## Final word

## Making space for multilingual creativity



Fact file



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A SUBSTANTIAL and increasing number of children grow up speaking multiple languages.

Department for Education (DfE) figures indicate that 21 per cent of state-educated primary and 17 per cent of state-educated secondary pupils speak a language other than English at home. In cities such as London and Leicester, the figure rises to 50 per cent.

British education, however, is largely monolingual, and the National Curriculum insists on the teaching of 'Standard English'.

Speaking a language other than English is too often viewed as a barrier to learning, yet it represents a valuable cultural phenomenon that is part of the lived experience of many of Britain's children. As such, space should be made in the classroom to explore what it means to be multilingual and how to make the most of this skill.

## Moving between languages

Working with a class of year 3 pupils at a primary school in Lambeth, we investigated how children can use more than one language in creative writing.

We ran a 90-minute lesson, which involved the children writing a poem about the universal theme of 'night-time' using two or more languages. We began with Spanish, which is taught at the school, and English.

The pupils were given a selection of cards with a vocabulary of animals, objects, adjectives and verbs to rearrange into a poem. On one side of each card was the Spanish and on the other side the English translation. The children could flip each card and experiment with switching between the two languages. Pupils quickly got the hang of moving between languages and were encouraged to

start adding words and phrases from other languages they knew from outside school.

They were asked to explain verbally what the words meant, meaning that the teacher didn't need any prior knowledge of the language in question. If they didn't know how to spell any of the words, they could write them phonetically, which sparked discussion about the difference between oral and written language.

Multilingual pupils were enthusiastic about sharing home languages with their peers and having them valorised by their teachers, while monolingual English-speakers enjoyed learning snippets of other languages. The result was a range of imaginative, multilingual poems and children excited about the possibilities of creativity in language usage.

## ${\bf Environment\ of\ inclusivity\ and\ open-mindedness}$

The benefits of providing a space for linguistic exchange, in which creativity can flourish and concerns over accuracy can be (temporarily) put aside, are far-reaching.

The diverse heritage languages brought to the classroom by our pupils can serve as a source of enrichment for classmates and teachers alike, and there are considerable academic and professional benefits for pupils able to maintain their native tongues while learning English.

Celebrating multilingualism brings visibility to minority communities, builds student confidence and pride in cultural heritage, and facilitates an environment of inclusivity, sensitivity and open-mindedness. Through crosscultural dialogue, children are encouraged to reflect on the importance of language, the multilingual history of English and the changing nature of European languages and cultures in contemporary society. This can only be a good thing.