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# Magda and Albana: Learning to Read with Dual Language Books

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This paper explores the ways in which dual language books are used in England to support bilingual pupils in school. While pupils in many schools speak a wide range of languages at home, these hardly feature in the curriculum. In the context of a project in which an education authority provided dual language books to primary schools, the paper describes how two women used Albanian/English story books to teach their six-year-old daughters to read in Albanian. The study reports on how the mothers and their children used both texts to transfer skills from one language to another, to negotiate meaning in both languages and to compare reading strategies. At the end of the school year the girls were reading in English with the best in their class, were developing fluency in Albanian and using it more in the home. Their mothers had become closely involved in their daughters' schooling and reported improvements in their own English literacy skills. The teacher's role was crucial: by providing support and resources to parents she enabled them to help their children become additive bilinguals in a situation in which they were beginning to lose the active use of their first language.

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## Introduction

'It is not so difficult for me to explain that, but I want to find the best way for her to understand me, you know. And I think it's more easy for her in English, but it is better to explain it in Albanian, because that is why we are working. I work with both languages to make it easier for her', Albana's mother adds, 'but I am also learning English this way, because I do not have so much opportunity to talk English.'

Albana is six years old, speaks Albanian and English and attends a primary school in an outer London borough. She is reading *Not Again Red Riding Hood* (Clynes & Daykin, 2003) in Albanian and asking her mother about the meaning of a word.

Lere, also keen to develop her own English skills, is anxious that her daughter should not forget the language of the home. Like many speakers of a minority language, Albana has become increasingly dominant in English since she started school.

While London is the most multilingual city in the world, with over 300 languages spoken (Baker & Evesley, 2000), schools remain profoundly ambivalent about promoting the bilingualism of their pupils. The current national

curriculum (DfEE, 2000) is resolutely monocultural and makes only a passing mention of bilingualism. More recent documents make positive references to bilingual learners as part of an agenda for raising the achievement of pupils from minority ethnic communities: a policy document (DfES, 2003) and studies from OfSTED (the body responsible for the inspection of schools in England) include examples of the beneficial impact on achievement of using pupils' first languages in the classroom (OfSTED, 2005). The National Languages Strategy (DfES, 2002) provides an entitlement for all pupils in upper primary classrooms to learn languages; any language may be taught, at the discretion of the school, taking into account parental preference, linguistic context and teacher availability.

However, it is very noticeable to anyone visiting classrooms in England, even in very multicultural schools, that it is rare to hear pupils speak any language other than English in class. In spite of what may be written in school language policies about valuing the languages of the home, the most common practice in this respect is restricted to multilingual welcome signs, a few dual language books in the library and children responding to the register with greetings in several languages. Professional development materials to improve the attainment of bilingual pupils, published recently, refer to research findings about the benefits of bilingualism. They recommend the use of first languages in the classroom and the purchase of dual language books as well as a closer engagement with families and communities (DfES, 2006). However, these materials have yet to make an impact in the classroom. At the present time, where languages are studied in class time, the main European languages, and primarily French, are still by far the most frequently taught and many schools are unaware that they can offer teaching in community languages.

While at the level of policy, documents and curricula are still overwhelmingly monocultural, a substantial body of research is developing in the areas of bilingualism, identity and multilingual literacies. At school and at classroom level, individual teachers have been creating resources to encourage the use of community languages in primary schools for some considerable time. This study describes two girls learning to read with their mothers in their home language using dual language books provided by their teacher.

## Dual Language Books: The Debate

Different terms have been used at different times to differentiate languages spoken by linguistic minorities in the UK from the 'foreign languages', generally major European languages, traditionally taught in school. Terms used have included mother tongue, first language, home language and heritage language. None of these terms can convey the full complexity of the experience of bilingual children living in the UK. In this paper, the term *community language* is used except when discussing Albana and Magda's use of Albanian, in which case the term *home language* is preferred, as this seems the most appropriate to their particular situation.

Books published in community languages and English have been in use in some multilingual schools in England since the 1980s. As teachers became familiar with the many languages spoken in their schools and became aware of

the importance of supporting pupils' first languages, many started making their own dual language books, working with bilingual colleagues and involving parents through book-writing workshops of various kinds. Such workshops were found to present valuable opportunities for building partnerships with parents focused around literacy practices (Clover & Gilbert, 1981). Professionally published books were gradually developed by the Language Services of some Local Education Authorities (LEAs), special projects and commercial publishers. In the 1970s and 1980s the Reading Materials for Minority Groups Project developed stories from several cultures represented in London schools, working collaboratively with parents, teachers, storytellers and artists (Ingham, 1986). The books were produced to a high standard and are still very popular with teachers although many are now out of print. Currently, commercially published dual language books are available in over 40 languages, with many texts also available on CDs. The books published in this format are mostly folk tales, children's classics, popular picture books, picture dictionaries, with some non-fiction works, reference works and curriculum-related material. In addition to published books, some LEAs make available bilingual books and other multilingual resources developed by teachers on their website.

In 1986, in a report on a small observational study carried out by community language teachers deployed in London schools, Ming Tsow commented that 'there is very little on reading in two languages simultaneously or on the use of dual language text' (1986: 13). While noting that the two languages in the book that featured in her study were used to good effect by children developing biliteracy, Ming Tsow raised the issue of the relationship between the language variety spoken in the home and the standard variety of the community language used in the book. Children were in effect working with three languages, for example, Sylheti speakers learning to read in standard Bengali as well as English and Cypriot Greek speakers learning standard Greek and English. Ming Tsow concluded her brief study with the comment that 'the usefulness of dual language text depends very much on how it is used by the teacher, the children's familiarity with the content and their motivation' (p. 17) and the wish that teachers would research such issues further in their classrooms.

Twenty years on, while researchers have started exploring the simultaneous acquisition of literacy in different languages in the school, the home and the community, with the exception of a study by Robertson (2004) which describes the use of a dual language book to teach Urdu in a community class, there is still little research into the way in which dual language books are actually used in the UK. The most comprehensive discussion of the nature and use of such books in the English education system since the early 1980s can be found in a book which provides guidance for teachers on the use of resources to encourage languages other than English in the classroom (The Multilingual Resources for Teachers Project, 1995). This publication had a significant impact on raising the standard of commercially produced dual language literature.

Teachers consulted in the 1995 study found that newcomers who were literate in their first language used the books to support their understanding of the English text and to help them develop new vocabulary. This is still one of the main ways in which these texts are deployed in the classroom and for this reason the texts used are most likely to be traditional European stories translated into

community languages. The teachers also noted that, whereas books in a single language could only be used by readers of that language, dual language books were accessible to a much wider range of pupils. Teachers felt most comfortable when using such books to raise language awareness for all children (Edwards, 1998). On the same issue Conteh commented that, as not all teachers are confident about using dual language texts, 'their potential as teaching resources for all children may have never been fully realised' (2003: 151).

Teachers who use dual language books have particularly welcomed those whose content reflects children's cultural identities and literary heritage as well as their language knowledge. Blackledge comments that, 'The best dual language text books are often written from the perspective of the home culture and translated into English, rather than vice-versa, making them more culturally relevant . . .' (2000: 86) and notes that such texts will help children to feel that their personal experience and identity is recognised and valued.

Some teachers have expressed concerns that children who are dominant in English will only read the easier text in English and not focus on the other language (The Multilingual Resources for Teachers Project, 1995) and Gravelle (1996) has also suggested that valuing and teaching community languages is better achieved by providing school libraries with a range of books in these languages. However, Gravelle (2000) has also found, from her own work in the classroom, that dual language books can act as a powerful stimulus for pupils to create their own bilingual books. In her seminal work on the early development of biliteracy, Kenner strongly recommends that classrooms be resourced in a wide range of multilingual materials, although her preference is for these materials to reflect those found in a bilingual home, dual language books being 'based on the school story book model' (2000: 17). The professional development materials referred to above provide little guidance for their use.

The popularity of dual language books with parents of bilingual children and their role as 'a bridge between home and school' (The Multilingual Resources for Teachers Project, 1995: 54) has been noted in a number of studies. A more recent study of the literacy practices of Gujarati and Urdu speaking families in London (Sneddon, 2000) found that parents appreciated the fact that teachers sent Gujarati/English books home because they had great difficulty in finding suitable reading material for their children in Gujarati. In a related study, Sneddon and Patel (2003) found evidence, from children's re-telling of stories encountered in Gujarati and English dual language texts, of complex negotiations of meaning across both languages. However, that study did not provide direct evidence of exactly how the parallel texts in the dual language books had been used.

The following section considers some of the rich and complex areas of investigation that bear on the simultaneous study of literacy in community languages and English.

## **Multilingualism, Identity, Literacy and Achievement**

### **The Cummins framework**

The theoretical framework most commonly referred to by researchers and teacher educators in the UK in the context of bilingualism and the education of

pupils learning English as an additional language is the one originally developed by Cummins throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Cummins, 1984). Relationships of power, language status and social justice are central to Cummins' framework as they affect educational opportunities and achievement, personal identity and the involvement of families from minority ethnic communities in their children's learning (Cummins, 2000).

One of the key elements of the model is the common underlying proficiency which has introduced many teachers to the concept that the general cognitive skills that underpin language use operate from a common central function. Of particular relevance to the present study is the considerable evidence that the ability to make sense of print transfers readily even when scripts are different (Cummins, 1984, 1991; Cummins *et al.*, 1984). Whether at the level of concepts about print, phonological awareness or reading comprehension, the extent and ease of transfer depends on how closely the languages are related, whether they share a script, whether the scripts operate on similar or different principles (for example alphabetic and logographic). Outcomes of learning to read in two languages can be substantially different with different pairs of languages (Bialystok, 2001).

Of particular relevance to this study is Cummins' distinction between communicative and academic language (Cummins, 2000). Like many young children, Magda and Albana learned everyday English rapidly. Teachers in England receive little preparation and report a lack of confidence in teaching bilingual pupils (TDA, 2005). When faced with young children's early facility they have often been led to think that their pupils are fluent English speakers and have failed to realise the need to support the development of academic language.

Cummins (1986) considered the factors that can empower students from minority communities. Educational success within a generally submersive environment is most likely to be achieved where the following issues are addressed:

- incorporating the language and culture of the community in the school;
- involving families and the community in the education of their children;
- interactive and reciprocal teaching style;
- fair assessment.

Recent and current research into multilingual literacies, identity and parent partnership with schools provides some evidence into how the first two elements of this model could be implemented in schools.

### **Multilingual literacies**

Throughout the 1990s research interest grew into the use new minority communities made of their languages, the role these played in defining personal identity and how this related to the uses they made of literacy in a range of domains and settings. Research into multilingual literacies developed from The New Literacy Studies, which challenged the idea of 'autonomous' literacy as a unified concept, applied universally to different settings and circumstances (Street, 1984, 2000). Researchers using ethnographic procedures explored literacy events and literacy practices in multilingual social settings with the aim to 'focus attention on the multiple ways people draw on to combine the codes in

their communicative repertoires to make meaning as they negotiate and display cultural identities and social relationships' (Hornberger, 2000: 357).

The 'hidden' language and literacy experiences and practices of young bilingual children in their homes, in complementary classes of various kinds, in their communities, with their parents, siblings, grandparents and peers have been explored (Blackledge, 2000; Conteh, 2003; Gregory *et al.*, 2004; Kenner, 2004; Robertson, 2006; Sneddon, 2000). These studies revealed children who not only coped, but thrived, on learning literacy in two, three and sometimes four languages or language varieties, often with different scripts, directionality, writing conventions and teaching methods.

The concept of syncretic literacy was developed by Gregory *et al.* (2004) to describe these children who were not only making sense of the different values and methodologies they encountered as they learned different literacies simultaneously, but were also creating new forms out of their experiences and actively shaping their identities as learners. The studies describe children comparing and contrasting their learning (Kenner, Robertson), playing school (Gregory), teaching each other (Kenner), negotiating meaning from a text in several languages (Creese *et al.*, 2006; Datta, 2001; Robertson, 2004; Sneddon & Patel, 2003), blending and creating new strategies and demonstrating a wealth of metalinguistic knowledge. Gregory *et al.* (2004) highlight the important role of family and community members acting as mediators of this process.

### Language and identity

Ethnographic studies have illustrated how personal identities change and are re-invented over time. The choice of language and script for education and literacy practices in any particular community reflect changing circumstances and attitudes and the multiplicity and complexity of available options (Saxena, 1994).

The concept of identities as social constructions that can be imposed, assumed or negotiated is developed by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) in a model that takes account of power differentials between linguistic majorities and minorities in officially monolingual societies. Multidimensional identities are embedded in local and global relations of power and can be created and recreated imaginatively through symbolic links and associations and given coherence and developed through personal narratives.

Creese *et al.* (2006) have described how complementary schools can encourage the development of heritage and learner identities and how multicultural identities develop through the interaction of language and culture. In the present study, two young girls find themselves the only speakers of Albanian in a large multicultural school in which English is the language of the curriculum, the classroom and the playground. Their many bilingual peers speak mainly locally well-established languages from the Asian subcontinent and rarely use them in school. The girls' identities as learners had focused entirely on their development of English literacy. They were gradually losing the active use of Albanian in the home until their class teacher created a space in the classroom in which multicultural identities could be shared and in which they could choose to develop their identity as Albanian speakers and readers.

### **Home-school partnerships**

The development of partnerships with parents is at the centre of the project described in this study. As research from the 1980s onwards demonstrated the important role that parents play in supporting children's learning to read (Schofield *et al.*, 1982), primary schools developed schemes to encourage parents to read with their children (Wolfendale & Topping, 1996). While this movement has been broadly successful in raising children's reading attainment, it has been criticised for being a one-way process (Gregory & Williams, 2000). In the case of multilingual children, bringing the powerful language of the school into the home has the potential for devaluing the literacy practices already there. It is much rarer for schools to enquire into home literacy practices. Most of the researchers mentioned above have expressed concern about the lack of knowledge and awareness that schools have about the literacy experiences of bilingual children (Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000: 10). With specific reference to sending materials home in community languages, Blackledge (2000) and Harris (1997) are also concerned that schools may not have the detailed knowledge of pupils' language backgrounds to deploy this strategy effectively and respond to parents' needs and wishes.

The concept of 'funds of knowledge' developed by Moll (Gonzalez *et al.*, 1993) with teachers working with Mexican American children in Tucson, Arizona, enabled them to enquire into the knowledge and expertise of parents and to incorporate these into their curriculum. By developing her knowledge of the background of her pupils and by building partnerships with their parents and the wider community, the teacher in the present study was using strategies recommended for empowering pupils (Cummins, 1986; Faltis, 1995; Sneddon, 1997).

The following data describe how dual language books were used by mothers to teach their daughters Albanian, the language of the home.

## **Magda and Albana Becoming Bilingual**

### **The school context**

Navneet Padda is a Punjabi and English speaking teacher in a Year 1 class in an outer London borough. She values her bilingualism and understands the importance of biliteracy. She also values the bilingualism of the 25 children she teaches (in a class of 30 children) who speak nine languages between them. With the support of a special project from her local authority (EMAT, 2007) she has equipped her class with dual language books in Bengali, Urdu, Gujarati, Albanian, Hindi, Punjabi and French. At a meeting with parents she talked to individual families about using the books to encourage the development of the children's bilingualism, offered verbal advice on how to use them as well as a translated leaflet. She lent the children books and CDs and talked to them in class about the stories when they returned the books. She regularly uses multilingual resources as part of her literacy teaching. Navneet noted her two Albanian speakers' enthusiasm for reading and, apart from sending home books in Albanian and in English, she made sure that Magda and Albana had additional support in learning to read in English.



### Language use in family and community

Magda and Albana were born in London to recently arrived Albanian parents. They are six years old. Their mothers, Miranda and Lere, have agreed to talk about their daughters' developing biliteracy and how this has been achieved. Neither Miranda nor Lere have family in London and they feel rather cut off from the Albanian community and the activities that are organised far away in central London. Magda and Albana talked with great enthusiasm about an Albanian concert they had attended in a London park, but this was a rare event.

As the children drew diagrams of what language they spoke to whom in the family, their mothers explained: Miranda and her husband speak almost entirely Albanian in the home among themselves and to their two children. Magda uses a little English to her father, half English and half Albanian to her mother, English to her brother, and wholly Albanian to her grandparents who were on a visit to London at the time of the study. Magda learnt English when she started at nursery school. She remembers just talking 'a bit' when she started; 'I didn't speak really well English', but 'people were helpful.' She does not remember this as a difficult time. Her mother confirms that she learned English very quickly. Miranda has been keen to maintain the family language and talks to her children about life in Albania. However, she claims to have little memory of traditional stories and has only one book in Albanian in the house.

Albana explains that she speaks both English and Albanian to her mother and father and that they both respond in the same way. However, her mother Lere confirms that she and her husband speak entirely in Albanian to each other. Albana tells us that her younger brother, aged four-and-half will speak only English although he understands Albanian perfectly. Like Magda, Albana learned English very rapidly when she started to attend playgroup and had a speaking part as Mary in the nativity play. From then on, she tended to speak mainly English at home. Lere commented that, although she was keen to maintain Albana's Albanian, she was also keen to develop her own English and Albana was often the only person she had to talk to.

Lere was enthusiastic about the class teacher's support for learning languages. Like Miranda, she has only one book in Albanian at home (poems by a Kosovan writer) and particularly appreciates the availability of the dual language books that are sent home from school. She is very interested, and pleased, to find that in the six months since she started reading in Albanian, Albana is using the language much more for communication in the home, is talking to her grandmother in Albanian and, says Lere, 'she has learned words in Albanian that I don't know!'

Lere and Miranda report that the girls are very keen to read and very insistent that their busy mothers find time for reading in both languages every day. Both intend to buy children's books for their daughters when they visit Albania in the coming school holidays. Both women agreed to be observed and recorded reading with their daughters on four occasions in a quiet side room at the girls' school, following the same procedures that they use in the home.

### Magda and Albana reading: Magda

On the first occasion the book Magda has brought with her is *The Swirling Hijab* (Robert, 2002) which she has read once before with her mother at home.

The book is beautifully illustrated; it has text in Albanian, with English below, on most pages. It is obvious that Magda is used to reading with her mother and enjoys it. She looks a little shy but confident. When invited to test out the microphone by giving the title of the book she is going to read, she gives her name and decodes the title in Albanian. Neither word in the title, *Perçja Valëzuese*, is familiar to her, but she decodes accurately, with a self-correction on the word *Perçja*.

Magda launches straight into reading, working out the sounds, occasionally glancing towards her mother, who responds with a suggestion in a whisper. She works out the phonics slowly and blends the sounds. Long words are a bit of a challenge and her mother occasionally corrects pronunciation and syllable stress. It is clear from the way she is reading that she is encountering many unfamiliar words. Interestingly, she is completely intent on the Albanian text and does not even glance at the English.

She does not pause to ask for explanations until she comes to the word *luftëtare* (p. 9). Her mother attempts to explain the word in English and is struggling to find the right translation. She suggests 'fighter' and, interestingly, she does not either refer to the English text. Magda spots the right word, 'warrior', her first reference to the paragraph in English on the page.

Magda is less keen to explain what the story is about; she points to the illustrations and mentions the hijab and the word *perçja* and explains that *është* is black. She does not actually talk about the story, but indicates that she really likes the illustrations, and particularly the one where the hijab is used as a Bedouin tent.

After her friend Albana has read, Magda asks to read another, much more demanding text, but one that she is clearly familiar with. It is a traditional story in Albanian from a book which had been made for the school as part of a special project. Her mother starts reading and Magda follows on. She is working hard to decode and is anxious to demonstrate her skills. She is getting some support from her mother in decoding long words. She explains, 'The story is about when he was a strong man and he (asks Miranda) . . . ' Miranda struggles to explain in English. She tells us that the hero was shot and that he had . . . Magda finds the word 'wound' in the English version and Miranda confirms that he had nine wounds.

On her second reading session, Magda brings *Handa's Hen* (Brown, 2002), another beautifully illustrated book with parallel text in Albanian and English. This is a completely new text for her. She decodes slowly and carefully. Miranda supports her when she trips. Miranda asks Magda for the meaning of key words in Albanian: *Gjyshja* (Grandma), *shoqen* (friend), *më ndihmo* (help me), and Magda readily translates with reference to the English text. Miranda and Magda then discuss the meaning of *rreth kotecit* (hunt around); while both are having a little difficulty with it, they agree that it means 'looking for something'. Miranda attempts a wider definition, but finds her English resources fail her at this point. She then asks, 'do you understand the story, Magda?' 'Not too much', admits Magda and they agree that she needs to read it again.

In her third session Magda revisits *Handa's Hen*, reading each page in Albanian first and then in English. This time she is reading confidently and with expression in both languages. As before, Miranda intervenes to help with the pronunciation

of polysyllabic words in Albanian, such as *laramanë* (p. 4). Magda's hesitations and mispronunciations indicate that some English words are also unfamiliar: she pronounces 'stripy' as 'strippy' (p. 4). When she trips over 'peeped' (p. 5) and is asked what it means, she uses both the Albanian text and the illustration and then explains to me that it means 'see'. Later, on page 11, she makes use of the whole text on the page to explain to me that *gëlltitur*, which she mispronounces, means 'swallow', and then again on page 12, she refers to the English text to explain to her mother that *trishtuara* means 'feeling sad'.

By the fourth session Magda is gaining in confidence and reading more clearly for meaning than she was in her first recording, when she seemed more intent on the decoding of the text. The more she understands, the more she is likely to stop and ask her mother, in a whisper, for example, what *gargunjë të shndritshëm* means. Miranda whispers back 'it means shiny' and comments 'the words are very big in Albanian.' They then discuss the fact that the three related words in English on page 15, 'hurried and scurried and skipped' which produce a very traditional stylistic effect, are translated by one word only in Albanian, *kërcyer*. When she has finished reading in both languages, Magda retells part of the story in Albanian, using the pictures to remind herself. She is enjoying this, is much more confident than when asked to retell the Hijab story and is pleased with her performance.

### Magda and Albana reading: Albana

Albana's first book is *Handa's Hen*, which she has also read once at home with her mother. Her mother offers her the choice of reading in either language and Albana chooses Albanian. As she starts to read it is immediately apparent that she is a very confident reader. She reads fluently and needs little intervention from her mother, who merely corrects her positioning of the stress on the word *flutura* (p. 3). The text is full of unfamiliar names of animals and Albana occasionally hesitates and self-corrects. Her mother is following her reading closely and praises her for tackling these words. She intervenes very occasionally when Albana is sounding out unknown words. *Në barin e gjatë që valëzonte* (crickets in the long waving grass) (p. 7), and *gargunjë të shndritshëm* (shiny starlings) (p. 12) provide a challenge for Albana, but she reads on. Like Magda in her first reading, she appears to completely ignore the English text. She seems very intent on reading fluently and, as she reads, more expression comes in to her voice and she enjoys making the chicks' cheeping noises at the end of the story.

Albana is keen to continue reading and switches to the English text. She reads quickly and fluently. She slows a little when she comes to 'peeped behind some clay pots': the word 'peep' is as unfamiliar to her as it was to Magda and she seems to be unsure of the meaning of 'clay'. Albana's fluency in reading reveals her control over intonation in both languages. She keeps both languages separate, switching easily from one to the other. Her teacher, who was listening to her reading, noted that she pronounced the name Handa differently when reading in Albanian and in English.

On her second visit Albana comes bouncing into the room with the book *Not Again Red Riding Hood* (Clynes & Daykin, 2003) under her arm and wants to start reading at once. She has read the book at home with her mother. As before, she

is reading fluently and confidently with minor corrections, *sotto voce*, from her mother. This time she chooses to read the English text after the Albanian, page by page.

In response to a question, Albana asks her mother what *akoma* means. Lere explains this as meaning 'yet' in English, but interestingly (and like Miranda explaining the word *luftëtare*), neither Albana nor her mother refers to the English text, which translated the word as 'still'. Albana also asks about *hynte* and Lere explains that it means to 'get in', as in going into the forest. In the reading of this book, Lere is supporting Albana in a more teacherly role and Albana seems quite comfortable with this. Lere explains that she sometimes asks Albana to translate what she is reading. Albana can manage short sentences, she says, but not long ones. Albana asks her mother to break these down for her to help her understand what she is reading. Lere notes that this procedure does not always help if there are a lot of new words which are not familiar to Albana, either in Albanian or in English.

Given that both texts were available on the page, it was interesting that Lere and Albana would use translation as a strategy, working on their own resources, occasionally noting how their chosen word differed from the one in the text. Lere commented that this process really supported her in learning English, although she sometimes found this challenging. Lere demonstrated her home teaching strategy by asking Albana to translate a short sentence 'Mummy counted 10 . . .'. They talked about the cookies and how the text meant that the cookies have just been cooked at that moment and are very nice and hot. Reading the next sentence closely Lere asked Albana to explain in English 'giving Mummy a hug' and they discussed how you describe a hug; Lere tested her English vocabulary: tight, to squeeze?

Like Magda, in her final session Albana started to retell the story in her own words, but ended up having a major discussion with her mother about the finer points of meaning of individual words and phrases. Both mother and daughter seemed more anxious to get every detail right.

## Teaching and Learning Strategies

The literature on children developing multilingual literacies (Gregory *et al.*, 2004) describes them syncretising strategies from literacy practices in different settings. The girls in this study encountered literacy in Albanian almost exclusively in the form of the dual language book sent home from school. While they had received advice from the teacher, neither woman had actually observed reading lessons in class. In the course of the four recorded reading sessions there was much discussion about teaching strategies, some of which continued after the girls had returned to their class. The strategies the women developed for themselves emerged from these discussions and from observing the interaction between mothers and daughters.

Lere explains that when Albana starts reading a new book sent home from school, she starts with the Albanian text. She helps her as necessary and then Albana reads in English. If the text is particularly challenging, Lere will part read, part tell the story.

Miranda reports that Magda once asked her to read with more expression and is pleased that her daughter is so involved. It is clear that making the transition from decoding print to reading with expression is an issue and that both mothers are supporting their daughters with this, much in the same way that the teacher developed the girls' skills at reading with expression in English in class.

Both women, in the recorded sessions, demonstrate similar strategies: they follow their daughters' reading intently, offer a word when the child is stuck and will correct a mispronunciation, which is most likely to occur with a long word (like *flutura*). The issue is generally one of the correct placing of syllable stress which affects meaning. Generally, they let their daughters complete that first reading; then they follow a similar procedure in English. Both women praise their daughters regularly.

It is at the level of understanding that the bilingual strategies develop. Both women use questions to establish the girls' understanding. Lere explains how she uses translation, asking Albana for the English equivalent. It is very noticeable that in a number of instances this is offered without reference to the English text on the page. Lere breaks down the text to help Albana understand and translate and is also keen to offer explanations in Albanian although these are not always so readily understood by Albana. Lere behaves in a more 'teacherly' manner than Miranda, occasionally bombarding Albana with questions. This may be in response to the fact that, while Albana is more fluent and confident at decoding text than Magda, she finds understanding harder on a first reading.

When Magda reads *Handa's Hen* for the first time she is quite hesitant and trips on new words. After she has read in both languages, Miranda refers back to the Albanian text and asks if there are any words she does not know. Magda suggests *Gjyshja*, and Miranda confirms it means Grandma. Miranda then questions Magda's understanding of other words, like *shoqen* and *me ndihmo*, which Magda translates confidently as 'friend' and 'help me', as recorded above.

Both women commented on the challenge presented by the language of books which is different from what is used in everyday communication, both in Albanian and in English, but which offers them and their daughters an opportunity to learn new words. Such unfamiliar words are the subject of considerable discussion in both Albanian and English. Miranda explores *fluturojne* with Magda, how it relates to butterflies, how it means 'fluttering' and is similar to the English word and they both debate the meaning of '*rreth kotecit*' as described above. *Përvoje* (ordeal) is another word that provokes discussion as it is also unfamiliar to the women in either language. Second readings suggest that explanations are taken on board and new words remembered in both languages and that the girls are more confident and reading with expression. The high motivation of both mothers and daughters is much in evidence.

Magda does not remember learning to read English as being unduly difficult. She explains:

I talked a bit English when I started school. I didn't speak really well. People were helpful. When I was in playgroup and I learned numbers, letters and shapes. And then when I finished playgroup I went Nursery and then I learned a bit more. And we learned A, B, C. We were drawing

pictures and we were drawing shapes and we were counting up to 20 and 30. I didn't have books . . . I did have books, but I couldn't read them because I was little. I only could read them a bit. Then I went to R3, to Reception, and then we started learning a bit more and then we went Year 1.

She then described how her mother introduced her to the new symbols she needed to know to read Albanian, how she explained the different sounds represented by some of the letters and how she posted words on her fridge in magnetic letters to help her.

It is very apparent from listening to the girls read (and Albana is a more overtly confident reader at this stage than Magda) that, with help from their mothers, they have worked out how to blend sounds in Albanian from their knowledge of decoding English. Miranda and Lere have talked about their own difficulty in learning to read in English because of the great irregularity of many words. Albanian has a much more regular sound/symbol correspondence, and in that sense, is easier for the girls in the early stages. However, the women have also noted that many common words in English are short. Albanian presents the challenge of long words, with a complex structure, that are harder to decode, and especially to stress in the correct way.

Cummins' research mentioned earlier has indicated that reading skills transfer even when writing systems are substantially different. However, as Bialystok's (2001) experiments have shown, there is clearly a great advantage for biliteracy development if both languages, even if very distantly related like Albanian and English, use the same alphabet and have a broadly similar sound structure so that phonological knowledge can be transferred and adapted. A parallel study (forthcoming) in which mothers and children are reading texts in Urdu and English reveals the need for different strategies. In that study a mother used primers imported from Pakistan alongside dual language texts to support the learning of the Urdu script, and rhymes and jingles to help her daughter learn new sounds. Robertson's study of young children working with an Urdu/English text shows them comparing and contrasting at all levels of the reading process (Robertson, 2006).

Almost every page that the girls read in the course of this study introduced them to words they had never heard before in English, like *peep* or *clay*, or in Albanian, like *flutura* or *luftetare*, as well as many words never encountered in either language: clothes like hijabs, creatures like spoonbills, starlings or lizards. Lere mentioned reading the dual language version of *Beowulf* (Barkow, 2002) to Albana. She found the language literary and challenging. While she understood the words in Albanian, they were not words she would use in conversation and Albana would not have heard them spoken. However, the women and their daughters are enjoying the challenge: Miranda commented on how much learning to read had enriched Magda's vocabulary in Albanian and Lere reported Albana's much greater interest in using Albanian in the home.

The strategies used by the women, as well as the different sound values for letters and an enriched vocabulary in both languages, are teaching their children to negotiate meaning in two languages. While there was a tendency to keep the languages separate when reading, there were many instances, when the women

were helping their daughters understand the text, where explanations moved across both languages. Comparing and contrasting the languages at different levels as they read seemed to happen very naturally as a result of reading both together. This creative process, mediated by their mothers, as described in Gregory *et al.* (2004), is very likely to be a factor in moving the girls into the group of best readers in their class. And, as was frequently mentioned by the women, the learning was not just the children's: they were developing their own reading skills and widening their vocabulary in English through using the books sent home by the school. Both were planning to enrol in English courses in the next school year and Miranda had arranged to become a regular volunteer assistant in the school.

## Discussion

As Ming Tsow commented in 1986, it is how the books are used that is significant. In this study the dual language texts used by a well-informed teacher in close partnership with parents played an important role in developing the children's academic literacy skills in two languages, creating a space for them to explore their personal identities and encouraging their mothers to become more involved in the education of their daughters.

Magda and Albana had their first encounter with learning to read in a language they were just beginning to acquire, with no opportunity to learn in the language they knew best. Magda's mother did not have a repertoire of traditional tales to tell her daughter and neither of the women had books in Albanian to read to their children. No one at school could speak their language and they were at risk of being cut off from their Albanian heritage. In terms of Cummins' framework, both girls, but especially Albana, were becoming subtractive bilinguals, replacing their use of Albanian with English in the home. Like many young children, they learned conversational English rapidly and their accents in English are good, but learning the academic language of books presents quite a different challenge. It is likely that their teacher's awareness of the educational risks and her understanding of the value of biliteracy made a significant difference to the educational outcome for Magda and Albana.

The dual language books brought the languages of the home into the classroom to be discussed and shared. Using the books, the teacher created a space, within an overwhelmingly English environment, in which different identities could be explored and 'heritage' or 'multilingual' identities affirmed (Creese *et al.*, 2006). The girls' performance in the sessions observed demonstrates that they have both embraced their identities as successful learners of English.

As the opportunity arose to learn to read in Albanian, the girls responded with enthusiasm, as did their mothers. The pride in an Albanian identity is very evident in the observed sessions. This is particularly noticeable in Albana's reading and in the fact that her use of Albanian in the home increased dramatically. The fluidity of identity, as described by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), is evident as the girls switch languages and learner identities while they read the two parallel texts on the page: Albana pronouncing the name 'Handa' very differently when it occurs in the English and in the Albanian text. Magda is less fluent at decoding text, but her confidence and understanding increased substantially

when she read a much more challenging text which was the only one available with an Albanian story content. Both girls developed the confidence to show off their Albanian identity in a display of reading in assembly to the whole school.

The complexity and flexibility of the concept of personal identity is exemplified in the different ways in which literacy materials can support negotiation and personal choice. From the point of view of developing their heritage identity the girls would benefit from reading Albanian books, with Albanian content and illustrations written to appeal to Albanian children. The dual language books available are written to a common English literacy norm and the texts are of the 'bedtime story' type. One story is set in the Middle East, another in Africa, a third is a sequel to a well-known European folk tale. While Blackledge (2000) and Gravelle (1996) have noted their concern about this issue, research in the 1980s suggested that books imported from the 'mother country' were not always the most suitable for teaching a community language to UK-born children as the culture they represented did not reflect their daily lives (Tansley, 1986).

In these situations sending home dual language texts that are also widely used in the classroom can help children to develop a deeper understanding of key texts and create a space where heritage and multicultural identities can be explored and shared. The benefit of this approach is that the teacher, in a very multilingual classroom, is able to talk knowledgeably to the children about the texts they are reading and encourage them to share their experiences.

A key aspect of the Cummins (1986) empowerment framework was the involvement of families and communities in the school. The teacher in the project was able to build on the excellent relationships she had developed with parents. She was aware of the pitfalls discussed by Blackledge (2000) and Harris (1997) and avoided them: she was knowledgeable about her children's languages, she had consulted with parents, texts had been carefully chosen and their use was monitored: there was no question of inappropriate materials being sent home. Although the project did not involve bringing family literacy practices into the classroom, the teacher made active use of the families' funds of knowledge with respect to language and literacy to encourage and support the learning of home languages. Parents were actively recruited and involved in reading with their children and invited to participate in the work of the classroom.

It is clear from meeting the mothers and their daughters that their motivation to retain Albanian and to become biliterate was high, but, as they themselves reported, due to their lack of access to an Albanian community, without the encouragement and advice of the teacher and the resources provided by the LEA, they would not have been able to achieve this.

## **Conclusion**

There is a great need for both teachers in training and experienced teachers to have access to research and much greater opportunities for the kind of enquiry and action that has been promoted in this project. Research of this nature is highly motivating for teachers. With appropriate encouragement and dissemination, high quality practice at school and classroom level could eventually influence the national curriculum, the preparation and continuing development of teachers and, eventually, the achievement of all children.



The research that informed this study, while it emphasises the great variety of experiences, knowledge and skills that bilingual children and their families have, the 'many pathways to literacy', and many ways of developing and negotiating identities, all point to the benefit to bilingual children of families, communities and schools working in close partnership to empower children to succeed. The literature points clearly to the benefits of bilingual education and biliteracy, to the many ways in which multilingual literacies can be valued and developed in schools, to the links that can be made with complementary schools (Robertson, 2007).

Dual language texts have proved to be a valuable tool in the present project. Through facilitating a strong engagement with the language of books in both Albanian and English it has the potential of making a lasting impact on the educational opportunities of the children and families involved.

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