Children having English as an additional language (EAL) comprise a diverse group of learners in English schools who may be at a disadvantaged position in terms of their limited experience with the National Curriculum (NC). Their contribution to school based on experiences with schooling at the home country may be overt and visible and could therefore be dismissed. Often this kind of knowledge, described as social and educational capital by Bourdieu, does not count as the upgrade needed to progress at NC level. Previous research has demonstrated that some children with EAL tend to develop passive attitudes and expectations to be provided with language and learning support without becoming actively engaged, while others become increasingly resourceful in their adaptation to new contexts. This leads to series of questions about children’s agency and role in the process of education and its links with social status. This research aims to understand the complexity of the experiences and engagement of children with EAL in schools as they transfer from primary to secondary education. They make important choices in negotiating identity through language and participation at school and can bring valuable perspectives if empowered to make active choices.

Background

Children's experiences and engagement will be understood by looking at the broad school context through their own stories and views and by using creative methods integrating talk, visual material and narratives. Additionally, there will be a focus on how children are perceived by staff and peers, and how these two sets of perceptions interact to impact identity negotiations.

Focus on the inter- and intrapersonal changes in the process of transition and the meaning of these is an important step in understanding the world of children with EAL.

Methodology

Transition will be explored in a single primary school shadowing 20 students into their new secondary schools. The schools are located in a highly ethnically diverse and economically deprived area. The sample includes a range of backgrounds first-generation children with EAL at various stages of learning English.

Creative methods will be used to enable children to be open and articulate about their views and experiences in a relaxed and friendly way. This entails a range of talk opportunities, pictures and photos.

- Paired discussions
- Learning walks
- Interviews with pictures
- Photographs
- Learning journals

Theory

‘Official accounts’ of children demonstrate learnt knowledge and discourse of being and doing in certain ways. Bourdieu’s field analysis will be applied to look into children’s positioning in the classroom in relation to their habitus and ability to manage several cultural contexts on a daily basis. Their experiences and engagement will be analysed in the processes of developing new disposition or coping strategies while changing learning environments. Particular attention will be paid to identity negotiation, capital transmission and ways of behaving as elements of agency with the potential to challenge ‘taken-for-granted’ knowledge at schools.

Transition

Changes in learning environments, teaching styles and developing relationships are likely to yield data about children’s engagement and identity development. In addition, little is known about how children with EAL manage this change to a more structured secondary school environment, more academically-orientated learning and expectations.

Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and dispositions will be helpful in positioning children’s experiences within a social context. The dominant discourse around socio-economic status and ethnicity are likely to shape expectations and identity options for children with EAL based on their language, ethnic background, ability and gender. This invariably affects their identity in educational contexts.

The research will explore how children use their agency to negotiate and manage the expectations of teachers, parents and peers and to highlight personal options in a social context.

Expected outcomes

Detailed accounts of the experiences of children with EAL of transition from primary to secondary school will contribute to the development of an enhanced understanding of their agency and capital in managing changes in learning environments. Focus on the curriculum and the related experiences of children in a process of change could promote practical innovations for improving schools and classrooms.

References