

MULTILINGUAL CONFERENCING: ONE CITY'S RESPONSE TO EDUCATING PUPILS FROM ASYLUM SEEKING FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

Multilingual conferencing: one city's response to educating pupils from asylum seeking families

In response to the dispersal of 1200 children from asylum seeking families across Britain to schools in Glasgow, Scotland, units were established in schools across Glasgow, in which specialist teachers support the English language development of the newly arrived pupils and enable their integration into the mainstream classes by team teaching. This paper, based on ethnographic research, conducted within a European project, reports on how one such unit has become an integral part of the mainstream school due to creative pedagogy and how the school has accessed what the pupils already know in order to help them make sense of learning in a new language.

KEY WORDS: bilingual pupils, creative learning and teaching, asylum seeking families

IZVLEČEK

Večjezična konferenca: dovzetnost nekega mesta za izobraževanje učencev iz družin prosilk za azil

Kot odgovor na razporeditev 1200 otrok iz družin prosilk za azil v Veliki Britaniji v šole v Glasgowu na Škotskem so bili po šolah v Glasgowu ustanovljeni oddelki, v katerih specializirani učitelji pomagajo novodošlim učencem pri učenju angleškega jezika in skozi skupinski pouk omogočajo njihovo integracijo v večinske razrede. Pričujoči prispevek temelji na etnografski raziskavi, ki je bila izpeljana v okviru evropskega projekta, in pojasni, kako je tak oddelek zaradi kreativne pedagogike postal sestavni del večinske šole ter na kak način se je šola dokopala do vedenja o znanju, ki ga imajo učenci že osvojenega z namenom pomagati jim razumeti smisel učenja v novem jeziku.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: dvojezični učenci, učenje in poučevanje, družine prosilke za azil

INTRODUCTION

The dispersal of around 1200 children from asylum seeking families to Glasgow schools, resulted in the setting up of the Glasgow Asylum Seekers Support Project (GASSP) funded by National Asylum Seekers' Support (NASS). The educational

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wing of this project established bilingual units in schools across Glasgow, in which specialist English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers would support the English language development of the newly arrived pupils while enabling their integration into the mainstream classes by team teaching.

This new initiative has a management structure that exists in parallel to Glasgow City Education Authority. The project provides clear support guidelines for teachers in the bilingual bases, which, while not in contradiction to the curricular frameworks of national documentation¹, do prioritise teaching and learning strategies over curriculum content. Thus the rationale for educational provision for children from asylum seeking families² urges schools and teachers to *take into account breaks in education (experienced by the children) and English as an Additional Language (EAL) needs, based on existing best practice*. The GASSP rationale for the curriculum makes no explicit mention of national curricular frameworks but rather emphasises that the curriculum must be guided by principles of good practice in bilingual education and cites references to the research that identifies good practice. Children and teachers are at the heart of this rationale rather than a curriculum, societal needs or performativity policies.

CONTEXT

The research was conducted in one of the GASSP primary schools, Lady Jane Grey³. Lady Jane Grey primary school is a three-storey red sandstone Victorian school building in the centre of a housing scheme in the city of Glasgow. The school is surrounded by high-rise flats built in the late 1960's and now due for demolition. There is large-scale deprivation in the area marked by high rates of crime, illegal drug use and suicide. This housing scheme is now one in which Glasgow City Council have chosen to house dispersed asylum seeker families as they await the Home Office decision as to their status. Consequently, the school which until recently had very few non-white, non-monolingual English speaking pupils, now has almost 100 pupils from Somalia, the Congo, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, the Lebanon, Zimbabwe, Russia and Lithuania. These children, by dint of having to use English for the purposes of education in the classroom and using at least one other language at home to communicate with their families, can be deemed bilingual.⁴ There are a total of 200 pupils in the school, aged 5 – 12 years old.

The school has a bilingual base which employs four teachers in addition to the seven mainstream classes. All newly arrived children from asylum seeking families (and other bilingual children) are registered with an age appropriate mainstream class. They all go

¹ SEED (2000) (revised version) *The Structure and Balance of the Curriculum: 5 to 14 National Guidelines*, Edinburgh

² GASSP Education Handbook, 2001

³ All names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

⁴ A bilingual pupil is one who uses one or more languages in their everyday life. (Wiles, 1984)

to their register class at the start of the day and attend this class for art, drama, music, physical education, religious education, science, technology, health education and social subjects. They are taught in the bilingual base for maths and language until the base teachers and mainstream teachers together assess that they have enough English to be able to work within the mainstream classroom. The children with very little English also have an hour a day in the base for 'reception time' to improve their English. The teachers from the base team teach in the mainstream classrooms for part of the time. All teachers in the school participate in running after school clubs for the children, e.g. computer, art, netball, football etc. In these ways, the teachers from the bilingual base are not viewed by the pupils as only being there to support the bilingual pupils.

A two year ethnographic study in this site led to a clearer understanding of how the GASSP project was responding to the needs of the asylum seeking pupils and their families.

EDUCATION OF BILINGUAL PUPILS IN SCOTLAND

There is currently no national policy for the education of bilingual pupils and this can lead to confusion amongst teachers as to what is the best practice to adopt. The development of a policy through the GASSP project has enabled mainstream teachers to see good practice in action and has had an impact on their understandings and practices as will be highlighted in this paper.

In a complex situation of limited national policy and conflicting government reports, teachers may have to resort to their common sense beliefs, or folk theories about how best to teach bilingual pupils. Teaching practices also to what support systems for bilingual pupils were available in the different education authorities.

The CLASP project was investigating creative learning and I was interested to discover if the newly arrived, bilingual pupils from asylum seeking families could be engaged in creative learning when they and their teachers did not share a language.

Woods (1990)⁵ suggests that one of the empirical features of creative teaching is the relevance of the curriculum and teaching practices that operate within a broad range of accepted social values while being attuned to students' identities and cultures.

Woods et al (1999:10)⁶ propose that the relevance of values in, and the context of, the curriculum is especially significant in the teaching of bilingual children as a critical factor in creative teaching. They suggest that this relevance is manifested particularly in the encouragement of children's free play, in activities that start from the child; in the development of home-school links; in the teaching that occurs 'in the margins' of programmed activity and through spontaneous reaction to children's interests.

⁵ WOODS, P. (1990) *Teacher Skills and Strategies* London: Falmer

⁶ WOODS, P., BOYLE, M. and HUBBARD, N. (1999) *Multicultural Children in the Early Years* Clevedon, Multilingual Matters

Cummins (1996:73)⁷ writes that *human relationships are central to effective instruction – particularly in the case of second language learners who may be trying to find their way in the borderlands between cultures*. While not explicitly mentioning relevance here, Cummins goes on to write that *For students to invest their sense of self, their identity, in acquiring their new language and participating actively in their new culture, they must experience positive and affirming interactions with members of that culture*.

Bentley, (2001: 136–137)⁸ proposes a number of ways in which schools need to be restructured into learning communities and to develop abilities and forms of creativity which resonate with the 21st century, including *the ability to transfer what one learns across different contexts and real world outcomes so that creativity and motivation are reinforced by the experience of making an impact and giving benefit to others*.

SCHOOL SOLUTIONS

The responses in Lady Jane Grey and indeed in all the schools in the GASSP programme have been based on three main principles: team teaching, community involvement by and from the schools and developing an anti-racist ethos. These principles accord with the proposals of Woods, Cummins and Bentley as discussed earlier.

The practice of these principles has resulted in schools where the EAL teachers work in the mainstream classes alongside the class teachers. On many occasions the whole class, bilingual and monolingual, work in the bilingual pupils' base with both teachers. There is shared decision making about pedagogy between both teachers and indeed the pupils. The local environment is used as a learning resource. Parents, volunteers and specialist workers, e.g. community artists, are brought into the school to increase the relevance of the curriculum. All languages and backgrounds are respected. The whole school is involved in its change to a multilingual school and there are clear guidelines for racist incidents

If the knowledge conveyed to children by teachers is relevant to their concerns and reflects their societal and cultural knowledge, then it will be more easily internalised by the child and turned into personal knowledge (Woods and Jeffrey, 1996, opus cit: 116). However the societal and cultural knowledge of bilingual pupils is not prominent in the curricular guidelines for teaching in Scotland. So relevant teaching occurs where teachers strive, often against the prescribed curriculum, to construct knowledge that is meaningful within the child's frame of reference. Teachers use strategies to share and create knowledge through imagination and children's prior knowledge.

⁷ CUMMINS, J. (1996) *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*, Ontario: California Association for Bilingual Education

⁸ BENTLEY, T. (2001) 'The Creative Society: Reuniting Schools and Lifelong Learning' in Fielding, M. (ed.) *Taking Education really Seriously: Four Years' Hard Labour*, London: Routledge Falmer

By putting relevance at the forefront of their teaching, the teachers created what I have characterised as a Multilingual Conference in Lady Jane Grey School. In this conference, the teachers were highly effective keynote speakers who provided the stimulus for the children's development of their own learning.

Much has been written about the benefits of play in learning for enabling children to develop knowledge through practical experience. Writing about play, however, tends to focus on *young* children's learning strategies (e.g. Bruce, 1991⁹; Meek, 1985¹⁰; Moyles, 1989¹¹). Teachers in Lady Jane Grey however are convinced of the need for play throughout the school. Teachers recognised the need for active involvement and acknowledged that this is what the children wanted in order to make the learning relevant to them.

Thus the conferencing happening in Lady Jane Grey involved active participation where the children responded to the teachers' keynote speeches by deciding how to interpret them to take the learning further.

Making games was a strategy used for the children to demonstrate knowledge about the local environment. For bilingual learners of all ages, play optimises their use of their first language, enables them to bring their own cultural knowledge and understanding to bear and enables collaboration with others. The children in this study however were not passive recipients of instructions to play, but initiated play as a way to make sense of a new language and a new curriculum. The teachers had provided them with a stimulus that they then took control of and developed in ways in which the teachers could not have predicted.

Teachers may be reluctant to describe classroom activities as play, due to the over-emphasis on play as a medium for learning for younger children. Play can also be seen as exploratory interactions between children and adults, perhaps fostered by the adults, but developed into meaningful activity.

In Lady Jane Grey, parents and volunteers were welcomed in the classroom to interact with all the children but often orally responded to what pupils had written in English, their new language, by discussing the content in their first language. This first language interaction acted as a powerful force for the bilingual children's cognitive, social and cultural development and gave validation to what had been written. The non-teaching adults who worked with the children offered them an audience for their ideas: an audience which admired and valued their multilingualism.

⁹ BRUCE, T. (1991) *Time to Play in Early Childhood Education*, Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton

¹⁰ MEEK, M. (1985) Play and paradoxes: Some considerations of Imagination and Language in Wells, G. and Nicholls, J. *Language and Learning: an Interactional Perspective*, London: Falmer Press

¹¹ MOYLES, J. (1989) *Just Playing? The role and status of play in early childhood education*: Buckingham, Open University Press

The multilingual conference that is Lady Jane Grey Primary uses, in addition to inspiring keynote speakers, or teachers, a range of workshop facilitators and seminar leaders, in the shape of community workers and volunteers. These workshop facilitators and seminar leaders with specific talents of their own provided an important additional layer in the children's educational experience, helping to ensure that education was not just about becoming enmeshed in school practices but had a role in the development of the children as bilingual learners, translators and multilingual beings.

Many of the teachers in Lady Jane Grey believed firmly in making learning meaningful by taking up issues and enquiries initially introduced by the children.

Starting with the child's knowledge and interests often led to the children going beyond the original enquiries and surprising the teachers.

The teacher provided the initial stimulus, but it was the children who decided how and what they would learn from this. In such situations the teacher was caught up in the children's learning and was liberated from the constraints of the curriculum by the children's ability to create their own learning situations from the initial enthusiasm and stimulus of the keynote speaker.

The children needed to make connections between what was happening in school and what was happening at home. For the majority of these children from asylum seeking families, the educational experience in Scotland was significantly different to what they or their parents had known before. There were frequent occasions when the children demonstrated an ability to recreate skills and knowledge learned in school into the home context, thus increasing the relevance for them of their learning and giving them increased ownership of the learning. They talked about how they had showed their parents what they had been doing in school and tried out new art techniques, science experiments and forms of writing at home, bringing in the results of their labours into the classroom. This in turn gave the children public acknowledgement of the effort they were putting into making learning relevant to them. There were also many incidences of the children helping the teachers to make connections with their existing knowledge. Creative learning was enabled by an ethos which encouraged experimentation and home-school links. The children were enabled to be multilingual participants in their own learning.

Collaboration was developed in the school as a teaching and learning strategy being worked towards for the mutual benefit of children, parents, staff and wider community. The interactions between teachers were marked by respect for and interest in others' feelings and opinions and this respect is carried into the classrooms and marks the relationships between teachers and pupils and, thus, that fostered between the pupils by the teachers.

In addition to the approaches described above, the teachers, both in the bilingual base and in the mainstream classrooms made use of learner inclusive/co-participative pedagogies which enhance the children's ability to take ownership and control of their learning. Although the classes are initially organised on an age-related basis there were frequent opportunities for cross-age co-participation. Older children read their stories

to younger children; younger children shared their findings with older children; mixed age groups went together on excursions into the community to investigate features such as recycling, play facilities and urban wildlife.

Children were encouraged to use all their linguistic resources to enable learning to take place. Inter and intra-language collaboration enhanced the understanding as children helped newcomers to participate by repeating the task requirements in another language.

Since the arrival of the bilingual base, the school involved adults other than teachers in the children's education. Parents made costumes for school performances and made a mosaic to display in the school showing the languages of the school. The janitor and classroom assistants showed the children games they used to play in the playground. Volunteers from the community used their first language in the classrooms to communicate with children new to English.

LADY JANE GREY PRIMARY AS A MULTILINGUAL CONFERENCE

In this research site, collaboration between the children was essential, particularly due to the limited English of fifty percent of the pupils. The teachers used pedagogies such as cross-age co-participation and inter and intra-language collaboration to assist the children to be creative learners and also to enable integration of the children from asylum-seeking families. In addition to this, the teachers worked and played together, modelling team work and co-operation in their daily routines, although they do not suggest that this was easy.

The arrival of the children from asylum seeking families, supported by the GASSP project teachers and guidelines, have changed a monolingual primary school into a daily multilingual conference where the pupils work as both participants, presenters and simultaneous translators. I have suggested that the teachers in the school provide the stimulus for the children's development of their own learning, acting in this multilingual conference as highly effective keynote speakers. Other adults in the school and wider community are the audience essential to the children's belief in themselves as participants and presenters. The creative pedagogies adopted by the GASSP teachers have inspired the mainstream staff and enabled them to be more creative themselves and more responsive to the needs and interests of all pupils. The creative pedagogies thus adopted across the school have enabled the children from asylum seeking families to use their linguistic and cultural resources to be creative learners in a new linguistic, cultural and educational environment.

SUMMARY

VEČJEZIČNA KONFERENCA: DOVZETNOST NEKEGA MESTA ZA IZOBRAŽEVANJE UČENCEV IZ DRUŽIN PROSILK ZA AZIL

Gerri Smyth

Porazdelitev približno 1200 otrok iz družin prosilk za azil¹² v Veliki Britaniji po šolah v Glasgowu na Škotskem je bila temelj za zagon projekta Glasgow Asylum Seekers Project (GASSP) – Podporni projekt prosilcem za azil, ki ga financira National Asylum Seekers' Support (NASS) – Nacionalna podpora prosilcem za azil. Izobraževalni del tega projekta je ustanovil dvojezične enote po šolah v Glasgowu, v katerih specializirani učitelji pospešujejo učenje angleškega jezika pri novodošlih učencih medtem ko s skupinskim poučevanjem omogočajo njihovo integracijo v večinske razrede.

Kaj se zgodi, ko enojezična šola v ekonomsko deprivilegirani, brezperspektivni mestni četrti postane zaradi državne politike večjezična, večrasna šola (Listina o priseljevanju in azilu)? Kako otroci iz družin prosilk za azil, od katerih mnogi do prihoda na Škotsko niso bili deležni nobene formalne izobrazbe in ki jim je angleški jezik tuj, dojemajo šolsko skupnost?

Prispevek prinaša razlago kako dvojezična enota postane integralni del večinske šole zahvaljujoč kreativni pedagogiki, in na kak je šola prepoznala in ocenila znanje, ki ga ti otroci že posedujejo, z namenom pomagati jim razumeti smiselnost učenja v novem jeziku.

Prispevek temelji na etnografski raziskavi, ki je bila izpeljana kot del European CLASP¹³ project – evropski projekt Kreativno učenje in perspektive študentov – v dvojezični enoti ene od osnovnih šol v Glasgowu, Škotska. Kooperativni etos, ki se je razvil med učitelji, je vplival na načine, ki otrokom omogočajo odločitve v zvezi z njihovim učenjem, to pa je povratno vplivalo na pedagogiko celotne šole.

V prispevku je nakazano kako je populacija teh visoko mobilnih učencev omogočila šoli boljše dojetanje perspektiv učencev ter kako je pripomogla k vzniku kreativne pedagogike v šoli.

¹² Prosilec za azil: oseba, ki pri britanskem notranjem ministrstvu zaprosi za status begunca.

Begunec: oseba, ki ima zaradi prošnje za azil ali izredno dovoljenje za bivanje, kar pomeni omejen status, ki dovoljuje začasno bivanje v Veliki Britaniji, ali pa status po konvenciji, ki osebi dovoljuje stalno bivanje v Veliki Britaniji.

Obstaja pravica do izobraževanja za vse otroke ne glede na njihov status, Konvencija Združenih Narodov o otrokovih pravicah

¹³ CLASP: Creative Learning and Student Perspectives (kreativno učenje in perspektive študentov)