

**National Foundation for Educational
Research**



**Raising the Achievement of Bilingual
Learners in Primary Schools**

Interim report

April 2005

Raising the Achievement of Bilingual Learners in Primary Schools

Summary

1 Introduction

In 2004, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to evaluate the pilot *Raising the Achievement of Bilingual Learners*, which was part of the Primary National Strategy (PNS). This present report summarises the initial findings from the first twelve months of the evaluation. Data sources were interviews with key staff (the Primary National Strategy Manager, the Ethnic Minority Achievement Manager and the pilot consultant) in a sample of seven local education authorities participating in the pilot, and interviews with a range of staff (leadership team members, class teachers) in three primary schools within each of these authorities.

Interviews focused on the implementation of the pilot and the way in which the pilot had been initially received: it was too early in the evaluation for effects to be identified with any confidence. Thus the findings below should be treated with caution and regarded merely as a statement of progress along the line. In some cases, the programme may be amended in the light of the experience of its first presentation; in others a particular problem may not emerge again; in others, perceptions may change as the programme continues.

2 Findings at level of local authority

The consultant post

- challenge posed by the appointment of a consultant at relatively short notice varied across the participating authorities and depended on the availability of someone with the necessary expertise in pedagogy for bilingual learners as well as the skills of working with and training colleagues; as 'local knowledge' of schools and their EAL profile was considered important, internal appointments were preferred
- appointments were discrete or secondments, and were from both school and EMA support team staff; all authorities had one f/t post and some exceeded this
- initial consultant training involved two separate days in London and a two-day residential event
- given the range of experience and expertise represented in the consultant group and the fact that the mode of training was, in some cases, unfamiliar to

participants, it was, perhaps, unsurprising that the initial round of training met some criticism on the one hand for not taking consultants' existing knowledge and experience sufficiently into account and, on the other, for being insufficiently directive (eg training materials for use with schools not available as a package at the beginning of the pilot)

The profile of the pilot

- there was recognition that the pilot was principally to embed and strengthen well-established pedagogy – rather than to innovate; and, by bringing this pedagogy and focus into the main stream of the PNS, to demonstrate its contribution to promoting inclusive teaching practice
- the application to the field of EAL of the well-established systematic school improvement strategies of needs analysis (by specific data collection), action planning, target-setting and professional development was considered a significant move
- there was a positive response to the collegiate nature of the pilot, whereby local authority expertise was harnessed, re-energised by regional professional development activities and national training, and then made available to local schools more intensely than resources might allow without the pilot

The aims for the pilot identified by the case study authorities

At the time of the initial interviews, the aims identified by the case study authorities were very general, including

- to encourage pupils' use of first language in the classroom
- to increase the expertise of mainstream staff in EAL pedagogy
- to involve minority ethnic parents in their children's learning more effectively
- to ensure that schools reflected the ethnic diversity of their communities
- to improve schools' capacity for self-evaluation and self-improvement with regard to their EAL provision
- to develop a more consistent strategy for raising the achievement of advanced bilingual learners
- to establish a structure for the development of reading skills by advanced bilingual learners
- to embed race equality within the curriculum
- to develop speaking and listening activities across the curriculum

The selection of schools

In the case study authorities:

- the ten schools were selected collaboratively by the EMA manager, PNS manager, pilot consultant (if in post), senior primary advisors and numeracy and literacy consultants
- the basis of selection included: DfES criteria, relevant quantitative data (proportion of EAL pupils, level of language acquisition, KS1 and KS2 scores – including decline between key stages - , languages spoken), existing staff expertise, and involvement in other PNS initiatives

- schools were generally positive about being invited to participate, particularly where the purposes of the pilot were transparent and involvement was presented as being supportive and relevant

The diagnostic visits

- in some authorities the pilot was the catalyst for formal collaboration, for the diagnostic visit, between officers with discrete but complementary functions: the EMA manager, the school link/attached adviser, the literacy/numeracy adviser(s) and the consultant; this collaborative approach was a key model which was to be reproduced at school level (see below) and was critical to highlighting the whole-school nature of the pilot, providing the infrastructure for change, and giving (local) 'authority' to the (national) pilot
- the commitment of the serial approach whereby the diagnostic visit initiated informed action-planning and target-setting which were then supported by additional resources by way of consultant time and professional development, was generally received positively although in some cases the visits were felt to be unduly time-consuming and using instruments very similar to those already in existence in the authority

Plans for monitoring, evaluation and dissemination

- responsibility for monitoring was regarded as being shared between LEA officers (the range identified above) and schools
- at the time of the interviews, there was a focus on collecting qualitative data (grounded in schools' RAPs) to examine the process of the pilot, with the expectation that quantitative data would come into play over a longer time-frame
- precise strategies for evaluation and monitoring were not in place but officers mentioned discussion with senior managers in schools and using standard LEA evaluation sheets for scrutiny of the consultants' training; strategies related to individual schools rather than across schools
- similarly, plans for dissemination had not been drawn up although there were firm intentions to do this using opportunities such as conferences, training sessions, intranets, workshops, materials

3 Findings at level of the school

Implementation

- schools were at different starting points in terms of the stage of development of their provision for bilingual pupils but, generally, shared a common process for implementation: an entry point via the headteacher leading to the decision to participate made by the senior management team and the participation of the leadership team via the diagnostic visit. This common process meant that the key leverage points into the core curriculum were secured for the pilot.

Initiation

- a critical element for positive initiation was the role of the consultant – generally, a colleague informed about the needs of bilingual pupils but also equipped with the relevant management skills (giving feedback, coaching and mentoring, observation)
- (difficulties arose when, on account of pressures of time forcing speedy appointments without sufficient leadtime, consultants had not gained the necessary prior management experience)

Principal initial attractions of the pilot to headteachers/schools

- opportunities for bringing consistency in expertise and practice across the staff, achieved via the availability of extra resources (mainly expert time – the pilot as a whole was ‘budget-light’) within familiar structures (the PNS model)
- the inclusive approach – the pilot was for all staff
- the focus on developing, extending and making coherent rather than replacing and innovating so specific work harmonised with, rather than conflicted with, the school improvement plan and the more specific targets focused on bilingual pupil learning supported, rather than competed with, the more general ones which had already been set for the school

Other attractors

- opportunities to share practical ideas and effective pedagogy within the school and with other schools
- the links with general language development and inclusive pedagogy
- the fact that bilingual learners would experience more inclusive practice as all teachers became more aware and used targeted strategies across the curriculum
- in some cases, the speed of introduction of the pilot had impeded extensive involvement across the school; competing priorities or programmes already started meant that individual teachers/classes had to be selected for exploratory work; the challenge was to regard this a pilot phase which was later rolled out to the rest of the school

Raising achievement plans

Those seen focused on leadership & management and teaching & learning

Leadership and management

Activities commonly involved:

- the collection of new hard data and/or the finer/more specific analysis of existing data in order to inform action (eg stress points at which to re-allocate support staff)
- target-setting in relation to bilingual learners and provision
- more sophisticated tracking of bilingual learners
- structured opportunities for the exchange of practice and implementation of new techniques
- human resource management – in particular, reconfigurations of teacher assistant and support staff resources

Teaching and learning

- invigoration of oracy across the curriculum using first languages as appropriate to enhance learning
- reappraisal of practice across the school, tracking back from the main focus of the pilot: thus, from key stage 2 down to nursery and from advanced bilingual learners to newly-arrived pupils, thus reinforcing the whole-school approach, and allowing for capacity-building and sustainability

Facilitating conditions for implementation phase:

- interventions were particularly well received if they were closely aligned to context and 'fitted' the school's practice, systems and discourse
- 'refresher' sessions were welcome on the grounds that though some practice might have been familiar it was not necessarily always in evidence (the positive attitude to hearing things 'which had been heard before' was influenced by consultants' skill in presentation and avoiding being what might be regarded as patronising)
- professional development meetings (PDM) which offered relevant practical activities were able to appeal to a multifaceted (ie whole-school, including teaching assistants) audience and were, thereby, able to offer the 'shared experience' which has been shown to be a critical element in the introduction of initiatives touching all parts of an organisation; relevance and relatability were more readily achieved where a member of the school staff was involved in the presentation of the PDM with the consultant
- specific initiatives were further strengthened where parallel in-service sessions were able to show further application of techniques in particular curriculum areas
- implementation was particularly successful where the previous facilitating conditions prevailed and, in addition, the consultant had previously worked in the school

Challenges posed by the PDM programme

A particular challenge for the first presentation of the PDM programme in the pilot schools was represented by the fact that the complete programme had not been developed by the time of the initial sessions. While it is noted that this was strategic rather than contingent, insofar as it was considered important for the consultants to have ownership of the complete programme and thus be involved in its development, the situation demanded quite a high degree of trust on the part of schools. It was particularly challenging for headteachers, accountable to their staff for quality assurance of in-service training, to embark on a series of sessions without having a clear idea of the shape of that series. Where the trust was being demanded by a consultant known to, and respected within, the school, there was less concern than where the consultant was an unknown quantity; in the latter case it would, perhaps, have been notable had there not been some expression of concern, particularly where communication was not strong.

Messages emerging from the pilot to date (April 2005)

It should be stressed that the following messages are tentative at this interim stage; they may be revised in the light of data collected during the second phase of the evaluation. Furthermore, there is no comment as to whether the outcomes to date are intended or unintended: the important thing is that lessons are learnt from them.

In a context in which there are countless initiatives in schools, all of them broadly related to 'raising standards of achievement' (a core LEA task), the way in which a particular programme is piloted or introduced is of considerable importance. In this case, the pilot benefited from lessons learnt and experience gained from other strands of the Primary National Strategy, which was itself grounded in accumulated theory.

The following characteristics seemed to have considerable potency in establishing the pilot securely and, arguably, might well have a similar function in other nationally-led initiatives:

- entry to individual school via the headteacher and then the 'leadership team': while the formulation of the latter differed, it was characterised by its capacity for widespread influence across the curriculum and, thus, extensive raising of standards
- the presentation of the 'content' in such a way as not to alienate teachers experienced with bilingual learners, while motivating them to scrutinise practice which they may have previously assumed to be satisfactory
- the school-based linking of theory with practice so that there was the opportunity for the development of understanding alongside the development of practical applications in the classrooms in which the teachers were working
- the availability of in-school consultancy time to facilitate modelling, working with, and experimentation
- the prompt for more 'finely-tuned' (applied) analysis of existing data collection