

## Paying lip-service to diversity



Bilingual education presents a major conundrum in contemporary diverse societies: on the one hand, bilingualism and diversity more generally are applauded in many educational discourses and widely seen as a good thing; on the other hand, schooling is all about mainstreaming, and bilingual children are more likely to lose their home language at school than extend it.

This schizophrenic state is produced by the discrepancy between the desire to support diversity and the trend towards an ever-increasing focus on standardized assessment, year-group performance targets and league tables. Contemporary educational policies often celebrate diversity and may well support bilingual learning. However, standardized assessment, year-group performance targets and league tables undermine diversity and bilingual learning and can be highly damaging to the academic achievement of minority students.

[The British Statutory Framework for learning in the early years](#) offers a case in point. The Statutory Framework is mandatory for all British education providers catering to children up to the age of five. In its Introduction, the Statutory Framework espouses four foundational principles, three of which highlight the diversity of children: 'every child is a unique child;' 'children learn and develop well in enabling environments, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs;' and 'children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates.'

Before you read on, take a moment to reflect what 'the individual needs' of 'the unique child' might be in a linguistically diverse society. Are you thinking that all children should get the opportunity to experience different languages in early education? Are you thinking that children with a home language other than English should get the opportunity to develop both English and the home language? Are you thinking that a childcare provider should have measures in place that value all languages and promote linguistic diversity?

The Statutory Framework suggests that 'providers must take reasonable steps to provide opportunities for children to develop and use their home language in play and learning, supporting their language development at home' (p. 9) but offers no guidance what such 'reasonable steps' might be. However, even this limited vision of linguistic diversity in the early years is undermined in the assessment requirements. In fact, there is a fundamental contradiction between the recognition of children's diversity and the requirement for the continuous

assessment of child performance against learning targets. This contradiction is particularly explicit in the ‘communication and language’ area, a designated prime learning area. It is only English that is recognized as adequate performance in this area:

When assessing communication, language and literacy skills, practitioners must assess children’s skills in English. If a child does not have a strong grasp of English language, practitioners must explore the child’s skills in the home language with parents and/or carers, to establish whether there is cause for concern about language delay. (p. 9)

This assessment requirement equates ‘communication and language’ with English, and with **English only**. The assessment requirement effectively devalues all other languages, associating them with language delay and a deficit view.

What do these assessment requirements mean in practice in actual childcare centers? Education researchers Leena H. Robertson, Rose Drury and Carrie Cable, unsurprisingly, discovered that these assessment requirements undermine any form of bi- or multilingual provision in early childhood education. They found British childcare centers – including those that have multilingual teachers and staff – to be monolingual spaces where languages other than English are silenced.

Many childcare centers, in fact, employ bilingual teaching aides. However, the role of these teaching aides is so constrained both by the assessment requirements and their marginalized position vis-à-vis ‘regular’ early childhood educators that all they can hope to achieve is support children’s transition from home language to English. As one Urdu bilingual teaching aide interviewed by Robertson and her colleagues explained:

They’re losing everything. So if you had a little input of their first language, I think that would be a benefit for everybody; parents, families, schools and children because the more languages they have the better. [...] Now all the children who’ve been through my time at let’s say [this school], not many of them are reading or writing their first language at all. (Robertson et al. 2014, p. 619)

For children who have a home language other than English this means that – rather than their individual needs being recognized and supported as those of ‘the unique child’– they are streamlined into monolingual children. For all children, irrespective of their home language, the silencing of languages other than English in this first institutional space they are likely to encounter in their lives is a lost opportunity.

The overall result is that the Statutory Framework creates the illusion that linguistic diversity is valued in early childhood education while simultaneously rendering languages other than English illegitimate and worthless forms of ‘communication and language’ for young children.



Robertson, L., Drury, R., & Cable, C. (2014). Silencing bilingualism: a day in a life of a bilingual practitioner International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 17 (5), 610-623 DOI: [10.1080/13670050.2013.864252](https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2013.864252)

