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Linguistic Diversity in a Gorton School: A Case Study

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1. Introduction

Many schools in the United Kingdom have large numbers of students who are not from an English-speaking background. These students are learning English as an additional language and are therefore referred to as EAL students (English as an Additional Language).

The nature of this study is to investigate linguistic diversity within a primary school and to understand the issues these schools face with EAL students and what is in place to help accommodate their needs. Based on information drawn from the _Primary National Strategy_ it is clear that different students have different needs. For instance, older students from non-English speaking backgrounds have more difficulty in learning English, compared to younger students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The _Primary National Strategy_ also states that the best way to deal with EAL students struggling with English is to create an inclusive environment. They maintain that one of the important factors in doing so is for staff members to understand more about the linguistic, social, cultural and religious backgrounds of the students in their classrooms and to empathise with the political, social and cultural factors that affect the lives of their learners.

2. Research

To explore these issues we have focused on a primary school in Gorton, which we have referred to as the _CASE SCHOOL_. We are unable to reveal the name of the school for confidentiality reasons. The case school and the area in which it is located are very diverse, with a large number of people from different cultural, social and religious backgrounds. According to the 2001 census, Gorton has a population of 88,143 people of which 70% are of white ethnicity, 19% are of Asian ethnicity, 5% are

of black ethnicity, while the rest of the population are of mixed race ethnicities or other. The population also includes people from many different religious backgrounds, 52% of the population is Christian, 18% are Muslim and 2% are Sikh or Hindu while the rest stated no religion.

Gorton, located to the south-east of Manchester city centre, is not only a very diverse area but it is also surrounded by neighboring areas such as Longsight, Openshaw and Levenshulme with culturally mixed populations as well. The school itself is Roman Catholic with 215 pupils attending. It attracts, however, people from all religious backgrounds, including many people from areas neighboring Gorton such as Longsight. The OFSTED report, conducted in March 2009, echoes the case school's diversity and praises its achievements, particularly due to the economic disadvantage of many of its students and the Gorton area residents.

> *This average-sized primary school draws pupils from an area where there is some significant social and economic disadvantage. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is well above the national average. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is increasing and is also well above the national average; most of these pupils speak English as an additional language. Thirty three different languages are represented in the school.*

(OFSTED, 2009)

From the information available it will be possible to determine what languages, other than English, are spoken by the student body, what difficulties the teachers face teaching EAL students, what strategies are put in place by the school to deal with these issues and how effective these strategies are according to the teachers.

3. Method

It is our intention to investigate the case school by speaking to teachers and discovering what difficulties they face teaching EAL students and how they overcome them. By using a questionnaire sheet it has been possible to compile a set of statistics highlighting the number of EAL students attending the case school, the number of multilingual students attending the case school and what languages students attending the school speak, as well as what languages the teachers speak. The results can be found below, followed by summaries of interviews with 4 individual teachers whereby teachers had more freedom to express their issues with teaching EAL students and how they believe the school is dealing with these issues.

4. Results

Questionnaire Findings

Our original plan was to give the questionnaire to teachers from every year, however, when we went to give them out, teachers from every year were not available, so we ended up with a selection of questionnaires filled out by 4 teachers, mainly from the key stage 2 age group.

At the case school there is quite a high percentage of students who are learning EAL. From our questionnaire sample you can see that 27% of the students in their classes were learning English.

The number of children who were effectively bi-lingual or multi-lingual was also fairly high as can be seen in the graph below.
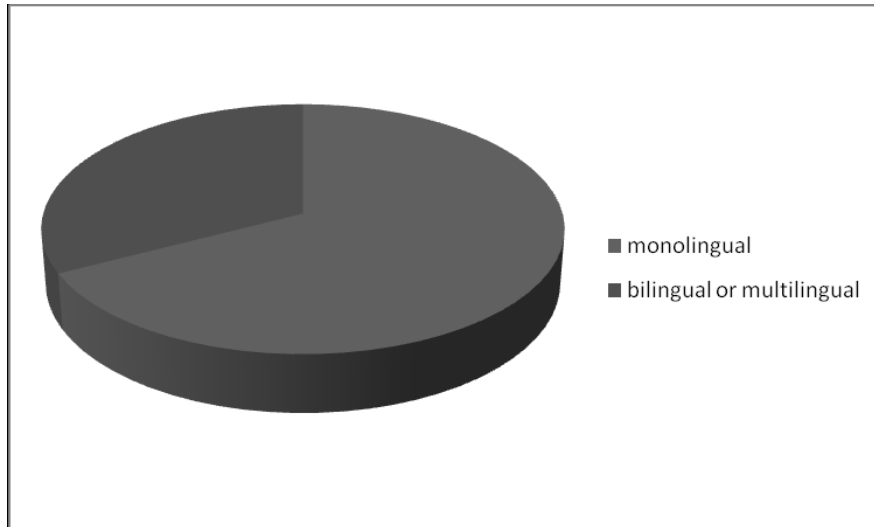
What is important about these findings is that year 1 was not included because as one of the teachers explained, a large number of her pupils are bi/multilingual despite the fact that in the classroom they would not speak their mother tongue and would only speak English. The reason for this is because the pupils are very self orientated at this age and do not communicate with other students in their home language because they do not realise that they speak the same language at home as some of the other students. She said that this often carries on until around age 7.

Variety of languages spoken by pupils included:-

1 Arabic

2 Mongolian

3 Italian

4 Hindi

5 Polish

6 Ghanaian (not sure of the specific language)

7 German

8 Angolan

9   Tagalog

10 Dutch

11 Polish

12 Afrikaans

13 Spanish

14 Czech

15 French

16 Portuguese

17 Chinese (Cantonese)

18 Tigrinya (language of Eritrea)

19 Moroccan

20 Swedish

21 Estonian

22 Nigerian (we were not sure of which specific language)

23 Jamaican (patois)

There was a range of 23 languages that the teachers we surveyed identified as native of pupils. The range of languages spoken by the teachers was much lower, with only 5 different languages. These include:

1   English

2   Spanish

3   Polish

4   French

5   German

Extra comments in the questionnaires included about how the school teaches Spanish as a second

language and this allows students to talk to each other in their mother tongue in order to find words/phrases. Another extra comment included that more support was needed in class for EAL students, which leads us on to our findings in the interviews.

In the interviews 4 teachers were interviewed from Key Stage two on a one to one basis about the language situation in the school. We interviewed two male and two female teachers. Below are the summaries of the interviews we carried out with each teacher.

TEACHER A

The first person interviewed explained how as a teacher he had not been given an actual guide of how to deal with students learning EAL, however, that there was a specific EAL coordinator who was aware of the students who needed aid and would conduct both group and individual aid with them. The EAL coordinator finds out about the specific language needs during the admission process, so, by the time the students come to the teacher then the set up is already in place. He said that for pupils he felt there was enough support in place and it is good how it is tailored to individual student needs. The teacher said that although no specific training had been given to them, they did not encounter any personal problems. He felt, however, that there had not really been enough training and that in cases he had gone into it a bit blind. With dealing with any EAL problems, there is a strong teacher network, which means that teachers could gain advice from each other. This was teacher A's first teaching post and said that all EAL advice had been from other teachers. Despite it being a very multilingual school he said that he did not encounter any problems communicating with the children in the classroom, however, he said it was just a different way of teaching and adhering to the students' need. With regards to the parents, he said that all the parents spoke English, some better than others, but they never had any issues communicating with him.

TEACHER B

Teacher B said that when she started 5 years earlier she was not given any training, however, she says that there are better things in place now and that things have been largely improved over the years. She has personally been on an EAL course, which she says has helped her to understand her EAL student's situations and provide them with better support. There is not a specific pack on what to do with children learning EAL but there is the EAL coordinator and they organize all of the extra support for the children who need it. She says the system works because the teachers support each other and also they can go to the EAL coordinator when having questions. Teacher B said that she had many problems communicating with parents because a lot of them do not speak English, often problems with letters. This is resolved with occasional translation of the letters and is often helped by students in older years that can help communicate them. Often the children have a better level of English than the parents do, so they can help communicate letters. Teacher B feels that there is enough support in place for the students who need support. There are often problems in teacher B's classroom with children speaking their native language in the classroom but English is encouraged in the classroom because they would not want to alienate other children. Sometimes, however, it is an advantage that they speak other languages. Spanish is taught as part of the curriculum from nursery.

TEACHER C

This teacher has lots of pupils to whom English is a second language. Pitching lessons can be difficult, due to the different levels of English in the class so she employs a range of techniques to support "EAL pupils". These include but are not limited to:

1   Labeling everyday objects.

2   Work with a partner the pupil is comfortable with: provides speaking opportunities, without making the student feel as though they have been put in the spotlight.

3   Pictures illustrating topical words.

4   Appropriate distribution of support staff.

Despite the enormous encouragement for students to speak English in the classroom, support for mother tongue and promotion of heritage culture does exist in the school. The teacher uses the local mobile library service to source books relating to pupils' heritage cultures, incorporating storytelling and first language (L1) vocabulary as teaching resources, reinforcing the value placed on pupil's heritage language and culture. Reading material in L1 for children to use at home with their families is also available. Children are encouraged to share their linguistic knowledge in class, with simple phrases being used by the whole class.

One of her Polish pupils does not like speaking Polish in class, preferring to use the more commonly used language, English. Many children compartmentalise their language usage, with L1 remaining in the domestic domain. The teacher encourages the use of L1 in school as an invaluable part of the pupils' identities.

In the classroom environment children are aware of the EAL programme and try to help each other out however they can. However, new EAL pupils joining the class throughout the year present more serious challenges, because not all the children progress together.

With 50-60 languages spoken in the school, the school has a dedicated EAL teacher/ support worker, to help with individual needs, such as confidence boosting or reading. Teacher C has claimed there is a great inclusive attitude in the school enriching and preserving heritage languages and cultures.

An interesting point that teacher C made was that children often translate for their parents if they are more confident in English. Some parents"have no English at all". This is not a serious barrier to communication and there are translators available (through an independent council body) as well as the EAL support teacher (school level, not sure if all schools have one or if this reflects national policy as this is first teaching post, 2nd year).

TEACHER D

Teacher D is currently in his second year teaching his class of 30 pupils. He has over 8 years of teaching experience and is very linguistically aware. His class contains 14 EAL pupils. He teaches pupils ranging from absolute beginners, to children who are fairly fluent. The EAL students'

backgrounds and English speaking abilities are listed below:

4 Chinese, one of which the teacher believed to be a selective mute.

3 Polish children, all of which are fairly fluent in English.

1 Dutch child, who is fluent in English.

1 child from Mozambique, who speaks Portuguese.

1 Eritrean: Tigrinya. She has been at the school for a few years, but still has language issues, mainly in writing.

This teacher's 6 years experience at the case school was preceded by 2 years experience in one other school in Warrington (mainly monolingual in English).

His methods of teaching English to EAL pupils consist of using illustrations for simple nouns. Gap-fill and sentence arrangement exercises. These are teaching strategies used to tailor content to individual's needs. "Differentiation comes in during the planning stage". This involves a slightly increased workload. Inside the class, lower ability kids are supported by Teaching Assistants, focus on high frequency words, have different assessment expectations, but still sit assessments.

Reading can sometimes pose more of a problem than speaking and therefore one to one sessions to help students read are in place. There is support from the Local Educational Authority in the form of an EAL consultant temporarily appointed to the school to improve access to the curriculum for EAL pupils. "Not fabulous" he claimed, however, it did give him a few ideas such as teaching assistants during input time and activities. EAL Coordinator (part of the regular teaching staff) provides one on one and small mixed language groups (i.e. 6-1 outside of class) as well as translators.

Another observation that Teacher D made was that Pupils do not seem to take languages into account in their own interactions, but some kids with the same languages seem to stick together.

Similarly to Teacher C, Teacher D mentions the role of the children as interpreters between staff and parents. He believes that it is far more difficult for adults to acquire new languages. He speaks about children often not having access to English at home, where L1 tends to dominate, except from books and television.

Translators have to be funded by the school, which can be problematic. Translators tend to be used in relation to assessment, rather than everyday occurrences.

At Teacher D's previous post in Warrington working mostly with English pupils he remarked the similar lack of EAL facilities, although he also claimed there was less necessity for it.

"I've never been in a classroom where you can hear Polish and Chinese and Dutch and German in an hour, you know, it's incredible!"

5. Conclusion

It is quite clear from the research we have carried out on the case school that pupils who have English as an additional language are in large quantity and the support needed for them is now more necessary than ever, in order for them to fully achieve their potential. Our survey produced some staggering statistics e.g. 23 (and possibly more) different languages being used by pupils throughout the school. This is a clear indicator that linguistic diversity is a major part of the school's culture and needs to be catered for as efficiently as possible. It is clear from the interviews that we carried out with certain teachers that much progress has been made over the years to cater for EAL students, but clearly more work could be done, especially as EAL numbers are more likely to rise than fall in the future. Many of the teachers appear to be satisfied with certain initiatives, such as providing the school with an EAL coordinator, as this provides each pupil with one on one support which helps to greatly boost their confidence. The EAL course that some teachers have been placed on also appears to be benefiting the school as teachers are learning how to expand their knowledge about how best to deal with a class which may contain many EAL students such as our case school. The main problem many of the teachers have with EAL support is the lack of training. We feel that the best way to combat this is by putting every new teacher on a specially designed EAL training programme before they start teaching as some teachers may not have been exposed to a linguistically diverse school in the past. As for existing teachers, they should be given the choice to go on the training programme or not as some of the teachers we interviewed claimed that they didn't encounter many problems with EAL and the working environment wasn't affected. We feel that extensive EAL packs should also be readily available within the school as teachers would be able to consult them and get extra guidance should they encounter any problems. Another option which may be considered to help the EAL situation is offering a n English course to parents who have no or a very slight grasp of English. This would enable them to communicate with their child at home about their work, which would enhance the child's learning. However, this could be very costly and time consuming and is therefore unlikely to happen.

Overall, our study proved our hypothesis that the case school is very linguistically diverse and that more needs to be done to fully cater for students who have English as an additional language and for their teachers.

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