

ABETARE AND DANCING: the story of a partnership

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It is almost 5 o'clock on a night in early November. The last teachers' cars are leaving the car park. Mothers and children are arriving for the Albanian class. They sit on benches in the playground and chat in the gathering dusk while the children run around. The air is still mild. Ana arrives laden with bags full of teaching materials, the children come up to her and greet her with a hug. Ermir, the dance teacher, arrives and the little group move in to the warmth of the mainstream school building. The door is left open for late-comers. The children say good bye to their mothers and follow both teachers into a classroom. The two hour session will be split with the younger children learning Albanian with Ana for the first hour while the older children learn dance steps and play games in the gym, then they will swap over.

Introduction:

The present chapter tells the story of the partnership between a primary school that values the language and culture of its children and a community organisation that works with it to support the children's bilingualism and emerging identities. It follows the children as they move from a language class that uses ABETARE, an Albanian teaching programme, to learning the complex steps of traditional dancing. In interviews with the researcher, they reflect on their experiences. The article is part of an ongoing two-year evaluative study that will map the developing partnership between Shpresa and Garnham school and explore its impact on the attainment of children of Albanian heritage.

The research and policy context

Of particular relevance to the formation of the partnership is the theoretical model developed by Cummins. Through a concern for social justice, this model identified aspects of education that can seriously disable learners who speak minority languages in contexts in which they have no access to bilingual education (1984; 1996; 2000). However Cummins suggests that incorporating the language of the community into the school, even if it can't actually be taught, and involving families and the community in the education of the children (Cummins, 1986; 1996) can support educational achievement. He argues that building on pupils' cultural knowledge and language skills and providing teaching that "affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in learning" leads to successful academic engagement (Cummins et al, 2006). It is just such a concern that led the school to engage with the Albanian organisation.

The work of Pavlenko and Blackledge on multidimensional identities (2004) and of Creese et al. (2006) in complementary schools also shows how identity development can be supported through the interaction of language and culture in a safe space. Harris' study of bilingual pupils in west London demonstrates what pupils' own informal speech reveals about their developing identities (2006). Recent work on the development of multiliteracy by Gregory (Gregory, 2008; Gregory et al, 2004) and Kenner (2004), reveals children who not only cope, but thrive, on becoming literate in languages which may be taught in very different ways in different settings. The

research shows how their experiences can lead them to a deeper understanding of how their languages work and to reflect on the relationship between their languages, as the children in the present study demonstrate. Community organisations can play a key role in supporting parents to engage more successfully with their children's schools (Sneddon, 1997) and support the school in making better use of parents' 'funds of knowledge' and expertise (Gonzalez et al, 1993).

While the lack of status and support for community languages in the UK has been well documented (Conteh, Martin and Robertson, 2007), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) have recently expressed an interest in the teaching of community languages (DfES, 2002) and acknowledged the value of complementary education. This has led to the funding of the Our Languages project to encourage the teaching of community languages through partnerships between complementary and mainstream schools (CILT, 2008a). The model suggested reflects what Shpresa had already initiated in east London and the organisation was invited to submit a case study as an example of good practice in partnership (CILT, 2008b).

The context of the partnership

Garnham Primary School was built in the 1970s near the commercial centre of a borough which, until their recent downsizing, provided the labour force for the enormous Ford factories near the river Thames. The school is surrounded by small Victorian houses and both low and high rise council housing. From being an almost exclusively white working class neighbourhood, the area is now very ethnically mixed. It is not, however, economically mixed. Unemployment is high, leading to high levels of deprivation and to political tensions in the community. In Garnham School, 75% of children are learners of English as an additional language, 25% have refugee status and 50% are entitled to free school meals.

The school is "a haven of calm within the community". The report by OfSTED, the body that inspects schools, describes it thus and elaborates "pupils... enjoy school and appreciate the wide range of additional activities provided for them. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding, and a tribute to the school's very good pastoral care and support" (OfSTED, 2007:1).

One of these additional activities has been run by Shpresa (meaning *hope* in Albanian) since September 2007. The organisation was set up to meet the needs of the community of Albanian speakers living in east London, many of whom arrived from the mid-1990s as asylum seekers (Sneddon and Martin, 2008). Shpresa organises Albanian classes and a range of dance, drama, sporting and cultural activities for children and young people in after-school, week-end and holiday programmes. The organisation has developed a powerful model of partnership with mainstream schools, running classes in six boroughs in north and east London. In return for the free use of premises, it offers activities for children, information about language and culture, supports teachers and parents to establish relationships and can also set up workshops for women to enable them to better support their children's education and get involved in the life of the school. Shpresa also raises the profile of Albanian culture through organising performances of Albanian dance by the children, both in school and in public venues.

When Shpresa approached the school to offer its services to the 100 Albanian speaking children on roll, the headteacher was cautious: “I was very wary in the beginning because I had worked with lots of parents’ groups in the past. The idea is always very good, I am very positive, but it can mean an awful lot of work for the school” (CILT, 2008b). He agreed to work in partnership with Shpresa for a trial period of three months and, realising how thoroughly professional and competent the organisation was, became enthusiastic about the benefits of the partnership.

ABETARE in the classroom

Back in the classroom, the children have hung up their coats and the older group has followed Ermir to the gym. The younger children sit in horse-shoe formation around large tables facing the white board. The arrangement is formal and reflects the style of teaching. The children have only an hour to learn basic literacy in Albanian. Ana tells the children: “*Tani do të prezamtojme veten tone. Gjithe secili do të thotë emrin e tij dhe sa vjeç është*” (Now we are going to introduce ourselves. Everyone has to say their name and how old they are).

Antoneta stands up confidently “*Unë jam Antoneta dhe jam 7 vjeç*” (My name is Antoneta and I am 7). The other children follow in turn. Ana asks them “*çfarë date është sot?*” (What is to-day’s date?). The children respond in unison “*Sot është 6 Nentor 2008*”.

All the children in this class started school speaking only Albanian, but all have now become dominant in English. In earlier interviews mothers have expressed great concern over their children’s loss of fluency and confidence in Albanian. Ana is very aware of this and explains that, as well as teaching literacy and aspects of different subjects such as history, geography and maths, she is intent on getting the children to hear and respond to a good model of language.

She conducts the whole lesson in Albanian, mostly from the front of the class. She has a warm and expressive voice, articulates carefully and uses body language and props from her large bags.

Albanian uses the Roman alphabet and has a regular grapho-phonetic relationship. There is a strong emphasis in this programme on learning the letters that represent the 36 phonemes of Albanian. An understanding of this relationship can help children to transfer their reading skills from English to Albanian with comparative ease (Sneddon, 2008). Ana distributes flash cards for the children to use in pairs and follows this with illustrated letter cards attached to the white board: Aa for *ariu* (a bear), Rr for *rosa* (a duck), Ee for *elefant* (an elephant) and Eë for *ëmbelsira* (a cake).

The children know exactly what is expected of them, they respond rapidly individually or in unison; Ana builds up the pace *spejt! Speje!* (quick); the atmosphere becomes competitive. The lesson then moves on to the initial letters of children’s names. Ana explains the difference between consonants (*bashkëtingëllore*) and vowels (*zanore*). The children count the letters and digraphs from an alphabet chart (36), consonants (29) and vowels (7). They move on to blending single sounds into syllables.

Ana hands out individual exercise books that are part of the ABETARE literacy scheme and explains the tasks. The page they are using focuses on the letter I (pronounced 'ee' in Albanian). It includes handwriting practice, completing words, and a simple dictation exercise. Some children are working individually in their books, individuals come out to the board and make up short words with letter cards. One demonstrates 'unë – Ina – jam' (My name is Ina). Another reads: *Unë jam Iliri, Ilda, Indrit*. The class chant what is on the board.

The lesson moves on. Rebeca volunteers a well known poem about the Albanian national Flag Day:

*Babanë epyeti Beni
O babi a e di?
Pse flamurin e kemi?
Dy ngjyrqsh kug e zi?*

(Beni asked his father "father, do you know why our flag has the colours black and red?") She recites two stanzas; Ana supports her with a couple of prompts and all the children clap. Another child recites another section in a quiet voice and is also cheered.

The only real opportunity for children to use spontaneous language is when Ana asks them to talk about the half-term holiday which they had the week before. A boy stands up and starts "Last week I..." Ana interrupts "In Albanian!" He continues in Albanian to tell the class that he played in a football match and that his team won. Saima comments: 'excellent!' On this occasion he is the only one to rise to the challenge of describing holiday activities in Albanian.

Towards the end of the session Ana summarises the lesson, reminding the children what they have learned. She moves them onto the mat and leads a game. She calls out: *vigani!* (tall) and *skkurtabiqi!* (small). The children respond by standing or crouching. The children are playing a kind of Simon Says game. The leader stands or squats and calls out an instruction. She tries to confuse them by doing the wrong action: the children must do what she says, not what she does. The pace is fast. Ana encourages the children to take on the role of leader of the game. They do, and loudly. A few children are talking excitedly in Albanian. The children are enjoying the game and they cheer and clap. Ana tells them it is time to pack up their workbooks and go to the gym for their dance lesson. They cheer again.

The ABETARE programme that Ana is using is geared to teaching children in Albania. It includes a wide range of resources including stories and audio materials as well as textbooks and workbooks, some of which the children use at home. She differentiates lessons for the individual children in the class, taking account of their varying skills in Albanian and ensuring they hear a good model of speech. Although Ana has reported that she uses English if it is necessary to ensure understanding, there is little evidence of this in the lesson. There is also very little evidence of the children using a mixed code as reported, for example, in Gujerati classes in Leicester (Creese and Martin, 2006). The children have been speaking entirely in Albanian throughout this class, but because of the way in which the class is run and the time constraints, there is little opportunity for them to speak among themselves. However the pace is fast and lively and it keeps the children very focused.

Dancing

While the ABETARE is taught in the classroom, dancing and games are going on, first with the older children, then with the younger. The gym is bright and spacious. On benches round the side two mothers are sitting, watching and chatting. They live too far away to go home and come back for their children.

The older children are in a circle. Ermir speaks in English: "OK, you know the words?" They children are playing a 'statues' game. Two children chase the others. When the leader calls '*ngriva!*' those who manage to freeze instantly cannot be caught. When the leader calls '*shriva!*' *the players* un-freeze and they are chased again. The children are very excited and running and shouting in both Albanian and English.

Ermir sits the children down in a circle to reflect on their learning: "we're going to play that again soon. Now, can you tell me why we play this game? Come on".

Child: "to learn words?"

Ermir: "OK, so we learn words. What else?"

Child: "to work as a team".

T.: perfect! To work as a team. Because there were two people working together, then the rest. So we had to work as one team and they had to work as one team. That is quite good. That's important in the dancing too, working as a team. Because you are altogether dancing, and one of you, in the middle of the dance, as she is doing now, is doing something different. So it changes the team. OK? So if you be as a team, you can make it work. Yeah? What do you think? So did you all work as a team? You didn't plan anything. Me with her (the girl who was his partner) we planned. Him and her, they planned.... So you can help each other. OK? Good. O.K. So what is next? O.K.? You tell me. So why is that game?"

Child: "to work in pairs and get exercise".

Ermir: "Exercise. Always, Every where you go, exercise is in everything you do.

Dancing is exercise. As you learn you work as a team. Why is working as a team so important?"

Child: "to make it work".

Ermir: "what we are going to do is, I want you in one line first".

The children line up, try to pair up, hesitate, get confused, shriek with laughter. They play a game which involves responding rapidly to the number they have been given. The pace is very fast and the children are challenged when it gets faster still.

After the games the children move in to a dance formation, in two lines facing the teacher, girls in front, boys behind. Ermir demonstrates the steps and counts "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8" to keep the rhythm. The children are watching carefully and very intent on getting the steps right.

"Sometimes you have to do this on a big stage or a small stage. Sometimes you are going to have a big hall, sometimes a small one. So you have to get used, OK.?"

Ermir demonstrates two different formations: with children spread out or closer together. He counts to keep the beat and the pace gets faster and faster. Children are concentrating hard and following his lead very closely. The steps are getting ever

more complicated. All of this practice is without music. The CD player on the bench is not used.

Next Ermir arranges the children in a triangular formation. This is difficult and Ermir is moving children around to get them in the right position: “if you stay behind her, it’s an issue. You’re hiding. So always stay on her right side. OK? So it’s a triangle, so another girl should be there which she’s not. Yep. OK. So this is your place. Ready? Let’s go. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 other side. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and again”. He keeps counting and setting up the elaborate dance pattern, occasionally repositioning the children. “Me and her go back, and them two and you are going to go forward. OK? We’re going to go. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, so you come here”. It is a very intricate dance and the tempo is speeding up.

Later the younger children go to the gym. This time Ermir starts with dancing. They are practising very complex patterns with fierce concentration and are really working well in time and keeping the rhythm. The teacher tells the children “if you do the dance good, we can play games.” He moves on to the same games played with the older children. The children are excited but remain disciplined and laugh a lot when they make mistakes.

Ermir has chosen to speak in English with the children, using Albanian only when it was an integral part of the game. He is engaging the children in reflection and teaching co-operation and team-work. He has high expectations of the children and they respond with team-work and discipline. The results are remarkable; it is obvious why the public performances of the children are popular.

Back in the classroom

When the older children come in from their dancing lesson they settle down to a board game. *Zhongleri* (juggler) encourages the children to use new vocabulary to describe pictures.

The boards are packed away. The Albanian national day is in three weeks’ time (28th November) and this is the opportunity for a history lesson. Ana is talking entirely in Albanian, but slowly, with expression, using body language, pictures, maps and artefacts. She is asking questions and the children are responding in Albanian, much more confidently than the younger children. The lesson works well as a language lesson: I only know a few words of Albanian, but I can follow it and learn about Albanian heroes, Ismail Qemali, Mother Theresa, and the significance of the *flamuri* (the flag), I learn from the map about the greater Albania and understand that it was broken up at a conference in 1913.

Ana hands out a page of text about the flag day and asks the children to underline words they don’t know as she reads the text. Children ask for explanations and then take turns at reading. Ana nods approval and encouragement and then makes one of her rare statements in English “next week we are going to do this. We are going to do a concert about this, because 28 November is our flag day. That’s why I am doing something. O.K.?” She writes questions on the board and uses the opportunity to focus children on questioning words like *kur* (when) and *kush* (who).

The history lesson ends with an enthusiastic and rousing rendition of the ‘flag song’. The children know most of the words, but Ana is intent on ensuring they are all word perfect for a performance and hands out a printed copy. Her last words to the class are in English: “next week we’re going to do it again, but you have to learn at home, with your mum and with your dad, OK?” The caretaker comes in and starts checking the windows, Ana and the children rush to tidy, stuff their homework in their bags and grab their coats. A groups of mothers and fathers are waiting for them in the hall and they disperse into the dark and the cold outside as the caretaker locks up at precisely 7 o’clock.

Children’s voices

The observations have shown children working seriously and enjoying the different aspects of their Albanian space. In recorded discussions with the researcher they articulate their feelings about bilingualism, about cultural confidence, about their mainstream school and the Albanian class; the children give the matter deep thought and have a great deal to say. Four boys and four girls, aged from 8 to 12, who attend the Albanian classes were interviewed in pairs. The following section includes some key responses.

When asked about how she felt about her bilingualism Claudine (aged 10) explains “I quite like being, speaking two languages because it makes you quite different and you stand out from the rest, and I’m trying to go for French as well.” Vanessa explains that she feels “quite special. Because some people only speak English and they want to try and speak other languages but they can’t, like, do the accent, and they can’t really pronounce it properly”. Both girls report teachers showing an interest in Albania and asking children to teach them some words.

Edi, who has just started secondary school, is in no doubt about the benefits of multilingualism “There’s, like, lots of people that know more than one language that are in the top set. I’m in the top set for all my subjects”. He is learning French and has been invited to join the Latin class. “If you know more than one language, if you have a job that you have to go abroad it will be easier for you to communicate with people” and with respect to Albanian in particular he comments “it’s important to learn and speak and write your own language. You might have to go back to your own country and, if you haven’t learned it, like, it would be hard for you to adjust.”

Lala (aged 8) has found that people in school are impressed and “they say we’re clever”. Monica values her Albanian class “because we get to learn how to write and... you can learn two languages and it makes yourself clever”. She thinks there is another great advantage: she can have a secret conversation with her friends or her parents. Regarding switching between two languages, Arian is in no doubt that this is no problem: “you just say it. Change straight away, like”. But Xhuli disagrees on this point and comments, “it’s difficult... you can’t learn two languages at the same time”, but declines to elaborate.

The children appreciate their language class “I think it’s great, says Claudine, because it teaches you more Albanian that you don’t actually understand that much. And it makes you learn more and then you can communicate with your family in Albania.” They express appreciation for the careful explanations and comment on the way their work is marked and how this helps them to progress.

A question about whether learning Albanian helps or not with learning English prompts some deep thinking about how it feels to be living in two languages and two cultures and provides some insights into the children's awareness of their bilinguality. The children are very clear about the importance of English: "English, you live in it, you have to speak it every single day". Vanessa explains that you wouldn't understand anything in school if you weren't good at it.

Geni tells me "I do think if you know two languages you can learn more stuff about two languages and you have to use your brain even more. Because you have two languages and you have two rules. Like two types of rules, the Albanian rules and English rules. And if one rules says, um, eat at night time and if the English rules says, um, eat lunch-time and eat breakfast at lunch, at night and the Albanian rules says eat lunch at day time. It will be a little bit complicated. Then you have to do both of them at the same time. It's about the rules. A little bit complicated how you think about different things".

Claudine explains the relationship between her languages: "They're structured the same way but some of the sentences are, one word could be before the other one and it could still make sense in Albanian."

While the children are appreciative of the opportunity to learn Albanian they become really animated when talking about dancing and performing. Edi and Monica were thrilled to be dancing and reciting poetry on stage with microphones. "If we go on a concert", says Vanessa, "it feels like you're going on TV and being, like, popular. My friends, like, say "I want to go to the concert, I want to do that!" Lala tells how, since coming to the classes, the very disciplined dancing "came up in my brain and I know how to do it!"

But there is more to dancing than just feeling like a television star. Vanessa and Claudine explain the cultural importance of being able to hold their own at community weddings. Weddings in Albania are very much focused around a large party with music, explains Claudine "it's very important so you'll know how to dance in an Albanian wedding. You can't just stand still and think, what are they doing?" Vanessa and her friend went to her sister's wedding and "me and her, we were practising a dance and we done it in front of the stage and everyone was clapping and cheering".

Discussion and conclusion

It is clear from the children's statements above that their language is acknowledged and valued in the school and that they have never been made to feel embarrassed about speaking another language at home. The school's awareness of the benefits of bilingualism and of the importance of incorporating language and culture in the curriculum led them to engage with Shpresa. The partnership provided the means to raise the children's skills in Albanian and enabled the whole school, through the performance of poetry and dance, to engage with Albanian culture. At this stage of the study it is not possible to say whether, as suggested by Cummins' empowerment model, the partnership has had an impact on children's measured achievement in English. But the test data at the end of the first year of partnership suggests that the

children's literacy skills are developing well and that they are catching up with the 'moving target' of their peers.

The present paper has focused on the children's experiences of Albanian classes and the opportunities offered to them to explore their ethnicities in this safe space. Children's own voices reveal how they synthesize the Albanian and the English, the old with the new, in their everyday lives. The setting offers a range of spaces for exploring language and culture. The language class is very culturally Albanian: Albanian is mainly used with just a little English, the materials are imported, the teaching style, while lively, is traditional. The dance class provides almost the reverse: mainly English used by the teacher with a little Albanian. The children are using their new language while developing the very traditional skill of Albanian folk dancing.

While the children's observations reveal the importance to them of maintaining and developing their Albanian, the language they use to explain this, like that of the children studied by Harris (2006), is firmly anchored in the locality, in this case east London, and reveals the Britishness in their identity. Their observations in relation to folk dancing, wedding traditions and public performances shows the children synthesizing the traditional dance and poetry of their Albanian heritage with the talent shows they enjoy watching on television and the opportunity offered to them to "be famous". The school's Ethnic Minority Achievement co-ordinator has noted the children's confidence in their developing identities "They talk about the club and the things that they have done and they really love going out to perform in other schools. The children talk about Albania, dancing, and their culture and wanting to fit in to the community here" (CILT, 2008).

The present article has focused on the development of children's language and identity. Other aspects of Shpresa's input have resulted in a strong involvement of Albanian parents in the school as well as the provision of volunteers to work alongside teachers and to sit on the school's board of governors. The partnership continues to develop and has plans for the future. Shpresa is aware of the need to adapt the Albanian curriculum, the teaching style and language use to the needs of London children dominant in English and conducts regular training and review sessions for its teaching staff. The organisation is campaigning for a more formal recognition of the language in the form of examinations such as GCSE.

Both the headteacher and the director of Shpresa are keen to demonstrate the benefits that children derive from a positive and creative commitment to community cohesion and to develop and spread their model to other schools and other communities. As the headteacher explains: "All I have got for them is praise. As a model of how things work, it's a very good model. I could convince other schools as well. All I get is really good pay-back for it, in community relations, parental relations and during an OfSTED inspection, for example. I am more than happy. There are no disadvantages." (CILT,2008b)

4,928 words

All children have chosen their pseudonyms.

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