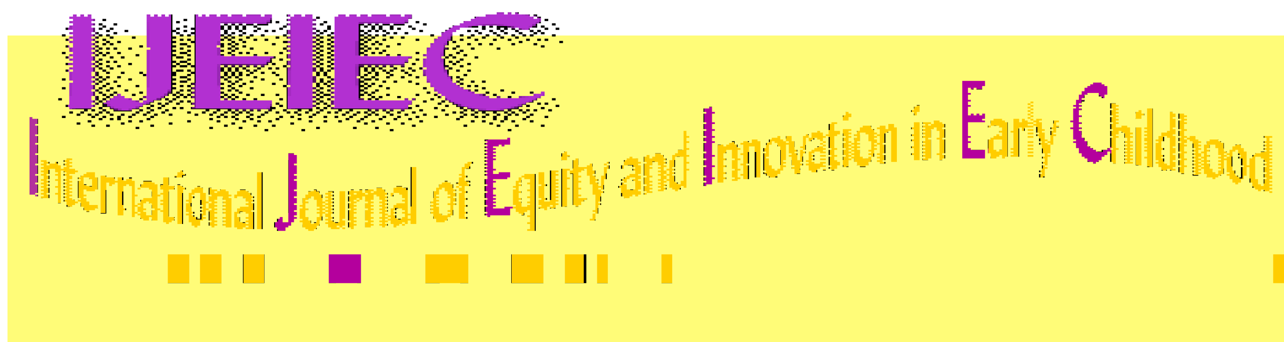

Research

English and 'Community Languages' in Early Years Establishments

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Abstract

This paper is based on an evaluation study completed in February 2003, focusing on the support available to children who speak English as an additional language in Early Years establishments in Manchester, UK. It explores the relationship between language, culture, gender, class, and early years work more generally, and highlights both overt and covert ways in which English is privileged despite the rhetoric of valuing cultural and linguistic diversity. It also illustrates how such a privileging has far-reaching and potentially damaging implications for children (and their communities) in terms of entrenching inequalities and social injustice, rather than attempting to create more inclusive Early Years environments.

One of the key responses to children who speak English as an additional language has been to appoint Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) workers. Whilst EMA practitioners are more common in primary and secondary schools, their involvement in Early Years is relatively new. I demonstrate some specific ways in which EMA workers make a significant impact in this area of work. The analysis offers nuanced and multi-layered perspectives on EMA work, indicating both the benefits, as well as the complexities and dilemmas of this role. I conclude by suggesting ways in which support to children who speak English as an additional language can be strengthened and enhanced, thus improving equity in early childhood education.

Introduction

This paper draws on a short-term evaluation study exploring responses of early years providers in Manchester, UK, to children who speak English as an additional language. Firstly, I outline the scope and design of the study. Secondly, a brief historical account sketching educational support to this group is discussed, which also highlights some of the current tensions in funding this area of work. The main support that is offered to children who speak English as an additional language is through Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) workers. Hence, thirdly, I focus on the role, and complexities associated with the EMA role. Three key interventions are identified which illustrate the crucial support that EMA practitioners offer: at transitions, their role in children's attainment and achievement, and their relationships with carers and communities. However as practitioners within early years and play settings, they are also part of the wider early years context, which is framed by the National Curriculum for the Foundation Stage and the Early Learning Goals. Despite the specific focus of the study on children who speak English as an additional language, EMA practitioners are inevitably a part of, and influenced by the more general policy and practice issues within Early Years work. This location of the EMA worker as the 'bridge' between community and establishment offers insights into the complexities of their role. Lastly, I conclude by drawing on the key implications of improving support and therefore equity to children in Early Years settings who speak English as an additional language.

Scope and design of the study

The evaluation was commissioned to document the specific types of support offered to children who speak English as an additional language from which future interventions can be planned and developed within early years settings. Funding was also of central concern, as resources are increasingly being linked with the requirement for 'evidence-based' practice. The methods selected for the evaluation were qualitative. In depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in English, with two EMA practitioners (one from each of the two establishments under investigation), the EMA manager, one EMA senior manager and a foundation consultant. Two establishments[i] were identified as the focus for the study, where direct observations of sessions were conducted. Eight children's case notes, were also examined, and the carers[ii] of these children were invited to a group discussion[iii] to comment on their own, as well as, their children's views of the provision. The study does not therefore make claims to 'represent' the perceptions of children, but rather the variety of methods used at least indicate some of the key concerns facing minoritised[iv] children. Detailed notes were kept for analysis for which a thematic approach (Banister et al, 1994) was used. Despite being a local, small, scale study, some of the findings have a wider resonance and I begin by locating EMA work within such a framework.

Contextual factors and current tensions

According to the Statistics of Education, 2002, over 200 languages are spoken in homes of children attending schools in England, and approximately 9.3% (over 632,000) of all pupils in England are recorded as speakers of English as an additional language. The 2001 census showed that nearly one in eight pupils

come from a minority ethnic background and that this is expected to increase.

In terms of educational under-achievement for minoritised children and young people, there has been long standing national concern about two particular groups: African-Caribbean and Pakistani young people. However, rather than attempting to concentrate on the structures of education which give rise to these situations, there has been a tendency to pathologise specific communities (Troyna, 1982; Williams, 1987). It is therefore encouraging to note that in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) consultation document, Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Minority Ethnic Pupils, released in March 2003, there are unequivocal statements, which illustrate the need to recognise racism as a determining factor in educational outcomes. Hence, it urges a 'whole school' approach to improve achievement, which includes amongst others, relevancy of the curriculum, staff attitudes, racial bullying at school, and establishing and developing links with communities. Further, the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) requires specific actions from schools to promote racial equality, and the DfES has worked with the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) to produce a statutory code of practice for schools. OFSTED has been charged with the responsibility of inspecting schools compliance with the Act. All these measures are potentially helpful interventions and are in line with the wider government agenda of social inclusion. However, there are some paradoxes, particularly in relation to language and funding, which operate in a less facilitative way.

Early years: raising standards?

So how does Early Years provision fit into the picture? In its efforts to improve educational standards, the government has sought to bring early years provision more and more within the education framework, and is based on the premise that early intervention is a 'good' thing, as to start education early, yields better results. This has led to an increasing formalisation of early years work, culminating in the establishment of a curriculum for the foundation stage, with clearly delineated 'stepping stones'. Children's attainment and achievement is expected to be delivered and assessed according to the Foundation stage, and was introduced in September 2000, for children aged three to the end of the reception year. This applies to all settings that receive nursery education grant funding. Within the foundation stage, early learning goals have been established for the following six areas of learning: personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development; and creative development.

The Early Learning Goals (ELGs) are underpinned by *The Stepping Stones* (see Curriculum guidance for the Foundation Stage, 2000) which identify developing knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes that children need if they are to succeed in meeting the early learning goals by the end of the foundation stage. Within early years settings, where there are EMA practitioners, they work within this framework, but focus on children with English as an additional language. Interestingly, neither the curriculum guidance, nor the stepping stones offer

detailed guidance on working with children with English as an additional language. Further the needs of this group do not appear to be well integrated within the overall curriculum guidance.

The ELGs and associated stepping stones are firmly based on theories of developmental psychology. A brief examination at the underpinnings of developmental psychology reveals its biologist and positivist roots (Burman, 1994, Dahlberg et al, 1999; Mayall, 1996; Walkerdine, 1985). The biological reading of dominant developmental psychology has led to what on the face of it appears to be universal stages of development, with particular skills and attributes deemed to be present at specific ages for normal development. However, what constitutes 'normal' and how this is arrived upon, and the authority it has been able to claim needs to be treated with caution. As Burman writes:

> Developmental psychology makes claims to be scientific. Its use of evolutionary assumptions to link the social to the biological provides a key cultural arena in which evolutionary and biologistic ideas are replayed and legitimised. Closely associated with its technologies and its guiding preoccupations has been its use to classify and stratify individuals, groups and populations so as to maintain class, gender and racial oppression. (Burman, 1994, p.4)

So far from developmental stages being neutral, objective, and universal, we need to be alert to the ways in which developmental psychology and child development theories and practices work to maintain existing power relations. Hence an awareness of their limitations should engage us in developing critical work that seeks to counter their in-built inequalities. These concerns are intensified for early years work with carers and children from working class, and minoritised communities, particularly around assessment as discussed later.

Early Years provision also has an additional function. It also helps carers, particularly women to be part of the labour force *if* there is good quality, flexible and affordable childcare on offer. This also connects with the wider government agenda of getting people off welfare and back into work. 'Welfare to work' programmes are far from gender, 'race' or class neutral as they have a significant impact, particularly on minoritised, single mothers on welfare. Early learning centres can therefore be seen as a response to the needs of a capitalist society by providing childcare for workers. Further, links with capitalism, as Dahlberg et al (1999), point out, extend, to the children themselves, and within this construction, early years establishments, can be interpreted as the providers of the future labour force.

The elasticity with which state sector childcare is either provided or withdrawn is contingent on the socio-economic-historic context, with gender roles expected to dovetail accordingly. Hence, the mass provision of state sector childcare during the second world war, required, women to make a major shift from the private to the public sphere, only to return to the previous status quo at the end of the war (see e.g. Riley, 1983 for a detailed discussion). The current context, through welfare to work programmes, encourages (or coerces?) mothers back into the labour market, but fails to take

fully into account the generally low wages on offer, particularly to minoritised women, as well as experiences of racism and sexism within workplaces. This is not to deny the central importance of high quality and affordable childcare to women, as was also articulated by mothers in this study:

> *'Your mind's at ease, you don't have to worry [about leaving your child here]'.*
> *'For me it was a breakthrough. I wouldn't have been able to work if it wasn't for the nursery, they've been very flexible.'*

So on the one hand, whilst such provision is to be warmly welcomed, its allure fades where this is coupled with a requirement through welfare to work programmes, (rather than a choice), for mothers on benefits to be part of the labour force. For the majority of middle class mothers, particularly those supported by earning partners, whether or not to be part of the labour force is largely a matter of choice, this choice diminishes the poorer you are. As an aside, it is also important to note the low pay within early years work, and the gendered nature of the workforce, which contributes to its low status as, reflected not only in pay, but also in training. In contrast, as Cameroon et al (2002) highlight, other countries in Europe, for example, Sweden, Denmark, and Spain have a much more rigorous and lengthy childcare training for early years practitioners.

Language and power

The acquisition of English is seen as a key factor in children's development and integration in to their local communities, and their attainment levels in education. Whilst English remains the language of dominant groups in the UK, the ability to communicate in English is clearly advantageous. However, statements made in 2002, by David Blunkett, Home Secretary, whose insistence that English should be spoken at all times, including at home, reveals how discourses of language can be firmly located in Britain's imperial-colonial history. This is nowhere made more explicit than in current immigration and asylum plans to connect speaking English as a requirement for citizenship (Home Office, 2001). Neither was this issue lost on carers, who themselves raised it in the group discussion: *'…naturalisation and immigration, have to learn English to get our passports'.*

However, there is clearly a strong element of coercion in the learning of English where the full power of the state is called upon via its immigration practices. This state apparatus sends a very loud assimilationist message to minoritised communities and is also very transparent about the privileging of English over other languages.

Further, the preferential status given to English compared to South Asian or African languages is well illustrated in the label 'community languages' that is allocated to the latter. Such a labelling implies that 'community languages' are not worth having as their use is limited to the more private sphere of community rather than a resource which can also be used more widely. This construction also fails to recognise that language is about more than the ability to communicate. As was made very clear in this study, as elsewhere (Burman, 1994), language is not just about communication; it is also about the transmission of cultural values, as these carers powerfully describe:

> *'You have English [but] when you speak in Urdu or Punjabi, there's more respect'.*
> and:
> *'Your children have to be comfortable in all cultures, [but] mixing with [English] children, then they begin to be English'.*

Therefore, to counter this, the acquisition of English needs to be balanced with the views and desires of children and their families to simultaneously develop fluency in their own languages – and indeed, this emerged as crucial to the carers who participated in this study, as described by the following carers:

> *'Once they forget our language, they'll never go back to it'.*
> *'It's embarrassing if they can't speak [own language]'*
> *'I don't like [name of child] to forget Arabic language'*

Within the context of a racist society, language can serve as an important feature of cultural identities, which arguably are central to a child's sense of self-worth and development. Crucially such cultural identifications may also serve as a protective factor against the effects of racism (see for example discussions around racial identity development, Cross et al 1991; Maxime, 1993).

Funding: money speaks

From 1966 to 1999, EMA workers nationally, were funded from the education element of Section 11, Home Office money to support the educational needs of minoritised children. The bulk of this funding has been directed towards primary and secondary schools. Local authorities have sometimes also used some of the resources for Adult Education as well as some Early Years provision, focusing largely on adults or children who speak English as an additional language. Since 1999, there have been changes in the national funding regime, which is having a significant impact on EMA support within early years. The current funding system is called the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG).

EMAG requires 85% of it to be devolved directly to schools, and this appears to present a number of key difficulties in maintaining services to young children, families and communities who speak English as an additional language. Firstly, the emphasis on schools leaves early years providers who are not identified as 'schools', such as children's centres, or playgroups, with very little call on this particular form of funding. Secondly, where EMA services are interested in increasing the devolved budget to schools, there is likely to be a reduction in provision – unless other funding opportunities are created or developed. Furthermore, the funding made available to schools for EAL children is based on a complex formula. This is based on quantitative measures with schools having to show that they reach certain thresholds (in terms of numbers from particular minority ethnic groups and language needs) to qualify for the EMA grant. Leaving aside for the moment early years providers who are not classified as schools, schools themselves have to show a high 'level of need' to qualify – a classic way of rationing services. Numbers play a key role in determining how limited resources are distributed and whereas this is normally accepted as rational and sensible decision making, there are also considerable impacts of such decision-making which often go unnoticed – thereby marginalising and

making invisible such concerns. Hence what happens to schools who just 'fail' to meet such thresholds, or to children who may be attending schools in predominantly 'white' areas? EMA outreach services may be one (not always ideal) way of responding to such unmet needs, but ultimately the issue of entitlement is central to equitable services.

The current funding regime gives rise to certain basic questions that need to be addressed when allocating resources and key to this is the issue of entitlement. Should the area you live in and its demographic composition determine access to services? And is it ethical that children who have the least choice in where they live should be subject to the vagaries of demographics? Or should entitlement be more contingently defined according to individually specified needs? It seems a strange paradox that in a society that values, affirms and encourages individuality, resources to respond to needs are allocated in a block way, herding together particular groups to qualify for support. Additionally, as one of the central tenets of education is to offer education to all, it is crucial to consider to what extent this is being fulfilled under current arrangements.

Here particular attention also needs to be paid to the needs of asylum seekers - many of whom will be forcibly 'dispersed' to areas where there may be no existing community based networks or infrastructure. Such networks are potentially not only of benefit to asylum seekers themselves, but also 'add value' and extend the possibilities of partnerships between educational establishments and communities. Dispersal policies have many drawbacks, but in this context contribute to exacerbating asylum seekers right to entitlement even further by making them invisible to funding regimes.

So far, I have commented on some of the wider issues framing early years work within the UK. In the second part of this article, I focus on the particular issues facing minoritised children and EMA workers within this context. I do this by analysing the EMA practitioner's role and highlight key issues, which also have a relevancy beyond the early years field. The central premise of my analysis is, that EMA workers, and other minoritised practitioners, whose specific responsibilities include being the 'link' worker between mainstream organisations and minoritised communities are structurally located between competing cultural contexts. Despite the difficulties of this positioning, many minoritised workers demonstrate ways of working which are rooted in values of equity and justice. However, far from romanticising their contribution, it is precisely by exploring the ways in which dominant discourses and power relations enter in to their work that we can develop a deeper understanding of the complexities and dilemmas of this role.

The EMA practitioner's role

Three inter-related issues emerged from the interview and group discussions, which illustrated the contribution of EMA practitioners. These were their role in transitions, their specific contribution to children's attainment and achievement and their relationship with carers and communities. Each of these elements is discussed in turn.

Transitions

The case for smooth transitions from home, to, and between, educational settings is now well established and this is correspondingly reflected in the practice of EMA workers. However, Myers (1992) makes a salient point when he reminds us that undue emphasis on transition to school can devalue children's home environments. This is particularly important to bear in mind when working with minoritised families and communities, as educational establishments, in part due to the legacies of the impoverished psychological theories they draw upon, generally operate to white, middle class, male norms (Burman, 1994). The devaluing of home in the context of working with minoritised children and carers runs the risk of devaluing cultural practices, language and religion (frequently regarded as deficits to be compensated for) and substituting these with dominant norms and cultural values. Through the accounts of EMA workers, other staff and parents, the EMA worker emerged as a key link between families and educational establishments. This can act as a safeguard against such devaluing, particularly where EMA workers are able to offer home visits and speak a common language with children and their carers. The establishment, via such practices is sending a positive message to both child and carer about the value that is placed on the home language and cultural identification. As this member of staff articulated:

> *'Carers can have a better understanding of the setting, its aims etc and we should be able to assess the children more accurately. They themselves [EMA workers] will raise issues with staff – its not just about speaking the language, it's about the community, parents feel more comfortable, they're not excluded'.*
>
> *And another member of staff: 'Home visits before the child starts allays parents anxieties, but that [home visits] wasn't always consistent, but I think it's good practice…parents ask questions to EMA workers which they would not raise with mainstream [white] workers'.*

Carers too, valued common language between staff and children and noted difficulties where this was not possible, especially initially:

> *'He was always crying at the beginning because he's foreign, but now he likes coming here…now he's OK. Arabic speaker would be helpful.'*

Another carer graphically described the stress (her word) that was experienced by her child on starting at an early years establishment. She reported that her child found the nursery environment very 'strange': people looked and smelt different, there was nobody else with a common language, the nursery day was structured differently from nursery provision in the child's country of origin, nursery food was also very alien. We should note that in addition to anticipated difficulties for children who are separated from their carer, children who speak English as an additional language may also be being separated from their cultural context. Whereas the former concern has received attention, for example, through the policy of gradual

admission, the latter has not benefited from any such interventions.

The role of the EMA worker at transitions is therefore crucial, and is enhanced where worker and child speak the same language. Not only does this provide a direct form of communication, but it also appears to increase the depth of dialogue between carers, children and establishments by actively valuing cultural and linguistic diversity.

Children's attainment and achievement

This section focuses on the EMA practitioner's work with children. Much of what EMA workers do is indistinguishable from the work of their colleagues. However, they also work in specific ways by providing bilingual support, by demonstrating an awareness of the power relations and hierarchy between languages, and by a sensitive understanding of the processes involved in English language development for children acquiring English as a second language. EMA practitioners have also been instrumental in ensuring that assessments do not unfairly disadvantage minoritised children. Each of these points is now elaborated further to better understand the specific contribution made by EMA workers to children's attainment and achievement.

Bilingual support appears to serve three key functions. Firstly, it provides children with easier opportunities and greater fluidity to communicate with adults, and with common language peers. Secondly, it demonstrates in a very real way the value and importance of the child's home language and, thirdly and crucially, the child's development in any of the curriculum areas is not hampered by the lack of a common language between staff and child. This factor comes to the fore in the contentious area of assessments (discussed later). Fourthly, the 'silent' phase described by EMA workers in more mixed settings was reported as hardly noticeable in a more homogeneous setting. This in itself endorses the central contribution of bilingual teaching and support.

However, even where bilingual support is not available, the dedicated[v] time that the EMA worker has with children enables attention to be paid to other forms of communicating. These are largely non-verbal e.g. through gesture, facial expressions, and finding or making visual support aids including props, pictures, and figures.

Multi-lingual labels and / or posters, story-time in dual languages, both spoken and written, music and singing in more than one language, audio and visual tapes in children's home languages were all used as a way of making visible and encouraging children's recognition and use of their home language. However, workers also reported difficulties that demonstrate the unspoken and powerful ways in which English is perceived vis-à-vis home languages. In one example, a worker recalled an incident where a child had been out of the main room for some time, and was found in the toilet area, singing in her home language. Through discussion, the child explained that the toilet was the only place (other than home) that she felt she could use her home language. So in some way, the child had picked up a very strong message that her home language was not good enough to be spoken in the main room. The worker reported that the child was embarrassed and possibly ashamed of her home language. This sense of shame in relation to home languages,

was also raised by another EMA worker in a different setting. Her view was that once children acquired sufficient fluency in English, they were reluctant to use their home language:

> EMA worker: *After a time they rarely revert into Arabic or other language once they have acquired English.*
>
> KC: *Why do you think that might be?*
>
> EMA worker: *The message is that European languages are OK, so I encourage own language speaking and so do most of the staff.*

Once again, in both these accounts, we see the power associated with speaking English and other European languages. This alerts us to the need to be constantly vigilant to combating racism in its various forms – and language, as we have seen is a key arena in which power relations manifest themselves.

In addition to valuing and encouraging a child's home language, the EMA worker also has a pivotal role to play in developing the use of English. The EMA staff interviewed demonstrated sensitivity and flexibility to each child's learning process. Interestingly, in this process, the role of other common language children is particularly noteworthy. It is not only staff who are intervening and providing opportunities for learning, but children themselves are also creating learning opportunities – and this is nowhere more apparent than when children are grouped according to language. Workers report that common language peers (especially those who have been at the nursery longer, or more fluent in English) often help each other by explaining things to the newcomer, or sometimes even interpret/explain things to the practitioner. The support of common language peers, especially when a child may be in the 'silent' phase is particularly important. The 'silent' phase is described in relation to English language acquisition as a time when the child is absorbing English by watching, listening, and largely using non-verbal communication. It is also a time when the child is building confidence to speak in English and it is likely that she can understand more than she can communicate verbally. So although a very busy time for the child, it is also potentially a very isolating time – which can be lessened when there are other common language speakers. Despite these advantages of grouping together common language children, at the same time, we must be mindful of the dangers of being overly reliant on children: as sole interpreters, restricting companionship only to common language children, 'ghettoisation' and placing too large a burden of responsibility for 'teaching' onto children.

The silent phase is also demanding, and challenging for workers. It requires enormous patience and gentle encouragement. As this worker said:

> *'Children who are fluent in their own language but haven't got the confidence to express themselves [in English], but they are still learning, so when they're ready and it may only be a whisper to me. I take it as normal…'*

Central to this practitioner's approach is the affirming of the child's progress, respecting where the child is at and allowing time for the child to use verbal communication. However, given that the

desired outcome is the spoken word, there can be pressures to speed this process up. Questions which EMA workers grapple with include how long is it appropriate for the silent period to be? and does prolonged silence indicate a general delay? As this worker reports:

> *'If within six months if there's been no response, either verbal or non-verbal, I would be worried'.*

She then went on to recall a child who stayed in the silent phase for two years, but spoke in her last term at nursery. This level of flexibility, of being able to stay with a child and respecting their learning process, yet still encouraging them over a long period of time is heartening. Yet it is within this period that there is a danger for children to be labelled and pathologised. The use of the term '[s]elective mute' was made with reference to particular children. Workers also gave accounts of the context of children's non-verbal behaviour being misinterpreted – especially around frustration and anger. The other obvious key danger is that a child may be wrongly labelled as having a developmental delay, or, alternatively, a failure to make an assessment where there may be need for additional support. A bilingual worker who can assess the child accurately in the child's language is, therefore, crucial where there may be such concerns.

Another reading of the current emphasis on assessment accords with the view that policy and practice based on developmental psychology 'has been driven by the demand to produce technologies of measurement' (Burman, 1994:3), or as one of the participants in this study put it 'obsessed with targets'. Other than the onerous nature of workers now having to do more recordings and the potential for this to impinge on time spent with children, the notion that one is measuring something quantifiable and concrete is seriously questioned by what the following participants say:

> *'If a child does not fall into a category or profile…have to think of the child as an individual..[these assessments have to be] done for official purposes, but on a day to day basis who officially fits?'*

In relation to assessment, another participant remarked about children with English as an additional language:

> *'… we can't reliably assess children in English and that brings up a whole host of issues for staff in terms of knowing where they are and how to plan for them'. Moreover, the statutory requirement that assessments are to be conducted only in English or Welsh at the end of the Foundation stage is of alarm. Such a system clearly disadvantages children who have English as an additional language, and risks children being labelled as 'failing' at a very young age.*

Yet another participant observed, *'all assessments are culturally biased'.* This is also demonstrated in the following example, relayed by an EMA worker. In conducting a standard assessment that aimed to measure children's ability to follow instructions (amongst other things), she observed that South Asian children conducted the task differently, more in line with South Asian child-rearing practices rather than western ones. However, as it was the latter method that

the devisers of the assessment were looking for, there was a danger that South Asian children would be seen as 'failing'. And indeed, the EMA worker reported that this did happen. The EMA worker's concern about the unfairness of the assessment and its interpretation, placed her in a position where she had to explain to colleagues the limitations of such assessments. This is a difficult area as it is challenging widely held assumptions about the neutrality and objectivity of such assessments.

<u>*Relationships with carers and communities*</u>

Relationships with carers and communities form a central plank of the EMA worker's role – and this extends beyond the immediate transition between home and establishment. Carers reported:

> *'It's like close relatives rather than staff – it's more than that, there's a personal touch'.*
> *'Lots of parents can't speak English, they [staff] can communicate with parents, [it] builds trust'.*

The majority of carers who participated in the evaluation were women. This is in line with the general trend of women as primary carers. It is therefore reasonable to assume that establishments, will, on the whole be dealing with women. The relationship between early years providers and women is sometimes an uncomfortable one. In attempts to work with parents, most often mothers, establishments sometimes organise parenting workshops in an attempt to encourage mothers to play more with their children with the aim of re-enforcing learning from play group or nursery. EMA workers are part of this educational culture, so it is not surprising that all the EMA workers interviewed reported activities with parents for example:
'workshops to help parents with learning – water play, language…story times, also lending toys and games to parents'
'helping parents to work with children at home in first language'
'workshops, parenting activities, active learning with children…parental skills'.

On the face of it, these activities may be seen as harmless and indeed as helpful. However, it needs to be recognised that they are based on white, middle-class views of what constitutes 'good' mothering, without taking into account women's social contexts, differing child-rearing traditions, language, culture, class and so on. As Burman (1994) argues, such interventions contribute to regulating mothers further, so that as well as being held responsible for the emotional well-being of their children, mothers are also expected to be responsible for their children's educational development as prescribed by dominant norms. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) point out that linking educational success with mothering places women in the position of having to extend their household labour to include educational opportunities for their children. Here we see how easy it is for EMA workers themselves to be both regulators, as well as being regulated by the demands of, and assumed universality of application of theories of child development. This does not apply only to EMA workers, as such interventions are part of the wider educational culture and frequently seen as good practice, but they clearly operate at crucial structural intersections.

Further the notion of teaching 'parental skills' makes three key assumptions.

Firstly, it assumes that mothers have no skills in this area, or secondly that what skills they do have are not recognised within the limited strictures of eurocentric views of the developing child. Thirdly, this is often accompanied by a denial that factors such as racism, poverty, class, gender and disability impact on mothering and childhood experiences. The widespread acceptance of western, middle-class models of child development infused within early years and play work at a national (and international) level means that its underlying assumptions, beliefs and practices frequently go unchallenged. Within these approaches, working class, young, lesbian and minoritised women are more likely to be subject to the gaze of practitioners as they are more likely to deviate from an assumed norm emanating from majority groups. Further, it is much easier for practitioners to focus on individual mothers and locate 'faults' with them, rather than grapple with seemingly intractable problems of structural inequalities.

Additionally, within multi-cultural Britain, cultural sensitivity is a state that is frequently aspired to in service provision, yet the precise meaning of cultural sensitivity appears to be elusive. A failure to interrogate 'cultural' assumptions may well lead to the views and concerns of minority groups such as women, children, young people, disabled people within particular cultural groupings being rendered invisible (Chantler et al, 2001). For typically, cultural assumptions function to privilege dominant views within particular cultures, thus maintaining existing power relations. Hence an 'over-attention' to cultural sensibilities may in itself lead to the most marginalised within those communities being overlooked.

This is raised here as a reminder that although the cultural proximity of EMA workers is a valuable resource, it is equally desirable to understand the ways in which community dynamics (whether of minority or majority groups) tend to favour dominant views.

The EMA role is crucial, as workers are able to work in ways which, value cultural diversity, and potentially as power brokers working towards equity. However, the position of the EMA worker is complex and the responsibility high. As we have seen, through their contact with carers and also through their own experiences, EMA workers may bring issues to the attention of the establishment around differences in child-rearing practices, minoritisation, cultural differences, and racism which establishments traditionally find difficult to work with. These factors serve to place EMA workers in a sometimes untenable, position with perceived responsibilities for anti-discriminatory practice, but without the power to institute change. Moreover, they are also structurally positioned as being in the middle of competing cultural systems – between families, communities and educational establishments. Additionally, their trainings will be eurocentric which may well serve to obscure cultural sensitivity (Mercer, 1986).

The EMA workers interviewed for this evaluation were women and, this accords with the wider trend of the gendered nature of the early years work force. This can sometimes position EMA workers in particularly stressful negotiations between families, communities and educational establishments. As Yuval Davis (1997), points out, women are seen as being responsible for transmitting cultural heritage and values between the

generations. In this instance, EMA women workers, especially where there is cultural proximity, may well be expected to fulfil this role, that is, an expectation that they should carry a sense of obligation, responsibility and loyalty to ensure 'cultural' values are not lost. On the other hand, workers who are culturally distant from communities they are working with, may, also respond to dominant norms within minoritised communities in attempts to work in a culturally sensitive manner. In either case, we need to ensure that marginalised voices are attended to rather than responding unthinkingly to supposed cultural norms. Clearly, relationships with (minoritised) communities are not only the responsibility of EMA workers, but also of the whole institution if unhelpful dynamics of tokenism and marginalisation are to be avoided (Batsleer et al, 2002; Burman et al, 2002; Chantler et al 2001).

What I have attempted to illustrate are the multi-layered and sometimes conflicting dynamics of relating to communities. These cannot be restricted purely to relationships with carers, or work with children, but should be extended to include a wider, more complex and nuanced way of engaging with communities in which EYP establishments are based. This includes issues of class, gender, ethnicity and how these intersect. Indeed, Dahlberg et al (1999) promote the idea of early learning institutions as 'forums in civil society':

> Early childhood institutions can be understood as public forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance (1999, Dahlberg et al, p. 73, emphasis in original).

They elaborate on principles including democracy and egalitarianism, and suggest possible projects that early years institutions may be involved in. However, they stress that to be forums 'early childhood institutions must choose to understand themselves as such and actively assume that task' (1999, Dahlberg et al, p. 74). This way of conceptualising early years offers exciting and meaningful ways of working in this field.

Conclusions

The EMA practitioner in early years settings makes an impressive contribution to children's achievement by valuing cultural and linguistic diversity, at transitions, by providing bilingual support, by challenging unfair assessments, and by working closely with carers and communities. In particular, attention needs to be drawn to what EMA workers describe as the 'silent' phase of acquiring English, and the issues of assessment. These are specific points where there is the greatest potential for labelling children who speak English as an additional language as 'failing', or with a 'developmental delay', or alternatively failing to recognise where additional support may be necessary. EMA workers can potentially make a key contribution here to redress such imbalances.

However, their location as the 'bridge' between carers and early years establishments places them at the juncture of conflicting cultural systems. Negotiating across and between dominant discourses of 'community' and establishment is a complex task. Communities may well have expectations

of EMA workers to report their concerns and to challenge discriminatory practices of establishments. At the same time, the gendered nature of the EMA workforce (in common with the rest of early years workforce) intersects with expectations from communities to uphold traditional notions of culture. Multi-cultural education rather than structural analyses, has traditionally been seen as key to harmonious 'race' relations. This dynamic further complicates the role of the EMA worker, as there is a danger that she will be urged, from both community, and establishment, to maintain cultural values and practices, even where these privilege dominant power relations of 'race', class and gender. In relation to gender, there has been long standing concern over the differential and preferential treatment accorded to boys, rather than girls (Burman, 1994; Walkerdine, 1985). Furthermore, notions of gender are frequently infused with racialised notions of minoritised cultures, which can lead, to a greater acceptance of gender inequality within minoritised communities on the part of early years practitioners. In their work with parents, predominantly mothers, early years establishments need to develop a model of working which focuses more on the impacts of structural inequalities, rather than individual pathology or cultural stereotypes.

The acquisition of English, whilst clearly desirable, needs to be developed in conjunction with children's home languages. Carers were adamant that home languages, and therefore culture, are a crucial part of children's identities, and, expressed a great sense of loss and potential dislocation, if the acquisition of English was at the expense of their own languages. The privileging of English is evidenced in both overt and covert methods. Overt strategies include the necessity to speak English to secure British citizenship, the requirement that the assessment at the end of the Foundation stage is to be conducted only in English or Welsh, and the descriptor 'community languages'. It is of great concern that the assessment of the Early Learning Goals at the end of the Foundation stage can only be conducted in English or Welsh. This serves to cement and further disadvantage children who have English as an additional language and confirms the longstanding association between dominant cultural competency, educational achievement and social mobility.

More subtle ways were documented in early years establishments where children are sometimes reported as being embarrassed or ashamed of their home language. In terms of educational achievement, the focus on English can lead to damaging and inaccurate assessments being made in relation to other areas of development. As this participant said:

> *'Children with English as an additional language will have language skills, maybe not English. Our job is to ensure that those skills are not lost, but further developed at the same time as developing English. There is a pressure to cram English into children [and so a] danger that children lose skills in first language and I think that's a terrible crime, they're set up to fail'.*

The role of bilingual early years practitioners is therefore crucial to ensure that the lack of a common language does not foreclose opportunities for children who are not yet fluent in English. The

presence of EMA practitioners within early years settings is heavily determined by the question of funding and associated views about who is entitled to resources. Given the history of funding for such services and the recent changes, the issue of whose responsibility it is to fund EMA practitioners within early years is particularly pertinent. This article highlights the valuable contributions that such practitioners make within early years despite the complexities of their location between communities and establishments. Their role can be enhanced not only by a more secure funding base, but also by firstly, all early years practitioners developing a structural understanding of inequalities, secondly, understanding the ways in which power relations manifest themselves in the process of acquiring English, and thirdly, an awareness of how dominant norms and values are embedded within their trainings. If there is a serious commitment to social inclusion, the rhetoric of 'diversity' and Prime Minister Blair's mantra 'education, education, education,' then we must build on and develop the good practice that is evident in EMA work within early years.

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[i] One of the establishments was a large day nursery serving very diverse communities. The other was a small pre-nursery centre (playgroup, age range 2.5 – 4 years), serving the Bangladeshi community.

[ii] The term carers is used in the UK to include parents as well adults who have primary responsibility for children who are not the child's biological parent in a variety of family arrangements e.g. foster carers, reconstituted families, same sex relationships, other relatives.

[iii] Whilst facilities for interpreters were made available, these were not formally taken up. The discussion with the 3 carers from the nursery was conducted in English. In the playgroup discussion, 6 carers participated, and the discussion was conducted largely in English.

[iv] The terms minoritised and minoritisation are used to indicate that minority groups do not occupy the position of minority by virtue of some inherent and essentialised characteristics, but rather acquire this position as the outcome of a socio-historic process. As such this terminology is important as it reflects the *processes* rather than the stasis associated with the term 'minority ethnic'.

[v] Dedicated time refers to the positive benefits of EMA workers being in addition to the level of staffing required by the Children Act (1989).