

POLICY, PRACTICE and RESEARCH

IKRAM'S DAY

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Ikram's Monday

Morning 9.40am – English Literacy Hour, Watford Garden School

Ikram and his Year 2 class of 6-7 year olds have finished the first, whole class part of their daily literacy hour lesson. The main focus of the lesson so far has been on 'story settings' in terms of locating 'key words and phrases in text', as identified in the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998, p. 28) as the appropriate learning objective for this term and for children of this age in all English schools. Some children develop their own story settings by labelling relevant parts of their maps, but today Ikram's independent task is not related to the story. Instead on a photocopied sheet he begins to correct English sentences which have no punctuation marks. "Full stop goes there and there, and that's capital letter", Ikram says with confidence and succeeds in completing the task before the lesson is over. Both Ikram and his class teacher look pleased.

Lunchtime 12.35pm – Urdu Class, Watford Garden School

Outside the shrieks, the laughter and the general hurly-burly of the school playground continue. Inside 17 children of Pakistani background, aged between 5 and 7 years, begin their weekly Urdu class. Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, is often a new language to these children: their home language is Pahari, which no longer has a written form. The teacher, Mrs Gani begins the lesson by writing the Urdu alphabet on the blackboard. Everyone joins in repeating the letters. Using a big book and its illustrations Mrs Gani asks everyone in Urdu to identify objects which begin with the different Urdu letters. She is pleased with Urdu words and accepts - with a smile - all those offered in Pahari or English. She translates between the three different languages, Pahari, Urdu and English, and occasionally corrects Urdu pronunciation. Some time is spent discussing the differences between the two different types of /d/, one of which does not exist in English. A while later all children copy the Urdu alphabet, which has similarities with classical Arabic. Meticulously

Ikram copies letters from right to left, and as I move next to him, he tells me, "I can do the proper one!" and he begins to recite the alphabet. Ali interrupts him and says, "Ikram, that's Arabic, not Urdu." Ikram stops. Smiling cheerfully - he, too, knows the difference - he resumes his writing.

Evening 5.20pm – Qur'anic Class, Mosque

About 34 boys in all sit in a large circle in the local Mosque. The teacher, Mr Khan, reads with one of the youngest, who is about 5 years old. Some of the older boys, 14-15 years, try to play as many tricks as they possibly can behind Mr Khan's back. Not very easy, given that Mr Khan can see everyone. "Cheater! You cheated again! You didn't do it properly!" they taunt each other loudly in English. Ikram sits very close to Mr Khan and reads with sustained concentration a language, classical Arabic that he does not speak or understand. He turns his book towards the end (which in his school literacy hour lesson would be considered the beginning) and says, "This is very difficult. But I can do this one. Shall I show you?" he asks and without prompting he begins to recite a section without looking at the text. The confident body posture and the expression full of pride seems to indicate that though reading (decoding classical Arabic writing in terms of recognising the sound/symbol correspondence) is important, the most cherished and esteemed skill here is the ability to recite by heart.

This vignette from a PhD study that explores the ways in which bilingual children learn to read. An increasing number of British children learn to read in more than one language at the same time as they learn to read in English, and for the children this results in social, emotional and cognitive advantages.

Ikram is a typical learner in that he is learning to read simultaneously in three different languages. Children, like Ikram, are very aware of their own learning process, what they have to do as a learner in each school, which potentially provides them with innovative new ways of entering the world of English literacy. They are also able to discuss their literacy learning in highly analytical and complex terms. At the age of 5 they examine, translate and reflect on words in different languages, how they are written in different scripts and contrast sound systems in different languages, for example how English has only one 'd' sound but Urdu has two.

In particular, children like Ikram are skilled at 'sorting out' the different reading systems. This results in the following literacy-learning strengths:

- Easy identification of similarities and differences between lexicon (vocabulary),