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Bilingual Bookmaking

Context

I am an Assistant Headteacher at Park Primary School, Stratford, London, and the work here is a continuation of a project I first ran at Elmhurst Primary School, Forest Gate, when I was the SMSC coordinator there. Both schools serve ethnically, religiously, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and the Bilingual Bookmaking project was devised to celebrate pupils' community languages and to engage pupils' families in Reading for Pleasure, as well as to explore pupils' home reading cultures.



OU Research inspiration and rationale

The strands of the TaRs research that most influenced the project were strands 2 (Teachers' knowledge of children's reading practices) and 5 (Building reading communities). Whilst the research elucidated the educational benefits of teachers having a more refined understanding of pupils' home reading practices, we as schools felt that we – as teachers – didn't yet have enough insight into this. We also sought to find a way to begin building 'new and more equal reading relationships with families and community members'.

Aims

- To celebrate the diversity of pupils' community languages, and to celebrate pupils' multilingualism
- To enable teachers to understand more about pupils' home reading cultures and home reading identities
- To improve parental and community engagement, with a specific focus on developing literacy and a shared reading for pleasure culture.

Outline

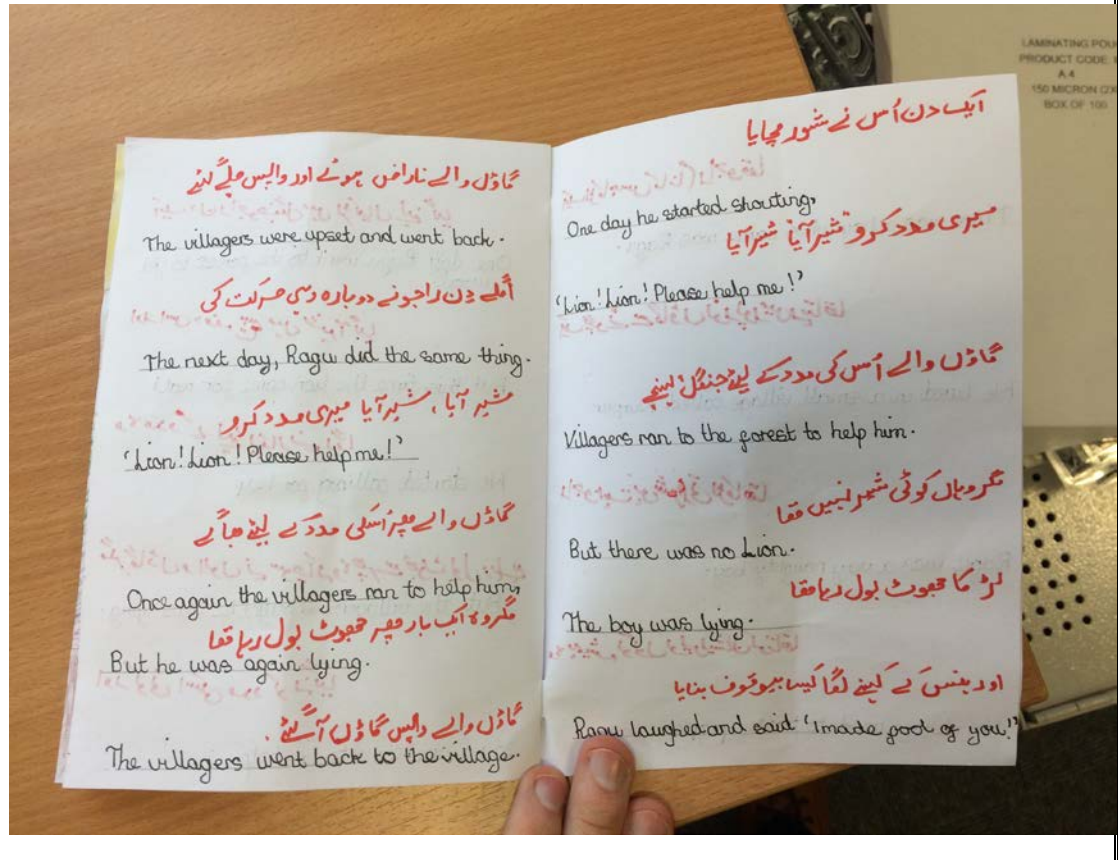
Through assemblies and in-class discussions, teachers discussed with their classes the diversity of languages they speak; we found that almost every pupil is (at least) bi-lingual. Teachers explained that over a half-term holiday, children and their families could work

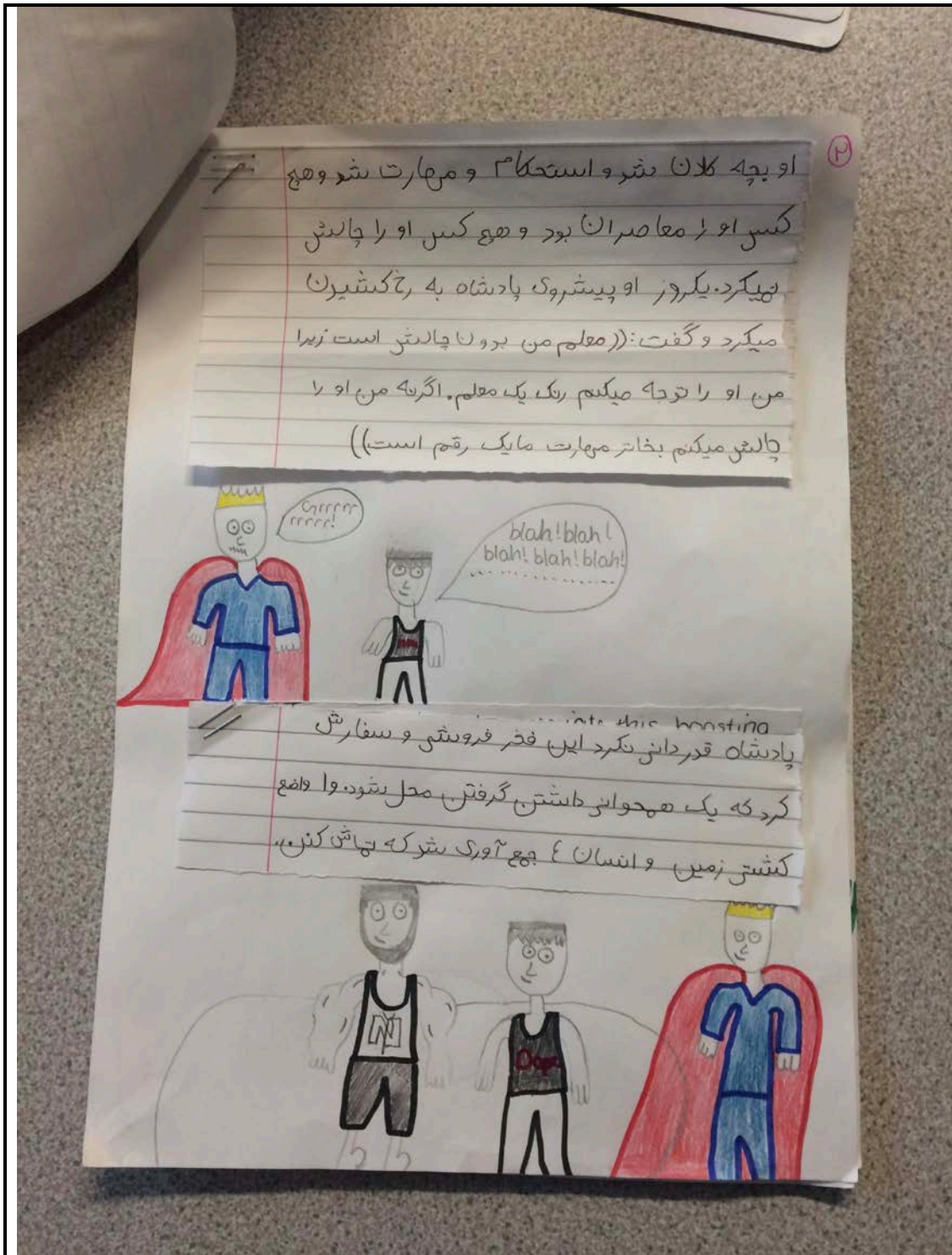
together to produce bilingual books. The brief was kept wide open, but it was suggested that children and their families could perhaps:

- write down their older relatives' favourite stories
- write down tales that have passed down in their first languages
- create texts/posters that told about events in the families lives, written in multiple languages.

Whilst the co-creation of a shared library of these texts was the main 'purpose' shared with pupils, and one which really excited them, we also set a date for all parents and relatives to be invited in, for a day of multilingual storytelling. Children and families could share the stories they created in the holidays, and teachers would also join in, as the majority of teachers are also bilingual.

The quality of the books and stories produced was mesmerising, and through talking to pupils and parents, it became very clear that they really relished the opportunity to work on a project like this together, and for the school to be celebrating the importance of community languages, as well as developing English.





Impact

The work produced was eye-opening in several ways. Firstly, it indicated the enthusiasm and enjoyment that the project had engendered among children and their families. Whilst the project was optional, most children across the school worked on something. It seemed deeply 'appreciated' that the school had formally acknowledged the importance of community languages, and this had a positive impact of parental engagement.

For pupils, the storytelling day – in which all of these stories were shared and read aloud in a range of languages – enabled them to learn lots about each other’s home cultures and languages, to share new stories and to enjoy hearing stories that they know so well, but which are seldom heard in school, such as ‘The Thirsty Crow’.

The school library now contains a collection of bilingual stories produced by children and families, we expect these will be well read and this supplements the bilingual books we have in stock.

In terms of teachers, this simple and very ‘hands-off’ project – in which the children worked with their parents during the holiday – forced a powerful recognition of how rigid the barrier is between home and school. There may sometimes be a tendency to presume that stories the children know are the stories that we as teachers share with them; it was educative for teachers to engage with and explore the reading cultures in pupils’ homes, and for them to have a chance to see their pupils differently, as children in families.

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

The impact of this is quite vast. For one thing, we plan to continue to run this project again, and for it to become an annual project, including the storytelling day. In addition though, the impact has been at the level of the curriculum; the project allowed us to recognise that there is a rich goldmine of narrative that remains untapped in our local community, and that pupils can gain so much from sharing and learning about each others’ cultural stories.

For teachers, it highlighted the benefits of recognising that children’s reading culture and their identities as readers are both shaped not only by us and the school, but by peers, by parents, relatives and the wider community. Reading and storytelling take many forms in our local community, in the temples and madrasahs as much as the libraries and the playgrounds, and this better understanding of the community raises teachers’ understanding of their pupils as readers and as learners.