The assessment of special educational needs for bilingual children

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Introduction
For over 25 years there has been profound suspicion in the black community of arrangements made for the assessment of special educational needs. Initially, the public debate focused on the over-representation of children of Afro-Caribbean origin in special schools for the ‘mildly’ educationally subnormal (Coard, 1971), but the concern soon spread to other groups. The Education Act 1981 on special educational needs was described by a black pressure group as ‘a serious threat to the education of black children’ (Haringey Black Pressure Group on Education, 1984, pp.9-10), and the headline of an article in a Muslim newspaper referred to educational psychologists as ‘immigration officials of a monolingual system’. The language of some academic commentators was just as strong. In the USA, De Blassie and Franco (1983) described the transfer of bilingual pupils to SEN provision as ‘tantamount to a “rape” of these children’ (p.55). Cummins (1984, p.1) used the term ‘deportation’. He had in mind a 1917 report in which a physician celebrated the successful use of mental tests to secure the deportation from the USA of large numbers of aliens, and they were described in the jargon of the day as ‘feeble-minded’. If a dispassionate observer reviewed recent changes made in procedures and methods of assessment, would they come to as harsh a conclusion? This article examines the position with reference to bilingual children, specifically those from ethnic and linguistic minority communities.

Policies and procedures
The 1981 and 1993 Education Acts (DES, 1981; DfE, 1993) did at least offer some clarity on questions of definition. They stated that a lack of competence in English (or Welsh in Wales) is not to be equated with SEN as defined in the Act:

‘A child is not to be taken as having a learning difficulty solely because the language (or form of the language) in which he is, or will be, taught is different from a language (or form of a language) which has at any time been spoken in his home.’

(1993 Act: Section 156)

But the Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) that followed paid relatively little attention to the specific needs of children from linguistic minorities. Its advice is couched in very general terms. A more detailed guide for those working with bilingual children, published by the National Association for the Development of Language in the Curriculum, highlights points in the recommended procedures when additional specific actions may be needed if a child thought to have SEN has a first language other than English (Cline, 1995). Crucial procedural steps which are not made explicit in the Code of Practice include:

• the active involvement of ESL (English as a Second Language) and bilingual support teachers at every stage;
• the recording and reviewing of information on a child’s knowledge and use of their home language and of English;
• the setting and reviewing of specific educational aims covering language and cultural needs;
• the arrangement of appropriate language provision;
• the investigation of social, cultural and language isolation and peer harassment as possible factors in the child’s difficulties;
• the engagement of an interpreter/adviser from the parent’s own community if needed;
• where a child attends a religious or community school, the inclusion of that school among the outside agencies to be consulted.

Such procedural steps are necessary, but they are not sufficient in themselves to meet the challenges described earlier. For that purpose sensitive and fair methods of assessment must be developed. The first step must be to review some unhelpful myths that have grown up around the topic.

Notions of the ideal that stand in the way of achievable good practice
In the legendary world of King Arthur, belief in the existence of the Holy Grail was no doubt an obstacle to social progress. As long as the Knights of the Round Table thought that the answer to the problems of the kingdom lay in finding the Grail, they probably did not look closely at their own households and estates or tackle the problems at home that were staring them in the face. The challenge of SEN assessment for bilingual children lacks romantic appeal, but it has its own versions of the Holy Grail, which have often stood in the way of progress.

We should develop a culture-fair test for bilingual children
The logic is simple and obvious: if tests are culturally biased, the answer must be to develop tests that are fair, and then the problem will be overcome. The Code of
Practice advocates the use of ‘assessment tools which are culturally neutral’ (DfE, 1994, para 2.18). A culture-fair test, however, is impossible. Human development and human behaviour take place in a cultural context, which is often unfair (De Blassie, 1983), and the results of any tests may reflect, in part, the pattern of opportunities that exists. The purpose of testing is to make predictions in a cultural context, and a culture-fair test would be empty of useful content.

There is a weaker version of this principle (both attainable and worthwhile), the modest aim of which is to reduce test content that is strongly biased against particular cultural groups. Individual test items are reviewed to identify those which might be offensive to a target group or which incorporate any form of stereotyping. Items are checked to ensure that their language will have a common meaning for all who might take the test, and that the activities described in them will, as far as possible, be equally familiar (or equally unfamiliar) to all examinees. Such a review may be seen as a necessary step, even if not sufficient in itself to solve all the problems identified.

At the same time even this version has a siren aspect. Some commentators imply that such measures would be sufficient in themselves to transform the situation, but it is not enough to substitute one set of materials for another. There are important sources of bias outside the instrumentation: in the processes of referral, collecting background information, decision making and reporting. It is essential to attend to these issues as well as to test bias itself (Graf, 1992).

We should work exclusively in the child’s home language
For some time there has been compelling evidence that bilingual children who are taught in school at least partly in the language they speak at home make greater educational progress (Collier, 1989). In this country, outside Wales, there are now almost no stable and continuing bilingual education programmes. In areas where there is a single major minority language community, it is a shame and a scandal, but it is a fact. It is the national context within which assessment strategies must be developed.

In some statements by both community representatives and academics it has been suggested that interviewing and testing with bilingual children for SEN assessment should be in their home language. Unfortunately, in the context of national education policy, it will not necessarily be helpful. There are in any case, technical problems about translating normative tests, but the main point is that for many bilingual pupils the use of each of their languages is domain-specific as their home language may not be their dominant language across several educational domains. If a child has never discussed, say, a particular scientific concept or historical event in their home language, using that language to ask them about it in an assessment will make the task harder and not easier.

A weaker form of the principle of using the home language for testing purposes would command general assent. In this version it is asserted that the first question to be asked when a bilingual pupil shows learning difficulties in school is a question about communication. The first task in any assessment must be to evaluate the child’s full language proficiency, i.e. his or her knowledge of, and skill in, using each of the languages to which he or she has access. With whom can the child communicate in and out of school, and how effectively? The design of an adequate teaching programme cannot begin without that information. There has been a good deal of work in the USA on methods of language planning (Ortiz and Garcia, 1990), but it appears that in the UK there is often no basic information on children’s competence in their first language in the advice attached to SEN Statements (Cline, 1991; Desforges, Mayet & Vickers, 1995).

All children should have workers from the same background as themselves
For some black people it seems ‘quite obvious that many black parents and pupils will be at a serious disadvantage… in the absence of black psychologists… and other black professionals’ (Haringey Black Pressure Group on education, 1984, p.9). Indirect research evidence gathered in the '70s appeared to support the view that black groups in the USA were advantaged when tested by computer but white groups were not (Johnson & Mihal, 1973), and other studies suggested that black children trusted a black interviewer more than a white interviewer (Strickland, 1972). That conclusion, however, was based on indirect evidence, and when researchers tried to show directly that the race of an examiner would affect the scores children obtained on tests, their results were inconsistent (Graziano, Varca & Levy, 1982). It appears that there may be many other factors: for example, the age of the pupils, the region where they live and the nature of the assessment task can each affect whether or not performance changes with the race of the examiner.

In any case, in a multi-ethnic and multilingual society, within a conurbation such as London, children may come from any one of 150 language backgrounds, and it will be impossible to offer ethnic and linguistic matching to all children who may require SEN assessment. In addition, there is a danger of placing those psychologists and teachers who speak minority languages in a professional ghetto, working mainly with people from the same communal background and consequently having restricted opportunities for assuming wider responsibilities.

Alternatively, a more desirable and attainable goal would be for trainers, employers and staff to ensure that relevant professionals are competent to work effectively with the full range of the ethnic and linguistic groups in their geographical areas. The major challenge, therefore, for services and for university departments is to establish the necessary training as a normal element of all initial and in-service professional development. In some LEA services, the creation of a variety of liaison and advisory posts has been helpful, but the role of workers from ethnic and linguistic minority communities remains critical. What is being argued here should not take away the pressure on trainers and employers to ensure that the personnel in professional services closely reflects the composition of the
In each case there is a weaker version of the *ideal* principle which is both more attainable and more desirable. Perhaps it will not be too long before we can say that all bilingual children who are assessed:

- are given assessment materials on which a formal process of item bias review has been completed;
- have a full bilingual language assessment at the outset, the results of which inform all that follows;
- are dealt with exclusively by workers who, whatever their own background, are knowledgeable about and sensitive to key features of the children’s culture and language.

### Focusing assessment on the learning environment

Over the years, SEN assessment has focused successively, and sometimes exclusively, on the child, on the teaching programme and on the ‘zone of potential development’. If appropriate methods are selected, an approach such as curriculum-related assessment may have considerable advantages in work with bilingual children (Frederickson & Cline, 1990; Cline & Frederickson, 1996). Dynamic assessment of the zone of potential development may also be valuable (Hamers, Ruijssenaars & Sijtsma, 1993). But a full response to the challenges set out above should include a focus on the learning environment, which has traditionally been ignored and is not normally covered within these approaches. Therefore the remainder of this article concentrates on this neglected aspect of SEN assessment.

The problem with earlier approaches was not that the simple main effects on which they were based do not occur: low IQ is correlated with significant distortions in the regular pattern of development; behaviour and performance are influenced predictably by the contingencies explored in behavioural psychology. The problem is that such accounts are partial and that what they ignore is crucial to successful prediction in individual cases. One missing feature in such models is a clear vision of the dynamic interaction between the individual person and the context in which he or she is placed - an interaction that works both ways as children influence and are influenced by key relationships with others.

These phenomena are not static and do not form simple, separable, unique units like the individual personality. When ‘contextual factors’ were investigated in the past, the image of a ‘launch’ mechanism was often influential. An event or feature of the context during an early stage of a child’s development (e.g. parental divorce or family reading habits) was seen as responsible for subsequent aspects of the course of development. The complexity of the settings of human development is more fully appreciated today, and the study of the impact of change on environments over time is beginning to receive more attention (Kreppner, 1992; Kindermann & Valsiner, 1995). Predicting the course of development requires a knowledge of conditions throughout the journey, as well as of the circumstances of the ‘launch’. The task of describing person-context interactions needs to be rigorous, capable of replication and theory-based. The accounts that emerge will not necessarily be quantifiable or unique, and alternative accounts will be possible. A critical question, if the aim is to ensure the replication of a science, is how to choose among (or how to weight) alternative accounts (Thorngate, 1995). In returning to the specific challenge of SEN assessment, I will suggest a basis for making the choice.

In the assessment of the learning environments of children with SEN the aim must be to determine whether there are factors in the environment that may cause or exacerbate their difficulties. The underlying assumption with this approach is that children’s classroom performance and behaviour result from an interaction between their current state and personal characteristics on the one hand and the conditions for learning in that particular environment on the other. Studying either the children or the classroom alone will not be enough; assessment must also focus on the interactions between them. But, whilst there is a growing appreciation of the need for assessment to encompass such knowledge, the means of doing so are still lacking. With the notable, pioneering exception of TIES-II (Ysseldyke & Christenson, 1993), there are no published instruments available for practitioners’ use with children who may have SEN. A strength of TIES-II is that it relates closely to the North American classroom context for which it was developed but, unfortunately, those who have trialled the materials in the UK have found them less useful (Frederickson & Cline, 1996).

It is impossible for the advice attached to SEN Statements to ignore the learning environment completely as an account of children’s responses to their current educational provision is a requirement and it is not possible to describe the response without giving some kind of account of the provision (DES, 1989; DfE, 1994, para. 3.50). It appears, however, that professionals are not well prepared for the task. Two teams of investigators in recent years have noted that the analysis of the current learning environment in such advice has generally been sparse and vague (Goacher, Evans, Welton & Wedell, 1988; Audit Commission, 1992). My own examination of a small sample of Statements in a pilot study in 1993 confirmed that such accounts were very rarely based on systematic assessment and rigorous evidence.

A workshop report on the subject (Frederickson & Cline, 1996) was general and did not give attention specifically to bilingual pupils. I will therefore, conclude with some comments on what might need to be included in any SEN...
learning environment assessment, specifically when the children concerned are bilingual.

What constitutes the ‘learning environment’ for a child? It can be argued that the total context includes the neighbourhood, the family and the home, the local authority, the school and the classroom. Strategically, the most pressing need appears to be for a more systematic approach to assessing the immediate learning environment, i.e., the classroom or other setting in which teaching and learning are to take place. Although a great deal of work has been undertaken on the evaluation of home, family and school factors, there is no generally accepted strategy (or instrument) for evaluating the immediate learning environment systematically in work with children with SEN in the UK.

Ultimately, a full account of a child’s immediate learning environment will need to include detailed answers to the following:

- **Where?** Where does the learning take place?
- **With whom?** With whom does the child associate while learning?
- **From whom?** Who facilitates the child’s learning?
- **When?** When is teaching scheduled and when are learning opportunities used?
- **What?** What is the taught curriculum?
- **How?** What methods and materials are used for communication and teaching?

To illustrate the approach, I will look briefly at just one of the questions. My purpose is to suggest some of the issues that will need attention when the child who is being assessed is bilingual.

With whom does the child associate while learning? For any child with SEN, a full answer to the question will need to cover such issues as group size, the educational status of the other children in the learning group, and their special educational needs. Arrangements for collaborative work and pupil grouping will be an important focus of enquiry: a child with SEN may be in a large group but not of it, and a criticism made of North American work in this field was that the authors gave too little attention to the evaluation of peer interactions (Frederickson & Cline, 1996). The importance of these factors should not be underestimated, as Kindermann (1995) has shown.

When bilingual children are being assessed, it is essential to identify their peers in the classroom who have the same home languages and the same ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The availability of support from such peers will obviously make a crucial difference to children in the early stages of second language acquisition, and it will continue to be important for those with language learning difficulties and with strong intracultural identification.

A teacher has many options in structuring a child’s working contacts. Through the sequential arrangement of homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, the allocation of individual and collaborative work with varying requirements (including language and reporting), the regular use of peer tutoring, the teacher may explore systematically whether or not this feature of the learning environment can be made to provide more effective support within the classroom. For example, an adaptation of peer tutoring for systematic use with bilingual pupils, has been described in detail by Curtis (1992). A teacher could carry out time sampling observation and could commission diary records from the tutor, the tutee or both. It is valuable to seek multiple perspectives on the learning environment and an individual child’s response to it. That strategy has been endorsed in several accounts of development work in this area (Bennett, 1991; Ysseldyke & Christenson, 1993; Frederickson & Cline, 1996).

When assessment involves the investigation of ‘multiple perspectives’ on a situation, a significant consideration is sometimes neglected. This is that, amongst the range of perspectives that may be collected, there are good reasons for giving primacy to the perspective of the primary actor: the child who is considered to have SEN. Because he or she is likely to present his or her ‘perspective’ in a less articulate and less organized way than other actors in the scene, there has been an (understandable) tendency to downplay its importance. But that is to ignore the degree to which the person-environment interaction depends crucially on the person’s perceptions, the impact of those perceptions on their own behaviour and on the ways in which they interpret and seek to influence the behaviour of others.

Innovative attempts have been made to develop structured approaches to investigating the perspective on the learning environment of children with SEN, including interview schedules and questionnaires such as the Student Interview Record in TIES-II and instruments devised by the education service in Waltham Forest (Gersh, 1992). At present, there is no published interview schedule or questionnaire designed specifically for work with bilingual pupils who may have SEN. But the time for tackling this task is overdue. It was true 25 years ago, and remains true today, when critics asked how we could achieve equity in SEN assessment, important aspects of the answer must be to investigate the immediate learning environment systematically and to give appropriate priority to children’s perspectives on it.

References


This is an edited version of Tony Cline’s inaugural lecture given at the University of Luton on 28 January 1996.

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Accepted for publication: December 1997