Mediating knowledge

A day in the life of a bilingual practitioner: ways of mediating knowledge
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What do bilingual practitioners do during one working day?
How do bilingual practitioners mediate young bilingual children’s learning?
What is distinctive about bilingual mediation?

Context for our study
Bilingual practitioners use their language expertise and their knowledge and understanding of other cultures, the culture and working practices of schools and early years settings, and children's learning and language development to support bilingual children and their parents.

A day in the life
We filmed two bilingual practitioners in early years settings at work for a day, and interviewed them afterwards. After analysis of the data, we compiled edited extracts to exemplify their work and interactions with children, staff and parents. We invited our practitioners, Razia and Sadiye, to view our edited compilations with us, and recorded their comments.

“I know their background quite well ... I am trying to make a difference to them ... we have to be there first ourselves.” (Razia)

“They're not accessing the curriculum the way they should ... so if I've got their language and I'm able to use it then that is right that I should use it.” (Sadiye)

Funds of knowledge
Moll et. al. (1992) argue that the dominant model of education is framed within values of white English-speaking educators, emphasises the disadvantages of children from minority language backgrounds and undermines bilingual children's first language development in favour of English.

Bilingual practitioners’ funds of knowledge include:
- knowledge, resources, competences, values, assumptions
- knowledge through life experiences and within social networks, e.g. siblings’ play and interaction, family's traditions, community
- knowledge of the child as a ‘whole person’ through knowledge of ‘multiple spheres of activity’
- bilingual and bicultural knowledge of: children's backgrounds; being a bilingual child and/or parent; the importance of providing connections/being a ‘bridge’ for children and parents; the educational system; systems and procedures.

Emerging findings
Further analysis of all the data collected in our study has exposed some issues:
- There is still a big gap between policy rhetoric and reality for bilingual practitioners and children.
- Processes and practices continue to constrain what bilingual practitioners are able to do.
- Dominant discourses do not facilitate bilingual learning in mainstream settings.
- Much first language use is instrumental and children's responses are minimal.

Bilingual practitioners draw on their linguistic and cultural ‘Funds of Knowledge’ to respond sensitively to bilingual children and their families and to support children's transitions to school. They act as mediators of learning and understanding, facilitating communication and knowledge exchange, making connections, building bridges and relationships. They have a distinctive role as boundary crossers.

Find out more about this project and the Practice-based Professional Learning CETL at our web site:
www.open.ac.uk/pbpl/