

Chapter 7

‘Auntie-ji, please come and join us, just for an hour.’ The role of the bilingual education assistant in working with parents with little confidence

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Introduction

This chapter considers strategies which aim to inform parents about their child’s learning, particularly in those situations where that learning is accredited by means of the completion of parent courses. The chapter focuses upon the question of how we involve those parents who are reluctant to take part in the courses offered for linguistic and cultural aspects. It will make reference to the importance of having access to staff or personnel with whom parents can identify and communicate comfortably.

It is generally agreed that an individual’s attitudes about education are founded on that person’s own experiences of ‘formal learning’. These experiences vary greatly when considering differences within class and culture. However, it is dangerous to make general assumptions from surveys of individual groups and this chapter carries such a health warning.

The definition here of ‘courses’ for parents includes any information exchange within the range of a structured dialogue taking place between teachers and parents on a regular basis and that where parents gain some national accreditation for their learning.

Courses for parents in Coventry since the 1970s

In some cultures the role of the educators is seen as distinct and separate from the role of parenting, and educators may need to take some time explaining and illustrating how the child can benefit from partnership and continuity of educational experience across early years settings and home (Siraj-Blatchford 1994).

For the past two decades home–school work in Coventry has been committed to parental involvement and parental empowerment. This has been

demonstrated by reading workshops; the family curriculum; the 'Put Yourself in Their Place' series of participatory activities to extend parents' understanding of children's learning; the home early learning programme; home school link worker parent courses which enable parents to encourage other parents to be involved in school activities. In 1980 the 'Eburne – Further Education College Outreach Programme' enabled hundreds of inner-city parents to take up, each year, 'free' GCSE and A level classes. A course about working with young children and their families was accredited with the RSA in 1984. The consequence of this has been that dozens of mothers have since become employed as valued education assistants by Coventry schools. Several have gone on to higher education and are now in teaching or social work. Today Coventry has over ten courses accredited with the Open College Network that specifically focus on the involvement of parents in their child's education.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Coventry was renowned for its vast production of home-grown community education certificates which acknowledged completion of a course. Successful parents were able to present these at interviews. In 1996 these have been mostly replaced by Open College Network and the NVQ Child Care and Education Level 11 portfolios.

Support for bilingual pupils and their families

Coventry LEA has also been committed for almost two decades to English language support for its bilingual pupils. About 6000 such children are supported each year by a team of 150 full-time and part-time teachers and 60 full-time and part-time bilingual education assistants. The latter are almost all placed in the early years settings in schools where the need for language support is identified, using here a bilingual approach to enhance the child's learning opportunities.

Language makes accessible culture, culture includes the bilingual pupils' experience, and experience shapes knowledge... If teaching strategies encourage, value and support the use of bilingual pupils' home language, the children are more likely to share their language and culture freely without feeling that they are the centre of attention.

(Blackledge 1994)

This applies equally to their bilingual parents.

The role of bilingual assistants in courses for parents

Part of the bilingual education assistant's role is to take opportunities to share the child's learning progress with the parent. To gather parents together in a group for this purpose is cost-effective in respect of staff and it is mutually supportive for the parents.

Many of the bilingual education assistants have completed an OCN course about how to facilitate learning opportunities within parent groups. They usually

begin by co-tutoring on parent courses with a home-school links teacher. After which they go on to work with an experienced parent working with new parent groups.

Why do parents embark upon accredited courses which so often demand vast amounts of their time and energy? Generally, the intention is to gain qualifications and experience that may lead them to paid work with children. Also more and more committed parents, particularly mothers, have been encouraged to take the first step into the realm of further education. Parents who have attended courses often say they have developed a greater insight in their own child's learning; they are better equipped to support this learning; and above all they have achieved greater confidence in their own ability.

Mirpuri- and Sylheti-speaking families

As this new-found confidence is a positive factor for so many parents we need to focus on some who are least likely to benefit by courses for parents. This chapter focuses on the experiences of Mirpuri and Bangladeshi families for the reason that these two groups share certain social and educational concerns. The greatest concern is that Coventry children from these two communities make up the largest number of pupils, proportionally, requiring additional English language support. Teachers fear that these children are failing to gain access to the whole curriculum. This is a particular worry when the children are still at this basic level of English in Year One and in some cases, subsequent years. The Sylheti dialect, being similar to the Bangla language, is used by most of the Bangladeshi families in Coventry. The Mirpuri dialect although similar to Panjabi (Urdu) is used by a small minority of Asian families in Coventry. Both of these dialects are spoken and not written. When information is translated for the Mirpuri and Sylheti community it is written in Urdu script and Bangla respectively. A similar example in Britain might be in the northeast of England where the Geordie dialect speaking families would get standard English written letters sent from school. This doesn't present much of a difficulty for such parents where they are used to seeing written standard English and hearing it spoken on the radio and television. However, this is not generally the case for the Mirpuri- and Sylheti-speaking families who, brought up in Mirpur and Bangladesh, will probably not have had as much exposure to the media.

Within the Asian community, when both parents of preschool children are out at work the children are often cared for by grandparents. Many of these children are starting school with a limited range or vocabulary in their first language and almost no experience of hearing and speaking English. For Mirpuri and Bangladeshi children from relatively small Asian communities in Coventry their linguistic isolation is accentuated.

The faith shared by the majority of Mirpuri and Bangladeshi families is that of Islam. According to Sitara Khan (1985), many Moslem families share a similar attitude towards British education and racism in Britain. She states:

Muslim parents feel that the British educational system has failed them and their children. In general Muslim children have consistently failed to fulfil themselves academically within the system and have often emerged at the end of it feeling estranged from their parents and their culture. (p.33)

Mirpuri- and Sylheti-speaking pupils are sometimes overlooked because they are the smallest minority ethnic group within the school. Unless there is someone available who speaks the Sylheti language and Mirpuri dialect, the language and dialect used by these pupils can remain unidentified for some considerable time by the school.

During the autumn term 1995 four Mirpuri and Sylheti bilingual assistants and two case work officers from the home-school links team talked to some of the mothers about their own personal experiences of education in Kashmir and Bangladesh. They were particularly interested in talking with the mothers as they found that it was the mothers who generally underestimated their role in their child's education. Some of the comments are given in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Mothers' comments

My memories of school in Bangladesh/Mirpur	What I think is most different about schools in Britain
'If we didn't do well enough we were made to do that year over again.'	'In the primary school the children just seem to play.'
'My father refused to pay for my education after my ninth birthday as the teacher said I was a slow learner.'	'They are not given enough homework.'
'I learnt the ABC and the numbers 1-100 at five years old. I didn't understand what it meant though.'	'The British teachers' life must be easy because they are just child minding, they are not teaching.'
'We were taught that it was impolite to have eye contact with our elders or those in authority.'	'I think they learn things more slowly in Britain but they do understand what they are learning.'
'The quick learners at school were given responsibility to teach the slow learners. Those who had difficulty learning were punished with the stick, with a detention or writing lines.'	'The children here are encouraged to question the teachers. We could never do that.'
	'Here children aren't afraid when they are learning in school. They seem to enjoy it. I think it's better.'

A few weeks later the same home-school links staff conducted a small survey by listening to 30 Sylheti and 20 Mirpuri-speaking mothers talking about their involvement in their own child's school – see Table 7.2.

Table 7.2 Home–school links survey

Are there any reasons which prevent you from coming into your children's school?
(Please tick)

	SYLHETI- SPEAKING MOTHERS %	MIRPURI- SPEAKING MOTHERS %
a) I work during the day	3	18
b) I have too much work to do in the home	53	55
c) I have a younger child/ren not yet at school	20	36
d) I speak very little English	27	73
e) Other members of my family speak English and talk to the teachers instead of me	3	91

Involvement of Sylheti- and Mirpuri-speaking parents in courses in three primary schools

The first school

The first school is an urban primary school with over 500 children on role of which 5 per cent of children are from Sylheti-speaking families. Over the years the school had been successful in running several Open College Network courses for parents. Some of the courses were open to all parents. Other courses were geared to attract parents from specific ethnic groups so that in one instance the Gujarati bilingual education assistant was made available to recruit and support Gujarati mothers who were anxious about their competency in the use of English. The African-Caribbean education assistant and the deputy headteacher together offered a course for the African-Caribbean parents and parents of dual-heritage children. Usually the recruitment for courses about the curriculum would focus on parents whose children attended a particular year group.

In October 1994 the school offered a course for Sylheti-speaking parents with children in the nursery and reception class. The course was delivered by an English teacher and a Sylheti-speaking bilingual education assistant.

That is to say that the initial content was delivered in English and translated with further explanations in Sylheti. Discussion took place in Sylheti and translated back into English. The course was called 'Parents and Learning' and aimed at explaining the components of a successful school. Of the seven mothers who began the course, one had a rudimentary understanding of English, the others spoke and understood very little English. None of them had any formal education. Their children's illnesses prevented three of them from attending every session. There were ten sessions in all. The final session focused on evaluating the course. The headteacher joined in for this and presented course attendance certificates.

The general consensus from the mothers was that they had enjoyed the course and were genuinely sorry that they had missed certain sessions. The mothers had completed most of the science, language and maths activities with their children at home. They were asked what their greatest fear had been when they embarked on the course. They said it was the fear of making a fool of themselves and being shown up by not being able to read and write Bangla as well as the English language. They said that they felt safer with a group of Sylheti speakers only. They were asked how the course could have been improved. The one who understood a little English said that she would have liked more practice writing English. The others said they would like to have started to learn English at the same time as learning about the school. They asked for the next course to be about disciplining children. One said and others agreed with her: 'My greatest fear is that my child will no longer respect me when my child's English becomes much better than mine'.

Summary of the school's strategy

The positive outcomes were that:

- the parents felt more confident learning alongside others with whom they closely identified;
- they were able to discuss complex issues in Sylheti that wouldn't have been possible in English.

On the negative side:

- there was pressure from their families for the women to concentrate their energies on learning English.

It is therefore recommended that courses should:

- combine learning English with learning about children;
- attempt to enable different Asian language groups to learn together so that the most isolated groups build confidence in mixing with others;
- encourage discussions to go on within separate language groups and English to be the main language used for delivery and recording key words and phrases.

As a result, materials have been prepared for the next course on 'Handling Children's Behaviour' within the context of learning to read and write English. In fact the next course was later delivered as one of the twice weekly English classes and included other Asian parents learning English. The Asian languages represented within the group of fifteen mothers were Malay, Gujarati, Urdu, Panjabi as well as Sylheti. All the mothers completed the course achieving OCN accreditation at Entry Level.

The second school

This school is another large urban primary school and has almost equal numbers of families who are English, Gujarati, Panjabi and fewer Mirpuri speakers. The

staff were concerned that, although the majority of Mirpuri-speaking mothers would come to school to bring their children and some would attend their children's medical examinations, they were reluctant to discuss with the teacher their children's educational progress. The staff had always known that this was probably caused by the mothers' lack of confidence in their spoken English. The staff also found that the Mirpuri-speaking mothers were reticent to join the English class for adults and were also reticent to come into the nursery family sessions. The appointment of a Mirpuri-speaking bilingual education assistant certainly improved the communication between the staff and the parents. However, the early years staff particularly wanted to explain just how much parents can support their children's learning. A parental involvement programme was planned to operate from the second half of the spring term and to start with the nursery. By this stage in the academic year the nursery children had settled in to the routine and were less likely to be upset by any changes, however slight.

The school is now fortunate to have bilingual staff, or access to staff who can communicate with parents from each of the four main language groups. The Mirpuri-speaking mothers understandably tended to cluster together when bringing and collecting their children and they were by now comfortable conversing with the Mirpuri bilingual education assistant on a daily basis. An invitation to come into the nursery one afternoon a week for three successive weeks was offered to the Mirpuri-speaking mothers. During the afternoon sessions different activities were taking place where parents and children were encouraged to interact. The staff explained the educational value of the activities and how similar learning experiences could be tried out at home. The bilingual education assistant explained how she sold the idea to the parents. The dialogue tended to go as follows: 'Auntie-ji, please come in to the nursery next Wednesday afternoon, just for an hour. We're doing some cooking with the children and could do with your help. You can bring a friend'.

Initially, she said that there were protests from the mothers about too much work to do at home or having younger children who could not be left. However, after it was explained that the mothers would get a chance to see how their nursery children were progressing, they agreed. Most parents attended the three sessions. The nursery staff were pleased to answer their questions, such as, 'Is – mixing with the other children?', 'Does she talk in English or our language when she's here?', 'Does he do what he's told?'

The mothers were encouraged to take part in the activities. Where they preferred just to observe, this preference was respected. Although the school particularly targeted the mothers of the nursery children, fathers and grandparents and other relatives were also welcomed. The nursery staff invited parents from the English, Gujerati and Panjabi families in turn to attend similar nursery sessions.

Summary of the school's strategy

The positive outcomes were:

- the daily exchanges with the parents were now shared by all the staff and not only the bilingual assistant;
- the children's attitude towards their work changed. They took a more serious, interested approach, as though they were thinking, 'It's OK now that my mum approves of this';
- the mothers began to talk about the educational activities that they had been doing with their children at home.

On the negative side:

- the Mirpuri mothers didn't progress to becoming part of the parent and toddler group as did the other more confident groups.

Recommendations:

- take into consideration the timing of Ramadan in the year as this inevitably curtails the involvement of Muslim parents;
- greater explanation and encouragement needs to be given to the Mirpuri mothers regarding the benefits for pre-nursery children by attending the parent and toddler session.

The third school

Here the nursery class has a family session every Wednesday morning. Eighty per cent of their children are from families of Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Gujerati heritage. The majority faith is Islam. This urban primary school nursery class is particularly successful in its family session attendance. The Sylheti-speaking mothers, who had previously been reticent in attending, were encouraged by the presence of the newly appointed Sylheti-speaking bilingual education assistant in 1992. The family session is truly a family session. Some times as many as 30 parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents plus their preschool children come into the nursery. The nursery children are only allowed to attend if they are accompanied by an adult carer. Other younger siblings are also welcomed. Every week an activity for the adults is offered. The activities alternate from being adult centred to being child centred. For example, one Wednesday family session offers jewellery making. The next session might be about the educational value of children using paint to express their ideas, followed by sharing and cooking different traditional recipes.

The secret of the success in this family session is that no visiting adult is put under pressure. The monolingual staff concentrate upon engaging the children in stimulating activities; the bilingual staff focus on the parents/ carers. The latter may be in the activity corner or move between the other adults who may wish to sit and observe or chat in small groups with others who share the same home language. Some adults stay for as little as half an hour; some stay all morning. No

one is ever made to feel that they must become involved in any activity which makes them feel uncomfortable. However, increasingly parents/carers do become more involved. Some parents have offered to share their own particular skills with others. At present the 'activity' corner is embarking upon an Open College Network ten-session craft course. The Sylheti parents are assured of moral support from the Sylheti bilingual education assistant should they feel they would like to take part.

Summary of school's strategy

The positive outcomes are that:

- the parents/carers feel confident to attend on their own terms. Within this non-threatening atmosphere adults are more likely to try out initiatives new to them;
- the more confident parents began to take the initiative to provide or suggest a tutor for the week's activity.

This cross-cultural skill-exchange continues to thrive.

On the negative side:

- the morning session is labour-intensive i.e. staff to look after the children (mostly pre-nursery age), bi-lingual staff to communicate with the parents/carers;
- the minority European white parents now rarely attend the morning family session as they feel marginalised.

Recommendations:

- to ensure staff make maximum effort to encourage families from all ethnic groups to attend;
- to capitalise on offers of extra staff such as work experience students to attend the family session to share some of the responsibility.

Conclusion

For parents to participate in the daily life of an early years' setting there must be real and obvious commitment from staff. It is not enough to use the rhetoric of parents as 'partners' in the education of their children. Some educators do use such phrases, and through using these words feel committed to them. In reality this is not always the case, and it is all too easy to neglect the most vulnerable and needy parents (Siraj-Blatchford 1994).

This chapter has emphasised the crucial role of a bilingual member of staff. Without doubt, this is one of the most effective factors in the involvement of minority ethnic families who are not confident in their use of English and their acceptance in an unfamiliar environment. The ideal is, of course, to employ appropriate qualified teachers who are themselves from minority ethnic families.

School budgets rarely enable immediate employment of bilingual staff to accommodate all the languages that the school requires. In this situation a helpful suggestion might be to cultivate and enlist the support of the most confident of the minority ethnic parents as volunteer home school link workers to encourage other parents (Karran 1985).

As well as employing bilingual staff, the school and nursery staff need to ensure that they consider the hidden messages that their classroom environment and practices transmit to the community that they serve.

An atmosphere should be created where ethnic minority parents feel comfortable to come and interact with children and their educators. Home-school links are vital to this endeavour and can be promoted in a number of ways. Parents should have access to information about their child. Letters should be translated and efforts made to use interpreters with parents who are still learning English. Bilingual signs should be displayed around the classroom and outside it. Dual-language books and tapes should be displayed where they are easily accessible. Use can be made of a variety of multicultural resources offering positive images through such things as poster, play utensils, dolls, games, puzzles and music tapes. The curriculum on offer should also incorporate a variety of festivals, family life and art and craft materials. If the classroom resources and curriculum reflect the children's lives, the children are more likely to want to engage in and learn from the activities we provide.

(Siraj-Blatchford 1994)

I would add that as this affects the learning process of minority ethnic children it also affects that of their parents.

If the Bangladeshi and Mirpuri communities are feeling isolated within Coventry's inner city, where there is a relatively high 19 per cent of Asian pupils in school, then account must be taken of the effect of isolation of the geographically scattered Asian families in the Coventry suburban schools. All the recommendations mentioned here have relevance for home-school liaison with minority ethnic groups generally.

Finally, courses which involve parents in the process of their children's learning have proved to be an ideal opportunity to create a teacher, parent and child partnership. Courses offer the school, and its parent groups of mixed ethnicity, the benefits of a rich intercultural and educational exchange. Parents and teachers are able to discuss issues, consider each others' concerns and bring about appropriately supportive changes both at school and in the home.

Summary of strategies which encourage the involvement of isolated groups of Asian parents in their child's learning

- Consider resources which acknowledge cultural heritage and language;
- outwardly value parents' skills as well as the skills of being a parent;
- provide access to an adult worker or volunteer who can share the same cultural identity and home language;
- offer activities, discussions and courses which address the important issue of children's education;

- offer opportunities to parents for improving their English literacy and oracy skills;
- offer parents practical activities to use at home with their child which complement the child's learning in class. (e.g. IMPACT maths). Check first on the cultural acceptability of the activity from an informed source;
- listen to concerns parents may have;
- be prepared to act upon suggestions made by parents.

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