

REFERENCE No.

ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Non-Technical Summary

A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

Developing bilingual learning strategies in mainstream and community contexts

SUMMARY

General aim

The study set out to enhance understanding of bilingual learning and devise ways in which it can be built into classroom practice. Current Government policy emphasises the importance of using bilingual strategies in schools to raise the educational achievement of children from ethnic minority backgrounds. The research examined whether and how the cognitive and cultural benefits of bilingual learning might apply for second and third generation bilingual children who would not otherwise have the opportunity to use their full language repertoire within the mainstream curriculum.

Action research was conducted with children, mainstream teachers and bilingual assistants participating in the Primary National Strategy Pilot for EAL (English as an Additional Language) in two Tower Hamlets schools, and teachers from the children's Bengali after-school classes. The Bengali classes were visited to find out how children were learning language, literacy and numeracy in their mother tongue. Bilingual tasks were then planned in literacy and numeracy that were relevant to the primary curriculum and linked with children's community class learning. Strategies used were reviewed at seminars for all the educators involved. Data was collected via fieldnotes, digital video and digital audiorecording.

Objectives

To discover how children draw on linguistic and conceptual knowledge from each of their languages when learning bilingually

To investigate how working bilingually impacts on children's identities as learners

To bring together educators from mainstream and community language schools to reflect on the bilingual learning process

To develop bilingual strategies that can be used by children as co-learners with peers

To consider how bilingual and monolingual educators can support children in using these strategies

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Findings and most significant achievements

Features of bilingual learning

Second and third generation children can enhance their learning by engaging with tasks bilingually, even when English is their stronger language. The understanding of a concept in one language can aid understanding in another, for example by discussing how metaphors and similes are constructed or how a mathematical concept operates in each language. Translation requires children to reformulate ideas, enriching learning. Children's bilingualism leads to heightened metalinguistic awareness, consolidated through explicit discussion of differences between language structure in mother tongue and English. Bilingual activities also give children the chance to use and extend their bicultural knowledge.

The study revealed that children are in danger of losing these advantages unless they have sufficient support to develop their mother tongue. In addition to attending community language classes, children need to do academic work bilingually in mainstream school in order to fully develop concepts and skills in mother tongue as well as English.

Learner identities

Children see themselves as bilingual and consider their mother tongue to be a key aspect of their identities. They wish to use mother tongue as well as English for learning in the mainstream classroom, to fully express their bicultural experience and deepen academic understanding. Teachers find that bilingual learning has a positive effect for their pupils, empowering children and enabling them to draw on their complete range of linguistic and cultural resources. Such valuable opportunities are denied if schools treat children as monolingual, assuming that sufficient learning is taking place through English only.

Bringing mainstream and community educators together

If mainstream teachers find out about the work going on in community language classes and discuss this with community educators, they understand more fully the importance of bilingualism and how it contributes to children's overall learning. When planning bilingual activities for the mainstream classroom, teachers then begin to involve bilingual assistants and seek the help of community class teachers. Joint reflection thus leads to benefits for pedagogy and practice.

Developing bilingual strategies

A number of bilingual strategies appropriate to second and third generation children have been developed through the study and successfully trialled in mainstream class teaching:

Transliteration (eg writing Bengali words in Roman script) enables children not yet confident in mother tongue script to create texts and talk about meanings, also involving monolingual teachers and classmates

Modelling of key vocabulary and language structures in mother tongue as well as English helps children develop their thinking bilingually

Providing bilingual resources such as storybooks and poems in several versions (eg English, Bengali script and transliterated Bengali) supports children's learning

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Collaboration with families gives access to additional bilingual knowledge, for example by sending bilingual tasks home or inviting family members into the mainstream classroom to read and write with children

Support for bilingual strategies

Collaboration with community class teachers and bilingual assistants enables monolingual teachers to devise and carry out the above strategies. Schools therefore need to forge closer links with community classes and families to fully develop children's bilingual learning. This works particularly well if mother tongue classes are provided on site in schools and given high status and visibility. Links can then be developed more easily with the mainstream curriculum.

Dissemination

Articles on the study have appeared on the BBC and EU online news websites:

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

http://ec.europa.eu/research/headlines/news/article_07_04_10_en.html

A one-day dissemination conference organised with Tower Hamlets Children's Services brought together UK policymakers and practitioners and international researchers. Speakers included the Directors of the National Languages Strategy, CILT (National Centre for Languages) and the National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education, and representatives from the Primary National Strategy and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. Papers have also been given at conferences in Ireland, Germany and the UK.

Impacts on policy and practice

The study feeds into an emerging policy area: the learning needs of second and third generation bilingual children. Our findings alert policymakers and practitioners to the urgency of maintaining and developing children's skills in mother tongue as well as English, to give the best chance of academic success. The research highlights the importance of mainstream and community teachers working together to implement bilingual learning strategies, and the strong partnership we have built with Tower Hamlets has led to a joint bid to Paul Hamlyn Foundation for further action research on this theme.

We are holding meetings with policymakers involved in the dissemination conference to discuss a research agenda that links with the National Languages Strategy, the Primary National Strategy and current government initiatives around supplementary schooling.