

Supporting young children in multi-lingual settings

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Mustafe starts to talk to Aafia about his picture. While they continue their conversation (mostly) in English, they also intermingle this with some Arabic words and phrases. Fariido (a bilingual Somali English speaker), who is playing at the nearby sand pit, shouts across to them 'Don't say that!' Fazia, an Arabic speaker, who is sitting next to Aafia, responds to Fariido 'It's Arabic. It's OK.' Mubarak – who is a Somali English speaker like Fariido – also looks over to her and reassures her that it is OK for the others to speak in Arabic. Fariido looks unconvinced but turns back to the sandpit.

Fieldnote Excerpt 1

Where was the research done?

This extract is taken from the fieldnotes of an ethnographic study set within a reception class of an inner city school, Sunnyside, in the North of England where the majority of pupils are from North and Sub-Saharan African countries. Over the course of the school year I spent a day a week with the class and observed the children's peer interactions (Barley 2014).

I was interested in finding out how young children explored difference and identity in a multi-ethnic Early Years Setting and whether this influenced their peer interactions. My study found that language and identity were closely intertwined in children's peer interactions at Sunnyside.

What is the issue?

Globally, more and more young children are being taught at school in a language other than the one that they predominantly speak at home. Often when these children start school they must learn the dominant language not only to succeed academically but also to interact with their peers.

In the current study young new language learners all responded differently to the languages that were brought to the class. Some viewed language as functional while for others language became a symbolic marker of their religious identity. Additionally, for some children their minority language held valuable linguistic capital while for others their minority language did not afford them any valuable capital in the school context and had to be shunned (Barley 2014). This article will discuss the different ways the children in the class valued or shunned their home language and offer suggestions for how to best support young bilingual (and multilingual) children.

Why do young children value minority languages in different ways?

As highlighted in the fieldnote extract above Fariido, a bilingual Somali English speaker, discouraged her peers from speaking Arabic in the classroom. Other observations revealed that Fariido also discouraged her peers from speaking in Somali at school. Consequently, speaking a language other than English appeared to be a social taboo for Fariido. Fariido was often asked, when a bilingual support worker was not available, to act as a translator between her mother and classroom staff. Fariido appeared to be embarrassed to do this in front of her peers and more often than not became very dismissive of her mother, speaking to her in a derogatory tone.

During an informal unstructured interview one of the school's Somali bilingual support workers, Aziza, told me that Fariido's reaction was common for Somali children at the school. She told me that in her experience Somali speaking families do not value their linguistic capital as much as their Arabic speaking counterparts. Therefore, while the majority of Arabic-speaking families encourage their children to use Arabic outside school and take pride in their language and cultural heritage, many Somali-speaking families encourage their children to speak only English and adopt British cultural practices at the expense, in her opinion, of their Somali cultural background. Aziza contends that these differences could stem from the different residency statuses that these families tend to have, where most Somali-speaking families are asylum seekers or refugees seeking to permanently settle in the UK while most Arabic-speaking families are in the UK temporarily on postgraduate student visas. Cummins (2001) similarly discovered that families seeking to permanently settle in a new country often sacrificed their own linguistic capital as they sought to encourage their children to integrate into their new environment.

In contrast to Fariido's devaluing of all minority languages some other children in the class used language as an exclusionary tool:

In early May, I am sitting at the writing table with a Somali-English bilingual girl, Dekka. One of the Arabic speaking January starters, Saida, joins us. As she does she says to Dekka, 'Dekka, you're not my friend.' Dekka doesn't respond so I ask Saida why. She explains to me that Sadira and Abia are her friends as they speak Arabic saying, 'Sadira and I speak in Arabic and with Abia too.' I ask her if she is friends with anyone who doesn't speak Arabic. She shakes her head at this. Dekka continues to draw, appearing to ignore our conversation.

Fieldnote Excerpt 2

Saida, Abia and Sadira were all from Libya and in the UK temporarily while one or both of their parents undertook postgraduate study. When they joined the class all spoke little English. However, as the year progressed, Saida and Abia – who were both confident and

outspoken – quickly soaked up and reproduced the English language. While the shy Sadira appeared to understand more and more English every week, she did not use this newly-acquired knowledge to converse with her peers. As Drury (2007) and Bligh (2011) highlight, learning through the so-called silent or non-verbal period like this is a common strategy amongst young new language learners. These two different approaches to learning a new language, however, began to impact on this group of girls' patterns of interaction. As the year progressed, Sadira began to play more and more with Kareem and Lina, who like Sadira were Arabic speakers and display a reserved identity performance at school. As time went on, Sadira started to play on her own becoming reluctant to talk to any of her peers:

In early July, Mary (the classroom teacher) tells me that Sadira's mother came to see her earlier in the week. Mary tells me that Sadira has told her mother that she doesn't want to come to school, confiding in her that Abia and Saida have been telling her that she cannot play with them as she needs to spend time with Mary so that she can learn to speak English.

Fieldnote Excerpt 3

After this conversation Mary encouraged Lina to take Sadira under her wing and she began to flourish again, interacting once more with the quieter Arabic-speaking children.

These instances highlight some important points relating to children's use of language amongst their peers. Saida's (attempted) conversation with Dekka shows how she at times excluded non-Arabic speakers from her circle of friends.

As the year progressed, Saida and Abia came to value the linguistic capital that speaking English afforded them and actively excluded Sadira from their activities and games as she, in their eyes, did not hold the same status as they did in relation to their newly gained linguistic capital. Notably my other fieldnotes showed that Saida and Abia continued to exclude non-Arabic speakers after they also began to value their English language capital. Rather than substituting one language for another, they appeared to value the capital that being bilingual afforded them.

When analysing these instances together a pattern appears to emerge showing how some children in the class *actively* used a language that the teacher did not speak to exclude or bully other children. Monolingual school staff, while aware of this issue, struggled to identify strategies to deal with bullying in these instances.

Following on from Fieldnote Excerpt 1 (above) we can see how language was a symbolic marker of identity for some children in the class:

Aafia puts down her pencil and looks round the table at the other children before asking them 'Do you do this?' She then puts her hands over her face and bends down to the table and up again – going through the motions of Salah (prayer). The three boys watch her and then all join in. As they are doing this, Aafia and Mustafe begin to recite phrases in Arabic. Amir stops and listens to them while Mubarak continues to move up and down, covering his face with his hands. Suddenly, the children stop and return to their drawings, discussing the different places that they pray and comparing their experiences. Amir is particularly interested in the Arabic phrases that Aafia and Mustafe recited and proudly tells the other children that he has started to learn Arabic at the mosque and will soon also know how to pray using the phrases that Aafia and Mustafe were reciting.

Fieldnote Excerpt 4

'Being Muslim' was a key part of Amir's identity and informed almost all of his social interactions at Sunnyside. He regularly talked with his peers about going to the mosque, praying, and what 'being Muslim' meant to him (Barley 2014). As the year progressed being a new Arabic speaker became more and more important to Amir as his new language skills became a marker of his religious identity of 'being Muslim'. For Amir 'being an Arabic speaker' started to hold valuable linguistic capital amongst his school peers.

How can we support young children in multi-ethnic Early Years settings?

This research has shown that language and identity were closely intertwined in children's patterns of interaction at one school in the North of England. Although the findings are specific to the context, they reveal that for some children language had a purely functional value while for others it was a symbolic marker of identity. Similarly, for some children their minority language held valuable linguistic capital while for others their first language was viewed as being something to shun. Children's use of language impacted on their peer interactions and played a role in their peer cultures irrespective of the meaning that the children placed on its use.

The Senior Leadership Team at Sunnyside recognised the different value that children placed on their home languages and the danger in devaluing a community's linguistic heritage. In response to this, Sunnyside is implementing the initiative 'Our Languages' that aims to promote the use of community languages in schools across England. As part of this initiative, Sunnyside is teaching Somali to all Year 3 children and staff. By promoting the Somali language, Sunnyside hopes to support Somali parents in encouraging their children to speak Somali at home, promote self-esteem amongst Somali children and raise the status of the language amongst the whole school community. As Weber (2015) notes, it is

important that these initiatives go beyond purely celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity. They should aim to counter discriminatory structures that value some minority languages, but not others, consequently impacting on the value that a community may place on its own language.

This article highlights another challenge for schools when children use a minority language that they know school staff do not speak to bully other children and exclude them from their games and activities. More research is needed in this area to develop strategies that support friendship development in diverse settings and effectively counter this form of bullying which will only become more and more pertinent in our ever diversifying societies.

Key points:

- Children's use of language impacts on their peer interactions in Early Years Settings.
- For some young children language has a functional value while for others it is a symbolic marker of identity.
- Similarly, for some young children their minority language holds valuable linguistic capital while for others their first or home language is viewed as being something to shun.
- School initiatives need to go beyond purely celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity and need to challenge discriminatory structures that value some minority languages higher than others.
- Strategies need to be developed that help school staff to challenge bullying that can occur when children use a minority language that they know school staff do not speak to exclude other children from their games and activities.

Further reading:

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