her mixed-level class. Each child, from the youngest to the oldest, came out in turn to be the teacher. As they recited the words loudly and confidently, the class followed them and each young teacher corrected their students' pronunciation until they were satisfied. Next, Zainab negotiated translation of each word into English, which she wrote on the board with the students' advice, since their English was stronger than hers. Some words (for Somali artefacts, for example) did not translate easily and further discussion was

needed about the meaning. Meanwhile, parents at the back of the hall added their own comments and suggestions.

James was struck by the way in which everyone present pooled their resources to make what he termed ‘a learning community’. He commented on the ‘child as teacher’ approach: ‘It’s a more rounded use of resources, it develops the children in different ways – self-learning, self-monitoring...the understanding you get from having to teach something, to try to explain it, focusing in your head on what it should be’. James’ description was reminiscent of the ‘synergy’ in teaching and learning (Gregory, 2001) displayed by siblings learning together in earlier research in Tower Hamlets.

Children in Zainab’s class loved their opportunity to be the teacher and used it well. There was a similar change in power relations when translating, because students had more knowledge than their teacher. Again, children maintained their respect towards Zainab during this process. Seeing this helped James, who was dyslexic, to feel more at ease about children correcting his spelling in class. He noted that teachers do not have to be perfect, and co-learning can be very valuable.

At the same time, James had ideas about additional teaching approaches that could be incorporated into Zainab’s lessons: for example, the use of groupwork, and the use of drama to activate children’s understanding of keywords. By combining strategies from their teaching repertoire, James and Zainab planned how a song about school, well-known in Somalia, could be taught in both their settings so that children could access the meaning in English and Somali. The song emphasised the eagerness of a child to attend school, the value of schooling, and their sense of identity as a learner who could contribute to their country. Phrases such as ‘I am the flower of this country’ and ‘I am running to attend my school to establish who I am’ gave scope for discussion on metaphor and concepts of citizenship.

After James had witnessed a performance of the song by students and parents at Somali class, he and Zainab co-taught the lesson to a Year 6 class in primary school. Studying the text of the song in both Somali and English, they agreed the keywords in Somali. Zainab presented these to the class through recitation, followed by James who then invited children to act as teacher. A Somali child took his turn, along with eager classmates from other language backgrounds. Once the class had practised the key vocabulary and pronunciation, translation into English was negotiated with help from Zainab and Somali students. Next came James’s strategy of learning keywords through drama; children worked in groups to incorporate their chosen Somali words into English sentences and act out a roleplay for the rest of the class. Having consolidated their understanding of core vocabulary and rehearsed the song in Somali, children were able to work out the meaning of the whole song with help from their Somali peers.

A second stage of the lesson, which could also have been taught in mainstream school, was undertaken by Zainab in the Somali class. Children took questions home to their parents about the meaning of key phrases in the song, along with the text in Somali and English. Answers were brought back and shared in groups, before being presented to the whole class in English and Somali. The results showed the depth of thinking that students had engaged in, by discussing the issues with family members

at home and with each other. One ten-year-old child had combined her learning from the Somali song and from mainstream school: to the question ‘Why does the student say “I am the flower of this country?”’ she replied ‘Because when young children grow up they grow up like a flower which is a lifecycle’. The same child produced a sophisticated interpretation of a student being able to ‘establish who I am’ at school in the Somali context: ‘he/she is putting peace into their country and showing they are strong and not weak to help others’. Another child constructed a personalised response to the positive messages contained in the song about learner identity, drawing pictures of themselves with the captions ‘I am the flower in my country’ and ‘I like to learn’.

The combination of teaching approaches from complementary and mainstream schools thus enabled Somali students to draw on their cultural and linguistic heritage to engage with complex issues and create personal meanings. Their classmates in primary school also responded with interest and imagination to the task of deconstructing the song’s meaning. In both cases, learning took place bilingually, enriching understanding. Inclusion and respect for others came to the fore, as the two Somali speakers in a class of mainly Bangladeshi origin claimed a new position as experts.

Taking the project forward

The wide range of lessons jointly planned by teacher partnerships, and the successful involvement of parents and grandparents, made it clear that collaborative work around topic-based learning could enhance children’s learning. We are now working with the mainstream and community teachers to embed this approach into curricula in both settings. Complementary school teachers are contributing ideas to current topics in primary school, drawing on their knowledge of the history and culture of their communities. For example, the topic of ‘Global Swap Shop’ led to a session in which the community Bengali teacher was interviewed by Year 5 and 6 classes about his personal experience in a textile factory in East London, until the work was outsourced to cheaper labour in Bangladesh. He had prepared materials in English and transliterated Bengali to help the children think through issues about sweatshops and fair trade, and was able to use the same materials to stimulate work in his Bengali class.

Joint events have also taken place between complementary and mainstream schools. A Grandparents Event brought grandparents from different language backgrounds to meet their grandchildren’s classes at primary school – each filled in a family tree with terms for relatives in their own language, based on an idea from the Somali class teacher. An evening Family Languages Celebration at primary school also involved students and parents from the after-school Somali class plus all the Bengali classes at the local community centre, and a reciprocal visit was made by primary teachers to see their pupils perform bilingual poetry and roleplays at the yearly Bengali school celebration. To support parents in bringing up children bilingually, a panel giving advice took place at primary school, with a local complementary class teacher as one of the experts.

Excellent partnerships have thus been built up between primary and community teachers, who have shared their respective skills and created a fuller picture of their

students' learning experiences in each educational context. As one primary teacher commented after planning a successful week's literacy lessons around a comparison between Bengali and English poetry: 'It's about the whole child really...just by having contact with their community schools I feel I can understand a bit more about their learning in a broader context – they've got skills we don't always use in class and doing the poetry work has given us the chance to use some of those skills...it was lovely to see the confidence of the children who were able to take on the task and engage with it, using their mother tongue'.

A first step towards setting up work of the kind described here is to arrange visits between mainstream and community teachers so that they can begin to set up partnerships, whether around curriculum, cultural events, or joint assessment of pupils they have in common. As well as the research discussed above, the Toolkit on 'Partnerships in Language and Culture', produced by the national DCSF-funded Our Languages project, will be of great assistance in developing ideas:
www.ourlanguages.org.uk

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