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## HOPE, LITERACY AND DANCING

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*She's very clever, very, very good... I think she's more confident because of her background. She knows something about her background. She knows herself. ... I think when they know their language, they know how to write in their language, they do better in English...I personally think the club has had an impact on her. She knows her identity, she has found herself, she is more confident.*

Lala has been attending Albanian classes on a Thursday evening after school for a year. She is learning to read and write the language and practise the intricate steps of traditional Albanian dancing. Her teacher has noticed a substantial difference in her performance in class.

The complementary classes Lala attends are run by Shpresa. Shpresa means 'hope' in Albanian. The following article describes a partnership between the Albanian charity and Lala's primary school and explores some of the benefits this has brought to the many ethnic Albanian children who attend it.

### **The context of complementary education**

In 1985 the Linguistic Minorities Project's report on patterns of migration and the prevalence, use and teaching of community languages raised awareness of the existence of mother tongue classes organised by communities themselves to maintain their languages (LMP, 1985). In the same year the Swann Report came to the conclusion that the maintenance of the language and culture was beyond the remit of mainstream education and "best achieved within the ethnic minority communities themselves" (DES, 1985).

Since that time complementary education has continued to flourish away from mainstream education, and largely ignored by it, providing for the language, literacy and cultural needs of communities intent on maintaining their linguistic and cultural identities in the face of an essentially monolingual and monocultural curriculum (Conteh et al, 2007). Complementary schools have existed in the UK since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. They are also known as Saturday schools, supplementary schools, mother-tongue schools. They have been set up by communities to counteract the effects of racism encountered in schools and meet educational needs not provided by the mainstream sector. Subjects taught include the language, history and culture of a particular community as well as study support for key National Curriculum subjects such as English, maths and science. The schools are run as voluntary organisations and vary in size from a dozen pupils to 300. Venues for classes are varied: a teacher's front room, a community hall, mainstream school premises after hours. The schools commonly teach for between 2 and 4 hours a week, at week-ends or after school. Funding is an issue for all complementary schools. More established and prosperous communities can fund teaching from their own resources, but most of the schools struggle to maintain their services, some with small grants from charitable trusts and

limited support from a few local authorities. Most rely on voluntary teaching staff. While the Swann Report had recommended that mainstream school premises be offered free to communities to run classes, the devolution of financial responsibility to individual schools means that this very rarely happens.

In 1997 the Trust for London initiated the development of the Resource Unit for Supplementary and Mother Tongue Schools to support the sector with advice and training. This led to some recognition for the sector from the DfES and the funding of Guidelines (Abdelrazak, 1999) and a Directory (Kempadoo and Abdelrazak, 1999). The latter revealed the existence of almost 2000 schools in the London area.

While the sector is enormously varied, (Sneddon, 2003) it is uniquely responsive to identified needs and offers safe spaces for young people to explore and express their developing personal and learner identities (Creese *et al*, 2006; Issa and Williams, 2009). The name 'complementary schools' has been adopted by the research community to describe all types of community run schools as described above.

## **Recent developments in research and practice**

Until recently there had been comparatively little research into this sector since the Linguistic Minorities Report. Mirza and Reay have studied the schools set up by the African Caribbean community in response to the low expectations of teachers and the racism that children experienced in their mainstream schools (200). Li-Wei studied the role of schools set up to provide language classes and cultural experiences in the Chinese community in Newcastle (1993). A study of Portuguese speaking pupils in schools in Lambeth by Barradas (2007) demonstrated that those who attended complementary classes attained significantly higher grades at GCSE and that the benefit was strongly apparent from KS1.

An influential ESRC-funded study of complementary schools in Leicester (Martin *et al*, 2004) explored their contribution to the life of the wider community. The pedagogy and classroom practices of two Gujarati schools were studied in depth and revealed the complex ways in which both English and Gujarati are used to support bilingual learning (Martin *et al*, 2007). The study also demonstrated the crucial role of complementary schools in providing safe spaces in which young people can develop personal, learner and multicultural identities (Creese and Martin, 2006). A further study, also funded by the ESRC, in complementary schools in four communities also revealed how young people negotiate complex and fluid identities and how the schools encourage the development of a 'successful learner identity' (Creese *et al*, 2008:7). All of these studies as well as recent research (again funded by the ESRC) into children learning bilingually in Bengali and English (Kenner *et al*, 2008) have shown how young people benefit from learning in an environment that values and develops their language skills, supports their achievement in the mainstream and provides a space that enables them to explore their personal identity.

Recent work on the development of multiliteracy by Gregory (Gregory, 2008; Gregory *et al*, 2004) and Kenner (2004), reveals children who not only cope, but thrive, on becoming literate in languages which may be taught in very different ways in different settings. The research shows how their experiences can lead them to a deeper understanding of how their languages work and to reflect on the relationship

between their languages, as the children in the present study demonstrate. Community organisations can play a key role in supporting parents to engage more successfully with their children's schools (Sneddon, 1997; Faltis, 1995) and support the school in making better use of parents' 'funds of knowledge' and expertise (Gonzalez *et al*, 1993; ).

As recent and ongoing research continues to reveal forms of community education that have remained largely hidden from the mainstream, the contribution of complementary education and the importance of community languages is beginning to receive recognition in official policy. The Aiming High report (DfES, 2003) recommended that mainstream schools reach out to their communities through working in partnership with supplementary schools. The Primary Strategy's *Learning and Teaching for Bilingual Children in the Primary Years* (DfES, 2006) recommends that teachers build on children's language knowledge and engage with pupils' families and the wider community.

More recently the DCSF has engaged directly with the complementary sector: it has provided some funding to enable the Resource Unit, now the National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education, to develop its support role on a national scale. It has also funded Our Languages, a major action research project to promote the teaching of community languages (CILT, 2008a). Of particular relevance to the present study is the aspect of Our Languages that promotes children's learning through the development of partnerships between complementary and mainstream schools. Ninety partnerships were funded to explore innovative ways of working collaboratively and also to develop teaching resources. While the project described in this paper was not one of those funded, it was selected for inclusion on the Our Languages site as a model of good practice (CILT, 2008b).

The present paper reports on a study of the impact of the partnership between Shpresa and a primary school in east London that has large numbers of Albanian children on roll. As well as building on studies of multiliteracy development, bilingual learning and negotiation of identity in complementary and mainstream schools, the study was informed by Cummins' model for the empowerment of pupils from linguistic minority communities. The model is widely known to teachers who have specialised in working with pupils learning English as an additional language. It suggests that incorporating the language of the community into the school, even if it can't actually be taught, and involving families and the community in the education of the children can support educational achievement (Cummins, 1986; 2000). Cummins argues that building on pupils' cultural knowledge and language skills and providing teaching that "affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in learning" leads to successful academic engagement (Cummins *et al*, 2006).

### **The Shpresa model: literacy and dancing**

Shpresa Programme is a voluntary organisation that came into existence in 2003 to meet the needs of the ethnic Albanian refugee community in east London. It provides a wide range of services to the whole community. Its education and youth programme offers Albanian language classes, dance, drama, sporting and cultural activities after school, at week-ends and during school holidays. It also provides opportunities for

young people to perform in public at cultural events and festivals. It is entirely funded from grants from charitable trusts.

Shpresa developed a model of partnership which it offered to schools with substantial numbers of ethnic Albanian children. In exchange for the free use of school premises, Shpresa provides Albanian classes, games, sports and traditional dancing, in after school or week-end sessions for children. In addition to these activities the organisation provides its partnership schools with information about the Albanian community and culture. It offers workshops for parents and works to involve them in the education of their children and the life of the school. It can also provide trained Albanian volunteers to work in the school. It raises the profile and status of Albanian culture through providing children with opportunities to perform Albanian poetry, drama and dance, both within the school and in public venues. It aims to support the maintenance of the Albanian language, to improve children's attainment in their mainstream school, to improve communication within families and between parents and teachers. The combination of dance with literacy has proved popular with children and young people. Shpresa currently works with over 300 children.

Gascoigne School is a large primary school set in what was until recently a mainly white working class area, but is now very ethnically mixed. 88% of the children who attend speak English as an additional language, 25% of children are refugees and half of all children in the school are eligible for free school meals. It currently has 84 ethnic Albanian children on roll.

Families of children at Gascoigne school who attended Shpresa classes in a local community centre requested classes in their children's school as this would be more convenient for the community. They approached the headteacher who met with the director of Shpresa and agreed to a partnership for a trial period of 3 months, starting in April 2007. Shpresa set up an after school class which includes an hour of literacy in Albanian and a very popular hour of games and lively and complex traditional dancing. It set up regular consultations with parents and ran support sessions to meet identified needs. It also provides individual support for parents if this is needed. In particular it ran the Step-by-Step parental support programme (ACE, 2004) that introduces parents into the English education system, helps them to support their children and get involved in the life of the school. It advised the school on issues of culture and language. It deployed three Albanian volunteers, training to work with children in schools. The director of Shpresa has regular meetings with the headteacher and the Ethnic Minority Achievement co-ordinator and has agreed to serve on the School's Board of Governors.

The headteacher was soon enthusiastic about Shpresa's efficiency and good organisation. By early 2008 he and his staff were convinced that the partnership was having a significant effect on parental involvement in the school, on discipline and on the children's cultural confidence and attainment. The headteacher commented:

'All I have got for them is praise. As a model of how things work, it's a very good model. I could convince other schools as well. All I get is really good pay-back for it, in community relations, parental relations and during an Ofsted inspection, for example. I am more than happy. There are no disadvantages.'

## **Methodology**

The Cass School of Education at the University of East London were invited to evaluate the impact of Shpresa's involvement with Gascoigne Primary School, and in particular of the after-school classes in Albanian, on

- the achievement of Albanian speaking children in the mainstream school
- children's identity formation and cultural confidence
- parents' involvement in their children's education.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. End-of-year test results in English for all ethnic Albanian children from Reception to Year 6 for June 2008 were analysed and compared with results for other ethnic groups in the school. The achievement of attendees at the after-school classes was compared with the achievement of non-attendees.

Qualitative data was obtained through observations and semi-structured interviews. These were carried out with 12 children (5 girls and 7 boys aged 7 to 12), 8 mothers and 3 teachers. The children interviewed were asked about their language use and literacy experiences at home, their interests, their cultural and social life in England and Albania/Kosovo, their bilingualism and biliteracy, their life in school including friendships, interests and thoughts about their future. They completed diagrams that describe their language use in the family.

The parents (all who responded were mothers) were asked related questions about language use and literacy practices, their involvement with their children's education, their relationship with teachers and the school and their involvement with Shpresa. The teachers interviewed were asked for their impressions of the Albanian children in the school with respect to achievement and linguistic and cultural confidence. They were also asked about their relationship with the children's parents. Observations were carried out at the Shpresa classes and at public events organised by Shpresa at which the children performed.

## **Key findings**

### **Albanian children's achievement:**

The quote at the beginning of this article is an example of teachers' perceptions of the impact of Shpresa on children. To test whether there was any measurable impact of the Albanian classes on the attainment in English of children who attended them, the end of year results for 2007-2008 were analysed for all children.

At the time of testing there were 84 ethnic Albanian children in the school, of which 24 attended the Shpresa classes. Given the small numbers of children involved and the fluctuations from year to year, comparing the means is informative, however the differences proved to be too small to be statistically significant.

A comparison was made between the two groups of children using a tracking variable that measured their overall progress in English between June 2007 and June 2008 in relation to national norms (children at national norms = 2; below norms = 1; above norms = 3).

Using an independent sample t-test, the mean tracking score for Shpresa non-attendees is 1.55 (Standard Deviation .702) and for attendees is 1.70 (Standard Deviation .876). The difference is in the right direction (Shpresa attendees are closer to the score of 2 = on track) but the result is not statistically significant (.482). Interestingly the spread of test scores is slightly wider for Shpresa attendees. A regression analysis with attendance at Shpresa, gender and school year group as variables, also still failed to produce any statistically significant data. Given the small numbers involved, the fact that literacy in Albanian is taught for only 1 hour a week, and that the classes had been running for just over a year at the point of testing in June, the effect would have to be exceptionally strong to register as statistically significant.

However, comparing the ethnic Albanian children's test scores with all other significant groups in the school (White British, Black African, non-Albanian White Other), as well as whole school data and national norms, is revealing. At the end of KS1 for overall English, the Albanian children have marginally higher scores than all groups and, at 14.7, are close to the national benchmark of 15. This pattern is maintained in all years except Y5. At the end of KS2 for overall English, the Albanian children's scores are slightly higher than White British and non-Albanian White Other and similar to Black African (25.29 to 25.3 for BA), at 25.7, they are still short of the national benchmark of 27. They do, however, exceed this with a score of 28 for reading.

Given the economic status of the families and the fact that most of the Albanian children were new to English when they started in nursery, the data suggest that the children are making very rapid progress in English in the school.

### **Children's confidence in their bilingualism and their culture**

Teachers have commented on children's confidence and pride in 'who they are' has been noted by teachers. From the evidence of interviews with children and parents, all parents are keen to maintain their children's use of the family language, whether or not they send their children to Albanian classes. They tell stories to their children and take them to visit family in Albania/Kosovo. They have a few literacy materials in the home and many teach their children the Albanian alphabet. They appreciate dual language books sent home by the school as it is impossible to find children's books in Albanian in London. More parents would have liked to send their children to classes but found the times were not compatible with work commitments.

Observations at the Albanian classes, like those of Creese et al in Leicester (2006) reveal a setting that offers children different ways of using their languages to explore their Albanian and English identities. The literacy class is very culturally Albanian: it uses ABETARE, a literacy scheme imported from Albania, it teaches some history and geography and celebrates key dates in the Albanian cultural calendar. The Albanian language is used almost exclusively in the class. While children in the dance class use mainly English they are focused intently on the very complex traditional Albanian dance patterns (Sneddon, forthcoming).

Gascoigne School values the many languages spoken by its pupils and encourages the development of bilingualism. It advises parents to maintain the use of their language

in the home. It uses Language of the Month in all classes (Debono, 2002) to introduce children to a wide range of languages. Children interviewed know that their bilingualism is an asset and are proud of their language skills. However the impact of Shpresa classes is most apparent in the way in which the attendees talk about their bilingualism.

Vanessa talks about the structure of her languages:

*They're structured the same way but some of the sentences are, one word could be before the other one and it could still make sense in Albanian.*

Geni is struggling to explain the complexities of living in two languages and two cultures simultaneously:

*I do think if you know two languages you can learn more stuff about two languages and you have to use your brain even more. Because you have two languages and you have two rules. Like two types of rules, the Albanian rules and English rules. And if one rules says, um, eat at night time and if the English rules says, um, eat lunch-time and eat breakfast at lunch, at night and the Albanian rules says eat lunch at day time. It will be a little bit complicated. Then you have to do both of them at the same time. It's about the rules. A little bit complicated how you think about different things.*

Children's responses suggests that the children who work across languages both orally and in writing on a weekly basis have thought more deeply about their language learning and are more confident about discussing such complex issues.

A teacher has found this applies to many of the children:

*They are involved in lessons at a much higher level, metaphors and things, and they understand it. Once they have got the grammatical bit sorted out, tenses and ordering of words, I think Albanian has the adjective after the noun... once they've worked that out, their writing shoots up because they've got the higher level skills.*

When asked directly about personal definitions of identity all the children comment on their dual affiliation

*I would say that I'm Albanian and English. I'm mixed like that, I know both languages.*

*I'm, like, Albanian, like my cousins and everything, but I like England because it's better, bigger.*

One 8 year old was in no doubt that he intends to contribute to British society:

*Because I'm born in England, I'm going to be an English Prime Minister, but if I was born in Kosovo I would have been a Kosovan Prime Minister.... So I'm thinking of being Prime Minister so I can tell everyone around the world to stop things like global warming and that's the main reason.*

While most of the Albanian children interviewed had an active and varied social life, those who attend Shpresa classes reported with great enthusiasm on the opportunities



it offered for practising skills such as traditional dances, and for participating in large-scale cultural events and public performances.

*If we go on a concert', says Vanessa, 'it feels like you're going on TV and being, like, popular. My friends, like, say 'I want to go to the concert, I want to do that!' And one day we went to this big concert and we had to hold up our flag, because we went London and we had to hold up our flag and sometimes people took photographs and put them in the newspapers.*

Her friend Monica explains the cultural importance of dancing, especially at wedding celebrations, which include a great deal of music and dancing: *'It's very important so you'll know how to dance in an Albanian wedding. You can't just stand still and think, what are they doing?'*

Vanessa and her friend went to her sister's wedding and *'me and her, we were practising a dance and we done it in front of the stage and everyone was clapping and cheering'*.

### **Parents' involvement in their children's education**

A Shpresa teacher explained the value Albanian refugees placed on education: *"We will starve ourselves for education. We wear second hand clothes to pay for a private tutor if our children need it."*

All women interviewed valued the education offered to their children. They have high aspirations for their children, most of them mentioning they would like their children to study at university. These ambitions appear realistic given the children's commitment to learning.

The support offered to parents by Shpresa was reinforced by school initiatives to improve parental participation. Advice was offered to parents of bilingual children on how to help their children with homework. All teachers and senior school staff are available in the playground at the beginning and the end of the school day to facilitate informal contact.

While several women report a lack of confidence in contacting teachers and difficulties in the past with communication, all those interviewed now feel that they can approach teachers readily. They know the procedure for making appointments and they particularly appreciate the ease with which they can talk informally to a teacher when they bring the children to school. Not only do they attend formal parents' meetings, but they are proactive in approaching teachers.

The women feel well informed about their children's progress and are full of praise for the way in which the individual needs of their children are addressed. A mother whose youngest child has caused her concern reports:

*I had lots of problems last year with A. I talked to his teacher, to the headteacher. I am very pleased with his teacher, she finds ways with A, to settle him down, getting him to work. He is a very hard character, very strong. And she did very well. I'm very pleased with her. She finds ways of making him enjoy school.*

All mothers interviewed were positive about the school. They appreciate the quality of education, the dedication of staff and their approachability. They report that their children are settled and happy. The women whose children attend classes have mostly attended the parental sessions run by Shpresa. They are particularly knowledgeable about how the school and the educational system operate and are very fulsome in appreciation of the teachers' commitment to their children.

*This school is very good. And the teachers are very good. They behave very politely to parents. When I ask them about my children, they explain and they talk about my children. I ask them about behaviour, about teaching, about reading. ..The teachers are always polite. And when we ask something they are ready to give the answer.*

Vanessa's mother is equally full of praise: *"For three years, my two girls have gone to Gascoigne and are very happy. The staff work very hard for the children. I'm very happy with the teachers. They are very, very, very good teachers. Good teachers for teaching my girls, for everything. I'm very, very happy. I have never had a problem with the children's school. Never.*

The dedication of the headteacher is also appreciated

*He's very, very good. I used to live opposite this school. I see Mr G every time he comes and goes in the holidays. I see him talk to children, work with them. He's very good. He works hard, very hard.... I think, this school is much better than many schools...Our children make progress. They are learning very well.*

### **Social cohesion in the school**

The school is 'a haven of calm within the community', says a recent OfSTED report. It elaborates

*'pupils... enjoy school and appreciate the wide range of additional activities provided for them. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding, and a tribute to the school's very good pastoral care and support' (OfSTED, 2007:1).*

The women interviewed commented appreciatively on how their culture and language was incorporated into the school curriculum. Children interviewed had a wide range of friends from different ethnic backgrounds. They spontaneously talked about their friends' culture and language with knowledge and respect. This came across strongly at interview as many of the children, and some of their mothers, commented on the benefits of mixing with children from different ethnic backgrounds. This suggests the school has been successful in creating a culture in which children 'know who they are' and are respectful of who other children are. Arian comments:

*it is really a good thing that other people from other countries, if everyone was from the same country in this school and they had all completely the same background .. if I, maybe sometime, went to some other people from a different background, I'd find it really hard to get along with them...*

## Discussion

The school's partnership with Shpresa operates on a number of levels. Measuring the direct impact of the after school classes on children's achievement was always going to be difficult. There are many variables involved and correlation does not prove causation: while the classes may develop children's bilingualism, it is equally probable that children who are confident about their bilingualism are more likely to attend the classes. In the event, while the results show that the children who attend the classes are performing closer to national norms than those who are not, the results do not reach statistical significance. The research of Cummins has shown that, while young children commonly learn to communicate in a second language within two years, it takes five to seven years for them to achieve full competence in the academic language of school (Cummins, 1984). The quantitative analysis of children's end-of-year results reveals that the ethnic Albanian children, whether or not they attend Shpresa classes, are learning English rapidly and performing very well indeed, especially at the end of KS1.

Research has shown for some time the cognitive benefits that children derive from becoming balanced bilinguals (Cummins, 1979). While it may be difficult to prove a positive effect from the involvement of Shpresa, the data clearly show that the children's regular use of their first language in the home, and the developing biliteracy of many of them, in no way detracts from their performance on national tests.

While all families interviewed are equally keen to maintain their language and culture, the children who attend the Shpresa classes have thought deeply about the way in which their two languages and cultures interact. While they sound and look like the born Londoners that most of them are, they are very confident and proud to perform Albanian poetry, drama and dance in public in front of large audiences.

The parents, and they are mostly mothers, who have attended the education support sessions run by Shpresa are well informed and confident about working with teachers to support their children. This knowledge, together with their greater involvement in the school seems to have made them particularly appreciative of the teachers' work and commitment.

Both the quantitative data and the interview data indicate that it is not only the children and parents who attend out of school classes who benefit from the input of Shpresa. The social networks of families and the interactions of parents on school premises ensure that information is spread. Shpresa's involvement in the school through the work of trained volunteers in the classroom, support for cultural events and termly meetings with parents, ensures that the Albanian language and culture have a strong presence in the daily life of the school. This has led to the substantial growth in parent trust and involvement in the school, as reported by the headteacher.

Cummins' empowerment model suggests that where the culture and language of a linguistic minority community are incorporated into the work of the school and where parents and the community are directly involved, this empowers pupils to succeed (Cummins, 1986; 2000). There is evidence that the children at Gascoigne school have been empowered in this way.

The school has worked to this model. The evidence from the interviews with children and parents shows how the school values the languages and cultures of all the children who attend it and has created a culture of respect. The additional involvement of Shpresa has enabled the school to communicate more effectively with hard-to-reach parents who care about education and empower them to support their children. Their joint work has contributed to Community Cohesion and to meeting the Every Child Matters agenda.

The data obtained from interviews suggests that the following ingredients in the partnership between Gascoigne School and Shpresa were instrumental in its success:  
The school

- values the language and culture of its children and works to incorporate these in its curriculum
- recognises the importance of partnership with parents and works to involve all its parents, especially those harder to reach
- carefully analyses patterns of pupil achievement and acts on the analysis
- is willing to offer free premises and facilities in exchange for community input.

Shpresa

- is well organised and managed, has well trained staff and all policies and procedures in place
- plans a language and learning programme that is lively and attractive to children (mixing physical activities with literacy) and offers them opportunities for
- keeps in close touch with parents and responds to their needs
- respects school property and avoids any additional burden on teachers
- trains and deploying volunteers which benefits both volunteers and the school.

The example above is one that worked well. The Our Languages site offers many more (CILT, 2008c). Both partners jointly established clear objectives and communicated regularly with each other and with children and parents to meet them. While community organisations have a unique understanding of their communities and their needs which they can share with schools, schools need to be aware that they operate with very limited and uncertain funding and be willing to consider how they, in turn, can benefit the organisation.

## **Conclusion**

The findings suggest that the partnership has encouraged a strong and positive involvement of families in the education of their children and the life of the school, the development of confident cultural identities and high levels of biliteracy. In view of current policy this study was particularly timely as it provides evidence of the value of mainstream/complementary school partnerships and a model that can be readily adapted for a wide range of cultures and settings.

*Names of individual children have been changed.*

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