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## **Language and Identity in Multicultural Settings: Ethnographic Case Studies of an Early Years Centre and Reception Classes**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores various support strategies to support language and identity in multicultural settings, as used by an inner London Early Years' Centre. Ten nursery aged children from a variety of backgrounds with different needs were chosen for an ethnographic case study. The centre takes pride in its multicultural ethos and a number of good practice is observed, but how inclusive is the practice in supporting children's cultural and linguistic experiences? How can children's multiple identities be supported in a multicultural nurseries? Can children adopt to a new set of value systems while maintaining their own? The paper explores these key issues.*

This project is a socio-linguistic investigation of children's language use and constructions of identities. It is planned in two phases: Phase 1 in an inner city multicultural Early Years Centre and Phase 2 in its linked reception classes. The focus is to identify and disseminate good practice relating to language, culture, identity and awareness of others. The ethno-linguistic study is concerned with investigating how children from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds are supported through a range of pedagogical practices which are based on knowledge and understanding of the emotional /social development of young children.

The project builds on existing work on language, culture and identity (Pahl, 1999; Clarke and Siraj-Blatchford 2000) ([www.naldic.org.uk](http://www.naldic.org.uk))

The Project Aim is to identify and disseminate good practice relating to children's own constructions of multiple identities in multilingual and multicultural contexts. In this paper we present initial findings from Phase 1 drawn from field notes and audio recordings.

### **The Project Objectives are to collect:**

- Evidence of young children's understanding and interpretations of concepts such as a sense of self, similarities and differences.
- Evidence of peer-group interactions, group dynamics and adult-child interactions.
- Evidence of children's naturally occurring conversations during activities.
- Evidence of language use in different learning and social contexts.
- Examples of the kinds of practice which support the above.

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### **Language in multicultural contexts**

Language practices are subject to their social, political and historical contexts (May, 2001), that is language practices are linked to ideologies of language, which are not necessarily stable or unchanging. Rather, they are multiple and influenced by changes at local, national, state and global levels (Gal, 1998; Woolard 1998). There is often a dynamic tension between identities asserted and chosen by the self and identities asserted and chosen for the individual by states, nations or institutions. We understand multilingual young people and children's identities as emergent, multiple and dynamic and linked to relations of power in society. The assumption that one language equals one national or cultural identity ignores the complexity of multilingual societies. Schools are the institutional representations of society. Our interest in this study is to explore these relationships, in the context of the Early Years Centre and its link schools.

Current Government policy in the UK constructs an ideological context which is characterised by contradiction in relation to the value of languages other than English. Whilst the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (now the Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCFS) strategy document *Languages for All: Languages for Life* (2002) makes a positive argument for language learning and bilingualism, other Government policy statements link the use of some non-European languages with negative factors such as school underachievement and social segregation. The present study contributes to the debates of multilingual practices through the analysis of social, emotional and cultural variables.

### **Language use in multicultural settings: Cultural and linguistic implications**

Since the mid 1960s educators in England, following recommendations of major Government investigations, have implemented a series of educational reforms attempting to reverse the pattern of underachievement amongst minority ethnic students (Plowden Report, 1967; Bullock Report, 1975; Swann Report, 1985). The result was massive spending plans aiming to provide 'equality of educational opportunity' for those from minority ethnic communities (for example Home Office Section 11 funding for children of the Commonwealth) and some political legislation (Race Relations Act 1976; Race Relations Amendment Act, 2000). Many argued that one of the reasons why such interventions brought about superficial changes was because of their failure to 'leave a deep structure of relationships between educators and culturally diverse students, largely untouched' (Cummins, 1996:136). This implied an unchanging power relationship in the classroom (Kozol, 1991) which was largely due to generations of low expectations towards the minority students (Blauner, 1969; Ogbu, 1992, Mehmet Ali, 2001). Such negative attitudes often result in a long continuum of reactions ranging from internalization of a sense of ambivalence or insecurity about their identities to rejection of and active resistance to dominant group values. At both extremes the result has frequently been alienation from schooling and mental withdrawal from academic effort (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984; Ogbu, 1992; Cummins, 1996). We start from the premise that this may not be the case in all early years settings however, the awareness of such negative attitudes need be borne in mind in carrying out similar research as the provenance of such attitudes can often be traced back to Early Years Practice.

A considerable research data mainly from Europe and North America suggest that for underachieving linguistic minority students, the extent to which their language and culture is incorporated into the school programme constitutes a significant predictor of academic success (Beykont, 1994; Campos & Keatinge, 1988; Ramirez, 1992; Collier and Thomas, 1997). Similar research has shown that this process is also reversible where the facilitation of the use of the two languages interchangeably results in cognitive advantages (Cummins and Mulcahy, 1978; Kessle & Quinn, 1982; Clarkson, 1992; Issa, 2005). This is further supported by research on the bilingual brain which depicts a hierarchical arrangement between lexical and conceptual levels of representation in which lexical memory systems are shown as independent of one another but interrelated by virtue of their connections to a common conceptual memory system (Durgunoğlu and Roediger, 1987; Smith 1991; Kirsner, Lalor and Hird, 1993). Hence, the interdependence between two languages where the distinction between surface level fluency and more evolved language skills is highlighted. Students' simple communication skills may hide their inadequacy in the language proficiency necessary to meet the cognitive and academic demands of the classroom. Cummins (1984a, 1984b) expressed this distinction in terms of *Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills* (BICS) and *Cognitive Academic Proficiency Skills* (CALP).

Our research identifies a further dimension of children's multilingualism where the process involves the use of two as well as three languages.

### **Methodology**

Approaches from linguistic ethnography provide theoretical and analytical frameworks which unite around a view of language use as contingent on context and implicated in power relations. We draw on ethnographic case study (Hammersley, 1992; Harland, 1996; Scott and Usher, 1999) as means of theory development and analysis:

'Methods of data collection are used that attempt to capture the 'lived reality' of such settings and though these methods are usually referred as qualitative i.e. semi structured interviews, observations of processes and documentary analysis, they are not exclusively so.' (Scott and Usher, 1999:87)

Ethnographers, according to Scott and Usher (1999) argue that the detailed description of the case that emerges can be complemented by examination of other cases that seem to have similar properties, i.e. other schools of a similar nature. Theory development is either cumulative in that as more cases are studied the database becomes more extensive and rich and the findings more reliable, enabling the researcher to generalize to larger populations, or theory developed from one or more cases can be tested as to its validity and reliability by examining further cases. We hope that our study will serve as basis for formulating other similar studies in the field. Below we describe how our research aim and objectives will be addressed by existing theoretical and analytical frameworks and the particular processes created in the study that will contribute to their development.

Our methodology is child centred, (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003; James and Prout, 1990; Mayall, 1993) that is to say, we are basing our research on the principles of children's rights (Alderson, 2000b) which include their right to be heard as individuals. In this research we take seriously the notion that children can demonstrate both empathy

and sophisticated methods of communicating their viewpoints. This may include both verbal and non-verbal communications.

In this respect our research design is Interpretivist in its approach. We perceive this to mean adult and child as well as child and child interactions as continually evolving through shared situations (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). By this we mean everyday activities such as conversations during play, group times (adult led and child led), music, story art and role-play as well as other routines and rituals. However, central to our research is how children themselves negotiate and construct their own identities through such interactions. An important aspect of this is the many-layered nature of the interpretations, which will include those of the children, their parents, the Early years practitioners and ours as researchers.

### **The Project School**

The project school is a maintained Nursery School and Children's Centre serving an urban multicultural/multilingual neighbourhood in South London. Its recent OFSTED Report has highlighted the following attributes:

- Excellent quality of education, resulting in children's very high overall achievement in all areas.
- An extremely wide range of family services, including *Surestart*, which provide support for families, opportunities for further learning and guidance for adults.
- Excellent relationships and links with parents and the whole community, adding considerably to children's progress.
- Excellent arrangements for making early contact with families in the area and inducting their children into the Nursery, enabling learning to occur from the moment that children start school.
- Excellent leadership based on clarity of vision, which inspires, governors, staff and parents alike.
- Remarkably strong and inclusive climate for learning, which results in very good overall achievement for all groups on roll (including, for example, boys, girls, those with English as an additional language, special educational needs and those who enter the Nursery achieving well already).

### **Data Analysis**

Our data collection is comprised of:

- Field notes
- Audio recording of children's naturally occurring conversations
- Discussions with centre staff
- Discussion with parents at home or at the Centre.
- Looking at children's profiles and records of development

*Some Initial Findings from available data*

In children we have observed positive attitudes to their own languages alongside their highly developed sense of identity. In the following example Nicole is looking at the pictures of watermelon and aubergine with captions in English, Bengali and Spanish. She listens as the researcher (AH) reads the English, Spanish and the Bengali Transliteration.

Nicole, looking at the water melon and points to the writing:

*'That says watermelon'* (Nicole, age 4) (AH field notes 04/03/08)

Nicole then points at numbers on a cupboard in the technology room and says:

*'Those are numbers'* (AH- field notes 04/03/08), thus demonstrating an ability to differentiate between different symbolic systems

In addition to a welcoming, friendly and calm atmosphere, language awareness featured highly on the Centre's agenda. Displays featured signs and captions in different languages. The welcome sign in different languages at the Centre entrance contributed to the whole ethos of the Centre as did photos of some of the families with captions describing the use of home languages. There was also a notice-board giving information about the various Centre activities available for parents and children during each week, for example, parents and toddlers singing sessions. Children were constantly building on previous experiences relating to themselves as well as others in their environment as demonstrated in the following example:

Before the group sets off to a local ecology centre Precious (age 4) shows AH the picture of herself and her parents in the nursery reception area. AH reads the caption to find Precious willing to acknowledge:

AH- *'We speak Yoruba at home'. Do you speak Yoruba at home?*

Precious (nods). (field notes, AH- 27/03/08)

Children's awareness of different languages were also associated with countries as shown in the following example:

During observations in the outdoor play area Jedidiah(JD) (age 4) says:

JD: *I was born in England*

AH: *'in a hospital?*

JD *'No in England'* (field notes, AH- 27/03/08)

In another observation, Malachi (MA) was playing on the large model wooden train:

MA: *We're going to Barbados*

AH: *What will you do there?*

MA: *play with the sand and the water*

AH: *where will you stay?*

MA: *In the restaurant, in the hotel...have to go on the aeroplane...train to the airport...mum and Dad lived in Barbados when I was born* (AH- field notes 04/03/08)

It is useful to mention in this context that although MA is of Eritrean background his family was going to Barbados for a family wedding.

During a later observation, children were inside the 'reflection tent' (specially constructed space where children can be private or be with others looking at their images in the mirrors provided). Jedidiah (JD) bursting out looks at researchers (AH) and (TI) and says:

*I speak my language* (Jedidiah, (AH field notes, 04/03/08)

Language awareness appears to be embedded in the ethos and everyday practice of the nursery. This was most visible in children's knowledge of their own and other languages as clearly demonstrated in the following examples:

TI: *Estevon, what language do you speak?*

ES: *Portuguese*

TI: *obligado*

Estevon looks at TI and smiles (TI audio recording 27/03/08)

Children's experiences were collated in individual profile books which contained pictures with captions featuring children's home as well as Centre experiences. Children were usually invited to choose and talk about the photos to be included; if children spoke a language other than English, this was presented side by side with English. Parents played a key part in this. In the following example Shaimaa is talking to TI about her book written in Italian, Arabic and English:

SH: here I'm playing with my baby sister

TI: *(pointing at the picture of an umbrella)* is that your umbrella?

SH: *yes*

TI: *ah, you have long hair in that picture*

SH: *mummy cut my hair*

TI: *(looking at the photo) ah, I love cheesecake .*

SH: *yes, I like it too*

TI: *(Looks at Italian version) how do you say cake in Italian then?*

SH: *torta*

SH: *(looking at her name written in Arabic) here is Shaimaa in Arabic, these are Arabic, my dad speaks Arabic*

TI: *Do you know Arabic?*

SH: *I speak Arabic, Italian and English*

TI: *How do you say daddy in Arabic? Is it baba?*

(TI audio recording 27/03/08)

Another interesting area related to children's awareness and use of different language varieties was demonstrated in the following example by Shaimaa (the Arabic, Italian and English speaker).

In the outdoor play area, accompanied by a doll, a bag and a broom, she showed her facility with South London English variety when she said to her friend:

*'Bye, darlin', I'm goin' to the mee-in'* (meeting)  
Field notes AH 04/03/08

Children's interactions with each other often reflected shared experiences through routine activities as shown in the following example where Yasemin (YS) has visited the local ecology centre 'Roots and Shoots' with a group of children. On her return to the nursery the following conversation takes place between Yasemin, Shaimaa and AH:

AH: *Yasemin came to Roots and Shoots*  
Sh: *Why* ↑  
AH: *Why did we go to Roots and Shoots?*  
SH: *Shoes?*  
AH: *Shoots*  
SH: *Whot?*  
YS: *Roots and shoots Shaimaaa!!*  
(AH audio recording 27/03/08)

↑  
(represents rising intonation)

### Summary of initial findings

During our conversations with some parents, we became aware of how children's linguistic and cultural experiences from home formed the foundation for further development in the Centre. Our initial findings of the first part of Phase 1 of the Project appear to support this. We have found that:

- Children's positive attitudes to their own languages were highly developed and contributed to their sense of identity.
- The welcoming, friendly and calm atmosphere of the Centre was clearly visible. The head teacher and the Centre staff played a key role in establishing positive links with the parents.
- Children's awareness of different languages was also associated with knowledge about different countries and places. We could see evidence of activities related to Knowledge and Understanding of the World (one of the areas of Learning and Experience in the current Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage).

We had ample examples of children's awareness and use of different languages. Again, this was very much supported by the Centre and reflected positively in parents' attitudes.

The children's construction of multiple identities was manifested in their interactions with each other. By this we mean that children not only had opportunities to extend their home identities but to enrich them through collaborative and shared activities in which the concept of 'the other' begins to be internalised and negotiated.

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