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**Connecting children's worlds: creating a multilingual
syncretic curriculum in partnership with complementary
schools**

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Abstract

Children from minority language backgrounds have multiple sites of learning: home, community, mainstream school, and in some cases complementary school where they study their mother tongue after school or at weekends. However, due to the institutional constraints of an education system based on monolingual principles, mainstream teachers are often unaware of the contribution that complementary classes make to children's learning, or unsure of how to draw on their pupils' linguistic knowledge in the curriculum. Children's multilingual identities and their other worlds of learning therefore remain invisible in mainstream school. This paper describes an action research study with teachers from complementary and mainstream schools in East London, in which they jointly planned lessons around topics that were then taught in both settings. The complementary teachers brought a holistic perspective based in the linguistic and cultural knowledge of their communities, which enabled these resources to be brought into mainstream learning, thus creating a syncretic curriculum that led to an increase in agency of children and their families as well as teachers themselves. We argue that collaboration between complementary and mainstream teacher colleagues can play a crucial role in constructing a space for multilingual learning in a monolingualising society.

Keywords: community schools, home and school, home language, multicultural, education, multilingualism

Introduction

Complementary schools are often known as mother-tongue, supplementary or Saturday schools in the UK. In other countries, different terms may be used, such as 'heritage language schools' or 'community-based schools' in the US. Such schools often operate in challenging circumstances, with teachers working on a voluntary basis in mixed-age, mixed-level classes with limited resources. Although complementary schools are key sites of children's learning, they are rarely linked with mainstream education.

A primary school teacher in East London, about to participate in our action research study with community-run complementary schools, reflected on her current knowledge of children's out-of-school learning:

'What happens with children outside the school is very separate from us, we don't really get to see that other part of the child, and having worked particularly with the older children they often don't like to really talk to you about it ... I think they see that side of their life as much more part of their family and community, and the school - sadly, I don't know if they feel that as much.'

Aware that some of her pupils attended Arabic classes, she had asked about these with interest, hoping to find out what took place there. To her surprise, children were not forthcoming, and she assumed their reticence meant that they preferred to keep school and community learning as separate parts of their lives. She was keen to begin working in partnership with a complementary school teacher since 'I think it will give

me a bit more of that whole picture of the children, because there's always that little bit that's missing.'

This paper will critically examine the reasons why children's worlds of learning tend to remain separate, and discuss how this separation can be challenged through linking complementary and mainstream schools. We first consider research showing that children and young people tend to blend or syncretise their different linguistic and cultural experiences, rather than wishing to maintain a division between them. Many researchers and educators have emphasised the benefits of a curriculum that draws on home and community knowledge, but this often proves difficult for teachers to put into practice, due to systematic exclusion of minority languages and cultures from mainstream school at an institutional level. Meanwhile, complementary schools operate in marginalised spaces which, precisely because of their exclusion from mainstream discourse, give teachers greater flexibility to create a curriculum responsive to their students' needs. Furthermore, complementary teachers have significant resources in terms of linguistic and cultural knowledge, and tend to take a holistic approach to children's learning. There is therefore considerable potential for complementary teachers to contribute to a re-working of the mainstream curriculum, but as far as we are aware, there have as yet been no research studies addressing this issue through direct partnership between mainstream and complementary teachers.

The two-year action research project described here set up partnerships between teachers from two East London primary schools and Bengali, Somali or Russian complementary schools in the same neighbourhoods. We will present examples from topic-based lessons designed by the teacher partnerships, demonstrating how the presence and action of complementary teachers led to a more inclusive curriculum in which children could access and develop their linguistic and cultural resources. We argue that although mainstream schools have institutional power, complementary schools are spaces where greater 'learning power' can be developed. If complementary teachers and mainstream teachers work together on an equal basis, their joint agency can disrupt institutional power structures, enabling children and their families to actively participate in shaping a multilingual curriculum, and creating conditions under which syncretic learning can take place.

Living in 'simultaneous worlds'

In home and community settings where multilingual interaction is accepted or encouraged, children have been observed to make links between their languages, as demonstrated by six-year-olds growing up in London and learning to write in Chinese, Arabic or Spanish as well as English (Author 1, 2004). These children switched between languages and created bilingual texts at complementary school and at home, operating in 'simultaneous worlds' rather than separate ones. The availability of digital resources has further encouraged the development of multilingual literacies through watching films and TV programmes in different languages or engaging in transnational networking with friends and family via the internet, as found by Cruickshank (2004) with Arabic-speaking families in Australia and Lam and Rosario-Ramos (2009) with young migrants of diverse origins in the United States.

Such multilingual creativity has considerable potential to support children's mainstream educational achievement, particularly if they can draw upon these

resources as part of classroom work. Children themselves often find ways to link their learning in home settings; studies on ‘playing school’ by Bangladeshi British siblings in London (Gregory, 2001) and Puerto Rican siblings in the United States (Volk and de Acosta, 2004) show how they ‘syncretise’ pedagogies and linguistic knowledge from mainstream school, complementary school and other community settings, creating a unique blend of strategies that support their learning.

The argument for making connections between children’s home and community experiences and their school learning has been clearly made by educators internationally, and has resulted in a number of inspiring projects in different countries, yet there are ongoing difficulties in maintaining and extending such work. We will first consider some of the successes achieved and then examine factors that militate against syncretic learning in mainstream school systems.

Implementing a syncretic curriculum

The idea that families from linguistic minority backgrounds, often marginalised by schools, possess ‘funds of knowledge’ emanating from everyday experience was put forward by Moll et al (1992). Teacher-researchers working with Mexican-American families in Arizona successfully devised a curriculum drawing on parental expertise. Approaches that recognise and exploit resources from home and community have been used to create a multilingual literacy environment in a nursery class in London (Author 1, 2000), to bring the knowledge of Māori elders into a New Zealand school (Glynn and Berryman, 2003), in a language awareness project led by minority families in France (Young and Hélot, 2008), and in a science curriculum drawing on indigenous knowledge systems in Alaska (Barnhardt and Kawagley, 2005), to name only a few examples.

However, educators aiming to introduce a multilingual and multicultural approach often encounter significant setbacks. For example, researchers working on a language awareness project involving children from diverse backgrounds in an Irish primary school found teachers constrained by a curriculum with monolingual English priorities (O’Rourke, 2011). Student teachers in London who hoped to put into practice their ideals of a curriculum addressing ethnic diversity were faced by entrenched disregard for knowledge falling outside the White monolingual norm (Pearce, forthcoming). Bilingual assistants in English primary schools whose knowledge of their students could have been integrated into the curriculum were instead ‘silenced’ by classroom practices that ignored their experience (Robertson, Drury and Cable, under review).

Issues of power and agency therefore loom large with regard to the construction of a syncretic approach to learning. Cummins (2000) identified the existence of ‘coercive power relations’ in school systems that operate to maintain the dominant language and culture, through discourses such as the ubiquitous but invisible ‘English-only’ sign on the classroom wall. Such discourses remain forceful in England, where the research study discussed in this paper is set. The National Curriculum in England was planned by the Conservative government in the late 1980s to maintain the values of the white British elite (Gillborn, 2005). A recent curriculum review (Ajegbo, 2007) argued for broader topic-based learning that would integrate multicultural experience, and for the mainstream to make contact with community-based education such as complementary schools, but these recommendations have not been implemented. From a critical

multiculturalist standpoint (May, 1999), educators highlight the need to explicitly challenge the status quo if structural change is to be achieved at an institutional level. Nieto and Bode (2008: xx) describe such a curriculum as ‘education that affirms diversity, encourages critical thinking, and leads to social justice and action’. But how can this kind of curriculum be promoted in mainstream schools?

From a postmodern perspective (Foucault, 1980), power is not monolithic and can be exercised in a variety of ways in different contexts. Resistance through individual or collective agency is also possible to some extent (Pignatelli, 1993; Mick, 2011). Cummins (2001) suggests that, for educators working in multilingual settings, power can be additive as well as subtractive. Interactions between teachers and students form an ‘interpersonal space’ where identity negotiation and the generation of knowledge take place. This space can be used to positive or negative effect. If teachers work together with students on a more equal basis, this will generate ‘collaborative power relations’ leading to a ‘transformative pedagogy’. The multiliteracies approach developed by Cummins and colleagues in Canada and elsewhere shows how students can create ‘identity texts’ that relate curriculum content to their individual and collective experience (Cummins and Eager, 2010). The need to construct ‘safe spaces’ in which bilingual learning can be developed has been argued by Conteh and Brock (2010), drawing on the concept of ‘third spaces’ (Bhabha, 1990; Gutiérrez, 2008) where multiple aspects of cultural experience can co-exist and interact to make new meanings.

In order to construct spaces where multilingual learning can take place, mainstream educators are likely to require support from beyond the school itself. Tuafuti and McCaffery (2005) demonstrate that the involvement of families and communities is key to a collaborative empowerment approach, through their example of successful Samoan bilingual schooling in New Zealand. Links with community educators could also be of key importance, and we will now discuss the particular strengths of complementary schools as flexible spaces for developing children’s learning.

Complementary schools as sites of ‘learning power’

Recent research, particularly in the UK, demonstrates that complementary teachers tend to understand their students’ multiple linguistic and cultural lifeworlds, and often try to integrate these experiences into their pedagogy through a holistic approach. A survey of complementary education in the UK (Maylor et al, 2010) showed that teachers built strong relationships with children and parents, responded flexibly to students’ needs and fostered positive learner identities. Anderson (2008) describes how London complementary teachers took a humanistic perspective to learning, designing their own curricula including literature, music and historical issues. Primary school teachers in Bradford, northern England, set up Saturday complementary classes as spaces where they could draw on children’s different languages to explore concepts and skills related to the mainstream curriculum (Conteh et al, 2010).

Studies in other countries have indicated similar pedagogical approaches, grounded in complementary teachers’ close connections with their communities. Hall et al (2002) discovered that complementary schools in Norway had high parental and community involvement. Teachers made links to mainstream curriculum topics, whilst helping pupils to create different understandings and values from those constructed by assimilationist mainstream discourse. Such education was ‘emotional, spiritual and

deeply meaningful’ (ibid: 409). Chinese teachers in the US were found by Wu et al (2011: 53) to be providing ‘reciprocal, supportive and culturally relevant instruction’.

We would therefore suggest that, due to complementary teachers’ relative freedom in constructing curricula based on their understandings of students’ linguistic and cultural background, complementary schools are sites that can generate ‘learning power’ even though they do not possess the institutional power of the mainstream system. Teachers, students and parents demonstrate greater agency in complementary settings.

Mainstream and complementary schools are beginning to build links in the UK (Sneddon, 2010), and researchers have pointed out that complementary teachers could become partners with mainstream teachers to co-design curricula, since they bring a wealth of knowledge on how children’s language, culture and identity can be used positively in learning, and have strong links with parents and communities (Issa and Williams, 2009; Robertson, 2010). The action research project we will now discuss set out to explore the potential of such collaboration.

The study

Partnerships were set up between teachers from two primary schools in Tower Hamlets, East London, and teachers from four complementary schools (two Bengali, one Somali and one Russian) located in a variety of premises ranging from community centres to church halls and an Islamic secondary school. Teachers from on-site after-school Bengali and Somali classes at one of the primary schools also participated. In most cases, the complementary schools had pupils in common with the primary schools involved. Eight mainstream teachers worked in partnership with nine complementary teachers (the two Russian teachers worked jointly with a primary school partner).

Table 1: Teaching partnerships

Mainstream partner	Complementary partner
Annika (School A)	Sulaman (Bengali Community School)
Alison (School A)	Shah (Bengali Community School)
James (School A)	Zainab (Somali Community School)
Siobhan (School A)	Muna (Somali Community School)
Shaheen (School A)	Rakib (School A Bengali class)
Jane (School A)	Osman (School A Somali class)
Hamida (School B)	Redwan (Bengali Mosque School)
Jo (School B)	Natasha & Tanya (Russian Community School)

Most children in Primary School A and about half the children in Primary School B were of second and third generation Bangladeshi origin, since the majority ethnic group in the borough of Tower Hamlets is from Bangladesh. Bengali complementary schools have been in existence in the borough for many years. Tower Hamlets also has a significant Somali population, recently arrived due to war and economic hardship in Somalia. Some children in both primary schools were Somali, and the Somali community has begun setting up language classes in the past few years. There are many smaller linguistic groups in the borough who also run complementary

schools, including newer arrivals from Eastern Europe, such as the children attending the Russian complementary school in the project, some of whom were pupils at School B.

Unusually for the UK, the local government in Tower Hamlets provides some funding to complementary schools via its Languages Service and runs a one-year part-time teacher training course in collaboration with a further education college, as well as termly professional development sessions. Complementary teachers Sulaman, Shah, Zainab and Muna had attended these courses. Rakib was also a mainstream primary teacher, while Osman and Natasha had been secondary school teachers in Somalia and Russia respectively. Redwan had attended training sessions at a local Muslim centre, and Tanya did not have previous teaching experience.

Our research question was:

- How can complementary-mainstream teacher partnerships develop pedagogies to enhance children's learning in both settings?

We first interviewed the participating teachers, asking whether they had ever visited the other setting, how they thought learning might differ at complementary or mainstream school, and what they would like to gain from the project. Each teacher then visited their partner and observed a lesson, followed by planning together around a topic they thought would interest their pupils, and deciding how to teach it in each context. Plans included how to draw on children's languages and cultural knowledge, and involve parents and grandparents. The first lessons were taught in each setting, with partners observing each other and in some cases co-teaching. In accordance with an action research approach, a second planning session was held to consider what children and teachers had learnt from these lessons, and to discuss further work on the same topic or a new one. Teachers were interviewed during or after the partnership work to explore their responses. In Primary School A, the project continued in the second year, with complementary and mainstream teachers meeting to plan around the topic-based International Primary Curriculum, newly instituted as part of the school's teaching.

We adopted a critical action research methodology that took into account the differential power positions of teachers from the complementary and mainstream sectors. Primary teachers visited complementary schools first so that complementary teachers could present their work with greater confidence. However, visiting the mainstream for the first time could reinforce complementary teachers' sense of marginalisation, as when the headteacher of one complementary school felt overwhelmed by the richness of resources he saw in the primary school. Back at his own school, he gestured to his rundown premises with their basic materials and told the researchers 'here we have nothing'. It was our responsibility as researchers to challenge this perception. The Bangladeshi British member of our team drew on her own experience and understanding to explain that 'the children are your resources'. The headteacher's self-confidence was restored as we discussed the cultural knowledge that enabled him and his staff to interact positively with children and parents and to provide significant learning experiences.

Throughout the study, we audiorecorded interviews with teachers and took fieldnotes on visits and planning sessions. Lessons were videorecorded and we collected samples of children's work. Data was analysed qualitatively, identifying patterns and coding for themes that emerged. We investigated the exchange of teaching strategies between complementary and mainstream partners, which we have discussed elsewhere (reference removed for anonymity). We also examined how topic-based teaching was linked to teachers' and children's linguistic and cultural knowledge, and how participants responded to new curricular approaches, which we focus on here.

Perceptions from the mainstream

Initial interviews with primary teachers showed they recognised that complementary schools had important links with children's home background, which tended to be lacking in mainstream school. James thought complementary teachers would give children a sense of their family history and culture, 'someone who knows the bits of you and what you've done', thus bridging the gap between different parts of children's lives, whereas primary school could often feel alien. Charlotte noted that when children were from a similar cultural background to the teacher, 'you kind of know a bit more about what that other part of the child is, but when it's such a different cultural background to your own...you're quite in the dark about that really'. She was keen to visit the complementary school: 'it would be really nice for me to see some of our children in a different context...whether they are the same children we know here or very different'.

Teachers were aware that complementary schools could help children construct more secure cultural identities. Jo commented that it was very important for children to keep links with their home culture and to be with peers from a similar background, whilst in mainstream school they might be the only child speaking that particular language in their class. Jane similarly observed that a Somali child in her class felt isolated, and hoped that her partner teacher from the on-site Somali class, Osman, could act as cultural mediator in building a closer relationship with parents. Some teachers could refer to their own childhood experiences; Hamida valued the social skills she had developed with friends at Bengali class. Annika remembered how learning Swedish with her grandmother had helped her identify with that aspect of her background. She often had conversations with parents regarding the significance of cultural and linguistic roots, and how children would want to decide how to build their own mixed identities.

With regard to the curriculum in mainstream school, teachers recognised that it lacked cultural and linguistic pluralism. Annika pointed out that 'they've changed our curriculum from language to literacy, and English literacy – there was a time when we were much broader', whilst the current curriculum felt 'stressed', with little creativity. She remembered asking parents how children used languages at home, whereas such information was no longer collected. Alison realised that children were not often asked to bring their home language and culture into learning, and 'it would be nice to think more like that'. Charlotte wanted to make her lessons inclusive for all children, for example by relating geography topics to different countries, 'so we do try to reach out a little bit, but I can honestly say I don't really use their first language in my teaching currently'. She also noted that 'we do try really hard to involve the parents and involve the community', but wondered whether parents would be more involved at complementary school.

Teachers also saw the possibilities for change, and hoped this would happen through the project. James thought the curriculum could include different languages, linking home and school life and giving greater ownership by children. Annika had conducted a language survey in her own class and noticed how ‘children’s shoulders went back’, and they were proud of their linguistic expertise. Jo saw languages as a ‘different talent that children have’, which could help develop skills in a completely different way. She thought it would be ‘an awesome thing’ for her only Russian-speaking pupil to bring his culture into the classroom, and this would help her build an individual relationship with him based on a better understanding of his life. She could envisage cultural exchange taking place in her class, for example by inviting Bengali-speaking and Russian-speaking parents to tell different versions of the same story.

Topic work was seen as a potential way forward for developing such approaches. Hamida, who spoke Bengali herself, began to consider how the current topic for her nursery class, ‘People who help us’, could be extended: ‘Can we go and do something in Bengali with that?’ She thought that learning bilingually would support children’s development of Bengali alongside English, since they would not necessarily be encountering academic skills in Bengali at home. Charlotte had experienced the possibilities for cross-curricular learning in different languages when working with Rakib, her primary teacher colleague at School A who taught Bengali in mainstream school as well as in the after-school class. School A had chosen Bengali to initiate their primary languages curriculum, rather than the more common subjects of French or Spanish, because they had participated in a previous research project with our team and discovered the importance of children’s home language for learning. Rakib and Charlotte had linked their teaching around topics such as healthy eating, for which children drew and labelled pictures of fruit in Bengali for a display in the classroom. Charlotte realised that multilingual work could be built into the curriculum, for example by focusing on key vocabulary in different languages.

Rakib, as an experienced mainstream class teacher who had also run the Bengali after-school class for many years, had a clear vision of how a multilingual approach could be developed. He believed that children should have the opportunity to develop academic language in their mother tongue through the mainstream curriculum, pointing out that, for example, children learning Bengali alongside English would then have the chance to work in both Bangladesh and the UK. He knew the benefits of exploring a topic in more than one language to maximise children’s understanding, and noted how comparing word meanings in different languages could enhance learning. The current curriculum, particularly in the upper primary years, did not encourage such comparisons since it focused on topics such as the Vikings, Romans and Victorians in ways that offered little obvious connection with countries such as Bangladesh. The new International Primary Curriculum was more flexible, and he could envisage studying a topic such as growing food in different countries, which children from different backgrounds would be able to investigate by talking with their parents at home. In Bengali such collaborative learning would give rise to a rich variety of words for the different stages of rice growing, enabling children to understand this process in depth. Children could also learn each other’s languages; Rakib found that when teaching Bengali in mainstream class, non-Bengali speaking pupils often manifested particular interest and learnt quickly.

Mainstream teachers therefore demonstrated a desire to move forward into partnership with complementary teachers, to change a situation in which, as Charlotte said, ‘we’re really operating as two very separate entities at the moment’. The potential benefits of partnership were also well expressed in a comment by Shah, one of the Bengali complementary teachers: ‘We are working in two different parts and we are supporting each other, here only my head is working, and I teach here and when there are two heads here there will be more to learn and everything will come forward...ideas, discussions....’. Shah highlighted the fact that the two sectors were already teaching the same pupils, but the connections were not being fully exploited

Making the connections: children’s responses

An eight-year-old at Russian school, on hearing that the research project would be linking his two learning environments, showed initial disbelief: ‘How are you going to join up my [Russian] school and my primary school? Are you going to knock down my primary school or build a tunnel?’ His response suggested that, until now, he had experienced the separation as inevitable. Most children showed both surprise and delight when they saw their mainstream or complementary teachers in the other setting. One child commented that when her mainstream teacher Alison visited her Bengali class, ‘it was the first time someone came from school to see us’. When Alison came to a talent show at Bengali school, her pupils were thrilled and would not let her leave until she had seen them perform. Children actively made links with mainstream teachers on the visits, both through spoken communication and through texts they produced. Pupils in Somali class enthusiastically welcomed James and included his name in sentences they were writing in Somali. During Annika’s visit to Bengali complementary school, Sumaya, who also knew Annika as the deputy headteacher at primary school, made a bilingual game for her that bridged both settings. She folded a sheet of paper so that the outer layer showed Bengali numbers; selecting each number led to a different message in English.

At primary school, Bengali teachers were immediately surrounded by excited children in the playground, some of whom were their own pupils and others who, recognising them as teachers due to their Islamic clothing, began talking about the Bengali or Arabic classes they attended. The headteacher of one of the Bengali schools was astonished by seeing so many of his pupils running up to him; his spontaneous comment was ‘this is my school, all my children are here’. When Bengali complementary teachers visited primary classrooms, children vied to be the one to escort them and greeted them with ‘asalaam aleikum’. A relationship of familiarity was quickly established; for example, pupils in Hamida’s primary class began asking their visitor Redwan about his family. As Alison said, ‘I know the children were really pleased to see me there [in Bengali school] and really thrilled to see Mr Shah in this school as well’.

For children who were in a linguistic minority at primary school, the arrival of a complementary teacher who shared their cultural background could initially evoke more complex reactions. In a monolingual institutional context where children’s languages and cultures were not recognised in the curriculum, being different from others was not valued. Being of British Bangladeshi origin at least mitigated this difficulty, since this was the majority group in both primary schools. However, teachers mentioned that children from other backgrounds felt their difference more acutely or were sometimes excluded by classmates. The presence of a teacher

speaking their language was therefore particularly important to give these children support, but being heard speaking languages such as Somali or Russian, which were even more marginalised than Bengali, could also emphasise their minority position. It thus took time for some children to develop a sense of security about using their home languages; as they did so, their growing self-confidence was evident.

Two Somali boys from Year 6 were chosen to escort Osman, a Somali complementary teacher, around their primary school. At first, they were embarrassed about speaking Somali with him, but gradually became more involved in their conversations as they showed him mosaic sculptures they had made. They then felt sufficiently confident to invite Osman to visit their class and wanted him to sit with them as they worked. Similarly, Natasha from the Russian school described the ‘priceless’ faces of her pupils when she appeared at their primary school: ‘They read just one question: “What are you doing here?”’ One child seemed uncomfortable when she first spoke Russian to him in his classroom, but later exuded confidence after leading his classmates in acting out the Russian story ‘Kolobok’ as part of the research project.

Resources in complementary school

By visiting the complementary schools, mainstream teachers began to understand more deeply how children’s linguistic and cultural knowledge were developing there. Alison saw children reading Bengali poetry and discussed with them the beautiful language used by the famous writer, Tagore. As well as literary language, children were learning about moral values, for example through Islamic stories that often have a parallel in the Bible. Hamida observed Redwan telling his Bengali class the story of Sulaman (Solomon) giving judgement in the case of the two women who both claimed parentage of a baby, and eliciting from the children the moral ‘A real mother won’t harm her baby’.

Mainstream teachers could also see how complementary schools were enabling children to recover cultural knowledge that had been lost in the move to a new country. When James made his first visit to Somali class, parents and children put on a display of cultural items from Somalia and performed Somali songs and dances for him. Children eagerly volunteered to name each artefact and describe its use, but it was evident that some children did not know this information and were learning by participating in the class. Parents and Somali teachers explained the importance of maintaining children’s knowledge so they could feel confident when visiting Somalia, and could eventually pass on their heritage to the next generation.

In all complementary settings, links with children’s families were evident. The Russian school was preparing special celebrations for Mother’s Day, to which parents would be invited, and primary teachers attending the annual celebration at a Bengali school were struck by the number of parents, grandparents, teenagers and babies crammed into the room as the audience. In Zainab’s Somali class, parents were participants. They sat at the back and called out reminders to children who were misbehaving. They also supported learning by making suggestions in Somali, and children would run over to them for help. Observing this, James remarked that the class reminded him of a student-run study group that he had joined at university: ‘everyone puts something in’. He recognised the benefits of the class operating as a learning community in which parents were directly involved.

Constructing a syncretic curriculum

Through the research project, complementary and mainstream teachers devised lessons that drew on children's linguistic and cultural knowledge, and involved their families. Topics in this syncretic curriculum included: poems and stories with parallel themes in different languages; learning about plants through gardening with parents and children; fruit and vegetables grown in different countries; bread-making with parents; jobs in different countries; and animals in the Noah's Ark story (linking the Islamic and the Christian versions). Here we will focus on three examples of partnership work in the second year of the study, when complementary teachers were invited to join mainstream teachers in School A at planning meetings for topics from the International Primary Curriculum, which the primary school was beginning to implement. The first example concerns the topic of 'Grandparents', and demonstrates the complementary teacher's depth of understanding about how to help children develop intergenerational relationships in the context of migration. The second example, 'The Rag Trade', shows how the complementary teacher drew on his own life history to introduce children to the complex socio-political issue of global trading, linking their lives in London with those of child labourers in Bangladesh. In the final example, 'Living Together', the complementary teacher's holistic approach enabled children to understand abstract concepts of interdependence and community. In each case, the complementary teacher's expertise came to the fore, supporting their mainstream colleagues to develop the curriculum in ways that interconnected with home and community experience to enrich and extend children's learning.

'Grandparents': connecting with families

As part of the research project, teachers were encouraged to consider how parents and grandparents could participate in children's learning. Annika, deputy headteacher at School A, had reflected in her initial interview on her own experience of learning with her Swedish grandmother. She recognised that grandparents played a key part in children's lives, and suggested that children could investigate the places where their grandparents lived as part of the International Primary Curriculum topic for 5-7 year olds, 'Our World'. Osman, the teacher from the Somali after-school class at School A, was working with Annika and colleagues on this topic. He realised that families who had migrated tended to experience linguistic and cultural dislocation. Children needed to explore their roots and strengthen relationships with grandparents, particularly if the older generation was not in the UK, as in the case of Somali families separated by war. He perceived that some of his pupils lacked key vocabulary and expressions in Somali to relate more closely to adults in their community. He therefore suggested a family tree picture as a starting point.

Osman drew a tree important in the desert environment of Somalia, a *qudhac* (acacia). He wrote terms for siblings, parents and grandparents in Somali and English on the branches, starting from siblings on the lower ones. Each child could write their own name on the trunk of the tree. He used this in Somali class to practise kinship terms, and developed a lesson plan in which children brought in photos of grandparents and roleplayed conversations with them, finding out how to address an older person appropriately.

Meanwhile, Annika and colleagues organised a Grandparents Afternoon at school, which was well attended by grandparents and parents from different cultural

backgrounds, many of whom had never visited the school before. Children presented topic work they had produced in class, including drawings of their grandparents and writing about what they enjoyed doing together. Osman's family tree diagram was translated into other languages by the grandparents present, who discussed similarities and differences between the words they used. Grandparents then visited particular classes for a question and answer session with children about their lives.

Through this work, children strengthened relationships with grandparents near and far, developing their multilingual identities and their identities as learners. Grandparents felt that the school valued their cultural background and contribution to children's learning. Osman produced new curriculum work that met the needs of his complementary class, and led the way for the primary teachers to explore the topic at a deeper and more personal level for children from different backgrounds.

'The Rag Trade': connecting across countries

The International Primary Curriculum topic of 'Global Swapshop', concerning international trade, was selected for Years 5 and 6 but was at first thought by teachers to be rather difficult for their 10-11 year old pupils. However, their Bengali teacher colleague, Shah, could immediately see the relevance to children's lives. He suggested asking children to look at the labels in their clothes to see where they had been manufactured, and to consider the prices paid for them. Clothes bought cheaply in the high street often came from countries such as Bangladesh, where child labour still existed. Shah also pointed out that many children's parents would have worked in the rag trade on arrival in East London from Bangladesh, often in sweatshops or as homeworkers. He himself had worked in the Burberry factory, only to find himself made redundant when it was transferred to Bangladesh because labour was cheaper.

The primary teachers invited Shah to visit their classes and be interviewed. Shah went further, by devising a PowerPoint presentation in which pictures of high street shops were juxtaposed with photos of child labour, with a central picture of children in a UK primary school classroom. These visuals were designed to stimulate children's thinking about interconnections and differences between their own lives and those of children in other countries. Shah led the discussion in primary school and in his Bengali complementary class, providing keywords in Bengali and English such as *shujuger bebohar* (exploit), *bebsha* (trade), *srom* (labour) and *sromer mullo* (Fair Trade). One photo showed workers protesting in Bangladesh, holding placards with slogans in Bengali and the words 'Save Our Life' in English. Children worked out the meaning of the Bengali text, helped in primary school by a pupil with good literacy skills built up in Bengali after-school class. Shah also suggested that children could interview parents about their working lives in London and elsewhere, and gave examples of possible questions in English and Bengali.

The complementary teacher was able to lead on this topic because he had a comprehensive knowledge of children's everyday lives in London, their parents' life histories, and links to their countries of origin. He also had a clear understanding of socio-political issues involved in global trade, from his own experience. One child who participated in the topic work at complementary school and primary school commented 'I didn't know all this before and my Bengali teacher made a difference because he's from Bangladesh and he taught us a lot about it'. Shah's partnership with

mainstream teachers significantly enhanced learning by bringing challenging issues into the curriculum and enabling children to reflect critically on the interconnections.

‘Living Together’: connecting communities

The holistic perspective that complementary teachers brought to their work was demonstrated by Sulaman, the headteacher at Bengali complementary school, when preparing to teach the topic ‘Living Together’ in partnership with Year 3 and 4 teachers at primary school. Whereas Osman had represented each child’s family visually as a tree, Sulaman immediately envisioned the concept of community as a tree. He drew a detailed picture of a jackfruit tree, common in Bangladesh, with roots, branches and fruit. He explained that this picture could symbolise ‘community’ in a variety of different ways. The tree could represent a society, such as the UK or London, with roots in different countries that all join in the same trunk to make one tree. The branches could be different communities, which will bear fruit if they are living together in harmony. The tree could also be a school with the branches as pupils from different backgrounds, or it could be a child who might have roots in different countries and languages. Different kinds of trees enrich an orchard or garden, just as different individuals or communities contribute to society.

Sulaman helped to plan lessons in which children first drew their own tree and considered why trees are important to our environment: creating fruit and seed for new trees, giving shade, producing oxygen and taking in carbon dioxide. This led to the understanding that trees are essential to life, and that we need to look after them by planting seeds, adding compost, watering and protecting them. The class then discussed how a school community can grow and develop like a tree, if children from different backgrounds are working well together. This topic was taught successfully by Sulaman with his Bengali class at complementary school, and in primary school by Rakib for cross-curricular work in Bengali lessons. In the latter setting, Year 4 children produced trees with roots labelled ‘Somali’, ‘Urdu’, ‘Bengali’, ‘Turkish’, ‘Swedish’, ‘Dutch’ and ‘Hindi’ as well as ‘English’, representing their own and other children’s languages in their class. The flexibility of the tree concept meant that children could include different aspects of their multilingual identities, as speakers of English and one or more other languages. Amongst the leaves of the tree, children wrote terms in English and Bengali which they had identified through discussion with Rakib as contributing to a well-functioning community, such as *shanti*/peace, *shikka*/education and *khela*/play.

Sulaman’s holistic approach thus gave children access to complex International Primary Curriculum learning targets such as ‘how independence and interdependence are important when people live together in communities’. His visual metaphor of ‘community as a tree’, with its many possible meanings that children could apply to their own lives, provided support for children’s abstract thinking.

Increasing agency of children, families and teachers

The syncretic learning made possible through complementary-mainstream teacher partnerships enabled children at primary school to demonstrate linguistic and cultural knowledge that they had previously kept hidden. The children who had initially been embarrassed to speak Somali with Osman came forward to share their language when their class studied a Somali song. The Russian child who had tried to picture how his two schools could be connected became more confident and focused in both settings

after leading his classmates' performance of a Russian story. The project work was multilingual, and Alison commented on how bringing dual language storybooks into her class had promoted all of the children's languages: 'the biggest thing was seeing the impact of children using their mother tongue language within the classroom, the effect it had on their self-esteem was so high'. A child struggling with English literacy turned out to be a confident reader of a dual language storybook in Turkish, whilst a child who 'doesn't really have much of a voice' became confident for the first time when reading in Urdu. A child who 'hardly ever spoke in English' to Alison 'suddenly actually wanted to use her mother tongue, wanting to bring books and talk in Somali...that's really developed my relationship with her'.

Since the topic work validated children's home and community experiences as part of school learning, they had a greater range of knowledge on which to draw. Four-year-olds in Hamida's nursery class vividly described their memories of Bangladesh: 'it rains there and the mud is always soggy'. In Jane's nursery class, children began to talk about their own experiences of making different kinds of bread at home as they helped a Somali parent to mix dough. Children whose complementary and mainstream education had previously been kept separate could now syncretise their learning. After her partnership with Jo, Natasha commented 'The children were completely immersed in their work on the story for a week at both schools in both languages...they finally saw a connection between their day-to-day activities and Russian school'.

As part of the research, mainstream teachers began to take new steps to link with families, reaching out to parents and grandparents for help in order to accomplish the topic work. For example, Siobhan invited parents into her Year 6 class to be interviewed about 'Memories of School'. An Afghani mother came into school for the first time ever and joined the parent panel, answering questions from children with her son as interpreter. Shaheen explained how she asked parents for suggestions about different topics: 'You have to search for these ideas – now I go to the parents, ask the parents. They are over the moon to be consulted'.

The complementary teachers' support for multilingual topic work also enabled mainstream teachers to draw upon their own linguistic and cultural resources. Two class teachers, both Bangladeshi, initially planned to compare London with an English village for the 'Living Together' topic, but after discussion with Sulaman, saw the potential of bringing in children's knowledge of village life in Bangladesh or elsewhere. Teachers from a Muslim background, part of a group planning with Osman for a topic on 'Water', realised it could include finding out about Islamic washing rituals before prayer, and making comparisons with other faiths. Shaheen, as class teacher, and Rakib, as Bengali teacher, were able to work together on the topic of 'Bangladesh', demonstrating a shared empathy as they introduced the children to Bengali songs they evidently loved, and Shaheen began to talk about her memories of cooking with her grandmother as they created worksheets on typical Bengali dishes. Annika shared with her class a Swedish lullaby from her childhood, and they eagerly requested it the following day. This quality of engagement seemed to arise from having permission to draw on personal experience, particularly multilingual experience, whereas the monolingual construction of the curriculum had hindered teachers from doing so previously.

The benefits of a syncretic curriculum for learning were summed up by Annika in a comment that is a mirror image of Charlotte's original concern about the 'little bit that's missing' when mainstream and complementary school are separated. After participating in the project, Annika stated: 'It's about the whole child really for me...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'. The children's missing knowledge had been incorporated into the curriculum, giving them the opportunity to draw on the full range of their capacities for learning.

Conclusion

It is clearly possible to devise a multilingual syncretic curriculum in mainstream school that contributes significantly to children's education and promotes the agency of students, families and teachers. This study demonstrates the key role played by complementary teachers in bringing 'learning power' from community settings into the mainstream. Positive changes happened because mainstream teachers' partnerships with complementary colleagues, whose understanding of learning is strongly grounded in children's lifeworlds outside school, provided the strength to jointly challenge the institutional constraints of a monolingualising education system. The shared curriculum also demonstrated that mainstream teachers valued the learning taking place in complementary school. In Alison's words, 'It made the children see we're not separate entities in their lives and that we're all part and parcel of their education'. Mutual respect and equal support between the two sectors is vital if children's worlds are to become truly inter-connected, to the overall benefit of their learning.

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