

Making all languages count

Sally Bird talks with Pascale Vassie of the NRCSE

In February this year (2016) I met with Pascale Vassie, Executive Director of the National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education (NRCSE). Established in 2006, the NRCSE is the national strategic and support organisation for the supplementary education sector across England.

Through talking with Pascale I learned a great deal about a domain generally only associated with teaching languages to children, but also, I discovered, of great relevance to the language and cultural development of young people and adults. Although supplementary schools appear to be for children, there are important roles for adults and high levels of participation among teenagers.

I asked Pascale to tell me more about the organisation and its work. As we talked I made notes and here is what she told me.

S. What is the NRCSE – its main role, its objectives?

P. Our goal is to encourage excellence, innovation and partnership in supplementary schools. We aim to help raise the profile of supplementary schools and their standards of teaching, learning and management through the promotion and administration of the Quality Framework for Supplementary Education. This is a quality framework for supplementary schools, the only one of its kind, which we started in 2008. It comprises an award scheme with four stages: bronze, silver, gold and special distinction, each stage with criteria against which schools can measure their achievements and performance. For example, at the gold stage, most of the teachers would be professionally qualified, either in their own country of origin or the UK.

The award scheme is not only useful for quality assurance, but it also helps supplementary schools to develop their provision, achieve recognition and gain credibility and respect. Unfortunately, there is a tendency for the mainstream education sector to disregard the role of supplementary schools; there is a great deal of ignorance about supplementary schools and consequently a lack of respect for their work.

S. How do you manage the award scheme?

P. We are a membership organization with around 500 members. As soon as a school joins us they can start working towards the first stage of the award scheme. The model is one of guided support and assessment of management procedures and voluntary, developmental, peer-assessed quality assurance. We work in partnership with local authorities to run the scheme in their area. Our role is to train a key member of staff in the local authority to use the Quality Framework to support supplementary schools to put in place safe and effective management procedures. We then support them in mentoring schools to achieve the higher levels and in celebrating the awards.

In the best set-ups there is a close relationship between supplementary schools, the local authority and local primary and secondary schools. It benefits the supplementary school and the local primary school to have a good working relationship and a more fixed partnership if possible. For example, there are strong schemes in Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester, Leicester and Sheffield – and a new one starting in Bradford this year.

It's difficult at the moment – the local authorities are stretched and can't give as much time to the scheme as they used to. From our side, we are a small organisation, with a core team of six people. But the work is extremely important as a way to raise the profile of non-mainstream education and its role in supporting educational attainment among Black, Asian, minority and migrant communities and the teaching of a massive range of languages and cultures.

This year, in 2016, we have 165 schools at the bronze stage, 39 at silver, 22 at gold and 7 with special distinction. Overall since the scheme began in 2008 over 440 schools have stepped onto the first level of the framework, committing themselves to the development and maintenance of quality standards.

S. I come from a sector which uses quite a lot of different terminology and acronyms to describe our profession – ESOL, ESL, EAL, ELT, EFL. I see the community language teaching sector has quite a lot of terminology too – can you explain it? For example, what's the difference between 'supplementary' and 'complementary' schools? Why do some people refer to 'community' languages and others to 'heritage' languages?

P. Well, the different terms have arisen due to changes over the past twenty, thirty years, depending on where, when and why the language is taught.

Take for example, 'mother tongue'. Many young people are not really learning their mother tongue anymore – their families have been in the UK quite a long time and they would probably actually report their first language as English. They are learning a language that has importance for them for cultural and historical reasons. 'Heritage language' is perhaps a better description of the language that members of third or fourth generations are learning.

There is a sense in which the term 'community' language, although we all still use it, now has a slightly perjorative feel to it, partly due to the different treatment of different languages by national policy and the mainstream education sector. Why is one language a 'community language' and another a 'modern foreign language'? Aren't languages just languages, sometimes a heritage language, sometimes a foreign language, depending on the context for the user? The Australian curriculum, for example, now divides languages into First Language, Background Language and Second Language.

As for schools, in some areas they are called 'supplementary' schools, in others 'complementary' schools. The original term 'supplementary', was established back in the 1970s by the African-Caribbean communities who set up schools to put back into their children's education what the mainstream schools had left out. These schools saw themselves as filling a gap in provision. The term 'complementary' came later, and is used primarily within HE contexts for schools teaching languages other than those taught in mainstream education. So you now find in some areas of the country, like say, Leicester, they use the term 'complementary'. At the NRCSE we decided to stay with the original term, 'supplementary' because, regrettably, children are still not all accessing the same level of education and all languages should be seen as academically valuable. The important distinction is between the statutory education generally provided from 8.30-3.30, Monday-Friday and the education provided within unregulated settings out-of-school hours.

S. What changes have there been over recent years for community language teaching and learning?

P. The sector is one of constant change, reflecting the cycles of arrival, settlement and development of new communities. Groups arrive, settle and the communities start to develop language and cultural provision for their children. This is usually after the community has settled a bit, about ten years after the first members of the community arrive. So, in recent years, asylum seekers and refugees arriving from conflict zones are the new organisers of schools, for example, people from Iraqi, Syrian, Palestinian and Tamil communities. So too are people arriving from the expanded Europe.

As communities stay longer their needs and goals change and the community schools change too. We have noticed that, as new generations from the same countries of origin arrive, they may or may not use the schools set up by earlier arrivals – take the examples of the Somali and Polish communities. People came from both these countries in the past and set up community schools. More recently newcomers have arrived, frequently starting again, rather than joining the schools established by their predecessors. Perhaps the values and lifestyles of the newer arrivals are different and the ways they want to run their schools are different. When new communities join existing schools, there is the risk of tension, but also the opportunity for re-invigoration!

Some communities are long settled in the UK and their supplementary schools have changed. For example, supplementary schools offering Asian languages such as Gujarati, Punjabi, Urdu and Bengali are decreasing in number. Some communities have established full-time schools where the heritage language is part of the core curriculum so the need for out-of-school tuition has fallen. For some communities the priorities appear to have changed, many African-Caribbean schools are changing into tuition centres with less emphasis on culture and more emphasis on maths, English, science and IT, the 11+ and preparation for university entrance. But within each of those communities there are still schools that focus entirely on language and culture. The Turkish communities

in the UK are very settled for example, but language, dance, celebration are a Saturday morning fixture.

S. So how many supplementary language schools are there?

P. Well, it's hard to say exactly how many there are. We always say the figure is between 3000 and 5000. The total number of supplementary schools – around 5000 – doesn't shift too much, but the focus of the schools changes.

S. What do you mean by that?

P. Well, there are schools which focus either entirely or predominantly on language teaching. Then there are schools which focus predominantly on other content, such as school core curriculum subjects, faith or cultural activities. So that, in some cases the teaching of language is incidental or very specific, for example, the language of religious texts for faith schools. For other communities, supplementary language schools are really more like tuition centres for subjects like English and Maths. So it is difficult to put an exact figure on the number of schools which focus predominantly on language.

Lots of schools teach the heritage language through another subject or activity, so there is plenty of language teaching and learning taking place, mediated by that subject or activity.

S. So it isn't all about language?

P. Learning language is key in approximately 70 per cent of schools, but it isn't the only thing the supplementary schools are trying to do. Some of the most important functions of a supplementary language school might be social and cultural. Let me give you an example. I was impressed by the high levels of participation of Albanian teenagers at dance classes conducted in Albanian at a supplementary school. It seemed to me that the class gave the youngsters a chance to be themselves in a safe environment – it was a space removed from the pressures of life in a busy, complex London borough. It was an activity that had a simplicity to it and connected them to one another and their shared cultural heritage in some sort of meaningful way. Perhaps the socialising was of primary importance, followed by the dance, followed by the language.

Lots of supplementary schools attract high attendance of youngsters through programmes which link language and culture – dance, song, crafts and folklore. Language is the thread linking people to something they really want to do and it helps them express themselves through the activity.

S. What are the key achievements and successes for the NRSCE and for community language teaching in general?

P. Well, it's great to see so many people involved in activities and language use that is meaningful for them, like the Albanian teenagers I just mentioned.

Where we achieve strong relationships and partnerships between supplementary schools, mainstream schools, colleges and local authorities we feel there is a powerful model for maintaining and improving standards.

Then there's the way supplementary schools help with achievement in the mainstream school sector. Surveys and studies over the past two decades have shown how

supplementary schools support students with academic attainment, helping them achieve better and feel better about their performance. For example, in 2005, Bristol Council developed a scheme linking mainstream and supplementary schools. The project showed a significant impact on school attainment – mainly measured in terms of improved GCSE grades for teenagers who had attended the supplementary schools. New research funded by the British Academy, is looking at the cognitive benefits of language learning; it will be interesting to see the findings, and I really hope it will improve the status of all languages and supplementary schools in the UK.

It's been good to see supplementary school teachers getting trained and developing their knowledge and skills. NRCSE has successfully run both short and longer training courses for teachers. There's a course at level 3 which runs for nine weeks and looks at the British education system, child welfare, classroom management, lesson planning and some basic teaching methods. A companion course develops the learning to study both the theory and practice of language teaching and is a good pathway to a PGCE for those who want to train further. A recent course in Milton Keynes had teachers of Greek, Chinese, Arabic, Urdu and many other languages working together on language teaching theory and pedagogy.

S. NATECLA is an association of teachers of young people and adults, so we are interested in the role played by adults in community language teaching and learning. Where do adults who want to learn community languages fit in?

P. Of course the adults are mostly the organisers, managers and teachers in the supplementary school sector, also the parents, and the people who campaign for better recognition for community languages.

Some supplementary schools do provide classes for adults. Chinese language schools have benefitted from the rise in the international usage of Chinese Mandarin – they have been able to expand their provision to adults.

There are lots of adults who want to learn a community language to be able to communicate with family members – they've married into a family which uses another language. Then there are teachers who want to learn the languages spoken by their pupils and students. And, an emerging trend in the UK now, is for third and fourth generation adults to decide to learn their heritage language – having not actually learned it as children! So the demand is there among adults, and can be met by the local supplementary school.

S. And finally, what do you hope for, in the years to come?

P. We need to build stronger, lasting partnerships between supplementary schools and local education authorities.

We need to see supplementary schools better respected and acknowledged by the mainstream education sector. Preserving formal qualifications helps with this. NRCSE is currently campaigning, along with communities and supplementary schools, for the continuation of GCSEs and A levels in community languages and also for the provision of ongoing teacher training for supplementary school staff. Awarding

organisations have agreed to redevelop almost all the existing language exams in line with Department for Education requirements, but we need to ensure that the number of entrants rises and for that we need support for supplementary schools and we need mainstream schools to encourage their pupils and put them forward for language exams in community languages. There are many languages that don't have a British exam available and this is also a priority for us. Having a qualification in a language raises its prestige, also enables people to be formally recognized for their proficiency in that language.

Most importantly, we would like to see the development of a society here in the UK where all languages are better valued, better respected and better learned.

Endnote

At the end of April 2016 the government announced that GCSEs and A levels in a range of community languages such as Panjabi, Portuguese and Japanese are to continue. The government has worked with Ofqual and the exam boards to secure agreement that the qualifications will continue. Pearson and AQA will continue to offer the languages they currently offer and will also take on most of the qualifications that are being withdrawn by OCR.

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From Pascale at the NRCSE:-

“The National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education is delighted that government and the exam boards have recognised the importance of all languages to Britain and have collaborated to ensure the redevelopment of GCSE and A level examinations in those languages, lesser-taught in Britain, but no less important to the world.

We urge recognition of the vital role of community-led supplementary schools in supporting children and young people in the acquisition and retention of mother-tongue and heritage languages and we call on government and exam boards to provide training and support in the new exams for supplementary school language teachers – the majority of whom teach on a voluntary basis at weekends while working in other professions during the week.”

Pascale Vassie, Executive Director NRCSE

To find out more about the NRSCE and to support the community language programmes in your area, check out the NRSCE website on www.supplementaryeducation.org.uk