

Visit to the US by Stuart Scott and Steve Cooke 4th - 12th May 2002

We visited primary and middle schools in Fairfax and Arlington counties in the state of Virginia and in Washington DC recommended by Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas, where there were varied programmes to support the first and second language development of ethnic minority students. eg two way bilingual, immersion and first language support. The purpose of our visit was to ascertain to what extent the work of Collier and Thomas had an extended validity in GB and whether the work in school in the US could be built upon and maybe new networks developed to support joint work and evaluation with ethnic minority learners. We were looking for reflective schools and hoping to establish links and themes for further joint work.

The differences between US and UK schools were not significantly different. Classes were smaller in the schools we visited, maybe because of their special status, but our impression was that classes in the US were in general smaller. Schools provided more physical space and more resources per student. Teachers had more noncontact time. This produced a calmer atmosphere. There were similar preoccupations with literacy and numeracy with the same emphasis on metalinguistic awareness.

We had an opportunity to discuss the latest five years of research with Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas. This work, which can be found at <http://www.crede.ucsc.edu/research/llaa/1.1es.html>, further confirms the previous research presented at the Intercultural Education Partnerships seminar in Oxford in 1999/2000. This research is inexorable and impossible to marshall arguments against, because unlike most educational research it is quantitative and based on sound statistical practice over an extended period and with enormous numbers of students. It provides clear pointers for policy development, and an increasing number of US school districts are respecting its findings. Policy of course, and especially policy in such a politically sensitive area as ethnic minority achievement, is not often ever governed completely by sound educational research, and this was clearly evident in the different rationales put forward for the different programmes in the schools we saw.

Although the last five years of Collier and Thomas research confirms the earlier findings that minority ethnic students develop English more rapidly where there are bilingual programmes, there are a lot of political and logistic reasons why

their implementation in any country will be partial, erratic and troublesome. Two way bilingual schools are unlikely to be implemented in UK. The only chance of growth in this area will be in EU schools with EU majority languages and in the private sector. In some US schools in some US states a large group of English speaking parents are keen for their children to become bilingual in Spanish. Spanish has high status in the US since it is used extensively for business with South America. It is even more important in a border state like Texas where two way programmes are expanding fast. No minority language shares that kind of status at this stage in Britain. First language support could, however, be provided in schools with a large number of speakers of one minority language. This might be an aim for school authorities in some parts of the UK, and an incentive to begin to collect or mine retroactively the kind of data here that underpins this policy. This will still be necessary, since although we can confidently predict the outcomes, even the data from two or three UK authorities would have a larger impact here than a hundred in the US. On the other hand, some of the US schools with first language support in Spanish were situated in inner city environments, where they were increasingly becoming multilingual schools. For instance, we encountered Bengali speakers who were receiving their schooling in Spanish and English. This may be an issue in authorities where demographic changes are dispersing previously closeknit communities.

The area where we saw the most fruitful possibilities for future working were in enrichment. We only rarely saw evidence of thoughtful language conscious teaching, and in cases where we did, we considered it to be the result of efforts by individual teachers rather than driven by school policy. Boring lessons in two way bilingual classes are still boring lessons, and unfortunately we encountered a number of these especially with older children. We saw many students (especially boys) not engaging with the tasks, which were often undemanding. We saw very little innovation, which surprised us, since we would have expected that teachers interested in new ideas might be attracted to these rather special and well resourced schools. The teachers were predominantly young, but their methods were not. The need for staff development was acknowledged by managers, but many things seemed to stand in its way, and certainly we found no clear development programmes. The structures were often in place and in one school certain staff had a clear staff development role and could initiate new ideas at classroom level albeit they had only just begun. We felt that maybe here there were opportunities for working with colleagues on providing enrichment. We intend to share good practice with them over the next year. We also now need to discover where the language conscious schools are and make contact with them.

Stuart Scott and Steve Cooke May 2002