Multilingual children at home and at school

managing experiences and expectations

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A note on terminology

This article uses the term 'heritage language' (rather than home language, family language, or multilingual families), specifically to underline the point that 'heritage is not inevitable' (Bourdieu, 2000), and highlighting the intergenerational aspects of heritage language maintenance. Not all family members speak a 'home language' or 'family language', which is part of the underlying issues discussed in this paper.

Multilingualism in schools - from national to school policy

While the number of multilingual children in schools has increased steadily in recent years (DfE, 2018), the experiences of these children have been considered by government for decades. Although the Bullock report (DES, 1975) states that

In England, approximately 20% of students in our classrooms are first- or second-generation immigrants (UNESCO, 2018), and many of them speak English in addition to one or more heritage languages. The discourse around bilingual learners remains strongly focused on English as an Additional Language (EAL), and unsurprisingly so, since National Curriculum targets have clear expectations in terms of capacities, knowledge, and skill linked to the English language. More recently, the wisdom of addressing multilingualism in pupils from a deficit perspective has been questioned, and the dominance of a monolingual world view has been challenged (Cenoz, 2017). Importantly, links between heritage language maintenance and mental health have also received recent attention (Little, 2017, 2019).

Parents are a potentially rich source for curriculum input and enrichment activities, however, Grace (2008) warns that schools need to go further than simply 'celebrating cultural differences'

> [n]o child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the 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 (p. 286),

practical guidance on how this joining of multiple languages and cultures may be achieved is more difficult to come by in national policy context. Bilingual learners' specific needs were recognised, for example, by Ofsted (2005). Their report highlights, among other aspects, how good oral skills may mask ongoing literacy support needs, and argues that bilingual learners are frequently being underestimated. In summary, findings show that bilingual learners need additional time to develop their full learning potential.

Unfortunately, time is a commodity schools have less and less, and although multiple support measures are in place to make statutory examinations more accessible, these by themselves cannot fully address what are long-term developmental needs. To support bilingual learners, many schools have a specific EAL policy in place - the most comprehensive of these focus on all languages in the classroom, not just English. In some schools, multilingualism becomes subsumed into a more generic celebration of diversity and multiculturalism. Parents are a potentially rich source for curriculum input and enrichment

activities, however, Grace (2008) warns that schools need to go further than simply 'celebrating cultural differences, [as] stereotypes may actually be reinforced rather than diminished' (Grace 2008, p. 137). Working closely with parents to explore their views and needs can therefore be a powerful step to encourage a more productive understanding of multilingualism at school level.

Multilingualism at home - parents' experiences with school

For parents of children from migration backgrounds, the heritage language is often more than a handy way to stay in communication with extended family - in fact, helping their children to learn and maintain the heritage language potentially has strong links to both identity and mental health (Little, 2017). Nevertheless, school start is often the time when home languages take a back seat, leading to many parents balancing the responsibility they feel towards their culture and extended family, with

the responsibility they feel for child's school experience (Okita, 2002). This can lead to the child questioning the status of the heritage language, which may ultimately bring family discord. Raising the status of the home or heritage language publicly is one of the most helpful practices parents have identified (Little 2017, 2019).

Linking home and school

Since the Bullock report (DES, 1975) highlighted potential discrepancies (and connections) between home and school life, our understanding in the field has continued to develop. The Funds of Knowledge approach (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti 2005) explores the cultural, linguistic and experiential understandings children bring to school, and how these influence children's ability not only to access the curriculum, but also to shape their social development and cohesive integration. The temptation is to homogenise these experiences, encouraging and facilitating multilingual and multicultural children

to access the world of their monolingually anglophone peers. But with the number of multilingual children steadily on the rise, this approach may not be helpful in preparing children for what Vertovec (2007) calls a 'super-diverse' society.

Classroom Practice

Acknowledging the status of the home language at school can be a vital factor in this preparation for super-diversity. At primary level, a simple way to support parents is to encourage home literacy practices in any language, and signing off on children reading at home, no matter the language of the reading material. This not only raises the status of the heritage language for multilingual pupils, but also normalises multilingualism in the classroom for all children, by making it visible.

Curriculum demands are one of the strongest barriers against experimentation with multilingual classroom practices (Tinsley and Board, 2016). However, in my own conversations with teachers, emergent practice shows how a new focus on multilingualism is slowly making its way into the classroom, with teachers adapting and transforming policies to fit their students' multilingual realities (Zavala, 2015). Adaptations can be made on an ad hoc basis, allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire (García and Wei, 2014) throughout their learning. Translanguaging (the use of different languages together) and code-switching (both are ways for students to use all their languages

as required) are two such adaptations, which enable students, for example, to plan a story in a mix of languages, before writing it fully in English (potentially with help). Where multiple students share a heritage language, this language can be encouraged in classroom communications or group work to create a multilingual, inclusive learning environment.

By distinguishing between what children know, and what they know how to express in the language of the classroom, we are able to differentiate between children's voices and their language skills (Bailey, 2007). While this holistic approach stands in direct opposition to 'normative, monoglot ideologies' (Blommaert et al, 2006), it also shows ways in which 'policy on paper' (Shohamy, 2006) can be interpreted in the classroom in order to facilitate a multilingual world view to benefit all children's preparation for life in a diverse world.

Parents and teachers working together

As yet, we are only beginning to fully understand the impact heritage language maintenance has on family cohesion, integration, and mental health (Little, 2017), necessitating further research in understanding families' linguistic circumstances, and how these can be used to enhance communications between home and school.

One immediate and practical way for schools to support the status of heritage languages is through an extension of the school library, to include books in the various

languages spoken by children at the school. Asking for donations from families, and help with cataloguing books, can be a useful way to include parents who might otherwise struggle to participate in school life.

In families where the language is vital for communication (e.g. because a parent or other resident family member does not speak English), the need to maintain the heritage language is obvious. However, emotional support needs may be less visible, sometimes, both to the school and to the family members themselves. Supporting families to self-assess these needs can be an important step in opening communication channels, especially since there are currently no clear guidelines available to multilingual families about how to balance their multiple languages. Questions to ask families may include the following:

- How are multiple languages used in the family home (exploring speakers, times, occasions for using the heritage language)?
- Is there a strong heritage language community available locally?
- Does the family have access to resources in the heritage language (books, DVDs, streamed television)?
- In what ways is the heritage language important (maintenance of contact with family abroad/in the UK, cultivation of cultural roots, travel, religion)?
- What issues/struggles does the family face in maintaining the heritage language? Is there an 'emotional load' linked to heritage language maintenance?

Those wanting to go further, and encourage families to reflect in-depth, may be interested in asking parents to participate in an ongoing research project funded by the British Academy. The project features a questionnaire/quiz written with multilingual parents in mind, asking questions which encourage self-reflection, and explore the role of the heritage language for individual family members. The outcomes plot the individual's emotional and pragmatic needs in relation to 'their' language, leading to short guides aimed at helping families to share and explore their needs. These guides can then also be used in collaboration with schools, helping teachers to understand the emotional and pragmatic needs of multilingual families in more detail.

The questionnaire/quiz can be accessed at https://www.familylanguages.com/language-quiz.

We are in urgent need to understand our multilingual families better, to help them connect their children's funds of knowledge between home and school. This research aims at, ultimately, gathering a significant amount of data to explore relationships between family languages and emotional health. By encouraging parents to take the quiz and engage in the reflective process, schools have the power to actively embed the Bullock Report's aims from over four decades ago - to show that home and school languages and cultures can indeed unite, in a holistic approach towards understanding children's and families' needs in today's super-diverse society.

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Pen Portrait

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