

Why children's languages are important to their learning

Research evidence from Tower Hamlets

Goldsmith, University of London and Tower Hamlets Languages Service conducted a research project (funded by the ESRC), to examine the effects of bilingual learning for second and third generation Bangladeshi British children from Years 2, 4 and 6 in two primary schools. Findings showed the cognitive and cultural benefits gained by children when they had the opportunity to use their full language repertoire within the mainstream curriculum.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6447427.stm>

Bilingualism aids cognitive development

Children's learning is enhanced when they can think in both languages – this is important for second/third generation children as well as children new to English. Even if children are fluent in English and achieving well, bilingualism adds to their learning

eg Mathematical concepts can be enriched by thinking in more than one language. A group of Year 2 children were given word problems to solve, centred around the theme of Bangladeshi weddings, a celebration familiar in their lives outside school. When they were working out how many fish they needed to divide between a certain number of guests (if each fish fed ten people), they were asked to identify which mathematical operation they were using. Fahmida was unsure, but when prompted with the Bangla word 'baita' ('sharing'), she immediately pointed to the symbol for division.

Children learn how language works – even very young children can compare their languages (rather than being confused by them)

eg Children in a nursery class in Tower Hamlets, East London, were learning about jobs in Bangladesh, with their Bengali-speaking class teacher and a visitor – an after-school Bengali teacher from a nearby mosque. Neither adult could remember the word for 'fisherman' in Bengali, so they gave the children the word for 'fishing' instead. At end of the class, one four-year-old came up to the community teacher and said the word wasn't right because it meant 'fish-catching not fisherman'. The community teacher then remembered the word for 'fisherman' and the little boy went away satisfied. By comparing his languages he had worked out that 'fishing' and 'fisherman' were different types of word – one was an activity and the other was a person.

Bilingualism supports children's learner identities

Children feel secure in their cultural identity and have deeper self-confidence when they can use home languages for learning. Children can communicate with family especially grandparents to talk about what they are learning in school.

eg Children told the researchers they wanted to learn in Bangla as well as English at school. They were aware they were losing Bangla. A Year 6 child explained 'we speak Bengali at home and then when we come to school, slowly, slowly we forget Bengali and then we will be like the English people only speaking one language'. Children were excited about the chance to use Bangla in school: 'We're going to be expressing our culture'. They articulated several advantages of bilingual learning, such as 'You understand more' and 'You can learn in two different ways'.

Schools and the community working in partnership to further develop children's bilingualism

Research evidence from Tower Hamlets

Funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Tower Hamlets Children's Services, the project explores how community language teachers and primary teachers can form partnerships in order to develop bilingual learning. The teachers, from complementary and primary schools in Tower Hamlets, East London, visited each other's classes and jointly planned a programme of topic-based lessons using bilingual strategies adapted to each context. Parents and grandparents supported the activities through intergenerational learning. Results show how children's bilingual development can be supported in both mainstream and complementary schools.

Whole school approach

Links with community language teachers help schools develop community cohesion and intercultural understanding

- ❖ Find out about children's languages in each class and whether they attend community language school– (see file: Family languages chart)
- ❖ Display children's achievements from their out of school learning. (E.g. classroom displays, whole school assemblies)
- ❖ Involve children's languages in cross-curricular topic work (see Teaching Resources files)
- ❖ Invite community teachers to planning meetings
- ❖ Visit community classes
- ❖ Hold International Languages Evening and invite community classes
- ❖ Bilingualism panel to answer parents questions (see file: FAQ's on Bilingualism)
- ❖ Dual language book making with parents and library loan system

Bringing children's languages into topic-based work and involving parents

If children can use their languages in curriculum topics, this will add to their learning and help them express cultural knowledge from home.

Parents/grandparents can provide support for the topic from their life experience and become more closely involved with children's learning. Schools can also connect with children's learning in community class, through working on the topic together with the community teacher.

Some suggestions:

- You could ask children to write questions about the topic to take home to families. Ask them to write in their own language as well as English (they can use transliteration – eg writing Bengali in English letters – if it's difficult for them to write in home language script). Using home language helps children communicate with parents and expands their learning. Children may need encouragement to start off (eg from a teaching assistant who knows another language, or by showing them an example). Once they get going, they enjoy writing in their language and feel proud they can do it! They can bring answers back in their own language and English and use these to write about the topic.
- Children can take activity sheets home, eg asking for topic keywords in different languages, and bring these back to use in their writing.
- Children can bring artefacts from home and information in different languages about the topic (eg from research on internet sites in home language).
- You could invite parents/grandparents to come and talk about / show information about the topic. There could be a panel of different parents from the class to answer children's questions. Children can translate for parents if necessary and feel proud to do so.
- You could ask children/families for stories/poems/songs in different languages, or use dual language storybooks connected with the topic. Parents can come into class to read, tell a story or sing. Children can write and act out roleplays including different languages.