Final report from the PBPL funded project:

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

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Executive Summary

Bilingual communities have long existed in the UK and many young children enter education or care settings speaking the languages of their home and community. Bilingual practitioners provide crucial support for children and parents in enabling them to access ‘the ways of being and doing’ - the working and learning practices that form part of the culture of these settings. They draw on and use their language expertise to support children’s learning and language development and act as ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al 1992) for children, parents and other staff. They also act as mediators of learning and understanding, facilitating communication and knowledge exchange, making connections, building bridges and relationships. However, many have to work within the constraints of a policy and practice discourse which foregrounds English. The ‘Day in the life of a bilingual practitioner’ project involved filming ‘a day in their life’, interviews carried out at the time and further comments and reflections when extracts were viewed with the practitioners at a later date. This provided a snapshot of their working life, their interactions with children, parents and other practitioners and an analysis of the ways in which they mediate communication, language and learning. We also considered the potential of bilingual practitioners to contribute to learning communities which take account of diversities of languages, cultures, religions and beliefs.

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Aims of the project

This project aimed to explore how bilingual practitioners draw on and 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.

Aims

- To video record a working day for two practitioners to show the 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.

- To provide evidence to develop our capacity to provide course modules and teaching and learning support for bilingual and monolingual adults following our courses.

- To provide discussion vignettes that could be downloadable and used as mini tutorials.

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?
Methodology

This Project drew on the methodology of the ‘Day in the Life of an Early Years Practitioner’ and the ‘Day in the Life of a Higher Level Teaching Assistant’ (CETL PBPL previously funded projects).

It also drew 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.

Data gathering – planned and actual activities

The Project used video methodologies to obtain fine grain data of bilingual practice in action. The three researchers were involved in different aspects of the data collection but two researchers were present for the filming and follow up interviews in each setting, The filming took place in 2008/2009.

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 (observation and field notes).
- Practitioner interviews at the end of the filming.

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.
A professional film crew were involved in the filming in both settings. There were no major difficulties encountered in data collection. Data analysis is ongoing.

**Theoretical framework**

**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.

A bilingual practitioner’s 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 participation
- 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**

The data have been analysed both individually and collectively to identify and explore emerging themes. Analysis of all the data collected in our study has exposed some key 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.

However, we feel that we can conclude that the bilingual practitioners involved in this project drew 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.

**Raising questions**

The findings suggest that little has changed over time in terms of what bilingual practitioners are able to do and are enabled to do within early years settings. We suggest that the following questions are worthy of further discussion by students, tutors, researchers and policy makers:

- If the knowledge mediated relates to becoming a ‘schooled child’ and learning English, how can bilingual practitioners contribute to creating ‘new spaces’ which challenge the monolingual views of mind?
- How can bilingual practitioners draw on the ‘funds of knowledge’ young bilingual children and their parents 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?

**Impact**

a) The video data from the project are being used to produce vignettes of practice which take the form of multi-media learning objects based around the analysis of the assets. The production of these learning objects is enabling us to gain skills in new production techniques which will be of benefit in our teaching role.

b) The learning objects and video data will be used in the re-make of E215 Extending personal professional development: early years (E210), the second level work based learning course and the final course in the Early Years Foundation Degree and possibly in the remake of E230 Ways of knowing: language, mathematics and science in the early years (E207) the new planned second level work based learning course and the final course in the Foundation Degree in Teaching and Learning (for teaching assistants working in primary schools). The material will support students in developing their understanding of bilingualism and the role of languages in learning.
c) We intend to provide seminars/workshops using the vignettes of bilingual practice for colleagues in Faculty of Education and Languages, Open University tutors (possibly online) and colleagues working in the sector as part of our wider role in providing CPD sessions in local authorities. These will support colleagues, tutors and practising teachers in developing their knowledge and skills in this area of learning.

d) The project has had national and international impact through the papers presented at conferences during 2009 (see below). The questions posed and the discussions entered into with other academics and practitioners have helped to stimulate and challenge our thinking and further analysis of the data.
References


