A day in the life of a bilingual practitioner: ways of mediating knowledge

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Casting off the language and culture of home

More than 30 years ago the Bullock Report stated:

‘No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of home as he [sic] crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart. The curriculum should reflect many elements of that part of life which a child lives outside school.’

(DES 1975: 286)
A ‘bilingual resource’

- Mother tongue provision was believed by Swann to ‘delay rather than overcome the trauma for pupils entering an English speaking environment.’
- A ‘bilingual resource’, was recommended to ‘help with the transitional needs of a non-English speaking child starting school.’ ... such a resource would offer ‘psychological and social support for the child, as well as being able to explain simple educational concepts in a child’s mother tongue, if the need arises’

(DES 1986: 407)
Responses to bilingualism and linguistic diversity

• A deficit model of linguistic diversity during the latter part of 20\textsuperscript{th} Century and early 21\textsuperscript{st} Century

• In the 1960s, the linguistic and cultural experiences of the newly arrived, so-called ‘immigrant’ children were seen not so much part of each child’s individuality to be built upon but rather as a ‘barrier’ to be overcome.

• As the teaching of English was viewed as crucial in overcoming the ‘language barrier’, there was a concentration on teaching the ‘non-English-speaking children’ English.
Responses to bilingualism and linguistic diversity

1990s/2000s
- Absence of guidance for educators working with bilingual children.
- Notion of ‘inclusion’ did not take account of needs of bilingual children.

Assimilationist view
Official reports either
- problematised bilingual children’s experience in terms of disadvantage’ or deficit or
- avoided acknowledging it claiming that existing practice was adequate.
Policy Rhetoric

**Bilingualism** is an asset that:

“confers intellectual advantages and the role of the first language in the child’s learning is of great importance”

(DCSF, 2007, p.4)
Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage

‘The importance of home languages
Key principle

Bilingualism is an asset, and the first language has a continuing and significant role in identity, learning and the acquisition of additional languages.’
(DCSF 2007: 4)
Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage

‘About learning English as an additional language
Key principle

Supporting continued development of first language and promoting the use of first language for learning enables children to access learning opportunities within the EYFS and beyond through their full language repertoires.’
(DCSF 2007: 4)
Benefits of Bilingualism

- Children’s Rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).
- Children and their parents, families and communities as ‘funds of knowledge’ for teachers, settings and schools (Moll et al, 1992)
- Use of first language in supporting and speeding up the process of learning the school language (Cummins, 1984; Thomas and Collier, 1995)
- Strong sense of self, and resilient, capable, confident and self-assured learner identity (DfES, 2007)
Our project - origins

• This Project draws on the methodology of the ‘Day in the Life of an Early Years Practitioner Project and the ‘Day in the Life of a Higher Level Teaching Assistant’.

• We also draw on the methodology developed by Gillen et. al., (2007) who filmed ‘A Day in the Life’ of a two and half year old girl across five countries and Tobin et. al.’s (1989) seminal work on Preschool in Three Cultures.
Research questions

In the absence of data of bilingual practitioners working bilingually in mainstream contexts in England:

What do bilingual practitioners do during one working day?

In the absence of theorizing ‘bilingual mediation’:

How do bilingual practitioners mediate young bilingual children’s learning? What is distinctive about bilingual mediation?
Project aims

- To video record a working day for two practitioners to show the types of interactions that occur between bilingual staff, children and other adults, including parents.
- To interview the bilingual staff.
- To provide rich descriptive accounts of the roles of two bilingual practitioners.
Methodology & data gathering

The Project used video methodologies to obtain fine grain data of bilingual practice in action.

Stage One:
- Identifying two bilingual practitioners, working with 3-5 year olds in two multilingual early years settings in England.
- Visits to meet and discuss filming.
- Obtaining permissions.
- Preparation of interview questions.

Stage Two:
- Videoing the two bilingual practitioners during a working day (non participant observation and field notes).
- Practitioner interviews at the end of the filming.
Methodology & data gathering

Stage Three:
• Initial analysis and editing of video data to obtain a representative shorter compilation tape of practice, and transcription and analysis of interviews.

Stage Four:
• Shared observation and discussion of compilation DVD with bilingual practitioner. Discussion recorded.

Stage Five:
• Data analysis of emerging themes.
The practitioners - Razia

• Speaks, reads and writes Pahari, Urdu and English
• Speaks Punjabi and Hindi
• Educated overseas
• Worked as a bilingual practitioner for about 18 years
• Has always worked in the early years
• Currently works in two schools
• Has worked in school where we filmed for 18 years
• Lives locally
Razia’s setting

- Early Years unit – Nursery children attend for 2 hours a day and Reception children attend for whole school day
- A multi-ethnic primary school near London
- Staff – Urdu/Pahari/English Bilingual Teaching Assistant; Polish/English Bilingual Teaching Assistant; Learning Support Assistant; Nursery Nurse; Nursery teacher; Reception teacher.
- Total number of children in Early Years Unit 43 - 30 bilingual and 13 with English as their mother tongue
- Mother tongues spoken by children in the Early Years unit: Twi, Polish, Tamil, Urdu, Pahari, Punjabi, Kannada, Hindi, Bosnian, Albanian, Portuguese, French Arabic, Wolof, English
The practitioners - Sadiye

- Speaks, reads and writes English
- Speaks Cypriot Turkish
- Educated in UK
- Worked as a nursery nurse for about 16 years
- Has always worked in the early years
- Has always worked in school where we filmed
- Lives locally
Sadiye’s setting

• Nursery – children attend for 2 hours a day either morning or afternoon
• A multi-ethnic Children’s centre in London
• Staff – English/Turkish speaking nursery nurse; Gujarati/English speaking nursery nurse; Turkish/English speaking Learning Support Assistant; Nursery Nurse; Nursery teacher
• Total number of children in Nursery  60 -  43 bilingual and  17 with English as their mother tongue
• Mother tongues spoken by children in the Nursery: Turkish, Kurdish, Bengali, Arabic, Polish, Urdu, Greek, Ibo/Hungarian, Somali, French, Creole, Ga, Farsi. Yoruba, Thai, Portuguese, Tamil, Spanish, English
DVD vignette

- Sadiye and the dice activity
'And sometimes we don’t choose to do it, when a child is happy to speak English only and they understand the task we don’t speak first language. But where we feel that oh, in fact you know, he doesn’t understand really what ... So in a sense yes, we are expected to use their first language in that situation.'

Razia
The lived experience - reality

‘We are not stopped to use our first language, as it used to be some years ago. We’re allowed to use first language wherever it’s possible. Teaching them English is our main goal really, that’s our objective.’

Razia
The lived experience - reality

‘I’m flitting between the two languages.’

‘I have to tell the Turkish children what’s happening here before it gets too complicated and I can’t explain to them what I’m trying to say, you know, so I’d sort of say something and then I’ll explain to them the basics, the key points of what I’ve told the others.’

Sadiye
The lived experience - reality

'I mean sometimes, that’s why I try and keep it short when I’m speaking in Turkish right, because sometimes, especially when I’m reading a story, I think well if I, if I’m focusing so much on trying to enable the Turkish children to pick up on what I’m saying, then am I not allowing the English-speaking children to access what they should be properly, and I wonder about that in my own mind sometimes, like equal opportunities for them as well, but then I think they’re getting a pretty much, good balance.'

Sadiye
'Allowing them to speak in their home language is very important isn’t it? Giving them the scope to do that, obviously as time goes by you should have the English and the Turkish and the other words there, whatever other language that might be, but allowing them to speak and feel confident to speak is all good for their development.'

Sadiye
The lived experience - reality

‘They’re not accessing the curriculum the way they should be, they’re not getting the benefits of what the others are getting and it’s not fair, so if I’ve got their language and I’m able to use it then that is right that I should use it.’

Sadiye
‘...later on when we have lesson time on the carpet, that is, that is the time when the teacher can teach them, and my role is to make sure the children are sitting and listening. In my language ..., I try to sit nearby and keep them a) keep them focused on the listening and speaking side of it, b) to make sure they are understanding. Sometimes I try to give them, try to translate it there and then, other times I just make notes. Sometimes in my mind or on a piece of paper, so I can take them away and go through that lesson briefly again so they understand.’

Razia
The lived experience - reality

‘So it’s just knowing the children, getting to know them and then finding the right sort of activities for them. And it is very hard sometimes, especially when you have to deal with a special curriculum, you know.’

Razia
The lived experience - reality

‘They’re losing everything. So if you had a little input of their first language, I think that would be a benefit for everybody: parents, families, schools and children because the more languages they have, I think the mindset is opening up to languages, not closing so lots of languages are, we are losing languages every day almost. Now all the children who’ve been through my time at let’s say [this school], not many of them are reading or writing their first language at all.’

Razia
The reality

Goal is learning English
Curriculum is perceived as given, inflexible, constraining
First language is used:
- when children don’t understand
- to provide basic information
- to keep children focussed
- to provide information for parents

Perceived tension between learning English and using the first language for bilingual and monolingual children
Reasons for undermining bilingual children’s first language development in favour of English

• The power relationship (linguistic and social) becomes internalised as ‘common sense’ and may become self-imposed within minority communities – evidence of this is in the interviews with bilingual practitioners.

• Schools and practices are viewed as powerful. Bilingual practitioners and parents recognise the fact that ‘academic, economic and social advancement in the mainstream requires mastery of the codes of the culture of power’ (Au and Raphael, 2000, p. 174) – evidence of this view in bilingual practitioners’ interviews.
Theoretical framework


Moll argues that the dominant model of education:

- is framed within values of white English-speaking educators
- emphasises the disadvantages of children from minority language backgrounds
- has the effect of undermining bilingual children’s first language development in favour of English.
Theoretical framework

González et al discuss the significance of Vygotsky and his theory of socially mediated knowledge:

‘… human thinking develops through the mediation of others. Put succinctly, people interact with their worlds, which are ‘humanised’, through mediational means and practices. This mediation of actions through artefacts and practices, especially the uses of languages in both their oral and written forms, plays a crucial role in the formation and development of human intellectual capacities.’ (2005: 259-260)
‘Funds of knowledge’ include:

- Knowledge, resources, competences, values, assumptions

- Historical - developed through life experiences and within social networks (such as within siblings’ play and interaction, within family’s traditions, within dealings with neighbours, within community gatherings and so on)
Funds of knowledge

• “...networks are flexible, adaptive, and active and may involve multiple persons from outside the homes; in our terms, they are ‘thick’ and ‘multi-stranded’ [...] the ‘teacher’ will know the child as a ‘whole person’ [...] taking account of having knowledge about multiple spheres of activity [...]”

• [Whereas in school] ...the typical teacher-student relationship seems ‘thin’ and ‘single-stranded’ as the teacher ‘knows’ the students only from the performance within the rather limited classrooms contexts.” (Moll et al, 1992, p133-4, emphasis added)
Funds of knowledge

- More than children’s ‘background’ or ‘home culture’
- A different way of understanding what children might bring to school, their ways of being and learning
DVD vignette

- Bavna and the girls
Knowledge of children and their families

'I've got knowledge, good knowledge of the education system ... Most of those children I know their background quite well, it’s like a support family centre I suppose... I am trying to make a difference to them.'

Razia
'I think we have to be there first ourselves, and I think I've been there. I have, because I'm a teacher, parent and everything, I know how parents are thinking, what those children [are thinking] because I have been a parent, and it's just personal experience, more important than any learning really.'

Razia
Having been there - personal experience

'I think I know for myself, from my own point of view what it was like to, to know like, you know like, when my mum didn’t understand certain things that came home, so therefore I used to have to do everything myself, and explain to her what this letter meant you know, so it’s nice to be able to help the children by helping their parents you know?'  

Sadiye
‘I think also the fact that I have grown up in a home and my Mum couldn’t speak English, I’m able to work out what people with a second language, irrespective of whether they can speak Turkish or not, are on about, you know? Because I’m used to having to translate and interpret and work out, so even if I have a Somalian parent, we muddle through and I can get it a lot quicker than what Sue can sometimes, because she’s not used to having to deal with the language, from young, and language being an issue from young.’

Sadiye
“Just taking the time to learn just a few words makes a child, makes a child warm to you, makes them feel less isolated, makes them want to be with you, and therefore you’re helping them to access what it is that you’re doing, just through gesture, from knowing a few words, looking at them, them looking back at you....”

Sadiye
Seeing children as rich and knowledgeable - beings not becomings

‘...they are very knowledgeable, they bring lots to school...if I take an example of a little boy who’s new at school, he knows a lot about science, ... and in maths he’s very good. He talks about back home, how they had lovely open space ... and they can go out to play. He had real opportunity to play with the real materials out there ... he really is very rich, very rich, knowledge wise.’

Razia
Drawing on funds of knowledge

Bilingual and bicultural knowledge

• Understanding of children’s backgrounds
• Experience of being a bilingual child and/or parent
• Importance of providing connections/being a ‘bridge’ for children and parents

and

• Understanding of the educational system
• Understanding of systems and procedures
‘I always call myself a bridge, bridging to home and school.’
Emerging thoughts

• There is still a yawning gap between rhetoric and reality
• 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
• However bilingual practitioners do draw on their linguistic and cultural ‘Funds of Knowledge’ to respond sensitively to bilingual children and their families, to support children’s transitions and act as mediators and boundary crossers - this is a distinctive, if somewhat constrained, role
Raising questions about the mediation of young bilingual children’s learning

• If the knowledge mediated relates to becoming a ‘schooled child’ and learning English, how can a bilingual practitioner create ‘new spaces’ which challenge the symbol-processing and monolingual views of mind?

• How can bilingual practitioners draw on the ‘funds of knowledge’ young bilingual children bring to early schooling within the constraints of the early years or primary curriculum?

• How can bilingual practitioners use children’s mother tongues to mediate learning when the curriculum is delivered in English and focuses on early learning of synthetic phonics?

• How can Razia’s notion of being a bridge be extended to the mediation of children’s learning?
Making Connections: Creating Bridges

‘FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE’

• One approach to addressing diversity of meanings in learning is to try to create bridges for learners between their home culture and ways of knowing and institutional practices and values.

• The work of Gonzalez and Moll and the ‘funds of knowledge’ of communities and individuals highlight the positive transformative effects when funds of knowledge are examined and validated – recognising and validating the cultural resources that learners bring.

• How can we ensure that bilingual practitioners have spaces to make bridges between what children do in their everyday practices with friends and family by demonstrating how they relate to schooled practices?
References


References


