

Diversity in family involvement in children's learning in English primary schools: Culture, language and identity

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ABSTRACT: Government policy in England has for many years encouraged parental involvement in their children's education. In response, most primary schools have developed a range of strategies designed to assist parents in supporting their children's learning at home, particularly in learning to read. However, it is a common assumption that parents from some social and ethnic groups are "harder to reach" than others and – indeed – that some are even not interested in their children's education. There is also confusion among teachers about how a parent who herself does not speak English could possibly help her child to learn to read and write in English. These views, it can be argued, are based on simplistic notions of the roles that parents can take, and on a "one-way" model of involvement, which invests all the knowledge and skills with the school. In this article, using evidence from a small-scale, qualitative research project with parents of South Asian heritage in a multilingual city in the north of England, we show the complexity of the issues involved in recognising the diversity of ways in which families do and can support children's learning out of school, the importance of understanding the family contexts themselves, and the ways in which parents construct their identities in relation to their children's school experiences.

KEYWORDS: bilingualism; identity; language policy; parental involvement

INTRODUCTION

The Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967), the first major study of primary education in England, long ago recognised the importance of positive relationships between home and school for children's learning. Primary schools in England have, since Plowden, prided themselves on what they see as their positive relationships with parents. Muschamp, Wikeley, Ridge and Balarin (2007) conducted a survey of parental involvement in primary education in England which reveals the huge transformations in both family formations and parenting practices over recent years. They show that the value of home-school communication is emphatically recognised at all levels, and make the important point that there are many simple activities which parents can do, in order to support their children's learning in school. But the survey also suggests that schools often have very narrow views about what parents can do and fail to recognise the diversity of ways in which families can support their children's learning at home. For example, parents with limited English skills tend frequently to be seen as being in the "hard to reach" category, as having nothing educationally beneficial to offer their children.

Rather than focusing on the need to educate parents in the ways that they, as teachers, think they should be able to support their children's learning at home, there is a case for saying that teachers themselves need to be informed of the rich and diverse ways in which children from different backgrounds learn at home and in the community. In England, there are a whole range of complementary and community settings where children learn to read and write in ways that, given appropriate recognition, can support and enhance their learning of English in mainstream schools (Conteh *et al.*, 2007). But very few primary teachers or policy-makers know much about these contexts. Teachers also need to know much more about the work of researchers such as Cummins (2001) into the experiences of bilingual learners. Similarly, in terms of literacy, as researchers such as Gregory, Long and Volk (2004) are beginning to show, there are "many pathways" by which parents, siblings and grandparents can support their children's emerging literacy skills. The practical implications of these fields of research are very important for primary teachers, both for their work in classrooms and in constructing effective links with the parents and families of the children they teach.

Education in England¹ in recent years has undergone profound changes. Under successive governments, the culture of target-setting has been allowed to permeate at all levels. As Ainscow, Conteh, Dyson and Gallanaugh (2007) point out, this is beginning to change the nature of the relationship between families and schools:

Recent policy has begun to cast these relationships in a particular light. Given the concern with performativity, a child's family background is to be judged in terms of its capacity to promote the achievement of desired outcomes (p. 9).

And these "desired outcomes" cover a very narrow range of what can actually be counted as educational success, generally being interpreted as attaining the expected level in externally-directed national tests at the ages of 7 and 11 years. The government's most recent strategy document on home-school relationships, *Every parent matters* (DfES 2007), sets out a model of what – in the official view – it takes to be a responsible parent and packs a threatening punch within its blandly positive, inclusive message:

Our vision is of responsive public services driven increasingly by ever greater numbers of parents with high aspirations and expectations for their children. Public services need to be respectful of parents as adults with expertise of their own and provide a personalised approach....That said, for a small minority of parents who have lost, or never had, the capacity to parent responsibly, public services must be ready to intervene promptly and sensitively....[W]e have to accept that this journey may be a long one and compulsion for the few, through measures such as parenting orders, may sometimes be required to ensure that responsibilities to the child (such as getting them to school every day) are being properly fulfilled (pp. 6-7).

As Ainscow *et al.* (2007) argue, those parents judged to be "irresponsible" may be a very small number within the official statistics as a whole, but pronouncements such as the above can have the effect of promoting in policy-makers' and teachers' minds a

¹ Education policy in the UK is developed and administered separately for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

particular way of thinking about parents, contributing to constructions of – almost – a typology of those who can be counted on as more or less “responsible”, more or less “aspirational”, or more or less “hard to reach”. This in turn can inform the ways in which schools view and approach their pupils’ families, and lead to negative expectations of certain groups of parents, with the assumption that they cannot be trusted to help their children at home. One such naturalised assumption about parents from some ethnic minority backgrounds and those not proficient in English is that they “lack the educational knowledge appropriate for helping their children at home” (Muschamp *et al.*, 2007, p. 6).

This assumption is unhelpful and needs to be challenged. And it is beginning to be so, through evidence gained from detailed, fine-grained, small-scale research studies into learning which is taking place in a vast range of contexts outside mainstream schools, including families in the home. Bilingual researchers have an important role in such research, as Ma (2008) demonstrates in his work with Chinese parents reading dual-language texts with their children at home. He reveals the importance of such shared activities, not just for children’s literacy development, but also for the identity of parents as active participants in their children’s education. Moreover, in supportive school contexts where recognition is given to these forms of literacy learning, such activities can also contribute to the identities of both parents and children as active members of the school community and of wider British society. In discussing the positive aspects of such parent-child learning encounters, Ma comments:

The example of collaborative reading described in this article demonstrates the *mutual* benefits of parental involvement in reading. It adds a dimension to bilingual children’s education in terms of understanding ways in which linguistic minority parents may be acknowledged by, and enculturated into, the mainstream society. In empowering their children, these parents thus become themselves empowered and included as core collaborators in home-school networks (p. 247).

In these cases, both parents’ and children’s bilingualism is nurtured, the parents’ positive role in supporting their children’s learning is affirmed and schools tap into a valuable community resource. Moreover, in a school where the “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1992) of the community are positively recognised, the advantages can be even greater. In an interview with a teacher in the mainstream school attended by the child in his study, Ma goes on to indicate the positive influences that bilingual parents can provide in a school for all pupils, not just their own children or other bilingual learners:

In this school, parents have come in and read the home language version of a well-known storybook to the whole class as part of an ordinary story time session. This enlarges the experience of *all* children in the class, not just about how language works but also about the multicultural society they live in – and at an age when attitudes are forming (p. 251).

DIVERSITY, LANGUAGE AND LEARNING IN ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A STUDY OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

- 01 English is everywhere isn't it? It's in the media and when you put on TV, English is everywhere and when you go to school it's English all the time. Everywhere...shops, everywhere in society, you've got English, because it is part of your own language as well, and lots of
- 05 families too, and lots of families you know, started speaking, tried speaking lots more English, but lots of families now start realising that their children are missing Punjabi and Gujerati, Bengali etc and they want them to improve their language, Punjabi. They want them to be able to keep their own language, they want that to be part of their
- 10 identity and it also connects to their history, their own tradition, their own family so obviously it's an important part.....
(small section omitted)
...I think sometimes when you think about politics and what things are said in the media, that's why you can understand why people have these attitudes, they do because I mean they, politicians say something like
- 15 Asians should stop speaking their, your language ... But yeah, if you get somebody who speaks French and comes into this country and they can't speak a word of English, they say, ah that's wonderful you speak French and then they learn to speak English ... I think some people don't value the South Asian heritage languages ... and then children are
- 20 in school for instance and they speak two languages but it's not valued, for instance a Punjabi English speaker is not as valued as a French English speaker.

These words were spoken by Rehana², a young woman who is a second-generation member of a Pakistani heritage community in a post-industrial, multilingual city in the north of England. They begin to reveal some of the complexity of ethnic minority families' experiences, how these experiences influence their views on education, and how they have changed over time. They are taken from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a small-scale, ethnographic study into the experiences of and attitudes to education of two South Asian heritage families in the city (Kawashima, 2007).³

Both families in the study were second generation "immigrant", Muslim and in many ways representative of the group of parents often perceived in policy as "hard to reach". Rehana is a member of one of the families and was their main informant. Her father migrated to England from Pakistan in the 1960s and found work in a textile mill. In due course her mother, born in Pakistan, came as his bride at the age of sixteen. Rehana's father speaks English, but her mother does not speak it well; her time in England is taken up with looking after her own family and maintaining links with the extended family in Pakistan. Her first child, now in her twenties, was Rehana, and four siblings followed; the youngest is now eight years old and attends the local, multilingual primary school in the inner city.

Meena, whose words appear below, was the main informant of the other family in the study. She was in her early thirties at the time of the research and a teacher in a

² All names have been changed.

³ The term generally used in England for immigrants from the Indian sub-continent, including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

private secondary school. Her father came to the city from a rural area of Bangladesh in the 1950s and found work – like Rehana's father – in a textile mill. In 1982, when Meena was nine years old, she came to England with her mother and five other siblings. As was the case with her older sisters and, in a way that was normal in the community, Meena entered into a traditional arranged marriage when she was sixteen years old. Her husband came from Bangladesh. The year after she married, her daughter Haleema was born. Meena was divorced from her husband when she was 24 years old. Just before divorcing, she decided to return to school as a mature student and eventually completed a Master's degree in Social Policy.

Meena and Rehana were not just informants in the conventional way, but became co-researchers in developing the knowledge for the study. Although the researcher had theoretical knowledge relevant to the study, as an outsider, there were limitations to the extent to which she could develop her knowledge about the context of South Asian heritage families and community norms. So she had many things to learn from the expert knowledge of Meena and Rehana and their families on these issues. Interviewing both families was the main research method, and there was also a strong ethnographic dimension to the study. Repeated visits to their homes on the part of the researcher played an important role in capturing the, often tacit, views of the families and the importance for them of the routines of daily life. Participant observation helped to clarify and understand what identity meant for them and the interviews confirmed and enhanced what was observed; this allowed the families' constructions of identity in the study to be developed in a rich and rounded way. Such a close, detailed approach to research clearly had strong ethical implications, and the researcher was careful at all times to work with, rather than on, her informants and develop positive, trustworthy relationships with all participants.

In the above extract from one of her interviews, Rehana describes something of the language ecology typical of many British cities such as the one she was born in, demonstrating the ways in which daily life in local contexts is always mediated by the wider global contexts which surround it (lines 01-06). She also reveals her strong awareness of the ambivalent attitudes to language diversity that can be found among teachers in mainstream schools in England (lines 19-22), attitudes which are influenced by the somewhat intemperate comments made from time to time by senior politicians and reported prominently in the media. For example, David Blunkett, while Home Secretary immediately after a spell as Education Secretary, published a policy paper entitled *Integration with diversity: Globalisation and the renewal of democracy and civil society* in a volume on *Rethinking Britishness* (Blunkett, 2002), where he made the following statement:

Speaking English enables parents to converse with their children in English, as well as their historic mother tongue, at home and to participate in wider modern culture. It helps to overcome the schizophrenia which bedevils generational relationships. In as many as 30% of Asian British households, according to the recent citizenship survey, English is not spoken at home (p. 76).

Following the publication of the paper, *The Times* (16 September, 2002) ran the headline "Immigrants told to speak English even at home". That Blunkett felt it appropriate to use the word "schizophrenia" in relation to normal processes of language maintenance and change over generations tells us much about the way

multilingualism is perceived in the UK. While it may be the norm in the world generally, it is still viewed with suspicion in England, despite the fact that the most recent schools census indicates that almost 14% of pupils in primary and 11% in secondary schools in England speak other languages besides English (Multiverse, 2007).

In her interview, Rehana indicates some of the complex issues involved in providing for the educational needs of such children, who are labelled as learning English as an Additional Language (EAL⁴). She also reveals her sophisticated awareness of some of the contradictions in language policy in England that are influential in forming the attitudes of many teachers who work in schools with high proportions of bilingual pupils. Her understanding of the ways in which children's opportunities for success in learning has been constructed partly through her own experiences as a pupil at a time when, advocating a strong equal opportunities ideology, the Swann Report (DES, 1985) recommended separation of provision for the teaching of so-called "community languages" and of English for bilingual children. She recalled an incident which happened when she was in primary school that made the need for separating languages very real to her:

I was on an occasion told by a teacher who was a Muslim Punjabi-speaking teacher herself, and she said to me, "Don't speak Punjabi, it's rude for those teachers who don't understand Punjabi." In the playground my friends and I were playing, I don't know what we were doing but we were speaking Punjabi and a teacher who is a Punjabi speaker came over us and said, "How rude of you girls to speak in your own language in school. That is for home, it's not for school and it's especially rude in front of all the English teachers who don't understand you." It struck me as being rude or naughty. I didn't want to be seen to be naughty...So I always believed that my Punjabi should be used at home and that English was for school.

But her understanding also encompasses other ideas. Rehana has studied to degree level, and now works as a primary teacher. As a student teacher, she studied language in education and came across other ways than the Swann Report of thinking about bilingualism, not least the far-sighted Bullock Report (DES, 1975). Pre-dating Swann, this had some encouragingly enlightened things to say about bilingualism and its role in society. After a general statement about the value of bilingualism internationally, the report continues:

When bilingualism in Britain is discussed it is seldom if ever with reference to the inner city immigrant populations, yet over half the immigrant pupils in our schools have a mother-tongue which is not English, and in some schools this means over 75% of the total number on roll. The language of the home and of a great deal of the central experience of their life is one of the Indian (*sic.*) languages, or Greek, Turkish, Italian or Spanish. These children are genuine bilinguals, but this fact is often ignored or unrecognised by the schools. Their bilingualism is of great importance to the children and their families, and also to society as a whole. In a linguistically conscious nation in the modern world we should

⁴ *The current official terminology for bilingual pupils in mainstream schools in England.*

see it as an asset, as something to be nurtured, and one of the agencies which should nurture it is the school” (pp. 293-294).

Among the recommendations for bilingual pupils, which the Bullock committee made, was the provision of specialist support for their learning beyond the early stages and across the curriculum. The aim of this was not just to develop proficiency in English, but to promote what has come to be known as “additive bilingualism”.

More than a decade after Bullock, Cummins (2001) provided theoretical underpinning for ways of promoting additive bilingualism. His development of socio-cognitive concepts such as “language thresholds” (pp. 104-108) and “linguistic interdependence” (pp. 109-112) supports the idea that the learner needs a threshold level of competence in both first and additional languages in order to succeed academically and stresses the links that need to be made between all the languages in a learner’s repertoire for successful learning. Cummins’ research offers powerful explanations for many of the distinctive features of bilingualism, indicating how academic achievement can be impaired if the learner does not have the opportunity and support to use their first language for cognitive development, and how academic language proficiency needs time to develop. It also permits, in his words, “a variety of seemingly contradictory data to be integrated” and provides “a partial basis for prediction and planning with respect to the education of minority students” (Cummins, 1984, p. 6).

That Rehana was introduced to such ideas in her teacher education course in England was very unusual. It was down to her individual tutors at college rather than official policy, or the standards required for newly-qualified teachers, where such features of learners’ experience as bilingualism are not even mentioned (TDA, 2007). The significant practical implications and the benefits for learning English of Cummins’ and his associates’ work still remain largely unknown to mainstream teachers in England, though they are now beginning to be represented in guidance for teachers working with bilingual pupils (DfES, 2006). Cooke (2004) attests to the almost subversive nature of the dissemination of these ideas among teachers and bilingual assistants working in multilingual classrooms, and to the powerful ways in which, for them, they represent a model of praxis – that “dynamic relationship” between theory and practice (Conteh, 2003, p. 3) that often leads to transformative teaching and learning.

A key aspect of Cummins’ model is the need to recognise the learner’s whole experience of language as part of their “common underlying proficiency” in whichever language they are using. Children’s experiences in different languages and contexts can work together to provide firm foundations for new learning and cognitive development – so, learning to read and write in, say, Urdu in a community school can have positive benefits for subsequent learning to read and write in English in a mainstream one. But, in order to do so, it needs to be recognised, valued and understood by the wider system as well as by the individual teacher working with her own pupils in her own classroom. Such an idea clearly has important, but complex, pedagogical implications, particularly within the diverse and multi-faceted language contexts in the cities in which many schools are set (Conteh, 2007, p. 460). There are also issues about the language knowledge and ethnic make-up of the teaching force, which does not represent the diversity of the population as a whole (Conteh, 2007:

458-459). In most multilingual mainstream classrooms in England, teachers work with pupils whose languages and cultural backgrounds they do not share. Being expected to provide opportunities for the use of other languages in their classrooms can, as Bourne (2001) argues, have disturbing and disruptive effects for the long-established status quo for such teachers. This is clearly an area where there is a great need and potential for community and family involvement in children's learning in school, but, as Crozier (2000) has shown, there are many pitfalls and problems to overcome in constructing effective, equitable home-school links.

UNDERSTANDING AND NURTURING FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN LEARNING: THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Many of the naturalised attitudes towards ethnic minority parents contained in policy and held by teachers, such as those indicated by Muschamp *et al.* (2007) are based on out-of-date, stereotypical information. One significant feature is that policy documents still usually relate narrowly only to "parents", whereas in many communities, as research has begun to indicate, the support for children's learning comes from a wide range of family members including siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents (Gregory *et al.*, 2004). In order for fruitful relationships between schools and families to be nurtured, it is important to understand the viewpoints of the families themselves, and the ways in which these have changed through the generations.

As second-generation members of South Asian heritage families, both Meena and Rehana felt that they benefited from belonging to strong and close communities. They were also aware of their own individuality and distinctive experiences, and the importance of education to them. When Meena discussed education, she stated:

I mean if I hadn't got a degree I wouldn't be working as a teacher and I wouldn't be you know ... my views, my mind has opened. I open my horizon. I question things more, identity, how I'm treated here, how I should be treated. It has opened my mind as well as my job opportunities.

For both Meena and Rehana, their educational experiences have given them self-confidence and have been influential in forming their ideas and attitudes. Their mothers, Salema and Nandine, who were brought up in Bangladesh and Pakistan respectively, had little school experience, and so might be expected not to have strong views on education and perhaps to fit the stereotype of "hard to reach" parent. But, it emerged that they actually had their own clear views on identity and educational concerns, though they seemed to find it difficult to show and speak these. As older members of South Asian heritage communities, they had come to expect their children to have different lives from them. Regarding the roles of girls, Salema and Nandine did – when they were younger – expect their daughters to stay at home to help with the family rather than going to school. They did not question such a life because it was the culture around them and they had brought this concept to Britain. However, it was clear that they had come to recognise that being girls of South Asian heritage growing up in British society meant going beyond their home lives, taking up opportunities to go to school, gain qualifications and even work outside the

community, as both Meena and Rehana did. They had clearly been influenced by their own children's experiences and ideas. This was an unexpected finding in the research.

As younger members of the community, Meena and Rehana both have strong and well-articulated views on identity and its importance for education. Like their mothers, both show attachment to the norms and traditions of their communities. In terms of language and other social practices, Rehana talks about her life in terms of continuity. While conversation between her and her siblings is largely in English, they also need to possess skills in Punjabi to relate to older members of the family and, through strong extended family networks, to those in Pakistan. They keep religious practices and try to pray five times a day. The female members of the family always wear traditional South Asian dress of shalwar and kameez. Similarly, Meena, in discussion about languages, reports the fact that she mostly speaks to her daughter Haleema in English, but she emphasises the importance of the heritage language, Bengali, in her extended family. She suggests that Bengali "helps Haleema discover who she is and where she belongs". She is very clear about the importance of both languages for different aspects of her life:

Of course you need English. English you know, should be...because you are studying in English, you need that language, I believe in preserving your own language as well. That's your identity, and I believe this strongly that that's your identity, and if you lose your language, then I feel you have lost a big part of your identity.

Clearly, both Rehana and Meena consider the fact that they were brought up in the British education system, and so have British as well as South Asian heritages, to have strongly influenced the way they feel about themselves. This duality contributes to the belief both hold that they should go beyond traditional ideas and particular lives that are part of being members of South Asian immigrant communities. Although they respect their parents, they look for different lives for themselves. They see that having educational opportunities, qualifications and different jobs are ways to achieve this. But they both see themselves as firmly rooted in their heritage cultures. Meena's story, in particular, indicates the reaffirmation of South Asian identity in one single parent who, on the face of it, has adopted some very non-traditional behaviour, including divorce, returning to education as an adult, and living away from the family group. She describes her identity in this way:

01 "I feel I'm in a position where I can pick and choose, yeah, because
both identities are so important to me, and it's in me, so I don't know
which part I am taking and which identity I am now, because you don't
think about these things but...umm...because I've been brought
05 up here, not born, but brought up here, and there are lots
of...uh...Western women, I mean because of Western influences, that
have an impact on how I see things and how I view things. I think it's
very positive to be a part of both cultures. Yeah, it gives you broader
understanding about life. It's just you are more flexible then to...how
10 you see things in life, your outlook in life is broader and so...(small
section deleted)...
...it's very important to me and...I want to keep both identities, I want
to keep it and because I have that flexibility to choose and, you know,
see things...better perspectives, wider perspectives.

In the ways they recognise and value duality, such views clearly resonate with the socio-cognitive models of language and learning mentioned earlier. Meena's strongly positive attitude towards her experiences of living in two cultures (lines 07-09) and her determination to maintain the perspectives they offer contribute to a model of diversity as synergy, with the possibility of creating new ways of thinking and acting which go beyond those encompassed by the separate aspects of her experience. This has important implications for education at both policy and classroom levels. In their everyday lives within their families, the children are learning distinctive South Asian and Muslim ways of viewing and doing things as well as experiencing, through TV and other means, what it means to be a child in "English" culture. These experiences contribute to their constructions of who they are and are inevitably brought with them into their classrooms. Recognising and respecting this is very important for promoting diversity in educational contexts and will influence the quality of their engagement with learning. Like all children, pupils from South Asian heritage backgrounds will develop self-confidence as learners if they recognise themselves in the content and processes of their mainstream classrooms.

As well as revealing the importance of language, culture and identity and their implications for education, from the interviews and observations of Meena's and Rehana's families, it became clear to the researcher, through visiting the city where they live, that the learning process for South Asian heritage children does not end at the close of the school day. They are expected to access various additional learning opportunities, including learning their heritage languages and religion in the community schools, at the mosque and from their parents. As already mentioned, such learning experiences can be rich and positive, with the potential to benefit children's learning and achievement in mainstream schools. For example, Rehana observed that being educated in Punjabi by her mother helped her cognitive development and enabled her to learn more things than if she had been monolingual. But, as she suggests in her words at the beginning of this article, such ideas would currently be strange and difficult to most mainstream primary teachers.

CONCLUSION: WAYS FORWARD FOR PROMOTING DIVERSITY IN FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Although, as we have established, the South Asian parents and families in the study have positive attitudes towards the education of their children, in reality it is not always easy for them to become actively involved in daily interactions with their schools. And the barriers, often, are not easy to overcome. There is a long tradition of ethnographic research which reveals the dissonances between home and school for many children from "different" backgrounds (for example, Cazden *et al.*, 1972; Heath, 1983; Nieto, 1999; Philips, 1983). The ways in which they can impair effective home-school communication and their negative effects on children's achievements in school are made clear in these studies.

But there is nothing inevitable about this – nothing which cannot be changed. Cultural psychologists such as Cole (1985, 1996) recognise the ways in which teaching and learning processes are cultural conversations, negotiations influenced by the personal and social histories of both teachers and learners. What they bring to the classroom as aspects of their identities is, in many ways, just as important a factor for

success as what is transacted within its four walls. Cummins (2001) leaves us in no doubt as to the potential transformative power of negotiations between teachers and learners:

When powerful relationships are established between teachers and students, these relationships frequently can transcend the economic and social disadvantages that afflict communities and schools alike in inner city and rural areas (pp. 1–2).

He shows the ways in which classroom interactions always reproduce and are mediated by the hierarchical relationships which exist in the wider society. He goes on to argue that it is only when the “deep structure of relationships between educators and culturally diverse students” become oriented towards “empowerment” rather than reproducing the ‘coercive relations of power operating in the wider society’ that the culture of the classroom can be transformed, and genuine equality of opportunity can become a possibility (p. 136). One of the dimensions identified by Cummins as significant in genuinely transformative teaching and learning is the incorporation of cultural and language diversity into the processes (2001, p. 137). But, mainstream schools and classrooms in England remain very much “monolingualising” spaces (Heller 1995: 374). Like Rehana and Meena and their mothers Salema and Nandine, there are many ethnic minority families in England who are strongly motivated to help their children in school, but they hesitate to enter the monolingual, monocultural environment of the school and engage in conversations with their children’s teachers, who mostly come from social and cultural backgrounds which they do not share. The fact that they may not be confident in speaking English, and about their own educational, social and cultural backgrounds, can be barriers they need to overcome. Sometimes, however, the barriers are not so overt; they are more subtle and cannot be overcome by the families alone.

In this article, we have explored the history of parental involvement in their children’s learning in English primary schools and the issues that surround the involvement of families from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. We have shown the complexity of these issues, related to the experiences of multilingual, multicultural families within the wider British society, and how these experiences are often hidden from the children’s teachers and not reflected in educational policy. As we have indicated, small-scale, qualitative research in England is beginning to show that ethnic minority parents have the potential to help their children’s learning in many ways, both at home and at school, using the languages and skills they already possess. The experience and knowledge of the families could be used effectively and could provide considerable advantages for children’s learning in school, for example in the ways that Ma’s work (2008), mentioned earlier, suggests.

All families have power, and their experience and knowledge can play an important role in the learning processes of their children and in helping teachers to access community funds of knowledge. When families realise this, they may become more confident, and see their teachers, in Crozier’s (2000) terms, as “partners” rather than “protagonists”. Teachers, also, need to recognise the value of genuine partnership. Gussin Paley’s *White teacher* (1979), a little-known text in England, has an important message about the need for genuine dialogues between teachers and the families of the children they teach, based on teachers’ awareness of their own identities, cultures

and personal viewpoints and how these influence their relationships with their pupils. But educational policy in England must change to accommodate these dialogues, moving away from the current, rigid, top-down model of policy formation which currently prevails in England to an approach which can, as Ainscow *et al.* (2007), “provid[e] a supportive framework for schools and teachers as they attempt to make sense of diversity in their own contexts” (p. 8) argue. And research which reveals the rich and diverse ways in which families support children's learning within their communities needs to continue to grow and to be allowed to influence policy and practice.

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