

Marie Metcalfe's Development Work
**Raising awareness of language and
cultural diversity**
at the Sacred Heart Primary School, Battersea, London

Marie was a member of a 'Learning Circle' sponsored by the National Union of Teachers in the UK. The programme was facilitated and accredited by the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. The group met at the NUT's London headquarters to support teachers from a wide range of schools in taking the initiative and developing their capacity to lead development projects.

Marie works in a large primary school in Battersea, London. Over half of the pupils have English as an additional language, with twenty nine different languages being spoken by the school population. Marie was concerned that there was very little contact between the school and the families from these different ethnic groups and thought that a focus on the children's first languages might help with the learning of English and literacy skills in general. It seemed to Marie that raising awareness of the different languages spoken by pupils would help to affirm and celebrate the children's cultural background and promote their self-esteem. Marie was also keen to reach out to the different language communities in the school and encourage their participation in school life.

Marie investigated how other schools had developed innovative ways of celebrating diversity. She 'googled' and found the 'Language of the Month' project which was developed at Newbury Park Primary School in Redbridge. This project seemed ready made for Marie's purposes and she could see how the idea could be adapted for use in her own school.

A different language was chosen each month and celebrated through school assemblies and attractive displays. In assemblies, speakers of the chosen language presented some words and images. The children's families were invited to come to the school to contribute to a display about their language and culture. A letter was also sent home to parents asking them to translate some key words for display purposes. Both parents and staff were very positive about this project. Parents' comments included:

My son got really interested in our language and wanted me to get some books on it.

My son has been teaching me to say hello in Spanish.

Teachers acknowledged the positive effect of ‘Language of the Month’ on children’s sense of pride in their cultural heritage and their enhanced sense of agency through becoming ‘language experts’.

It has made them feel really proud of their language. They are really keen to show off.

They all want a turn at being ‘Language of the Month’ experts.

This project continued to grow and Marie drew up a plan to respond to ‘Shine Week’ – a national festival celebrating the talents of all young people. This involved organising a range of arts projects linked to the various communities in the school. Parents would lead these projects. Marie also ran a film club to link with the language of the month, showing films in different languages after school. The children are really excited when the film is in their language and display a sense of pride in their language. They also write reviews of the films in their own language.

Building on the success of the ‘Language of the Month’ initiative, Marie held a series of language-based coffee mornings as a way of encouraging parents to meet one another and to become more involved with the school. Teaching Assistants from each of the main language groups within the school helped to support both this initiative and parents’ growing involvement with school activities. Parents have begun to come into school to support cooking lessons for example and to read stories to children in their home language.

The school has a growing number of Amharic and Tigrinya speakers. Through links with the local refugee project, mums became more involved in school life and children are now taking a more active role in the local community.

Following this project, Marie moved on to link the children’s interest in language with the PSHE¹ curriculum, using it to raise discussions around manners. Teachers are also encouraging speaking and

¹ PSHE – Personal, Social & Health Education

listening skills, supporting the children in speaking in longer, grammatically correct and coherent sentences.

Marie found her involvement in the London Learning Circle to be invigorating. Despite the participants' wide range of backgrounds, their commonality of purpose, to improve their own practice and the education of children in their care, bound them together. Marie is very pleased that her development work is having a wide impact. She wrote this in her portfolio:

It has been more successfully taken up by some teachers than others but with the continued support of the senior management team it is being encouraged and all staff have adopted the use of a (languages) display board and the morning greeting (in the language of the month).

At the completion of this project Marie planned to continue her development work by networking with other local schools. She remains excited by the possibilities she has unleashed.

References

- Roberts, C. (2005) English as an additional language www.tes.co.uk/section/story (date of access 22/02/08).
- Sneddon, R. (2000) Language and literacy: Children's experiences in a multicultural environment. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 3(4), 265-282.