



**"My problem is all these new kids with huge language difficulties. They are holding back the rest of the class."**

The question to consider here is who, in fact, has the language difficulty. A child may not be able to speak English, but she will surely speak one or more other languages. Both the teacher and the rest of the class could regard the multi-lingual nature of their situation as a rich resource rather than as a problem.

Now is our chance to hear one another's languages and to compare and think about them. It is often asserted that people who speak many languages are more cognitively agile than monolingual people. Surely a classroom containing a number of languages has greater possibilities for cognitive development? Once a teacher has acted upon this idea, the English second language speakers may help in bringing the rest of the class forward.

**"I don't see why my child should be wasting time learning Portuguese or Tswana at school when she could be learning useful things like needlework."**

This person seems to think that our brains have limited space for learning, and that learning one thing eliminates the possibility of learning another. However, one could argue for an additive rather than a subtractive approach. This is based on the notion that some learning facilitates more learning.

There is also the concern about time on the school timetable. Traditionally subjects have been slotted into periods. Our thinking about what is learnt when, tends to limit us: 10 to 10.30 is physical education, 10.30 to 11 is history. Language is perceived as being learnt only in a specific language lesson.

Yet language is used, and therefore acquired, in all lessons. Why not, for exam-

ple, encourage Tswana in the needlework class? If the teacher can't speak Tswana, some of the children may be able to help.

**"I'm just the geography teacher. English is the English teacher's job."**

Firstly, I'd like to dwell a little on a point made in the previous paragraph. This relates to the idea that every teacher is a language teacher.

As babies we do not acquire language in language lessons. We hear language being used in all sorts of situations. Sounds start to make sense. We understand their meaning and so learn to shape our own sounds in order to communicate with others. Babies don't learn language for the sake of language but for the sake of communication.

Linguists such as Stephen Krashen argue that we acquire language better when focusing on understanding the content of a subject other than language. So, if you want to learn English, do geography in English. The job of the geography teacher is to ensure that her lesson is understandable.

I would argue further that the job of the English teacher is to help the geography teacher think of ways of making her input more understandable. A greater range of classroom activities would shift the focus from the written or spoken word to an understanding of the concepts themselves. Words would naturally follow as a means of providing form to these understandings.

This working together of teachers would have more far-reaching effects than the "extra lesson" syndrome so many language teachers get locked into.

What matters is that we continue to ask questions and to try out new ideas so that the process of developing our schools never comes to a standstill.

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change. Schools cannot stay the same – and wouldn't it be sad if they did?

Some schools have attempted to adjust to the wider variety of cultural backgrounds among their pupils by adding bits and pieces to the syllabus, and by acknowledging particular festivals in their assemblies. So, for example, a Christian school may celebrate Diwali or the Chinese New Year.

Such practices further crowd the timetable without having any significant impact on the ethos of the school. Some continue to flourish as it did before. A school genuinely working to accommodate and affirm all of its community does not take this tokenist route. Rather it evaluates its ethos or hidden curriculum as well as its taught curriculum, and ensures that change is constant. Acknowledging in a meaningful way the different languages pupils speak goes a long way in this direction.

**T**HE opening of South African schools to all has

## Multi-cultural challenge

brought with it many challenges that pupils, teachers and parents are struggling to meet. However, a seminar held recently by Idasa in East London on new approaches to multi-cultural teaching found that the challenges are not insurmountable.

Senior House of Representatives education official Mr E Fray outlined some of his experiences while headmaster at Greenpoint Secondary School in the city. He said that admitting Xhosa students to the school had brought with it the challenge of dealing with circumcision initiates.

These pupils returned to school after the

winter holidays wearing khaki instead of school uniform. It was sometimes difficult for teachers to deal with them because they had now graduated to the status of "men".

These had not turned out to be insurmountable problems, however. Rather they had contributed significantly to a growth in sensitivity at the school to the new students' cultural background.

The principal of St Anne's Primary School, Mr B Lahoud, shared his experiences with the intergration of children of different races over a period of 10 years, when Catholic schools opened their doors to all.

The third member of the panel, Ms N Barry, lower primary project leader at the Independent Teacher Enrichment Centre, spoke about the development of materials for anti-bias education suitable for use in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual situation.

Participants in the seminar all felt that it was useless simply to criticise schools, but that parents and educationalists should take an active interest in school affairs. It was felt that most black parents have yet to clarify in their own minds what they mean when they say they want a good education for their children.

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