Enriching cross-curricular work by involving complementary schools

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Language is learned most effectively as a tool of communication and understanding, whether it is children's mother tongue, a second language or a foreign language. Vygotskyan theory highlights this by explaining how learners move from interpersonal to intrapersonal understandings, internalising language and concepts constructed through interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1962). The principle of mainstreaming for children learning English as an Additional Language is based on the idea that they will acquire English more quickly by engaging with the curriculum with the help of peers and teachers. Meanwhile, the increasingly popular foreign language teaching approach of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) has shown that learning geography through French, for example, aids achievement in both subjects (Coyle et al, 2010).

There is one important aspect of bilingual children's language learning that has been left out of the cross-curricular approach. Where children are also attending complementary schools in the evenings or weekends to learn community languages, this is an additional opportunity to link together the knowledge and understanding built up in different areas of their education. For example, at a school in Tower Hamlets, the topic of 'The Rainforest' was recently addressed in English in the general primary curriculum, in Bengali and French in the respective MFL lessons (the school was teaching both languages), and in Bengali in the after-school complementary class. Thus cross-curricular work was broadened to include all children's sites of learning. What might be the advantages of this comprehensive approach? We argue that it leads to the *reinforcement* and *expansion* of learning, a *holistic understanding* of concepts, and an increase in *agency* of children and their families as well as teachers. We will be giving examples from a research project on bilingual learning which set up partnerships between mainstream and complementary school teachers in Tower Hamlets.

Reinforcement of learning

Exploring a topic in more than one language gives the possibility of transferring concepts between languages, thus maximising children's access to understanding. This is well explained by Cummins' 'iceberg' diagram, in which features of each language appear separately above the surface whilst a large area of 'common underlying proficiency' lurks in the deep water below (Cummins, 1984). With the Rainforest topic mentioned above, ideas that could be shared between languages range from the concept of 'tiger' or 'monkey' to the concept of climate change being caused by illegal logging. A lesson on the significance of rare plants in the Amazon in mainstream class could be complemented by a discussion in Bengali class on how tigers in the Bangladeshi rain forest are being threatened with extinction. Meanwhile, a French song about animals in the forest could give children an opportunity to act the roles of different animals and consider how they move around, catch food and sleep. In each case, children will be able to relate their thinking to a similar set of ideas that they are encountering in their other classes, and the learning of language will be stimulated by engaging at a deeper level with the concepts involved.

An example from our research demonstrates how a topic can be approached from different yet related angles in mainstream and complementary classes. A teacher from Russian complementary school worked together with a primary class teacher to devise lessons based on the story of 'The Gingerbread Man' and a traditional Russian fairytale 'Kolobok', which is very similar. 'Kolobok' is a little ball of dough who, like the Gingerbread Man, tries to escape from a series of animals who want to eat him. The two teachers planned lessons that used the English and Russian versions in both school settings, adapting the activities in different ways to suit the context of the complementary school or the mainstream class.

In both cases, children first heard the story in English, followed by seeing a sequence of pictures from the Russian story on the interactive whiteboard (in primary school) or a laptop (in Russian school). Since English was children's stronger language in both primary school and Russian school, this gave them immediate access to the ideas in the Gingerbread Man story, which they used to help them predict the content of 'Kolobok'. Both classes then listened to the tale in Russian and learned the rhyme that was central to the story – where various animals in turn threaten to eat Kolobok - in Russian as well as understanding it in English. The primary school class then acted out the rhyme in Russian outside in the playground, with children taking on the role either of Kolobok or one of the animals. Engaging with a similar story in more than one language strengthened children's understanding of the narrative, and activated comprehension strategies as they worked out what the Russian version might mean. The activities thus reinforced their literacy learning in English as well as offering new MFL learning.

In Russian class, the story was used as a springboard for work on literacy. Children retold the story from the pictures, then studied a written version and picked out words they recognised. They used phonics to sound the words out and practised writing them on the board. One child, who attended both classes, was able to help his primary school classmates to pronounce and understand Russian words. By mediating this knowledge and leading his peers in the roleplays, he gained confidence in Russian. Whereas he had previously been hesitant in complementary school, he now worked with motivation on the Russian literacy task. Both his teachers commented that he was more settled in class and displayed greater concentration. The parallel curriculum had evidently benefited the content and focus of his learning.

Expansion of learning
Transfer of concepts can therefore build a stronger basis for learning. However, transfer is never a simple process. Whenever learning takes place in more than one language, differences as well as similarities are highlighted. A word or phrase in one language may prove to have no exact equivalent in another, because the concept does not exist in the other language or is viewed in another way, often due to cultural differences. This can lead to 'translanguaging' as children switch between languages in order to express meanings (García, 2009). Children may also search for different possible translations, thus enriching their understanding of the concepts involved (Al-Azami et al, 2010). A pedagogy of translanguaging has been developed in Welsh/English bilingual classrooms, where students learn about a topic in one language and are then asked to express their understanding in the other, without

engaging in direct translation (Williams et al, 1996). A similar approach is used in Arabic/Hebrew bilingual schools in Israel (Mor-Sommerfeld, 2008), where two teachers work together in the class, each using one of the languages. Rather than repeating each other's words, they take it in turns to present and discuss different aspects of the topic. This kind of learning challenges students to expand both their linguistic repertoire and their cultural understanding, as they explore and question ideas instead of taking them for granted.

The example from Israel highlights the importance of the sociopolitical context of learning. When teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds teach 'the same' curriculum, their lifeworlds will expand meanings in different ways. The date when Israel was established as a state is simultaneously called 'Nakba Day' (the day of catastrophe) by Palestinians. In the bilingual schools, teachers from Israeli and Palestinian backgrounds tell their own stories and help children think through the historical issues, using both languages. By exchanging perspectives they stimulate children's critical understanding.

Complementary school teachers can expand children's learning in a similar way. As part of the Tower Hamlets research project, Bengali and Somali class teachers joined primary school colleagues to plan lessons for the topic-based International Primary Curriculum. The topic of 'Global Swapshop', concerning international trade, was at first thought by the Year 5 and 6 teachers to be rather difficult for their pupils and they were unsure where to begin. However, their Bengali teacher colleague could immediately see the relevance for children's lives. He pointed out that many children's parents would have worked in the rag trade on arrival in East London from Bangladesh, often in sweatshops or as homeworkers. He himself had worked in the Burberry factory, only to find himself made redundant when it was transferred to Bangladesh because labour was cheaper.

The Bengali teacher devised a powerpoint presentation in which photos of child labour in Bangladesh were juxtaposed with pictures of UK high street shops that sold clothes produced in developing countries. He taught lessons to his pupils in Bengali class, and also to Year 5 and 6 children in primary school, encouraging them to discuss the issues involved. He provided keywords in Bengali and English such as *shujuger bebohar* (exploit), *bebsha* (trade), *srom* (labour) and *sromer mullo* (Fair Trade), and suggested how they could interview parents about their own experiences in London and elsewhere. Part of the lesson concerned a picture of protesting workers with placards showing slogans in Bengali and the words 'Save Our Life' in English. Children worked out the meaning of the Bengali text (in primary school, they were aided by a pupil with good literacy skills built up in Bengali complementary class) and discussed why that particular message had been chosen in English. The primary school teachers built on this initiative through children writing letters to tea companies as part of an international campaign for FairTrade tea.

Further joint development of the topic took place when the deputy headteacher of the primary school visited schools in Bangladesh with a delegation from Tower Hamlets. She took with her questions in Bengali from children at primary and complementary school. The answers she brought back enabled primary and complementary classes to produce a joint presentation for Tower Hamlets Languages Celebration, in which they roleplayed interviews with children at schools in Bangladesh, including a night school

for children who worked in factories. The presentation finished with slogans written by the children: 'Keep Child Labour Out Of The World!' and 'Each Child Deserves A Life Of Their Own!'. In devising their roleplays and making costumes, children demonstrated empathy for their peers in Bangladesh and a developing understanding of the global economy and the need for social justice. The community/mainstream partnership had significantly enhanced learning by bringing challenging issues into the curriculum and enabling children to explore different perspectives, including the voices of their peers in Bangladesh that might not otherwise have been heard. One child who participated in the topic work at complementary school and primary school commented that:

> *I didn't know all this before and my Bengali teacher made a difference because he's from Bangladesh and he taught us a lot about it…It helped when our teacher took the questions to Bangladesh because it was very interesting to see what they actually said.*

A holistic understanding

Children growing up in multilingual contexts live in 'simultaneous worlds' (Kenner, 2004) and develop multiple identities, yet are rarely able to express the full range of their experiences in mainstream school. A primary school teacher involved in our research was aware of this and said:

> *What happens to the children outside mainstream school is very separate and we don't really get to see that other part of the child…there's always that little bit that's missing.*

The 'little bit missing' restricts children's potential for learning, since they can only build on limited areas of their knowledge. The teaching and learning environment in many schools is constructed monolingually, and children feel unable to use their languages in the classroom (Kenner et al, 2008). This also restricts the possibility of talking about cultural knowledge from their homes and communities. In contrast, research by Creese et al (2006) shows that complementary schools often provide 'safe spaces' for children to switch between languages and synthesise different aspects of their identities.

Complementary school teachers tend to have a good understanding of 'the whole child', due to their knowledge of children's home and community backgrounds, and of bilingual development. They can bring this knowledge and understanding into their teaching, helping children to explore their own experiences and those of others from a rounded perspective. A clear example of this arose during our research. When preparing to teach the topic 'Living Together' in partnership with primary teachers, a Bengali complementary school teacher explained his vision of 'community as a tree'. He drew a picture of a tree, with roots, branches and fruit. This picture could symbolise 'community' in a variety of different ways. The tree could represent a society, such as the UK or London, with roots in different countries that all join in the same trunk to make one tree. The branches could be different communities, which will bear fruit if they are living together in harmony. The tree could also be a school with the branches as pupils from different backgrounds, or it could be a child who might have roots in different countries and languages. Different kinds of trees also enrich an orchard or garden, just as different individuals or communities contribute to society.

The community teacher helped to plan lessons in which children first drew their own tree and considered why trees are important to our environment: creating fruit and seed for new trees, giving shade, producing oxygen and taking in carbon dioxide. This led to the understanding that trees are essential to life, and that we need to look after them by planting seeds, adding compost, watering and protecting them. The class then discussed how a school community can grow and develop like a tree, if children from different backgrounds are working well together. This topic was taught successfully in Bengali class at complementary school, and in primary school by the Bengali MFL teacher for cross-curricular work. In the latter setting, Year 4 children produced trees with roots labelled 'Somali', 'Urdu, 'Bengali', 'Turkish', 'Swedish', 'Dutch' and 'Hindi' as well as 'English', representing their own and other children's languages in their class. The flexibility of the tree concept meant that children could include different aspects of their multilingual identities, as speakers of English and one or more other languages. Amongst the leaves of the tree, children wrote terms in English and Bengali which they had identified through discussion with their teacher as contributing to a well-functioning community, such as *shanti*/peace, *shikka*/education and *khela*/play. This topic could easily be developed by asking children to find out from parents and grandparents how to say and write these terms in other languages.

For further work on 'Living Together', the Bengali complementary school teacher produced lesson plans for comparing village life in Bangladesh to city life in London, including questions that could be taken home to parents about village or city life in different countries. Photos of Bangladesh provided a springboard for ideas. The community teacher's approach did not only cover the practical aspects of food or jobs, but also the network of human relationships underlying the functioning of a community. For example, one picture showed a typical village courtyard in Bangladesh, surrounded by houses each lived in by a different family. Questions encouraged children to consider how the families worked together, with each family growing different crops and sharing their produce and income. They could then discuss how families function in a city, with each member making a particular contribution.

The community teacher, who often taught Bengali literacy through his own poetry, composed a poem in Bengali about 'My Village', expressing feelings about the village environment and community. He wrote a contrasting poem about 'The City', evoking the noise and bustle of city life, and taught a lesson comparing the two with Year 4 children in primary school, as well as in his own Bengali class. Children responded well to the poem, discussing their own experiences of visiting rural areas or cities in other countries. The Bengali teacher's holistic approach thus gave Year 4 children access to complex International Primary Curriculum learning targets such as 'how independence and interdependence are important when people live together in communities'. This work impressed his primary colleagues, enriching the curriculum at Bengali school and primary school.

Developing agency
Parents and grandparents, particularly from ethnic minority backgrounds, are rarely involved in the mainstream school curriculum. However, cross-curricular topic work in different languages gives the opportunity for this to happen, especially if mainstream and complementary school classes are working together. Complementary

schools are often set up and run by parents, and power relations between parents and teachers are therefore more equal than in mainstream school. Shared languages and cultural understandings also make parents more self-assured about approaching teachers in the complementary school setting. Our research project showed how community teachers collaborating with mainstream teachers can facilitate outreach to families in order to support learning. In the process, the agency of teachers themselves – both at complementary and mainstream schools - also increased. Cummins' concept of 'collaborative power relationships', which are additive because power is created and shared (Cummins, 2001), fits well with a context in which children, parents, grandparents and teachers all became more confident in contributing to learning.

Work around the topic of 'Grandparents' illustrated the development of agency throughout the complementary and mainstream school communities. Teachers at primary school recognised that grandparents played a key part in children's lives, and wished to involve them more in school. The teacher from the Somali community class agreed, and suggested a family tree picture as a starting point. Like the Bengali teacher whose work was discussed earlier, the Somali teacher drew a type of tree important in his home environment, in this case a *qudhac* (acacia). He wrote terms for siblings, parents and grandparents in Somali on the branches, starting from siblings on the lower ones. Each child could write their own name on the trunk of the tree. He used this in Somali class to practise kinship terms, and developed a lesson plan in which children brought in pictures of grandparents and roleplayed conversations with them, finding out how to address an older person appropriately. This lesson met needs that the teacher had perceived amongst his young students, who lacked key vocabulary and expressions in Somali to relate more closely to adults in their community.

Many Somali families do not have grandparents in the UK, so children then worked with parents to write letters in Somali to their grandparents in Somalia. Finally, the Somali class borrowed laptops from primary school for a family learning session to make a powerpoint presentation for Tower Hamlets Languages Celebration, showing photos of grandparents alongside messages in Somali with English translation. Skills were shared as children helped parents to use the computer technology, whilst parents supported children to express themselves in Somali. Parents proudly joined children on stage when they presented their work to an audience of 500 people at the Languages Celebration. The children also presented their work to a whole-school assembly at primary school. These activities represented a significant increase in participation for Somali parents and children in the wider learning community.

As parallel work in primary school, a Grandparents Afternoon was held for all Key Stage 1 classes. This was well attended by grandparents and parents from different cultural backgrounds, many of whom had never visited the school before. Children presented topic work they had produced in class, including drawings of their grandparents and writing about what they enjoyed doing together. The Somali teacher's family tree diagram was translated into other languages by the grandparents present, who discussed similarities and differences between the words they used. Grandparents then visited particular classes for a question and answer session with children.

Through this work, children built up vocabulary for kinship terms in home language as well as English, and developed spoken and written language to communicate with grandparents. They explored their roots and strengthened relationships with grandparents both near and far, developing their multilingual identities and their identities as learners. Grandparents felt that the school valued their cultural background and contribution to children's learning. The Somali teacher produced new curriculum work that met the needs of his class, and led the way for the primary teachers to explore the topic at a deeper and more personal level for children from different backgrounds.

We found that when community teachers introduced their ideas for cross-curricular topic work involving children's languages and cultural knowledge, this enabled mainstream teachers or teaching assistants who were themselves bilingual to draw upon their own linguistic and cultural resources. The monolingual construction of the curriculum seemed to have hindered them from doing this previously. They now felt that their bilingual experiences could provide valid contributions to children's learning. They could see how village life in Bangladesh could be fruitfully compared to city life in England, or how a topic on 'Water' could include discussion of Islamic washing rituals before prayer and compared to other faiths.

As part of the research, teachers began to take new steps to link with families, reaching out to parents and grandparents for help in order to accomplish the topic work. For example, one teacher invited parents into her Year 6 class to be interviewed about 'Memories of School'. An Afghani mother came into school for the first time ever and joined the parent panel, answering questions from children with her son as interpreter. A Somali parent made *laxoox* bread with a nursery class as part of a topic on food, and as children mixed the dough they began to talk about their own experiences of making other types of bread at home. A Year 3 teacher explained how she asked parents for suggestions about different topics:

> *You have to search for these ideas – now I go to the parents, ask the parents. They are over the moon to be consulted.*

It was not only bilingual families who benefited from this outreach approach. A grandmother with an English-speaking background enjoyed being involved in the Grandparents Afternoon and offering her own grandchildren's words for the family tree on kinship terms. She thrived on being interviewed in class and expressed her wish to continue with this work:

> *I want to talk to them about things like coins, games we used to play, clothes we used to wear, oh so many things.*

Topic work could thus equally involve parents and grandparents from all backgrounds in contributing their experiences.

Conclusion
The research project showed how cross-curricular work planned jointly by complementary and mainstream teachers resulted in a creative, organic development of topics that drew on the linguistic and cultural resources of children, parents and grandparents as well as of teachers themselves. By engaging with a topic across their learning settings, whether in the general primary curriculum, MFL class or complementary school, children explored and deepened their conceptual knowledge as well as increasing their language proficiency.

In particular, we saw how the community teachers were able to take the lead in cross-curricular topic work, sharing their in-depth knowledge of children's home and community lives with mainstream colleagues. This successful collaboration clearly demonstrates that 'complementary schools', and the teachers who work in them, do indeed play a vital role in complementing children's learning.

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